

~ Toy Soldier Saga Book I ~

A Few Good Elves

Diane Morrison



A Novel in the
SPELLJAMMER
Fantasy Universe®

A Few Good Elves

A Spelljammer® Novel

Book One of the [Toy Soldier Saga](#)

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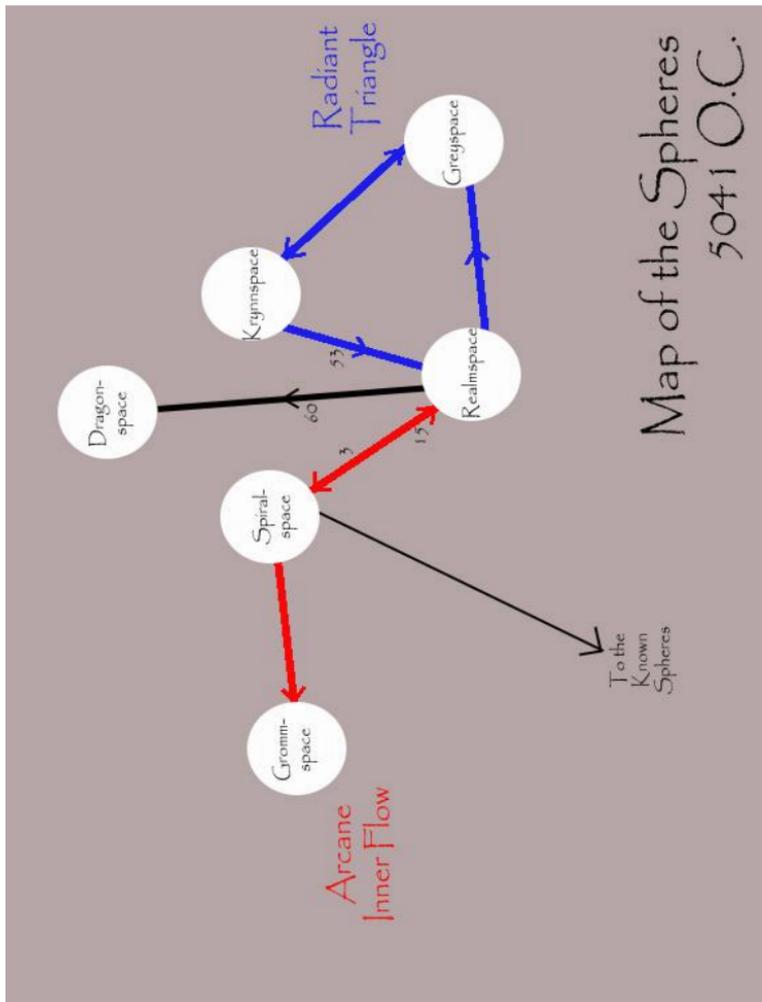
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See you in the stars!

For Erin:

*Husband, best friend, and co-creator of this Universe.
Through your belief in me, I learned to believe in myself.
Thank you for that gift.*



Distorted history boasts of bellicose glory . . . and seduces the souls of boys to seek mystical bliss in bloodshed and in battles.

Alfred Adler

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight . . . on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender. . .

Winston Churchill

In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.

Jose Narosky

Prologue

When an elven child is born, the whole community gathers to welcome him into the world. As his mother endures the travails of birth, the elves of her home gather about her, singing, rubbing her belly, rubbing her back, her feet. They drum, they play pipes. The *Tel'Quessir* are a people who produce few children, and who revere nature as a sacred force of the gods themselves. Therefore, there is no holier occasion than the birth of an elven child. An elf's first memory is usually of the moment when he is held up to the other elves of the community of his birth, and they sing to him their love and welcome.

Shaundar Sunfall was no exception, although it seemed to him there were faces in his community that he did not remember seeing there. But the next earliest memory he had was of holding his baby sister.

It was just like the other memory, singing and love and pipes and welcome, but he was one of the people singing this time. He remembered holding his mother's hand and she smiling at him with love and joy and pride, her blue, blue eyes alight like a spring sky. He was very young, maybe twenty or so, and it was unusual for a family to be bringing a new child forth so soon after his own birth. He remembered some whispers that it was unnatural, which is what inevitably comes of a mixed union such as that of his parents, but most viewed it the way that his

parents did; a great blessing. Shaundar wasn't too sure about it all himself. After all, with a new baby, he wouldn't be the baby anymore, and he wasn't certain that he approved of that. But his father had come home, which was uncommon in those days, and that probably made it all worth it. He remembered how his father also smiled at him with love and pride, his bright amber eyes gleaming through the golden-red hair that marked his gold elven heritage. And he remembered the moment that his sister's dark head had first peeked into the world, and the moment that she greeted it with a glorious cry.

His father eased her from her mother's body and held her up for everyone to see. She had her mother's look to her – blue, blue eyes, fair silvery skin, and hair the colour of twilight. She was, for all intents and purposes, a moon elf. No sign of the mixed sun and moon elven heritage, not like Shaundar bore, and although Shaundar didn't remember being taunted at that age, he remembered, even then, a great sense of relief that this was so.

As the assembled elves began to sing their welcome, Shaundar's father pressed his tiny little sister into his hands. "You are the big brother now, Rualith," his father said, calling him by the childhood name he'd been given, which meant "Little Star." He placed a hand on the side of Shaundar's face and guided it upward; until all Shaundar could see were his father's sharp golden eyes. "She will need you to protect her and take care of her. Can you do that, son?"

Shaundar looked down at the little bundle in his arms, which looked back at him with her own sky blue gaze. She had stopped crying and was gazing at him with the puzzlement and wonder of all newborn babies. Then her little mouth widened into a smile and she gurgled happily, and Shaundar was overcome with a fierce sense of love and protectiveness. He made a vow then and there that no one would ever harm this precious little bundle.

He looked back into his father's piercing gaze, which often made him feel small and uncomfortable, only this time he did so without a trace of those feelings. "Yes sir," he swore solemnly from the depths of his spirit and heart.

Part One: Learning to Fly

Chapter One

The day that Shaundar realized that he would never be a bladesinger was a beautiful day on the small world of Nedethil. Even in the far reaches of the roots of the great cosmic tree that the Northmen called Yggdrasil's Child, which was known to most spacefarers simply as Garden, the climate was generally mild and temperate. For some reason it was bristling with sylvan old-growth forest too, which made it the perfect colony world for the families of the Elven Imperial Navy members who patrolled Garden's roots policing pirates, which kept them in fighting shape, even though the Unhuman War was long over. The elves loved their unusual home, with its great roots and branches that stretched into some unknown plane of existence, and they called it the Great Oak, or affectionately, "Old Man" after Rillithane Rallathil, elven woodland god who was said to also be a great tree.

One of the great points of pride for Nedethil was that it had a public school, located in the port city of Theraspar, something that even pristine Evermeet could not boast of. This was in large part due to the efforts of Shaundar and his little sister Selena's formidable grandmother, Dathlue Mistwinter, who had established the public school when she came to live with her daughter and son-in-law after the fall of fabled Myth Drannor. However, since she no longer taught at the academy, the place was a constant source of misery to Shaundar. Elven children were usually given some latitude about their schooling, but Shaundar would

have skipped every day if he could get away with it. Unfortunately his father, Rear Admiral Ruavel Sunfall, was not very forgiving of this.

That day, Shaundar walked Selena to school with more than usual reluctance. It wasn't just that the spectacular weather was calling his adventurous spirit to go fishing or chasing frogs instead of immersing his nose in a book, although that was certainly part of it. He just had a bad feeling about school that day.

The two Sunfall children walked hand-in-hand past the spelljamming dockyards, where small butterfly-shaped ships and not a few merchant vessels were resting in port. Shaundar's cornflower blue eyes stared longingly at the ships. What would it be like, he wondered, to sail among the stars, just like his father? His heart leaped to the tales of battles with space pirates, monstrous neogi and fierce beholders, and to the descriptions of the places his dad had seen; glowing nebulae, flatworlds, water worlds, belts of thousands of rocks hurtling through space to be dodged like an obstacle course, even worlds carried around on the backs of giant animals. He would make a great cabin boy, he reckoned; he knew all the language of spacefaring and he could tell the time and keep watch with the best. Why in the worlds did he have to go to *school*?

Still, his father had said that he was old enough now to go with him on patrol if things were relatively peaceful, at least for the summer break. Shaundar could not wait! He spent most of his free time at the docks, read everything he could find on ships and spelljamming, and

pestered the entire Navy flotilla of Garden and other spelljamming folk he could find with his questions, until they usually sent him home to continue the assault on his father and Uncle Madrimlian.

Distracted by pleasant thoughts of his summer holiday, Shaundar did not notice the approaching band of elven children until Selena caught his arm and turned him in their direction.

His heart sank. He recognized Laeroth Oakheart, scion of a prominent silver elven family, forming a barrier between him and the school's front door with several of his wirier moon elven friends. Laeroth was about ten years older than Shaundar and his friends were all about the same age. Shaundar was, unfortunately, their superior in the academic arts, and had surpassed them in both marks and in progress. They were not pleased by this, and they tended to express their displeasure physically.

"Off to class, Sunfall?" Laeroth trilled cheerily, his expression twisted into a smirk.

Shaundar sighed. "Just leave me alone, Laeroth," he said softly.

Laeroth took a step forward. "You hear that, guys?" he announced to the pack of ruffians behind him. "He thinks we should leave him alone!" He juted his alabaster face into Shaundar's own. Shaundar was already as tall as Laeroth, but much slighter of build; lanky,

even. “And why should we? You think you’re better than us or something?”

If asked honestly, Shaundar would have told them that he didn’t think any such thing. Actually, he shared the opinion of almost everyone around him. He was a half-breed and therefore, he would never amount to anything much. He didn’t really understand why the *Teu’Tel’Quessir* seemed to think he was stuck up.

But Laeroth did not wait for his answer. He kicked Shaundar’s legs out from under him and knocked him to the ground. His face hit the dirt and his lip split open on a sharp rock. He wiped his bleeding mouth on his sleeve on reflex, and then groaned inwardly. Not another uniform! His father was going to kill him.

The front door of the schoolhouse burst open and a small, blond-headed gold elf girl shot out like a catapult stone. Her sea-foam green eyes flashed furiously. “You leave him alone!” she cried.

“Narissa, stay out of this,” Shaundar groaned as he got to his feet.

Her hands balled into fists and planted themselves firmly on her slender hips. “I will not!” she returned. “Laeroth, you leave him alone.”

“Who’s going to make me?” Laeroth laughed at the tiny-boned elf maid before him. “You and all of your friends?”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” a quiet voice replied, and Shaundar smiled. He cast his gaze to the side to see a fairly well-built young sun elf, golden-complexioned, with hazel-green eyes and a careless mop of midnight-black cowlick, approach the front of the schoolhouse as he eased his book bag off his shoulder and onto the ground. His eyes were fearless and steady and his body was tensed and ready for the fight.

Shaundar knew that things were going to be okay. Yathar was here.

Laeroth hesitated. “You’re outnumbered,” he pointed out uncertainly.

Yathar was not deterred. “Only by one. And Shaundar and I could take you and all your cronies on the best day of your lives, with or without the help of the girls.” He grinned impishly and winked at Selena, whose cheery smile answered him.

Laeroth never had the chance to put it to the test. One of the professors came out. Shaundar’s spirits fell. It was Professor Lord Captain Durothil, Yathar’s father.

“What’s going on here?” demanded the regal-looking sun elf with flashing violet and amber eyes. They fixed on Shaundar and narrowed. “Sunfall, causing problems again, are you?”

Laeroth smirked, but Yathar stood beside Shaundar supportively. “No sir,” Yathar denied on his friend’s behalf. “Laeroth was causing the trouble, sir. Shaundar was just defending himself.”

Captain Durothil licked his lips, but he could hardly call his son a liar in public. “Get inside, all of you,” he snarled in frustration. “You are late.”

Obediently, all the children collected their things and filed into the building, Shaundar relieved by his narrow escape. He put a hand on his friend’s shoulder to show his thanks. Yathar gave an almost imperceptible nod with sparkling eyes and smiled in return. But Captain Durothil was displeased and he found something to focus his wrath upon. “Sunfall, your uniform is out of order again. I think you can spend some time cleaning up the classroom with me at lunch to learn the importance of cleanliness.”

Shaundar sighed in resignation. “Yes sir.” Laeroth grinned.

“Today,” the Professor announced as his students settled in, “we study the destruction of Myth Drannor, and the human conspiracy at the heart of it.”

Shaundar was confused. He knew all about Myth Drannor. His family had been formed just after the fabled city's fall by some of the survivors. His grandmother was a scion of the Mistwinter family, and his

father had been one of the now near mythical *Ahk'Faerna*, a soldier of magic; but he was conscripted by the Navy into the Unhuman War when the Army of Darkness, mostly goblinoids led by a trio of fiends known as the *Khov'Aniless*, the "Trio Nefarious," descended upon the elven kingdom of Cormanthyr and destroyed it.

Shaundar's grandmother had made no bones about how elven arrogance and hubris had a great deal to do with Myth Drannor's fall. She told her grandchildren a terrible story of how, at the passing of the last Coronal and the apparent assassination of his heir, the noble Houses of the city had fought for the right to take up the Ruler's Blade; how one-by-one they were deemed unworthy and destroyed by the power of the Sword; how when others, first moon elves, then common elves of all sorts, then *Sha'Quessir*, had tried to take up the Blade they were cut down in the streets; how finally it had all degenerated into a mass of infighting and chaos; and how the Srinshree, High Mage guardian of the Blade, had taken it and the legendary Rule Tower and disappeared; and no one knew where, or even whether or not she and the sacred Sword had been destroyed.

Needless to say, this pronouncement surprised him. He raised his hand and was ignored.

"Many of the noble houses thought it a bad idea when the Coronal Eltargrim Irithyll permitted the expansion of the city of Myth Drannor to other races," the Professor continued. "He felt that living in harmony was the only way in which the People would develop and

survive. So we taught them our secrets, our magic; and of course you see how our kindness was repaid."

"But that's not the way it happened at all!" Shaundar burst out, unable to contain his indignation.

Narissa cast him a cautious warning look, but Shaundar wasn't about to back down. "Oh really, Sunfall?" sneered the elven lord darkly. "So then, since you know so much more about it than I do, when I was there, who told you otherwise?"

"My grandmother Dathlue Mistwinter," Shaundar declared proudly, "and my father as well, sir. He was *Akh'Faerna*."

The Professor was less than impressed. "Is that so?" he returned with a raised eyebrow. "Well, I was *Akh'Faerna* too, of the rank of *Arshaalth*. Your father . . . ah yes, I think I remember him, *Nikym*, wasn't he? You can join me for detention tonight, Sunfall, and spare me any further pronouncements of the great Ruavel."

Shaundar turned red with rage until the rest of the class began to snicker. But he held his tongue. "Yes, sir," he acknowledged sourly.

Lunch break was bad, but after school detention was worse. Shaundar did his best to be respectful, polite and obedient. He had something very important that he wanted to discuss with the Professor.

He cleared his throat nervously. Captain Durothil cast him a disdainful look. This wasn't starting out well at all.

"*Quessir*," began Shaundar, using the term of respect with which one addressed a noble elf lord, "I was wondering if you would consider taking me into your bladesinger school."

Professor Durothil said nothing for a long moment, so he pressed on: "I've been top of my class in all the magical arts next to Narissa, sir, as you know. I'm really fast on my feet too. I've been training in use of the long sword with my dad, and I can dance, and sing, and I can even juggle. I know you're teaching Yathar, sir, and I would really be grateful and honoured if you would teach me too." He bowed formally with deep respect, the picture of gold elven etiquette.

The elven lord pursed his lips. "Sunfall, you are a moon elf. I think you would be better off learning from a moon elven school."

Shaundar ran his hand through his golden hair in an agony of suspense. "But *quessir*," he insisted, "Professor Oakheart said that I should learn from a sun elven school, being *Ar'Tel'Quessir*."

The Professor's expression did not change. "I'm sorry, Sunfall," he said firmly, his voice utterly devoid of compassion.

Shaundar stood frozen for a long moment as his dreams were decisively crushed. The training for becoming a bladesinger required the most exacting study over at least a century and that from a very young

age to be any good at it. He was forty years old, and he now knew that no one on Nedethil would teach him. He was shattered.

“Ten extra minutes to your detention for speaking out of turn,” Captain Durothil commanded ruthlessly.

This was just too much for Shaundar. Before he knew what he was doing, he was on his feet and headed for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” bellowed the Professor.

“I wish you people would make up your minds!” Shaundar snapped back as he slammed the door behind him and ran for the safety of the woods before the elf lord could see his tears.

He ran until he was tired, wiping his eyes in frustration. Wouldn’t that look good for the gold elven lord? Bursting into tears like a moon elf! So much for sun elven decorum. Already he regretted his hasty action, but it was far too late to take it back. He wandered around in the woods for a while, trying to calm down.

After some time, he found himself at the little creek hollow where he, Yathar, Selena and Narissa often came to play. All three of them were already there. Selena was sitting in a hollow in the top of one of the willow trees, swinging her feet. Narissa was kneeling quietly by the stream, and Yathar was meandering around, randomly whacking rocks and dead tree branches with a stick. They all looked at him and he looked away, not yet ready to speak.

He knelt by the stream to wash the tears from his face, and the sun was setting at just the right angle to make the water perfectly reflective. Shaundar looked into his own tear-streaked face. His moon elven blue eyes were almost indigo in the light of the sunset, and his corn-silk yellow sun elven hair shone like spun gold. His complexion was neither the bluish-white of moon elves nor a warm gilded sun elven shade; it was pale with a peach-golden sheen, like common moonstone. Even the elven flecks that sparkled in those blue eyes were neither the silver of a moon elf's nor the gold of a sun elf's, but an odd platinum colour that could be seen either way. There was a smudge of dirt on his stubborn chin and a scrape that he did not remember getting. He splashed his hands into the image angrily to drive it away and brought the water to his face, then to his lips.

“My dad’s a jerk,” Yathar said with conviction.

Shaundar did not argue.

“Never mind him,” he went on. “I’ll just teach you whatever it is that I learn when I learn it.”

“No,” Shaundar returned stubbornly. “You don’t need that much trouble.”

“I don’t care,” Yathar insisted.

“No,” Shaundar repeated firmly. “I’ll find something else I’m good at.” When he noticed Narissa appraising him with disbelief and a

little pity in her eyes, he said, “Dad’s taking me with him on patrol this summer. I’ll be a spelljammer instead.” For a moment, he almost believed he would enjoy it as much as the idea of being a bladesinger. He met Narissa’s gaze with a hard, determined look in his own, and Narissa’s pity dissolved.

Yathar shrugged. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

Shaundar was not going to change his mind. The dream had been too firmly crushed. It was better not to hope.

The four children sat in silence for several minutes, not sure of what to say. Then Selena announced, “The sun is going down. We should get back.”

“Not yet,” Shaundar replied. He was not ready to face the kind of trouble he knew would be waiting for him at home yet, not with his heart still so raw.

“Well, I have to go,” Narissa admitted reluctantly. “Dad will be really angry already.” She put a comforting hand on Shaundar’s shoulder and he gave her an understanding, if watery, smile.

Selena climbed down from the tree. “I’ll go home too and see if I can talk Dad down,” she volunteered sympathetically.

“Thanks, little sister,” Shaundar smiled gratefully at her. They grasped hands briefly before the two girls headed home.

Yathar sat down beside Shaundar but fidgeted restlessly. After a few minutes, he could no longer contain his pent-up energy and he grinned at his friend, “I know something that will cheer you up! Monkey wrestling!”

Shaundar laughed out loud. Monkey wrestling! Narissa and his parents hated it. He and Yathar would climb into a nearby tree, and grapple and slap at each other until one admitted defeat. It made them all nervous and it made a mess of the boys’ clothing. Shaundar scrutinized his uniform and considered it. Not only did he still have the bloodstain on his cuff, which had turned a rusty brown and settled in, but both jacket and trousers were now covered in dirt and grass-stains, and the jacket was even torn at the pocket. He must have snagged it on a low-hanging branch or something. “Might as well,” he replied cheerfully. Yathar clapped him on the back and helped him to his feet. The two of them then set about climbing as high as they could go into the biggest tree they could find, which in this case was the great willow whose enormous branches overhung the creek. Still angry and feeling low, Shaundar found greater bravery than he usually possessed, and he scrambled up to a high branch that teetered dangerously beneath him.

Not to be outdone, Yathar joined him on a similarly perilous limb, this one slightly lower because Shaundar, being in the lead, had claimed the higher ground.

“Ready?” Yathar asked eagerly.

“Ready!” Shaundar confirmed.

“One, two, three, GO!” they cried together, and they grappled like wrestlers. Yathar was a little stronger than Shaundar, but Shaundar had reach, so the match was about even. Yathar broke the grapple first and slapped Shaundar in the shoulder. “Ow!” he yelled good-naturedly, and he grabbed Yathar by the hair.

“Let go!” Yathar laughed, and he grabbed a hold of Shaundar’s other wrist and tried to bend it back on itself. Shaundar leaned forward to prevent this and pressed his advantage.

Suddenly there was a groan and a sharp cracking sound. Surprised, both boys let go of each other, and then Yathar was plummeting to the ground as the branch beneath him gave way. He screamed with fear.

Shaundar nearly fell out of the tree himself reaching for his hand, but he missed, and Yathar fell anyway. There was another sharp cracking sound, and then Yathar screamed again, this time in pain. He was rolling on the ground holding his shin. The tree branch lay beside him, and thankfully, not on top of him.

Shaundar called out his name and began scrambling down the tree. Fortunately elven vision allowed for a very small amount of light, because it was already twilight in the thick woods. Shaundar did not panic. He remembered his father telling him that panic had killed more

soldiers than the enemy. He forced himself to watch every step and handhold. If he also hurt himself getting down from the tree, how would he be able to help Yathar?

He immediately went to Yathar's side, and he could see that his foot was hanging by an odd angle. There was no doubt about it. "Yathar!" Shaundar cried to get his attention. "Your leg is broken."

Yathar bit his lip and managed to stifle his yells, but tears ran freely from his ghost-pale face and low whimpers escaped from his mouth with each breath. "What do we do?" he asked Shaundar in a very small voice.

Shaundar didn't know. "I'll have to splint it," he said, "but I don't think you can walk on it. I'll have to carry you out." He immediately started hunting around for a good stick to brace the leg with, and found one. It was frayed at the edges; Shaundar suspected it was the stick that Yathar had been playing with earlier. He whipped out his pocket knife and whittled off the sharp edges. Then he lashed it to Yathar's broken shin as gently as he could manage, trying to remember whatever he could from his mother's knowledge of the healing arts. Even so, Yathar still cried out twice and almost passed out.

"You okay?" Shaundar asked when he was finished, and grimly Yathar nodded.

Now, to consider the problem of how to carry his friend without hurting Yathar's leg. Shaundar thought of how a hunter carries a deer across his shoulders. He imagined that facing down would be very uncomfortable, but maybe if Yathar faced the sky . . . But how to pick him up?

His gaze fell upon a sturdy alder tree near where Yathar was lying, one that was only as thick around as his leg. Maybe if he could get Yathar to lift himself up on it . . .

"You need to lift yourself onto your good leg," Shaundar told his friend. "I figure you can pull yourself up on this tree and I can lift from behind. Then I can get under you to carry you. Okay?"

Yathar considered the tree and nodded.

"Ready?" Shaundar asked.

"Yeah," Yathar gasped.

Shaundar squatted down behind his friend and hooked his arms under Yathar's shoulders. Yathar reached for the alder with both hands. His face was the colour of snow, with little trace of the gold elven gilt.

"One, two, three!" cried Shaundar, and he pulled as up hard as he could. Yathar grunted and tensed his arms. His hands clambered up the alder tree as though he were rock climbing, grasping branches and

knotholes. Then he was leaning against the tree, balanced on his uninjured left leg.

“Break!” declared Shaundar, out of breath, and Yathar panted and nodded. Sweat was running freely down his brow and nose.

“Okay,” Shaundar said after a few moments. “I’m going to brace you over my shoulders by your right leg and arm. Mom said that it’s better to move the broken bone as little as possible, and I think that will keep it from moving as much. Ready?”

Yathar nodded again, too spent for words.

Shaundar bent down and hooked his right arm around Yathar’s right thigh, and his left arm around Yathar’s right shoulder. He pushed up with both legs and shifted Yathar’s weight. He was heavier than Shaundar had anticipated, but the determined young elf managed to heft Yathar up over his shoulders.

“You okay?” he gasped.

“Yeah,” wheezed Yathar.

With that, Shaundar started trekking along the creek bed, heading downstream and back towards town, wasting no more effort on words.

There was no telling how long he walked for. It felt like forever. It was almost dark by the time Shaundar saw the town lights. He did not stop to rest because he was unsure if he would be able to pick Yathar up again. Yathar was an elf but he was still heavier than Shaundar. He was exhausted and his breath was coming in short puffs. His legs trembled with the effort, but still he trudged doggedly on. Yathar needed him.

When he finally came to the edge of the trees, and found himself instead in the tree and crystal buildings of their little port town, Shaundar sank to the ground in relief and gently eased Yathar down beside him. “Help!” he croaked, his throat entirely without moisture, and then he repeated more loudly, “Help! Yathar’s hurt!”

Somehow, magically, his mother was right there, her midnight-blue eyes full of compassion. “It’s all right, my son,” she murmured, her voice both comforting and ethereal. She knelt at Yathar’s side with almost supernatural grace and poise and gently adjusted his leg so that she could get a good look at it. “That’s a good splint,” Shaundar’s mother told him with a faint smile that carried more approval than the most effuse praise. She began to unwind his makeshift tie, which had come from one of the straps on Yathar’s book bag. Relieved, Shaundar started to cry.

Then Selena, Shaundar’s father, Yathar’s father and Yathar’s mother arrived. “What did you do to my son?” Captain Durothil bellowed. He strode up to the three of them and slapped Shaundar across the face.

Shaundar, shocked into silence, gaped at Lord Durothil, who was reeling back his arm for another blow, but then his face contorted in pain. Ruavel Sunfall had Captain Durothil's hand in his and was twisting back on it in a way it was obviously not intended to be moved.

"Raise your hand to my son again, Captain and you will regret it," he promised solemnly.

"Av, quessir," Lord Durothil grunted.

The Admiral released his hand and the elven lord rubbed at his wrist. "How bad is it?" he inquired of Shaundar's mother. "Can you heal it?"

"Certainly," she replied in a mild voice. "I just need to set it first. I have taken the liberty of putting your son to sleep so that it will hurt less." With that, she gripped Yathar's leg on either side of the break and made a quick adjustment. Yathar's face screwed up in pain, even in slumber.

She re-splinted it using Shaundar's makeshift branch and strap, and though Shaundar had obviously missed the casting of the first spell, everyone watched and listened as Selene Sunfall chanted prayers of healing to Sehanine Moonbow, and made the sacred gestures that accompanied the ritual. Skin, and presumably bone, began to knit themselves back together. She wiped away some of the blood left behind

with her fingers. “There,” she said with a nod. “Now take him home and let him sleep; it’s good for his healing.”

Lord Durothil lifted up his son’s unconscious body. “We are not done, Sunfall,” he promised ominously as he left. His wife, a small faerie elf with pale skin, silver hair and violet eyes, looked to everyone else gathered there at the edge of the tree line. “I’m sorry,” she apologized quietly before following her husband.

The Sunfalls watched them leave. “Let’s go,” Shaundar’s father commanded. Shaundar staggered to his weary feet and followed obediently. No one said a word until they were home; which, for the Sunfalls, was a modest tree manor shaped partially by magic and partly by craftsmanship; a quiet, almost plain dwelling formed of a great willow tree, much smaller and less ostentatious than his Rear Admiral’s rank could have commanded.

Ruavel Sunfall closed the front door behind them. Shaundar knew he was in an amazing amount of trouble.

He fixed his son with that intense amber gaze. “So, what happened out there, Shaundar?” he demanded quietly. “How did Yathar’s leg get broken?”

Shaundar’s heart plummeted into his boots. He felt as though he were falling through a gravity plane. “We were monkey wrestling, sir,” he admitted meekly.

Ruavel's brow darkened. "I see," he said simply. His hand came up to rub his temple as though he felt a headache coming on. A vein in his forehead was standing out portentously. "So, let me get this straight. In one single day you started trouble with your classmates, lipped off your professor, ran out on your detention, to go into the woods without telling anyone where you were going, whereupon you promptly engaged in an activity that you have been *expressly forbidden* from doing, causing your friend's leg to be broken due to your foolishness. And on top of everything else, you have ruined another uniform."

Shaundar did not know what to say. He opened his mouth and closed it again. The weight of his father's disapproval was devastating.

Shaundar's grandmother came to the edge of the entryway. She looked like an older version of her daughter, only where Selene was wispy, Dathlue was solid. Rather than wearing the draping robes and dresses of a spellcaster, she was clad in practical, boyish leathers. She was not in the habit of wearing her sword at home, but it was draped at the ready on a peg near the front door. She was old enough that crow's feet and laugh lines had begun to form; which, for an elf, was very old indeed.

The Admiral held up a single hand, and in that gesture Shaundar read far more disappointment and dismissal than any words could have hoped to convey. It was all he could do not to burst into tears again.

“I find this very disappointing, Shaundar,” he sighed wearily. “I expect better things of you. Please go to your room and contemplate your actions. Tomorrow, you will go to school and undertake whatever punishment Professor Durothil deems fit; excluding anything physical.”

“Yes sir,” Shaundar replied in a very small voice. He swallowed the lump in his throat, determined this time to show proper gold elven grace, and he managed to walk all the way upstairs and into his room before the tears ran down his face. Even then, he swallowed the sobs so that his heartbreak was his alone.

His father was right. This was his fault. If he had not climbed so high, Yathar would not have fallen. Why did he keep doing such stupid things?

On the other side of the closed bedroom door, Shaundar’s father and grandmother were arguing. “You’re going to take all the adventure out of the boy, Ruavel,” his grandmother was saying crossly.

“Damn it,” Ruavel exclaimed, “the boy is going to grow up with some decorum! He’s a gold elf!”

“No he’s not!” Dathlue growled furiously.

Shaundar did not want to hear any more. He went to the window over his bed and opened the porthole-style shutter to gaze out into the starry night. That was the problem, wasn’t it? He was not a gold

elf. But, despite his failings, Shaundar swore to himself that someday, somehow, he would make his father proud of him.

Reverie did not come easily to Shaundar that night. He tried several times to relax on his daybed and sink into the trance that elves used rather than sleep, but every time he started to drift, he would see Yathar's frightened green eyes falling away from him, and he started back to full consciousness. After a while he gave up. He took the wool blanket from his bed and pressed it against the bottom edge of the door so that his parents would not be able to see light, and he lit a candle and gave himself over to reading. The first book he fished out of his school bag was Yathar's copy of *Hinue ath Tel'Kerym*, "The Song of the Blade," which was the bladesinger's code and training manual. He tossed it aside onto his bed with venom. It bounced against the wall with an audible thump and came to rest on its front cover. He found the dog-eared copy of the "Imperial Navy's Field Manual" that he had borrowed from his father instead, opened it to the section on semaphore, which he was actively studying, and brought it and the candle to his desk so that he could take notes. He dipped his quill and prepared to write.

He just about jumped out of his skin when the quiet knock sounded at his door. Oh drat, the book! Someone had obviously heard the noise when it had hit the wall. Cursing himself for his idiocy, he opened the door; then he smiled, relieved. It was his grandmother standing there.

“Can I come in?” she asked pointedly as Shaundar stared at her, already standing almost eye to eye.

“Oh, sorry,” he replied and stood aside so that she could enter.

She closed the door again behind her and studied him with her intense blue eyes. “May I sit?” she inquired, and Shaundar nodded. Grandmother was nothing like the other adults in his life. She never forced anything upon him or demanded anything of him. She asked his opinion and honestly cared for the answer. She even asked his permission to enter his space and use his furniture or his time, just as if he were an adult and had a right to refuse.

“You never mind your father,” Grandmother Mistwinter proclaimed as she eased herself gently onto Shaundar’s daybed. “He just doesn’t understand you; that’s all. But he loves you.”

“I know,” he sighed. He did not really want to discuss this.

Grandmother cast her gaze about Shaundar’s room and he followed it. There was the framed portrait of his mother and father when they were younger; Ruavel in a Navy Lieutenant’s dress uniform, Selene in a flowing silver gown and tiara – their wedding portrait. There was a portrait of Selena as a baby sitting on a chest of drawers. There was a small bookshelf filled with well-organized books, and a table laid out with an army of toy soldiers in mid-battle, remains of a game played with Yathar earlier in the week. A wooden long sword and two short swords

were hanging on weapon racks, practice for the real thing, which he would be taking up before too long. His short bow, which he had already used to hunt rabbits, monkeys, and the native oversized rodents that the elven colonists called *niri* “little bears,” also rested on its rack on the wall, his arrows in their quiver and carefully tended; no sign of fraying or tattering on the fletching at all. There were a few charcoal drawings of the family, Yathar and Narissa fixed to the wall, and they were pretty good, in her opinion. Her eyes came to rest on his model of the Realmspace system dangling on strings from the ceiling, with a full set of hand-built, hand-painted scale models of the ships of the elves’ Realmspace fleet interspersed among the smaller planets. The Sun was even enspelled to glow softly, though it did not provide good reading light.

“You know,” she said mildly, “if you believe in yourself, then it doesn’t matter whether or not anyone else believes in you.”

Shaundar said nothing. He wished he could believe in himself. It was just so hard.

“Shaundar,” she insisted in a tone that commanded his full attention. He looked into her eyes, which were almost radiant with the force of her emotion. “Listen to me. Your problem is that you are trying far too hard to be something that you are not. You need to be exactly who you are. Be true to yourself! And never mind your father. He’ll come around, you’ll see.”

He nodded. Grandmother was probably right. She certainly seemed to know exactly who she was and made no apologies for it. He wished he was as clear.

“Don’t blame yourself for what happened to Yathar,” she added, almost as an afterthought. “He’s just as responsible as you are. It takes two to monkey wrestle, I think.” She winked at him conspiratorially and patted his hand.

Shaundar’s mood lightened considerably. She knew just what was bothering him, didn’t she? “Did you ever monkey wrestle, Grandmother?” he queried with a smile.

“No,” she replied, “my friends and I used to chase each other through the woods with sticks. Monkey wrestling is much safer.” She grinned wryly, and Shaundar laughed out loud, though he stifled it quickly so that he would not wake anyone. He had the same wry smile as his grandmother.

“Get some reverie, boy,” she encouraged him gently, and she stood up and strode for the door.

“Good night, Grandmother,” Shaundar wished her quietly. She smiled at him and closed the door behind her.

Shaundar blew the candle out, grabbed hold of his blanket and threw himself onto the daybed to sit comfortably cross-legged. He sat on Yathar’s book and fished it out from behind him quickly, but he could see

that he had already managed to bend one of the pages. Well, nothing to be done about it now. He straightened it out as best as he could and closed the cover. Tossing it into his school bag, he settled in for reverie, somewhat cheered by his grandmother's kindred spirit. He watched the butterfly-shaped ships dangling on their strings and let his gaze become unfocused.

Morning came far too quickly. After some delay Shaundar dragged his weary bones from his bed with a titanic effort of will. His shoulders and the muscles of his thighs ached. He washed quickly in the washbasin because he was already running late. He took another uniform from his closet and quickly switched the pin of his family crest, a stylized shooting star, over to the new collar. Rather than throwing the damaged uniform out, however, he stowed it away in a drawer. It would be good practice to try some cantrips on later, such as *clean* and *mend*.

He then attempted to tame his yellow hair into a semblance of order, and finally managed to smooth it all into a tight ponytail. Only then did he go downstairs for the morning meal.

Shaundar's father was standing out on the balcony in a smoking jacket, puffing at his pipe, which Shaundar's mother had forbidden him from smoking in the house. He nodded at his son through the window but did not speak. "Good morning, sir," Shaundar replied hesitantly. The Admiral turned back to watch the morning sunrise with another nod.

He went to the kitchen where Lianna, the head cook from the *Aerdrie's Pride*, which was Ruavel Sunfall's Armada-class ship, was making a nut-and-berry stir fry of some kind. It smelled like hazelnuts and starberries in a light honey-and-butter glaze. Lianna cooked for the Sunfalls when she was on leave in return for her keep, since she had no family of her own. She was a high elf from a world called Oerth, which Shaundar understood was in a sphere called Greyspace, one of the three spheres in the so-called "Radiant Triangle"; the other two being Realmspace and Krynnspace.

"Morning to you, young sir!" she greeted him cheerfully. As much as the Sunfalls were in disgrace, they were still elven nobility. Technically, Shaundar would be heir to the House, being the eldest son; unless, of course, his father decided to name Selena as the heir instead.

He cast a sunny smile back at her. "Good morning, Lianna."

"Dawnfry's ready. Have you washed up?"

He nodded as he automatically took the silverware and set the table. Selena had already laid out the plates and serving spoons. She remained quiet until she saw her brother smile, at which point she cast a smile back at him and said good morning. He returned the greeting, and then steaming nuts and fruit were being spooned on to their plates. They ate quickly. As they did so, their father came back into the house, after having first deposited the offending smoking jacket on a coat hook outside.

“Hurry up children,” he admonished. “You’re going to be late.”

They finished their morning meal and put the plates away. Shaundar noticed that yet again, to his dismay, he had managed to dirty the cuff of his uniform sleeve. He groaned. Selena’s was still pristine, of course.

Well, there was no time to do anything about it now. Shaundar turned it around so that his father wouldn’t notice, retrieved his book bag, to which he hastily added the Navy field manual, and fled out the door.

Selena, who was not nearly as tall as him, struggled to keep up. “Wait!” she called out at last. Shaundar slowed his breakneck pace and waited, taking her hand when she caught up. They ran together for the schoolhouse.

Out of the edge of his peripheral vision Shaundar saw movement, and recognized dark hair and a pale moon elven face. He managed to dodge the outstretched foot with some alacrity. “Run to school, Selena,” Shaundar commanded, and he spun around and lifted up his book bag to confront his attacker.

Laeroth Oakheart and two of his minions emerged from the starberry bushes where they had laid their ambush. “You’re dead, Sunfall!” Laeroth pronounced with an evil gleam in his eye.

“We’ll see,” Shaundar growled.

Confident in his superiority, especially since they did have him outnumbered this time, Laeroth closed in for the attack. Shaundar stepped deftly to the side and let him have it in the face with the book bag. Of course, it was at that exact moment that Professor Durothil emerged from the schoolhouse.

“SUNFALL!” he roared, and everyone froze where they were, except Laeroth, who found himself this time in the position of the one picking himself up off the ground with a bleeding lip.

The Professor closed the distance impossibly fast and took one of Shaundar’s pointed ears between his fingers. He yelped in surprise and pain.

Delighted by this turn of events, Laeroth immediately poured out crocodile tears. “Professor,” he sniffled, “he just smacked me in the face! My ears are still ringing! I wasn’t doing anything, just walking!”

“YOU LIE!” bellowed Shaundar.

“Enough!” Lord Durothil exclaimed. “I think it would be just like you, Sunfall, to lay an ambush for the boy, low-minded as you are.”

Shaundar could not believe the injustice! Tears of rage and frustration began to run down his face.

“Get inside,” the Captain commanded, pulling on Shaundar’s ear until he had no choice but to follow.

He hauled Shaundar up in front of the class. Yathar was there, Shaundar noticed with relief, and he started getting to his feet before he realized that he had a splint on his leg still and was forced by necessity to sit back down. Laeroth was smirking like a dohwar.

“It seems that *Quessir* Sunfall has seen fit to attack another student,” the Professor announced drily. “Since he has no discipline, and his father the *Admiral* has forbidden me from striking him, let’s see if we can’t teach him some. Hold out your arms, *Quessir* Sunfall. Out to the sides, palms up.”

Shaundar lay down his book bag, which had torn at the strap, and obeyed warily.

From a cupboard, Lord Durothil excavated two of their rather thick textbooks on elven history. He balanced one each on the palms of Shaundar’s hands. “Hold those up,” sneered the elf lord, “until I tell you to stop.” With that, he turned to the class and began the day’s lesson.

His father’s admonishment, to submit to whatever punishment Professor Durothil saw fit to demand, echoed back in Shaundar’s thoughts. So be it, then. He braced his shoulders and determined to hold the books aloft. After a few minutes, his shoulders and arms began to ache horribly with the effort, but Lord Durothil carried blithely on with the lesson, sparing no more thought to Shaundar Sunfall.

After a few more minutes had passed, during which Shaundar had begun to grit his teeth, he realized with a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach that the Professor did not intend for him to succeed at this task. Shaundar noticed the elf lord cast a quick, sideways glance at him out of the corner of an amethyst and citrine eye, which then widened slightly in surprise and returned quickly to the other students. Yathar was beginning to fidget in his chair. Narissa and Selena were not concentrating on the lesson anymore, but were watching Shaundar with wide, horrified eyes.

Several more minutes passed. The Professor stole a couple more glances in Shaundar's direction. Shaundar's arms began to tremble and sweat beaded on his brow. Stubbornly he continued to stand as ordered. He locked his shoulders and elbows into place, even though by now all his muscles were screaming in agony. He was not going to allow the Professor to get the better of him! Beside the point, that was all he needed; Lord Durothil telling his father that he had not only struck another student, but had refused to complete the prescribed punishment. There would be no hope of going on patrol with his father over the summer then!

He dared to glance at the hourglass that Captain Durothil kept on his desk. More than half an hour had gone by! He had never heard of anyone being required to do this for so long. The girls were beginning to look very upset, and even Laeroth's self-satisfied expression had mutated into some kind of scowl that might have been irritation or concern.

Yathar, unable to contain himself anymore, was waving his hand to be heard.

“Yes, Yathar?” the Professor drawled.

“Sir,” he began uncertainly, “it’s been thirty-four minutes . . .”

Yathar’s father cut him off with a snarl. “You leave Sunfall’s discipline to me, boy, and mind your own business!”

“But sir!” Yathar burst out, indignant and horrified.

The Professor slammed his book down on the edge of Yathar’s desk, from which Yathar recoiled. “Protest any further, Durothil, and you will join him.”

Yathar slumped back, defeated.

More time passed. Shaundar lost track of it at that point. He was dimly aware that at some time, Narissa excused herself to use the outhouse because she brushed past him, but mostly, the whole world had degenerated into white-hot pain. His vision was blurred by the tears of agony leaking from his eyes, his whole body trembled, and it felt like every part of him from the base of his skull to his waist were on fire.

The door of the schoolhouse opened and Narissa’s father, Admiral Lord Alastrarra, walked into the schoolroom.

“Numilor,” he began, addressing Lord Durothil, “might I have a word” He trailed off as his eyes met Shaundar’s, who radiated a plea of mercy at him with all of his might.

“What did he do?” the Admiral asked quietly.

Lord Durothil waved a dismissive hand in Shaundar’s direction. “He struck another student with his haversack full of books.”

Lord Alastrarra’s eyes, sea-foam green like his daughter’s, narrowed slightly. Shaundar felt his hopes disintegrate, and he just about burst into tears and surrendered, but then miraculously, Narissa’s father demanded, “How long has he been like this?”

“A while, sir,” responded the Professor vaguely, but Yathar spoke up immediately. “Almost a full hour, sir,” he proclaimed at the same time. The reproach in his voice was unmistakable.

Lord Admiral Alastrarra pursed his lips. “Well then, I think that is probably sufficient, don’t you? He’s not in the Navy yet, after all.”

Lord Durothil frowned but covered it quickly. “Must have lost track of time,” he mumbled. “Sunfall, you may stand down.”

He gasped with relief and lowered his arms. The books fell lifelessly from his hands, which no longer had the strength to carry anything. They turned immediately from an unnatural white to a hideous purple as the blood rushed back into them. He bit back a cry as fire

nerve pain raced along the same path. His muscles spasmed uncontrollably.

Shaundar slowly bent to pick up the textbooks, but he realized that Narissa had beaten him to it, and she was standing up and offering the books to the Professor. She said nothing. Her oceanic eyes were glistening. He wondered if she had used the outhouse as an excuse to fetch her father, since their home was not far from here. If so, he was grateful beyond words.

So he reached for his haversack instead, and found himself unable to close his fingers around it. They were numb. He tried a couple of times but simply could not force his hand to curl properly. Lord Durothil took the textbooks from Narissa and observed Shaundar with detachment, making no move to assist.

After watching him make a few more attempts, the Professor's lip curled into a snarl, but before he could say anything, Lord Alastarra had the haversack in his hand. "Where's your seat, son?" he asked of Shaundar compassionately.

"Next to Yathar, sir," he answered, biting back his tears of gratitude.

The Admiral carried the book bag over to Shaundar's desk and inquired of the Professor, "What's the subject today?"

"The history of Cormanthyr, sir," Lord Durothil replied sourly.

Narissa's father took the history textbook out of Shaundar's bag and laid it on his deck. "I don't suppose you know what page they're on?"

"Page 42, sir," Yathar piped up helpfully.

Shaundar was amazed when Lord Admiral Alastrarra opened the textbook to the required page. "I imagine you'll have to get Yathar to help you turn the pages until the feeling comes back to your fingers," he told Shaundar mildly. "If it hasn't fixed itself by the end of the day, I'm sure your mother's prayers will take care of it well enough."

Shaundar, who was still in enough pain to be struggling not to cry, thanked Narissa's father meekly.

"Now," said the Admiral, "if I might speak with you, Captain . . ."

"Av, *quessir*," replied Lord Durothil, and he followed Lord Alastrarra out.

"Thank you," Shaundar said in a thin voice to Narissa.

"I had to do *something*," she sniffled.

Laeroth and his friends said nothing, but their expressions were troubled. From that point on, though they might bully Shaundar if they

caught him by himself in town or in the woods, they never did so again at school.

Chapter Two

Summer had finally arrived! Somehow, Shaundar had made it, and his father had not changed his mind about taking him aboard his ship. Selena was disappointed. Most of the time, the two Sunfall siblings were included in everything that one or the other might be involved in, being so similar in age; but this time, Rear Admiral Sunfall had ruled that Selena was still too young to be going out into wildspace, and she would have to stay home. It would just be Shaundar and his dad; though Uncle Madrimlian's ship, a Man-o-War class known as the *Ruamarillys "Starflower"* was assigned to the Rear Admiral's flotilla, so Shaundar would likely see him over the course of the summer as well.

All week Shaundar had been at the docks, lending a hand with the loading. It was a mind-boggling process, keeping track of all the provisions, which had to be taken into orbit bit by bit in flitters, since elven Armada-class ships were incapable of landfall. It was amazing how many things were required to feed the crew of a dreadnaught! First there came the dried provisions; waybread, dried fruits, peas and beans, pemmican and cornbread (innovations of the green elves borrowed by the Imperial Elven Navy,) and these in scores of enormous wooden crates. Next were the preserves; fruit preserves, pickles of all sorts, magically-sealed and preserved citrus fruits to prevent Sailor's Disease, these in scores of slightly smaller crates that were easier to carry. They were followed by barrel after crate full of baking and cooking supplies:

flour, honey, baking powder, yeast, spices, and butter in magically-preserved containers. After that came crates and crates of various kinds of nuts. Then came all the fresh foods, some of which were in the form of items that kept well (such as apples, potatoes and cheeses,) some in the form of carefully-tended live plants (like the miniature orange trees and the potted beans) and some were in the form of live animals (domesticated fowl for eggs, rabbits for fresh meat.) Flitter after flitter carried the items and creatures into the stars, where a large butterfly appeared to be hovering. Shaundar knew that was his father's – and now, his – ship, the *Aerdrie's Pride*.

Ammunition for the siege weaponry went up after that. Shaundar's young eyes had never seen so many ballistae bolts and catapult stones. The large bolts were crafted with wicked-looking sharp heads that had all the care in their creation of legendary elven arrows. The catapult shot came in three sizes; boulders, bigger boulders, and shot-put-sized spheres that Uncle Madrimlian referred to cheekily as "grapeshot." Each stone was carefully shaped to be as properly round as possible, so that it would fly with little resistance or change of course. Of course, that didn't matter once the stone had left the air envelope of a ship, but even a little wind resistance in the wrong place could change a trajectory just enough to ruin the shot, or so Shaundar's father had told him.

After that, the sailors were directed to roll hundreds of plum-wood barrels onto flitter after flitter. Most of them simply smelled like spring water, but maybe a third smelled of *quesstiasa*, a potent elven

spirit distilled from fruit nectar and honey under moonlight. “Why so much *quesstiasa*?” Shaundar asked of Lianna, who was rolling barrels with him.

She laughed out loud. “It’s the taut of *alu’quesst*!” she explained. “It comes from groundling sailor tradition, I think. Each spacehand gets one taut of *alu’quesst* a day. It’s about half water and half spirits, with a dollop of sweet. It’s easier and cheaper to make than wine, and it keeps better.”

Shaundar had heard of *alu’quesst*, but he had no idea what was in it. He supposed that explained why his father and all the other Navy officers he knew drank it.

Lianna smiled widely and added, “Humans use rum instead, and they call it grog.”

Shaundar made a face. He could not imagine why they would drink rum, himself; to him, the stuff smelled vile.

Last came flitters full of shipbuilding supplies; huge coils of rope as thick as Ruavel Sunfall’s arms, wood planks in various sizes, thick and heavy sailcloth, and vats of some sticky, dark amber coloured, resinous substance that the spacehands simply referred to as “putty.” It smelled like pine trees to Shaundar.

“If you think that smells funny,” Lianna laughed, “you should smell the stuff the humans use. They make it out of *tar*!”

Shaundar wrinkled up his nose. He could not imagine putting tar in the creases and chinks of elven ships. Since they were living plants, they would no doubt be poisoned.

The day before they were scheduled to ship out, Shaundar already had everything packed; two regular and one formal dress uniform, one set of civilian clothing, field manual, stellar compass, spellbook, short swords (real ones, not wooden practice models!), journal, an *Espruar*/Common dictionary (Shaundar actually spoke the humans' Common trade tongue fairly fluently, having been raised on the docks, but you never knew when something new might come up,) his limited spell components (he was only performing cantrips, but a few of them still required material items and he might have an opportunity to continue magical training aboard ship,) penny whistle, juggling balls, *kholiast* cards and counters, his latest ship model pieces and paints, sketch paper and charcoal, and a strongbox full of coins; most of his allowance over the past year, saved diligently for this trip. They were scheduled to make a voyage to Toril at the end of their patrol, which was the primary world of the sphere, and the legendary kingdom of Evermeet to attend an audience with His Majesty King Zaor and receive their new orders. Shaundar had not been to Evermeet since he was very small, but he remembered the small family estate there very well, with its thick green branches and ancient secrets. He also thought he remembered a sparkling city almost entirely made of crystal. He could not wait to get back there to find out!

They were leaving once the sun was down, because Ruavel Sunfall believed that it was a bad omen to sail without being able to see the stars. He recommended with a smile that Shaundar try to get a little reverie before they sailed, but there was simply no hope of that. He was far too excited! He fidgeted and ran around, finally breaking a vase filled with flowers and earning banishment to the outdoors from his mother. Shaundar went without complaint. Selene Sunfall never sounded upset about these things; she just calmly handed Shaundar a mop and then a broom while she picked up the larger pieces and the flowers. When he meekly apologized she just smiled. “I didn’t like that vase much anyway,” she said. “Your father brought it back from Wa and I think it was gaudy. Don’t tell him I said that though!”

So Shaundar had a perfect vantage point from the huge tree branch he had managed to climb – which was, technically, part of the roof of the Sunfall manor – to see Lord Durothil and Yathar coming up the walk. He chose not to reveal his presence; it was generally better to avoid Lord Durothil. Both of them were dressed in Navy uniforms, and most promisingly, Yathar had a large haversack with him. Captain Durothil rang the bell purposefully.

Selene answered it. “Ah, yes, Lord Durothil,” she acknowledged respectfully, followed by a formal bow; which the Captain returned. “We received His Majesty’s letter and Ruavel would, of course, be happy to take Yathar on board. He’s at the docks but he’s coming back to collect Shaundar for the voyage, if you would like to leave Yathar here.”

Shaundar suppressed a cheer. Yathar was coming with them? That was fantastic!

Yathar's father nodded curtly. "I suppose there's no harm in that," he agreed. He looked down at his son and admonished, "Stay out of trouble, Yathar, and remember the honour of our House."

"*Av, quessir,*" he responded almost impertinently, sketching the uniquely elven salute of the Imperial Navy; hand touched briefly to heart, then extended out towards the Captain with the palm up and open, though one's arm remained bent at the elbow. But Captain Durothil did not notice his son's irony. Grimly he returned the salute, nodded briefly to Selene, and turned on his heel to depart.

Yathar bit his bottom lip and watched him go, but Selene touched his shoulder and then hugged him when he looked around at her. "We're glad to have you, Yathar," she told him happily. "I'm sure Shaundar will be delighted to see you."

Shaundar hopped down from the roof with two skips and a jump. He was filthy and grinning. "Maybe we'll be in the same quarters!" he laughed hopefully.

"More than likely," Shaundar's mother agreed with an exasperated smile. "But Rualith, if you don't get changed into your uniform and clean up right away, your father will have a cat."

His heart started beating rapidly. He fled into his room and followed his mother's advice.

Yathar sighed as he watched his friend leave. If Shaundar only knew how envious he was! His parents were willing to be affectionate, even if they were often tough on him. Yathar could not remember whether or not his father had ever hugged him.

When he returned, Shaundar was the picture of a young elven Midshipman; uniform buttoned and neatly pressed, boots polished to mirror sheen, hair tied back with a ribbon in a tight ponytail, and the pin of his family crest firmly affixed to his collar. He wore no other signs of rank. Technically, an elf was not allowed to officially join the Navy until she or he had reached the age of majority, which for elves was one hundred standard years of age. However, Navy elves were permitted to bring their families along on voyages with a low expectation of combat; so many Navy officers "apprenticed" their children or the children of other officers as cabin boys and girls. That way, when their children finally did reach the age of majority, their previous years of experience and unofficial service counted towards the long, arduous process of earning promotions, and they were accustomed to shipboard life.

Selene Sunfall smiled. "You boys both look so great!" she exclaimed with joy.

"I wish I was going too," lamented Selena, who had followed Shaundar out.

“You’ll get your chance in a couple of years,” Ruavel Sunfall told her gently as he came up the walk. As usual, Mom’s advice was perfectly timed. “Are you boys ready to go?”

“*Av, quessir!*” they replied in unison, and saluted. Then they started to giggle because their response was completely unplanned.

Smiling just a little at the corner of his mouth, Rear Admiral Sunfall returned the salute.

Selena bounded forward and threw her arms around her brother.

“Stay out of trouble, little sister,” he urged her affectionately as he embraced her as well.

“I’ll try,” was her dubious reply. Her eyes were wide and teary.

He pried himself from her grip and bowed in the formal elven fashion, which she reflected back at him. “Sweet water and light laughter . . .” he began the traditional farewell.

Selena joined in with, “. . . until we next meet.”

“You take your own advice, Rualith,” Shaundar’s mother admonished him gently as she bent a little to hug him. Selene was very long and slender, still a little taller than Shaundar, who was already looking most of the ladies of the community in the eye.

“I’ll try, Mom,” he promised. He had every intention of doing just that.

“You too, Yathar,” she advised, putting her arms around him also.

“*Avavaen, etriel,*” he nodded in agreement, using a more proper “yes” instead of “aye,” and addressing her with the term of respect for a distinguished elven lady. But he embraced her too.

The two elven boys followed Rear Admiral Sunfall as he headed to his ship, and Selene watched them go with only the barest shimmer of tears in her eyes.

Once at the docks, the Admiral turned and clasped the two boys by the shoulders. “I have a gift for you two,” he said. “As cabin boys, it’s very important you be able to make accurate time. Now, these are gnomish items I’m told, but they work – I’ve tried them out to be sure – so don’t let that deter you.” He removed not one, but two small wooden boxes from his coat, and presented one to each of the boys.

Shaundar opened his wooden box; where he found a gleaming round timepiece, made, perhaps of brass. It opened like a locket to reveal an almost too small to be believed clock face; tiny little numbers and tiny little hands pointing at them. He removed it from its box to reveal a long brass chain with a clip at its end.

“They call it a pocket watch,” Admiral Sunfall announced. “You clip it on the inside of your pocket, and then you always know what time it is.”

Shaundar was delighted, and Yathar’s smile swallowed his whole face. “It’s brilliant,” he beamed, and Shaundar agreed. “Thank you, sir!” he exclaimed.

A rare smile touched the corners of the Rear Admiral’s mouth. “Now then,” he said, “let us make sure that our watches are synchronized. Your main jobs will be to keep the watch, turn the glass and ring the bell. Let’s be sure we’re keeping the same time so that I don’t call you to task.” He pulled a similar watch from his own pocket and the two boys made adjustments until their watches kept exactly the same time as Lord Sunfall’s.

“Good!” the Admiral nodded once that had been accomplished. “Now, let’s go see our ship, shall we?”

The flitter that would carry them was perched on the dock like a butterfly alighting on a flower. It was a faint pinkish-purple with green at the tips of its wings. Up close, you could see the veins running through the leaves that formed the wings of the small boat. The pilot who powered the flitter saluted in the elven fashion when they approached his craft. Lord Sunfall returned it, and after a moment’s hesitation, so did the boys.

“Ready, sir?” inquired the pilot, a young moon elven man with a stern ponytail. He looked vaguely familiar to Shaundar.

“Let’s go,” he confirmed, and he and the boys boarded the flitter.

Quarters inside were Spartan and compact. Low beams, which were actually the veins of the plant, were parallel with Shaundar’s father’s brow, and most of the space inside seemed to be occupied by a large, padded chair; the helm.

Spelljamming ships were powered by different sources of motive force. The most common type was magical. A spellcaster would sit in one of these specially-enchanted chairs, named after the large wheels that drive large marine craft, and their magical energy would be converted into motive force to propel the vessel. Shaundar heard some of the spelljammers (that’s what the pilots who powered the helms were called) talk about their trade in the dockyard pubs. They described flying their ships like they were the ships themselves. Much of a ship’s ability to move through space depended upon the will of the spelljammer; this much, Shaundar knew. He thought it sounded amazing, and it was one of the reasons he was working at magical studies.

The pilot took his seat and his eyes glazed over. “Taking her out, sir,” he said, and they began to lift off of the ground.

Shaundar and Yathar each took a porthole and gazed down at the ground below as it receded. The top of the Sunfall house soon looked like a dollhouse, and for just a moment, the air became cold enough that breath plumed from their mouths like Lord Sunfall's pipe smoke. With that, the sky turned from the purple of twilight to black, and all the multitude of stars in the sphere emerged from their hiding places.

The *Aerdrie's Pride* awaited them, her great wings extended like a canopy. She was golden and green, but in most other ways she simply appeared to be a larger version of the flitter that carried them. Her wings were tilted and extended so that they stretched out more like a bird's at full extension, and a command post – a small keep, actually – was perched in between them on what would have been the thorax, if the craft actually had been the butterfly it resembled. Beneath her on the port side, to which she was attached by great thick hawser ropes, Shaundar could see a great twisted length of wood; one of Garden's many incredible roots. He noticed several people moving in and out of a small building perched on a disk far below from which the root seemed to be sprouting.

The pilot steered their flitter along the port side of the Armada's abdomen and beside one of those great wings. "Coming level to the gravity plane, sir," the pilot reported. Shaundar nodded. Basic spelljamming metaphysics: all things had gravity. Larger objects had more gravity than smaller objects. A spelljamming craft's gravity plane ran parallel to its helm and out to the distance of its air envelope; as a matter of fact, the gravity caused the air envelope to form. So, if a

smaller object were to approach a larger object in a way that was contrary to its gravity plane, it would change the gravity plane of the smaller object, and the passengers of the flitter might find themselves falling suddenly towards the starboard wing, for example!

“Slowing to tactical one,” murmured the pilot. Spelljamming ships all travelled at about the same rate when they were covering long distances, but when they came into range of any other gravity well, they slowed to a speed dependant on the magical abilities of the spelljammer flying the craft and the power of the helm in use. However, a jammer could voluntarily travel more slowly; often a good idea when docking, Shaundar would imagine!

Now that they were close to the Armada, Shaundar could see that the wings were actually straightened into flight decks, which were covered with a small swarm of flitters with several elves moving about between them. “Coming in for docking, sir,” their pilot announced, gaining back just a little bit more of the focus in his expression.

One of the elves on the deck raised two torches limned with faerie fire and began to wave them to their starboard side. Obediently their pilot swung the flitter slightly starboard. The signaller waved them forward, and then Shaundar noticed an empty spot on the deck, which she indicated. The pilot hovered the flitter gently over the deck’s empty spot, and when the signaller crossed her arms, he landed. There was barely a shudder.

“Touchdown, sir,” he told Shaundar’s father with a smile.

“Stand down, *Sy’Ruan*,” the Admiral nodded.

“*Av, quessir*,” he replied, and he stood up from the helm and shook himself like he was shaking off water. A low thrumming noise that Shaundar hadn’t noticed until then ceased. He found he missed it immediately.

“Will our duties include piloting flitters, sir?” Yathar inquired hopefully. “We’re *Sy’Ruani* too, aren’t we?”

The Rear Admiral laughed. “Well, we’ll train you to do it, if your magical abilities are sufficient to the task. But it won’t be part of your official duties, no. Not until you officially join the Navy in about sixty years – if you choose to do that.” With that, he stepped off of the flitter and onto the deck of the *Aerdrie’s Pride*. The pilot smiled. “Welcome aboard, boys,” he said. “The name’s Garan Oakheart. We’ll probably be bunking together.” He followed the Admiral. Yathar looked at Shaundar with a raised eyebrow, and they both stepped onto the deck behind them.

A small sun elven woman was approaching them briskly, followed by a larger moon elven male. She was wearing a variation of the officer’s uniform, with crescents at the collar. He was clad in a much more practical looking uniform with less buttons and embroidery, and more solid wool and leather. They both saluted the Rear Admiral.

He returned it. “Welcome back, sir,” the gold elven maid smiled. “It’s been pretty quiet; you’ll be pleased to hear. The pirates out of Darkroot have been keeping a low profile since the incident at H’Catha, the beholders are keeping their wars to themselves for the moment, and aside from the usual smuggling attempts for contraband, we’ve had no real trouble.”

“I *am* pleased to hear it,” he nodded. “A good time to train new Midshipmen, then! Aliatha, this is my son Shaundar, and my son’s best friend, Yathar Durothil. Boys, Aliatha Leafbower, First Mate.”

They both saluted immediately. She acknowledged with her own and there was a flash of approval in her cinnamon coloured eyes.

Lord Sunfall indicated the rougher-looking silver elf. “This is Bo’sun Naivon. I assume you’ve found them quarters?”

The silver elf nodded. “*Av, quessir*. Should be easy enough to bunk them with the other *Sy’Ruani*. Might be a bit of a tight squeeze with Stretch, here –” he indicated Shaundar – “since I was expecting boys, but we’ll manage.”

“Well, it won’t hurt them to learn that things have to fit in small spaces aboard ship,” the Rear Admiral noted, “and let’s face it. *Aerdrie’s* a bit of a luxury liner.”

“*Av, quessir*,” the Boatswain agreed.

“Are you ready to get back at it, sir?” the Matey inquired of Lord Sunfall.

“*Av, Aia’Ruan,*” he replied with a single nod. “I am ready to relieve you.”

“I am ready to be relieved,” recited the First Mate with all the reverence of ritual.

“There’s nothing else?”

“Our position is in stable orbit above Nedethil on the periphery of the dark side, local time 9 p.m., ship time three bells of the forenoon watch, and Lieutenant Wintervale is in the helm.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed the Rear Admiral. “Then I relieve you, Matey.”

“I stand relieved, sir.”

“I have the deck and the conn.”

“*Av, quessir,* you have the deck and the conn,” she affirmed.

The Boatswain raised a horn to his mouth and bellowed, “Attention to the bridge! Skipper’s got the deck and the conn!”

The cry was repeated by other crew members, who yelled it still further down the line, until, Shaundar was certain, the whole ship was informed.

“Go stow your gear, boys,” Shaundar’s father instructed them. “I have to get to work. Bo’sun, did you bunk them with the other Midshipmen?”

“*Av, quessir,*” he affirmed.

“Right then; back to your station. *Sy’Ruan*, you can show them where to hang their hammocks.”

Garan Oakheart saluted. “*Av, quessir,*” he acknowledged, and when the Rear Admiral nodded his dismissal, he smiled at the boys and said, “We’ll find you room; come on.”

Obediently Shaundar followed the senior Midshipman as his father and the First Mate headed for the bridge.

Yathar was suspicious. “Are you related to Laeroth Oakheart?” he inquired.

“My brother,” the Midshipman nodded. “I understand that he’s a bit of an ass, though, so I hope you won’t hold that against me.” His green eyes sparkled.

Yathar grinned. So did Shaundar.

He headed to the center of the deck, in front of one of the command post buildings, and pulled a trap door open to reveal a hatchway leading down. Shaundar cast a look into its depths dubiously. He shouldered his bag and hoped that he would fit.

They followed Garan down, almost (but not quite) getting stuck, through four decks. Shaundar caught a glimpse of crates, a ballista, and a passageway full of very official-looking doors before they reached the passage that Garan was looking for. He hopped off the ladder into it like a monkey. “This way,” he said to the boys. Shaundar shrugged and followed, with Yathar right behind him.

He led them down a claustrophobic corridor into an alcove where several hammocks were dangling from the roof. A sphere of light, which Shaundar knew from his magical studies was known as a *Nchaser’s Glowing Globe*, swung from a corner in a buoy net, providing light. Below them, a hodgepodge living area of blankets, board games and random personal items was laid out on the floor, where a pair of gold elves, a boy and girl slightly older than the boys, were playing at dice and passing a pipe back and forth. They looked up when the three of them came in.

“Junior Midshipmen’s Quarters,” Garan announced. “Those look like new hammocks there and there –” he indicated them – “so I guess that’s where you’re bunked. There’s lockers below to stow your gear in. And these are our bunkmates, Casaro Auglamyr and Tyelatae Dahast.”

Tyelatae wrinkled up her nose. “What kind of elf are you?” she demanded of Shaundar.

“Have a care,” Garan said to her in a cautionary tone. “The skipper’s son, that’s what kind of elf he is.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, suitably chastised. “Well, make yourself at home then, boys.”

Shaundar suppressed a smirk. Sounded like things were going to be much more fun on ship than they were on land! He found an empty locker and started stuffing his things into it. Yathar did the same.

Garan reached for the pipe in Casaro’s hands, which Casaro passed over, and he took a couple of draws off of it, filling the close quarters with smoke. He passed the pipe over to Yathar with a questioning look. Yathar looked at him, looked at the pipe, and with twinkling eyes he took it and puffed at it. He managed not to cough despite the fact that Shaundar knew that this was the first time he had ever tried tobacco. He then passed it over to Shaundar with a challenging grin.

Shaundar knew perfectly well that all of their parents would roast them alive if they were caught smoking, but he had always been curious. Besides, he was being included! He took the pipe, which was a simple wooden piece, put the stem in his mouth and drew the smoke

without inhaling it, just like he had seen his father do a thousand times. He didn't cough either. The smoke tasted faintly of roses. He liked it.

He handed the pipe over to Tyelatae, who fastened it between her teeth firmly and puffed steadily at it as she took her turn at the dice. She rolled two sixes. "Hah! Double crowns!" she cheered. "Hand over your money, Casaro."

"Hmm, smoking and gambling," Yathar snickered. "So we're *trying* to annoy our parents, I guess?"

"Don't tell me that you're afraid of your parents," Tyelatae sneered.

"Hey, this is Yathar Durothil," Garan informed the Midshipmen. "Have you met Captain Durothil?"

"Yeah, he scares *me*," Casaro admitted.

"To answer your question," Yathar piped up sourly, "in this case, not particularly. I am sure my father wouldn't care if I chose to smoke or gamble, as long as I didn't do either in polite company."

Tyelatae nodded thoughtfully as she collected her winnings. "So, what's your name, Skipper's Son?"

"Shaundar," he replied.

“Nice to meet you, Shaundar,” she greeted him. “You want another pull on this before you have to go up on deck? You two should be by Navigation sounding us out of harbour right quick.” She offered the pipe back to him.

“Thanks,” he smiled, and just to be polite, he did take another puff at it.

“She’s right,” Garan confessed. “We should probably hurry. I’ll show you lads what to do.”

“See you after your watch!” Casaro mumbled, watching mournfully as Tyelatae collected his coins.

The boys followed Garan once again, as he came back up the corridor and passageway and marched out onto the deck. He led them over to a large silver bell in a wooden frame, big enough to fit both boys underneath it, covered by a sort of half-dome. A rubber-tipped striker was dangling from the frame beside it. There was also a very large hourglass in a wire frame pouring sand busily into its other half. It was just about halfway through this process.

“Do either of you remember what time the Admiral said it was when you came aboard and the Matey was giving her report?” Garan queried.

“Local time 9 p.m.,” Yathar answered.

“Ship time three bells of the forenoon watch,” Shaundar responded.

“Good!” Garan beamed. “So that means that the next time it’s time to strike the bell, it will be four bells of the forenoon watch, so you strike the bell four times; that’s twice, pause, and twice again. You lads know how to keep ship time, don’t you?”

“Av!” the boys confirmed, nodding. There were six watches on a ship of four hours each (or seven, if you counted the two half-length dog watches), and the bell was struck to keep time every half hour; once at the half hour, twice at the hour, three times at the hour and a half, and so forth, to a total of eight bells at the end of the watch. The glass was turned at each time that the bell was rung. And this was all very important, because distance was measured by time spent travelling, and its accuracy was essential to successful navigation.

“Well then, I won’t go into it any further,” said Garan. “The junior Midshipmen keep the time by tradition, and that’s you lads.”

“Av, *quessir*,” they chorused.

Garan laughed. “I’m the same rank you are, don’t *quessir* me!”

“Sorry,” Shaundar smiled. “I knew that; it’s just that it’s habit.”

“So what do you think?” Yathar asked Shaundar. “Do you want to split it up at the dog watches?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Garan interjected. “Casaro’s still junior enough to take a shift at that too. Why don’t you split it into three two-watch shifts? Or, you could split it into two three-watch rotations.”

That made sense to Shaundar. He looked to Yathar and shrugged.

“Av, sounds good,” he agreed.

“Now then, we await the skipper’s word, and then we sound us out of harbour,” Garan explained. “You know how to do that, lads?”

“Av, Garan,” Shaundar nodded. “The bell is struck in three patterns of three strikes, separated by a pause between them. But isn’t the Yeoman supposed to be doing that job?”

“He reads the field manual,” Yathar explained with a teasing smile.

“Wouldn’t hurt you to do that either, Durothil,” Garan admonished gently. “Your friend’s research is paying off for him.”

Yathar was almost startled. He wasn’t used to being the one that was chastised! He smiled. Garan was right; he really should have been studying more. It was nice to be treated fairly for once, even if he was being scolded; and Shaundar was glowing under that small bit of praise. “Av, Garan. I’ll try to follow his example.”

Shaundar cast a quick sceptical glance in his direction. Was Yathar making fun of him? But then he saw the serious expression in Yathar's eyes and smiled a bit more.

Garan smiled back. "And to answer your question, Mr. Sunfall; yes, but it's our tradition to let our newest greenhorns sound us out of harbour when we have them. It's our nod to Aerdrrie, who respects change."

Just then, the Boatswain appeared on the deck with his horn and he called into it, "All hands to your stations! Prepare to make sail!"

Garan cupped his hands to his mouth and hollered down the deck, "All hands prepare to make sail!" It was repeated somewhere out of Shaundar's sight, and again somewhere beyond that in both directions.

The deck came alive with spacehands climbing rigging, securing and releasing lines, opening sails, checking the landing gear of the flitters, and fastening down anything loose on the deck. Shaundar tried to watch it all at once.

"Stand to your lines!" bellowed the Boatswain, and sailors headed out on the port side wing to stand by the thick hawser lines.

Boatswain Naivon then turned to face the boys. "Which one of you young lads would like the honour of sounding us out?" he asked with a smile. "Garan did explain about that, didn't he?"

“Av, Bo’sun,” Shaundar and Yathar said as they met each other’s eyes. “Go ahead,” Yathar encouraged Shaundar.

“Are you sure?” Shaundar questioned uncertainly.

“I’ll take first watch,” he smiled back. “So I get to ring the bell next.”

Shaundar grinned at Yathar and clasped him on the shoulder. He took the striker in his hand.

The Boatswain nodded just once and then looked to the bridge. On the other side of glass windows stood Shaundar’s father, proud and firmly in his element in his Navy uniform. Boatswain Naivon saluted, and the Rear Admiral returned the salute and nodded.

“Mr. Sunfall,” said the Boatswain, “sound us out of harbour.”

“Av, Bo’sun!” he affirmed, and he struck the bell; three times, then a pause, then thrice more, and a pause, then three more times. Two of the strokes caught the edge of the bell and came out more muffled than the rest, but he thought he managed all right.

“Not bad, Mr. Sunfall,” said the Boatswain encouragingly. Shaundar grinned.

Boatswain Naivon put the horn to his mouth again and roared “Cast off!”

“Cast off!” went the call up the deck, and the spacehands standing to the hawsers unfastened the knots holding them.

Slowly, the *Aerdrie’s Pride* began to move forward.

“Pitch five degrees up, yaw ten degrees starboard!” the Boatswain directed. This, too, was repeated down the deck. Through a complex symphony of ropes being moved by several sailors, some of the sails on the port side unfurled and some of the sails on the foremast were tilted slightly to face more upwards, like wings. The *Aerdrie’s Pride* began to turn up and to the right. She also began to increase her speed.

“Straighten the yaw!” the Boatswain cried, and the spacehands began to reel in and fasten down most of the port sails they had unfurled. The *Aerdrie’s Pride* stopped turning to the right, though she continued to climb. She pulled away from Garden’s root to reveal a whole field of stars in every imaginable colour; infinite possibilities just waiting to be discovered.

Shaundar was grinning like an idiot. He laughed out loud! Yathar was cheering. Garan and the Boatswain laughed with them. “Think we’ve got some more starhands here, sir,” Naivon grinned at Garan.

“Poor lost fools,” he chuckled conspiratorially in return.

Rear Admiral Sunfall strode out onto the deck and was greeted by a round of salutes. He folded his arms. “Not bad, Mr. Sunfall,” he said, “But in the future, be mindful of striking the bell on her edge.”

Shaundar’s smile disappeared. “*Av, quessir,*” he sighed.

Shaundar had never worked so hard in his life! Cabin boys’ duties, along with keeping the time, also included helping in the kitchen, scraping space barnacles, polishing brass, mending sails, distributing the taut of *alu’quesst*, and naturally, swabbing the deck. He never seemed to do these things precisely right; he kept missing a spot when polishing the brass, or not putting enough oil on the deck to polish it properly, or making a mess of his sewing. He was in constant trouble with his father for his sloppy work and his bad attitude. He found himself eating about twice as much as he did on land and he needed every bit of it. He and Yathar both put on a fair bit of muscle over the three months of the voyage, and just to add insult to injury, he got even taller. It took Shaundar some getting used to in order to reverie in the hammock, which was just barely long enough for him, but he managed it. Sometimes he was so tired that he actually fell asleep instead of into reverie. But he never missed the turning of the glass or the ringing of the bell, no matter how weary he was; not once.

Life below deck, however, was fairly good. Garan seemed to consider it his personal responsibility to look out for the younger

Midshipmen and he acted almost like a big brother to them all. Shaundar was reasonably sure that his father would not approve of most of the activities that went on below deck; or, at the very least, he would not approve of Shaundar participating in them. They diced, smoked, played cards and drank. By the time the voyage was done, he was a fair hand at High Paladin and not too shabby at *kholiast* either. He did everything but the drinking; he figured he was already in trouble enough for being sloppy and/or late for things, so how much worse would that get if he were also drunk? He did actually study magic as well, a fact that earned him derision from most of his bunkmates except Garan, who encouraged him, and Yathar, whose teasing was gentle. He also applied himself diligently to learning everything taught to the young Midshipmen; navigation, sword-work, metaphysics, trigonometry. He loved everything about being aboard ship and worked very hard to be good at it all, even though his father seemed to despair of him ever being up to the task.

His least favourite task was the barnacle-scraping. The stubborn things had feet that dug right into the ship's wood. It took hours of prying, digging and scraping to remove them. Little splinters of wood often came loose with the barnacles and then putty and wood bits had to be applied to seal the wound before it affected the rest of the plant. It was backbreaking hard work.

One day, frustrated by the tedium of the task, he was struck by an inspiration. He took his spellbook out of his pocket and flipped through it. It had been given to him by his mother when he had expressed an interest in magic, and most of the spells were fairly

utilitarian in nature. He thought he remembered something that would be especially handy in this situation.

Ah, there it was! Did he have the necessary components? Well, there was no shortage of wood bits. And string? Well, his canvas work shirt was a little threadbare. One of those threads would surely come loose with a little encouragement . . .

He read over the spell a few times and fixed the proper sequence of gestures in his mind. Then he went over the correct pronunciation of the arcane formulae. When he was certain he had it, he began the casting sequence, invoked the arcane energies, intoned the formulae, and brought the sliver and thread together.

They both vanished in a flash of light. For a split second, Shaundar thought that it had failed. But then a wind blew around him and a transparent humanoid silhouette appeared before him, watching him with smoky intangible eyes.

“I did it!” Shaundar exclaimed with surprise and joy.

He looked to his book, and realizing that it would only last for an hour or so, he said to the creature, “We’re scraping barnacles. Take this file and pry them loose. Try not to damage the wood too much. I’ll seal the chinks with putty.”

Obediently the creature started digging out the stubborn, rock-hard barnacles. It was much better at it than Shaundar was. He finished the job in record time.

“Thanks!” he said gratefully to the creature when the spell reached its duration and it began to dissipate.

He returned to the Midshipmen’s cabin and used the extra time to go over the spell again, and to see if he could figure out another spell or two. So when Garan returned from his work shift, wiping the sweat from his brow, Shaundar was already there.

“What are you doing loafing about here?” he demanded.

“I’m not loafing!” protested Shaundar. “Well, okay, I guess I am loafing, but I finished scraping the barnacles like I was told to do and I haven’t been assigned anything else.”

“Already?” Garan exclaimed incredulously as he sank down on his hammock. “How did you manage that?”

“I cast an *Unseen Servant*,” returned Shaundar smugly.

Garan leaned forward and studied him intently. “Did you? Did you *really*?”

Shaundar said nothing. He was a little nervous suddenly. What was Garan about? Had he broken some rule again?

Garan hauled himself to his feet and started to stride down the corridor.

Shaundar stood up too. “Where are you going?” he asked anxiously.

“To speak to the Skipper!” was Garan’s reply as he began to ascend the passageway to the deck.

Shaundar groaned and put his face in his hands. He should have known! Now he was in trouble for not doing the whole job himself! He flopped down in his hammock, completely disconsolate. Now what would he have to do? Peel all the potatoes in the galley? Scrub the brass with a toothbrush? Worst of all, he would have to face his father, of course.

He was completely unsurprised when the call came a few minutes later. “Mr. Sunfall! On the deck on the double, if you please!”

Well, there was no point in delay. He resigned himself to face his father’s wrath. “*Av, quessir!*” he bellowed up the passage, and made haste.

It was exactly as he had feared. His father was on the deck, arms folded, with Garan standing at his side. Unexpectedly, Uncle Madrimlian was standing with them. Great, now his embarrassment would be complete. He saluted smartly. “Here, sir,” he said dejectedly.

“Mr. Sunfall,” the Admiral began, “Mr. Oakheart tells me that you have demonstrated an aptitude for magic. I understand you cast an *Unseen Servant* to aid you with barnacle-scraping?”

This was not what Shaundar was expecting. “*Av, quessir,*” he admitted warily.

Rear Admiral Sunfall smiled broadly. “I’m pleased that you seem to have finally found something aboard ship that suits you! Mr. Oakheart says that he’d like to show you the ropes of spelljamming. Is that something that would interest you, Mr. Sunfall?”

Shaundar could hardly believe it. Really? They were going to let him *spelljam*? “It sure would, sir!” he grinned enthusiastically.

“Then on the first bell of the morning watch, I want you and Mr. Oakheart to report to Flitter Bay 3 for flying lessons.”

“*Av, quessir!*” cheered Shaundar with more fervour than he ever had in his life, and he saluted his father as well.

The Admiral returned it and dismissed him with a nod. Shaundar went skipping down the deck to the passageway, radiating joy.

Ruavel Sunfall watched his son go with such happiness that it transformed his often-weary face into a sunny smile that almost matched. “Well, the boy’s brilliant, no doubt about that,” he confided to Captain Madrimlian. “Gets it from his mother.”

The Captain nodded. “No question, sir. First level magic and he’s only forty! I know I’m impressed.”

The Rear Admiral nodded to Garan. “Thank you, Mr. Oakheart, for bringing this to my attention. I am a very proud father today.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Garan began, “it would probably mean a lot to him if you told him that.”

Admiral Sunfall sighed. “I can’t let him think there’s any favouritism on my ship, Mr. Oakheart. Shaundar is too clever by half, really. Give him an inch and he’ll figure out how to turn it into a hex-length.”

“Av, *quessir*,” Garan replied in a tone that suggested that he did not agree. But recognizing his dismissal, he saluted and followed Shaundar.

Shaundar had hardly been able to rest at all that night. He tossed and turned in the hammock until Tyelatae poked him in the ribs and told him to be quiet. It probably didn’t help that Yathar whispered back and forth excitedly (and enviously, to be truthful) with him for most of the night. Eventually he pulled out his charcoal and paper and drew pictures of flitters cruising through space until he finally fell into a cheerful dream about flying through a colourful nebula.

He was already waiting for Garan at the first bell. Garan laughed out loud when he saw Shaundar there. “Got the bug already, do you?” he chuckled.

“I always wanted to do this, Garan,” he confessed.

Garan shouldered a haversack and asked Shaundar, “Did you bring a lunch?”

Shaundar was crestfallen. “No, I didn’t think to do that.”

Garan tried to keep his serious expression, but Shaundar’s stricken look made the corner of his mouth twitch into a smile. “Don’t worry; I brought one for both of us, just in case.”

Shaundar grinned widely. “Thank you, Garan.”

He clapped Shaundar’s shoulder. “Let’s do this. Get on board.”

Shaundar didn’t have to be told twice. He scrambled up the ladder, no longer a challenge now that he was a veteran of ropes, rigging and the crow’s nest. He stepped into the hatch and saluted the bow properly, but then he paused, which caused Garan to run right into the back of him. He apologized and finished stepping into the boat. “Garan, is this the same flitter that took us from Nedethil?” he asked, as his gaze fell over familiar surroundings.

“Sure, she’s my boat!” Garan told him cheerfully. “Each of us flitter pilots are assigned to a specific flitter so that we can get to know her character and handle her as well as possible.”

“Does she have a name?” Shaundar asked him as he ran a hand over her beam.

Garan smiled. “I call her *Daoine*,” he said reverently.

“Starshine,” Shaundar repeated. “I like it!”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Get in the helm!” Garan urged.

The helm! It didn’t really look like much. It was an overstuffed padded chair with big cushions and armrests. There was a little table on the right side of it that held a book, a pipe, and a folded-up star chart. On the left side of it was a stand that held a stellar compass; a curious sphere with three brass bands suspended in it at different angles which told bearing in three dimensions, orienting on the centre of the crystal sphere; in this case, RealmSpace. This was all partially protected by the low-hanging beam that had almost gotten the best of Shaundar’s father, but most of it was an open deck so that the pilot could see out, and so that there was room to operate the light ballista that it was equipped with. Shaundar knew, however, this would require a gunner in addition to the helmsman.

He flopped down on the big overstuffed chair and was nearly swallowed by it. He felt, for just a split second, a sensation like he was

falling, and then that low thrumming noise that Shaundar had noticed on his liftoff began humming again, just barely on the level of his conscious awareness.

“Now,” instructed Garan as he climbed in behind him, “stretch out those senses and let your will bond with hers.”

Shaundar closed his eyes and tried to follow Garan’s directions. It was the oddest sensation at first. He was aware of his own body; he felt the cushions underneath him, the arms of the chair in the palms of his hands and the pounding of his heart, and he smelled the green sap smell of *Starshine* all around him and the faint odour of Garan’s tobacco; but he also became aware of the ship as if his body and hers were one. He felt Garan’s feet on his deck and the gentle pressure of his own body in the helm, and while he couldn’t exactly “see,” there certainly was a sense of what was around the flitter. His feet – he meant, his landing gear – were firmly perched on the deck of the *Aerdrie’s Pride* with blocks securely around them, where a small handful of elves moved and worked.

“Wow,” he breathed.

“I see you’ve made the link,” said Garan with approval in his voice. “Now, I’ll signal the tower that we’re taking her out. Normally you’d do this before you took the helm.” He reached down to the left of the helm chair and pulled something out of it. Shaundar opened his eyes to look and caught a glimpse of semaphore flags being unfurled.

“Can they see me in the helm from the tower?” he asked.

Garan nodded. “Sure.”

“Then I can do it, Garan,” he offered hopefully. “I’ve been studying semaphore. It would give me a chance to practice.”

Garan smiled at him again. “Have at it, then!” he relented, and he gave the flags to Shaundar.

He raised the flags up and brought them down quickly to signal the tower to pay attention. A few moments later the Yeoman in the Tower raised the flag in her left hand straight up and stuck the one in her right down at a 45 degree angle; the signal to go ahead with his message.

Shaundar began to spell out the message in the complex semaphore language, detailing that they were taking the *Starshine* out for a spin. When the Tower acknowledged that and asked for heading, Garan tapped him on the shoulder. “Tell them we’ll be within *Aerdrie’s* orbit,” he directed. Shaundar did so.

During all of this, Shaundar was still actively aware of the flitter’s senses and position. It was almost like seeing through two sets of eyes at the same time. He thought to himself that it should be disorienting, but it really wasn’t. Within a few minutes it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“Good job, cabin boy!” Garan complimented him when the Yeoman gave the signal to proceed. “When the deckhands have removed the landing blocks, then the fun begins.”

Shaundar fidgeted impatiently while the sailors came out and took the blocks away. He felt a restless sensation in his feet.

Another spacehand came out on the deck with torches of *faerie fire* and waved his arms in the same way that Shaundar had to get the Tower’s attention.

Shaundar raised his left arm up and his right at the 45 degree angle downward.

The signaller waved Shaundar forward.

“Okay,” Garan coached. “Now, will yourself up slowly; as slowly as you can manage it.”

Shaundar closed his eyes again to fall deeper into union with the flitter, and visualized levitating about an inch above the ground. The *Starshine* responded in kind.

Garan could not believe it. That kind of control usually took considerable practice! “Nice!” he whistled. “I think she likes you.”

Shaundar grinned.

“Now comes the hard part,” said Garan. “Just as slowly, and even more carefully, just ease forward and up a little. Mind the *Aerdrie’s* rigging.”

“Av!” Shaundar acknowledged. Continuing the visualization, he imagined levitating a little higher and floating gently forward. The *Starshine* moved just as he willed.

“Good, good!” cheered Garan. “All right, *Quessir* Sunfall; take her out! Pitch 25, yaw ten and mind the rigging again.”

“Av!” Shaundar beamed, and he willed the flitter up and out at the required bearing, though he did continue to move with caution. They flew up past the rigging. Shaundar thought the angle was a little close and he willed the small craft to roll to the larboard side slightly. He felt the pull as the gravity of the *Aerdrie’s Pride* tugged at their larboard wing, and then they were clear of her gravity plane and down was once again the floor, as the *Daoine’s* gravity plane took over.

“Oh, well done, Mr. Sunfall,” breathed Garan in genuine respect of Shaundar’s instincts.

Yathar, who had snuck up on deck to watch his friend take off, suppressed a cheer.

Shaundar’s mouth was an O of amazement as he saw the splendour of the space before him. They were passing near to a nebula that showered the void with a prismatic display of incandescent beauty.

Shaundar didn't think he'd ever seen anything so heartbreakingly lovely in his life.

"The Colour Spray Nebula," Garan informed Shaundar, noticing his expression.

"I've read about it," Shaundar said.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

"Yeah," sighed Shaundar happily.

"All right, cabin boy," Garan smiled, "let's peel her out a little. Increase speed to maximum."

Shaundar thought about what it felt like to run at full tilt, his arms out and the wind rushing through his hair. *Fly!* he willed the *Starshine* with all his heart, and the Colour Spray Nebula leaped towards them and the *Aerdrie's Pride* fell behind.

"Excellent! Let's try some manoeuvres, shall we?"

Garan led him through a series of aerial acrobatics; weaving, dodging, dancing, and turning sharply. He was directed to zigzag, turn on his wingtips, and flip over in mid-flight. It felt as natural as breathing. He met every challenge that Garan gave him with talent and zeal. The *Daoine* responded to his every whim almost before he set his intention. It was wonderful!

For Garan's part, he realized that he was witnessing something truly amazing. The boy had a gift; there was no question about it. Garan assigned more and more difficult manoeuvres, things that would challenge second-year spelljammers, and Shaundar passed the bar and begged for more. He'd never seen anything like it.

And Shaundar realized this. Garan hesitated longer before each assigned task, and sounded more and more impressed and surprised as he accomplished it. Before long, they were cheering together.

"Well!" said Garan at last, "we've been out here for more than a full watch; maybe we should go in."

"Have we?" Shaundar exclaimed. It sure didn't feel that long! He took out his pocket watch; sure enough, Garan was right. It was actually three bells into the forenoon watch. "Av, Garan, I'll bring her about." He flipped the *Starshine* over 180 degrees and headed back for the *Aerdrie's Pride*.

As they got closer, Shaundar realized that his father was on deck, watching with his spyglass. His face cracked into a cocky grin. At last he'd found something he was really, really good at! He thought he would give his father something really interesting to watch.

He barrelled in on the *Aerdrie's Pride* at full speed, and then at the last moment, he dipped the pitch of the *Daoine's* bowsprit down about 35 degrees from the gravity plane and made to buzz the flight deck.

“Shaundar, what are you . . . ?” cried Garan in alarm, and at that exact moment, the crew of the *Aerdrie’s Pride* chose to adjust the lateen yard; which was suddenly right on a head-on collision course with the *Starshine*.

He almost managed to pull up in time; seeing that he would fail at that, he also rolled the *Daoine* sharply starboard. But it was too late! The flitter struck the yardarm at the point where the starboard wing connected to the ship’s body. There was a horrible crunching sound as the wood popped and tore, accompanied by the most excruciating pain Shaundar had ever felt as the wing was ripped from the flitter’s body. For a split second he thought his arm had been torn off. The flitter careened into a tailspin. The last thing Shaundar saw before he lost consciousness was Garan being thrown out the open bow with his eyes wide and terrified. Both of them were screaming.

He awoke in total darkness, and he was scared. For a moment, he wondered if he was dead. Then he realized that he probably would not have the incredible headache that was seeping into his brain if he were dead. However, none of his surroundings were familiar. He was reasonably sure he was on a ship – the creaking of the boards and the smell of wood and sap told him that – but it wasn’t the Midshipmen’s Quarters. He wasn’t in a hammock, either, but lying on some kind of cot with railings on the sides. He sat up with a groan.

A square of light appeared as a window slid open on the top of a door that now drew Shaundar's attention. He noticed with alarm that the window had bars. "You awake in there, lad?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

"Av, I'm awake," Shaundar replied cautiously, wincing as the noise reverberated through his aching skull.

"Get the healer," another unknown voice commanded, and there was the sound of booted footsteps on wooden stairs, which drifted off into the distance.

The image of Garan's terrified face flying past him flashed through his mind. A wave of nausea rolled through Shaundar's body. He leaned over the railing and dry heaved for several minutes. Nothing but slimy spittle came out.

By the time Shaundar had finished that, the door was opening with a metallic creak, and a small moon elf came into the room. Light from the outside passageway revealed a large metal lock on the edge of the door, and a burly green elf with a ring of keys in his hand.

"Bring that light in here," the moon elf maid ordered, and the green elf followed with a lantern.

"You're the healer?" Shaundar demanded of the moon elf.
"Garan Oakheart! Is he okay?"

She took the light from the green elf and began to shine it painfully into his eyes. “Well, he had a bit of a nasty bump on the head, but it’s healing well enough. Mild concussion, nothing serious.” She started tapping Shaundar painfully on his knee joints. His feet kicked out involuntarily.

“Thank Sehanine,” he breathed, and he started to weep with relief.

“There, there, lad,” soothed the green elf. “Don’t you worry about your friend, now. He’ll be fine.” He clasped Shaundar on the shoulder.

“I think we can safely say the boy has all his faculties,” the healer nodded. “But just to make sure, what’s your name?”

“Shaundar Sunfall, *etriel*,” he replied automatically.

“Do you know where you are?”

“No, *etriel*,” Shaundar answered honestly. “I mean, I think I’m on the *Aerdrie’s Pride*, but . . .”

“You’re in the brig, lad,” the burly green elf informed him gently.

The brig! It was Shaundar’s worst nightmare! “I guess I’m in some pretty serious trouble, then?” he asked in a very small voice.

The green elf's expression was compassionate. "Well, you've been charged with 'negligence causing the destruction of His Majesty's property and harm to a fellow officer,' or so the rumour mill says. Seems a little harsh, if you ask me; as far as I can tell, all you did was to zig instead of zag."

The healer fixed the green elf with a stern glare. "You just never mind, *Ruan*. The skipper does not require your critique of his judgments."

"*Av, etriel*," he responded, and saluted.

Shaundar had never felt so miserable and low. "The skipper is right. I screwed up. I deserve to be charged for it." It was probably nothing short of a miracle that Garan hadn't been killed by his folly. Why did he always do such stupid things? Why didn't he ever *think*?

"What happened?" he sniffled. "Did I hit my head?"

"I don't think so," she shook her head in reply. "I was checking for that, but it looks like it was just spelljammer shock."

"Spelljammer shock?" he repeated. "What's that?"

"It's because of the link with the ship," the *Teu'Tel'Quess* maid explained, her eyes sparkling in the dim light. "When there's a lot of damage to the craft, especially when it happens all at once, sometimes the pain is too much for the spelljammer to handle and he passes out."

You've only been out for a day or so. Sometimes it will last up to four days. But other than looking at your scalp for marks, I couldn't check for a head injury until you were conscious again."

He nodded solemnly, but stopped quickly when it made his head throb. "I have a horrible headache," he admitted.

She flashed the lantern in his face again, and then smiled encouragingly. "Your pupils are dilating normally, so I would guess that it's just the spelljammer shock. I'll worry about it if it doesn't go away in a day or two."

Shaundar did not return the smile. He was not feeling especially like smiling. "Yes, *etriel*," he said.

"Are you hungry, lad?" the green elf asked.

"No, thank you," he replied. His rolling stomach was not in any shape for food.

"Drink something anyway," the silver elf commanded. "Healer's orders. Maybe some broth, if you don't want something solid?"

"Yes, *etriel*," Shaundar acquiesced.

"I'll get the galley to bring you some," his jailer offered.

He said nothing. He really didn't want food. He just wanted to crawl into a hole and forget he existed for a while.

“Well, I’ll leave you be, then,” the healer said. She smiled at him as she left.

“Try to keep your chin up, lad,” the green elf encouraged him. He took the light and closed and locked the door behind him, but he didn’t close the window.

Shaundar lay back on the cot and threw his arms up over his face in exasperation and despair. Why was he such an *idiot*?

Sometime later, the door opened again and Shaundar’s father came into the room.

Shaundar got to his feet and saluted. His mouth trembled but he managed not to cry.

Ruavel Sunfall drew his mouth into a thin line. For a long moment he didn’t say a word. Anger, frustration, relief, exasperation and disappointment all flashed through his golden eyes like lightning strikes; then he finally sighed, “Why did you do it?”

Shaundar swallowed past a very large lump in his throat. “I don’t know, sir,” he responded with doleful honesty.

The Admiral indicated the end of the cot. “Sit down, Rualith,” he directed.

Shaundar sat obediently. He wasn't sure how to react. He was expecting the Admiral; instead, he was getting his father.

Ruavel squatted down at the edge of the cot and leaned against the wall so that he could look Shaundar in the eye. "This is a court martial level offense, Shaundar," he began.

"Yes, sir," said Shaundar despondently. His eyes were firmly on his swinging feet.

The elder Sunfall grimaced. "The penalty is a dozen lashes," he informed his son gravely.

Shaundar bit his lip and nodded. "I deserve it, sir."

Ruavel exhaled sharply and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "The Fleet Council has agreed that you can take a demotion instead, however."

Shaundar hesitated a long moment. A demotion would make him one of the enlisted. Shaundar didn't think he was better than anyone else, so he wasn't afraid of working for a living. But his father would carry the shame among his peers forever; his no-account son, court martialled at the tender age of forty and reduced to a common starhand. He would prove all the sneering sun elven nobles in the Fleet right. And worst yet, considering that you had to be a Midshipman at minimum to pilot, and considering that it took several years for promotion in the Imperial Navy,

if Shaundar accepted the demotion, he likely would never get to sit in a helm again.

“No, sir,” he decided, meeting his father’s eyes resolutely. “I will take the lashing, sir.”

The Admiral’s eyes widened with surprise. “Are you sure, son?”

He nodded. “*Av, quessir,*” he said firmly.

Ruavel Sunfall hesitated. He had never been one for corporal punishment; and yet, discipline in the Navy had to be maintained. He had honestly expected his son to accept the reduction in his rank. Twelve lashes! He was just a boy. Did he really have any idea what he was getting into?

He studied his son’s expression. Shaundar’s chin was set in a stubborn manner that he knew very well, and his eyes were teary and clouded with guilt, but the look in them was unwavering.

Well, he’d given Shaundar the choice, so he was as helpless to stop this as Shaundar had been to avert the flitter crash in the first place, once its course had been set. He gritted his teeth and patted his son’s shoulder. “Good man,” he said, and found his voice to be a little unsteady. His face cracked into a strained smile. He was dismayed, and he was exceptionally proud. “The sentence will be carried out tomorrow morning,” he choked out, and unable to speak any further, he squeezed his son’s arm and left the cell.

Shaundar lay back on his cot and waited, alone in his remorse and his misery.

They came to get him the next morning. Just like any criminal, they clapped him in irons; and because he was a mage, they pinned his fingers in mage-irons as well; little cuffs that locked his first and second fingers together so that he couldn't perform the fine manipulations necessary to cast most spells. He found some grim satisfaction in that; obviously they considered him to be a potential threat magically.

His *Sy'Tel'Quess* jailor was agitated and muttering under his breath as he fastened the irons. He took a quick glance around the side of the cell door and then he produced a couple of small leaves from his jerkin. "Here lad, take these," he whispered. "They'll help with the pain."

Shaundar shook his head vigorously. "No, thank you," he refused.

"Go on, take them, and be quick about it!" urged the green elf.

"No, I'm going to take the punishment," Shaundar repeated with a watery smile, touched by the green elf's concern. "Thank you, though."

With that, someone else came clambering down the stairs and the green elf bit his lip and hid the leaves again. Boatswain Naivon

appeared at the bottom of the ladder. “Is the prisoner ready?” he demanded of the guard.

“Av, Bo’sun,” he replied sourly.

“Come on there, man,” Naivon grumbled. “I don’t like it any more than you do, but the Skipper said we had to do it by the book.”

“I know my duty, Bo’sun,” the compassionate green elf returned sharply.

“Then let’s do it,” directed the Boatswain. “Come on then. We’ll have to help you up the ladder, Mr. Sunfall.”

“Thank you, Bo’sun,” Shaundar said to show that he had no ill feeling towards him about it. The two brawny elves made sure he didn’t slip as he clambered up the ladder in his irons. When he got closer to the deck he began to hear the rhythm of a drum being sounded.

He blinked against the brightness of the starry sky as he was brought topsides. When his eyes had adjusted, he could see that the entire ship’s company was lined up at the aft of the ship to witness his castigation, standing at attention in their dress uniforms. A battlepoet in his green uniform, a sharp contrast against all the standard Navy dress whites and the red of the Marines, solemnly beat a round-framed war drum in a steady march. To his relief he saw Garan standing with all the other Midshipmen and junior officers. He was far more rigid than

standing at attention demanded. Yathar was trembling and Tyelatae and Casaro's eyes were the size of saucers.

Before him was a wooden triangle frame with a crossbar at its top and another at its midpoint. It had leather cuffs dangling from the first crossbar, and two larger ones at the bottom of the triangle.

The senior officers were standing behind the battlepoet. From this distance, Shaundar's father's expression was unreadable.

The battlepoet stopped his drumming.

"Hats off!" bellowed the Boatswain, and those who were still wearing hats removed them and folded them under their arms.

Rear Admiral Sunfall called out in the silence, "Bo'sun Naivon, read the charges against the accused."

The Boatswain unrolled a scroll and read, "Midshipman Sunfall has been charged with negligence causing the destruction of His Majesty's property and harm to a fellow officer, and judged guilty by the Fleet Council."

Shaundar realized then that there were two other elves in Admiral's uniforms standing with his father. One he did not recognize, and the other was Narissa's father, Admiral Lord Alastrarra. Also present were Uncle Madrimlian and, gods forbid, Captain Durothil. His heart started to thunder as if it were beating to quarters.

“Does the accused have anything to say before punishment is meted out?” the First Mate queried.

“I’d just like to tell Midshipman Oakheart that I’m sorry,” Shaundar said quietly. In the silence, his voice carried clearly. It was almost steady.

“I don’t blame you, Shaundar!” Garan called out.

“As you were, Midshipman!” the Matey snarled, and Garan returned to his overly stiff attention stance. “*Av, etriel!*” he acknowledged, though his cheeks were so pale they were almost glowing.

“Is there anything else you would like to say, Midshipman Sunfall?” the Matey asked.

“*No, etriel,*” Shaundar responded. His heart was racing now. It was a great relief to know that Garan did not hate him. Shaundar wouldn’t have blamed him if he did.

“What is the sentence prescribed by the Fleet Council?” inquired the Matey with all the formality of ritual.

“Twelve lashes, *etriel,*” Naivon returned.

“Then prepare the prisoner to receive his sentence,” the First Mate nodded.

The Boatswain and his brig guard brought him to the triangle. They removed the irons around his wrists, but not the mage-irons. They took off his shirt, and they fastened his wrists into those leather cuffs at the top of the triangle, which drew his arms straight up above his head. He was tall enough that it actually worked. Next they removed his leg irons and fastened his ankles to the cuffs at the bottom, forcing his legs apart. It was already very uncomfortable. Last, they looped a leather strap around his lower back and his lower abdomen, which they fastened on to the crossbar at the midpoint.

The green elven guard's expression was deeply troubled. His copper flecked eyes were full of sadness. In one hand he held a cat-o-nine-tails. Shaundar had never seen one up close. It was a long hard leather whip with waxed cords, each of which had a knot in the end.

Both elves double-checked that all the straps were fastened tightly. Then the Boatswain offered him a thick leather bit. "Bite down on this," he offered. Shaundar nodded and Naivon put it in his mouth.

Until that moment Shaundar was resigned, but all of a sudden he was frightened. He closed his eyes until the panic passed. He resolved that he would not cry, and he would not scream.

The battlepoet struck the drum thrice.

"Bo'sun's Mate, do your duty," Rear Admiral Sunfall commanded.

The cat came down with a ghastly whistling noise and a sharp *crack!* Shaundar cried out despite himself, though the sound was muffled by the bit in his mouth. The pain was sharp and excruciating! “One!” intoned the Boatswain.

Whack! The whip came down again. The agony of the second strike was no less than that of the first. “Two!” Naivon called out.

The third strike came down. Shaundar shrieked. It felt like his shoulders were on fire! “Three!” called the Boatswain. He’d never experienced such pain in his life! How could he endure nine more strokes?

That awful whistle sounded again. Shaundar flinched but it did him no good because there was nowhere for him to go. “Four!” Naivon announced. Shaundar moaned low in his throat.

Snap! Another piercing pain stabbed through Shaundar like an animal’s claws. “Five!” the Boatswain cried. He started to weep helplessly.

The cat-o-nine-tails raked Shaundar’s back again. “Six!” Naivon yelled. Fluids oozed from Shaundar’s body; tears from his eyes, sweat from his pores, blood from his wounds. He could hear some kind of animal sound coming out of his mouth.

Another tear came from the cat. “Seven!” cried the Boatswain. Shaundar’s whole back was throbbing and angry now, but the swelling

was no protection from the sharp, piercing pain of the new strike. He was panting and gasping around the piece of leather in his mouth.

The claws struck yet again. “Eight!” Nothing in the world now existed except suffering. He couldn’t tell where one stroke ended and another began. His vision blurred and swam. If he could have spoken, he would have begged them to stop; would have fallen on his knees to cry for the demotion. But the time for that had long passed.

Smack! “Nine!” White hot pain seared through him as the skin on his back was flayed. He prayed to any god who would listen to make it stop.

Once more the terrible knots fell. Thousands of nerves in Shaundar’s shoulders roared in an intense supernova of anguish. The flare arced through his body like an explosion. “Ten!” called Naivon as Shaundar’s head slumped forward and the bit, covered in saliva and a drop of blood from a bitten lip, dropped to the ground.

The green elven Boatswain’s Mate ran his fingers through the cat’s tails to remove some of the blood, as he was trained to do. He wished the lad had taken the coca leaves. “Just two more, lad,” he murmured quietly. “Let’s get it over with.” Shaundar nodded just a little. *Two more, just two more*, he repeated to himself like a mantra.

The Boatswain’s Mate picked up the bit and put it back in Shaundar’s mouth. Shaundar bore down on it as the whip fell again.

New flames of torment erupted. Shaundar moaned. “Eleven!” cried the Boatswain.

“One more,” whispered the green elf, and he struck one last time. *Thwack!* Blood and salty sweat mingled in the new wound to cause a zenith of raging agony. Relief and shock both coursed through his body at the same time. He started to sob heartily, and then his vision went black.

By the time he regained consciousness he was being carried to the sick bay.

“Beating boys!” the healer was cursing. “If they’re going to do that, they should never let them serve in the first place. Are you all right, *Sy’Ruan*? Would it be better if you walked?”

The carrying was jarring things painfully. “Maybe,” he nodded.

The healer and the Boatswain’s Mate helped him to his feet and braced him up as he walked slowly into the hospital tower.

“Lie down on that cot; there’s a good lad,” the small moon elf instructed. Shaundar obediently shuffled himself over on his stomach. His back still felt like it was on fire.

“You’ll be all right, lad,” the Boatswain’s Mate told him encouragingly. He turned around and pulled up his shirt to reveal several long white scars along his muscular back. “Insubordination,” he

explained as he replaced his shirt and faced Shaundar again. “I wasn’t much older than you are now.”

“Guess I should have taken the leaves, huh?” he asked weakly.

“Probably not,” he said with a smile. “This way you’ve done it by the book; no one can claim nepotism and tales will be told of your bravery.”

The healer came over to the table shaking a bottle of something that looked like pale yellow alcohol. “*Quesstiasa*,” she explained. “I’m not allowed to just heal that for at least six watches – they believe it defeats the purpose of deterrent, you see –” her voice was sour – “but I need to do something to prevent infection. This hurts.” Her expression was apologetic.

Shaundar nodded. “Okay, go ahead, *etriel*.”

She poured the solution over his shredded back. It was cold but the pain was burning. He bit his pillow.

The Boatswain’s Mate was washing the blood from his hand in one of the wash basins.

The door opened and Yathar burst in, followed by Garan.

“Are you okay?” Yathar demanded. His gold-flecked green eyes were huge and dark.

“I will be,” Shaundar bravely smiled, trying not to worry his friend.

“I’m sorry,” Garan said, squeezing Shaundar’s hand. “I don’t blame you at all. It was just an accident.”

“Are you okay?” Shaundar wanted to know.

Garan stared at him blankly for a long moment, and then he said, “Oh yeah, I’m fine. Healer Saeah here tells me I had a little bump on the head, but I’ll have to take her word for it because it was fixed when I came to.” He smiled at her.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “You could have been killed. I was stupid.”

“Could have happened to anyone,” Garan said dismissively. “Listen, Shaundar, I don’t want you to let this stop you from being a spelljammer, okay? You are really talented . . . no, really!” he insisted in response to Shaundar’s wincing shrug. “You are really gifted; I’ve never seen anything like it! The Navy needs pilots like you.”

“If I were that good,” Shaundar grumbled bitterly, “I never would have hit the yardarm.”

“Even the best pilot can’t avoid every danger,” Garan encouraged.

“The *Daoine* . . . is she . . . ?”

“Well,” Garan replied slowly, “she does need some pretty serious repairs, but the Ship’s Druid is working on it now. She’ll be fine by the end of summer.”

“That’s good,” Shaundar sighed. “She’s a good little boat.”

“If you boys are going to stay,” the healer groused, “then stand back so I can work.” Garan and Yathar moved aside and she began to gently dab at Shaundar’s wounds with clean linen. “More alcohol coming,” she warned, and poured it on again. This time he was ready and the pain didn’t seem so bad. He cringed but he didn’t cry out.

She produced a jar of ointment that was bluish in colour. “Blueglow moss,” she informed Shaundar. “It’ll speed healing along.” She dabbed some on her fingers and reached for Shaundar’s back.

“No, *etriel*,” Shaundar refused. “That would be cheating. I’ll take my full punishment.”

The healer blinked at him. “It is not cheating, Mr. Sunfall,” she scowled darkly. “It’s perfectly natural and has not a thing to do with magic so it’s well within the rules. Now let me work.” She gently smeared the ointment over the lacerations. It soothed the sting a little.

“There!” she murmured. “That should do the trick. Now obviously you should avoid lying on your back for a couple of days; do you usually reverie or can you sleep on your stomach?”

“I reverie,” Shaundar told her.

“You’re not going to be able to reverie in your hammock so I’ll bring a day bed. You can go back on light duty probably tomorrow, but you’re off full duty all week unless they want to let me heal that magically.”

“Okay,” Shaundar accepted.

“I’ll be right back,” she assured him, and she headed out onto the deck.

“If you can, sleep,” the Boatswain’s Mate recommended. “You lads, you ought to let him rest. I imagine you have to get back to work anyway.”

“I suppose we do,” Garan admitted. “Well, come on, Yathar; he’ll be fine.”

Yathar was obviously reluctant to leave, but he patted Shaundar’s forearm. “Hang in there,” he supported Shaundar quietly. “It’s not your fault.” They left the sick bay.

But Shaundar knew that they were wrong.

Chapter Three

When Narissa went looking for Shaundar after school, she found him in the alchemy lab. He was crouched over a crucible with a mask tied around his face, mixing something.

She put her hands on her still-slender, but now slightly curving hips. “Shaundar, what are you doing?” she demanded.

Shaundar looked up briefly from his work. “Catching up on my alchemical silver project,” he said, just a little too innocently.

Narissa didn’t believe him. “I’m sure that’s what you told the Professor when you asked to use the lab, but that’s sulphur you have there, not mercury.”

Shaundar’s blue eyes twinkled and behind the mask she knew he was grinning. “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies,” he smiled.

Now Narissa knew for a fact that something was up. “Shaundar, don’t do anything rash. You don’t need any more trouble,” she sighed.

Shaundar looked back down at the crucible and added some sulphur powder to it with careful measurements of a long, silver spoon. “Really Narissa,” he blithely replied, “you probably don’t want to continue this path of enquiry. It will make you an accessory. You also might want to cover your nose.”

A rank stench began to rise out of the hissing crucible. “Oh dear gods,” Narissa groaned, and she pulled her blouse up over her face. Her eyes were still watering.

Yathar, now almost as tall as Shaundar, and Selena, who was looking forward to her first tour as a cabin girl that summer, came into the lab and tied masks on as if they had known what to expect. “Gack! That’s awful!” Yathar smirked cheerfully.

“It’s perfect!” Selena agreed enthusiastically. “So now what do we do with it, Shaundar?”

“Well,” explained the mischievous adolescent, “we have a couple of choices. We can smear it on the inside of his desk, or we can put it in bags and throw it, or we could set an acid drip on a container to release it.”

“Too sophisticated,” Yathar shook his head. “He’ll know it was you right away.”

Shaundar was undeterred. “He’ll know it was me anyway. The question is; can he prove it?”

“If you do the acid drip thing, then yes, I think he can,” said Selena gravely.

Narissa shook her head. “I’m not listening! I don’t want to know about this! I’m leaving!” She stalked off before she could find out

anything else that she didn't want to know. Why did they always have to keep rocking the boat? Why couldn't they ever just leave well enough alone?

They watched her go quietly for a moment. Yathar then asked Shaundar, "Why do you think she hangs around with a bunch of reprobates like us?"

Shaundar shrugged. "Pity for poor stupid animals, I suppose?"

"I think she has a crush," Selena piped up helpfully.

Shaundar and Yathar exchanged a glance. "Yeah, why not?" Shaundar grinned at his friend. "Everyone else seems to."

Yathar had the decency to flush a little. "That's not true," he protested.

"Really?" inquired Shaundar with an arched eyebrow as he dished the reeking solution into a vial. "Kya, Lyenna, Ryvannalyth, Corestiana, Myrua . . ."

"All right, enough already," surrendered Yathar, his cheeks burning.

". . . and that's just this month!" Shaundar finished. He sealed the vial with a cork.

Yathar deftly changed the subject. “I think we should put it in bags and toss it down from the rafters,” he suggested.

Shaundar took the crucible off the fire and covered it while they waited for it to cool. “We’ll have to dilute it for it to break in the bags and spread properly, but that’s not difficult. Do you want to do that now, while we wait to clean up, then?”

“Sure!” Yathar agreed enthusiastically.

They took three waterskins and filled them, and then they spooned a third of the putrid yellow solution into each one. They capped the skins tightly and shook them around to be sure it was thoroughly mixed.

“Great!” Shaundar nodded approvingly. “Now we’ll just go pick some sheep’s bladders up from the dockyard traders tonight or tomorrow and fill them with the water. Your dad will be in for a nasty surprise when he opens his office up in the morning!” He chuckled, pleased with himself.

“Why don’t we just grab some from the lab here?” Selena inquired.

“Because the Professor will notice that they’re gone,” Yathar explained, “and he’ll know that Shaundar was working on his project tonight, and then we’re done for.”

“Which reminds me,” said Shaundar cheekily, “it’s time to conceal the evidence.” He took out a bag of curry powder, acquired at some expense from the dockyard merchants, and weighed out the same amount he had removed from the sulphur bag; which he then mixed into the powdered sulphur. Then he cleaned the crucible out thoroughly and opened the window to dissipate the stench. After that, he actually poured a little of his already-completed alchemical silver into the crucible and let it sit for a moment before he cleaned it again.

“Selena, would you mind sweeping the floor, just to be sure we got all the sulphur?” Shaundar requested of his sister. He took off his mask hesitantly and tested the air. It seemed safe; there was just a faint rotten egg smell now.

Amiably Selena took up a broom and swept while Yathar wiped down the counters. “That ought to do it,” he beamed as he finished up the last one. In the meantime, Shaundar removed his dragon scale gloves, washed them off thoroughly and then scrubbed his hands.

“Let’s get out of here before anyone catches us,” Selena urged, taking off her mask.

The youths packed up their supplies and left the lab, locking the doors behind them as the Professor had requested.

Narissa was waiting for them outside. Shaundar thought to himself how very difficult it was to take her seriously when she was angry.

Her face scrunched up into a distinctly un-fierce pout. Her golden-sparkled oceanic eyes were dark like a brewing storm.

“Why?” she demanded. “Why aggravate an already bad situation?”

“Because he deserves it,” Shaundar answered truthfully.

“Because he’s a dick,” Yathar responded with feeling.

“Because it’s fun,” was Selena’s reasoning.

Her strides were purposeful as she fell in step with them. “And what do you think is going to happen this time if you get caught?”

“But Narissa,” smirked Yathar, “we’re not going to get caught!”

“Not unless you turn us in,” Shaundar smiled wryly. He knew she wouldn’t.

Sure enough, her face softened. “Damn it, guys, you just have to keep kicking the apple cart, don’t you?”

“Sure, that’s about right!” Yathar concurred.

Shaundar cast a disarming smile at Narissa. “It’s really too late to stop us so you might as well give it up. Come on, I have to go to the dockyards to pick up some things but then why don’t we all go swimming before supper?”

Narissa relented reluctantly. “All right, but I wish you would stop this nonsense.”

Yathar laughed and slung an arm around her shoulders. He enfolded her slight form completely. “Ah, Narissa, what would we do without you?”

Narissa disentangled herself and peeled his arm off of her. “I don’t know. You’d probably all be in prison by now.”

The four friends did indeed head to the docks, where a colourful and chaotic market was doing a brisk business. Shaundar found a grommam butcher and purchased several sheep’s bladders, and then he found a human apothecary and purchased several more at a much higher price. He did manage to bargain him down a little because with his height and size, and the fact that his voice had changed early, people from other places often mistook Shaundar as being older than he was and took him more seriously. Narissa studied him suspiciously as he made his purchases but she did not ask for the details.

That accomplished, they headed to the creek where a certain willow, missing a branch for several years, still grew.

Shaundar and Yathar clambered up onto the willow tree (lower, more solid branches now) and shared a pipe, something their parents were still ignorant of; yet another thing which Narissa tolerated but did not sanction. Selena asked to try it but Shaundar refused. “That’s the

last thing I need, Dad reminding me what a bad influence I am on you,” he declined bitterly.

Selena did not argue at that; she just looked sad. “Let’s swim,” she said to change the subject, and she stripped off her uniform and jumped into the water.

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Yathar chuckled. Carefully he unbuckled his sword belt and hung his delicate long sword on a sturdier willow branch. His clothes he was much more cavalier with, flinging them off in seemingly random directions entirely unabashedly. He dove with a dancer’s grace from the branch he was perched on and tumbled acrobatically into the shallow water, which caused Narissa to cover her eyes in fright. Naturally he was not in the least bit damaged when his grinning head, topped by the same stubborn dark cowlick of his childhood, splashed laughing out of the creek.

“You ass!” exclaimed Narissa, flinging mud at him. “Don’t do that!”

“Come on in, the water’s fine!” he urged without apology.

Narissa sighed and shucked off her clothes one piece at a time, diligently hanging them on a low branch away from the water so that they wouldn’t get wet. Shaundar tried not to stare. She really was very pretty. Her skin was like gilded porcelain and her gentle curves were becoming quite lovely. She sank into the water smoothly with a sigh.

Shaundar was as fastidious about his clothing as Narissa. He was careful that his friends did not see the thin white scars that marred his back by making sure that he was facing them while stripping, and by making sure to get into the water last. After twenty years, this was long habit and he accomplished this without it being the least bit awkward.

Narissa wasn't sure why Shaundar appeared to be so self-conscious. She found herself admiring his strapping young spacer's frame, with the stellar compass tattooed on his chest. In her opinion there was nothing to be self-conscious about. She blushed and turned away before he could notice.

He sighed with relief and enjoyment as he sank into the water. "Perfect!" he breathed. The water wasn't deep enough to stand up in, but he stretched out and paddled around a bit, staring up into the thick green leaves of the glade and the clear blue sky. A flock of colourful birds was chattering noisily in the treetops. Somewhere in the distance a monkey shrieked.

"Is there any word on your application yet, Shaundar?" Narissa asked.

Shaundar's bubble of happiness popped just like that. "Yeah, denied," he replied shortly.

"Denied?!" cried Yathar, sitting up with anger in his eyes. "What in the Nine Hells?!"

“Oh, Shaundar,” groaned Narissa, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not right,” Selena said. “It’s not fair!” Her silver-specked blue eyes were flashing with fury.

Shaundar ran his hands through his gold hair in exasperation. “I’m sure it’s the court martial,” he muttered. “They don’t want any troublemakers at Aces High.”

“Horseshit!” Yathar swore.

Shaundar said nothing. There really wasn’t anything that he could do about it. He’d been applying every five years since that first year he went to Wildspace on his father’s ship to be accepted to the Imperial Navy Elite Flight Academy, commonly known in the service as “Aces High.” They trained both cadets and officially enlisted officers, but they only trained the best. You had to have top marks and you had to be able to pilot a flitter through an exceptionally dangerous obstacle course in an asteroid field. Shaundar’s marks were more than adequate, and his piloting skills had only improved with every summer voyage on the *Aerdrie’s Pride*, but they kept denying his application anyway. They wouldn’t even let him try out. He climbed out of the water, having lost all desire to swim. “I’m going home,” he sighed, and he started to get dressed.

“I’m sorry Shaundar, I shouldn’t have asked. I’ve wrecked everything,” Narissa lamented. She leaped out of the water and grabbed his arm. “Don’t go; we were having such fun.”

Shaundar hung his head. He was just so frustrated! Why wouldn’t anyone just give him a chance? “It’s not your fault, Narissa. You didn’t know. But I think I need some time alone. I’ll catch up with you guys tomorrow. Bright and early, Yathar!” He put on his shirt and his shoes, and tossed the rest of his clothes into his haversack. “You’ll see Selena home?”

“Like I need you guys to escort me!” cried Selena, indignant.

“Of course,” nodded Yathar.

“Good night, guys,” he waved, and he gave Narissa a quick hug to show her that there were no hard feelings as he shouldered his haversack and trudged home.

“Guys, we have to do something about this,” Narissa declared after Shaundar had left, folding her arms over her breasts.

The Gray Leaf Inn wasn’t the nicest dockyard inn, but it wasn’t the seediest either. It had more of the feel of a neighbourhood pub. It was also known to be Captain Madrimlian’s favourite watering hole when he was in port. So Narissa had no difficulty in finding him, seated casually

at the candlelit bar and chatting in a friendly sort of manner with the innkeeper, puffing on his pipe contently but mostly ignoring the half-empty glass of Saerloonian glowfire set before him.

“Excuse me, Captain?” Narissa began politely.

The Captain glanced over from his conversation and looked with puzzlement at the young elf maid.

“Narissa Alastrarra, sir,” she introduced herself. “We met last Yuletide at the Sunfall house.” She offered a formal bow.

Recognition dawned in the Captain’s eyes. “Ah yes, of course! How are you, *etriel*?” He stood up and returned her bow.

“I’m well,” she replied. “Are you busy? May I sit with you for a moment?”

“By all means,” consented Madrimlian, and he pulled out a chair so that she could join him.

“Care for a little something, *etriel*?” the innkeeper asked.

“Just a light wine, thank you,” she smiled pleasantly. The bartender poured it as she settled herself into the bar stool beside the Captain.

“So what can I do for you, *Etriel* Alastrarra?” inquired Captain Madrimlian. He was a good looking elf, about the same age as Ruavel

Sunfall, with long brown hair and sharp blue and silver eyes that seemed to see more than just the surface of things.

“Sir,” Narissa began, “I’m here to talk to you about Midshipman Sunfall.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “I thought you might be.” He leaned back a little to study her. She had a very serious and determined expression.

“Sir, are you aware that Shaundar’s application for Aces High has been refused four times?” Narissa wanted to know.

The Captain tapped out his pipe. “Yes,” he said slowly, as though he were ruminating on the words, “I am aware.”

Her eyes were intense. “Sir, is he as good a pilot as Yathar says that he is?”

Madrimlian considered this carefully before he nodded. “I believe so, *etriel*. I’ve never seen him fly, but his compatriots and his trainers all say he’s a natural.”

“Then why, sir,” she demanded, “won’t they let him try out?” Her expression was hurt rather than angry. She was burning with the injustice of it.

The Captain mulled this over a little, turning his glass back and forth in his hand. The candlelight illuminated the golden wine so that it

almost seemed to radiate light, as its name suggested. “I get the sense that you know all the reasons as well as I do, *Etriel* Alastrarra. What you really want to know from me is what you can do about it?”

Narissa bit her lip and nodded. “Yes sir. You’re absolutely right.”

He set the wineglass down on the bar and cast the full power of his gaze on Narissa as he folded his hands thoughtfully into a steeple before him. “You could keep him from getting into mischief.”

She sighed and put her face in her hands. “I don’t think that’s possible, sir,” she admitted. “He goes looking for it, really.”

“Do you think that some of that is because people expect him to be troublesome?” probed the Captain curiously. “Do you think it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy, so to speak?”

Narissa looked up at Madrimlian with wide eyes that radiated dawning realization. “Yes!” she exclaimed. “Oh, I never really thought about it, but that’s exactly it!”

Captain Madrimlian sat back with an almost imperceptible smile. “I believe so too,” he confessed. “I ask because the other thing that can be done is that his commanding officers in the Fleet could write letters on his behalf, recommending him. But before I do such a thing, I would like to be sure that my recommendation is a worthy one.”

Narissa held her breath. “You would do that, sir?” she whispered, hardly daring to hope.

The Captain gave the barest hint of a nod. “I would. It would probably have a great deal more impact if someone would convince his father to do the same, however.”

Narissa leaped to her feet. “Thank you, Captain Madrimlian! You have no idea what this means to him – and to me.”

“You’re welcome.” The Captain touched his lips to the edge of his wineglass. “You know, *Etriel Alastrarra*,” he reflected, almost casually, “Aces High is based out of Selune’s Tears, orbiting Toril. I understand the last bastion of High Mages in our sphere is located on the Island of Evermeet, which is also on Toril. I can think of no better place for a gifted young mage to study with great masters. I believe that Laeroth Runemaster is still the keeper of the library there. And isn’t he an ancestor to the Alastrarras?”

“My great-great uncle,” Narissa confirmed. Then the true meaning behind the Captain’s words dawned upon her. “Thank you very much again!” she beamed. “You are a good elf, sir.”

He smiled back. “Sweet water and light laughter . . .” he acknowledged her.

“. . . Until we next meet,” Narissa finished, and she took her leave.

Captain Madrimlian smiled to himself. Ah, to be that young again; full of life and love and hope! Had a more beautiful creature than a young elf in *beryn fin* ever been created?

While Shaundar was washing the next morning, Selena cornered their father on the balcony.

“Dad,” she began, “can I talk to you for a minute?”

Rear Admiral Sunfall turned his gaze from the beautiful late spring morning to face his daughter. A smile spread across his face like a sunrise. “What is it, *Ruasali*?” he murmured, calling her by her childhood nickname, which meant “Honeystar.”

She fixed him with an intent, determined look that he recognized from her mother’s repertoire of expressions. He knew he was in trouble. “Daddy,” she began, “why won’t you write a letter to Aces High on Shaundar’s behalf?”

The Admiral tried not to scowl. He’d already had this argument twice; once with his wife and once with his mother-in-law. “I want Shaundar to succeed on his own merits,” he explained, “not based on nepotism.”

Rather than folding her arms, as her mother and grandmother had done, Selena took her father’s hand and blinked at him with a

pleading look; the same kind of expression that had won homes for countless lost puppies and kittens over the ages by children of every race. “But Daddy,” she insisted, “that would only be fair if there wasn’t so much set against Shaundar already.”

“Such as?” he asked warily.

“I think it’s prejudice, because he’s half-blooded and looks it,” Selena replied bluntly. This was a subject that was often carefully avoided in the Sunfall household; a figurative “elephant in the living room” that nobody talked about. “And he thinks that the court martial is counting against him.”

“The Navy accepts all kinds of elves,” Ruavel returned sourly, a little bothered that this subject had been breached, “so it can’t be prejudice.”

“Don’t be daft, Ruavel,” Grandmother Mistwinter snapped from the door of the balcony. Neither one of them had realized that she was there. “That prejudice isn’t present in the Navy as a whole, but it sure as the Hells is in the RealmSpace Fleet.”

“It’s just like I said, Ruavel,” Selene Sunfall added from behind her mother. “I’m pretty sure that that awful Captain Durothil has put a bug in the ear of every stuck-up gold elven noble in the Mithril of the Navy. If you don’t defend our son, who will?”

“You keep saying you want the boy to think about his future,” Dathlue argued. “This is what he wants to do with his future. You need to help him do it.”

“Please, Daddy?” begged Selena with huge eyes.

Ruavel Sunfall looked to his wife and her mother, and then he made the mistake of looking into his daughter’s hopeful, pleading eyes. “Do you really think they’re that set against him?” he asked darkly.

“No,” Selene answered, “I *know* it.”

He let out a long sigh, defeated. “Perhaps you’re right. Okay, Selena, I will write a letter recommending him.”

She threw her arms around her father and squeezed vigorously. “Oh, thank you, Daddy!” she cried joyfully, and she stepped up on the tips of her toes and kissed him firmly on the cheek. He smiled despite himself.

“What’s going on?” Shaundar queried as he came down the stairs and noticed the whole family crowding around the balcony.

“We’re talking about Selena’s first stint as a cabin girl!” Shaundar’s grandmother smirked. “It’s only a couple of months away now, after all! Are you hungry? Lianna’s about finished dawnfry; smells like diskcakes.”

Shaundar, who like most adolescent boys was always hungry, heard his stomach growl and quickly forgot about the impromptu family meeting. “Famished!” he admitted with good cheer.

The Sunfall children left home a little earlier than usual that day. Selena claimed that she had some homework to do before class started. Once they were out of sight of the house, they ran for all they were worth and caught up to Yathar, who was waiting for them behind the schoolhouse with a bag full of water-filled sheep’s bladders.

“We’ve got about fifteen minutes before he gets here!” Yathar blurted out. “What kept you?”

“Dawnfry was a little late,” said Selena, “and you know we couldn’t leave too early without it looking suspicious.”

“Well, here, take these,” Yathar urged, passing them each a sheep’s bladder, “and let’s go.”

The three friends stuffed their haversacks full of as many of the balloons as they could carry and climbed to the top of the schoolhouse. Selena needed a hand up, not being as tall or as nimble in high places as the boys, but they were strong enough to help her without difficulty. But it was Selena who popped the grate off of the attic vent so that they could get into the rafters. They propped it closed behind them so that no one would notice that it had been disturbed.

They made their way to Lord Durothil's office through the attic crawlspace. Mice shuffled irritably out of their way at their passing. Yathar peered down into the air vent that opened into the room.

"Okay, he's not there!" he hissed. "Let's get this grate off."

Selena pulled out the file that she had used to remove the last grate and unfastened the rivets until the boys could pull the ironwork out of the way.

"Quickly!" puffed Shaundar and he grabbed his water-filled bladders and tipped them unceremoniously into the room. Reeking water splashed all over the office, soaking Lord Durothil's chair, his papers left on the desk from the night before, and his textbooks.

Yathar covered his mouth to keep from laughing out loud, which created a strange chuffing noise. When he had recovered, he followed suit with his balloons. Now the carpets and most of the furniture were drenched, and the horrible rotten egg smell began to waft upwards.

"Hurry!" Shaundar exhorted his sister, and she also dumped out her cargo of balloons. One bounced off the edge of the desk and exploded in a spray that managed to soak three out of the four walls, including the door.

"Let's go!" Yathar whispered, and Selena took just a moment to fasten the grate again, holding her breath, before they scurried back through the crawlspace. By this time they all had the collars of their

shirts up and around their faces because the stink was truly horrendous. Shaundar glanced quickly out of the air vent. “Clear!” he announced, and they pushed their way out one at a time. Shaundar levitated down with a quickly whispered spell; Yathar bounded and tumbled, and they both caught Selena when she jumped, after replacing the vent cover once more.

They made as if to leave; then Selena called out, “Wait! We’re filthy!”

Shaundar and Yathar exchanged a glance; then they simultaneously invoked a chant and gesture and the dirt and cobwebs vanished from their hair and uniforms. Then Shaundar repeated the word and gesture and touched Selena. She was similarly tidied.

They fled into the grove; then, once they’d spent a moment recovering their composure and laughing together, they doubled back to the spot on the road to school where Laeroth Oakheart had once laid his ambush, and strolled casually up to the schoolhouse door as if nothing had happened. “Morning, Narissa!” Selena said happily when she saw the other elf maid, waving at her.

“Good morning!” responded Narissa, also in a good mood; right up until she approached the schoolhouse door, whereupon she wrinkled up her nose. “What on earth is that *smell*?” she exclaimed.

Professor Durothil came bursting out of the front door, accompanied by the rotten egg reek. His face was the colour of a tomato. His eyes fixed upon Shaundar and he roared, “SUNFALL!”

Shaundar put on his most perplexed look. “Sir?” he inquired innocently.

Yathar had never seen his father so angry. He was breathing heavily and his eyes were almost glowing. “Inside. The Headmistress’ Office. NOW,” he panted, pointing indoors.

“Av, *quessir*,” Shaundar responded obediently, and went as he was asked.

Narissa cast a horrified look in Yathar’s direction, but Yathar was undeterred. “*Don’t worry*,” he mouthed to her with a wry smirk.

Shaundar followed Captain Durothil into the school. “Ugh, what’s that?” he demanded disgustedly as the scent overwhelmed him. He covered his face.

“YOU KNOW PERFECTLY WELL WHAT THAT IS!” howled Lord Durothil with clenched fists. “Now get in there and explain it to the Headmistress!”

It had been more than a week since Shaundar had seen the inside of the Headmistress office. It was tastefully furnished with practical but elegant furniture and a daybed for reverie in case

Headmistress Zaretha Oakheart was required to work late. Shaundar came in and saluted the Headmistress with ease of long habit.

The Headmistress' mouth thinned. "Mr. Sunfall. Have a seat," she commanded.

Shaundar took up his usual seat, which was a hard-backed oak chair designed specifically to make the student perched on it uncomfortable, he was certain.

The elder Oakheart leaned forward. Shaundar could see that her blue eyes were watering and her expression was even more pinched than usual. "I understand we have you to thank for our wonderfully fragrant reception this morning," she began.

Shaundar scowled, genuinely angry that he was automatically being blamed again; the fact that this time it *was* his fault notwithstanding. "I just got here, *etriel*," he said.

"That doesn't mean anything," snarled Lord Durothil.

"Surely Professor Durothil doesn't believe that I'm capable of translocation yet?" Shaundar quipped sassily. "I'm still working on *Blink, etriel*."

Her eyes flashed. "Don't get smart, *Quessir* Sunfall!"

“I’m sorry, *etriel*,” Shaundar apologized. He hadn’t intended to be lippy. His comment had just burst out.

She folded her arms. “I understand that you were in the alchemy lab last night?”

Shaundar nodded. “*Avavaen, etriel*. I was finishing my alchemical silver project. I had Professor Nylyn’s permission.”

The Headmistress pursed her lips. “We’ll have to check and see if anything is missing other than the alchemical silver supplies,” she told him sternly.

“Go ahead, Headmistress,” he returned resentfully. “Do you mind if I wait outside on the steps, *etriel*? I think I’m going blind.” His eyes were watering now too.

“Yes, that’s fine, Mr. Sunfall; let’s get out of here,” said the Headmistress, standing up. “Professor Durothil, you can keep an eye on the young gentleman while I go with Professor Nylyn to check the alchemy supplies.”

Shaundar stood up as well, saluted, and headed out to the front steps of the school, which was now being evacuated. Lord Durothil, seething, followed close behind him, and Headmistress Oakheart was on his heels. She strode over to the alchemy laboratory building, which was at the edge of the schoolyard to minimize the damage should something go wrong.

“What’s going on, Shaundar?” Yathar asked.

“You mind your own business, boy!” bellowed his father furiously.

“Av, *quessir*,” replied Yathar in a sullen tone.

Half an hour passed while they waited. The teachers sent the other students home, but Yathar, Selena and Narissa waited for Shaundar. The stench did not dissipate. Shaundar realized with glee that this was because it had permeated Lord Durothil’s hair and clothing as completely as it had his office.

At length, the Headmistress and Professor Nyllyn, a small boned faerie elf returned from the lab.

“Professor Durothil,” nodded the Headmistress. “We can’t find anything missing from the alchemy lab.”

Lord Durothil bared his teeth. “Really? Not a thing is gone?”

“Some mercury, which is needed for alchemical silver, is missing,” the alchemy teacher corrected, “but nothing that could be used to make stink bombs.”

“*Quessir* Sunfall,” the Headmistress decided, “you are free to go. You might as well go home; class is obviously dismissed for the day.”

Narissa looked relieved, but Lord Durothil was not yet finished. “*Etriel Alastarra*,” he began craftily, “do you know if *Quessir Sunfall* acquired any supplies in the past few days that could have been used to make stink bombs?”

Yathar bit his lip and Shaundar held his breath. He knew she wouldn’t voluntarily turn him in; but would she outright lie on his behalf?

Narissa looked thoughtful. Shaundar waited for the axe to fall on his entire future with horror. But then she met Captain Lord Durothil’s penetrating glare and steadily she answered, “Not to my knowledge, sir.”

Shaundar could not believe it! He just about fell over in his gratitude for the respite. Yathar could not conceal his grin.

The Headmistress and the alchemy Professor took their leave. Shaundar thought it prudent to do the same. With Lord Durothil’s face turning an alarming shade of purple the four friends began to creep away.

“Maybe I should come back later,” an unfamiliar voice called. “You look busy! And dear gods, what is that *smell*?”

Yathar seemed to recognize the voice, however. A joyful smile spread across his face as he turned to look at its owner. A tall, dark-haired gold elf, maybe just past the hundred-year age of majority, stood at the base of the school steps clad in a Lieutenant’s uniform with pilot’s wings at the collar. His cinnamon eyes were full of amusement.

“Hey, Uncle Blackjack!” Yathar called with delight. “Glad you made it!” He came over and embraced him unabashedly. Blackjack cast back the same wry grin that was Yathar’s trademark and put an arm around him. “Good to see you, lad!” he smiled enthusiastically.

Lord Durothil bowed formally. “Hello, Fislyn,” he mumbled.

Blackjack released Yathar and bowed in return. “Hey, big brother,” he greeted Lord Durothil with an almost hesitant smile.

Yathar had been looking forward to his uncle’s visit all year. Fislyn “Blackjack” Durothil was more like an elder brother than an uncle, really. Like Yathar and Shaundar, he’d grown up on ship, and he was a gifted young hotshot pilot who had just graduated from Aces High this year. Blackjack had continually raised the bar for the rest of the students. He held the record for the fastest time completing the obstacle course in history and had continued to set records ever since. When he’d written asking to come to visit, Yathar was naturally delighted, especially because he hadn’t seen him for some time. Now that he knew that Shaundar’s application had been refused once again – something that Yathar had cynically anticipated – it was even more imperative that he see his uncle. Yathar figured that being the top of his class, and the most talented pilot anyone had ever seen probably gave Blackjack some brownie points with his instructors, and Yathar intended to milk that for all it was worth on behalf of his best friend.

That night, after Yathar was supposed to have gone to sleep, he and Blackjack climbed up on to the roof of the house, shared a pipe and looked up at the stars together.

“You hanging in there, lad?” Blackjack asked him quietly.

Yathar sighed. “Dad’s still a dick,” he replied.

Blackjack smiled thinly. “He wasn’t much better when we were growing up. Mom asked him to babysit me all the time so he would lock me in the closet. Or the root cellar. But he is my brother.” He stretched out on his back and folded his hands behind his head. “So, who was that lad whose balls your Dad was busting? Or shall I say, whose balls he was trying to bust?”

“That’s Shaundar,” he explained.

“Did he actually set off the stink bombs?” Blackjack wanted to know.

“No, we actually set off the stink bombs,” Yathar clarified. “But only Shaundar would ever get in trouble for it, even if we all confessed on the spot. Which reminds me; I want to talk to you about Shaundar.”

Blackjack laughed out loud. “Don’t expect me to talk to your Dad about it! He won’t listen to me. Never has!”

“No, I want you to see him fly,” Yathar said instead.

Blackjack rolled over and looked at him. “You think he’s that good?”

“Yeah, I do,” Yathar confirmed. “But I want to know if *you* think he’s that good. I figure you’d know.”

Blackjack nodded. “Okay, we’ll take him out in my flitter tomorrow after school.”

He smiled. “Thanks, Uncle Blackjack!”

Blackjack smirked. “Don’t mention it, lad!” He ruffled his hair. Yathar smoothed down his cowlick with a slightly cross expression, and Blackjack snickered. “You have any interest in being a pilot, Yathar?”

He shook his head. “I’m a bladesinger and I’m happy with that.”

“You getting any good at it?”

“I’ve mastered the first stanza,” Yathar announced proudly.

Blackjack raised an eyebrow and gave him an approving look. “Good for you! I understand that’s really difficult!”

“Not according to Dad,” Yathar growled. “If you believe him, I’m a complete idiot.”

His uncle sighed. “I wish there was someone else to teach you, Yathar. I know a couple of bladesingers from Aces High and they’re much

more free spirited. Just don't believe that Numilor's way of doing things is the only way, okay?"

"Don't worry, I don't," he assured his uncle. "I already know that Dad and I have very different ways of looking at the world. I know that I'm going to have to go my own way at some point."

Blackjack laughed. "You know, the problem with our family is that we Durothils come in two varieties; stuck-up ass and rebel. Are you sure you want to be in the rebel caste?"

Yathar laughed. "Better than being a stuck-up ass!"

"It's a rough road," Blackjack cautioned.

He shrugged. "I don't know how to think like Dad does, Uncle, and I don't want to."

Blackjack nodded. "Well, I'll keep an eye out for you if I can, Yathar." He smiled encouragingly and Yathar, so often pessimistic, found himself heartened by the knowledge that he and his uncle were so much alike. He often wondered if he was crazy or if everyone else around him was. It was very helpful to know that he was not alone.

Shaundar was thrilled when Yathar told him that his Uncle Blackjack was going to take them out in his flitter after school. He loved

being among the stars at any opportunity he could get. He ran home with Selena to inform their mother and met Yathar and Narissa at the docks.

He liked Blackjack instantly. He was leaned casually up against a sapphire blue and emerald green flitter smoking his pipe as he waited for them. His uniform was dishevelled and he looked like had all the time in the world. “Hey gang,” he greeted them in a relaxed tone. “You know you’re going to be packed in like sardines if you all want to come, right?”

“We just came to see them off, and to meet you,” Selena smiled, “but we will come along if you let us. I’m Selena; this is my brother Shaundar, and this is our friend Narissa. We’ve heard lots about you.”

“Have you now?” Blackjack inquired with a crooked grin. “All lies, I assure you.” Selena giggled. “Well,” he added, “if you’re willing to be squished you all might as well climb aboard.”

They didn’t hesitate. It was a race to be the first up the ladder, and the four friends wedged themselves in behind the helm with some effort, stepping over some mouldy pie plates, an empty chamber-pot and an oddly-bent corked clay bottle on the floor. They all saluted the ship’s bow automatically as they climbed on board. Shaundar noted that Blackjack’s helm setup included a stellar compass, a pipe stand, an untidy pile of star charts, and an open book with a picture of two naked gnomes doing something highly improbable. Selena picked it up immediately and demanded, “What’s this?”

Blackjack grabbed it out of her hands and slammed it shut quickly. “Sorry about that, I’m pretty sure your parents wouldn’t want you looking at that yet.” He stuffed it brusquely into one of the pockets on the side of the helm.

“And what’s this?” asked Narissa, lifting a small green-furred rodent off of the helm. It uncurled itself from the ball it was sleeping in and yawned, exposing its oversized teeth.

“Oh, that’s Sidewheeler,” Blackjack grinned. “He’s a miniature giant space hamster. He’s my familiar.”

Sidewheeler licked his paws and scrubbed at his face and whiskers. The girls sighed. “Aw, he’s so cute!” cooed Narissa happily.

Blackjack looked down at the helm and sighed. “Sidewheeler, you little shit!” he swore. Shaundar glanced down and he could see that the hamster had chewed some of the chair’s stuffing into a modest nest. Yathar’s uncle tidied it up quickly while the girls clucked over the roguish rodent; and then he shoved all the wrecked material into a box that was bolted to the overhead beam within reach of the helm. Blackjack added some of the mouldy pie crusts from the floor (minus the plates); and after that, he gently put his hands around the little green hamster (“sorry girls, gotta prepare him for takeoff!” he explained) and placed him carefully into the box as well. Before he fastened the door closed, Shaundar glanced inside and noticed that it was padded with blankets and possibly tiny cushions.

“I wanted a *niri* for a pet,” Narissa was telling Selena wistfully, “but my dad wouldn’t allow it. But these are so much cuter . . . I wonder if I could talk him into one?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Blackjack smiled. “Not to be discouraging, but they are bred by gnomes.”

Gnomes were notorious for their insane “scientific” experiments, in which they tried to “improve” upon existing designs and ideas that had worked well for thousands of years, usually resulting in catastrophic system failures and, occasionally, body counts. Shaundar knew that merely mentioning a gnomish connection was often enough to discourage people from having anything to do with a device or creature, no matter how well it seemed to work or how harmless it appeared. Narissa looked disappointed.

“Ready?” Blackjack asked the adolescent crowd.

“*Av, quessir!*” Shaundar and Yathar chorused.

Blackjack sank into the helm and the low thrum of an active spelljamming ship, which was music to Shaundar’s ears, began to pulse quietly. “Brace for takeoff!” he grinned as his eyes stared into the sky around the flitter instead of at the youths behind him, and he peeled out of the dock at full tactical speed, cackling. Narissa shrieked and covered her eyes, but the other three cheered.

He rocketed for the sky at full tilt, fast enough that Shaundar noticed the pull of Nedethil's gravity increasing; and then they were surrounded by stars and the root that was now as familiar a landmark as the willow in the woods behind the school. Blackjack made a beeline for that root and started to wind around it like a corkscrew, laughing wildly. "Show off!" Yathar accused with a snort.

"You think so?" Blackjack challenged, his eyes filled with mirth. "I hear your buddy Shaundar here is quite the pilot; you think I should let him take this baby over for a while?"

Shaundar's heart started to dance in his chest. "Can I?" he requested eagerly. He so loved to fly, and he hadn't had the chance since last summer!

Blackjack cast a glance over his shoulder in Shaundar's direction. "Sure!" he agreed. "You ever done a helmsman change in mid-flight, lad?"

Shaundar shook his head. "No sir, but I'm willing to try."

"Okay, come over here," Blackjack waved him over. "Move that table out of the way." As Shaundar shoved the table of star charts and whatnot aside, he noticed that Blackjack was leaving the root and making for more open space.

“Come crouch down,” Blackjack indicated. “Squat so that your butt is parallel with the helm’s seat.” Shaundar did so, leaning on the table with his right hand to balance.

Blackjack braced his left hand solidly on the armrest of the chair. “Okay, now I’m going to countdown from three, and then I’m going to push up and to the left, and you’re going to shimmy your rear end over to the left and fall into the helm; only we have to do this together or the helm will lose all power. Got it?”

This sounded like a great stunt! Shaundar smiled. “I got it!” He reached behind him for the helm’s starboard armrest to provide a better prop and launching point.

“Okay, ready? Three . . . two . . . one . . . go!”

Shaundar essentially hip-checked Blackjack in his haste to fall into the helm, but it worked. The flitter faltered a bit, but did not lose power; though it did slow down to about half of its previous speed, since Shaundar was not as accomplished a wizard as Blackjack.

Blackjack, bracing against the port side beam to stabilize, was impressed despite himself. The first time he had tried that, the helm had cut out and he had narrowly avoided a collision when he finally gained control. “Not bad at all!” he complimented the elven youth.

Shaundar smiled vaguely in response to the praise. He was losing himself in the rhythm and feel of the ship, bonding with her and

becoming aware of her wings, her slim thorax and abdomen, and her helm. He had the sensation for a moment that she was pleased to have all these young people crowded on her deck, but he shook his head and dismissed it. Elven ships were living plants, but nobody had ever given any indication that they were conscious or sentient.

Blackjack stood over Shaundar's shoulder, leaning on the back of the helm. "You feeling like trying some fancy flying, lad?"

"You'll trust me to do that?" asked Shaundar, aghast. Especially since it was common knowledge that he had once trashed a flitter and been court martialled for it, no one ever wanted him to do anything too risky.

"What in the Nine Hells is the point of flying a flitter if you don't want to do some fancy manoeuvring?" smirked the elder Durothil. "They're not exactly Men-o-War, are they?"

A bitter snort erupted from Shaundar's mouth. "Tell that to the Mithril," he sneered.

Blackjack snickered. "Yeah, I'm pretty convinced that most of the Admiralty have their heads firmly wedged up their own butts. But I'm not an Admiral. Have at it! Let's go deeper into the roots."

An eager grin spread across Shaundar's face. "*Av, quessir!*" He spun the flitter around on her wingtip and whizzed back into the roots of Garden. "What's her name?" he asked of Blackjack.

“Whose, my flitter’s?” he questioned curiously, and Shaundar nodded. Blackjack was pleased that he would actually ask. “*Aerakiir*,” he murmured.

“Starsinger,” echoed Shaundar. “Nice to meet you, *etriel*.” He patted the helm’s armrest tenderly.

Blackjack met Yathar’s questioning eyes and raised an eyebrow. Yathar made a circling gesture with his index finger in the direction of his ear with an apologetic shrug. But Blackjack suppressed a snicker and shook his head with a smile. Instead, he made a thumbs-up sign at his nephew. Yathar beamed and nodded with a satisfied smirk.

Shaundar pitched the *Aerakiir*’s bow closer to the root that nestled around Nedethil, and followed it in deeper towards Garden’s trunk. The visible light in the starry sky around the root dwindled until everything was faintly illuminated in the purplish green of dusk in a rain forest.

“Have you ever been to the underside of the root, Shaundar?” asked Blackjack.

“No, *quessir*,” replied the youth truthfully, “but I’ve always been curious.”

Lieutenant Durothil slapped a hand down on Shaundar’s shoulder. “Today’s your lucky day, then. Set course for the underside.”

He was happy to oblige. The root's underside was more wild and overgrown than the upper side. Smaller roots, which resembled twisted, leafless trees at this distance, branched out haphazardly in all directions.

"Get closer to the roots," Blackjack invited.

"Closer?" parroted Shaundar. "You don't want me to avoid them?"

"No, I want to see how you handle close quarters flying," the pilot explained.

A mad tinker gnome's grin spread across Shaundar's face. "You got it!" He swooped in nearer to the root-trees and began to put the *Starsinger* through her paces. He yawed about 15 degrees starboard to avoid a low-hanging root, rolled her ten degrees port to dodge another one, and dipped her bowsprit ever-so-slightly downward to pass underneath another root limb. The last caused Narissa and Blackjack to cringe as the root loomed across their vision, but the anticipated crash never came.

Blackjack shook his head just slightly. There was no arguing that this was an outstanding bit of flying. He decided to test his limits.

"Okay Shaundar," he said, "let's head for the deep roots. I think you'll find some terrain more to your liking there."

Shaundar cast a glance back over his shoulder to confirm. According to the star charts, the deep roots of Garden were littered with thousands of small asteroids tumbling over each other in unpredictable, and therefore hazardous, patterns. But at Blackjack's smug smile, he nodded, "*Av, quessir,*" and he did as requested.

As if to remind the spelljammers how dangerous the deep roots were, the first rocks they encountered were mere dust and debris, where one asteroid had been pulverized by a collision with another. A less-apt jammer might have hit them directly, severely damaging the flitter and the passengers within; but Shaundar waggled the wings of the *Aerakiir* and managed to avoid getting even a single stone through a sail. One did ricochet off of the wooden box that cradled Sidewheeler, however, producing an alarmed squeak.

"Sorry, Sidewheeler," Shaundar apologized absently, his concentration still on the void outside the flitter. His eyes were more alive than any of his friends had ever seen them.

He dipped between two tumbling stones careening in opposite directions to each other, narrowly avoiding a third that was hidden behind the other two by pitching up sharply and rolling larboard. He continued the spin to dodge a spear-shaped shard stabbing in their direction and swooped under a huge, black iron tektite. He actually spiralled around it upside down, keeping the dark boulder ominously overhead, and made use of its additional gravitational force to throw the *Starsinger* up and past a planetoid that was large enough to be classified

as a Type A earth body. He laughed out loud, completely in his element, while Narissa gripped the railing with white knuckles. “I got it, Narissa!” he assured her radiantly, sensing the pressure of her hands. “Don’t be afraid!”

Blackjack let out a low whistle of appreciation. Was the boy sensing the presence of the obstacles somehow and anticipating how he would have to manoeuvre? Or were his reflexes simply that quick? “Okay Shaundar, I’m impressed!” he admitted. He looked at Yathar and nodded. “Yes, he is that good. Let’s bring her about and head back; I’ve seen what I came to see.”

“You asked your uncle to evaluate me?” Shaundar asked Yathar as he spun the craft around another asteroid and brought her about to return the way they’d come. He tried not to be let down at having to go back already. It was kind enough of Blackjack to take him out here in his own personal flitter anyway.

“Yes he did,” Blackjack admitted to Shaundar. “He figured that if I were impressed enough by your skills that I might put in a word for you at Aces High. And he’s right; I will.”

Shaundar’s heart leaped right off of a precipice to plunge directly into an abyss. “Please don’t get my hopes up,” he groaned. “I’ve been turned down four times. It’s a lost cause. I appreciate the thought but don’t waste your time.”

It hurt Blackjack to see such despondency in a sixty year old boy. “Well, I’m going to say something anyway and we’ll see what happens,” he promised.

Shaundar cast him a friendly, if sad, smile. “Thanks for trying.” He knew for a fact that it wouldn’t matter, but he did appreciate the effort. “And thanks for taking us out here. Do we really have to go in right away?” His expression was hopeful. Maybe Aces High didn’t want him, but he still loved to fly.

Blackjack was pleased by Shaundar’s determination. “No, lad, we don’t,” he smiled.

About three weeks later, Blackjack was back at Aces High, standing in the office of his flight instructor, as promised.

Captain Lueten Whitestar stared across the desk at Blackjack and folded his hands. “You really think that the Sunfall lad is that good?” he demanded warily.

“Captain,” Blackjack said in all seriousness, leaning forward on the desk to emphasize his point, “he’s the best I’ve ever seen. Better than me.”

The flight instructor chortled. “What? The famous Blackjack thinks that somebody is better than he is? Will wonders never cease? I better call the Priests; the End of Times has obviously arrived!”

Blackjack grinned. “I told you, Captain, I’m not arrogant. I’m just not falsely modest, either. And yeah, I do. Or at least, I think he could be.”

The Captain leaned back with his hands folded behind his head. “You don’t think the boy’s a miscreant? He’s already got a court martial on his record and a couple of the Mithril have no use for him.”

“He’s no more of a miscreant than I am, sir,” Blackjack pledged.

The flight instructor looked sharply at his greatest – and most aggravating – student. “That doesn’t comfort me much, Mr. Durothil.”

Blackjack snickered. “Okay, forget that I said that, sir. But either way, the Navy needs him. It would be the biggest waste I can imagine if you didn’t take him on, *quessir*.”

Captain Whitestar glanced down at the letters that Blackjack had brought with him. One was sealed with the mark of Captain Madrimlian, an elf that he deeply respected. The other was sealed by the mark of the Rear Admiral, an elf that the Captain knew better than to cross. “I take it that these are letters of recommendation for Midshipman Sunfall?”

“I assume so, sir,” Blackjack answered.

The Captain broke the seals on the letters and read them while Blackjack waited. “All right,” he said at last, “I’m going to approve his application. Are you going back to Nedethil? Do you want to bring this back to him?”

Blackjack smiled. “Sure I will, sir. I’d also like to put in a request to be an assistant instructor for this season. I’d like to help you train him, *quessir*.”

“Would you now?” the Captain remarked.

“Not to put too fine a point on it, sir, but I don’t think anyone else can train him to make the best use of his reflexes like I can,” he explained. “There are many other aspects to being a pilot that I feel you would be the best instructor for, sir, because you managed to keep me in line and as you’ve pointed out, I’m a bit of a rebel too. But for raw flying? I just don’t think anyone else can keep up with him.”

The Captain raised an eyebrow. “Well, let’s hope that we never need talent like that.”

“Av, *quessir*,” Blackjack replied sincerely.

Captain Whitestar dipped his quill and penned a letter. It was relatively short and to the point. When he was finished he signed it, sanded it, folded it, and sealed it with the mark of the Imperial Navy. When that was dry he gave it to Blackjack.

Blackjack saluted the Captain. “Thank you, sir,” he said with a smile. “He’ll really be delighted.”

“Let’s hope I don’t regret this,” the flight instructor sighed. He returned the salute.

Blackjack strode from the office with a grin on his face.

When Blackjack returned to Nedethil, Shaundar and Yathar were helping Narissa to pack. For some reason, when Shaundar heard that Narissa was leaving for the summer to study with her great-great uncle on Evermeet, he found that he really didn’t want her to leave. He discovered that he was finding excuses to spend as much time as possible in her company. Helping her pack for the journey was one such excuse.

“We’re going to miss you,” Yathar said frankly. “It just won’t be the same without you urging us to stay out of trouble.”

“I’ll send letters,” Narissa quipped. “Not that you’ll read them anyway.”

When Shaundar made it home that night, he found Blackjack waiting for him.

“Hey!” he greeted Blackjack excitedly. “I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon.”

Blackjack smiled at him. He'd been chatting with Shaundar's mother at the front door, who also turned to him with the kind of knowing smile that hides knowledge of a spectacular birthday present or something similar. "Well, I had to deliver some mail," he said simply, and he handed Shaundar the folded up letter with the seal of the Imperial Navy on it.

Shaundar gave him a long look and took the letter as though he were afraid that it was going to bite him. He wasn't sure what to think. Why would the Navy send him a letter? Could it be . . . ?

He broke the seal and unfolded the letter; whereupon he read:

Attention: *Sy'Ruan Quessir Shaundar Sunfall of the Aerdrie's Pride, Realmspace Fleet*

Quessir Sunfall,

Upon reconsideration, due to the recommendations of one of our more respected graduates, a senior Captain in the Navy and your commanding officer, we have reviewed your request to attend the Imperial Navy Elite Flight Academy. With some trepidation due to your poor record and prior court marital, we have decided to approve your request. We invite you to attend our campus to audition for a spot at your earliest convenience. Should you be accepted, you will require the following equipment:

(2) standard Naval uniforms

(2) flight suits

(1) dress uniform

(1) copy Imperial Navy Field Manual

Personal items limited to 1 small haversack

Personal weaponry

Spellbook, preferably travel sized and waterproofed, if possible

Stellar compass and navigational tools (sextant, etc.)

Rank insignia

Our course is six standard months in length, with leave granted two days of every week, except for the final survival exercise, which is a maximum of one week in length. The course concludes upon your completion of this exercise.

We look forward to seeing you at your tryout.

Sincerely,

Captain Lueten Whitestar, Flight Instructor

Imperial Navy Elite Flight Academy “Aces High”

Shaundar read it over twice to be certain that he had read it correctly. “Is this real?” he asked quietly.

“You think I would make this up?” Blackjack demanded.

He put a hand to his mouth and found that it was shaking slightly. “Thank you. I don’t know how to thank you.”

Blackjack ruffled his hair. “Do your best, that’s how you can thank me. I think the Navy needs you.”

“I’m so happy for you, my son!” Shaundar’s mother cried as she embraced him.

Blackjack clapped him on the shoulder. “Okay, I have to go. The rest of the tribe doesn’t even know I’m here yet, I just thought I should drop that off first.” They bowed to each other, and Shaundar headed inside with his mom while Blackjack headed off to the Durothil estate.

“I can’t believe it,” Shaundar murmured to his mom.

“You know, Shaundar,” Selene Sunfall said, “sometimes the world is really unfair. But if you hold true to what you know is right, often it will eventually win out; though it may take a while.” Her eyes were encouraging and full of wisdom. Shaundar couldn’t help but respond with a grin and a solemn nod.

Shaundar noticed that his father had also come in with Blackjack, back from patrol and, Shaundar assumed, taking his two weeks leave. He wondered with some apprehension if he'd heard about the stink bombs yet, since that incident has occurred the day that the *Aerdrie's Pride* had left for its last patrol; but he could tell he didn't need to worry. Ruavel Sunfall smiled when he looked up from lighting his pipe on the balcony and saw his son, so Shaundar joined him outside. "How are you doing?" his father inquired jovially. "I heard the good news."

Shaundar began cautiously, "The letter says that I was recommended by my commanding officer. Did you write a letter for me, Dad?"

The Admiral drew on his pipe and nodded. "Yes I did. The girls helped me to see reason. And you're a good pilot, Shaundar; you deserve a shot."

Shaundar vacillated a moment, but then he reached out and put his arms around his father, surprising him. "Thank you very much, sir," he whispered hoarsely, needing a breath in which to find the courage; and then he said, "I know that I'm often a disappointment to you, sir, but I really will do my best at this. I really want to be a spelljammer."

Ruavel was a little taken aback, but he embraced his son as well. "You're welcome, Rualith. Just don't mess it up, okay?" he requested.

“No, sir,” Shaundar vowed with absolute sincerity, “I won’t.” And he meant not to, no matter what. No practical jokes, no dithering on assignments, and definitely no mouthing off the instructors. This was his one chance to matter, and he was going to do everything in his power not to squander it. He couldn’t wait!

Chapter Four

Shaundar had never been on a Man-o-War before the *Ruamarillys "Starflower,"* Uncle Madrimlian's ship. Compared to the *Aerdrie's Pride*, her quarters were a little cramped; but then again, compared to an Armada class ship anything would be a little confined. They wedged the Midshipmen in the abdomen, next to the passage that connected it to the thorax, and Shaundar was expected to bunk with them on his journey to Selune's Tears, and do a share of the work as well. "There are no free rides in the Navy!" Captain Madrimlian had explained with almost sinister good cheer; but Shaundar didn't mind the work. He itched to pilot the helm, but he was assigned instead to command the weapons crews, meaning that mostly he ran them through drills during the ten day voyage, since they saw no action.

One new attraction of the Midshipman's quarters on the *Ruamarillys* was the *glassteel* window which ran along the length of both sides of the abdomen. The other *Sy'Ruani* were accustomed to the view of stars and planets floating sedately by, but it was a new experience for Shaundar, who was used to catching glimpses of such things between work shifts or while perched on lookout in the crow's nest. Otherwise, the berth was pretty much like the little hidey-hole of the *Aerdrie's Pride*, complete with the usual Midshipmen's activities. He was pleased to win some extra spending money from a few of his bunkmates through *kholiast* games, along with a handful of new cards for his deck.

Narissa, being a young elven noble not involved at all in the Navy, was given the Captain's quarters while Madrimlian joined his officers in their cabin. They were going to Evermeet first to drop Narissa off, and then they were heading back to the diskcake-shaped rock in Selune's Tears where Aces High was located. Narissa managed to sneak down into their quarters a couple of times, much to the Captain's chagrin, who had promised to try to keep her from getting into mischief. The first time she accomplished this, she took one look at the smoking, the gambling and the drinking, and shook her head and laughed, "Doesn't that just figure!"

Shaundar grinned sheepishly over his hand of cards. "Would you expect anything less?" He offered her the smoking pipe when it went around, but she refused. "Dad would shoot me. Well, no, he would shoot *you*," she clarified.

"Probably true," he admitted.

"You can deal me in for the *kholiast*, though," she smiled, pulling out her deck. And then she proceeded to soundly beat the lot of them.

It was a different story in the officers' quarters when they met for dinner. It was customary in the Navy for the officers of a ship to dine together with the Captain, and Narissa, an honoured guest, was expected to dine with them. Shaundar did his best to polish off his gold elven manners, which were impeccable when he so chose.

Dinner on their last evening shipboard was a pleasant quiche pie, followed by lavender tea and *quinpah*. The officers were drinking a deceptively sweet but potent green elven summer wine to go with the quiche instead of their usual, and at some point one of the other Midshipmen had managed to manoeuvre the veterans into telling tales of their more glorious – and more humorous – battles and encounters. None of them were smoking because such a thing was considered to be a vulgar habit, inappropriate for the nobility and therefore, inappropriate around Narissa. Only rough spacer types so indulged, and never around a distinguished *etriel*. However, a few of the officers had excused themselves by this time for exceptionally long trips to the head, and they returned with a distinctive scent in their hair.

“So the Scorpion ships had us thoroughly surrounded,” Captain Madrimlian was saying, “and all retreat was cut off, and I looked at my Captain and I said, ‘*Etriel*, I don’t think we have any choice but to board them.’ So she gave me the go-ahead and we made as if our helm were down – didn’t strike the colours though, that would be dishonourable, never mind that the damn goblins did that all the time – and when they made to board we threw our cables and came across. Fought them to a man! But we were victorious that day, praise Corellon.” He drank some of his wine, which Narissa noted that he was still nursing gently, rather than knocking it back like everyone else except Shaundar.

Narissa bit her tongue, but she couldn’t help it. She spoke up with, “Sir, I read about the Battle of Permafrost in the library at school.

I'm given to understand that there was a bionoid among your crew who contributed significantly to the victory."

The Captain fixed her with a very direct look. "Yes, *etriel*, it's quite true. Yathar's great uncle Navar was the Marine Commander on our ship." Shaundar was surprised to hear this. He had no idea that Yathar had a great uncle! But of course, if he were a bionoid, that would explain it. Near the end of the Unhuman War, the conflict escalated to a level of destruction that threatened the very survival of both species. According to the tales, the orcs had created a creature, now known and feared throughout the spheres as a Witchlight Marauder, by some kind of unholy necromancy to literally eat worlds. The elves had desperately retaliated by creating their own biological weapons. A few hundred elves had volunteered to be transformed into bionoids; insectoid shapeshifters who were capable of taking on a small ship's crew singlehandedly. However, no longer considered to be elves by the commanders of the Navy, they were banished at the end of the war.

Narissa narrowed her eyes a little and probed, "Sir, what do you think about how the bionoids were treated?"

Madrimilian did not falter in his expression, but he considered his response for a moment. "An elf can get in trouble for criticizing the Navy, *etriel*, so if you repeat this in public I'll deny that I said it, but I think it was a damned shame. Captain Navar was, and remains, my dear friend." He took a sip of his wine and added, "A Lieutenant from our

ship's crew was court martialled for speaking out against his banishment. That was a damned shame too."

"Court martialled?" echoed Narissa in disbelief.

"Inciting sedition in a Naval officer,' was the charge, I believe," the Captain explained sourly.

"That's garbage, sir," Shaundar couldn't help but blurt out.

Madrimilian nodded. "They've come to their senses since but they have too much pride to make good on it. Which is a sorry state of affairs if you ask me; the Navy lost two great officers that day."

This gave the two youths some food for thought; but at that moment, the ship shuddered as it dropped out of spelljamming speed as enchanted to do, and the lookout cried, "Planet ho!"

The Captain wiped his mouth and stood up. "I believe that concludes our dinner, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "*Quessira, etriela*, it has been a pleasure. All hands to stations, please." They stood and bowed to each other in such synchronization that an outsider might have thought they were beginning a court dance. Then they all adjourned to their stations.

"Would you two care to join me on the bridge?" Madrimilian enquired of the young elves.

“Yes, please!” and “*Av, quessir!*” the two of them replied in unison. They followed him up the short companionway.

They were just passing the trailing edge of Selune’s Tears, a cluster of glittering asteroids that trailed in the wake of Selune, the moon of Toril. “Wow! They’re beautiful!” Narissa breathed. Shaundar, having seen them a few times by now, wondered how far into the cluster the infamous Aces High obstacle course was located.

The *Ruamarillys* sailed past Selune, which was huge, pale and this close, very bright. Now the blue-and-green marble orb of Toril rolled into view. They raced the sun around her circumference, leaving the browns and greens of the continents behind, and flew over the tossing ocean for some distance before they found themselves suddenly immersed in thick, soupy mist.

“Pitch 20 down, full ahead,” commanded the Captain, and after the requisite “*Av!*” one of which was called through a speaking tube from the helm room, the ship pitched down towards the planet as directed.

All at once the mist cleared, and a beautiful gleaming elven city on the edge of a harbour, sparkling with delicate towers and glittering gemstone streets, appeared before them. Two smaller ships, fashioned like all other elven spelljamming craft from a shaped leaf of the starfly plant, flew in formation of a reception committee. “All stop,” Captain Madrimlian commanded, and the *Starflower* stopped and hovered as instructed, once the call had been repeated up and down the Man-o-War.

A Yeoman from one of the other ships appeared on her deck and began to wave semaphore flags. Shaundar saw that they were being welcomed, and they were indicated to proceed with landing a flitter at the Tower of the Moon; whatever that was.

“Yeoman, signal our affirmative,” the Captain directed, and the Yeoman saluted and stepped out on to the forward viewing deck with their flags to do as ordered.

“Ready a flitter,” he directed one of the other Midshipmen, who saluted and headed down the hatchway to do as requested. Flitters weren’t kept at the ready on a flight deck, as they were on an elven Armada, but most Men-o-War kept one or two depowered craft to make landfall. The Captain then turned to Narissa and asked her, “Do you have all of your things together?”

“Oh, I’ll need a minute!” she blurted, and she scurried off to the Captain’s quarters to fetch them.

“May I have permission to assist her, Captain?” Shaundar requested.

Madrimilan cast him a knowing smile. “Go ahead, *Sy’Ruan*.”

Shaundar saluted, and with the Captain’s nod of dismissal, followed.

Narissa was shoving things hastily into her bags. Shaundar started neatly folding her clothing and packing it for her. “I guess this is goodbye for a while,” he sighed with genuine regret.

“Not really,” Narissa smiled back. “Two days out of the week for leave? Where else are you going to go but Evermeet? Nedethil’s too far away.” Her expression was challenging and just a little mischievous.

Shaundar considered this and realized that she was right, of course. Nedethil was on the other side of the sphere; about a ten day journey if one took a direct beeline, provided that positioning of the planets in their orbits were ideal.

Narissa put a hand on the side of his face, turning it towards her, and then she quickly stood up on her toes and kissed him on the mouth. Before he could react, she gathered up her bags and vacated the room. “See you this weekend!” she called over her shoulder.

Shaundar blinked in surprise; then he grinned. There were starfly leaves in his stomach. He returned to the bridge with a dreamy smile, wondering if this voyage could possibly get any better.

Shaundar’s first glimpse of Aces High came when the *Ruamarillys* was almost rammed by a speeding flitter. “Evasive manoeuvres!” yelled Captain Madrimlian, but the flitter had already zigzagged out of their way. Once it had gone, the Academy revealed itself as a disk-shaped

asteroid that was a huge flight deck on one side and a series of dormitories on the other, with space docks floating around the edge of the coin. Shaundar saw maybe a hundred flitters swarming on the flight deck, but in the space docks he observed a refitted Man-o-War, a Squidship, a Hammership and a Nautiloid from his present vantage point on the Castle Deck, and he was sure that there were many more that he couldn't currently see from the angle of their approach.

"Belay my last," sighed the Captain in exasperation. He looked at Shaundar and said, "So, you're not the only hotdogger in the sphere."

"Av, *quessir*," Shaundar smirked.

Another signaller with *faerie fire*-illuminated torches was guiding them into an empty space dock, really no more than a sturdy pole fastened to the edge of a gravity plane for a ship to moor up to. They edged into the spot carefully with Madrimlian directing their jammer by calling out the pitch or the yaw, and rarely, the roll.

Shaundar aided in mooring up; as he did so, his eyes fixed upon a familiar silhouette heading in his direction. "Fancy meeting you here!" he called jovially.

Blackjack strolled up to the dock and leant a hand tying off hawsers. Perched on his shoulder, Sidewheeler chattered at Shaundar in a friendly way. "Welcome to Aces High, lad!" he bellowed up to the deck.

“Don’t worry about the rest of the lines,” the Captain told Shaundar, clapping him on the shoulder. “Get your gear.”

“*Av, quessir*,” Shaundar returned and he hopped down the passageway to the Midshipman’s quarters, shouldered his bag and headed back up. By that time, the *Ruamarillys* was properly moored.

“Four hours leave and resupply!” the Captain bellowed to his crew.

“You’re not going to wait to see how I do, Uncle?” Shaundar asked.

Madrimlian smiled faintly. “Do I need to?”

“No, sir,” Blackjack interjected. “Come on, lad, I’ll show you around. Your test isn’t until tomorrow so you have some time.”

The school was very Spartan, really. Aside from the dorms, there was a modest library and study hall, athletic equipment and practice yards, a bath house, a mess hall, a medical building (which he recognized by the full moon and overarching crescent symbol of Sehanine Moonbow, elven goddess of the moon and healing,) a student lounge; and, like Shaundar suspected, several ships of almost any imaginable configuration. Some of them had obviously been repaired from derelicts, but Shaundar imagined that this wouldn’t make any difference to the feel of flying them. They even had a groundling’s galleon converted to a

spelljamming vessel. Shaundar suspected that flying that would be like trying to turn a rampaging elephant.

“Your dorm is here,” announced Blackjack, leading him to one of the student houses; a simple affair that was really more of a bunkhouse, still downright luxurious next to the available quarters on a typical ship. He was bunked with three other students, none of whom were in the building when he was stowing his gear.

“This is where I leave you,” said Blackjack. “Four bells of the morning watch; meet the Captain at Flitter Bay 50. That’s the farthest starboard column there –” he indicated – “last one in the row.”

“Thanks Blackjack,” Shaundar smiled in gratitude.

“Good luck!” grinned the fledgling instructor. He bowed and took his leave.

Well, it was only the afternoon watch; he still had lots of time. What was he going to do with it? The library, perhaps? There was no alchemy lab, he was both disappointed and relieved to note, so there was no way that he could be tempted to create anything in the nature of stink bombs, tanglefoot bags or sovereign glue.

He wandered into the student lounge just to see what was going on.

As usual, he could see that the sun elves and the moon elves were in their own little cliques. Even the elves from other spheres had divided themselves into the same factions; there were some high elves and a few *Qualinesti* playing table tennis or billiards with the silver elves, while the gray elves, the *Silvanesti* and the valley elves were engaged in a *kholiast* tournament with the gold elves. He didn't see any green elves or their equivalents, the wood and *Kagonesti* elves – not that there were hundreds of them that were starfarers, anyway – but he assumed they would likely be outside playing some athletic game together. It occurred to him that it might be easier to get involved in that, if there was such a thing, rather than trying to insinuate himself into the other groups. He turned to leave.

“Hey, new kid!” came a snide voice from the *kholiast* table.
“What are you looking at?”

An athletic, golden haired sun elf had stood up and was glaring in his direction. He sauntered over to where Shaundar was standing by the door. Some of the other elves at the table came with him, and all conversation in the room stopped. He was a full head shorter than Shaundar, even though he seemed older, maybe 75 or so. Shaundar realized belatedly that he must have been gaping out while gazing in his direction. *Perfect, might as well get started early*, Shaundar thought in resignation, and he scowled down at the youth and drawled, “Nothing important.”

One of the high elves snickered. The sun elven youth drew himself up to his full height and demanded, “Do you have any idea who I am?”

“Do I care?” returned Shaundar, now thoroughly annoyed.

“You should,” sneered the gold elf. “I’m Ardeth Mistrivven.”

Mistrivven was another noble gold elven clan. That figured. “Really? I’d never know it by your manners.”

There were now a few titters coming from various points in the room.

Mistrivven sucked at his teeth. “You just watch yourself,” he threatened.

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Shaundar sneered. He turned again to leave.

“Hey!” called one of the silver elves, “you want to play billiards with us? I need a partner.”

Shaundar turned to look at the elf warily, expecting some kind of trick, but her expression was sincere. The invitation seemed honest. They were even smiling at him.

“Sure,” he replied slowly, and headed over to join them.

The elf who had invited him bowed in a casual sort of way. “I’m Lannatyr,” she announced.

“Shaundar Sunfall,” he replied amiably, returning the bow.

“Sunfall?” piped up one of the high elves standing at the billiards table. “Any relation to Rear Admiral Sunfall?”

“My father,” answered Shaundar honestly.

The silver and high elven crowd sniggered as the Mistrivven lad looked startled, then slapped one of his cronies on the shoulder and retreated to the *kholiast* table. *Well, so much for kholiast while I’m here*, Shaundar thought to himself, a little let down because he liked the game.

“Never mind that guy,” the high elf who had asked about his dad said frankly. “He just thinks he’s all that because he’s got the top scores for slalom flying recently. And he figures his title gives him some pull around here. He’d be wrong, of course.”

Shaundar shrugged. “I get that kind of crap all the time. I’m sort of used to it.”

“Well, don’t get into a fistfight with him,” Lannatyr advised. “You’ll be expelled.”

“Kick his butt in the magical duelling class,” the high elf suggested. “Much more fun and officially sanctioned, if you do it right.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Shaundar nodded, thinking that maybe this would actually turn out all right after all. He thoroughly enjoyed himself that evening as he and Lannatyr proceeded to beat all comers at billiards. By the end of the evening he was certain that he had made a good friend.

At four bells of the morning watch, Shaundar was waiting at Flitter Bay 50, as directed. He even beat his instructor there – a tall *Qualinesti* elf with honey-coloured hair and brown eyes in a Captain’s flight suit.

Shaundar saluted, and the instructor returned it. “*Sy’Ruan* Sunfall, I presume?” he queried.

“Sir.”

“I’m Captain Whitestar,” he introduced himself. “They tell me I’m in charge of this outfit.”

Shaundar bowed. “Pleased to meet you, sir. Thank you for giving me a chance to try out.”

The Captain indicated the flitter. “Get on board, Mr. Sunfall.”

Shaundar saluted and climbed up on the ladder, his heart pounding thunder in his head. He saluted the bow. The Captain followed him up. Unlike the *Starsinger*, this flitter was pristinely neat and clean.

“Take the helm, Mr. Sunfall,” Captain Whitestar commanded.

“*Av, quessir.*” Shaundar sat in the helm and gave himself over to the link with the ship and the thrumming song of the active spelljamming helm.

The Captain climbed in behind Shaundar. “All right, take her out, Mr. Sunfall.”

Shaundar nodded. “*Av, quessir.*” Carefully he manoeuvred the ship as he left the flight deck. “What’s her name, sir?”

“Her name?” repeated the Captain.

“The flitter, sir. If we’re going to be this intimate, I’d like to know her name.” He flushed a little. Dad had always taught him to have proper respect for his spacecraft. Was this not something that was commonly done?

The Captain sounded pleased. “I like a pilot who respects his craft, Mr. Sunfall. Her name is *Ruatri.*”

“Well met, *Stardancer,*” Shaundar greeted her. “Where are we headed, sir?”

“Pitch ten up and six minutes nor’-nor’west.”

“Pitch ten up, six minutes nor’-nor’west, *av*,” Shaundar responded. He lifted her nose gently, and yawed larboard about 20 degrees as he gracefully rolled the *Stardancer* almost 45 degrees over to make the sharp turn. He checked his pocket watch and flew for six minutes into Selune’s sparkling tears at the required bearing.

Eventually he saw two asteroids floating in a relatively stationary position side-by-side. He noticed them because it was near to the six minute mark and they were flagged with *faerie fire* that illuminated them even more brightly than the crystal asteroids all around them, which already reflected and refracted much of the sun’s ambient light.

“Six minutes, sir,” he informed the Captain.

“All stop,” he replied.

“All stop,” Shaundar repeated, and he halted the flitter directly before the glowing rocks.

“Good to see that you can take direction,” confirmed the Captain. “All right, Mr. Sunfall; as you may have guessed, this is the course you need to run. You must complete it in ten minutes in order to qualify for our academy. It’s a slalom style exercise. You must circle every glowing asteroid. There are twenty of them. You will be docked thirty seconds for each one you miss. I will caution you that the course is

in three dimensions as well. If you fail to do the course in ten minutes, or if you crash the flitter, you fail. Do you understand these instructions?"

"Av, quessir," Shaundar replied breathlessly.

"Then are you ready, Mr. Sunfall?"

"Av, quessir," Shaundar repeated.

Captain Whitestar paused; Shaundar assumed it was to look at his pocket watch. He held his breath. His whole life had led up to this moment! He prayed to Sehanine that he would not screw this up.

A few moments later, the Captain called out, "Go!"

Shaundar was off almost before the Captain had finished saying the word, loop-de-looping a figure eight around the two initial asteroid markers. The Captain smiled his approval and nodded. Most candidates went through them like a gate, and lost thirty seconds right off for not paying attention to the instructions.

When he'd finished that, Shaundar noticed a bright blue glow ahead, at about a 15 degree yaw starboard. He made a beeline. Almost on top of it, Shaundar caught a glimpse of green light out of his peripheral vision to the larboard side. He rolled and swung around the marker, narrowly avoiding a shot-put sized rock floating serenely along his path, and barrelled for the green glow. Circling it was not quite as easy because it was an oblong menhir tumbling end over end through space.

He was required to dip larboard and then waggle up in order to dodge it; but by doing so, he spied an amethyst light directly beneath him. He pitched the bowsprit to the floor and dove straight down and through a scissor-like formation of crystal shards, which passed close enough that Shaundar felt the tickle brush past the flitter's wings. Captain Whitestar hitched in his breath and let it out again as Shaundar circled the fifth marker.

The sixth was glowing pink and was visible through a hole that burrowed entirely through an enormous boulder that Shaundar would otherwise have to avoid, losing precious seconds. Would the flitter fit? He thought so, though it would require some fancy manoeuvring. Well, nothing ventured . . .

He dove directly into the passage, which narrowly admitted the flitter and then curved ever so slightly starboard. Shaundar slowed a little, just enough to make the sharp roll that was necessary to traverse the tunnel, and then increased speed once again as he shot out the other side and looped the pink marker.

The Captain did not speak, but he could not help but be impressed. Only one other student had ever succeeded with that particular tactic.

But Shaundar was already corkscrewing through a debris field to wind around the seventh marker, and then in a move that Blackjack would have recognized from Garden's roots, he used the gravitational

force of the large white-glowing rock to propel himself back upwards to blue-blazing marker number eight. He weaved through a dancing field of rolling quartz boulders to swing around the ninth, then skimmed a Type A body at the closest orbit the Captain had ever seen, which actually exerted gravitational pull on the flitter, freshened the air and raised the temperature about five degrees due to atmospheric friction. But sure enough, right before them was marker ten, shining like a weird green moon, and Shaundar drew an arc around it.

“Halfway there, lad,” the Captain breathed. Blackjack was right! He’d never seen anything like it, and the boy still had seven minutes!

Then Shaundar did something else that the Captain had never seen before. Rather than pulling up to avoid the trapezoid shaped Type A body at the other side of the tenth marker, Shaundar swung the craft to barrel directly at it. Suddenly the Captain found that they were in a canyon that he didn’t know was there. As they flew along it, the trajectory of the tumbling trapezoid revealed the purple light of the eleventh marker at the end of the abyss like the sun peaking up over the horizon, just in time for the *Stardancer* to emerge from it and Shaundar to make the circle. Seeing that the twelfth was right next to the eleventh, rather than looping them both twice Shaundar rolled the flitter 45 degrees starboard and slapped his hands against the beam above his head. Gravity flipped from down to up for just a split second, causing the Captain’s head to bump painfully off of the beam above him, but Shaundar’s rear end never left the seat, and he circled both markers by passing through them in a snake’s curve.

“Sorry,” he murmured to the Captain, who was too aghast to be upset.

The thirteenth was almost sedate by comparison; just a simple large rock rolling through space, shining pink that was by itself, ahead of the trapezoid. But the fourteenth was in the middle of a meteoric minefield. Shaundar took his time; he slowed to tactical one and danced around the obstacles with the care of a ballet performer, lifting a wing here and pirouetting there. When he'd completed the loop he tiptoed clear and immediately exerted all magical force again as he swung larboard, where the fifteenth marker, a blue-lit disk, flipped itself end over end. He timed his approach to begin with a flip cycle and then traversed the edge of the coin-shape. He was in a perfect space. He'd expected to be nervous and sweating, but instead it was as though time had slowed down and he were seeing everything in slow motion and with perfect clarity, giving him plenty of time to react.

Marker sixteen was more challenging. His option was to fly through a gauntlet of quartz shards that tumbled past in a horizontal approach that reminded him of chopping knife blades, or avoid the field entirely by swooping up and over it, then coming back down. Flying through was crazy, but the blades came in regular intervals, being thrown off one side of a spinning Type A flat body, and he thought he had the timing. When a pass of shards finished careening by, Shaundar gave it all it was worth through the field, and got to the marker just in time to avoid the next wave as it tickled his tail.

Number seventeen was perched at the top of a narrow spire on another Type A body. He gave it a reasonably wide berth, realizing that the precarious balance would cause it to fall into the larger body's gravity if it were disturbed by wind. But he used the spire's base as a launching point to spin around to marker eighteen, a pipe bowl sized rock illuminated with blue in the center of a debris cluster.

The nineteenth marker was a huge orb surrounded by a grinding wheel of sharp rocks. Shaundar slipped between a pair of the tooth-shaped stones and wheeled out the other side without missing a beat.

For a horrible moment, Shaundar realized that they were back at the base, and he wondered with a sinking feeling if he had missed a marker somewhere. But then he realized that the asteroid that the base was located on was, itself, illuminated by *faerie fire* in a faint silvery sheen. Clever! He buzzed the Academy and orbited the disk around its circumference. "Done!" he cried out to the Captain.

The silence that followed this chilled Shaundar to his core. Had he failed?

But then the Captain laughed out loud. "Congratulations lad!" he roared. "I think you pass!"

Relief flooded through Shaundar's body. His vision swam for a second and he began to sweat and tremble as the adrenaline finally hit.

He spun around to look at the Captain. “Thank you, sir!” he panted. “What was my time?”

Captain Whitestar, studying his pocket watch like it was going to bite him, shook his head and giggled; not laughed, but *giggled*. “Six minutes, thirty-nine seconds,” he announced. He met Shaundar’s eyes with bemusement. “By the way, Blackjack’s previous record –” he emphasized the word *previous* – “was exactly seven minutes.”

Shaundar had never been as happy as he was at Aces High.

The silver and high elves threw a raucous party to celebrate Shaundar’s record that night. The gold elven crowd were invited to participate but declined the invitation, which didn’t surprise Shaundar in the least, all things considered. The green elven group took them up on it, however. Shaundar didn’t know a lot of *Sy’Tel’Quessir* and he found them to be a lot of fun. They drank like fishes, danced like demons, drummed and wrestled. Shaundar had never been the centre of attention in any kind of good way before and he wasn’t really sure how to handle it. He started making self-deprecating jokes to bring things down to a more normal level. It didn’t work, especially since Blackjack came to join the party, and he had nothing but praise for Shaundar.

At about two bells into first watch, the Captain poked his bed head into the student lounge. “Just remember that class starts at first bell of morning watch, you cretins!” he growled before disappearing.

“Oh, did we piss him off?” Shaundar asked nervously.

Blackjack laughed outright. “Hells, no! None of us have been expelled, have we? And we’re all still alive, right? But I do think I ought to get a couple of hours reverie and you guys might want to as well. Morning starts with navigation and that’s rough when you haven’t been to bed.”

Shaundar took his advice, but it didn’t help much. He wasn’t the best navigator in the world, but he wasn’t any slouch at it, either. He had to think and double check things to triangulate and make the appropriate calculations, but his results were accurate. He managed to do reasonably well on the test he was assigned, but he could have done better if he’d been more awake.

The course load would have been crippling if he didn’t love the subject matter, but as it was, his first week at Aces High was just gruelling. The first two hours of every day were devoted to scholarly studies: navigation, metaphysics, language arts, sociology, natural history, planetology, astronomy, ship recognition and design, tactics, and so forth. The next two hours were devoted to magical studies: basic wizardry, battle casting, magical theory, shipboard magical tactics, practical shipboard wizardry; etcetera. There was a break for lunch, and then it

was four hours worth of shipboard training, which ranged from helm operation of a variety of ships and helms, elven and otherwise, to manoeuvres practice, to handling sails and oars, to practical arts such as emergency carpentry and scavenging. There was one hour of physical education before dinner, involving everything from archery to siege weapons practice to boarding party war games. Then after dinner, they were given one hour in which to log assigned flight hours, catch up on homework, or engage in weapons practice. The rest was free time, in which they could still log flight hours and the like if they wished to, or relax if they preferred. They were, however, required to log at least two extra flight hours per week. Shaundar logged about seven, and before long he found he was gathering a crowd whenever he flew, even among the gold elves. Of course, the fact that he was breaking all the speed and manoeuvrability records was probably the cause of this.

Mistrivven and his cronies were less than impressed by Shaundar's new status as the Golden Boy, so they hassled him with minor irritations, like bumping into him on purpose in the hall and knocking down his books. But that stopped quickly when a couple of the larger green elves noticed the harassment, and began to provide Shaundar with a friendly escort when he travelled from one class to another.

In any case, by the end of the week, Shaundar was desperately in need of escape. He approached the Captain in his office and saluted.

The Captain said, "What can I do for you, Mr. Sunfall?"

“Sir,” he said, “is there some way that I can requisition a flitter to visit Evermeet for my weekend leave?”

He glanced up and asked casually, “You’re not going to crash this one, are you?”

Shaundar felt like someone had kicked him in the solar plexus. “No, sir.”

Captain Whitestar looked at him more closely. He realized he’d stuck his foot right in his mouth and scared the poor lad somehow. “I was just kidding, Mr. Sunfall. Sure, you can take a flitter. Where will we be able to reach you on Evermeet?”

The youth cast him a relieved and downright grateful smile. “My family has a small estate there, or you can find me through Narissa Alastrarra at the Tower of the Moon. And thank you, sir.”

The Captain pushed aside his paperwork. “Let’s talk for a minute. Have a seat, Midshipman.” He indicated the chair on the other side of the desk. Shaundar sat. “So, how are you finding your first week?” he inquired.

Shaundar smiled. “I’m having the time of my life, sir,” he confessed.

The flight instructor gave him a long, calculating look. “I understand that you’ve been having some personality conflicts with one of the sun elven students, Midshipman Mistrivven.”

Shaundar shrugged noncommittally. “Nothing I can’t handle, sir.”

“Well, you keep me informed,” he demanded. “Mischief is one thing. It’s probably even healthy for a pilot. But serious shit-disturbing is another. Anyone who starts genuine trouble will be drummed out of this program. Understood?”

“Perfectly, sir,” Shaundar responded, his expression carefully neutral.

Captain Whitestar then changed the subject, since this one seemed to make the lad uncomfortable. “I understand you’re blowing all of Lieutenant Blackjack’s records out of the sky.”

Again, Shaundar just shrugged. “I think he’s teaching me all his tricks, sir.”

“That’s good!” the Captain chuckled; which seemed to surprise Shaundar. “That’s his job! But he tells me you’re learning them really fast. And that’s your job, and I understand you’re doing it exceptionally well.”

“Thank you, sir,” responded the youth modestly. He even flushed a little.

“So, go have fun this weekend!” Captain Whitestar urged. “You can take *Ruatri*, since you’ve already come to know her a little. Just remember that class starts at the first bell of the morning watch in two days, Mr. Sunfall, and we won’t track you down, we’ll just kick you out of the program.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” he nodded, “I’m not going far and I will certainly be back!”

“Carry on, Midshipman.”

Shaundar saluted and left the office for Flitter Bay 50. He’d heard the warning in the Captain’s words and he determined to be on his best behaviour. Leaving for the weekend was probably the best move he could make because it would be hard to get into trouble if he weren’t here. Besides, he was really looking forward to seeing Narissa.

Captain Whitestar shook his head, thinking about how anxious the Sunfall lad seemed. Not at all the typical arrogant brash flyboy he tended to get in this place. He found himself wondering if the boy had ever been paid a genuine compliment before.

Chapter Five

Evermeet in the late spring was probably the most beautiful place on a planet's surface in the Universe. Jasmine and magnolia trees were in full bloom, and the air was filled with flower petals, perfume, and the heady scent of the sea. The teeming oak forests and elder groves were a living mass of lively green. Moonhorses of every imaginable rainbow colour, vast herds of fey green or white deer, hunting parties of centaurs and wemics, and even a handful of unicorns and pegasi, ran freely over the green grassy plains with their tall grasses bowing in the wind.

He cleared the mists that shrouded Evermeet from the view of the outside world, and flew in the pattern that he'd been instructed to follow to avoid the dangerous storms that were part of Evermeet's magical defences, which also served the dual purpose of signalling to Evermeet's aerial cavalry, and small spelljamming flotilla, that he belonged here.

Finding the Tower of the Moon was not difficult. It was located in the centre of the Island, right next to the Tower of the Sun. They were beautiful, graceful white spires rising above the treetops, one of which was decorated with an ancient gilded glyph for the sun, and the other of which was marked with a silvered crescent. It was said that the Tower of the Sun contained a secret weapon to protect all of the elvenkind of the

world of Toril, along with spells and weaponry to be called to Evermeet's defence. In contrast, the Tower of the Moon was a great bastion of learning, where the greatest elven mages came to study.

He landed the *Stardancer* nearby and walked into the grove of trees that formed the grounds, which were broken up by gravel paths that created meandering walkways through the woods. Shouldering his haversack, he began hiking. Unexpectedly, he came upon a tall pole decorated with totemic images. Green elven art. The totem was styled in the manner of a tree. Roots were carved at the bottom and there was room for other images to be carved there. Along the trunk were an image of a rabbit, a wolf, a dolphin, a raven, an owl, a hawk, an eagle; and then nestled in the top branches of the tree were a pegasus and a unicorn. He felt strangely at peace there.

A figure was walking towards him. He turned to see who it was. Narissa smiled and waved.

He waved back. "I saw your flitter!" she called. She came up to him and gave him a hug. "Look at you, all dressed up in your flight suit! You look great! How's Aces High?"

Shaundar smiled. "You know, it's going really well. How's magic studies going?"

They started walking together along the gravel path. "Great!" she said. "Great Uncle Laeroth is teaching me. He says I'm pretty good,

too. I'm not knowledgeable enough for High Magic yet, or old enough of course, but he's teaching me all kinds of wonderful things. Come on, I'll show you around!" She took the hand that was free of the haversack. Her aqua eyes were shining.

He squeezed her hand back. His stomach was turning cartwheels again.

She led him to the Tower, formed of alabaster and silver. The ground level was nothing but a series of colonnades completely open to the air. Trailing ivy and hanging flowers wound around them and dangled enticingly from the ceiling. There were several tables and chairs, and a few quiet daybeds with lovely views of the grounds. A few elves of various ages were seated here and there, chatting or resting. Shaundar did his best not to disturb the delicate lady resting on one of the reverie beds.

"You are staying, aren't you?" Narissa asked him. "There's visitor rooms."

Shaundar smiled. "Well, that's up to you and your Great Uncle. I could stay at our family estate, too; it's not too far from here." He did not let go of her hand.

"I'd like you to stay," she declared with her sparkling oceanic eyes.

“Okay, then let’s ask him,” he found himself saying as though it were coming from far away.

They headed up the spiral staircase at the centre of the structure to the next level. “This is where I stay,” she told Shaundar. “They’re just dorms.”

“I don’t mind dorms,” said Shaundar amiably. Actually, as far as dormitories went, they looked fairly comfortable. Small, practical fireplaces were ready to warm cozy little rooms with a handful of beds and desks in them, and they all even had a rather bright glass window with a nice view of the blossoming trees outside.

They continued to traverse the staircase, passing by the next level (which Narissa explained was strictly for the instructors) and the fourth (kitchens and dining rooms) to the fifth tower level, which opened on what seemed to be a thick pine forest.

“Uncle Laeroth!” called Narissa, completely unfazed by this unusual indoor terrain. “Are you home?”

They traversed a dirt pathway to find themselves at the door of a modest tree manor, not unlike the Sunfall house on Nedethil. The oldest elf that Shaundar had ever seen stepped out of the front door. He must have been older than Shaundar’s grandmother, because only the barest suggestion of wrinkles remained on his face, but he seemed almost insubstantial, like he might blow away at any second. He appeared nearly

alien, with very narrow features, even for an elf, and exceptionally slanted almond-shaped black eyes that held the depths of millennia. Only his golden hair betrayed his sun elven heritage.

“Narissa!” the elder greeted her cheerfully. “How are you doing this afternoon?”

Narissa released Shaundar’s hand and hugged the senior elf gently. “I’m good, Uncle; how are you?”

“Well enough,” he said in reply. “And who is your friend?”

“This is Shaundar,” Narissa introduced him.

Shaundar bowed formally, being not at all reluctant to give respect to such an honoured elder. “Very pleased to meet you, *quessir*,” he said.

Laeroth Runemaster brightened. “Ah, Shaundar! Yes, Narissa speaks very highly of you.”

“I’m honoured, sir,” he replied, flushing slightly. “I hope I won’t disappoint.”

“Well, come in, children,” he chuffed at them. “I was just having some tea; would you care for some?”

“Yes, please,” they chorused.

The inside of the manor was quite comfortable and reminded Shaundar almost painfully of home. It suddenly struck him just how far away Nedethil was. Oddly, he missed it. They joined the elder elf at his kitchen table, a structure of beautifully carved wood depicting a forest scene in which a young *quessir* was hiding his eyes from what was likely a nymph; but he was peeking through his fingers.

The old elf poured tea from a steaming ceramic teapot painted in a wonderfully colourful oak leaf mural into cups on saucers that matched, and set them down in front of the young elves with an identically patterned honeypot. He noticed that Shaundar was studying the table carving and chuckled. “The adventures of my misbegotten youth,” he explained with a self-deprecating smile. “I’m lucky to have survived it, really.”

They thanked him for the tea, and then Narissa asked, “Uncle, I was wondering if Shaundar could stay here for the weekend.”

The sage sipped his tea. “I can’t imagine why not,” he concurred. “Where else would he stay?”

“Well, I could stay at our family manor,” Shaundar explained honestly, “but it’s filled with dust covers and I’d have to pilot the flutter back and forth every day.”

“Or,” the old elf suggested, “Narissa could stay there with you.”

They were both surprised. “That would be allowed?” Shaundar inquired uncertainly.

The old wizard laughed. “Oh, not by Narissa’s father, I’m sure!” he admitted. “But really, where else are you going to get any privacy?”

Shaundar blinked twice. “Well, thank you, sir,” he said.

“It’s probably not going to happen this visit,” the elder admitted, “because we work in tendays here on Toril and Narissa still has studies to do, and if things are still shrouded in dust covers you’re going to need someone to go in and clean up the place, but perhaps next weekend we can arrange for Narissa to take some assignments with her.”

“Thank you very much, Uncle!” Narissa said brightly. She was smiling around her teacup.

“You’re welcome,” he nodded. “Now, have you finished your assignments today?”

Her face fell. “No, sir.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and leaned forward a little. “Are you going to actually get them done,” he queried, “or are you going to be too distracted today?”

Shaundar smiled and Narissa's mouth corner tweaked up hesitantly. "Honestly, I am probably going to be too distracted," she admitted.

The old elf heaved an exaggerated sigh, though his black eyes were twinkling. "Well, you might as well be done for today then, but I will expect you to work twice as hard tomorrow, little *etriel!*"

She beamed. "Thank you, Uncle Laeroth!" She hugged him again, just about spilling his tea. He chortled.

"I don't mean to be a distraction, sir," Shaundar apologized. "I enjoy magical studies too. If you'll permit me, maybe she and I can work on things together tomorrow. Then I'll be less distracting."

"Oh dear Seldarine," the ancient elf snickered, "a young elf in *beryn fin* really can't be expected to work all the time, now can she? It's important to have fun when you're young; how else do you have things to talk about when you're old?" He winked. Shaundar thought of the scene carved on the table and grinned. How had that scenario played out, he wondered? "But if you really want to get involved in those studies tomorrow, you're welcome to, my boy. A little knowledge never hurt anyone either."

Shaundar finished the last of his tea. "Well, thank you very much again, sir."

Narissa gulped down her tea and stood up. “We’ll be going for a walk in the woods then, Uncle,” she informed him. “Maybe we’ll go to the Seldarine’s Grove.”

“You should do that,” he nodded. “All the *Tel’Quessir* should see it at least once.”

“Thank you for the tea, sir,” said Shaundar gratefully again. “It has been an honour to meet you.”

“Likewise, Shaundar,” smiled the elder.

The youths found the staircase again and headed back downwards. They were well down the stairs before they started embarrassed giggling.

They stopped by the kitchen level to procure a picnic lunch, and then they entered the dormitories. After some consultation with one of the students, who had taken on the job of organizing sleeping quarters, Shaundar was given a bed in one of the dorms, which he was sharing with other visitors, a *Teu’Tel’Quessir* couple who had married recently and were here to make holy pilgrimage to the Grove. He met them on their way up to lunch in the dining halls; which, though laid out in a buffet of similar style, were far too nicely decorated to be considered mess halls. Shaundar dropped off his haversack on the daybed he was offered.

Narissa and Shaundar hiked into the woods together in the direction of the sacred Grove. Shaundar carried the picnic basket while

Narissa led the way. At length they came to a barrier of interwoven trees that was completely impassable. “How do we get around this?” Shaundar inquired.

“Just wait,” smiled Narissa smugly.

After a few moments, the leaves on the trees started to rustle and shake. Slowly the interlaced branches began to untangle themselves. Two of the larger oak trees actually shuffled aside to reveal a passage.

Narissa grinned at Shaundar. “Come on!” she laughed, heading through.

Shaundar was delighted. He thought this was very clever. He bowed to the trees as he went through. Immediately he was confronted with wrought iron gates almost completely concealed with climbing roses and ivy, but they were swinging open at Narissa’s approach.

A gleaming white marble pathway opened up beneath their feet. Ahead of them it was flanked by white marble pillars that were also entwined with roses and ivy, and the path opened up to both sides as well, but without the pillars. Statues of white marble were visible in the distance on either side and at the very far end ahead of them, but the details were difficult to make out. Shaundar could also see pastoral lawns and two simple but elegant white marble fountains.

“Want to look around?” Narissa asked. “The statues are really lovely.”

“Sure,” Shaundar smiled. He was happy enough to do anything with Narissa today that she wanted to do.

To the left was an astonishing marble statue of Titania and Oberon, the Faerie Queen and King. Shaundar was amazed by the complexity of the marble carving work. Titania’s wings had been inlaid with mother-of-pearl to make them iridescent, and they were so delicately carved that they seemed to be as gossamer as they must be in person. Each fine leaf in Oberon’s cloak was individually veined and shaded. There were several mixed flowers, some bowls of cream and honey, and some sparkling jewels left in offering. Shaundar left some of the strawberries that they’d brought for the picnic reverently.

To the right was a statue of Rillifane Rallathil, elven god of the woodlands, depicted as a green-skinned elf in bark armour (and Shaundar suspected that it actually was bark that had been varnished and preserved,) armed with a longbow. In the centre of the chestpiece of his armour was a gilded Tree of Life; His holy symbol. He had also been left offerings, but these were in the form of elven wine, clean water and compost. Shaundar and Narissa each poured some of their waterskins out on the ground.

Further up the central path was another intersection leading left and right. To the left was shrine to Hanali Celanil, goddess of love. She was wearing a short belted tunic and bracelets and anklets of golden bells, which tinkled gently in the light breeze. Her golden hair streamed out behind Her, and Shaundar suspected that it was spun of actual gold.

Her arms were flung open widely, as if to embrace Her petitioners, and at Her throat gleamed a golden heart pendant on a gold chain. Her lapis lazuli eyes sparkled with joy. Her shrine was strewn with flowers, honey, wine, incense, rings and jewellery.

Shaundar reached out and took Narissa's hand. "So why did you kiss me? You know, when you said you'd see me this weekend."

Narissa smiled shyly but she didn't pull away. A ray of the afternoon sunlight was captured by her radiant golden hair and it illuminated every gold speckle in her eyes. "I don't know. I wanted to, I guess."

Shaundar pulled her closer. "Well, I liked it," he confessed quietly.

"Really?" she asked softly. Her ocean eyes were huge under her delicate lashes.

He nodded. He put down the picnic basket and took her other hand.

She reached up and kissed him again. This time, he kissed her back. Time stood still. He could hardly breathe. But he could smell the scent of magnolias on the wind, and he could smell the lovely scent of her skin and hair. A queasy sensation of ecstatic happiness settled in his stomach. The centre of his chest felt like it was on fire. He knew then that he would give his life for her if she asked for it.

Shaundar could not keep his mind on school when he returned to Aces High that week. He was too busy thinking about kissing Narissa under Hanali's shrine. Conjugating verbs in Gnomish just wasn't sticking in his brain, he had trouble with basic transmutations, and he almost clipped the signal tower taking off when logging his flight hours.

Blackjack was waiting for him when he landed. "Hey, we gotta talk," he began, pulling Shaundar aside. "What's going on? Where's your brain today?"

"I'm sorry, I'm a little distracted," Shaundar admitted.

Sidewheeler ran down Blackjack's arm and hand, landed on Shaundar's shoulder where the hand was resting, and then bit Shaundar firmly on the ear. "Ouch!" Shaundar yelled. The hamster responded with something in rodent that sounded like irritable swearing, and ran back up to Blackjack's shoulder, looking smug.

"There!" Blackjack grinned. "That's your wake-up call!"

Shaundar scowled at them both crossly.

Blackjack said, "Seriously, you're going to get yourself killed if you keep that up."

"You're right," Shaundar realized. "I'm sorry."

“So, what is it?” Blackjack inquired. “What’s got your head full of cobwebs? Is it a girl?”

Shaundar blushed. Blackjack laughed. “Which girl? Narissa?” he pressed.

Shaundar nodded.

Blackjack smiled at him and he smiled back uncertainly. “Well, can’t say I blame you! Smart, pretty, funny . . . what’s not to like? But try and clear your head, okay? There’s some new training that we’re starting tomorrow. Normally the Mithril reserves it for Lieutenants and higher, but I got you a special dispensation because you’re kicking everyone’s ass at everything else. I went to the matt for you, though, so you have to be really on the ball, okay?”

Shaundar smiled. “I’m sorry Blackjack, I’ll do better.”

“That’s the spirit!” He clapped him on the shoulder. “Report to the Captain’s office at four bells of the morning watch tomorrow.”

When Shaundar reported as ordered, he was surprised to see Uncle Madrimlian waiting there for him instead of Captain Whitestar, along with Blackjack. He saluted them both. “Good morning, sirs,” he said cheerfully.

“Good morning Shaundar!” Madrimlian greeted him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Av, *quessir*,” he replied. “What are we doing here today, sir?”

“Blackjack didn’t tell you?” he smiled, raising an eyebrow.

“Thought I’d leave that to you, sir,” Blackjack returned.

“Have a seat,” Madrimlian encouraged him, indicating the chair. He sat as directed.

“What we’re doing here, Shaundar,” Madrimlian explained, “is changing the way spelljamming works. We’re training pilots to resist the magic-draining effects of a spelljamming helm. This will have a few effects. One is that instead of being able to pilot a helm only once a day, and being unable to do so again once you’ve left the seat, you will be able to pilot a helm for twelve hours in any combination. The other is that ideally, you will be able to get off a helm after a few hours, throw some spells in combat, and get back on the helm.”

Shaundar’s eyes lit up. “That’s a great idea, sir!”

“The training’s not easy,” Blackjack explained. “It requires a great deal of mental focus and concentration. That’s why Captain Madrimlian is here. He’s training us in the necessary mental exercises and concentration techniques.”

“I’m honoured to be given the opportunity to do this, *quessira*,” was Shaundar’s response.

“Okay then,” Captain Madrimlian began, “the first step is to practice your mental focus.” He had Shaundar focus his concentration on a candle flame, and nothing but the candle flame. That was the exercise for the first day.

The second day involved a completely different practice. He was expected to daydream intensely enough to smell and taste the subject of his daydream; but not to fall into reverie. Shaundar did not find this particularly difficult; he just thought of Narissa.

The third day, Madrimlian told Shaundar, “Now we get into the hard part. I’m a psion, did I ever tell you?”

“No, sir,” Shaundar said. Psions were regarded with some awe and mystery. Their magic was entirely of the mind. They couldn’t do some of the things that mages could do, like transform one creature or object into another or throw fireballs, but they had a much easier time reading minds and bending the will. Or so the tales told.

“This isn’t going to be a comfortable experience, Shaundar. I am going to try to break into your thoughts, and I want you to resist me. When you are able to do that, then we can go to the helm.”

“Av, *quessir*,” he replied.

“Are you ready?”

He shrugged. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

He felt the force of the Captain's mind against his instantly. Shaundar felt like someone had hit his head with a rock. He threw his best defence against his opponent. It wasn't enough. Madrimlian pored through the contents of his thoughts with no trouble.

"Don't be discouraged," he soothed Shaundar, letting up. "This isn't easy. It takes practice. You lasted longer than you think. Let's do it again."

They tried again, with the same results. The third was no better.

"How can I practice something when I don't know what I'm supposed to do exactly?" Shaundar demanded, a little frustrated.

Madrimlian smiled knowingly. "I heard a tale of a young boy who held heavy textbooks at arms' length for almost an entire hour once. Whatever sort of stubborn you exercised to accomplish that; well, that's the skill you need to practice."

Ah! Shaundar nodded. Yes, that made sense. He remembered how angry he was, how determined he was that he was not going to fail, no matter whether Captain Durothil wanted him to succeed or not. "Okay, I think I'm ready," he said after a moment.

The Captain tried again, but Shaundar thought about how he felt in the classroom, and how there was no way, *no way*, that he was going to be beaten! He could do this; he knew that he could.

He felt the Captain's presence, insidious, persistent. He steeled his will and resisted. He was going to win, damn it!

Madrimlian let up. He was beaming. "Well done, lad. That will do. Tomorrow we'll try the helm."

Shaundar met them at the *Stardancer* on the morning of the fourth day.

"Now, what I want you to do, Shaundar," instructed the Captain, "is to concentrate on sealing off the part of your mind that contains your magical power. Perhaps visualize it like a river behind a dam. And I want you to hold it from the helm so it can't be accessed. You are going to feel the helm trying to get at it, just as I was trying to get at your thoughts yesterday. Don't allow it. Make sense?"

"Av, *quessir*," Shaundar agreed.

Madrimlian indicated the helm. "Any time you're ready."

Shaundar focused on his magical abilities and what he had accomplished with them. Then, as directed, he visualized it all being kept in an inaccessible enclosure behind a stone wall. Once he had a clear image, he sat down on the helm.

He felt the ship bond with him instantly, and he felt it access his magic right away.

“That’s okay,” said Madrimlian. “This takes practice. We’ll try again tomorrow.”

They did, but the results were the same.

The Captain clapped Shaundar on the shoulder. “Really, try not to be discouraged. You’re doing a fine job. Enjoy your weekend and we’ll go again at the beginning of next week.”

Because he had been doing this extra training in the mornings, most of his evening time had been spent catching up on his academic assignments, so he still had to do an hour of flight time that night before he could leave for Evermeet that weekend. Shaundar took to the sky, and once he had cleared the Academy’s air envelope, he found that for a moment, he forgot what he was doing. Next thing he knew, the *Aerakiir* was filling his field of vision and he rolled starboard and pulled up as hard as he could.

It wasn’t long before the Tower flagged him down.

He landed, feeling chagrined. Blackjack marched over and cuffed him upside the head. “What in the Nine Hells are you doing!” he demanded furiously.

“I’m sorry, Blackjack,” he apologized. “I don’t know what happened. I lost concentration, I guess.”

Blackjack sighed. “Still working on Captain Madrimlian’s training?”

He shrugged, “Maybe.”

“Okay,” he nodded, “I’ll excuse you from the last of your flight hours this week. You can make it up next week. And you’re grounded until tomorrow. I don’t want you flying if you’re that distracted.”

“*Av, quessir*, that’s probably a good idea,” Shaundar agreed, though he was disappointed at the reduction in his time with Narissa. “Thank you.”

He noticed Mistrivven standing by his flitter, snickering at him as he left the concrete.

Shaundar left early in the morning so that he could get as much time with Narissa as possible. She met him right away. “I was worried!” she cried, embracing him. “Where have you been?”

He sighed. “Oh, I screwed up when flying yesterday and I was grounded for the night. I missed you too.” He kissed her first this time.

Narissa looked into his eyes and asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Sure,” he said, “but let’s go do something first.”

She replied, “Well, I got my work for the day. Do you want to go back to the Grove?”

Shaundar did. They took another picnic lunch; though this time, they picnicked under the statue of Labelas Enoreth, elven god of knowledge and time, feeling that He might aid their studies. Labelas was thought of by many elves as being a little stuffy, but Shaundar liked the look of him. He had silver hair tied back in a sensible ponytail and a single amethyst eye; the other was covered with an eyepatch. He was clad in druid’s robes and a book was cradled in His embrace. Shaundar bowed to the image, and then leaned up against the statue’s base, with Narissa curled up in his arm. They opened up Narissa’s magic books, and Shaundar laughed out loud. He could barely comprehend them. “I think you’re definitely the better mage!” he confessed.

“You’re just not as focused on it as I am,” she smiled. “Too busy being a starhand.”

“That’s probably true,” he admitted, “but it does mean that I’m going to be no help to you in your studies yet. Fortunately I brought mine. I was doing some special training this week and I fell behind on my metaphysics.” He reached into his haversack for his metaphysics textbook.

“What was the special training?” Narissa wanted to know.

“Well, I’m training to not let a spelljamming helm suck out all my magic as soon as I touch it, so that I can jam again later or cast some spells. But I’m having some trouble.”

Narissa laughed. “That’s because you like spelljamming ships too much!” she pointed out. “How many times have you told me about the ship bond? How much you love it? You just don’t want to hold anything back, that’s all.”

Shaundar blinked in surprise. Maybe she was right! “Could be,” he ruminated. “I was told to hold my magic in a pen of some kind and keep it from the ship, but if you’re right, that’s not going to work, is it? Not for me.”

Narissa shifted so that she could look at him. “You don’t hold anything back with people, never mind ships, so I think that tactic is doomed to failure. Why don’t you try to negotiate with the ship? Make friends, give and take? Offer to share, but on your terms?”

He touched her face. “I’ll give that a try,” he promised. And then he kissed her again. For a while, studies were forgotten.

Shaundar returned to Flitter Bay 50 at the beginning of the next week with renewed hope.

“Good morning, Shaundar!” Captain Madrimlian smiled. “Are you ready to give it another go?”

“Av, *quessir!*” he grinned.

He climbed up the gangway. The Captain said, “Any time you’re ready.”

This time, instead of sitting in the helm right away, Shaundar put a hand on it and closed his eyes. He visualized *Stardancer’s* name and how he felt when he bonded with her, to get her attention. Instead of a dam closing off his magic entirely, he concentrated on the image of a little mountain waterfall in the spring, trickling its water in a small but steady stream into a pool. Next, he imagined the flowers blooming and the trees budding around the pool, and all the wild plants being nourished from it. Then he visualized the water bursting through the mountain pass in a huge cascading waterfall due to the spring melt, flooding and soaking the plants below; then drying up and disappearing in the summer, while the plants that had survived the flooding dried up and withered. He went back to the image of the steady mountain trickle, and the placid blossoming and budding pool, and focused on how that trickle of water would stay through the summer and fall, maintaining the health of the plants in the pool through the seasons, until winter finally came; but it would then return in the spring again. Last, he invested the water with *faerie fire* and starry sparkles, and he visualized it all coming from his body at the top of the mountain, flowing out like blood from his veins.

Through all of this, Madrimlian watched him closely and did not interrupt.

At this point, Shaundar, maintaining the image he had formed, felt his way along the helm and sat down without opening his eyes.

The thrum of an active spelljamming engine began; but Shaundar knew that he still had most of his magical energy. It was running out in a steady, gentle stream; just like the image of his mountain spring dribble.

Madrimlian shook his head in amazement. "Oh, well done, lad," he breathed.

Blackjack also shook his head. "Hanali's tits," he swore. "That took me two weeks. *Two weeks!*"

The rest of the extra training for the week involved maintaining that link and the steady trickle of magical energy necessary to empower the ship, no matter what the conditions. At first he was able to hold his magic in reserve, but still found himself unable to cast any spells once he had touched a helm that day. But by the end of the week that seemed to have changed, and his ability to maintain concentration on this effect while engaging in other tasks had become almost reflexive.

After a discussion with Captain Whitestar, Shaundar agreed to catch up on his academic work on the weekends on Evermeet so that he could log more flight hours. That tamed his work load down to a more

manageable level. He even had some time to play some billiards with Lannatyr and the silver elven contingent. And everything seemed just fine, right up until the end of the week, when he was logging the last of his flight hours.

He took off with *Stardancer*, cleared the air envelope of Aces High, and once again, for just a moment, he couldn't remember what he was doing.

He shook it off, a little disturbed, and then all of a sudden he gleaned one of the other flitters out of the corner of his eye. Rage overwhelmed Shaundar and he barrelled down at it with everything he was worth.

The flitter rolled to dodge him and that just made him angrier. He came around for another pass. He was going to knock the thing out of the sky!

He broke it off at the last moment. What in the Nine Hells was he doing? Why was he careening around, trying to ram other flitters? And what was he doing up here again anyway?

He noticed another flitter coming towards him and realized that it was a threat. That's right, that's what he was doing! He made for it. At the last second he discerned that it was the *Aerakiir* and he pulled up, but he managed to clip her rigging.

The next thing he knew, he was on a stretcher and being hiked over to the hospital building.

“What happened?” Shaundar queried, rubbing his swimming skull.

Lannatyr was standing over him, looking concerned. “You kind of went berserk. You attacked me and Lieutenant Blackjack, and then you drifted off into Selune’s Tears. Blackjack had to board your flitter at tactical speed and physically drag you off the helm.”

Shaundar was now truly frightened. This was the second time that something like this had happened! “What in the Nine Hells is wrong with me?!” he muttered, utterly dismayed.

Lannatyr shook her head. “I guess that’s why they’re taking you to Sick Bay.”

As they were hauling him from the stretcher to a cot, Captain Whitestar came in, followed by Captain Madrimlian. Whitestar looked furious. “What in the Abyss were you doing up there, Sunfall?” he demanded.

Shaundar shook his head. He was almost in tears. Were they going to drum him out of the program? Was he crazy? “I don’t know, sir,” he admitted. “I wasn’t in control of myself.”

The Captain huffed in a huge draft of air in what Shaundar was certain was preparation to dress him down thoroughly, but at that moment, two of the larger *Sy'Tel'Quessir* that he chummed around with dragged a gold elf into Sick Bay and dumped him none too gently at the feet of the Captain. It was Mistrivven again.

“Captain,” began the larger of the two, whose name was Nasylvanna, “we saw Mistrivven pointing a wand at Sunfall’s flitter just before the incident.”

“We thought you might want to inspect him,” the other one chimed in.

Captain Whitestar narrowed his eyes. “Mistrivven, turn out your pockets immediately.”

Ardeth did not move. He curled his lip at the entire room in contempt.

The Captain grabbed him by the shirt, hauled him to his feet and began to dislodge the contents of his pockets and cloak with utter disregard for Mistrivven’s protests. Along with a handful of *kholiast* cards, some waybread and a couple of small but high quality gemstones, a wooden wand tipped with a sardonyx found its way onto the floor.

Captain Whitestar dropped Ardeth abruptly and seized the wand. He waved his fingers in an arcane gesture and writing in Draconic

script appeared on the side of the wand as though illuminated by an internal lamp.

“Perplexity,” read Captain Madrimlian. “A *Wand of Confusion*, I would bet, though you’ll have to have it identified to be sure.”

Ardeth Mistrivven had just about picked himself up off the ground when Captain Whitestar seized the front of his uniform again. “Is this a *Wand of Confusion*, Mistrivven?!” he bellowed.

Mistrivven sneered, “My personal belongings are none of your business, sir.”

Fire flashed in Captain Whitestar’s eyes. “They are when you use them to damn near kill your fellow students! You are OUT of here, Mr. Mistrivven! Pack your things; you are no longer welcome in the Aces High program.” He released him by shoving him bodily towards the door.

Ardeth recovered his balance and his composure as best he could. He looked at Shaundar and his eyes were ripe with murder. “My father will be hearing about this!” he spat.

Madrimlian raised an eyebrow and Whitestar turned daggers of fury on Mistrivven in his gaze. Captain Madrimlian said mildly, “‘Endangering the life of a fellow officer through negligence’ is a court martial level offense, Mr. Mistrivven. So is ‘sabotage.’ Perhaps you’d like to have your father witness your flogging?”

“If you are still on this base in fifteen minutes,” seethed Captain Whitestar, “then I will clap you in irons.”

Ardeth Mistrivven glanced from one Captain to the other, paled just a little, and decided abruptly against making any further trouble. He left without another word.

Captain Whitestar put a hand on Shaundar’s shoulder. “I’m going to have the healers look you over just in case, but I suspect the issue has been dealt with. And I would like to apologize. I should have suspected sabotage.” He nodded to Nasylvanna and his other green elf companion. “Thank you, gentlemen, for bringing this matter to my attention.”

“Our pleasure, sir,” Nasylvanna snickered. The green elves saluted, recognizing the dismissal, and shared a conspiratorial grin with Shaundar as they departed the Sick Bay.

When Shaundar marched up to the podium in his dress whites to receive his diploma – along with a commendation on his record – a little over a month later, he couldn’t help but be delighted by three things. One was that Narissa was there cheering him on; the second was that Ardeth Mistrivven was not standing at the podium with him; and the third was that his father had been invited to the ceremony. He would never forget it. After receiving his diploma from Captain Whitestar’s hand, he

turned to face the crowd, and he saw that Rear Admiral Lord Sunfall was not applauding, and he said not a word. Instead, Shaundar's father saluted him.

Chapter Six

The *Aerdrie's Pride* was headed home after her summer tour, and the crew were mutually agreed that they could not wait for leave to begin. Shaundar and Yathar were working the mainsail and chatting in between turns about what they were going to do when they got home. Yathar's plan involved feywine, three elf maids and a gnomish girl he had met at the beginning of the summer, and a three day hike into the woods with a tent and only one set of clothing each, since according to him, they weren't going to need to get dressed until it was time to go home. Shaundar's intentions were much more benign. He and Narissa were going out to dinner together, and then he hoped they would spend some time watching the stars on the roof of the Sunfall house (during which he hoped they would kiss and make out a little, it was true, but since he refused to give her father the Admiral any excuse to fault his behaviour, thus finding a reason to separate them, that's about as far as it was likely to go.)

Garan came up on deck. Since he was now a *Teu'Ruan*, but still Shaundar's friend, Shaundar said, "I would salute you, but I need both hands for this." He was currently reefing the sail.

"I'm out of juice and Tyrendel is running low," Garan explained to him. "How'd you like to take her in, helmsman?"

Shaundar smiled. He was now officially one of the four regular helmsmen, though he was at the bottom of the totem pole, especially since he had only just turned seventy-five; a position he'd held since his triumphant graduation from Aces High. "Av, quessir!" he agreed enthusiastically, always glad to take the helm. He finished tensioning the luff while Yathar lowered the halyard and fastened it to the tack horn. When that was done, he wiped the sweat from his brow, saluted Garan and passed through the bridge to the helm room, saluting his father and the Matey as he went.

Still tall for his age, and bearing the build of a born spacer, with his spectacular cornflower blue eyes, golden hair and peaches-and-cream complexion, Shaundar now turned the heads of most of the maidens, elven and otherwise, he encountered. On two occasions he'd deflected some very determined barmaids, and once he had even been required to physically restrain a very drunk human maiden who was part of a "free trader" crew. Quite frankly, the attention just embarrassed him. For one thing, he wasn't sure what to do since he wasn't at all used to it, and for another, he had eyes only for Narissa.

On the other hand, Yathar seemed to thrive on it. His cowlick had become a dark, devil-may-care dishevelled look that was irritatingly attractive even though he did nothing with it, and his green eyes seemed to reel in women like scavvers on hooks. His years of training as a bladesinger combined with years of hard work aboard ship to make him move like a dancer. Shaundar was still the plainer of the two of them, and quite content to dwell in Yathar's shadow.

Shaundar stood at the starboard side of the helm. “I am ready to relieve you, sir,” he informed Lieutenant Tylendel, who currently sat the helm.

He focused his gaze on Shaundar’s face. “Good timing! I am ready to be relieved.”

“Anything I should know?”

Tylendel shook his head. “Nothing I can think of anyway, but I’ll be sure to inform you if I do think of something. Our heading is sou’-sou’west, and we have thirty-seven more minutes before we’ll be starting our approach to Peaceon Base.”

“Is that at my spelljamming rate, or yours?”

Tylendel slapped a hand over his face. “I’m sorry Shaundar, that’s mine. Let’s see, that’s . . . “

“. . . forty-seven and a half minutes, but thanks for trying to do the calculations for me.”

Tylendel shook his head. “Okay, whiz kid, I am ready to make the transfer.”

Shaundar got into position, squatting down by the helm with his legs spring-loaded.

Tylendel braced himself with his left hand on the port armrest. “Ready? Three, two, one, and switch!”

The transfer was flawless. The *Aerdrie’s Pride* slowed just a little, but with barely a shudder. Shaundar made the bond with all the joy of greeting an old friend. He knew the Armada fairly well by now. They understood each other; they wanted the same things. Shaundar knew that she was stately and dignified, not a speedy little thing like *Ruatri*, and so he gave her time to consider her actions and make her moves. Most of the crew still said they’d never seen an Armada turn on a silver piece like that.

“I have the helm!” Shaundar announced.

“Midshipman Sunfall has the helm!” the call went out over the ship.

“I’m standing down,” Tylendel announced. “Have fun!” And he left the helm room.

Shaundar enjoyed a leisurely voyage in with the *Aerdrie’s Pride*. He sensed Garden’s presence long before it would have been in visual sight. The elven ships liked that tree somehow. Maybe it was related.

Before he realized it, they had reached the destination; that root outside of Nedethil that Shaundar knew very well, and the little plate of rock that served up Peaceon Base, the building at its foot.

“Sir!” he bellowed into the bridge. “We have arrived at our destination!”

Shaundar’s father looked out the window of the bridge, nodded, and headed into the helm room. Under normal circumstances the crow’s nest or navigator were required to confirm position, but they knew this spot very, very well.

“Good job, Mr. Sunfall,” Shaundar’s father, still Rear Admiral of the RealmSpace Fleet, acknowledged with a smile. “All stop.”

“All stop, *av, quessir*,” Shaundar confirmed, and he reduced speed until they were just drifting.

“Moor up!” he bellowed past the bridge. The crew repeated the command as they set about following it.

“Looks like the end of another tour, hey son?” Ruavel Sunfall smiled. He and Shaundar would now wait for the mooring to be completed; Shaundar because a helmsman was required at all times unless an elven ship were firmly docked in an elven shipyard, especially when mooring up to hold the ship steady; and Ruavel because it was his responsibility as the Captain of the vessel.

“*Av, quessir*,” Shaundar returned with both joy and sorrow. He had the strangest melancholia today. He felt, for some reason, that this was the last tour they would do together.

“Do you think that Narissa will be waiting for you?”

Shaundar smiled happily. “She wouldn’t miss it. And Mom will be with her, of course.”

Now it was Ruavel’s turn to smile. “Yes, and bless her for that. We’re a pair of very lucky elves, I think.”

“Don’t I know it!” was Shaundar’s reply.

Narissa fussed at her dressing table, carefully brushing her flaxen bob-cut hair. She was wearing a fun little tunic like the one that the statue of Hanali Celanil at Corellon’s Grove in Evermeet wore, belted at the waist, and a light silken jacket. She had painted her face with geometric henna tattoos – it was all the rage – and completed the ensemble with a small jewel at her forehead, which matched the earrings she wore. One of the traders coming in had confirmed sight of the *Aerdrie’s Pride*. That meant that Shaundar was coming home.

Lord Admiral Alastrarra watched his only daughter get ready with dismay. “But really, what’s wrong with Yathar?” he demanded. “Yathar’s never been court martialed. He comes from a good family . . .”

“He’s a lecher!” Narissa cried in exasperation. This was not the first time they’d had this conversation. “He’s a *rake*! He loves them all, that’s the problem.” She smiled faintly into the mirror, now satisfied with

the face she was ready to present. “Shaundar loves only me.” She whirled around to meet her father’s eyes with an interrogating expression of her own. “Besides, what’s wrong with Shaundar?”

Lord Alastrarra opened his mouth to answer when they heard the doorbell chime. A moment later, their servant was announcing, “The Lady Selene Sunfall, for *Etriel Narissa*.”

Shaundar’s mother glided into the room like a gentle mist gliding across the moon. She smiled sweetly at Narissa, bowed to the Admiral, and as though she had heard the question, she replied, “Your father has no good answer for you, dear. Are you ready? The flitters are on approach now.”

“Yes, thank you, Lady Sunfall,” Narissa beamed. She kissed her dumbfounded father on the cheek. “Love you Daddy. I’ll see you later.”

The two elf women headed to the docks together.

“That’s a pretty outfit,” Lady Sunfall complimented Narissa. “Is it new?”

Narissa smiled at her. Selene Sunfall was pretty much the closest thing she had to a Mom. It had just been herself and her dad for as long as she could remember. “Yes, thank you, Lady Sunfall.”

Selene exchanged a conspiratorial smile with the young elf. “I think he’ll love it,” she assured Narissa.

Narissa and Lady Sunfall had spread the word that the *Aerdrie's Pride* was on the way, so most of their crew had family members gathered at the docks by the time they arrived. They exchanged greetings. Narissa even waved to Laeroth Oakheart, who was, of course, waiting to see his older brother Garan. Lady Durothil came to stand quietly beside Lady Sunfall. Selene greeted Yathar's mother pleasantly, and they chatted about schooling for the coming year.

It took about an hour for the Armada to disembark their crew. The flitters had to unload them a handful at a time. The crowd gathered at the dock began to disperse as their loved ones came home. The mood was jovial and pleasant. Naturally, Shaundar and Ruavel were the last ones to arrive. Narissa watched Shaundar land the flitter with grace and poise. Rear Admiral Sunfall came down the gangway first, with Shaundar, Yathar and Selena following.

Selene and Ruavel clasped hands and kissed and embraced. Narissa ran up to a grinning Shaundar and threw her arms around him. Shaundar lifted her slight form into the air. Their kiss was considerably less chaste. They tasted each other's mouths with the joy and relish of the young. Yathar's mother was not given to overt displays in public, so she took Yathar's hands. Selena hugged her mother happily, interrupting her parents' reunion without a second thought.

Shaundar put Narissa down and took her hands in his so that he could look at her. "You look absolutely beautiful," he sighed happily.

Narissa blushed and beamed. “I’ve missed you,” she confessed.

“I’ve missed you too,” he admitted. “I’m glad to be home.”

Lord Sunfall came over with his arm around each of his girls.
“Good to see you, Narissa.”

“Good to see you too, sir,” Narissa greeted him.

“I trust you are well?”

“I am, sir. But now that you’re home, I guess I’ll be missing my father for a few months.” Then she cast an apologetic look at Shaundar and laid her hand on his. “Though I’m glad you’re home.”

Lady Sunfall put a hand on Narissa’s shoulder. “It must be very bittersweet for you,” she sympathized. “You get either your father or your beloved, but never both together.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Shaundar quipped cynically. “The Admiral hates me.”

Narissa shook her head. “He doesn’t hate you. He just doesn’t think you’re right for me. I think he’s wrong. Don’t let it get to you.”

Yathar cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention. “Flitter ahoy, sir,” he announced. He was squinting up into the sky with his hand shielding his eyes from the bulk of the brightness, and he pointed.

Lord Sunfall looked up and then pulled out his looking glass. “Confirmed, Midshipman,” he agreed. “Must be a messenger; we’ve unloaded all of our flitters. Is that the *Aerakiir*, son?”

Shaundar took the glass from his father. Sure enough, he recognized the *Starsinger*. She was flying the flag of the Elven High Command – a gold lion rampant against a purple background speckled with silver stars; the flag of the Navy itself – a golden Man-o-War on a green field; and the flag of the Realmspace Fleet, which was a silver tree against a green background.

Shaundar frowned. “*Av, quessir*, but she’s flying all colours. Looks very official.”

Blackjack made his approach and landed on the same dock that the Sunfalls had. When he disembarked, for a change he looked neat and clean. He had even brushed his hair and fastened his rank insignia properly. He approached Shaundar’s father and saluted sharply. “Sir,” he began, “I’ve been chasing you for a week now, but your helmsmen are just too fast.” He winked at Shaundar. “I have an official message for you from Lionheart Command – and orders.” He presented folded and sealed papers to Lord Sunfall. “I have some for Admiral Lord Alastrarra as well. I already caught up with the Vice Admiral on route.” He turned to Shaundar and Narissa. “Is your father home, Narissa?”

She nodded. “What’s going on?”

He shrugged. “You’ll have to ask your dad or Lord Sunfall, hon. I don’t have the authority to release that information.” Blackjack looked back to Rear Admiral Sunfall. “May I be dismissed, sir? I need to get this to the Admiral. I was told to be expedient.”

“Dismissed,” Shaundar’s father nodded absently as he opened the dispatch. Without another word, Blackjack saluted and headed to Narissa’s house. Lady Sunfall looked worried, and that bothered Shaundar. Her intuition had been proven time and time again to be spot-on.

Lord Sunfall read the dispatch, and his eyes widened with surprise, then narrowed into a sharp scowl. His golden eyes blazed with an internal fire that almost made them seem to glow. “I think I have to meet with the Admiral post-haste,” he said tensely.

“What is it, Dad?” Shaundar questioned him with concern.

“I’d better talk to the Admiral first,” he dodged, and with jaw set against any further questions he strode off the direction of the Alastrarra house after Blackjack.

The youths all exchanged looks, then turned their eyes to the Ladies for an explanation.

Lady Durothil was no help. “I think we’d better go home,” she said. “Come on, Yathar.” They headed back to the Durothil estate. “Catch you guys later,” Yathar called over his shoulder.

The remaining youths looked at Lady Sunfall. “What does this mean?” Selena asked her mother.

“Trouble,” she replied, “but nothing you can do anything about right now. I’m sure they will brief you in the morning, so why don’t you carry on with the plans you had for the evening?”

They didn’t move. “Are you sure?” demanded Selena sceptically, hands on her small hips.

Selene could not help but be slightly amused by her stubborn daughter, and her expression reflected this. “Dear, they have no choice. If it’s Navy business, you are part of his ship’s crew.”

Shaundar recognized the wisdom of this and so he relented. “Okay Mom. I was going to take Narissa out to dinner – that is, if you’d like to go,” he invited, and Narissa nodded, “and then I thought maybe we’d do a little stargazing on the roof or something.”

“Have fun!” urged Shaundar’s mom. “And what are you doing for the evening, Selena?”

She smirked. “I have a date!” she announced.

“A date?” echoed Shaundar, who had heard nothing of this.

“Good for you, dear!” Selene cheered her daughter. “Who with?”

“Laeroth Oakheart,” she grinned impishly.

Shaundar stared at her incredulously. “Are you serious?” he roared. “That guy is trouble, always has been!”

This seemed to entertain Selena even more. Her smirk, if anything, widened. “I like him. He’s fun. I’ll see you later. Don’t wait up!”

Shaundar watched her go, still wearing that disbelieving look. “What in the Abyss is she thinking?” he demanded of no one in particular.

Narissa laughed out loud and hooked her arm in his. “I guess she likes troublemakers! So do I, incidentally,” she teased gently.

“If he hurts her, I’m going to kill him,” grumped Shaundar.

“Okay, you’re a hero,” Narissa ribbed. “Are you still wanting to take me to dinner or should I spend the evening washing my hair?”

He cast her a roguish smile, took her hand and bowed. “I am at your service, *etriel!*” He kissed his mother on the cheek. “We’ll come right back after dinner.”

Selene did not seem concerned. “You kids have a good time! I’m pretty sure your fathers will both be up late tonight so no need to worry.”

The young elves headed into Theraspar's bustling streets, which always seemed busy and crowded after the return of an Armada's crew. The Market was still lively even though it was around the dinner hour; and since it was full of starfarers, Shaundar could guess why. An apothecary from Whirlybird, the small gnomish community that was located on the other side of Nedethil, was selling exotic alchemical ingredients, including kraken slime, flow barnacle saliva, and powdered silver. Shaundar stopped long enough to pick up some things, and Narissa bargained the stubborn little gnome maid down to something a bit more reasonable than the initial asking price. He was delighted; now he'd be able to sit down and concoct that Universal Solvent he'd been planning to work on!

The Lion and the Comet was the sun elven pub of choice among the Navy officers. For that reason, Narissa and Shaundar avoided it and headed to their favourite spot, the Leafy Bough. It catered more to green elves, so they got quite a few stares the first couple of times they'd come there. Eventually, though, they became sort of a fixture, and nowadays they received no more notice than any other regular customer might.

The bar was built from a very old oak tree, and the inside was covered in mistletoe and ivy, with moss for a floor. It also featured climbing flowers and berries of all kinds; except, of course, the infamous infinity vine. Every piece of furniture in the place was either similarly covered or carved with leafy vine designs. They served feywine, *alu'quesst*, *quesstiasa*, Halfling stout, the green elven summer wine that had loosened Madrimlian's tongue fifteen years before on the journey to

Aces High, and *elvarquist* for very special occasions. Their meals were fire-roasted skewers, honey nut berry pockets, apple scrambles, taperroot pies, and light native fowl in a variety of honey-and-citrus glazes. They also served taperroot crisps and dried berries and mixed nuts as snack foods. Hungry, Shaundar and Narissa shared a lime-glazed fowl and several skewers. Narissa stuck with just a little drop of the summer wine while Shaundar sampled the Halfling stout. “Not bad!” Shaundar pronounced it cheerfully.

“School starts tomorrow,” Narissa reminded Shaundar.

“Don’t remind me!” he groaned ruefully.

“Advanced Alchemy,” she pointed out. “You love that class.”

He grinned. “Okay, you got me there. But I’m bored in Magical Studies, and History is just better not discussed.”

She munched on a skewer. “I’m going to convince my father to let you take Advanced Magic with me.”

Shaundar shook his head while he finished chewing. “He won’t. Like I said, he hates me.”

She sighed. “He doesn’t. You’re just dating his little girl, that’s all. How do you feel about Laeroth Oakheart right now?”

He frowned. “That’s different. He’s a dork.”

Narissa rolled her eyes. “It’s no different at all.”

After dinner, they did return to the Sunfall Manor as they’d intended. Shaundar’s father had yet to come home for the evening. True to form, Selena was not back yet either. Shaundar’s mom had packed up his father’s dinner and was sending Lianna over to the Alastrarra estate with it.

Shaundar’s grandmother glanced up from the chair that she was reading in. “Are you two going to give me a hug or am I bouncing this book off your heads?”

Shaundar came right over. “Sorry, Grandmother; I missed you!” He hugged her tightly. Narissa also came to embrace her. Was it his imagination, or did she seem almost frail? She didn’t feel nearly as solid. She was almost birdlike, actually . . .

“So, what are you kids up to tonight?” she demanded in her gruff, interrogative style.

“We thought we’d play a little music,” Narissa replied, “then stargaze on the roof.”

“Do you want to play some music with us, Grandmother?” invited Shaundar suddenly on a whim.

The four of them played together for a couple of hours, carried away by the fun of it. Shaundar was skilled with a penny whistle and

well-practiced with a fiddle these days; Narissa had a fine hand with a harp; Dathlue was still brilliant with numerous stringed instruments, from lyre to lute to harp to *shalaquin*; and there wasn't a woodwind that Selene Sunfall couldn't play. They covered jigs, fairy dances, and ethereal summer tunes, some with singing and some without, almost in defiance of the building tension. Ruavel Sunfall did not return.

When Selena came back, tipsy and giggling, with Laeroth, who had escorted her home, Shaundar took that as his and Narissa's cue to exit for the roof, so that he wouldn't choke the elf to death or interrogate his sister.

By this time the stars were clearly visible in the blue velvet sky. It was clear enough that they could even see the Colour Spray Nebula flickering on the horizon and the outlines of several of the nearby planetoids. The air was filled with the scent of the last of the summer flowers; roses and jasmine and starglow, which were faintly luminescent in the dark and in full bloom on the hedgerow at the front of the estate. Shaundar sprawled flat on the blanket they brought and Narissa folded herself into the crook of his arm. It was starting to get just a little bit chilly at night, so they threw the other end of the blanket over themselves. They stayed like that for a long time.

"I want to go with you someday," Narissa sighed. "See all of this up close for myself."

“Someday I will take you,” he promised. He could think of nothing he wanted more. To sail among the stars with Narissa at his side! That sounded like his vision of paradise in Arvandor. He looked deeply into her magical aqua eyes. “I love you,” he said. His eyes were unabashed and clear. This was a fact, just as certain as knowing that the sun would come up tomorrow. It was a part of his very being.

Narissa hitched in her breath and her eyes widened. Shaundar had never actually said those three words before. Her heart ached with the fierceness of her love. “I love you too,” she admitted. “I’ve always loved you.”

He cracked that wry smile again and jested, “Not that I understand why.”

She put a hand on his cheek and delicately traced the outline of his jawbone. “You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit. I love you. That’s good enough.”

“You’re right, it is,” he agreed, closing his eyes and leaning forward. He touched her lips just slightly with his, and they kissed with agonizing and exquisite slowness.

Though they caressed each other tenderly that night, it was with much less raw lust and urgency than usual. Perhaps it was because something sacred had passed between them, or perhaps it was because they knew in their hearts that everything was about to change, but rather

than fondling one another in that urgent and sometimes clumsy way that adolescents do, they took their time and touched each other with gentleness and patience, stopping and starting because by mutual agreement they were not venturing below the waist. They both knew that Lord Alastrarra would have Shaundar's head if it went any further than that. It was customary among the sun elven nobility to save sex for after marriage – though it was not uncommon for nobles to take other lovers once an heir for the House had been secured – and marriage was only appropriate after a long courtship. Fifteen years was considered to be a good start. Shaundar was nearly crazy with the tension of it, but he did not dare to do anything to earn the Admiral's wrath and ruin any chance of ever being with Narissa. She was far too important to him to risk that.

As they lay together under the stars once they had wearied of trysting, tears started running in little trickles down Narissa's face. "What's the matter?" Shaundar asked her softly.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Everything is perfect. But it's all going to change, isn't it?"

It occurred to Shaundar that there was an unusual amount of spelljammer traffic moving around in the night sky. "I think something is wrong," he agreed. "But let's worry about it tomorrow. Tonight, I just know that I love you."

"And I love you," she smiled.

They fell asleep up on the roof, and still Ruavel Sunfall did not come home.

Shaundar's wake-up call the next morning came in the form of a pebble bouncing off of his nose.

"Morning, kids!" Dathlue greeted them from the attic window that served as the roof access. "Narissa, your father would like you to go home. Shaundar, the crew of the *Aerdrie's Pride* is to report to the town hall for a briefing in half an hour. You guys should get cleaned up."

Shaundar thanked his grandmother and sat up abruptly. "Shit, your father knows you spent the night," he sighed. He helped Narissa to her feet.

Narissa wiped her face with a hand and yawned. "But we didn't do anything wrong."

"Yeah," agreed Shaundar, folding up the blanket, "but he'll never believe it."

Within half an hour, Shaundar and Selena were at the town hall in clean uniforms, wiping the last crumbs of the waybread from their mouths that their grandmother had shoved into their hands as they was on the way out the door.

The crews of the *Aerdrie's Pride* and Admiral Alastrarra's ship the *Wings of Glory*, plus Blackjack, crowded into the meeting room at the town hall. There seemed just enough space for the 200 plus starhands that comprised the list. There was a table laden with mugs and teapots of strong black tea. Shaundar helped himself to a generous portion and dripped honey into it while he waited.

Yathar was with Blackjack, so Shaundar joined them in a seat at the edge of the door. The boys, seeing Selena, stood up and gave her the outside seat because it had a slightly better view than the others, and they were able to compensate better due to height. Everybody was murmuring amongst themselves.

"All right, all right, settle down," Admiral Alastrarra ordered as he came into the room, followed by Shaundar's father, Captain Madrimlian, Captain Durothil, and the First Mates of both Armadas. All of them looked very serious, even grim.

"Please be seated," Rear Admiral Sunfall said.

The assembled crews sat down if they had not already found a seat. From behind Shaundar, Garan asked him, "What's going on?"

"I'm about to find out," Shaundar whispered.

When everyone had fallen silent, the Admiral spoke. He was direct and to the point. "*Quessira, etriela* . . . we are at war."

A chorus of muttering and exclamations of surprise greeted these words.

“At least three remote crystal spheres – there may be more – which contained small elven colony worlds and small Navy outposts have been conquered, initially by forces unknown. The most recent was a sphere called Crystalspace. Two survivors of that assault managed to escape in a flitter, outrun their pursuers, and make it back to Lionheart Command.”

“Who did it, sir?” Garan called out from behind Shaundar’s head.

“The orcs,” said the Admiral with a bitter smile. “Who else?”

Rear Admiral Sunfall continued. “The two survivors inform us that many of the goblin races responsible for the Unhuman War have reunited to carry on these assaults. We can confirm orcs, kobolds, ogres and goblins. We may also have a new foe to face. For more information on that, I’d like to turn this over to Captain Madrimlian from Intelligence.”

Uncle Madrimlian stepped up to the front. “Our enemy appears to have new leadership. According to our sources, they are larger, more intelligent orcs. They appear to be highly organized and efficient. They wear uniforms – black studded leather, if you should happen to see it – and seem to follow a well-developed chain of command. Some of them have apparently learned to speak Espruar; and they have done this in order to say sadistic things to their prisoners before execution,” he added

grimly. Shaundar wondered how that information had come to their attention, and a chill ran down his spine. “They call themselves the ‘scro,’ to differentiate them from the ‘common orcs.’”

“‘Scro?’” someone laughed aloud. “That’s creative. ‘More intelligent?’ Well, at least they can spell!” The laughter spread up and down the room, defiantly derisive.

Shaundar was not as sure that it was a good idea to disregard their enemy’s acumen. The orcs were the ancient enemies of the *Tel’Quessir*; so ancient that the elven word for them was *hakavarn*, a combination of the words *hakar*, meaning “enemy,” and *vaarn*, meaning “evil.” In myth, a great battle between the creator deity of the elves, whose name was Corellon Larethian, and the creator god of the orcs, Gruumsh, had led to the creation of *Tel’Quessir* “the People.” According to the legend, Corellon was being soundly defeated, and His consort, Sehanine Moonbow, had wept tears of sorrow and fear, which mixed with His blood, and where this potent mixture landed on the earth, the elves were born. Then, Corellon had found the strength in His Lover’s sorrow to rise from defeat and cleave out Gruumsh’s eye, which in some spheres was said to have formed the sun (Shaundar wondered vaguely which one it was supposed to be, since there were so many) and this ended the epic battle. Gruumsh was called “One-Eye” forever after. He, of course, had subsequently fashioned the orcs, which were naturally infused with an inborn hatred of the elves. In other words, the orcs and the elves had hated each other since before recorded history, and the orcs had not been destroyed yet.

“I’m afraid that we don’t know anything more than that at this point,” Madrimlian added. He did not seem to find the scro’s chosen name quite as amusing. He nodded to the Admiral.

Lord Admiral Alastrarra continued. “The Realmspace Fleet has been called to active duty. We will be establishing a base on the edge of the sphere and rendezvousing there over the next couple of months.”

Rear Admiral Sunfall said, “As per Imperial Navy procedure, since we are being called to active duty, all underage crew are hereby dismissed from our ship’s crews and grounded.”

Shaundar leaped to his feet. A small chorus of exclamations of protest erupted. “Are you serious?!” howled Yathar, who was standing also. “With all due respect, sir, that’s horseshit!”

“Insubordination!” pronounced Yathar’s father furiously.

Shaundar’s father put a hand on the elder Durothil’s shoulder. “It is not, Captain. It’s understandable, even commendable, that our Midshipmen should find this objectionable. But our decision stands, Mr. Durothil. You will stand down; is that clear?”

“*Cryshal, quessir,*” Yathar acknowledged acidly. He gave a salute that was almost exaggerated in its crispness.

Lord Sunfall scowled. “Do not push your luck, Mr. Durothil.”

“Av, *quessir*,” Yathar sighed. He sat back down with more than great reluctance.

“So,” the Admiral nodded, “the rest of the *Aerdrie’s Pride* and the *Wings of Glory*, grab your gear and meet at the dock for resupply. Dismissed!”

The crews saluted and stood up to leave, their expressions determined.

Garan looked at Shaundar, Yathar and Selena sympathetically. “This sucks,” he said simply.

“Speak for yourselves,” Selena shook her head. “I have no urge to go to war. You guys are crazy.”

Yathar was actually angry. “This is a bad move,” he growled. “Shaundar’s the best pilot in the Fleet for manoeuvres – he may not be the fastest, but who cares when you can fly circles around all of them . . .”

Blackjack cleared his throat.

“Okay, so, he can fly circles around almost all of them,” he corrected. “And I’ve been training to be a bladesinger since I was a small child. If the orcs are attacking, the Navy needs us, damn it!”

“Well, I’ll do my best to get you guys reinstated,” Garan vowed. “I know that you’re right.” He clapped Shaundar on the arm, and Yathar as well, and followed the crew out the door.

“Hey Garan,” Shaundar called out. Garan glanced back over his shoulder.

Shaundar was struck by a dread he could not name; a terrible feeling for the well being of his friend. “Good luck,” he said simply.

Garan smiled reassuringly. “I’ll bring you some orc tusks!” he offered. “They should have learned after the Unhuman War. We’ll hand them their asses and send them crying back to their homeworld.”

Admiral Alastrarra was suddenly almost on top of them. Shaundar saluted sharply and everyone else followed suit. “Mr. Sunfall,” he began, “don’t you ever have my daughter out with you all night again.”

“Sorry sir,” Shaundar apologized with resignation. “We were stargazing on the roof and lost track of time.”

Surprisingly, the Admiral left without taking it any further. The three youths watched him go, agape. “He must really be worried,” Selena remarked. Shaundar just nodded.

The three youths headed out the door of the town hall, the last to leave, and Lord Durothil stepped in front of them, blocking the way.

He pointed at Yathar and snarled, “If you ever speak that way to one of the Fleet Admirals again, I will personally have you flogged.”

Yathar set his jaw. His expression might have been angry or determined. “*Av, quessir,*” he said in a carefully neutral tone.

The Captain cast a disdainful look in Shaundar and Selena’s direction and left.

“Yep, still a dick,” Shaundar quipped when he had gone.

“One of these days,” Yathar muttered, “I’m not going to be able to take it anymore and I’m just going to snap.”

Shaundar didn’t know what to say. He just put a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

Shaundar noticed that at dinner that night, his father had buckled on the Sunfall moonblade, which he never did. Moonblades were sacred to the elves, being magical items of incredible power. One had been given to each of the noble elven families of Myth Drannor. The reason why they were known as “moonblades” is because they were believed to have been enchanted by the Seldarine to reject the unworthy, falling dormant when drawn by someone unsuitable, and in some cases, they had even taken the potential wielder’s life. Mostly, they had rejected the gold elven families that had been gifted with them. The fact

that the Sunfalls still had one that was active was a significant point of note. And it was significant that it was belted at Ruavel Sunfall's hip.

"Orcs have always been a problem," Shaundar's grandmother was saying. "I'm not sure what the big deal is really, unless they've amassed a huge horde somewhere we don't know about. That's always a challenge, when they try that."

"Madrimlian feels that these ones are different," Shaundar's father replied. "They're smarter, tougher, and more organized."

"I think we've just seen the black hole's event horizon," Shaundar's mother spoke up. "I don't want to be alarmist, but I find this all very disturbing."

There was a knock at the door.

The Sunfalls all glanced at each other. "Well now, who could that be?" Grandmother wondered rhetorically.

"I'll get it," piped up Selena, and she wiped her mouth and went to open it.

Yathar was standing there on the doorstep. He had an overstuffed haversack slung over his shoulder and one eye was bruised purple and swelling rapidly. Shaundar's mother took one look at him and headed to the door at a march.

“I’m sorry to disturb you at dinner, Lady Sunfall,” he apologized quickly. “May I come in?”

“Of course, Yathar,” she said immediately, taking his hand and pulling him inside. “What happened?”

He didn’t answer the question directly, but his response told Shaundar all he needed to know. What he said instead was, “May I stay with you for a while? I don’t really want to ask, but I don’t really have anywhere else to go.”

Ruavel Sunfall was scowling darkly. “Of course, Yathar. You can stay as long as you like.” He glanced at Selene with a questioning look for confirmation.

She was nodding. “Absolutely. I think you’ll have to stay in Shaundar’s room for the time being . . .”

“That’s fine,” Shaundar piped up, scraping his chair back from the table. “I’ll help him with his stuff.”

Dathlue was also getting to her feet, a task which took considerably more effort for her than it did for her juniors. “Did you leave any of your things that you need us to go and get, Yathar?” she wanted to know.

He smiled at her, crinkling the skin on his swollen eye in a way that looked painful. “I thought ahead, Lady Mistwinter. I told Blackjack

I'd send him a *Wizard Mark* if it was okay. I don't know how much room you guys have . . .”

“As much as you need,” Selene told him warmly, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You're like a second son to us, you are unconditionally welcome here, Yathar. Get all of your things. Quite frankly, I'm glad you're leaving.”

Dathlue fetched her cloak and staff. “Then Blackjack will need some help. I'll go lend him a hand.”

“I'll go,” said Ruavel.

Dathlue fixed him with an authoritative glare. “You will do no such thing. You'll end up punching him in the face and you can't afford that kind of tension right now on the eve of war. I will go. He knows better than to mess with me; I might be old, but I can out-spellcast that arrogant upstart any day in a tenday, and he knows it. I'll stick a fireball right up his ass if he gives me any grief, you can count on it.” With that, she headed out the door.

“Stubborn old witch,” growled Ruavel affectionately.

Selene told Yathar to hold still, and she spoke a chant and washed Yathar's bruised eye with holy water on the palm of her hand. It healed almost immediately.

“Thanks, Lady Sunfall,” he smiled gratefully.

“Now go upstairs with Shaundar,” she ordered gently, “and he can make some room for your things, and we’ll move you into the guest bedroom once Blackjack has shipped out.”

“Sure Mom,” Shaundar agreed. “Come on, *teu’revanthatas*.”

Yathar smiled at him with gratitude. The elven word Shaundar had chosen meant “soul-friend;” family in spirit.

They unpacked Yathar’s meagre things. It looked like he had packed in haste. He had his spacefaring kit, his long sword, a handful of clothes including a single wool sock, his now tattered copy of the *Song of the Blade*, pipe and tobacco, spellbooks, uniforms (one of which still had a smear of putty on the sleeve), *kholiast* cards (but not all of them), and a handful of coins. Shaundar hung a hammock. Neither one of them spoke.

At last Yathar broke the silence. “I’ve left my House,” he said simply.

Shaundar nodded. “The Evermeet branch would still have you.”

“Fuck them!” he roared. “Fuck this whole hypocritical system anyway! What makes a noble anyhow? Are we really any better than common elves, Shaundar? Can you tell me how we warrant the privilege?”

“No,” Shaundar said. “I haven’t the slightest idea. I don’t see how having great ancestors makes us any better than anyone else. But it does give us responsibilities.”

“You take care of those, Shaundar,” he spat. “I’m done with this whole bullshit system. It’s just Yathar from now on.”

“You can be a Sunfall if you want,” Shaundar told him. “I would make you my brother.”

Yathar met his gaze. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Of course I would.” He took out his knife and stuck the blade in a candle flame to cleanse it.

Yathar fished around for his knife and finally found it in his boot, exactly where it was supposed to be. He scorched it also.

Shaundar cut the palm of his hand and Yathar slashed his. They clasped their wounds together.

“You are my brother,” Shaundar stated.

“You are my brother,” Yathar declared.

In unison they intoned, “And so it is.”

“Always has been, the way I see it,” Shaundar added. They wiped their knives clean and fastened some rags around their hands to stop the bleeding.

Blackjack came up the stairs at that point with a whole collection of stuff. “Hey,” he said, “I guess I’m staying in the guest room for now, but I understand it’s going to be your room when I leave, so do you want me to put your things in there?”

“Sure, thanks Uncle Blackjack,” Yathar smiled thinly.

“You don’t have to leave the family, you know,” he said to Yathar encouragingly.

“I haven’t,” Yathar replied, “just the House.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not the Lord of the House in Evermeet,” Blackjack reminded him. “My great-grandfather is.”

Yathar smiled at his uncle. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but don’t. I’m done with the whole system, Blackjack. My whole life has been a lecture about ‘proper *Ar’Tel’Quessir* behaviour.’ I don’t give a shit about ‘proper *Ar’Tel’Quessir* behaviour.’ It’s just Yathar now.”

Blackjack nodded. “Okay, I can respect that.” He clapped him on the shoulder. They finished unpacking Yathar’s belongings together.

Somehow they all managed to make it to school the next morning, though they were almost late. They watched several Navy personnel, including a few of their former crewmates, going around putting up posters with such slogans as “Sons and Daughters of Corellon; A Call to Arms!” “Keep ‘em Flying – Join the Navy Today!” and “The Orcish Horde Amasses – Are YOU Doing Your Part?” and they couldn’t help but stop and observe for a few minutes when they reached the dockyard and saw the flitters going up and down, loaded with supplies from the pile of crates marked for the *Aerdrie’s Pride*, and the rest of their crew lending a hand.

“We should be there,” Yathar growled again.

“I’m with you,” Shaundar agreed.

Selena said, “Come on guys.”

Shaundar cleared his throat as they carried on. “How was your date with Laeroth?”

“Laeroth?” exclaimed Yathar. “Laeroth *Oakheart*? Are you *serious*? What can you possibly see in *him*?”

Selena smirked again. “None of your business, big brother,” she smiled sweetly.

They entered the schoolhouse and found their seats. History, first thing in the morning. This was not shaping up to be a good day.

At least this subject matter was reasonably interesting. They were now studying the history of the Unhuman War; or perhaps, Shaundar thought vaguely, it was the history of what should now be known as the First Unhuman War.

But unfortunately, though Shaundar had hoped that the mobilization of the Realmspace Fleet might have ended Lord Durothil's status as a Post-Captain and taken him away from teaching school, obviously this was not the case, because he was still there like a persistent bellyache, preparing to instruct the class. He sneered at both him and Yathar when they came in this time.

"Nice of you to join us," he scowled darkly. Yathar stiffened, but the three of them sat down without comment.

"Today we continue with our study of the Battle of Lurienia," Lord Durothil began. "By his famous and controversial decision to release infinity vine, Commander Starrunner managed to sustain the air envelope long enough to withstand the orcish siege until help arrived, though the planet was never again inhabitable. The relief forces managed to turn back the orcish fleet and the elven forces were rescued."

Narissa's lips thinned into a tight line but she said nothing. Yathar, however, raised his hand.

"Yes?" Lord Durothil nodded in a sardonic tone.

“Sir,” Yathar began, “I understand that Captain Nevar Durothil led the relief forces, right? That was before he became a bionoid, wasn’t it?”

The Captain’s lips twisted into a grimace. He stalked over to the desk where Yathar was seated. “Our laundry is no longer yours to air, boy,” he sneered. “There is no Nevar Durothil, and if you ever suggest such a thing in public again, I will give you the same reminder that I gave to you last night about minding your manners.”

Shaundar was never sure what made him react at that point. It wasn’t as though Lord Durothil hadn’t said ignorant things like this before. Maybe it was because he was still angry about what the Captain had done to his son last night and that he was haughty enough about it to deliberately point this out in public. Or maybe it was that Yathar flinched. But before Shaundar realized it, he was on his feet. “Don’t you talk to him like that,” he said in a very quiet, deliberate voice.

Lord Durothil turned his amethyst-and-citrine gaze on him furiously. “What did you say, Sunfall?”

“I said,” Shaundar repeated, “don’t you talk to him like that. You have no right to talk to him like that anymore.”

Lord Durothil snarled and drew his arm back as if to hit Shaundar, but his arm never connected. Yathar vaulted over his desk and tackled him, while Shaundar ducked his head to dodge the blow and

drove his shoulder into the Captain's solar plexus. The combined effort knocked him down hard, smacked the back of his skull against the floor and winded him.

Silence fell in the classroom. For a moment, you could actually hear the birds chirping outside. Then just as suddenly, Laeroth Oakheart laughed out loud, got to his feet, and began to applaud heartily. Before long, the entire class were cheering and applauding with him; even Narissa.

Yathar spat in his father's face as he struggled to breathe. "I quit!" he announced, grabbing his haversack.

Shaundar grabbed his bag as well. "Yeah, I've had enough," he proclaimed also. "I'm done with this place; I won't be back." And with that, the two adolescents left.

Headmistress Oakheart followed them out the door and down the steps. "Sunfall! Durothil!" she cried. "What was that ruckus? Where are you going?"

Yathar laughed out loud. "Consider this our resignation!" he chuckled.

Shaundar also found himself laughing effervescently. He was struck with the strangest feeling, like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, making him lighter, somehow. At last he was free! They did not look back.

Chapter Seven

Somehow they found their way back to the grove with the broken willow tree. Shaundar once again squatted at the edge of the water and washed his face in it. It was a different face now; a little older, perhaps a little wiser? Or had he just done something incredibly stupid?

“Well, not to destroy the glory of the moment,” he asked of Yathar, “but now what?”

Yathar was grinning like a madman as he crouched in the branches of the willow. “I did have a thought,” he smiled with gleaming eyes. “You agreed with me; the Navy needs us, right?”

“Sure,” Shaundar nodded, “but we’ve been discharged.”

“Now I’ve been thinking about that,” drawled Yathar as he dangled the toe of his boot carelessly into the water, stirring it a little. “We haven’t actually been discharged because we never officially joined. But maybe we should.”

Shaundar gave him a long look. “We can’t, we’re underage.”

“Sure!” smirked Yathar. “But they don’t know that in Kanothi, do they?”

Kanothi was a fairly large town on the way to Whirlybird. “What are you saying?” Shaundar demanded.

“Let’s go to Kanothi and join up!” advocated Yathar. He fished out his pipe and started putting tobacco in it.

“Just like that?” Shaundar asked incredulously.

“Why not?” rhetorized Yathar. “Hey, you got a light?”

Shaundar passed him a tindertwig. “They’ll just kick us out again as soon as the Mithril gets wind of it,” Shaundar argued. “It’s not like the Admiral doesn’t know that we’re underage.”

Yathar puffed at his pipe until it got going. “I don’t think they can,” he retorted. “I’ve been doing some study. Navy law says that once you’ve officially enlisted, the only way out is feet first. They can even press you back to active duty years after retirement.”

Shaundar wasn’t sure. “Even if you enlisted under false pretenses?

“Doesn’t matter,” Yathar said.

Shaundar considered it. Well, what else was he going to do with his life? All he’d ever wanted to be was a bladesinger or a spelljammer. Perhaps if he proved himself in battle, he would earn the respect of Lord Alastrarra and prove himself a worthy suitor to Narissa in the Admiral’s

eyes. Maybe he would even make his father proud of something he had done for once in his life. Beside the point, he'd grown up hearing little snippets here and there about the dangers of the goblinoid horde. The *Tel'Quessir* might be in real danger, and he wanted to do his part.

"All we have to do," Yathar assured him, "is fool whoever is doing the recruiting in Kanothi long enough to sign an enlistment form, and then we're in." He offered his pipe down to Shaundar, who took a draw off of it and handed it back.

Shaundar nodded. "Okay, let's do it."

"Civilian clothes, then," Yathar said, hopping down and clapping him on the shoulder. "We don't want to give them any idea that we're recently decommissioned Midshipmen."

"Good idea," Shaundar agreed. He stripped off his uniform and dug his spare civilian outfit out of his haversack. "But I've thought of a problem. Mom and Grandmother are going to stop us as soon as they get wind of this. We need to find a way to get there and back before anyone knows we're missing."

"I've thought of that too," announced Yathar proudly as he put on his trousers. "I figured we'd get Uncle Blackjack to give us a lift."

"Think he will?" Shaundar mused, wondering if anyone would notice his Navy boots but realizing he didn't have any other footwear

handy. He decided to cover them as best he could with the leggings of his trousers and hope for the best, figuring that he was overthinking it.

“Sure!” Yathar was saying. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“I don’t know, to prevent his nephew from tearing off to war when he’s underage, maybe?” Shaundar suggested offhandedly.

“Nah,” responded Yathar, waving his hand in dismissal. “You know that Blackjack is okay. He’ll get it. He’ll support us.”

Shaundar shrugged. “Yeah, he just might. Okay, let’s go find him.” The boys headed back to town and searched out Blackjack.

They found him in the Leafy Bough, chatting up a tattooed green elven girl with a short sword at her hip. Sidewheeler was dozing on the bar between them, the picture of boredom.

“Hey, Blackjack!” Shaundar called.

He glanced up briefly and waved. The coppery-skinned elf maid also turned to regard them with enchanting copper-flecked emerald green eyes. The boys came over. Sidewheeler started awake, and dispensed a cheerful cacophony of chattering, pleased to be rescued.

“This is my nephew and his friend,” Blackjack was saying, “and they were just stopping in to say hello before they took off. Isn’t that right, guys?” His eyes were sharp.

“Actually, we really need to talk to you,” Yathar returned.

“Can’t it wait?” he demanded, indicating the lovely *Sy’Tel’Quessir* girl with his eyes.

“No,” Shaundar shook his head. “It really can’t.”

The girl put her hand on Blackjack’s shoulder. “That’s okay, Blackjack, I have to go anyway. Archery practice. Come over later.” She kissed him on the cheek, smiled at the boys, and left.

Blackjack sighed in exasperation. “Now look what you guys have done!” Sidewheeler was much happier about the situation however. He crawled up on Yathar’s arm and rubbed his face on the young elf in gratitude. Blackjack took a swallow of his drink. “What do you want?” And then it occurred to him and a wary light dawned in his eyes. “Hey, wait a minute! Why aren’t you guys in school?”

Yathar leaned on the bar. “We quit.”

Shaundar leaned on the bar on the other side of him. “Exactly,” he confirmed. “We need you to do us a favour.”

Blackjack shook his head. “That was stupid. I’m probably going to regret even asking this, but what?”

“We need you to take us to Kanothi right away,” Yathar explained with a neutral expression.

Blackjack took another sip of his beer. “Why?” he demanded warily.

“Blackjack, are you sure you really want to know?” Shaundar asked. “Plausible deniability could be your best friend, here.”

The older pilot sighed again. “I think I already do know. But no, I’m not going to ask, officially. I’m just going to ask you personally; are you sure about this?”

“Yep,” Yathar affirmed.

“Absolutely,” Shaundar nodded solemnly.

Blackjack studied their expressions one after the other to confirm this. Then he gave them each a crisp nod. “All right, lads. Let’s go.” He gulped down the rest of his drink and flipped the barkeep some coins. Then he stood up and strode out. Hardly believing their good fortune, the boys followed.

“Meet me at the moonhorse field,” he advised them. “I’m docked close to your place and we don’t want your father to see you.”

Shaundar thought this wise. He nodded and he and Yathar set out along the road out of town.

Blackjack and the *Aerakiir* were already waiting for them in the field by the time that they showed up. The moonhorses were standing in a multi-coloured line, fixing them all with an accusatory glare.

“Hurry up,” urged Blackjack. “I think the moonhorses are worried that I’m crushing their primroses.” The expression of the moonhorses did not change any as Shaundar and Yathar clambered up the gangway.

Using a spelljamming ship to get to another planetary location averaged ten minutes or less; you just headed above atmosphere, turned around and came back down. They found themselves in Kanothi in a matter of minutes.

Kanothi was more relaxed than Theraspar. You almost couldn’t see it from above, because it was almost entirely formed of enormous trees, and the green and silver elven inhabitants lived in their branches. But even they had a dock for landing flitters; ground-landing craft only, unlike the open bay of Theraspar, which also accommodated water-landers. Shaundar could see that the recruiting drive was working here too. Posters offered “A Chance to See the Worlds: Join the Navy!” and urged elves to “Fight for the Forests in the Skies!” It didn’t take long to find the recruiting station, which wasn’t far from the docking bay. On the door was a picture of King Zaor of Evermeet, dressed in military uniform and with his moonblade crossed in front of him at the ready, and the poster proclaimed “We Are Looking for a Few Good Elves.” There was a line-up winding out the door and down the street.

Yathar glanced at Shaundar and sighed. “So much for doing this undetected,” he groaned. “We’re going to be here until well past dinner.”

“Ahoy there!” somebody called out. They glanced up the line, and half a dozen would-be spacers from the front stood Tyelatae Dahast. Shaundar grinned. Much to her chagrin, Tyelatae had not changed much over the years. She was still a tiny little gold elf, champing at her pipe. She waved them over.

“Had the same idea we did, I see,” Yathar smiled.

She returned it. “I guess that answers the question of whether or not you intended to give me away. You lads want to stand with me?” They budged into the queue, not without some grumbling protests, but Yathar turned around slowly and gave the grumblers such a withering look that they backed right down.

The recruiting office was converted from a dockmaster’s office, so there was barely room for the three of them in front of the desk when they came in. The recruiting officer sat behind the desk, busily going through papers and smoking like Tyelatae; and to Shaundar and Yathar’s dismay, behind her stood Captain Madrimlian.

They locked eyes for just a moment. Shaundar realized that they were caught red-handed and despaired. But then, a faint smile touched

the corners of the Captain's mouth. "I'm going to go and get some tea," he said deliberately to the recruiting clerk.

"Hmmf," she grunted non-committally, still involved in her paperwork, and Uncle Madrimlian exited via a door behind the desk with an approving nod.

The three youths smiled triumphantly. This was actually going to work!

"Next!" the clerk bellowed before looking up and realizing that the next recruits had arrived. "Good, you're here. Names please?" She held a quill which she dipped into the inkwell as she was speaking.

"Shaundar Sunfall, Yathar, and Tyelatae Dahast," Yathar announced, indicating with his thumb.

The clerk noted this without comment and then asked, "What positions would you like to train for?"

"Marine," said Yathar.

"Weapons," said Tyelatae.

"Spelljammer," said Shaundar.

She looked up and fixed Shaundar with a slightly stern look. "That's a highly coveted position. Do you have any experience?"

“Actually,” Yathar snickered, “he does.”

The clerk shrugged. “Okay then, spelljammer it is.” She scribbled down their responses. “Now then, you’re given a choice in the Navy. You can choose your initial assignment location, or you can choose who you’re assigned with. What’s your poison?”

Yathar pointed at Shaundar. “I want to be assigned where he is.”

Shaundar nodded. “Ditto.”

“I want to be assigned where we’re likely to see the most action,” Tyelatae said with gleaming eyes.

The recruiter scrutinized Tyelatae with a slight frown. “Are you actually 100 years old, dear?”

Tyelatae puffed up indignantly. Yathar intervened with, “Yeah, we know her. She was our shipmate once.” Shaundar nodded his agreement.

She shrugged again and made some more notes. “We’re still gathering crew at the moment; where do we reach you when we’ve decided where to place you?”

Tyelatae told them to contact her at the Dahast estate; Yathar and Shaundar said to get a hold of them at the Sunfall manor. The name

did not pass unnoticed then; she raised an eyebrow and asked if they were any relation to the Admiral. “Yes,” Shaundar replied, but did not elaborate.

“All right,” the clerk nodded, “just sign on the bottom line and we’ll swear you in.” She dipped her quill and handed it to Shaundar. Hardly believing that this was actually going to go through, Shaundar signed. So did Yathar, and so did Tyelatae.

She glanced around at that point. “Hmm, the Captain still isn’t back yet; guess I’ll have to hear your oaths. Place your hands on your hearts please.”

The three of them did as instructed.

“All right,” said the recruiter, “repeat after me. I, (state your name please) . . .”

Yathar smirked as he recited, “I, Yathar.” Shaundar knew full well that he was resisting the urge to repeat, “State your name please.” He couldn’t help but smile a little too.

“. . . do swear by the Sword of Corellon Larethian . . .”

They reiterated the words.

“. . . to serve the *Tel’Quessir* with arm, sword, bow and spell . . .”

Again they echoed the words.

“. . . to the best of my ability.”

“. . . to the best of my ability,” they chorused.

“I will, if necessary, lay down my life in defence of the People . . .”

They repeated this.

“. . . and follow the commands of my superior officers and the royalty of elven nations . . .”

This one was a little bit more staggered. The phrasing seemed awkward somehow, and the fragment itself was longer.

“. . . as best as I am able, until I hang my sword upon the Tree of Swords and Jewels in Arvandor.”

Though of similar length, this bit was easier to recite. The gravity of this oath weighed upon Shaundar and moved him deeply. His voice trembled slightly.

The recruiter smiled and bowed to them all. “Welcome aboard! The Navy is grateful for your service.”

“Thank you, *etriel*,” Shaundar returned, and they all acknowledged the bow with one of their own.

“In the Navy, we salute like this,” she demonstrated the hand-to-heart, then open with palm up salute that was almost reflexive to Shaundar now, “but they’ll teach you that in Basic Training.”

“*Av, etriel*,” Yathar smiled.

The clerk sat back down behind the desk. “Thank you all. You will be notified of your posting within a couple of weeks.” She nodded to dismiss them, and they left the office, just about running into a tall high elven woman with long brown hair in a severe ponytail and very bright blue eyes. Seeing a *Teu’Ruan’s* single silver crescent at her collar, they all saluted. “Sorry, *etriel*,” Shaundar muttered.

She returned the salute. “That’s all right. New recruits?”

“*Av, etriel*,” Yathar replied.

The corner of her mouth twitched into a reluctant smile. “Well, the Navy’s glad to have you. It takes an elf of honour and courage to stand up in defence of the People.”

Tyelatae grinned. “We’re ready to kill orcs, *etriel!*”

The Lieutenant’s mouth formed a thin-lipped expression that might have been a smile or a grimace. “That’s great. We’ll see you in the skies.”

Recognizing the dismissal, the three youths left the recruiting station. Shaundar thought that King Zaor's image looked pleased with them.

"Thanks for vouching for me, lads!" Tyelatae beamed, thumping Yathar on the shoulder. "I owe you one."

"No problem," Yathar nodded. "You could make it up to me by letting me take you out this evening – providing that we haven't been deployed yet, of course." He flashed his trademark wry grin.

Shaundar burst out laughing. "Never miss a chance, do you?" he jeered.

Tyelatae, however, appeared to be responding to it. "I could do that," she smiled flirtatiously.

Shaundar just shook his head with a much more rueful smile. "Do you have a way back to Theraspar?" he asked her, resigned.

"We can probably squish you in with us and Blackjack," Yathar offered slyly. "The quarters might be a little tight . . ."

"Sure!" Tyelatae agreed readily.

So Yathar was out with Tyelatae that night when Admiral Alastrarra arrived.

“Admiral!” Shaundar’s mother greeted him warmly. “What a surprise! Please, come in. Would you care to join us for dinner?”

Lord Alastrarra cast a long, piercing look in Shaundar’s direction as he, and his father and sister, stood up and saluted. “Thank you for the invitation, Selene,” he declined, “but I need to speak with Ruavel for a moment.” He had a couple of papers clutched in his hand.

Shaundar’s father nodded. His expression was concerned. “Absolutely,” he agreed, standing up, and he stepped outside with the Admiral. Shaundar quietly ate his soup, waiting for the storm to break.

“What did you do?” whispered Selena.

“What makes you think it was something I did?” Shaundar retorted.

As if on cue, at that precise moment Ruavel stuck his head in the door with the Admiral on his heels. “Shaundar, come here, please,” he requested in a very serious tone.

Yep, the game was up. Selena glared at him pointedly. Ice flowed through Shaundar’s veins and his heart began a drum roll. He said, “*Av, quessir,*” wiped his mouth, and did so.

Ruavel had one of the papers in his hands now, and he showed it to Shaundar. Sure enough, it was his enlistment form. “Is this your signature on this form?” his father demanded with fierce amber eyes.

Shaundar stood up straight, looked him right in the eye, and responded steadily, “*Av, quessir.*”

His mother came over, took the edge of the form so that she could see it, and sighed. Her shoulders slumped. But she didn’t say a word.

Grandmother narrowed her eyes. “What’s he done?” she asked.

His father fixed him with a steady gaze. His expression was unreadable. “Why don’t you tell them?” he suggested quietly.

Shaundar nodded. His heart had stopped pounding and only the ice in his veins remained. He was solemn and steady as he faced his family and announced softly, “I’ve enlisted in the Navy.”

Dathlue Mistwinter grinned. “Good for you, Shaundar!” she cheered. “Have the courage of your convictions!”

“I must admit,” Shaundar’s mother said, “I am less pleased. I don’t suppose the fact that he’s too young matters in this?” she inquired hopefully of the Admiral.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, *etriel*. Naval law is clear on this. Once you have taken the Oath, you are bound by it, unless you are genuinely a child. We *Tel’Quessir* have always respected the rights of the individual, and if a youth in *beryn fin* decides that he’s old enough to fight, then he’s effectively an adult, whether we agree with this self-

assessment or not.” His hawk-like glare turned in Shaundar’s direction, and Shaundar read the message quite clearly that the Admiral was in the latter camp.

Lady Sunfall nodded her reluctant acceptance. “I always knew this day was coming,” she smiled faintly. “I just hoped it would not be so soon.”

Lord Sunfall looked thoughtful. Then he said to the Admiral, “Sir, I hope that all of his training at Aces High and his thirty-five years of service will be taken into account in his posting?”

Admiral Alastrarra nodded just once. “Of course, Ruavel. Actually, I may already have something in mind for him.”

“Excellent,” Rear Admiral Sunfall nodded. “I’m sure my son eagerly awaits his posting at your command.” He smiled encouragingly at Shaundar.

“*Av, quessir,*” Shaundar agreed.

Lord Alastrarra glanced from the elder Sunfall to the younger and back again. “You might be interested to know that Midshipmen Sunfall and Durothil quit school today, after knocking down Captain Durothil. He’s seeking a court martial against both of them.”

“Captain Durothil was going to punch me, sir,” Shaundar pointed out. His jaw was set in a very characteristic stubborn manner.

Ruavel Sunfall also set his jaw in an almost identical manner and his eyes blazed fire. “Then I don’t think there’s anything that Captain Durothil can do about it,” he replied coldly. “Neither Shaundar nor Yathar were Navy personnel until later this afternoon, since we had officially dismissed them from service prior to that, and civilians are allowed to defend themselves physically against violence.” He folded his arms.

The Admiral had no reply to that. “Well, good evening then; and sorry to disturb you all.”

Shaundar saluted, as did Ruavel. And with that, Lord Alastrarra took his leave.

A palpable silence fell, thick and uncomfortable. Selena’s eyes were still wide with amazement; Grandmother was smiling, and Mom was trying not to look at him. His father just stood quietly for a moment, looking contemplative; and then he clapped Shaundar on the shoulder and said, “Care to join me on the balcony, son?”

Shaundar followed him on to the balcony. The stars were emerging from the purple veil of twilight and he could see a couple of Nedethil’s closest neighbours in Garden’s cluster faintly illuminated in the night sky. From here, they watched the ships landing in the bay, and the starlight reflecting off of the water.

Shaundar's father produced his tobacco pouch and filled his pipe. He then did something he had never done before; he offered it to his son. Shaundar hesitated. "Brandy," his father explained. "It's a little less cloyingly sweet than that stuff that you smoke."

He dug his pipe out of his pocket and filled it with his father's tobacco. It occurred to him then how ridiculous hiding his smoking from his parents actually was. He imagined that his father was probably a young Midshipman once himself, and found himself wondering vaguely how long he'd known.

They lit their pipes and smoked quietly together, looking out over the bay.

"Well," Lord Sunfall spoke at last, "I was hoping to stave this off for a few decades yet."

"I'm sorry, sir," Shaundar apologized. His father was acting very strange. He wondered contritely if he had hurt his feelings somehow. He was certain he had deeply upset his mother. Suddenly he felt terrible.

His father's answering smile was bracing, if perhaps a little sad. "Don't misunderstand me, son. I am very proud of you today."

"Really?" Shaundar blurted out, surprised.

"You have chosen your own path, and you've proven that you have the courage of your convictions," he explained. "You're an adult

today, Shaundar.” He put a hand on Shaundar’s shoulder and smiled at him. “I do wish you had not chosen to quit school. But I know it didn’t suit you well. And I know there were mitigating circumstances. I can’t say that I didn’t see it coming.” He chuckled. “I suppose that I’m glad you made another plan for your future!”

Shaundar didn’t really know what to say. “Thank you, sir.” He was proud but also strangely melancholy. They were silent for quite a few minutes; quiet enough to hear a ship’s bell echoing from the harbour and the low murmur of starhands on the docks. Some of the crew of the *Aerdrie’s Pride* were still loading flitters.

Lord Sunfall cleared his throat. “So, when will you receive notice of your posting?”

“I’m not sure,” Shaundar replied. “Within the week.”

His father nodded thoughtfully. “Well, hopefully it will be a while yet before you see a lot of action, but if my wish comes true, it will mean sentry duty, which is the most boring job in the Known Spheres. Bring your *kholiast* cards and try not to gamble away all of your pay,” he advised. “And don’t neglect your sword work. Especially if you’re going to be manning the helm all the time, even with your training your spellcasting capabilities will generally be less than otherwise, so you can’t rely on them.”

“Thanks for the good advice, sir,” Shaundar said attentively.

They fell silent once again. Eventually Ruavel Sunfall tapped out his pipe, and Shaundar did the same.

“Sir,” Shaundar asked suddenly, “why do you think that the goblinoids attacked us?”

He smiled entirely without humour. “Revenge,” he said without hesitation. “The truth is, we humiliated them in the War. We took away their access to the stars and forced them into the nastiest place we could think of. If I can give you this advice, son; never humiliate a defeated enemy. Treat him with respect and dignity. People can stand to be defeated, but destroy their pride and they will hunt you to the end of time for the power of their hatred.”

“Yes, sir,” Shaundar nodded. There was something profound in that.

Then his father changed the subject entirely by asking, “So, have you told Narissa yet?”

Shaundar’s heart leaped into his throat and started dancing again. No, he had neglected that little detail. “Not yet,” he admitted.

“The sooner you get it over with, the better off you will be,” Lord Sunfall suggested. “Better that she hear it from you rather than her father.”

“You’re right, sir,” Shaundar agreed. “I will go and do that now.”

His father nodded approvingly. They came back into the manor. One of their servants was cleaning up the dinner dishes.

Shaundar met his grandmother's eyes. "Grandmother, may I speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure, Shaundar," she consented with a smile, and she eased herself up from the rocking chair and fell in step with him. Shaundar, knowing the stairs were becoming a challenge for her, led her into his father's office instead of his room. "What is it?" she asked once Shaundar had closed the door.

He hesitated a moment, wondering if it was too early. But he knew that it might be years before he had another chance. Well, it couldn't hurt to ask, could it? He didn't have to go through with it yet if the time didn't feel right. "Grandmother," he began slowly, "do you have a goldheart charm anywhere? If not, I'm sure I can have one made, but I don't know how much time I have before I'm sent off . . ."

Dathlue Mistwinter grinned widely. "Decided to grow up all in one day, did you? Don't do anything halfway, do you, Shaundar? I think that's great! Yes, I do have one from my youth; I can't think of a more worthy girl to wear it. I'll get it. Come with me!" She led him to her chambers, which had been moved to the ground floor in recent years, and opened up a tidy dresser drawer in her otherwise relatively Spartan room, where she found a golden box with a filigreed heart design on its

lid. She smiled nostalgically. “Still in the original box; good!” She put it in her grandson’s hands. “Give that to her with my blessing, Shaundar.”

He smiled warmly. “Thank you, Grandmother. I’m glad you approve.”

She laughed out loud. “Her father won’t! But that’s his problem.” She reached up and put a hand on the side of Shaundar’s face. It struck him as odd that she was so tiny, when her presence was so large. “You know, it’s about time I passed that along anyway. The truth is I’m not likely to be around much longer . . .”

“Don’t talk like that, Grandmother,” Shaundar cut her off.

Lady Mistwinter waved a hand dismissively. “I’m not a young girl anymore, in case you hadn’t noticed. Soon I’ll pass West. Not for a couple of years yet, I think, but soon. And I’m not likely to see much of you in these next few years. So while I’m still here, I just want to tell you that I love you and I’m proud of you. And I also want to leave you this advice, if you’ll hear it; always be true to yourself, and never make any apologies for being exactly who you are. Can you promise me that?”

Shaundar was not comfortable with this conversation, but he said, “I promise to try.”

His grandmother nodded. “That’s all I can ask, then.” She put her little arms around his chest and hugged him firmly. “Now, you get out there and talk to your girl.”

“Av, etriel,” he smiled.

As he left the house, Dathlue Mistwinter thought to herself how very much like his father her grandson was, and her heart swelled with pride and joy.

Shaundar ran into Yathar on the way home, looking dishevelled and happy. “How was your evening?” he asked his friend cheerfully.

Yathar grinned. “Interesting! She bites.” This did not seem to displease him. “Where are you going, by the way?”

“To Narissa’s place, to convince her to sneak out her window,” he answered blithely. “Care to join me?”

Yathar fell in step with him. “Sure, and we’re doing this why?”

“You *did* intend to tell her that we joined up at some point, right?” he demanded, fixing him with a sharp blue eye. “Rather than leave me to deal with it while you’re off getting laid?”

“Your folks found out, did they?” he asked. “Sorry I wasn’t there. How did they take it?”

“Amazingly well,” admitted Shaundar.

“Well then, not that I’m refusing to come along, but why do you need me?”

“Moral support,” Shaundar told him, and he showed him the gold filigreed box.

Yathar stopped in his tracks. “Is that what I think it is?” he asked in a hushed tone.

Shaundar nodded. “It was my grandmother’s, from when she was a young maid in Myth Drannor,” he explained.

“Damn,” Yathar swore. “Well, yeah, I guess we are going off to war, aren’t we? I don’t suppose there’s going to be a better time. Are you sure you want me there? Shouldn’t this be a moment for just the two of you?”

Shaundar smiled again. “Like I said, I need moral support. And she wouldn’t mind.”

Yathar patted him on the back. “Well then, I’m honoured to be there! Let’s go!” They hiked over to the Alastrarra estate.

It was little effort for the nimble youths to climb the Alastrarra’s tree house, up to the window that opened upon Narissa’s chambers. When Shaundar peeked into the window, she was curled up on her daybed, reading by candlelight. He almost backed out at that moment. But then she glanced up and smiled warmly at him. He waved.

She came to the window and unlatched it. “What are you guys doing here?” she whispered. “Father’s going to kill you!”

Shaundar cleared his throat. “Come out here for a minute,” he urged. “We have to talk to you. And I have something I have to ask you.”

Narissa extended her hands to the boys so that they could lift her up and out the window. Together they climbed up the large branches of the roof to a spot that was far away from vents or windows in the hopes that they would not be overheard.

“What is it?” she queried.

Shaundar looked at Yathar. He shrugged and explained, “Well, we thought you should know . . . we’ve joined up with the Navy for the war effort.”

She blinked at them for a couple of moments. “You can’t,” she denied flatly. “You’re too young.”

“We lied about our age,” Shaundar elaborated, “and our Oath has been accepted. We’ll find out where we’re posted in the next few days.”

Narissa looked them both in the eye, as if trying to discern the truth of their statements, like it might be some kind of joke. Then without any warning, she slapped first Shaundar and then Yathar across the face, burst into tears, and fled towards her window.

“Narissa, wait!” called Shaundar desperately.

“What were you thinking?” she cried, loudly enough that Yathar started sputtering shushing noises at her. She lowered her voice. “Are you both completely insane?” she hissed through her tears. “People *die* in wars!”

“I didn’t do this on a whim!” Shaundar assured her, taking her hands. “Narissa, listen to me!”

Narissa wiped her face miserably and looked into Shaundar’s eyes. He was heartbroken by the hurt expression that he saw there. “Please don’t cry,” he murmured, touching her face. “I did this for you. I did it for us.”

“Are you completely mad?” she muttered. “How can this possibly be for us?”

He sighed and sat down beside her, pulling her into his arms. “Everyone thinks I’m a screw-up,” he explained, near tears himself now. “I don’t want to be a screw-up. I want something I do to *matter*. Everyone thinks that I’m a clown, that I have no sense of duty. But they’re wrong; I want to defend the People. Your father thinks I’m beneath you. So how else am I going to earn enough respect in his eyes to marry you?”

“Marry me?” she echoed in a whisper.

Shaundar fumbled around for the gold filigreed box and put it in Narissa's trembling hand. "Open it," he urged. "It was my grandmother's."

Narissa's hands continued to shake as she unfastened the clasp and opened the box as she was bid. Resting on the red velvet lining was a gold filigreed heart on a golden chain. It was the symbol of Hanali, goddess of love, and receiving one as a gift meant accepting a betrothal.

"Narissa, I love you," Shaundar admitted. "When I get back from the War, will you marry me?"

Narissa opened her mouth to speak and promptly burst into tears again. All she could do was nod. "*Avavaen*," she finally choked out. "Yes, Shaundar, I will marry you!" She removed the necklace from the box. Grinning and giddy with delight and relief, Shaundar helped her fasten the clasp around her neck. Then he kissed her over and over.

Yathar clapped quietly. "Congratulations, guys," he smiled beatifically, genuinely happy for his friends.

Their uniforms and rank insignias arrived the next day. They were significantly different from their first Midshipmen's uniforms, which were intended for cadets. Yathar was amused by the uniform of the Marines. It was red and silver and decorated with piping and silver buttons. "I guess I see why the humans call us 'toy soldiers'!" he grinned.

Shaundar's was a little better. He was given the option of the standard Navy uniform for officers – more of the same, only Navy blue – or a sharp silver and blue flight suit. Naturally he chose the flight suit, preferring the ease of movement.

“Oh no you don't,” his mother shook her head at him. “You can wear that when you go out later. Being as you're heading off to war, and being as you have nothing better to do since you're not in *school* –” she said this last pointedly – “I've booked the two of you to sit for a portrait this afternoon.”

Shaundar raised an eyebrow. “Mom, are you serious?”

“Oh yes,” she insisted. “How else do you think your betrothed and I are going to remember you while you're off on duty for months or years at a time?”

“How did you know?” boggled Shaundar in amazement. “We haven't told anyone!”

Lady Sunfall smiled mysteriously. “I have my ways.” When the boys continued to stare at her incredulously, she added, “Do you think that your grandmother and I don't talk?”

So their afternoon was occupied by standing around while a portrait artist painted them, Yathar in his Marine uniform and Shaundar in his Navy officer's outfit, both of them with a *Sy'Ruan's* copper crescent

pinned at their collars. A couple of times Yathar had to be discouraged from making faces, which prompted Shaundar to do the same.

When Narissa came to meet Shaundar after school he was still there, now feeling quite weary of the whole process.

“Well,” she smiled, “aren’t you two a couple of fine looking sailors?” She kissed Shaundar soundly. Her goldheart charm gleamed at the opening of her collar, just above her breastbone. Shaundar’s interest in getting the portrait done was suddenly renewed.

Lady Mistwinter beamed. “May I be the first to offer you two my congratulations?” she put forward.

Narissa promptly hugged the elder elf. “Thank you so much, Lady Mistwinter! It’s beautiful.” She touched the heart absently in a manner that was already becoming a habit.

“Don’t you ‘Lady Mistwinter’ me, my dear,” she chuffed. “You call me ‘Grandmother.’”

“Yes, welcome to the family, dear,” Lady Sunfall smiled warmly. She embraced Narissa as well.

“I wish my father had been as happy about it,” she sighed ruefully. “Expect an assignment to some horrible backwater or something, Shaundar.”

The next day was spent sitting for a family portrait, in which Narissa and Yathar were included; a fact which touched them both deeply, even though Yathar and Shaundar were ready to chew off their own legs to escape by this point. Shaundar's mother insisted, however. They commissioned four copies of each portrait.

"Good news," Shaundar's father announced at dinner that evening. "Because of your years as Midshipmen, you won't have to go to Basic Training. You'll be put right to work."

"Well, that *is* good news, sir," Yathar agreed. "I don't suppose you know what our assignment might be yet?"

"Actually, yes I do," the Rear Admiral said. "You're both being assigned to the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*."

"The *Queen's Dirk*!" echoed Yathar excitedly. "Isn't that Captain Yvoleth's ship?"

Shaundar remembered this from his history class. Captain Yvoleth was famous from the First Unhuman War. A young Captain promoted quickly through the ranks by attrition during the hardest part of the RealmSpace fighting, he had earned a *Sword of Corellon* – the highest medal of bravery that the Elven Navy had to offer – for his gallant defence of Selune's Tears against a surprise assault by a flotilla of goblinoid Scorpion ships.

“That’s right,” Lord Sunfall nodded. “She’s been decommissioned since the War and her crew has scattered to the four winds, so we’re fielding her as quickly as we can. You’ll be running a little shorthanded for a while.” He smiled a little. “You’ll still be answering to Captain Yvoeth, though. He’s been quietly retired on Evermeet but he has agreed to return to active duty.”

Shaundar grinned. “That’s pretty exciting.”

“So,” the Rear Admiral went on, “enjoy your evening, because your official orders arrive tomorrow.”

The four friends did indeed go out to celebrate in style. They spent their time at the Leafy Bough, drinking summer wine and Halfling stout and playing cards with Tyelatae, who cheerfully informed them that she would also be joining them on the *Queen’s Dirk*. Narissa continued to embarrass the lot of them at *kholiast*, but Tyelatae and Selena had the upper hand at High Paladin. They had occasion to regret wobbling home as late as they did that night, however, because their orders, arriving in very official-looking dispatch cases, required them to report to the docks at 6 a.m. local time.

When they arrived, they were pleased to see Garan Oakheart waiting there for them next to a flitter and a stack of crates. He was clad in a similar flight suit to Shaundar’s, only the crescent at his collar was silver.

“Ahoy there!” called Shaundar happily. “Are you coming on this pleasure cruise too?”

“Hey, cabin boys!” joked Garan. “Yeah, actually. I was offered a transfer if I wanted to become Lead Jammer. I took it. Didn’t realize I’d be joining the two of you, though. How’d you manage it?”

“We lied like Erevan, how else do you think we managed?” was Yathar’s reply. “But they believed it long enough for us to swear the Oath, and here we are.”

“Outstanding!” Garan cheered them.

When Tyelatae showed up, she looked like she had been trampled by a horse, but she joined right into the loading without complaint. Before long, there were several other elves on the dock, including, Shaundar noted, the high elven Lieutenant with the bright blue eyes that they had just about run down when coming out of the recruiting office. Garan figured that each of the assigned spelljammers – there were three, though Yathar and a handful of other mages were considered to be backups – would take turns piloting the flitter while the loading went on. The blue-eyed Lieutenant was their Second Jammer. Shaundar, of course, having the least seniority, was Third. Today Shaundar helped load crates while Garan ran the flitter up and down to their ship.

“Not a bad job for a spelljammer,” remarked the blue-eyed Lieutenant as she watched Shaundar hauling boxes. She was not without her own burden, but it was smaller than the great big box that he was carrying.

He raised an eyebrow. “*Etriel?*” he said questioningly, unable to tell by her tone whether she was serious or mocking him.

Her somewhat severe face relaxed into a more friendly expression. “I see that you’re not afraid to get your hands dirty. I like that; most spelljammers think that honey won’t melt in their mouths. The Captain will like it, too,” she confided.

“My skipper made me work for a living, *etriel*,” Shaundar replied. “I really can’t imagine things any other way.”

She smiled a little more. “I think I’d like your skipper then, too.”

By the end of the day, the boys were weary from the hard work, but it was nothing they weren’t used to. “A lot less supplies for a Man-o-War, eh?” Yathar commented to Shaundar as they headed to the bathhouse in town to wash the sweat off and launder their uniforms. “Three days instead of a week or two to load up?”

“I noticed a lot of ammunition, though,” Shaundar pointed out.

Yathar shrugged. “She is a warship,” he noted.

Tyelatae, still smoking that infernal pipe, was already in the bath and before long she and Yathar were occupied, leaving Shaundar to scrub himself quietly. He was delighted when he felt a small, familiar hand on his shoulder.

“Hey beautiful!” he smiled as he turned around to look directly into Narissa’s eyes. She was still clothed and sitting on the edge of the bath. Unabashed, he kissed her.

She gave him a long, appreciative look. “I think I’m looking at the most handsome elf in the whole Navy,” she announced.

“Is that so?” Shaundar teased. “Don’t tell Yathar that; he’ll never forgive you.”

“Yathar isn’t paying any attention to me,” she pointed out. Yathar and Tyelatae were clearly not really paying attention to anything else by this point. “Scrub your back, sailor?” Narissa offered.

Shaundar handed her the brush and soap with a faint smile and without protest. As she leaned over the bath to wash him, the gold heart dangled and he caught her scent at the nape of her neck. It was intoxicating.

“Hmm,” she said when he turned around to present his shoulders for scrubbing, “looks like part of you is trained to stand at attention.” He flushed a little. “I was thinking I might crawl in there with

you,” she added as she started running the brush over his shoulders, “but I think I’d better not.”

“No, probably not,” Shaundar agreed. “I don’t trust myself.” He didn’t say anything for a moment while he enjoyed her touch. Delicious temptation. He was reasonably certain that if he pressed the issue she would lie with him, but out of respect for her honour, he chose not to. “How’d you know I was here, by the way?” he asked quietly.

“I tracked you down,” she informed him smugly.

“So you forgive me then?”

Narissa sighed. “Of course I forgive you. I just pray that you’ll come back to me, that’s all.”

“Dad says that we’re likely to see sentry duty for quite a while,” Shaundar assured her. “He said that the biggest threat I’m likely to face is gambling away all of my pay.”

Narissa laughed. “Well, I hope he’s right,” she affirmed. She rinsed his shoulders gently. “There you go, soldier,” she smiled.

He spun around and before she could protest, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her soundly, getting her clothes and hair all wet. “Great job!” she laughed sarcastically.

“Let’s go out!” Shaundar urged.

They spent the evening celebrating being together. Eventually Tyelatae and Yathar caught up to them and they toured around. All the bards were singing about the coming war and the deeds of the elves in the First Unhuman War, raising morale. Some were telling the tale of Corellon's battle with Gruumsh One-Eye. Yathar and Tyelatae drank like it was their last day on earth. Shaundar was not as cavalier and Narissa never had more than a small glass of wine anyway. The two of them ended up half-carrying Yathar and Tyelatae home.

The second day, Shaundar piloted the flitter, whose name was *lolaa* meaning "Knife," up and down as the loading went on. Speed was of the essence; the faster he could make the trip, the faster the loading could take place. It was all about timing and manoeuvrability.

He got his first look at his new ship when he took up the first load. *The Queen's Dirk* was a shapely man-o-war class starfly plant derived ship shaded in the traditional greens and blues. Shaundar liked the look of her. She was bristling with ballistae – Shaundar counted two light ballistae in the "eyes" of the ship, which were really glorified murder-holes, and four medium ballistae, two of which were mounted top and bottom on turrets on the abdomen, one in the very rear of the ship like a stinger, and one of which was perched before the Castle Deck, which also featured a turreted medium catapult. He landed the flitter as indicated next to the catapult on the fo'c'sle. Starhands came out of the hatchway to unload crates. When some of the smaller crew struggled with and nearly dropped one of the larger boxes, he hopped out to give them a hand.

“You there! *Sy’Ruan!*” called an authoritative voice. Shaundar turned to look and saw a tall sun elf with honey coloured hair and black eyes, flecked with the golden sparkles common to gold elves. He was dressed in an officer’s uniform and he had two silver crescents at his collar; the mark of a Commander. Shaundar guessed that he was the First Mate. He saluted. “Sir!” he responded.

“What in the Nine Hells do you think you’re doing!” he demanded angrily.

“Helping unload crates, Matey,” he replied directly.

The Matey came and got directly in his face. He was tall, but still a couple of inches shorter than Shaundar. “Then who in the Abyss is going to fly the gods-damned flitter back to the docks?!” he roared.

Shaundar was unmoved. Another sun elven officer asshole. Typical. “Me, sir,” he returned in a neutral tone. “I’m an Aces High graduate, sir.”

The Matey shut his mouth like a steel trap. “Well, carry on then,” he said lamely. Shaundar saluted again and got back to work.

“Have you noticed that our First Mate is a certified jerk?” Shaundar remarked casually to Garan as he waited for more crates to be loaded, since the number of times he could get on and off the helm was still limited; though it wasn’t an all-or-nothing deal anymore since his training at the Elite Flight Academy.

“You don’t say,” Garan remarked casually.

“I hope the skipper’s not like that,” Shaundar wished fervently.

“No, he isn’t,” the blue-eyed Lieutenant interjected.

“*Etriel*?” Shaundar inquired. “Do you mind if I ask you your name?”

“Sylria,” she answered. “I’m Sylria. And you are . . . ?”

“Shaundar Sunfall, *etriel*,” he replied.

“Nice to meet you, sailor,” she smiled.

Loading was finished by the evening of day three, and they were scheduled to ship out the following dawn. Shaundar spent the evening running crew up to the *Nikym d’Quex Etrielle*, until *Teu’Ruan* Sylria took over for the night shift. Yathar spent the night in Tyelatae’s arms, and Shaundar and Narissa curled up once again on the roof of the Sunfall manor to watch the stars. They didn’t sleep much.

Being two of the three assigned spelljammers, he and Garan were allowed to make the last run aboard, just before first light. Shaundar’s entire family, along with Narissa, came out to the docks to see him and Yathar off. Tyelatae was with them, and Lord Sunfall shook his head at her with a rueful smile. Lady Sunfall embraced them but said not

a word, and Shaundar’s father nodded proudly and bowed to them. Lady Mistwinter hugged them both in a rough, brazen way. “Take care of yourselves, kids, and try not to get killed,” she advised by way of farewell.

Narissa and Shaundar held each other for a long moment, and Shaundar kissed each one of her henna tattoos with gentle reverence, finishing with her mouth. In silence, she pressed something like a rope into his hand. Looking down, he could see that it was a short braided piece of her flaxen hair. “Keep it with you,” she requested, “and know that my heart goes with you.”

Shaundar entwined the braid around his fingers, and stuck it into his belt pouch with a smile. “Always,” he said, and then he kissed her goodbye. “I love you,” he told her. “And I love you guys too.”

“See you soon, big brother,” Selena smiled hopefully.

“We love you both,” Lady Sunfall told them. “Yathar, Shaundar, you keep each other safe, okay? I want both of my boys to come home.” Her voice broke a little at the end.

Yathar was so touched that tears came to his eyes too. “We love you too, Mom,” he said.

With Shaundar at the helm, the *Iolaa* flew into Nedethil’s starry skies, taking them into whatever adventure the future might hold.

Part Two: The Queen's Dirk

Chapter Eight

“Mail call!” the Quartermaster bellowed into the first helmsman’s quarters. “I have mail for Oakheart and Sunfall.”

“Thank you, Bo’sun,” Shaundar replied. “I’ll take it.”

The Quartermaster piled a few letters on top of two brown paper wrapped packages and pressed them into Shaundar’s hands. “I think I recognize your girl’s handwriting on one of those,” he smiled as he continued on down the passageway.

Shaundar went through the letters and packages, placing Garan’s letters and one of the boxes directly on to his hammock, since he was currently manning the helm, and sat down on his own. Since his posting, Shaundar had been enjoying relative luxury. The primary helmsman typically had his own quarters on an elven ship, with the secondary and tertiary helmsmen sharing quarters, but because Garan and Shaundar were chivalrous, they had left Sylria the secondary jammer’s quarters and they were sharing the primary’s quarters. Used to the crowded Midshipmen’s berth for so long, they almost had too much room for all of their things, and so their quarters had become the place where officers met to play board games and card games, since they had the space.

The Queen's Dirk was currently docked at a Crown of Corellon station that had been hastily cobbled together from derelict Armadas at the far reaches of the Sphere, circling the Sun in an orbit that was directly opposite of Garden. Mail had been waiting there for them. Shaundar could see that he had received letters from Narissa and his father, and the package was from his Mother and Grandmother.

He opened the letter from Narissa first.

19 Tenth-Month, 5041 O.C.

My dearest Shaundar –

Forgive me for being grateful that the rumour of orcish activity near H'Catha turned out to be just that. I'm sure you must be chomping at the bit by now, so to speak, but I am not eager for you to see action. Your mother is sending Yuletide gifts for you and Yathar. I've placed something of my own in the package for you. Well, a couple of somethings, actually. I guess you'll probably get that about the same time, mail being what it is.

Shaundar glanced over at the package. No, he was going to save the best for last. It could wait.

Selena is becoming impatient with school, I'm afraid. She may well end up following in the footsteps of her bad example elder brother. She fails to see the point of it all. I am beginning to weary of it myself. I miss my Great Uncle and his skill and cleverness. I am thinking that

perhaps I'll go back to Evermeet for the summer. Maybe I'll be able to go on your ship! Then I can meet Teu'Ruan Sylria and Captain Yvoeth for myself. They sound wonderful. It's good that they don't seem to mind your "monkey wrestling" too much; I doubt they could stop you if they tried!

Shaundar remembered this incident quite well, and he couldn't help but smile. It was the second or third day of their deployment. He and Yathar had not seen much of each other during that time. Shaundar had been becoming oriented with the helm room and the routine of jamming their ship, and Yathar had been getting to know the three other Marines that had been assigned by then, what with their crew being shorthanded; and even then, the only reason that they had Marines at all at this point was that they were all like Yathar, trained to do a few different things. Mostly, what they had been doing was manning the sails.

So when the two of them met up on the deck – Shaundar looking to get some exercise after being cooped up in the helm, and Yathar looking to stretch out sore muscles – they found themselves high in the rigging, monkey wrestling again.

Captain Yvoeth had called loudly so that he would be heard up in the sails, but not with anger, nor with the smug attitude of a superior officer lording it over his underlings. What he said was, "*Quessira*, on the deck, if you please."

Something in that voice commanded obedience. The two of them hopped down at once, looking chagrined. They saluted sharply.

The Captain was plain, as far as elves went, and he wasn't a gold elf, either. Shaundar suspected he was also a high elf from Oerth. His hair was a simple brown and his eyes a dark olive colour, and while fair, he was not as glowingly pale as a moon elf. He was dressed in the Navy officer's uniform but without the fancy feathered hat that Captains sometimes affected. The only reason that Shaundar knew that he was the Captain was the gold crescent at his collar.

"Gentlemen," he began, "what, may I ask, are you doing exactly?"

"Monkey wrestling, sir," Shaundar explained.

He raised an eyebrow. "'Monkey wrestling'?" he repeated.

"Av, *quessir*," Yathar nodded. "Keeps us in shape so that we're ready to go topsides quickly and fight the orcs, sir."

"You don't feel you're getting enough exercise, Mr. Yathar?" inquired the Captain mildly. Shaundar recalled that he was the first of their superior officers in the Imperial Navy to not insist upon calling Yathar by the family name he no longer chose to acknowledge.

"Well, I do, sir," Yathar admitted, "but Shaundar is sitting in the helm all day." He smiled a little at the corner of his mouth, and Shaundar

recognized that his friend was setting him up for some kind of physical training punishment. He determined that he would make him sorry for that later.

“I see,” remarked Captain Yvoeth mildly. “Well, I will work on the problem of Mr. Sunfall’s failing physical training, and in the meantime, since the two of you seem to have some free time on your hands, you can swab the decks. That ought to keep you both in great physical condition.” His eyes were twinkling.

For the first time ever when assigned some sort of extra duty because they had been horsing around, Shaundar was not in the least angry or resentful. “*Av, quessir,*” they chorused, and set out to find mops.

Lieutenant Sylria caught up to them both a few minutes later. “Are you lads actually old enough to be on this ship?” she inquired sceptically.

“You have to be at least 100 years old to join the Imperial Navy, *etriel,*” Shaundar replied in all seriousness – which, of course, did not really answer the question.

“*Teu’Ruan* Oakheart will vouch for us,” Yathar told her. Shaundar assumed that he must have, because they heard no more about it.

“Well, stick with me when trouble comes, lads,” she said, “and I’ll look out for you.”

Shaundar found himself liking her quite quickly. Something about her reminded him of his formidable grandmother.

The next day, Shaundar was assigned to a split shift of spelljamming around the dog watches, with a four hour interlude of sail crew between them, and that had remained his routine ever since.

I hope that Yathar, Garan and Sylria are well, and I hope you are well too. I’m glad to hear that you’re still getting along with your Captain. To be honest, I feel better knowing that he will be commanding you when battle does come your way. He seems a good, stalwart elf from everything I’ve heard from you and others.

Captain Yvoeth was, actually, very popular. He seemed to be more in touch with the needs of the crew than the sun elven commanders that Shaundar had served under; even his father. Knowing that they were restless, waiting for the war, he granted leave whenever an opportunity arrived, but ran a tight ship, with an expectation of proper dress and behaviour that was reinforced more by social expectation than by fear. Being unmarried (Shaundar had heard a rumour that he was a widower) he was not above dallying in the same establishments where Yathar spent his time on leave, but he never gambled with the crew and he drank nothing save the *alu’quesst* ration and a single glass of wine or beer while on leave, which he typically nursed all night.

The trees have lost their leaves and it has started to snow already. I just want to curl up by a warm fire in your arms and drink hot cider. I want you to know that I love you and I miss you fiercely, and I am looking forward to the day when you are home again so that we can be together. I'm praying to Hanali to watch over you.

Shaundar missed Narissa intensely too. Yathar teased him for not pursuing other dalliances while on leave – “We’re elves, not humans, Shaundar. We know better than to confuse sex and love. Why not have a little fun in your life? Narissa wouldn’t begrudge you.” – and he knew that Yathar was right, but he just didn’t have any interest. If he couldn’t have Narissa in his arms, he didn’t really want anyone else there, either, even if it was only a casual fling.

Love always, Narissa.

He kissed the letter gently and smelled light rose perfume, a scent he associated with her. For a moment his homesickness was more than a miasma; it was a wrenching in his belly. He folded up the letter and put it in his belt pouch to keep it with him.

He moved on to the letter from his father next. His father rarely wrote so he was keenly interested in what he might have to say.

25 Eleventh-Month, 5041 O.C.

To Sy'Ruan Shaundar Sunfall, Nikym d'Quex Etrielle – Vice Admiral Lord Ruavel Sunfall, Aerdrrie's Pride, sends greetings –

Shaundar blinked to be sure he had read that correctly. No, he was right; it did say “Vice Admiral.”

I hope my letter finds you and Yathar well, son. I am pleased that things have been so quiet in your realm, though I am sure you are less pleased by this. I have not been so fortunate. (Shaundar leaned forward, eager to read of the situation.) As if we needed something else on our doorstep with the goblin on the march, the human nation of Wa on Toril has built new warships and, drunk with their own cleverness, they decided to challenge our supremacy of space. We defeated them, of course, but they managed to take us completely by surprise. The Skyheart was destroyed and the Vice Admiral was slain by a catapult stone. So, I have been promoted and the Waans continue to be an irritation in Selune’s Tears which we are forced to deal with. Of course, this means that I now command the battle fleet should we find ourselves engaged in tests of arms, so if (and when) the orcish horde find their way to RealmSpace, we may be fighting side by side.

Shaundar was sorry to hear of the unexpected reduction of their forces, but the thought of fighting at the side of his father was rather appealing. He could almost hear the irritation and disgust in his father’s voice.

You will be displeased to hear, I am sure, that Captain Lord Durothil is next in seniority among the Captains of the Fleet, and despite my recommendations to Lionheart Command and the Admiral, he will be promoted to Rear Admiral from his position as a Post-Captain. (Shaundar

resisted the urge to begin gagging in his disgust.) *I am consoled by the knowledge that as Rear Admiral, it is the non-combat fleet that he will command. That means that he will not likely come into contact with you or Yathar either.*

“Well, that’s good,” Shaundar muttered.

Keep on the alert, my son. Madrimlian says that there are rumours of strange ships in the Sphere. (Shaundar tensed up and nodded to himself.) *I have given the details, as much as we are aware, to your Captain in a dispatch. You will also have orders based on that dispatch, which I leave in the hands of your Captain to divulge as he wills.*

Shaundar figured that this was only right.

If all remains quiet, I am sure we will see each other for Yuletide, but since your mother feels that it will not be so, I have sent along a gift for you. I have learned to trust her intuition and I hope that you are as wise.

Actually, Shaundar felt the same sense of building tension and had for a couple of weeks. He had chalked it up to being restless and eager to engage the enemy that they had been awaiting these past two years, but perhaps there was something more to it, especially if his mother had the same feeling.

In either case, I do hope to see you and Yathar soon. Stay out of trouble. And for gods' sake, tell Yathar to keep his fraternizing to when he is off-duty.

Oh, he'd heard about that one, had he? From the beginning of their posting, the officers had trouble prying Tyelatae and Yathar apart with an eating knife. Part of the problem, Shaundar recognized, was that both of them were bored to death with sentry duty. One day Shaundar was treated to the sight of the two of them swabbing the decks and peeling potatoes wearing nothing that they hadn't been born in. The Captain had said, tongue in cheek that he didn't figure they would mind, since they obviously viewed this as proper attire for active duty.

Oh yes, and thank you for the drawings that you made. I have met Captain Yvoeth and the likeness was incredible. I was amused by the sketch of Yathar having his face slapped by the barmaid. I sincerely hope that was an actual event you depicted and not a fabrication of your imagination, as I think that some humility would do the lad some good. You can tell him that I said so, too.

Shaundar laughed to himself. Yes, it was an actual event that he had sketched. His caricatures of the crew were beginning to see circulation amongst them, and many stopped him in the passageways to ask him to do more.

Sweet water and light laughter until we next meet.

Shaundar folded up this letter too and moved on to the package. He tore off the paper with eager anticipation. There were gifts in there for Yathar as well, Shaundar was pleased to note, and he set those aside for him.

From his mother and Narissa, he was delighted to see, was a whole tin of butter tarts and honey cakes. His grandmother sent his copies of the portraits that they'd had commissioned, finished at last, along with a smaller one of just Narissa in a wooden frame under real glass. He placed that on his night table with a smile.

His father had sent a sampler of fine tobaccos, something that was especially welcome, since they had spent little time in port and good tobacco was in short supply. And best of all, Selena had sent a portable alchemy lab in a suitcase. It was what had taken up the bulk of the space in the heavy package. He hid that in his locker, reasonably certain that the Matey would not approve of its presence and have it removed if he could. He munched cheerfully on a butter tart and filled his pipe with a blend of tobacco containing dried fruit, which was quite pleasant.

Yathar tapped on the door. "Hey," he said by way of greeting, "leave has been cancelled. The skipper wants us at our stations."

Shaundar tapped the pipe out as quickly as he had lit it. "I'm not surprised. Dad said he'd left orders. He's the Vice Admiral now."

"Damn, what happened?" Yathar wanted to know.

“Tussle with the Waans claimed the life of the Vice Admiral and Dad was promoted,” he replied. “I have worse news for you though. Lord Durothil is now the Rear Admiral of the Fleet.”

Yathar looked at him incredulously. “You’re not serious, are you?”

Shaundar nodded. “But the family sent Yule presents; yours are there. You should try some of this tobacco when we have a moment. Or maybe Dad sent you some of your own.”

“I’ll check it out after,” he smiled. Then his expression became solemn again. “My mother sent me a Yuletide gift too,” he told Shaundar. “I’m not sure what to make of it.” He showed his friend a tarnished looking silver ring.

“Odd,” remarked Shaundar with a frown. “Doesn’t look like much, does it?”

“But it has a moderate evocation aura,” he elaborated.

Now that had Shaundar’s attention. “There are no instructions or explanations with it?”

Yathar shook his head. “Just the ring, in a simple black box.”

Shaundar studied it with a discerning eye. The design on the band was an odd rune that he had never seen before. “Interesting.”

“We’ll check it out later,” Yathar promised. “Let’s go stand to our stations. Thanks for saving my Yule presents.” He clapped Shaundar on the shoulder and they headed to their posts.

The Captain was standing in the passageway between the abdomen and the thorax. “Mr. Sunfall, come up on the deck, lad. It’ll be easier for you to hear there than it would be in the helm room.”

“*Av, quessir,*” Shaundar confirmed, and he followed Yathar up topsides and stood near to him at the edge of the gangway at attention when the boatswain whistled up the rest of the crew.

“*Tel’Quessir,*” Captain Yvoeth began as he paced the Castle Deck, rounding the catapult turret, while the First Mate, whose name was Solahlyn Aelorothi, lurked by the hatchway with his arms folded, “I have just received orders from the Admiralty. Strange ships have been sighted in the rings of Glyth. They may be Scorpions.”

Shaundar let out a low whistle. Well, that would complicate things. Glyth was known to be a colony of illithids – squid-faced aliens who ate only brains – who kept humanoids of all sorts as “cattle” on the burnt out surface of the planet. They were also known to patrol local space to add to their collection, despite the efforts of the Navy to curtail this. Furthermore, the rings of Glyth were made up almost entirely of several small rocks and ice blocks, dangerous to navigate and often difficult to see.

“As the closest Navy ship, we have been ordered to investigate,” the Captain continued. “If there are enemy ships present, we have been authorized to engage them.”

The blood started pounding through Shaundar’s veins. Was this going to be it at last?

“So I’m sorry, leave is cancelled for now. We need to see what’s there before they have a chance to move or hide. We’re three days to Glyth from our present orbit. *Etriel Sylria*, plot us a course.”

Sylria, Second Helmsman but Primary Navigator, saluted. “*Av, quessir*. I’ll head to the Chart Room now, sir, with your permission.” The Captain nodded and she climbed down the hatch.

“Many of you have never seen combat before,” the Captain went on, fixing each of them with his kind but dark hazel eyes, which came to rest on Shaundar and Yathar. “If this turns out to be the opening gambit of the War in Realmspace, keep calm, do the jobs you have been trained to do, and trust your crewmates, and all will be well.” He smiled at them encouragingly.

“*Av, quessir!*” they chorused. Eyes glittered and the smiles were jovial. They were ready to fight.

“Mr. Yathar, you are also certified as a battlepoet, are you not?” the Captain inquired.

“Av, quessir,” Yathar affirmed.

He grinned. “I’m sure you know a few rousing battle ballads in addition to all those bawdy tunes you sing at the tavern. Let’s hear one; that should put us all in the proper frame of mind.”

Yathar beamed. “I’ll fetch my lute, sir!” Yvoeth nodded and Yathar went to do so.

“Mr. Sunfall,” the Captain said.

“Sir!” Shaundar replied, immediately at attention again.

The Captain smiled knowingly. “I’m sure reverie will not come easily to you with a hot head to match your hot blood, but do your best. We’ll be running full jamming shifts until we reach the rings of Glyth.”

“Av, quessir,” Shaundar nodded.

The Captain returned his nod sharply. “All right then. All hands to stations.”

The boatswain piped the order and the crew fell in as commanded.

Shaundar checked his pocket watch – the same one his father had gifted to him when he became a cabin boy – and he headed down to the helm room. Garan was seated in what was actually a fairly comfortable chair, as far as spelljamming helms went. Shaundar knew

this room as well as he knew the shape of his hands; he spent eight hours a day in here. The walls were papered with star charts, and there was actually a chest of drawers that contained many of their personal belongings so that they were ready for each shift. Shaundar had a small library of books on alchemy, spelljamming ships, Wildspace survival and magical theory, and, he would only confess under duress, a pin-up magazine or two filled with images of scantily-clad maidens, elven and otherwise. Garan's collection of such things, on the other hand, was truly prestigious, fairly filling the bottom drawer, which Sylria studiously ignored. However, Shaundar did notice that she kept a copy of the Gnomish Kama Sutra in the middle drawer, along with some long-winded printed stories that seemed to be more about how often the heroine got laid than any real plot he could discern.

Garan was currently reading one of Shaundar's books on magic. This one had been a gift from Narissa which she had acquired from her Great Uncle on Evermeet, detailing secret magic of the elves that had almost been lost with Myth Drannor. Shaundar had agreed to allow Garan to read it, provided it never left the helm room.

The *Queen's Dirk* was equipped with a backup helm, which had a separate room in case the first helm was destroyed, but it was only a minor helm, not a major helm; meaning that its enchantment was less effective and it only allowed half the travelling speed of the main helm. There were star charts in the backup helm room too, but no one ever spent any time in there.

“Ahoy,” he said, tapping on the edge of the door to alert Garan to the fact that he was there. He put down the book and looked up at Shaundar. “Did you hear all that?”

Garan smiled. “Guess it looks like we might finally see some action at last! I’m just waiting for my heading and bearing.”

“Do you need anything before we get underway?” Shaundar asked him. It was customary for the off-duty helmsmen to stick their heads in the helm room at least once per watch to see to the needs of the elf on the helm, since he or she could not leave the chair or the ship would lose all power.

“I could use a snack,” Garan confessed. “And I forgot to grab the urinal before I sat down, so would you mind making sure it’s in the helm pocket for me? I’m sure I’ll need it later.”

Shaundar handed him a handful of butter tarts. “Here; Yule present from my betrothed and my Mom,” he announced proudly.

“Well, that’s kind of you to share, mate; thank you!” He bit into one and pronounced it “delicious.” In the meantime, Shaundar double-checked and yes, the urinal was tucked away in the pouch on the starboard side of the helm chair. “You’re good,” he told Garan. “The urinal’s right where it should be.”

Garan thanked him, and that’s when the voice of the Captain came down the speaking-tube. “Mr. Oakheart!”

Garan grabbed the other end of the tube and bellowed back, “Sir!”

“We’re releasing the mooring lines,” the Captain declared.

“*Av, quessir!*” Garan called back, and then the *Queen’s Dirk* shuddered as the hum of the helm began in earnest.

“All right,” came the Captain’s voice down the tube again, “take ‘er out; pitch 45, yaw five o’clock, and roll ‘er as much as you need to. Steady as she goes.”

“Pitch 45, yaw five of the clock, roll as I will, steady as she goes, *av*,” Garan echoed back, and began the turn gently, timing the roll so that gravity shifted only slightly as they pulled away from the station. His eyes glazed back over in the strange double-vision of an active spelljammer.

“I’d better go,” Shaundar told Garan. “Cap’n told me to try to reverie.”

Garan snickered. “Doesn’t know you very well then, does he?”

Shaundar smiled. “He *did* say to try.”

“Skipper’s got damn good reasons for his orders, I find. You’d best go do it.”

“Okay, see you later,” he affirmed. “Fly Queenie nicely; I want her to be in one piece when it’s my turn to fly!”

But reverie did not come. Shaundar tossed and turned on his hammock for half an hour before giving up and joining the crew on decks, pulling ropes and manoeuvring sails. He figured the hard work might tire him out. Yathar was still singing rousing tunes of battle and strumming his lute. He was about halfway through “The Ballad of Sehanine’s Tears.”

Shaundar had never actually seen an orc face to face, nor a goblin for that matter; though he had once seen a couple of ogres loading a privateer’s ship (and he shuddered at the thought of facing them in battle) and a kobold or two while they were docked at Dragon Rock for resupply last year. He wondered if they really were as frightening and horrible as had been described to him.

Their first sight of the rings of Glyth came just before shift change in the helm. The outer ring, from a distance, looked like spokes in a wheel, oddly enough. Beyond it, Shaundar could see a shimmery band that might have been a ring or a trick of the light through Queenie’s air envelope, and then something that looked like a band of twisted coloured ribbon, like the end result of a maypole. According to the charts, there was a fourth ring beyond that, but Shaundar couldn’t see it. He did, however, make out the rolling balls of two of Glyth’s three moons, one of which, Polluter, was a pock-marked moon of another moon, Mingabwe, a bright white orb covered in ice. The third, Haven, was not currently visible from their approach, so he assumed it must be orbiting the far side. That was just as well, as far as he was concerned, since it was

supposed to be neutral trading ground for warring illithid factions; nothing they needed to get involved with. The planet itself was an odd purplish colour and there was a bright band rolling across its surface. As they approached, Shaundar realized that it was an enormous wildfire.

“Mr. Sunfall!” called the Captain. “Stand to the helm, if you please.”

“*Av, quessir,*” Shaundar replied. Sightseeing was over; time to go to work. He made for the helm room with a side trip to the head on the way.

“Lieutenant,” he nodded, coming in. “I am ready to relieve you.”

“*Av,*” Lieutenant Sylria returned, closing up her book. She looked weary. “I am ready to be relieved. We’re on approach to Glyth, right?”

“That’s right,” confirmed Shaundar, squatting down to the starboard of the helm.

“Well, other than that I have nothing to report. Do you want me to give you a chance to go to the head first?”

“Already did.”

“Right then. Three, two, one, switch!”

Shaundar fell into the helm with the ease of long practice and reached out his consciousness to join with the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*, affectionately known now amongst her crew as "*Etriellyth*," or "Queenie." He sensed her warm welcome as he began to feel his arms as her wings, his torso as her thorax, his legs and groin as her abdomen. He could see the crew moving about the decks and he could sense the rings in front of him.

"Has the transfer been made?" the Captain asked through the speaking-tube.

"Av, Captain!" Shaundar replied. "I have the helm!"

"All right, Mr. Sunfall. Begin a cautious approach to Glyth. Pitch 45 down, yaw ten o'clock. Bring 'er in as close to the edge of the ring as you can."

"Pitch 45, yaw 330, *av*," he responded, and began a rapid approach along the edge of the ring. It didn't take long for Queenie to slow to tactical speed. Shaundar guessed at what the Captain was up to. He was hoping that if there were Scorpion ships hiding in Glyth's rings, approaching along the edge of the wheel would disguise them enough that they might not be noticed. They ended up closing in on the outer ring in a tight counter-clockwise spiral. They did a complete circle, a process which took about an hour, and found nothing.

“Very well; if they’re here, they’re deep inside the rings,” the Captain observed. “Let’s start an approach to the second ring in. Yaw ten degrees larboard. Stay as close to one of those spokes as you can, Mr. Sunfall.”

“*Av, quessir,*” was Shaundar’s reply. He skimmed the edge of the spoke, realizing through Queenie’s senses that it was actually composed of several tiny asteroids about the size of snowballs that had just somehow lined up in this unusual manner. He wondered vaguely if it had anything to do with magnetics. “Sir, should I go into the second ring or travel underneath it?”

“Good question, Mr. Sunfall. How do you feel about it?” the Captain asked.

Not at all used to being asked his opinion on such things, Shaundar considered it. Travelling beneath it would give them a better overall view of what was going on in the ring, at least from a distance, and they were likely to notice ship movements and the like, even if they were too far away from the ships to make out their configuration. The ring was anywhere from a hundred fifty hex to maybe three hundred fifty hex wide, though, according to the charts, so they would certainly not see everything from that vantage point. Going into the ring would provide them with more concealment should there be an enemy force, but they might not notice the enemy’s ships until they were right on top of them. Shaundar felt that going directly in would be the better course. He wasn’t sure why; it was just a hunch.

“I think we should go in, Cap’n,” he answered.

“All right, make it so, Mr. Sunfall,” Captain Yvoeth commanded. “Fly ‘er as you will, but let the sail crew know which way to turn. I understand they train you to do that at Aces High.”

“Av, *quessir*, they do,” he replied. It was a difficult exercise; essentially, it meant taking command of the sail crew to aid in the manoeuvring of the ship so that they would turn when the spelljammer needed them to, rather than going through the Captain. It increased response time considerably, but the spelljammer really had to know what he was doing. It was kind of like playing a chess match entirely in your head. He hoped he was up to the task.

“All right, Mr. Sunfall has the helm and the deck!” Shaundar could hear the call echoing up and down the ship through the brass speaking-tube. “Stand by for his commands!”

Shaundar drew near to the second ring. He sensed the rolling asteroids. They were tiny, no more than twice the size of the *Queen’s Dirk* at the most. “Slowing to tactical two!” he called out. The Captain repeated this and it was taken up throughout the ship while he did so. “Entering the ring field!” he bellowed. “Roll 15 down, yaw ten larboard!”

The Captain repeated his directions and Queenie began to roll and turn accordingly.

They traversed the asteroid field slowly. Shaundar did not find it nearly as challenging as Selune's Tears. He took his time so that the Captain, First Mate and lookout could comb the field with their spyglasses. A couple of hours went by as Shaundar directed Queenie up and down the thickness of the ring, negotiating its circumference at a crawl. Eventually they started edging cautiously closer to Haven, since they weren't finding anything on their side of Glyth.

About two and a quarter hours into the search, Shaundar sensed something. He wasn't sure what it was, exactly, but he knew that several small bodies, each maybe less than a hundred feet in length, were clustered too close together near to one of the larger three hundred foot long asteroids. Asteroids would naturally separate if they were that close to one another, he figured. They would collide and bounce off of one another, forcing them apart.

"Captain!" he bellowed. "Eight degrees off the port bow, ten up; what do you see, sir?"

There was a long moment of silence as the Captain trained his glass in that direction; then abruptly he roared, "Full reverse! NOW, Mr. Sunfall!"

Shaundar willed Queenie to jump backwards as far as she would go. As he did so, he sensed the objects moving. They moved like ships, not rocks. One came around the large rock on their portside, another on the starboard, a third above and a fourth below. Shaundar kept moving

Queenie backwards to keep them at a distance. Still more emerged from behind other nearby rocks.

“Captain!” Shaundar heard Yathar’s voice, sounding almost panicked. “I count ten sail! They’re all Scorpions, sir!”

Oh dear gods. Shaundar felt the blood in his veins turn to ice. Ten Scorpions! All man-o-war class ships, every last one of them. It was a whole blasted fleet!

“They’re hailing us, sir,” the Yeoman announced. She hesitated and then declared, “They want us to strike our colours, Captain.”

A long moment of silence fell. Shaundar held his breath. He continued to move backwards as the fleet of Scorpions advanced. The legs of the insectoid goblin ships flexed and contracted in a sinister fashion, but it created thrust, like oars. One Scorpion started creeping around behind them, to prevent their escape. On the forward deck, Shaundar could see the Captain standing with his head lowered and his hands in the pockets of his coat, contemplating. Matey Aelorothi looked very grim. They conferred quietly for a few moments; then the Captain raised his head and addressed the crew on deck with eyes blazing so brightly that the dark hazel had become a bright emerald shade.

“Well, what say you, lads?” Captain Yvoeth asked. “Do we want to surrender to a bunch of pig-faces?”

The resounding “NO, QUESSIR!” reverberated through the ship. Shaundar’s heart answered in kind before his head could say no. He could swear that he even felt Queenie’s agreement.

“All right then! All stop on my mark . . . let’s make them think we’re thinking about it . . .”

Shaundar waited, continuing to backpedal. He gleaned the Captain’s intent. Vastly outnumbered, he was making it look as though they were considering surrender to draw the goblin fleet in closer, giving them less time to react and making them more vulnerable to weapon strikes. Shaundar could sense that the Scorpion ship that had moved in behind them was very close.

“All right, all stop, Mr. Sunfall!”

“*Av, quessir!* All stop!” he called back, and Queenie floated obediently.

“Yeoman, start pulling down our colours. Do it slowly, and leave them about half-mast. It’s very important that they not be entirely down.” Shaundar smiled. It was considered to be very dishonourable to strike your colours and then attack, so the hesitancy was imperative. “Weapons crews, stand to your armaments discretely. Marines, if you’re not already on the fo’c’sle, stand to the hatchway and prepare to fire crossbows on the enemy crew. Wait for my order before firing anything. Mr. Sunfall!”

“Sir!” Shaundar yelled back.

“On my mark, dive at full tactical,” the savvy Captain commanded, “and then you’ll have command of the sail crew again. Understood?”

“*Av, quessir!*” Shaundar returned. He took a deep breath to steady his body. He was vibrating with the adrenaline. “Sir, are we fighting or fleeing?”

The Captain grinned ferociously. “Word must reach the Realmspace Fleet,” he said, “but we can’t lead this fleet back to base, either. We must lose them or slay as many as we can. So Mr. Oakheart, stand by the *Iolaa* in the Lower Cargo Deck.”

Shaundar heard Garan distantly calling back his affirmative.

“When the fight begins,” Captain Yvoeth continued, “stand by ‘er helm. Your orders are to launch if the *Etrielle* takes significant damage, lose the orcs and make it back to base. Understood?”

Garan agreed and saluted, then scurried down into the Lower Deck, located on the underside of Queenie’s thorax and on the opposite side of the gravity plane. The *Iolaa*, their flitter, was perched on the roof of the deck like some odd kind of baby at Queenie’s belly, if butterflies hatched smaller butterflies instead of caterpillars, accessible via a trap door in the ceiling.

All the while, the Scorpion ships drew nearer.

“Steady, *Tel’Quessir*,” the Captain told his crew. Shaundar tensed like a spring and prepared to fly for their lives.

The Scorpion ship behind them began to extend the great grappling rams that resembled large scorpion’s claws, for which the vessel was named. Shaundar knew that if they fastened onto the *Queen’s Dirk*, all was lost.

“Yeoman, run up the colours!” the Captain commanded. “All hands; fire at will!”

The Yeoman yanked their flags back up the mainmast. The rear doors in the abdomen burst open to reveal the aft ballista, which launched a bolt directly into the belly of the Scorpion extending its claws. The catapult on the Castle Deck launched a stone at point blank range. Shaundar felt the vibration of the recoil like a slap between his shoulder blades. At the same time, the topside ballista shot a bolt directly into the Scorpion’s bridge with the terrible shriek of tearing metal and the crash of smashing glass, and the light ballistae concealed in the eye ports each put a bolt into the ships flanking them on the port and starboard bow. Then the Marines and all spare hands aimed their crossbows at the orcs and goblins who were preparing to board them on the deck of the wounded Scorpion to their aft. A dozen strings twanged in unison and several of the goblin crew cried out and fell back. Shaundar could even

hear their cries because they were close enough to Queenie's abdomen that their air envelope was intersecting hers.

"DIVE, Mr. Sunfall!" roared the Captain.

Shaundar pitched Queenie's nose down and peeled out at the best speed he could muster. Belatedly all three of the Scorpions that had directly surrounded them fired ballistae and catapults. One of the stones passed closely enough to Queenie's tail that Shaundar felt it graze just slightly, but the rest careened uselessly into space; except for a catapult stone fired from the portside Scorpion ship, which scraped and damaged one of the claws of the wounded Scorpion that had been at their aft. The goblin ship listed to the port and began to drift aimlessly. Shaundar realized that they had taken out its helm with their topside ballista.

The crew cheered and the Captain called, "Well done, *Tel'Quessir!* Reload!" Shaundar fled into the ring. By the time that the fleet had sorted itself out to begin pursuit in earnest, he had put a good lead between them.

"Outrun them if you can, Mr. Sunfall," the Captain commanded. And Shaundar ran. "Roll larboard 20," he cried as he skimmed around one of the larger asteroids. "Pitch down 25," he called as he dodged another. But he sensed the pursuing ships drawing nearer. "They're gaining, Cap'n!" he yelled.

The Captain peered through his glass. “Not all of them,” he clarified, “but some of them are, *av*.” He grinned in that fierce, almost predatory way again. “So you’ll just have to out-fly them, Mr. Sunfall. See if you can separate them into two groups. And stay within the ring.”

“*Av, quessir!*” Shaundar answered, and he continued to flee. “Roll starboard 15!” he called as he dodged a large rock. “Yaw larboard 15!” He skimmed around the edge of a chunk of ice. He knew the Captain was right. Elven ships were legendary for being more manoeuvrable than anything that anyone else flew, save perhaps the spawn of the Spelljammer itself, and Shaundar knew that his training made them even more dexterous still. If they could not outrun the enemy, keeping them busy trying to dodge asteroids was definitely their best chance.

Four of the Scorpions drew away from the others and began to close the distance to the *Queen’s Dirk*. One helmsman was amazingly fast and he was soon on their tail. “Weapons to the aft; fire!” the Captain shouted, and both the ballistae mounted on the top and bottom of the abdomen, along with the catapult on its swivelling turret and their “stinger” behind the aft doors, launched their missiles at the pursuing Scorpion. Shaundar shuddered with the recoil, but all four made contact. The catapult stone bounced off of the Scorpion’s deck and shattered the ladder that led up to the stinger, which was raised above the goblin ship’s Battle Deck and served as a platform for two heavy catapults. The ballista bolts punched holes in the bow.

The Scorpion ship returned fire. “Brace for impact!” bellowed the Captain. An enormous catapult stone bounced off of the edge of the ballista mount on the abdomen topside. A piece of the wall that protected it broke off. Shaundar felt Queenie’s pain like a sharp stab in the back of his knees and he yelped as she shuddered. The second stone collided with their larboard wing, which felt to Shaundar that he’d been punched in the left shoulder, and while the pain lingered, indicating a large bruise, nothing cracked. Their foe also fired a ballista bolt from its bow, but the bolt skimmed across the top of the Castle Deck just slightly to the left of center, and it missed everything.

“Reload!” the Captain called, and the ballistae crews lifted more bolts into place and cranked back the firing mechanisms, while the catapult crew levered the beam and spoon down to fill its cup with another boulder.

Shaundar wasn’t going to give them another chance if he could avoid it. He was just waiting for a suitable stone, one of unusual size . . . ah, there!

“Cap’n! I’m bringing ‘er about!” Shaundar called. He shifted sideways in the chair and braced his feet against the port arm and his rear against the starboard arm so that he was firmly wedged in place.

“Forward weapons crews! Prepare to fire!” Captain Yvoeth commanded.

“Sail crew!” directed Shaundar. “On one, pitch down 15; on two, pitch 90 up and follow the curve of the asteroid. All hands brace for impact as the gravity shifts.”

“When we come around the asteroid, fire at will,” the Captain said.

“Av, *quessir!*” the weapons crews acknowledged.

Shaundar barrelled towards the large meteor, which was a strange mixture of rock, metal and ice tumbling through space towards them. “Ready for my mark . . . one!” he called, and the sail crew dipped the sails so that they skirted underneath the tumbling stone. He directed Queenie along this trajectory for a few moments, and then he called out “Two!” and the crew floated the sails to billow out and the *Queen’s Dirk* swung up and around the curve of the asteroid. Gravity shifted towards the ceiling but Shaundar tensed his thigh muscles to bracket himself in place and he did not budge. Shaundar noted that the Captain had wrapped his hand up in a line and he barely moved either, though the Matey staggered. The catapult crew swivelled the turret around to aim their weapon forward.

They came around the curvature of the asteroid and found themselves facing the Scorpion that had pursued them head-on. “Fire!” cried the Captain, and the ballista on the thorax just before the fo’c’sle, along with the catapult and the two light ballistae located in the eye ports, all fired at once.

The Scorpion was not expecting this sudden turn of the tables and it had no way of avoiding the attack. The ballistae punched holes between the ship's mandibles; and better yet, the catapult stone landed with perfect soaring aim directly on to one of the enemy's catapults, smashing the mechanism. Humanoids scattered along the decks, variously taking cover and aiming crossbows, which missed due to the sudden burst of speed from the asteroid's gravity slingshot.

As they rocketed past, the Captain cried, "Aft weapons, fire!" The three abdomen-mounted ballistae let loose, and all the bolts found purchase. "Reload!" roared the Captain immediately.

Shaundar now found Queenie facing the other three Scorpions in the leading group; one each to the port and starboard bows and one approaching them head-on that had obviously intended to try to overtake them from above. "Dive!" yelled Shaundar. The sail crew yanked the topsails in and Shaundar drove Queenie downward at the steepest possible angle. A ballista bolt from the Scorpion they had just about rammed tore the mizzensail, but it still functioned. Both the port and starboard Scorpions put on a sudden burst of speed to catch the elven Man-o-War, and Shaundar laughed out loud as the claw ram of the portside one got just a little too close and clipped the starboard ship's claw ram right off at the pincer. To add insult to injury, the catapult stones that had been fired at Queenie continued their trajectory through space. One of them took out some of the port ship's rigging, and the other scraped the deck of the starboard ship, smearing one of their crew over the surface like a streak of red paint. Shaundar shuddered.

“Nicely done,” the Captain praised them cheerfully.

But the Scorpion ship that had just about collided with them turned sharply starboard and was right on their tail within seconds. Shaundar swore as they fired off a ballista bolt which caught Queenie in her rear door, causing a corresponding sharp pain in Shaundar’s left buttock. Their catapults, however, were fortunately far less accurate. The stones they fired sailed clear over their heads, and Shaundar waggled Queenie’s wings and avoided them entirely.

“Return fire!” the Captain commanded, and the three ballistae to the aft fired. The topside ballista bolt shaved a line down the top deck of their pursuer, while the other two punched into their underside somewhere. Slower than the ballistae to reload, the catapult fired next, bouncing off of the deck and taking some rigging and a couple of humanoids with it. But the Scorpion returned fire with its ballista again. This time Shaundar was ready for them, and he managed to wiggle in such a way that it only scuffed Queenie’s smooth surface a little to the starboard side of her abdomen. “Reload!” demanded the Captain.

But Shaundar could sense the lead ship of the second flotilla up ahead, just on the other side of a large asteroid in his path. He had an idea.

“On my first mark, pitch up 45,” Shaundar bellowed. “On my second mark, climb for all we’re worth.”

“Av, *quessir!*” the sail crew called back.

He made a direct beeline for the asteroid. “Ready? . . . Now!” Shaundar cried, and just as it seemed that they would crash into the great rock, they pulled up and came around its topside, their pursuer still firmly at six o’clock. Then that second flotilla’s lead ship filled his forward senses. “CLIMB!” he howled, and they pulled up as hard as they possibly could. Queenie’s wings groaned under the strain and all the sails filled. They passed closely enough to the oncoming ship that Shaundar could hear swearing in what he assumed was Orcish. Then there was a tremendous crash behind them and a sound like fingernails on a slate board, only magnified about a thousand times. It was exactly as Shaundar had hoped. Their hunter, following too close to stop and not as manoeuvrable as they, had collided head-on with the lead ship of the second flotilla and impaled itself completely on the lead ship’s claws. Neither was going anywhere for a while. Cheering rolled through the *Queen’s Dirk*.

“Three down, *Tel’Quessir!*” Captain Yvoeth announced. “Well done!”

The three Scorpions that they had left behind had regrouped and were now bearing down on them again, and they were still on a direct collision course with the second flotilla. But none of the pursuing ships were undamaged; one was missing a grappling ram, the second had damaged rigging and was turning laboriously, and the third had taken a brutal beating and was missing a catapult. Still, when all three of them

fired on the elven Man-o-War, it was almost a disaster. Five catapult stones and three ballistae bolts came at them from the aft firing arc. There was no way to avoid them all. Shaundar dipped low as he bellowed “Hard down!” figuring that the bolts would be less damaging. The stones all miraculously missed, save one which clipped the lantern off of their mizzenmast, but all three of the bolts made contact. One thrust into the *glassteed* window along Queenie’s starboard abdomen, one into the roof of the cargo hold and one clipped off of the topside ballista mount. This translated to Shaundar as an excruciating sciatic pain all up and down his right leg. He gasped and clutched his upper thigh as though it would help. And the hit was not without at least one casualty; someone in the abdomen was screaming.

But he had no time to contemplate it. They were just about on top of the rest of the fleet. “Captain!” panted Shaundar, “I’m going to buzz the leader!”

“Av, Mr. Sunfall!” acknowledged Captain Yvoeth. “*Ahk’Faerna* to the decks and prepare for crew strikes! Aft weapons; return fire on the Scorpion directly on our six only!”

Shaundar felt the pounding of boots on his decks as the mages of their crew ran for the topside. He could hear them beginning their incantations, preparing their spells. In the meantime, the artillery crews with rear-facing weaponry returned fire, save the catapult which was still facing the bow; though the “stinger” ballista was a little slow on the draw. Two of the three connected, but they only dented the hull.

“Sail crew!” the Captain called. “Prepare to roll 180 larboard on Mr. Sunfall’s mark.”

“*Av, quessir!*” they cried in answer.

“Wizards! When you see the deck of the enemy ship above you, fire your evocations!”

“*Av, quessir!*” they replied. Shaundar could hear Yathar’s voice amongst the responses.

The lead ship was closing fast. The Captain bellowed, “Forward weapons; fire!” The ballistae in the eyes, the forward-facing ballista and the catapult let loose. However, their enemy must have fired at exactly the same moment. Miraculously, their catapult stone and one of those fired from the Scorpion collided and sprayed debris everywhere, but neither found purchase. Shaundar bellowed, “Roll!” and the sail crew supported his will to initiate the manoeuvre. The second stone clipped nothing more significant than the railing surrounding the fo’c’sle, and the bolt that their enemy had fired missed entirely as they rolled around its trajectory. Then they were upside down in relation to the other ship and passing over it as their bolts punctured its mandibles and bridge with the groaning of torn metal, and the Captain called, “Wizards FIRE!” Lightning bolts and fireballs, along with something oily, slammed into the upper deck of the Scorpion ship, and for a moment, the eyes of the orcish and elven crews met as they stared up at each other. Then one of the fireballs ignited the oily substance and the Scorpion ship caught fire. As

they finished the pass, they could see that plumes of thick black smoke were already fouling their air, and the flames were spreading to the sails.

“Nicely done, and kudos to whoever cast that *grease* spell!” the Captain complimented them.

Yathar grinned. “Thank you, sir!”

The ship directly on their tail managed to barely pull up in time, but since the burning Scorpion was on a head-on collision course and unable to see due to the smoke, it was not able to avoid disaster entirely. Some of the now-burning rigging got caught on the tail of the other ship and the smoke began to foul their air as well.

Then they were almost on top of the last three ships, the ones that had been the slowest in the initial pursuit. “Hard to starboard! Roll starboard 90!” Shaundar directed as he banked sharply right and passed between two of them. “Fire at will!” the Captain called out. The abdomen-mounted ballistae each took a pot-shot at the two ships they passed between, while the catapult swivelled to the aft and fired on their smouldering pursuer in synchronization with the “stinger.” None of the forward-facing weapons had a good target, so they held their fire. Shaundar couldn’t tell whether or not the ships they’d passed between had taken any damage, and the stinger missed, but with amazing good fortune, the catapult stone carried the burning rigging with it into the hole it punched in their pursuer’s cargo hold and something inside exploded. The entire topside weapon deck flew into space in the form of

flak and splinters, completely destroying their ballista and setting the ship merrily ablaze.

The two ships they had passed between returned fire but they could each only bring a single catapult to bear. One missed, but the other rolled along the bottom of the hull and smashed the landing gear out from underneath the *Iolaa*. She fell against Queenie's belly with a crash. "You and you; help Mr. Oakheart tie that down!" commanded the Captain and they went to it.

"Captain!" the Yeoman yelled out. "The two burning ships have struck their colours!"

Queenie's crew shouted their approval.

"Good work!" Captain Yvoeth called. "Now let's worry about the ones that are left. Hard to port, Mr. Sunfall."

"Hard to port, *av!*" he replied, and he veered sharply to the portside as the sail crew spun the sails accordingly. "Port weapons, fire!" cried the Captain as they swung around the hindmost of the Scorpion ships trying to jam itself into reverse. The top and bottom ballistae on the abdomen and the light ballista in the portside eye all let loose as they passed by. They didn't seem to do any appreciable damage to the ship, but they did scatter the weapons crews on the tail platform and the main deck, preventing return fire. Shaundar could see that their previous ballista bolt had indeed made a small hole as well.

Rolling naturally to the port, they passed over one of the ships of the second flotilla that had not been damaged yet, once again facing deck to deck. “Mages, fire!” Captain Yvoeth commanded, but Sylria was already bellowing the same order, and once again a magical holocaust rained down upon the beleaguered goblinoids. One of the catapults went up as though someone had covered it in smoke powder. Queenie’s catapult and forward ballista also let them have it as they went by. Both missiles scoured the weapons deck and scraped off a couple of orcs.

“Finish the roll, Mr. Sunfall!” the Captain ordered, and Shaundar did so, feeling the gravity plane shift as they passed over the other ship. This brought their starboard weapons to bear on another ship which was almost on top of the one they were blowing up with magic. Shaundar realized this was the heavily damaged one that they had pounded on earlier with the missing catapult, no ladder and several ballista punctures. “Starboard weapons, fire!” the Captain cried, and the forward facing ballista punched another bolt into it, while the light one in the starboard eye tore sails and knocked down an orc. This proved to be the nail in the coffin, so to speak. The larger bolt struck the tail where it connected to the aft of the ship, sheering it off, and the Ssorpion began to break up after that.

“Fire the stinger!” cried the Captain, and the stinger ballista fired, directly into the ship they had passed over and fireballed. Within seconds it was striking its colours as well.

Out of nowhere came another Scorpion ship, which made an attempt to ram them. “Evasive manoeuvres!” the Captain directed, and Shaundar was already moving, spinning out of its path. One of the claws, which had been gored with several long marks, sheared off part of their rigging. Shaundar realized that this ship was the one that had accidentally rammed its fellow, which had finally managed to pull itself free.

“Hard to port!” Captain Yvoeth commanded. The sail crew had a little more difficulty responding with part of their sails tattered, but they managed to get Queenie turned around to come up on their attacker’s stern.

“Bring ‘er up on their starboard side,” the Captain told Shaundar. “Marines, prepare to board!”

“*Av, quessir!*” Shaundar, the Marines and the sail crew all acknowledged in unison. Yathar drew his long sword and perched at the ready, his other hand curled into a ball and forming a spot of light in it. The other wizards also began their incantations and the warrior Marines readied crossbows in one hand and boarding axes in the other. Other crewmates prepared boarding pikes or grapples and stood prepared beside them.

Shaundar managed to pilot his way gingerly through the debris of the shattered ship to come up slightly beneath their attacker’s gravity plane. None of its armaments were in any position to fire on them as they made their approach. When they aligned their gravity planes they

found several orcs standing on the Weapons Deck with crossbows aimed down at them. The elves let fly with their spells and crossbows and several orcs grunted or howled and fell from view. The orcs also let fly and three elves screamed in pain, struck with bolts, though it didn't look like anything was instantly lethal. Yathar released a lightning bolt from his glowing palm, which exploded on the deck and electrocuted three or four of their foes. Without even waiting for the grapples to finish connecting he yelled, "Follow me!" and leaped onto one of the legs that served as oars. Crossbow bolts fell all around him as he ran up the leg with a cat's grace and vaulted onto the Scorpion ship with a leap and a tumble that only a trained bladesinger could match. Then he began to dance and move on the deck of the enemy ship, a song in his throat and his sword making a graceful blur, and orcs and goblins began to die around him. To his credit, the First Mate was right behind Yathar. They were quickly joined by more Marines, and as swords and spells began to fly, Shaundar lost sight of them. "Hold position, Mr. Sunfall!" the Captain directed, and Shaundar did. He waited for the three remaining ships to attack them; but the attack never came.

After only a few minutes, the colours were struck on the boarded Scorpion.

"I count three surrendered, three sunk, one boarded!" the Captain said. "That leaves three more. Where are they?"

It was Garan who replied. "Captain, I think they're routing!" He had his spyglass pointed towards the edge of the ring. Captain Yvoleth

peered through his own glass. “Confirmed!” he agreed with a smile. “Mr. Sunfall, do you think you can catch them?”

“Are they out of the ring yet, sir?” Shaundar asked.

“Av, Mr. Sunfall, they just reached the outer edge,” the Captain answered.

“Then no, sir, I don’t think I can,” he admitted.

The Captain nodded once. “All right, all hands not otherwise engaged, board the enemy ship and help the Marines take prisoners. *Etriel* Naliatha, see to the butcher’s bill. Mr. Oakheart, I need a damage report; see that the Ship’s Druid gets it so that we can start repairs immediately.” He smiled broadly and clapped the shoulder of the Yeoman, who happened to be the nearest member of the crew to him. “Congratulations, *Tel’Quessir*; we have won the day!”

Chapter Nine

The whooping and cheering rattled Queenie's windows. Shaundar could not believe that they had actually succeeded! He found himself trembling and pale as he reacted to the adrenaline. His stomach lurched and he promptly grabbed the chamber-pot and vomited into it. But instantly he felt better.

"How are you doing, lad?" came the Captain's voice from the door.

Embarrassed, and worried that the Captain would think him a coward, he hid the chamber-pot behind the helm. "I'm all right, sir," he said.

Captain Yvoeth came over and put a hand on his shoulder. His eyes fell briefly on the chamber-pot, but he said, "That was a fine piece of flying, Mr. Sunfall. I'm sure we wouldn't have gotten away as clean as we did without you. Well done."

Shaundar smiled back thinly. "Thank you, sir."

"I need you to continue to man the helm for a few more hours," the Captain told him. "Are you good to do that?"

"I'll man the helm as long as I need to, sir," was his reply.

The Captain chuckled. “I believe you, Mr. Sunfall! Good then, I’ll send someone back in about an hour to see what you might require.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shaundar said gratefully.

“Carry on,” he nodded, and Shaundar saluted. He returned it and left the helm room.

There was a great deal of shouting and commotion aboard the ship for several more hours. In the stories and the ballads, everything was always well after the battle was done, but Shaundar learned that real life was a lot messier. The forward section of the upper hold had been converted to an infirmary, and there were several wounded in there, bleeding all over the floor. Naliatha, their Healer, directed her assistants to sand the floor to soak up the blood. Most of the wounds came from splinters and shattered glass, though one of the catapult crew had taken a nasty bump on the head and had a bad concussion, there were a couple of crossbow bolts that had to be removed from shoulders, and someone else had taken a good blow to the face which, Naliatha informed him, might have meant a lost eye if the shard that had caused it were just a fingernail’s breath to the right. And then Shaundar saw Tyelatae.

They brought her in on a stretcher, moaning. Her leg was literally in pieces. It was flat under the bloody sheet from just below the knee to her foot.

Naliatha took one look at it and said, “That will have to come off. Get me the amputation knives and the *quesstiasa*. Opium too, if we have it.”

“Ah, fuck,” swore Tyelatae. “The War just started and now I have to go home?”

“I’m sorry,” Naliatha apologized. “I don’t have the means to regenerate that. You’ll either have to wait for someone who can be available, or you’ll have to get fitted for a prosthetic.” Her expression was sympathetic.

“Well,” Tyelatae said weakly, “at least we won the day! Shaundar can really fly, huh?”

Shaundar felt terribly guilty. Obviously it had not been good enough, or Tyelatae would not be so badly injured.

At about that time, Garan stuck his head into the helm room. He tipped his uniform hat to Shaundar. “That was pretty amazing, lad!” he grinned. “I came to see what you might need, and whether or not you could give me a damage report from your perspective.”

“Tyelatae’s really hurt,” Shaundar told him with thin lips. “She’s going to lose her leg.”

“Ah, shit,” Garan cursed. “That’s terrible!”

“It’s my fault,” Shaundar groaned. “I chose to take the ballista bolts instead of the catapult stones. I deliberately put her in harm’s way.”

Garan stared at him incredulously. “I imagine you did,” he said, “and thus, we still have a ship and we’re all still alive, you ass! Ten man-o-war class ships versus us; we’re lucky to not be smashed to flinders. Except that luck had nothing to do with it; the Captain’s command and your skill at the helm, and everybody working together as a team; that’s what saved us. So you can take your self-pity party and cram it.”

Shaundar started as if slapped.

Garan shook his head. “I’m sorry, mate. I understand that you’re worried about her. I didn’t mean to say that you were feeling sorry for yourself; I know that’s not what it’s about. But nobody else here could have done what you did. Give yourself the credit you deserve, Shaundar. You saved our lives today.”

Shaundar nodded slowly, not sure of what to say. He cleared his throat. “Damage report, right. The rigging is shorn and will need repairing; the aft door on the portside has a hole in it, and so do the aft starboard abdomen window and the upper cargo hold. We’ve taken some hits on the upper abdomen ballista mount, the catapult turret and the fo’c’sle. The *lolaa* you already know about, of course, and we have a hole in our mizzensail and I think we lost the lantern on our mizzenmast.

Oh yes, and there's a big bruise on our larboard wing, which hurts like a bastard, quite frankly. But I don't think it cracked at all."

"I think you've confirmed everything I saw or suspected," Garan agreed. "Okay, don't forget to enter all of this in the log."

"I won't," Shaundar sighed.

Yathar appeared at the door, looking ragged and with blood splattered all over his face. "Hey, just making sure that you guys are okay," he said.

"I'm fine," Shaundar confirmed, "but you're bleeding."

"Where?" Yathar demanded.

Shaundar indicated his side, where a patch of blood was spreading over Yathar's silver and red uniform.

"Oh," he commented mildly as he put his hand on the wound and blood came away on his fingers, "I guess I'd better get that looked at." He smiled at Shaundar. "Turns out we boarded the flagship," he announced. "One of these scro was commanding the fleet. He's dead but the Cap'n thought we should bring him aboard and all have a look at him, so that we know what it is we're fighting. He's in the garden when you can get free."

“Thanks,” Shaundar nodded to him. He thought he might very much like to have a look at the face of their enemy. Then he asked Yathar cautiously, “Have you heard about Tyelatae yet?”

Yathar obviously had not, because a look of fright came over his face. “No, what’s wrong with Tyelatae?”

“She’s really hurt,” Shaundar explained. “She’s going to lose her leg.”

Yathar’s expression both paled and relaxed into relief at the same time. “I guess I’ll go hold her hand,” he said, and he made for the impromptu hospital.

“Mr. Sunfall!” came the Captain’s voice through the speaking-tube.

“Sir!” answered Shaundar.

“It looks like we have survivors from the burning ships who are desperately trying to get our attention. Let’s go pick them up, shall we?”

“Av, *quessir*,” he replied.

They manoeuvred around the wreckage of the Scorpion that had lost its tail and threw lifelines to the survivors clustered among the flotsam. Most of the survivors of the burning ships had abandoned the wreckage before their ability to breathe was compromised by the toxins

and smoke, but some had stayed and so they threw grapples to those folks before they did anything else, not getting close enough to foul their own air envelope. This all took several hours. Shaundar caught a quick look at their enemies as they were hauled onto Queenie's deck, before they were shuffled off onto the husk of the boarded ship to become prisoners of war. Kobolds were little reptilian creatures that cringed whenever an orc spoke to them. Goblins were not much bigger. They were orange or green in colour and had large eyes and squashed faces. Orcs were green, orange, gray or black-skinned, and they were taller and broader than most elves, between six and seven feet tall and built very solidly. They had hair that was almost like fur in odd places and they walked slightly hunched over, like a monkey. Shaundar realized where the epithet "pig-face" had come from, though it wasn't what he had expected. The description had made him believe that they actually had porcine, boar-like faces. They didn't, but the enormous tusks jutting from their mouths where their bottom canine teeth should be, combined with their pressed-in snub noses, did suggest a resemblance to porcine creatures when compared to an elven or even a human appearance. Their language was guttural, almost primeval, and it differed from the language of the kobolds, which hissed sibilantly.

First Mate Aelorothi was quite pleased with this turn of events. He seemed to delight in having prisoners to bully. Or perhaps he had a good reason to hate the goblinoids and the orcs. He kicked kobolds and goblins that were slower than he liked and spat in the face of orcs that

looked at him balefully. Some of the crew laughed, equally amused by the degradation of their enemies.

The Captain was not so amused. When he caught the Matey pushing one of the orcs onto the deck of the Scorpion, he grabbed the Matey's hand. "We will treat our prisoners with dignity and respect," he said firmly.

Matey Aelorothe sneered. "They would not treat us with respect were the tables turned, Captain."

Captain Yvoleth was resolute. "That doesn't matter. Whether or not our foes choose to act honourably in war, we will do so. And if you have a problem with that, perhaps you should seek a new commission, *Ari'Ruan*."

The Matey looked at the Captain for a long moment. "I don't have a problem with that, sir," he said at last.

"Good," the Captain nodded. And he watched the transfer of the prisoners for a few minutes before he was willing to leave it alone after that. Shaundar didn't say anything, but privately, he heartily approved. He saw no reason or excuse to treat the prisoners as less than people.

There was some discussion around what to do about the Scorpion's helm, because they couldn't leave access to it or the prisoners might try to man the helm and make a break for it, but to destroy the

helm would destroy any use the ship might have, and if nothing else, the Navy could sell it to the Arcane; the merchant race who originally brought the spelljamming helms to spacefarers. They finally decided to seal the door and conjure explosive runes upon it to keep the prisoners out. They also made sure to take anything that could be used as a weapon, including the belaying pins.

When Shaundar's shift ended and Garan came to relieve him, before he did anything else he went to see Tyelatae.

Yathar was still in the infirmary, shirtless and with a bandage around his midriff, though his face had been cleaned up by this time. He was sitting beside Tyelatae. Her leg was tied up in bandages and it had indeed been amputated.

"I came as soon as my shift ended," he told her.

She looked up at him with the dazed expression of the heavily drugged. "Don' worry about me, Shaundar," she slurred. "I'm tough, I'll be fine."

Yathar smiled encouragingly at him. "Naliatha says that it's easier to make prosthetics if you don't have to build a knee, so she'll be back on two feet in no time, one way or another."

"Well, I am glad to hear that," he swallowed, relieved. "I came to say I'm sorry. I chose to take those ballista bolts instead of the catapult stones, so this is my fault."

“Horseshit,” she swore as she sat up. “This is the orcs’ fault.” This was too much effort and so she collapsed back into her pillow. “They’re gonna tell stories about this day, Shaundar.” She sighed. “I really wan’ a pipe,” she lamented wistfully. “Mine broke, damn it.”

Wordlessly, Shaundar produced his pipe and shared a smoke with the two of them in contemplative silence.

“Have you taken a look at the Scro Commander yet?” Yathar asked.

“No,” Shaundar admitted. “I came right here. I’ll go do that and I’ll be back.” He got up, leaving them his pipe, and headed into the garden on the other side of the hold.

Elven ships kept a garden when they could for many reasons. Not only did it provide them with fresh fruit and vegetables in the course of a voyage, especially when tended by a druid, but they had noticed that the air lasted longer with a fair number of plants to renew it, and it nourished the soul, since most elves seemed to have an innate love of green growing things. Hence, they were designed to be aesthetically pleasing as well as practical. Currently, there was a large planter lying fallow in the centre of the garden, and that was where they had laid out the body of the enemy Captain.

He was larger than even other orcs – at least seven feet tall, maybe seven and a half – and even though he was perhaps even broader

than the common orcs, he seemed less savage, somehow. Maybe it was that he had less of that strange fur-like hair, or maybe it was his smaller tusks, which were encrusted with jewels and, Shaundar noted, looking closely, some kind of rune that had possibly been carved into one of his tusks and then gilded. Or, perhaps it was the way his shoulders were carried. Granted, the scro was lying on his back, but Shaundar didn't think that his shoulders would slope forward. He figured that he would stand fully upright. The scro Captain was wearing black leather armour, studded with the teeth or claws of some animal with which Shaundar was not familiar. The same rune as the one on his tusk was also tooled into two patches on his leather armour at the shoulder-joints. His skin was a very dark gray, but his eyes were closed so Shaundar could not see what colour they were. Around his neck he wore several teeth of various shapes and sizes connected by a leather string which had been threaded through them. Wondering what had killed him Shaundar inspected the body and found a congealing bloody patch between leather plates in the armour.

"Fearsome brute," Lieutenant Sylria remarked casually, studying him from a distance.

"They're pretty big," Shaundar agreed.

"Why do you think they hate us so much?" she wondered rhetorically, touching one of the enormous steel-toed black leather boots that their dead foe still wore.

“My father said it’s because we humiliated them in the last war, and no one can stand being humiliated,” Shaundar offered by way of explanation.

“I suppose I can see that,” she agreed.

It felt indecent, somehow, for the two of them to be poking at the scro’s body as if he were some kind of insect dried and pinned to a display board. Suddenly Shaundar was ashamed. “I’m going back to the infirmary,” Shaundar told her. “I’m going to sit with Tyelatae.”

Sylria winced. “Yes, nasty business, that. I heard about it. Is she going to be okay?”

“She says so.” He laughed out loud in a genuine appreciation of his friend’s resilience. “I imagine it will take more than a lost leg to keep Tyelatae down!”

Sylria smiled. “Well, I’m glad to hear that! Just don’t forget to get some reverie in at some point. And thanks for flying us out of that, Mr. Sunfall.”

He smiled just a little. “My honour and pleasure, *etriel*.”

They towed the captured Scorpion to Dragon Rock, a free port in Selune’s Tears that happened to have an outpost of the Navy on it. Since

it was possible that their prisoners would be ransomed back to the orcs, they did not want to reveal any of their secret bases, and yet the prisoners had to be taken somewhere secure. This was the best idea they could come up with. But it was halfway across the sphere from their current position.

So in the meantime, first priority became repair of the *lolaa* so that someone could warn the Crown of Corellon station they had left from, with the hopes that other messengers would be sent out from there. With a little creativity, a *fabricate* spell and a *mend* spell or two, they managed to get the repairs done by the evening, and Garan set out right away. After that, Shaundar and Sylria each ran a twelve hour shift in the helm while they made their way across the sphere. They were eight days to Toril. Garan didn't catch up with them until they had reached Selune's Tears, and by that point, Sylria and Shaundar were thoroughly weary.

It turned out to be Sylria's shift when they arrived in Selune's Tears, so she was the one who had to navigate the tricky asteroid field, and then to pull the captured Scorpion safely into dock, which was accomplished with the aid of the dock pilots in the little six-ton Mosquito ships that were most commonly used as tugboats. Upon their arrival at Dragon Rock, Shaundar was delighted to see the *Aerdrie's Pride* in orbit, and the *Wings of Glory* was there as well. Shaundar couldn't help but feel like he was seeing an old friend again, and he unselfconsciously blew a kiss in the *Aerdrie's* direction. Unlike the Armadas, Queenie was small

enough to dock properly in the well-constructed space docking facilities, so they would not have to wait for the flitter to unload them.

As the Captain and the Quartermaster dealt with docking fees, Shaundar saw that Lord Sunfall was waiting for them at the dock. Shaundar noticed his father's new rank insignia, which was a mithril star bracketed by four crescents, two on either side. As the Rear Admiral, there had been two less.

Shaundar saluted his father, as did Yathar. He returned it, looking awkward for a moment. His arms moved upwards and fell back to his sides. "I'm very glad to see that you lads are all right," he told them frankly.

"Me too, sir," Yathar agreed adamantly. "You can thank your son for that, sir."

Shaundar flushed a little.

Lord Sunfall scrutinized his son with that intense amber gaze. "Is that so?" he inquired in a speculative tone.

"I don't know, sir," Shaundar confessed. "I was at the helm, but I would credit more to the Captain's tactics and the gunner's skills. And the Marines finished the job," he added with a nod to Yathar.

Yathar snorted in what might have been disgust or amusement. "If we weren't in the right position, the best gunnery in the world could

not have saved us. Isn't that so, sir?" He looked to the Vice Admiral for confirmation.

A corner of Lord Sunfall's mouth twitched in the direction of a grin, but was reigned in sufficiently to limit it to a wry smile. However his eyes, filled with delight and amusement, betrayed him. "Such has been my experience," he observed with a hint of genuine pride. Shaundar beamed. Yathar gave him a look as if to say, *You see?*

A contingent of elves in the silver and green uniforms of the Military Police, along with Captain Madrimlian and a pair of elves in the silver and black of Intelligence marched briskly to meet them. Shaundar sketched a fairly casual salute, which he mitigated with a friendly smile. Madrimlian smiled back and murmured a hello in a similarly informal way. "Shaundar," he acknowledged him, "we're here to collect the prisoners for questioning. Where's Captain Yvoleth?"

Shaundar was pretty sure that the "questioning" was likely to be pretty rigorous, but he knew it would be the same for elven prisoners in scro hands. He indicated in the Dockmaster's direction, but the Captain was already on his way back over.

"Ah, Madrimlian," Yvoleth acknowledged him, making a perfunctory bow to accompany his friendly grin. "Good, I was hoping you had received our message."

Madrimlian’s answering smile was considerably more open than his usual. “Captain,” he returned, and he clasped his shoulder. “It’s good to see you.”

Yvoleth placed his hand on Madrimlian’s shoulder as well. “It’s good to see you too. Are you going to have time to catch up a little before you have to take these swine off my hands?”

Captain Madrimlian hesitated, but Vice Admiral Sunfall interjected, “You deserve to have some fun, my friend. Go ahead.”

Madrimlian pursed his lips. “I really shouldn’t,” he opined. “We need whatever information these prisoners may have as quickly as we can get it.”

Lord Sunfall chuckled. “You see these other elves in the black and silver, Madrimlian? They work for us too. Let them get started and spend an evening touching base with your old friend. That’s an order,” he added as Madrimlian opened his mouth again.

He snapped it shut. “*Av, quessir,*” he responded with a nod, but then he smiled and relaxed. “I would enjoy that,” he admitted.

Captain Yvoleth slung an arm around his shoulders. “Good!” he added as if all was now settled. “Shaundar, Yathar, you have liberty for the evening. Is the Golden Bough still there?” he asked Madrimlian hopefully.

“I believe so,” the Captain confirmed, sharing a secret smile with the other elf that cloaked some sort of private joke, the details of which Shaundar did not presume to speculate about. They headed off into the dockyards together.

Yathar, who had just marched the surly prisoners from the captured Scorpion’s deck into the waiting irons of the MPs and Intelligence, returned to where they were all standing, but he was gazing into the far end of the dockyards. “Hey,” he nudged his friend, “look who’s here.”

Shaundar turned to find out. “Oh yes,” Lord Sunfall smirked, “we thought it might be a bit of a nice surprise.”

Standing next to, and utterly ignoring, a giant orange and white hamster that was mostly shrugging off the attempts of the gnomes surrounding it to lasso it into submission, was Narissa. Her hand was shielding her eyes and she was peering toward the *Queen’s Dirk* intently.

Shaundar forgot all about chain of command and being dismissed. Before he knew it, his feet were moving and he was headed in her direction. When he moved, Narissa seemed to notice him because she waved and rushed forward to meet him. When she collided with him, he picked her up and swung her around with naked joy.

“Daddy said you were coming here and so I had to meet you,” she explained with radiant eyes. “I was on Evermeet.”

He had no words for how happy he was to see her, so he kissed her instead. He drank in her simple presence with his eyes. The henna tattoos had faded by now, but she still wore the sparkling jewel at her forehead. She had dressed practically in a light tunic and trousers of soft greens and blues, which accented those amazing oceanic eyes.

Yathar and Lord Sunfall were not far behind him. “Narissa!” Yathar greeted her cheerfully, giving her a friendly hug.

“Wait up, gods damn your eyes!” a chillingly cute voice cursed from behind them. They turned to see Tyelatae limping along on crutches, Garan trailing closely.

Lord Sunfall turned and raised an eyebrow at Tyelatae. Only the slightest twinge of a frown touched his eyes when he saw her amputated leg. “My dear,” he said, “I was unaware that *etriela* knew how to swear like that.”

Tyelatae had the decency to blush. “Sorry, sir,” she apologized in a rare display of meekness. “But it is good to see you, sir!”

He smiled faintly. “It’s good to see you as well, Midshipman,” he replied.

“Narissa,” Yathar began, “I’d like you to meet Tyelatae Dahast. Tyelatae, this is Narissa.”

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “the girl that Shaundar is so moon-eyed over. Definitely a pleasure! I would bow, but . . .” she indicated her crutches.

Narissa tried not to let how disturbed she was by the sight of Tyelatae’s missing leg show, but she was not entirely successful. Her eyes widened. “I’m pleased to meet you too,” she said, and after a moment’s hesitation, she did bow. Tyelatae’s lips drew themselves into a thin line.

Realizing her error, Narissa said, “I’m sorry, I had not yet heard about your battle wounds, Midshipman. And I have heard a great deal about you from Shaundar and Yathar in letters, so in a way I feel I already know you. Forgive my surprise.”

Tyelatae’s mouth softened and she seemed mollified. “Fair enough, *etriel*.”

“Sir,” Garan said to Shaundar’s father, “I understand that our Captain has gone to the Golden Bough for some drinks. Will you be joining us there?” Upon meeting Lord Sunfall’s steady amber gaze, Garan actually reddened and added, “I assumed you would be, since Shaundar would be with us.”

Shaundar had, of course, not made any such plans, but he recognized this for what it was; a way to circumvent the chain of command and social convention and invite their old skipper for a drink

with them, even though he was a Vice Admiral and they were only Lieutenants and Midshipmen.

Perhaps Lord Sunfall saw through their ruse, but if so, he gave no sign. “Will he?” he inquired mildly with a faint smile. “Well, I suppose I will be then.”

Lieutenant Sylria meandered over to where they were all gathered with a curious expression on her face. Garan smiled and put an arm around her. Shaundar wasn’t sure when they had become an item. He must have missed that memo. “Sylria, have you met Shaundar’s dad, Vice Admiral Sunfall?” Garan asked.

Her eyes widened a little. “I have not!” she exclaimed. “Well met, *quessir*.” She saluted sharply.

Lord Sunfall nodded in what for him was a reasonably friendly and informal gesture. “My pleasure, *etriel*,” he replied with a bow as opposed to a salute.

“Oh, I’m not an *etriel*, sir,” Sylria denied hastily. “I’m just a common elf. A Lieutenant.”

Shaundar piped up to save Sylria from further awkwardness. “She’s the Chief Navigator and Second Jammer on our ship, Dad,” he explained.

“Ah,” he said simply. “Well, I was just going to join the lads here for dinner, but I understand they are going with you to the Golden Bough? So I suppose I will be coming along.”

Sylria tried not to look surprised. “It would be an honour, sir.”

The Golden Bough, a pub that catered to elven nobility and officers, offered an excellent variety of elven dishes, including *quinpah*, a flaky honey glazed dessert pastry that was one of a very limited number of creations that Shaundar’s mother baked regularly. He and Yathar unselfconsciously ordered a huge plate and proceeded to devour them systematically, to the wide-eyed amazement of their dinner companions. There was no shortage of money to spend on wine; the *Queen’s Dirk’s* officers cheered loudly as the Captain announced that the Scorpion had been ruled a lawfully-taken prize and divvied up the considerable shares due them. Shaundar had never been in possession of so much money, and he was pretty sure that most of the crew had not either.

Narissa sat quietly at Shaundar’s side, holding his hand through most of the meal. He had no desire to release his grip, either. He ate one-handed without explanation or comment. Custom gave the right, and duty, of leading the conversation to the Vice Admiral, so most of the talk through dinner was about the battle and the goings-on of Realmospace. Lord Sunfall was the only one at the table without a dinner partner.

After about half an hour, Captains Yvoeth and Madrimlian made their way over to the table. The elven Navy members stood respectfully, save Lord Sunfall of course. “As you were, *Tel’Quessir*,” their skipper grinned. “We just thought we’d chat with our old shipmate, here.”

“Would you like us to leave, sir?” Shaundar asked.

“Oh no,” the Captain declined. “That’s not necessary. Totally informal situation.” He plunked himself in an empty chair. Captain Madrimlian pushed a chair over from the next table and without turning it, draped his legs over it and leaned over the back on folded arms.

Lord Sunfall smiled and waved his hand to call for two more wine glasses.

“So Battlepoet,” Uncle Madrimlian began, turning to Yathar, “have you written something to tell the tale of your victory yet?”

Yathar grinned broadly. “I have, actually, sir,” he announced proudly.

“I should very much like to hear it,” Lord Sunfall encouraged. Yathar nodded, “*Av, quessir*,” and he promptly drained his glass of wine, kissed Tyelatae and took himself over to where the pub minstrels were quietly playing dinner music. He spoke to the lute player, who nodded and handed over his instrument. As he sat down and tuned the strings, one of the other musicians called for attention. “Pipe down, lads and lasses!” she urged. “We have a Battlepoet going to play for us, here.”

“Put me on the spot, why don’t you?” Yathar jested loudly; but Shaundar knew that the attention did not disturb him in the least and he smirked a little at Yathar’s hamming. “*Tel’Quessir!*” he began, “if I might have the honour of playing for you, I wrote this to commemorate the achievements of our Captain and ship. If you will indulge me . . .” As the room fell silent, he plucked out a simple lead-in on his lute and sang:

*As we were sailing along the star sea,
We hadn’t been gone months, not two nor three,
When we saw ten sail, ten sail of orc
All men-o-war, full as big as we.*

*“Haul down your colours, you elvish dogs!
“Haul down your colours; do not refuse!
“Haul down your colours, you elvish dogs
“Or your precious lives you will lose!”*

*Our Captain being a valiant elf,
And a well-bespoken an elf was he;
“Let it never be said that we died like dogs!
“For we shall fight most valiantly!*

*“Go up aloft, ye cabin boys
“And mount the mainmast a topsail high
“For to spread the word to King Zaor’s fleet
“That we’ll run the risk, or else we’ll die!”*

*Now the fight began about six in the morn,
And onto the orbit of the sun,*

*But at the rise of the next dawn,
Where we saw ten ships, we couldn't see but one!*

*For three we sank, and three we burned,
And three we caused to run away,
And one we towed to Dragon Harbour,
For to let them know we'd won the day.*

*If anyone then should enquire
As to our gallant Captain's name,
Well, Captain Yvoeth was our commander,
And the Queen's Dirk was our ship by name!*

The gathering cheered loudly, and all applauded the Captain, who looked a little overwhelmed by the attention. "Stand you to a drink, sir?" Yathar offered with a smile.

"I can afford my own drinks, Midshipman," he nodded in return, "but I'll drink with you. Barkeep! *Elvarquesst* for my whole crew!"

This announcement was greeted with great enthusiasm, and three precious bottles of the magical iridescent ruby-shaded gold-flecked liquor were brought out for the crew to share. Candles were brought for each decanter, so that multi-faceted crystalline bottle could absorb their light. After they had begun to actually glow, the keepers of the decanters – the Captains and Lord Sunfall – chanted "*Daoine!*" in unison, and the constellation known as the Sword and Dagger appeared in miniature in

each of the crystal bottles; which, for the elves, signified the return of the sun after the depths of winter had passed. As one, the elves who hailed from the Realms chanted a song of farewell to winter, and a welcoming song to the coming spring. The glowing lights vanished as the chant concluded.

Each drop was carefully rationed into smaller glasses and doled out with infinite care to the members of the crew and the Admirals. Narissa was included in the ritual as well, which delighted her.

The elves then took their goblets in hand and began to swirl them around in a ritualistic manner that revealed the best sparkling lights and colour of the elven spirits. Those of their crew who were not Realms-born elves were gently guided through this ritual by those who were. Then each of the elves offered their goblet to another elf, who drank the *Elvarquesst* slowly and with the same sort of reverence with which Shaundar kissed his beloved's hands.

Narissa and Shaundar turned to face each other and offered forth their goblets. In unison they spoke the ritual words: "Well met, fellow traveller; and I give you the blessings of the winter's cold, and the first taste of the sun's return." Out of the corner of his eye, Shaundar could see Yathar and Tyelatae, and Sylria and Garan, performing the same ritual. He noticed the sparkle in Tyelatae's eyes and wondered if his blood brother had noticed too.

Narissa nudged Shaundar in the ribs and gestured towards the door. “My father is here,” she announced. Shaundar’s good mood fled as ice flooded his veins.

Admiral Alastrarra stood for a moment in the doorway of the pub, silhouetted against the torches burning just outside the door as he scanned the bar for them. He made his way over to where the two of them were and Shaundar stood up and bowed. To his surprise, the Admiral returned it. “Congratulations on your victory, lad,” he said simply.

“Thank you, sir,” Shaundar replied guardedly.

Lord Alastrarra sighed. “I would be honoured for you to court my daughter,” he relented with a half smile. “However –” he extended his finger to admonish Shaundar and Narissa both – “I expect this to be a proper courtship, worthy of the dignity of the *Ar’Tel’Quessir*, and I will not honour this union until you both have achieved the age of majority.”

Narissa radiated a joyous, sunny smile. Shaundar beamed too, delighted and relieved. “I would do no less, sir,” he assured the elf lord. “I’m not worthy, but since I have won her heart, I will give her the very best that I have to give.”

Now Lord Alastrarra’s smile was more genuine. “Then I approve, Shaundar Sunfall.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” Narissa whispered, and she hugged her father tightly.

Lord Sunfall cleared his throat. “Join us for a drink, Lord Alastrarra?” he inquired.

Sylria looked like she was trying to melt into the table and Tyelatae rolled her eyes. Shaundar was in agreement. This was likely to be as much fun as listening to dwarven poetry. “Would anyone mind if we got some air, *quessira*?” he asked the Admirals and Captains.

Tyelatae began to stagger to her feet on her crutches. “Sounds like a great idea!” she chimed in immediately.

Sylria was also getting to her feet. “With your permission, honourable *quessira*,” she concurred quietly.

Uncle Madrimlian seemed faintly amused. “I imagine that listening to your commanding officers drone on all night is rather dull,” he agreed.

Lord Alastrarra glanced around at all of them with a long look at Shaundar and Narissa, perhaps to confirm that they were all leaving together and his daughter would not be left alone with Shaundar. “No, that’s fine. Have a good time. Go back to the *Queen’s Dirk* for the evening if you don’t come back here. Lieutenant Oakheart, you are in charge.”

“*Av, quessir,*” he affirmed dutifully.

“Don’t stay out too late,” Captain Yvoleth advised. “We’re going to ship out tomorrow evening at the end of the second dog watch, so you’ll need some rest.” His eyes twinkled. Shaundar didn’t believe he expected his young officers to take his advice.

They all crowded out the door, allowing Tyelatae to take the lead so there would be no repeat of the docking incident. She led them back towards the docks. Dragon Rock was big enough to have just a little hint of weather and there was a mist swirling gently around their feet as they walked.

“Way to go Shaundar!” she laughed. “I think I was getting ready to gnaw off my own leg to escape.” She grinned widely, knowing how ridiculous that sounded.

Yathar rose to the challenge. “Looks like you already managed it, huh?” he jested. She laughed out loud.

“Daddy’s not that bad,” Narissa said defensively.

Shaundar and Yathar just looked at her.

“You never mentioned that your father was an Admiral,” Sylria pointed out to Shaundar.

Garan raised an amused eyebrow. “The name didn’t give you a clue?” he smirked.

Sylria flushed a little. “I suppose I assumed you were related, but . . .”

Shaundar rescued her. “I don’t advertise it where I don’t have to. It’s never helpful. Either people expect more out of me than they would anyone else, or they enjoy rubbing my nose in the dirt to stick it to my dad or the Mithril in general. All of the Fleet’s senior officers know me, though.”

“They know me too,” Yathar pointed out.

“You don’t get the same kind of double standard,” Narissa pointed out.

“That’s mostly because I left my family,” Yathar said blithely. “Can’t compare me to my father if I don’t publically admit the relationship, can you? I swear Shaundar, if it wouldn’t hurt their feelings so much, denouncing your family ties would be very liberating for you.”

“What family were you from?” inquired Sylria. Yathar and Shaundar grinned. Shaundar liked the way she’d asked that. It meant that she respected his decision to leave it.

“Durothil,” Yathar replied.

Sylria shook her head in disbelief. “Somehow, I have ended up surrounded by the young scions of Evermeet. What’s King Zaor going to do if you all get killed, incidentally?”

Tyelatae snorted. “Noble, maybe. Not royal, hon. It won’t make a lick of difference.” Now that they were in the docking district, she was scanning the buildings intently. A small herd of miniature brontosaurus – dracons – passed them by, chattering away in their native sibilant gibberish. A buxom little gnomish whore in a bustier that displayed her wares nicely blew a hopeful kiss in their direction, but Shaundar was accustomed to such things and he just calmly took Narissa’s hand, clearly giving the message that he was not interested. She pouted.

“What are we looking for, Tye?” Garan wanted to know.

She smirked. “A place with local colour,” she told him. She indicated with the crutch in the hand on the side with a whole leg. “That might work.”

The bar she was pointing to was the loudest place in the area. Some bard inside was belting out an extremely bawdy song in the Common tongue. His voice was rough but by the drunken roars of laughter, nobody seemed to care. An illithid was chatting casually with a roguish looking human man in high boots and a twisted dark moustache who was picking his nails with a sharp dagger. A kender, relatively tall at three full feet, was running a shell game, and he was actually charismatic enough that people were playing despite the fact that he was obviously a

kender; and a hippopotamus-faced giff was wrestling with an apelike hadoze. Everyone was making sure to leave them lots of room.

Narissa cringed a little. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Tyelatae grinned more widely. "We only live once, right?" Without further ado, she approached the door. Shaundar had a sudden premonition of disaster. He immediately followed. He opened his mouth to tell Tyelatae that he agreed with Narissa, but it was too late. Everyone outside the bar turned to look at them and aside from the raunchy bard's questionable ballad, all conversation died.

Tyelatae ignored them and started to push past them into the bar.

The kender looked at them and laughed out loud. "Well, if it isn't the glorious Navy, come to pay us a visit! Welcome, little toy soldiers!"

Uh oh. Trouble already. "Toy soldier" was derogatory slang for an elven Marine. Yathar's eyes narrowed.

"Where are you going?" demanded the giff in the Common tongue.

She scowled. "In there." She indicated with her crutch. "To have a drink."

The moustached man stopped picking his nails. “We don’t want your kind around here,” he snarled.

“Is that so?” Yathar sneered, his pride offended and his hackles up from the “toy soldier” remark. “Well, we’ll let the barkeep tell us that. Now if you don’t mind?” He made a gesture with the palm of his hand that suggested that they should move aside.

“Yathar, let’s just go,” Shaundar muttered, his bad feeling getting worse. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“Well, that’s just too bad,” the man growled, standing up to his full height, “because now you’ve got it, faerie boy.”

Shaundar glanced all around him and realized two things. One is that the crowd who were watching the shell game had dispersed. The other was that the giff and the hadozee had stopped wrestling and were closing in around them. So was the purple squid-faced illithid. This was not good. He subtly moved Narissa behind him.

Sylria seemed to recognize where this was going as well. She cleared her throat. “We just want a drink, lads,” she said in a very reasonable tone. “Surely you can’t take exception to that! Come on in with us and I’ll buy you all a round.”

The moustached man seemed to consider it for a moment, but then an evil grin spread across his face like a plague. “I’ll tell you what,” he proposed with a leer as he leaned closer, the odour of old rum, sweat

and halitosis washing off of him in a wave of stench, “you can pay me for my generosity with some elven tail, and then you can stay as long as you want.”

Sylria’s eyes flashed fire. “Go to the Abyss,” she answered directly.

His lips curled into a snarl. “Too good for me, are you? Well, let’s just find out.” He grabbed at her breast. She promptly kicked him firmly between the legs.

For a moment Shaundar thought that was going to be the end of it as he fell back and groaned. But then with a roar of “You’ll pay for that, bitch!” he reached for his cutlass.

Yathar exploded into action. In seconds he had his long sword in hand and was parrying the drawn cutlass with a clash of steel. Then the others leaped upon them. Before Shaundar knew it the hadozee had grabbed him and he was flying through the air. He collided with a barrel of olive oil, which exploded, and then the wall of the building next door and something just below his shoulder cracked as pain exploded through him. His vision went completely white for just a split second. When it cleared, Yathar and the moustached man were locked in a vicious duel, the hadozee was holding its eyes and shrieking as Sylria lowered her still-glowing hands, and Tyelatae was beating the giff furiously with her crutch while he systematically strangled Garan with his enormous gray hands as he flailed his feet a full foot off the ground. Narissa was moving her

hands in the beginnings of an incantation, but the kender saw this and kicked her sharply in the shins, diffusing her spell in harmless sparkles.

“Get ‘em, honey,” the gnomish whore urged him, whom he’d happened to land right next to.

He stood up, dripping with the oil, and focusing through the pain began his own chant and gesture. That’s when Yathar screamed and his hands flew to the sides of his head. His knees buckled. The moustached man, unsurprised, cackled and raised his cutlass for the killing blow at Yathar’s helpless throat.

Shaundar yelled and green bolts of energy flew from his fingers. Two struck the man directly in the chest and two struck the illithid. They did their job; the man staggered and the illithid reeled. Yathar stopped screaming and fell to his knees. The hadozee staggered around, still blind, and tripped over him. He made a frustrated hooting noise and kicked hard, but he missed Yathar completely.

Tyelatae, seeing that her beating was entirely ineffective, took a page from Sylria’s book and wound up that crutch as far back as it would go, then drove it directly into the giff’s groin. His eyes crossed and he dropped Garan like a sack of potatoes. “Take that,” Tyelatae said smugly.

The kender tried to grab Narissa’s hands, but she incanted a single arcane word that Shaundar recognized, and then she blurred into a streak of colour and appeared behind him. He whirled around with a

little dagger raised, but he was not fast enough. Sylria saw this and threw out her hand in the same gesture Shaundar had made. Five green bolts careened out of her spread fingers. One hit the kender, two hit the giff, one hit the man and the last struck the illithid. The kender yelped and the other two grunted. "They're all mages, sir!" the giff announced to the man with the moustache, who was beginning to recover from Shaundar's spell.

But Yathar was on his feet now. He curled his empty hand around a forming mote of light, which he threw into the man's face, blinding him. His sword then clashed with the man's cutlass, hooked underneath it and started twisting it at an awkward angle, trying to force him to drop it.

Now the illithid turned its mind powers on Sylria, who also screamed and clutched at her head. But Garan appeared to be recovering. He choked out something and extended two fingers, blasting forth a bolt of fire. It hit the illithid right in its cephalopodous face and now it was the one shrieking in some burbling, liquid inhuman scream.

Seeing how things were going, the giff struggled to draw the large pistol at his hip. Shaundar quickly extended his still oily hand and murmured the appropriate chant. The olive oil flew from his fingertips and hit the giff's hand, where it expanded and covered him with a similar slippery and greasy substance. The giff dropped the pistol before he could fire it and promptly slipped and fell on his rump.

“That’s enough!” yelled Narissa. She thrust forth her hand in the direction of the docks, in which she clutched a glass rod and some fur. Shaundar put his fingers in his ears. His hair stood on end.

A crack of thunder boomed through the area and for a moment, it was broad daylight even without sight of the sun, as a bolt of lightning jolted from the glass rod, blowing up six crates and scorching the wall next to where Narissa was standing. The message was clear. She could blow them all into the Void if she wanted to.

Everyone froze in place. The eyes of their foes were wide.

“Get out of here,” Narissa snarled furiously at them. Shaundar had never seen her so angry and wasn’t sure if he wanted to kiss her or run for his life.

“I suggest retreat, sir,” the giff advised prudently. Limping, slipping in the grease and staggering blindly, the rogues fled down the docks as quickly as they could.

Panting, the young friends all looked around at each other. Then the little gnome trollop asked, “Are you kids all right?”

Sylria bent to Garan’s side and ended up sliding in the grease to sit down rather more firmly than she had intended. “I’m fine,” he rasped, rubbing at his throat.

“How ‘bout you, honey?” the gnome asked Shaundar. “I heard something that didn’t sound good.”

“I think I broke a rib,” he admitted. It was hard to breathe; every inhalation brought intensely sharp pain. Within seconds Narissa was at his side with eyes full of deep concern.

“Fuckers,” Tyelatae swore. “All I wanted was a gods-be-damned drink.” She delicately picked her way around the oil. Garan had to crawl out of the greased area before he managed to get to his feet. Purple bruises were already spreading across his throat and lower jaw.

“Well,” the little lady-of-the-evening explained, “you picked the wrong people to annoy. That was Captain Lars the Dark. He’s a smuggler, and the Elven Navy just confiscated his entire cargo today.”

Garan uttered a curse in Elvish in a still-roughened voice. “Talk about bad luck!”

“Why don’t you all come inside and get cleaned up a bit?” she invited, taking Shaundar’s arm in a more motherly than lascivious kind of way. “We don’t just sell a good time. We have hot baths and perfectly innocent massages too. And I’ll have a look at your wounds.” She smiled faintly through her red rouged lips. “I’m a priestess of Sune.”

Ah yes, that made sense. Sune was the local goddess of love and lust. Prostitution was a perfectly reasonable profession for her to be in.

Narissa smiled at her warmly. “Thank you very much. I would be happy to pay you to bathe them and tend their wounds. I’m Narissa.”

“I’m Molly,” the Sune priestess introduced herself.

They entered the brothel temple, which Shaundar now noticed was marked with Lady Firehair’s symbol on the door. The scent of heady, perfumed incense permeated the building. Soft music played somewhere and everything was draped with silks and illuminated with a surplus of candlelight. A voluptuous human woman with dark, curly hair, dressed only in a red negligee asked Molly, “Is everything all right?”

“These young elves got into a bit of a scrape with Lars the Dark and his cronies,” she explained. “They’ll need baths and some healing. This is Sally.”

Sally came over to them and put her hand on the side of Garan’s face with a stern expression. He winced. She nodded. “I’ll get some witch hazel,” she offered, and disappeared into a back room.

“Come on,” she smiled, “I’ll run you some baths.” And she led them into another room, where several large tubs were waiting. Shaundar stood to the side where the oil was not likely to drip on their nice silks and concentrated on continuing to breathe.

“Nice going with the *grease* spell,” Yathar complemented Shaundar wearily.

“You know, I don’t even know why I prepared that one,” Shaundar confessed. “It’s fortunate I hit that barrel. I don’t think I even have any butter or anything.”

“I’m sure you do,” Sylria disagreed. “You’re not usually unprepared.”

“Maybe buried in the bottom of my belt pouch,” he admitted.

“The lightning bolt is what turned the tide,” Tyelatae reminded them. “Nice going, Narissa.”

“Yeah, good job, love,” Shaundar agreed, and Yathar and Garan nodded while Sylria smiled encouragingly.

Narissa was now shaking and pale as she put away the fur and rod. “I don’t know; I was just angry.”

Sally came into the room with some tincture that had floating green bits in it. “Here, hold still,” she told Garan and wiped it on his bruises. Then she made a noise of disapproval. “That’s swelling badly,” she muttered. “How’s your breathing?”

“Rough,” he admitted.

“Right, then. Blueglow moss it is.” She disappeared again.

Molly, in the meantime, was moving between the tubs and chanting prayers to Lady Firehair. Three of them filled with steaming hot water.

“That’s all the prayers to create water I can do today,” she announced, “so you might have to share.”

Tyelatae cast a wicked grin in Yathar’s direction. “Help me undress, sailor?” she teased him. He grinned and started to do so. “May we borrow a chair?” he asked Molly.

“Sure hon, just grab one,” she replied, indicating a couple of very nice high backed wooden chairs on the edges of the bathroom. He brought one of them over to the side of a tub and sat Tyelatae in it to help her with her uniform. She propped herself up on a crutch to remove her trousers, then sat back down again. Shaundar could see that the stump of her leg had been magically healed and there was no visible wound aside from the fact that it was gone.

“Thank you again very much for this,” Sylria said to Molly as she also started to undress.

“My pleasure, honey,” Molly smiled back. “Do you want some scented oils or anything?”

“How about it, Yathar?” jeered Tyelatae. “Do you want to smell like lavender flowers?” He grimaced.

“No thank you,” Sylria said simply.

“Now,” Molly chuffed, “let’s have a look at that rib, spacer. Take off that uniform so that I can see.”

Shaundar removed his uniform without further protest.

She poked his ribs until he winced and then inspected the spot thoroughly. “Yep, broken,” she confirmed. “Hold still.” She intoned a prayer prevailing upon her goddess to ease Shaundar’s pain. The sharp stabbing whenever he inhaled dissipated.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “That’s much better.”

“Don’t thank me, thank the Lady Firehair, honey,” Molly returned. “We don’t charge for healing here but we won’t say no to donations if you feel so inclined.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” assured Tyelatae as she braced herself on the edges of the tub and eased into the water. It was a little clumsy, but effective. “Right now, for a hot bath I’d give you the Crown Jewels of Evermeet.” She sank completely into the water with a *cath shee’s* contented feline smile.

“I don’t need a bath,” Narissa told Shaundar. “I just came from Evermeet. You go ahead. The hotter the water is, the better, I think.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Shaundar smiled gratefully, and he sank into the steaming water with a contented sigh. He luxuriated in the hot bath for a long time, a pleasure that was just not available to sailors in space.

Narissa picked up his clothes with distaste. “These need to be laundered.”

“I can hook you up with our laundry service,” Molly volunteered.

“He’s still going to need something to wear back to the ship,” Narissa pointed out. “Do you want me to go back and get you a clean uniform?”

Shaundar smiled at her with adoration and gratitude. “Would you mind? That would be great.”

“I’ll go with her,” Yathar volunteered, “just in case those guys are lurking around by the ship.”

“I don’t get it,” rasped Garan. “Okay, the Navy confiscated their cargo. They shouldn’t have been shipping contraband anyway. Can’t they see we’re just doing our job?”

“Well,” Molly said, drawing up a chair, “some people wonder who died and made the elves gods. They wonder what gives you the right to tell everyone else what to do. And they resent what they perceive as interference in their personal business.”

“Hey,” Yathar argued, “somebody has to keep order in the spaceways. If not us, then who? The orcs?”

“Yeah, because that would be an improvement,” sneered Tyelatae sarcastically.

She shrugged. “I’m not taking a side here, dear. I’m just telling you how some people feel.”

“That resentment,” Shaundar began, “is that why nobody but us seems to care about an orcish invasion?”

Molly nodded. “You got it honey.”

He nodded thoughtfully. He really didn’t know what to say to that. He imagined that whoever was in charge was likely to be the subject of resentment. The *Tel’Quessir* had been sailing the Void for thousands of years; generations of elves, which would mark the rise and fall of civilizations amongst the shorter-lived races. He supposed he could see why they would find it frustrating. It probably felt to them like the elves were monolithic and arrogant. Maybe they even were.

Sally reappeared. “Ah, there you are!” she exclaimed, seeking Garan out. “Here, eat this.” She handed him a small puff of something blue, glowing and slightly fuzzy.

“Blackjack says to never eat or drink anything that glows,” Yathar cautioned Garan with the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

“It’s okay,” Shaundar chimed in. “Grandmother told me about that stuff. Blueglow moss. It comes from the Cormanthor forest and it has healing properties. Though I do have to wonder where you ladies got it.”

“Our sister Temple in Cormyr harvests it twice a year,” Molly explained. “We don’t have a lot, but it’s good for things like severe bruising.”

“Thank you,” Garan croaked gratefully, and he ate it. Right away the bruising and swelling started to heal. He smiled at Sally. “Thank you again. That’s much better.” His voice sounded healthy.

Yathar sighed. “We’ll be back,” he assured the group, and he and Narissa left for the ship.

“Is there soap?” asked Shaundar; and Molly handed him a greenish-coloured bar that had sand in it and smelled of something astringent; sage, perhaps. He thanked her and scrubbed everything vigorously, hair included. Oil made rainbow shimmers on the water, mingled with the soap bubbles. He resorted to letting Molly pour buckets of the water over his head to clear the oil away until Narissa got back with a clean uniform. Most of the group had been dosed with the oil in some way, save Tyelatae and Narissa, so they also made use of the astringent soap. But eventually, everyone was clean again, if a little soggy.

Shaundar couldn't think of a better use for his prize money than to reward their kindness. He put a small sack of gold into Molly's little hand. She was not expecting the weight and almost dropped it. "Thank you very much," he said to her simply. "You've been very kind."

Molly simpered. "Are you sure you don't want to reconsider my original offer, sailor? I could teach you some things that your lovely girl here would be glad if you knew." She slid a hand over Shaundar's arm and winked at Narissa, who blushed.

He smiled but he shook his head. "No, thank you," he refused gently.

"Well," she smiled tenderly as she removed her hand and patted his arm, "I wish you kids all the best. And you know where I am if you change your mind."

They were silent and contemplative when they headed back to the *Queen's Dirk*.

The following evening they did ship out, but only as far as Evermeet. Shaundar's father, Lord Alastrarra and Narissa accompanied them on their ship. When asked what was going on, Lord Sunfall smiled faintly and answered, "You're being summoned before the King and Queen on the morrow."

“The King and Queen? But what for?” Shaundar demanded, suddenly very nervous.

Yathar laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “There’s only one possible reason, mate – we’re getting medals!”

They spent the evening together catching up at the Sunfall family estate, as Narissa, Garan and Tyelatae stayed with their respective families also, and Sylria, he was not now surprised to learn, stayed with Garan. Shaundar had never been so happy to see his family’s quiet, leafy green home. Now that they finally had the opportunity to speak without the rest of the Mithril present, Shaundar pressed his father for details about the battle with the new Waan fleet, and Lord Sunfall wanted to know every aspect that the boys could remember about the Scorpion fleet. They exchanged what news they had heard from home recently as well. It was fairly late and Selune and Her tears were fully visible when they at last decided on some reverie. Lord Sunfall bid them good night, and Shaundar went to bed, for once entirely happy and comfortable after having spent some time with his father.

The boys thought it would be several hours before they could reverie, if at all, but their bodies were still young enough to enforce their need on their busy minds, and they passed out whispering together in the bachelor’s rooms, almost as if they were small children again.

They were awakened in the morning by the smell of Lianna making dawnfry, which mostly consisted of fresh fruit. Shaundar and

Yathar devoured it. Fresh fruit was not something they'd had more than a taste of in the past several months.

“Hope you lads are ready for court!” Lianna teased them gently. They carefully put together their dress uniforms and washed thoroughly. Tidied and neat, they took a coach to Moonstone Palace in Leuthilspar.

According to Shaundar's father, the palace rivalled the splendour of lost Myth Drannor. The palace grounds alone were a marvel of engineering, with small parks and groves, lakes, hedge mazes, gardens, and statues of ancient heroes and deities. The palace itself was a soaring multi-level structure of towers, buttresses, keeps, cupolas, landing platforms, and domes, surrounding the large central dome that was the heart of the palace. The entire structure was crafted of alabaster, moonstone, marble, silver and gold.

They were joined at the grounds just in front of the palace by the entirety of their crew. Tyelatae bumped along on her crutches, accompanied by a small gold elven man whom Shaundar assumed to be her father. She waved merrily when she saw them and came over to where they were standing. They were met there by Admiral Lord Alastrarra and Narissa, to whom Shaundar bowed respectfully, though his eyes were only for Narissa and full of more than he could say; the lovely and intractable Admiral of the Evermeet Fleet, Sarin Ghar; and a small elven woman in a Navy officer's uniform whom Shaundar did not know. She had thick gray curls, cut in a short pageboy style, and steel gray eyes to match, that carried the weight of centuries, touched by faint worry

lines. She was at least a full foot shorter than Shaundar. But then he noticed the crescents at her collar; five of them on each side, all mithril, surrounding a mithril star.

“Dad,” he said quietly, “is that who I think it is?”

He smiled. “Yes, son, I believe it is.”

Yathar openly gaped. “But she never leaves Lionheart!” he exclaimed.

The steel-haired elf looked up when Yathar spoke, and came over to where they were standing. Shaundar and Yathar both stood crisply at attention and saluted sharply – as did Vice Admiral Sunfall. Tyelatae did her best, propping herself up on a crutch.

“I do,” she informed Yathar in a voice that was every bit as confident and steely as those eyes, “but rarely. We cannot spare you, Midshipman, for the trip to Lionheart currently, and Lionheart cannot come to you; so I did.” Her eyes sparkled.

“Then Lionheart has indeed come, *etriel*,” Yathar disagreed with a delighted smile.

“*Etriel*,” Lord Sunfall began, “may I be permitted to introduce my son, *Sy’Ruan* Shaundar Sunfall, and his blood brother, *Sy’Ruan* Yathar. Boys, this is, as you have guessed, Grand Admiral Lylanna Nuliaque.”

“I am pleased to meet you, *quessira*,” she said quite formally.

“It’s truly an honour to meet you, *etriel*,” Shaundar replied and Yathar murmured something in agreement. He was nothing short of awestruck. The “Mistress of Forgotten Hope” was a legend among the elves of the Imperial Navy. She was the chosen successor of the previous Grand Admiral Yelzul, who had appointed her less than a century ago, and according to rumour, she was exceptionally young to have accomplished this, as she had achieved her Fleet Admiral’s commission in a distant sphere within a mere four decades.

Captain Yvoleth made his way over to where they were standing and saluted. “Grand Admiral,” he smiled, “you honour us with your presence.”

She returned the salute. “It is I who am honoured, Captain,” she replied gracefully.

The doors to the central dome of the palace opened and two guards in elven plate armour appeared. “Are you ready?” one of them asked the Captain.

“*Queen’s Dirk!*” he called out, “marching formation! Line up in order of precedence!” Garan and Sylria joined them as they filed in as commanded along with the rest of the crew, though they did not often practice marching formation, being a Navy ship and not a ground-based

military force. Lord Dahast squeezed his daughter's shoulder and Narissa kissed Shaundar quickly on the mouth. "See you inside," she promised.

The Grand Admiral, Lord Alastrarra and Shaundar's father lined up in front of them. Trumpets sounded from within the building as the troops began to march solemnly inside.

They were being trumpeted into an enormous vaulted throne room, past assembled dignitaries, with two delicate crystalline thrones at its end that were occupied by two moon elves whose images Shaundar knew very well. These were King Zaor and Queen Amlaruil Moonflower, sovereign rulers of elvenkind in RealmSpace. The Queen's hair flowed around her beneath her silver circlet, an unusual red-gold colour that suggested distant gold elven ancestry. She smiled warmly at them.

The party of Admirals and the Captain who marched ahead of the other ship's officers stopped about halfway up the promenade and bowed. Shaundar immediately followed suit. Even Tyelatae made an effort to duck politely. As they continued to approach the thrones, the King and Queen stood up to greet them.

The Mithril stepped forward and bowed again, and the King took the Grand Admiral's hands while the Queen took Lord Alastrarra's. "We are pleased to see you again, Grand Admiral," His Majesty declared. He had the blue-black hair, intense blue eyes and pale blue-tinged complexion of most silver elves; only with him they seemed even more

striking, somehow. Perhaps it was the intensity of the fierce personality that blazed from behind those eyes.

“I am pleased to see you as well, Majesty,” the Grand Admiral smiled in return. “We are honoured to continue to serve the *Tel’Quessir* of Realmspace.”

King Zaor then saw Shaundar’s father and his eyes warmed in recognition. “It’s good to see you Ruavel,” the King greeted him with familiarity and friendship.

“Majesty,” said Lord Sunfall respectfully, but his eyes gleamed with warmth as well. They clasped each other’s hands. Shaundar recalled that they had served together in Myth Drannor. In the meantime, Captain Yvoeth filed the crew into a line and faced them towards the audience, so if there was any further exchange between his father and the King, Shaundar missed it.

When they were all in place, the trumpets sounded again.

Their Majesties and the Admirals came around to stand in front of the assembled crew. “Herald, if you please,” commanded the Queen in a soft voice, and one of the trumpeters cleared his throat and unrolled a scroll, from which he began to read:

“It is rare that the deeds of a crew of a starship reach Our ears. Yet We would acknowledge all worthy deeds of the *Tel’Quessir* of Realmspace. Thus it is that We have heard bards tell of the legendary

heroism of the crew of the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*, who fought bravely against the foes of the People, though vastly outnumbered and alone. This conspicuous heroism is worthy of Our respect. And thus We bestow Our personal commendation upon the crew of the *Queen's Dirk*, along with Our gratitude for your brave defence of elven sovereignty. Thus say We, King Zaor and Queen Amlaruil Moonflower, lawful sovereigns of Evermeet."

As he spoke, the King and Queen, with heralds at their sides, began to move along the line, bestowing a scroll and a pin of some kind. It was Queen Amlaruil who found Shaundar, Yathar and Tyelatae, though King Zaor came to Sylria and Garan. Above each of their uniforms' left breast pocket she fastened a tiny silver pin in the shape of a five-pointed flower, which Shaundar guessed to be the Moonflower house emblem, and in their hands she placed a scroll. She bowed to each of them. Stunned, Shaundar bowed awkwardly in return.

Then the Grand Admiral stepped forward. "The Imperial Elven Navy also has tokens to award for this heroic action. We award each member of this crew the *Bow of Shevarash*, for heroic bravery against overwhelming odds. Congratulations to each and every one of you."

Shaundar just about choked. There were three awards for great bravery in the Navy, known in ascending order as the *Bow of Shevarash*, the *Spear of Angharradh* (given for great acts of potential self-sacrifice,) and the *Sword of Corellon* (granted for bravery of truly legendary merit,

more often given to relatives of the recipient than the recipient him or herself).

The two Admirals moved through the crew, handing out the medals in boxes and returning salutes. Shaundar received his from the hands of his smiling father. Venturing a look at it, he saw that it was formed of silver or steel, with the enamelled image of Shevarash's symbol, a teardrop and a broken black arrow, at the end of a black ribbon. Shaundar remembered the legend. Shevarash was a wood elf whose family were slain by drow. Swearing an oath never to smile again until all drow were destroyed, he had descended into the Underdark to eliminate every dark elf he could find. Though he finally met his end at the hands of an overwhelming drow force, his legend had grown sufficiently by that time that he became a deity in His own right.

The Grand Admiral continued, "To all elves wounded in the conflict, we award the *Drop of Corellon's Blood*; that we may acknowledge the shedding of elven blood in our defence. Would the following elves please step forward . . ." and of course, among the names she mentioned were "Sy'Ruan Tyelatae Dahast," and "Sy'Ruan Yathar."

Yathar and Tyelatae came forward and accepted their medals with crisp salutes. They consisted of enamelled red drops at the end of a red ribbon.

Then the Grand Admiral said, “*Sy’Ryan* Yathar, and *Sy’Ruan* Shaundar Sunfall, please step forward.”

Shaundar and Yathar looked at each other with a questioning glance; but finding no answers there they stepped forward and saluted Lylanna Nuliaque.

The elder elf smiled and those lines at the corners of her eyes crinkled. “For cool command under fire, on recommendation of your Captain, you are each being awarded a battlefield commission to the rank of Lieutenant. Congratulations, *Teu’Ruan* Yathar, and *Teu’Ruan* Sunfall.” It was Admiral Lord Alastrarra who stepped forward to present them each with the Lieutenant’s silver double-crescents. As Shaundar saluted him and he fastened the insignia onto Shaundar’s collar, he smiled and gave him a barely-perceptible nod of approval.

As they turned to return to their place in the line, the Grand Admiral commanded, “Stand fast, *Teu’Ruan* Sunfall.”

Surprised, and wondering what was up now, he did so. “*Av, etriel,*” he responded obediently.

She smiled again, just ever so slightly. “Also on your Captain’s recommendation,” she announced, “for superb piloting which your Captain assures me was, and I quote, ‘easily the equal of the greatest aces of the First Unhuman War,’ we award you the *Wings of Aerdrie Faenya*. I understand that you are, in no small part, responsible for this

great victory, Mr. Sunfall. I fear that this may well be only the beginning and that we will need your skills again many times before we see the end of this War.” She presented Shaundar with a medal in the form of a pair of silver wings on the end of a dark blue ribbon spangled with silver stars.

Shaundar could hardly believe it. He took the medal with trembling hands and saluted the Grand Admiral almost automatically.

She returned it. “Congratulations on your spectacular deed and victory, *Queen’s Dirk*. We are in your debt.” And the gathering erupted into tremendous applause. Standing right in front of the assembled nobility and dignitaries, applauding heartily, beamed Lord Dahast and Narissa. And Shaundar could not remember ever seeing his father look so proud.

Chapter Ten

Shaundar and Yathar stood with Sylria on Queenie's Castle Deck, smoking cigars together. They'd stopped smoking pipes because it was just too time consuming to load and light, and a waste of perfectly good tobacco if they were suddenly called into action, which happened more and more frequently. The cigars were cheap and slightly sour – the best they could generally do on their Lieutenant's pay – but Shaundar was becoming almost affectionately attached to them.

Supply lines were becoming more strained, too. Occasionally, the *alu'quesst* ration was being supplemented with the human creation of grog. Shaundar was not fond of it and generally chose not to have his allotted taut when that was what was available. But he didn't complain. Nobody did. That was just what there was.

They were in orbit around the Karpri space station, along with the burnt-out hulks of a Scorpion and an Ogre Mammoth, and a Hammership that was technically a prize but would likely be pressed into Navy service, depriving them of their shares. The prisoners – *survivors*, is more like it, Shaundar thought privately – were few enough to be kept comfortably in the Hammership's hold. They had been exceptionally meek. This was making the Matey jumpy, but Shaundar had no doubt that it was no act.

The Karpri station showed recent signs of battle to go with its ancient scars from when the illithid had destroyed it just after the First Unhuman War. Shaundar felt badly for it. The starfly plants that comprised it seemed deeply saddened. Or maybe he was just being maudlin. He was not sure what had possessed the scro to decide to take it. Surely they must have guessed that there would be a *reason* that the elves had not used it themselves, now that war had returned to Realmspace?

The *Queen's Dirk* had been sent to stop them, and stop them they had, but by the time they had arrived, the enemy had already landed and all hands not actively manning the helm were forced to become a boarding party. Shaundar shook his head to banish yesterday's images of screaming and blood from his mind. Ship battles could be brutal but they were rarely so personal. He wondered how Yathar managed it, being a marine.

Shaundar had killed his first sentient creature face-to-face yesterday. He remembered it clearly; shouting and chaos all around him, the smell of blood, a huge scro roaring, bearing down on him with an axe, close enough that Shaundar could smell his sweat. He had not even thought; he'd extended his hand and incanted the appropriate formula, and five green bolts of death had exploded in the scro's face. He had actually flown backwards into his fellows, his charge completely arrested, and the agony in his eyes was not something Shaundar thought he would ever forget. They were blue, those eyes; blue like his own. Shaundar had seen the body later as they were cleaning up the mess of broken people,

body parts, and blood; blood everywhere, blood on the floor in pools and dripping from the walls, the ceiling, even each other. It was hard to read orcish expressions because the tusks seemed to change the way their jaws moved, but he was reasonably certain that his foe's last expression was one of horror.

They'd been outnumbered when they arrived, Queenie's crew; but the base was not unmanned, contrary to Lionheart Command's beliefs. After Shaundar had blasted the scro who had charged him, the fighting became too close for spells and he had drawn one of his short swords; but that's when reinforcements had arrived. They were elves, but they were entirely transparent. They came out of the walls and the ceiling and the floor, and none of the blood stuck to them. They wore the uniforms of 400 years past and they looked pretty pissed off. They had turned the tide of the battle decisively in elven favour, and it was simply a slaughter after that, with the goblinoids and their commanders running and screaming like terrified children as the ghosts cut them down. But that was why Queenie's crew were still in orbit and not inside the station.

They didn't bother Shaundar the way they seemed to bother everyone else. Their presence did seem to chill the air around them slightly but they had not harmed any of the elves of their crew at all. A woman who resembled his grandmother slightly had smiled kindly at him before vanishing into vapour. He was sad for her, that she was still here when her physical body had obviously been gone for a long time. He wanted to go back over to the space station and speak with the elven spirits there; to ask them why they had chosen to remain, and to urge

them to allow Sehanine to guide them on to Arvador; but the Captain had forbidden it. So instead he stood on Queenie's deck smoking, and thought about them.

There were seven new ghosts among the Karpri crew; at least, if the spirits of the dead stayed drawn here. Seven of their crewmates had been killed. That's why they were loafing about on the deck; they'd just finished the funeral, just "committed their bodies to the Void, their spirits to be guided home to Arvador by Sehanine; where they would hang their swords on the Tree of Swords and Jewels, and rest at last." One of them, a gunner named Laranna, was a good friend of Tyelatae's and Shaundar was not looking forward to the letter he was going to write to her about it. Two were Jasali and Lynes, and they were Marines. Laranna had died from a lucky shot to their fore-mounted ballista as they had made their screaming fast approach to the station, and the Marines had been killed in the initial assault, as they had *fireballed* their way into the barred doors of the station. The orcs had some kind of bombard on a rolling platform, and the stone or shell it had thrown had simply disintegrated the Marines leading the attack. Yathar had been covered in the blood and bits of his companions, only moments behind them, and only because he'd helped fireball the door open. That was the first and last shot the contraption managed to fire off; Yathar's fury had made sure that its crew would never get another chance.

Tarna from the sail crew had been impaled by a goblin with a pike. So had Sylria, but her wound was not a fatal one; just an inconvenient hole in her shoulder which forced her to sling up her arm.

Tishana had been squashed like an overripe pumpkin by an ogre's warhammer. Shaundar had actually witnessed that one, and the thought of it was still making him shudder. The same thing had almost happened to Yathar, but his bladesinger's reflexes had saved his life and ended with the ogre bleeding to death from a thousand cuts. The other two dead were brand new crewmates, elves whose names Shaundar didn't even have time to learn.

He scratched absently at his war injury, an almost embarrassing stab wound in his upper thigh, courtesy of a sly kobold's dagger. One inch lower and he would have bled out from his femoral artery. One inch higher and he would have been gelded. *Magic missiles* from Shaundar's hand had ended the kobold's life too.

Shaundar didn't want to tell Yathar, but he had not slept much last night.

Karpri was a water world. Its beauty was so legendary that artists travelled from every imaginable port of call just to paint it. Shaundar thought privately that from up here, it looked like a giant aquamarine. The polar ice caps and the green of the equatorial region created a banding effect in the jewel, but you could still see the shadows of large astronomical bodies' right through its luminescent translucence. The elven population of Karpri that the base had been created to protect hundreds of years ago were *Alu'Tel'Quessir*, sea elves, making their homes in the pure turquoise waters. Shaundar was touched by its transcendent beauty, made all the more poignant by the horror he had

witnessed yesterday, and he sincerely hoped that the sacrifice was worth it.

“Ship ahoy!” called the lookout suddenly, starting him out of his reflections. “Flitter two points off the starboard bow!”

“Hands to stations!” barked the Matey, who had the deck currently.

“Time to go back to work,” Yathar remarked casually, and the three friends stubbed their cigars out on their boots quickly and headed to their stations. *And that’s why we stopped smoking pipes*, Shaundar mused.

He clambered down to the helm room to stand by with Garan. “What have we got?” he asked his friend in a matter-of-fact way.

“Flitter, it seems,” Garan responded from the helm chair. “Shut up and let me bring ‘er in to dock.”

Shaundar shut his mouth obediently and allowed his friend to concentrate on helming the ship properly, holding Queenie steady so that their visitor could land. A few moments later he felt Queenie shiver as the flitter touched down on their Castle Deck. He heard the distant call of his crewmates as they moored their guest up.

It wasn’t more than a few minutes later that the Captain’s voice came through the speaking-tube. “*Teu’Ruan Sylria!*” he called.

“Av, *quessir!*” she replied calmly, as though she’d been expecting it.

“Plot us a course for Selune on the double.”

“Av, *quessir,*” she returned, and she said to Shaundar, “Come with me and hold the star charts steady? It’s kind of rough to do one-handed.”

“Of course,” he nodded, falling in step. “Garan, did you hear what was going on?”

“Yeah,” he scowled, biting his bottom lip. “Selune has been invaded. We’re the closest warship.”

Sylria nodded. “Yes, that’s right, we would be. Karpri and Selune are at their perigee to each other. It should be only a day’s travel at jamming speeds.” She headed to Navigation through the door that connected it and the Helm Room, and Shaundar followed. Shaundar held charts for her while she drew lines with a protractor and made her calculations.

“Nor’-nor’west four hours,” she muttered. “Pitch up 25. Then . . .” she drew a line while Shaundar held the ruler, “nor’west twenty hours, no pitch. Simple enough.” Sylria looked up and asked Shaundar, “Can you confirm my calculations?”

He went through the same process; but he came up with the same conclusion, of course. “Confirmed; not that you needed it,” he added. “You’re just trying to make sure I don’t get lazy, aren’t you?”

Sylria just smiled faintly. “All right, let’s go give it to the helm.” They headed back through the door to Garan and put the figures in front of him. As he studied it, Sylria called through the speaking-tube, “Navigation to the Captain.”

Yvoleth called back, “Go ahead.”

“Course plotted. Heading north by nor’west, pitch up 25; four hours.”

The Captain recited, “Helm! Sailmaster! Nor’-nor’west; pitch up 25.”

The answering cries to the affirmative came from both Garan and the sail crew.

“Quartermaster!” bellowed the Captain. “What time do we have?”

“Sir!” she called back, “we have three bells of the forenoon watch!”

“Thank you,” he responded. “You all know your duty. Go to it.”

“Bringing ‘er about, sir!” Garan called up the speaking-tube.

“You heard the lad; bring ‘er about!” Captain Yvoeth told the sail crew. “Hard to larboard!”

“Hard to larboard, *av!*” chorused the crew, and Queenie began a sweeping turn in the opposite direction. They pulled away from the Karpri station, leaving the ghosts, the wreckage and their prize, and the spectacular jewel of Karpri itself. *Rest in peace, no matter your race,* thought Shaundar compassionately to all the spirits of the dead that were left in their wake.

The briefing was called for four hours before they were to arrive at Selune. Shaundar was the one who happened to be in the helm at the time. In the bond with Queenie, he could see their visitor on the fo’c’sle; a high elven maid who couldn’t be any older than he was, clad in a Midshipman’s cadet uniform. He suddenly had a sinking feeling in his guts.

“*Queen’s Dirk,*” began the Captain, “yesterday at first bell, a fleet of ten Scorpions and two Battlewagons invaded Selune. They met no real resistance and had possession by the end of the first watch. There were two Navy ships in orbit, the *Light of Arvandor* and the *Wings of Fate*. Both were destroyed. The fate of their crews is unknown.”

Shaundar started. Lannatyr, his silver elven friend from Aces High, had been assigned to the *Light of Arvador*, a Radiant Ship in the Navy's service.

The Captain continued. "The situation is complicated by the political climate of Selune. Its inhabitants have an innate paranoia of Toril and its people, for those unaware. The Evermeet Fleet is ready to fly, but they do not believe that the Selunites will allow them to land."

Shaundar recalled this from his Civilizations classes in the academy. The Selunites were mostly elves and humans who worshipped Leira, goddess of illusions and dreams, and they were a culture of pleasure-seekers. Yathar was itching to get leave there so that they could sample the best of what the Sphere had to offer. It was said that every pleasure known to sentient species was available in a variety of colours and flavours. Likely due to the priesthood of Leira not wanting any competition, the Leirans, as the Selunites called themselves, had an unreasoning paranoia of the natives of Toril, whom they feared would invade to rob them of their admittedly hedonistic way of life. They had even evoked the power of their goddess to shield the side of Selune that faced Toril in an illusion that made the whole Type D planet seem to be a lifeless lump of rock, pockmarked with craters and not much else.

"Captain Whitestar believes that Selune is likely intended to serve as a comfortable base of operations from which the orcs can amass a battle fleet to take out Aces High, and then Toril. I believe his assessment is probably accurate. He has sent cadets to alert all possible

neighbouring ships, and to rally the Realspace Fleet. However, we are currently the closest ship aside from the Ruathimaer of Evermeet, and the Realspace Fleet is on the other side of the Crystal Sphere. Basically, we are on our own, save for the staff and students of Aces High.”

“Perfect,” snapped Sylria sarcastically. “That’s got to be, what? Six or seven hundred orcs and goblinoids, against sixty of us? Fabulous.”

“Fifty-three,” corrected Shaundar automatically.

Her mouth drew into a tight, thin line. “Av, that’s right. Fifty-three.”

“I believe,” Captain Yvoleth admitted, “that we have no choice but to engage them in a ground battle. We will break planetary protocol and land our troops on the light side of Selune facing Toril. This is strictly against local policy so I doubt we will be popular when we arrive. We will leave a skeleton crew in command of our ship and take as many of us as possible to the surface, along with as many as we can rally from Aces High and whoever happens to show up to help in the meantime. We will march on the port city of Leira and take it from the orcs by whatever means necessary. We are outnumbered but we have considerably more magical power, and with a cautious approach to the moon, we should have the advantage of surprise. Spelljammers, you will draw lots. Two of you will join the assault, and one of you must remain aboard with Matey Aelorothi.”

“*Av, quessir!*” bellowed Shaundar up the speaking-tube. Without hesitation, Sylria fished three cigars out of her pack and clipped one short. “The short one stays,” she announced, and she shuffled them around and mixed them up with her back turned to them so they could not keep track of which was which, then she turned to face them with the cigars apparently level in her hand.

Shaundar asked Garan, “You’re Lead Jammer; do you want to draw first or do you want me to?”

“Go ahead,” he replied. So Shaundar drew, and his cigar was a full length one. He was relieved. If yesterday was any indication of face-to-face battles, he sure didn’t want to leave his friends to fight while he was stuck in the helm, unable to help.

Sylria extended the two remaining cigars to Garan. He drew one. It was the short one.

He sighed in obvious disappointment and swore softly in Elvish. “I guess it’s really sort of my job anyway,” he agreed reluctantly. “I’ll do it. Guess I’d better get some reverie.” He clapped them both on the shoulder and headed off to their quarters. Shaundar was inspired to see that there was only dismay in his eyes; though he would have understood if there was relief too.

“Captain, helm!” Shaundar called up the brass speaking-tube.

“Go ahead, helm,” the skipper returned.

“Mr. Oakheart will be piloting, sir.”

“Very well, Mr. Sunfall. You will pilot us to the light side of Selune, where we will change helmsmen. Mr. Oakheart, go to bed!”

“Already gone, sir,” Sylria smirked. Secretly, they were all a little pleased by their skipper’s mother-henning.

“Good, carry on then,” the Captain added. “Mr. Yathar! I would like you to break into the armoury and distribute everything that you find.”

“Av, *quessir*,” Yathar answered back, and the heels of his boots clicked on the deck as he strode off to obey.

“All right, *Tel’Quessir*; we have four hours to Selune. Reverie if you can, and make sure you eat something.”

The crew returned their affirmatives and they all settled in to wait.

When they hit Selune’s Tears, Shaundar slowed to minimum tactical, took command of the sail crew and, as per Captain Yvoeth’s instructions, began a cautious approach to Selune, using the terrain of the asteroids to provide cover. He made for Aces High first. They didn’t get too close. The Captain felt that the orcs would be watching Aces High to

count ships and troops, either via looking glass (which might perhaps reveal ship movements) or scrying carried out through their shamans. Shaundar thought this was the logical thing to do and so he was very careful to meander about in a way that there was always rock between them and the surface of Selune.

They moored up near the Type A sized asteroid that had the number seventeen marker for the infamous obstacle course on the end of a spire on its other side. Sylria looked at him hard when he began to enter that area of the cluster. He couldn't really blame her. It was, after all, notorious for being a difficult course for flitters; never mind the much larger, less manoeuvrable Man-o-War. He turned to look at her and he smiled. "Relax, I know this neighbourhood," he assured her cheerfully.

"I'm sure you do," she nodded, but the tension in her mouth did not ease.

"All stop," said the Captain. "Two hours while we rally forces."

Slowly over those two hours flitters from Aces High began to make their way over to the *Queen's Dirk*. They gathered around Queenie or behind other nearby asteroids. In the meantime, Shaundar armed himself for battle. When his parents had sent him those protective bracers and ring last year for Midwinter, he scoffed. He couldn't imagine that he would need such a thing in the helm of a ship, although he did put the ring on and kept it on because there was no reason not to. But obviously his mother's keen insight, combined with his father's

experience in warfare, had combined to defeat his foolishness, and now he fastened the bracers over his uniform jacket with gratitude. He decided then and there that he would just wear them from now on as part of his regular clothing. Certainly battle was becoming frequent enough to justify that.

He buckled on his short swords again, also grateful for their magical aid, and double-checked his spell components. Butter, fur and glass rods (though one was useless; broken in half, which Shaundar guessed must have happened in the fight yesterday . . . no wait, that was two days past now . . .)

“Sylria,” he asked, “do you have any spare bat guano?”

“Here,” piped up Garan, who had managed an hour or so of reverie. He rooted through his belt pouches. “Take mine; I won’t need it as much as you will.” He gave Shaundar several bits of paper with the stuff wrapped up in it.

“Thanks,” Shaundar smiled. Bat guano was the most commonly-used flammable component to spark a *fireball* spell. It was an important piece of a wizard’s arsenal. Shaundar had used the last of his up the other day at Karpri, and it had been a while since they had been planetside anywhere so he could stock more of the stuff. He promptly opened up his spellbook and began to recite the preliminary incantations that readied the spell for use later. Most spells required such things. You had to incant, chant, anoint your body with odd oils, and draw mystical

symbols on your hands, among other things; so that when you called forth the arcane formulae of a spell's completion in the face of your foe, all the mystical energies would come together and the Universe would alter to your will.

They left him to it. Sylria even began her own preparations, murmuring quietly as she went through her book of spells as well.

Eventually Captain Yvoeth called for them to change helmsmen, and Garan took over. "All hands assigned to the boarding party, stand ready to disembark," the skipper commanded.

Garan clasped Sylria on the shoulder. "Good luck, you guys," he said simply.

"You too," Sylria replied. She and Shaundar wound around the passageway and clambered up the ladder to the Battle Deck.

Their fleet now consisted of about a dozen flitters and a handful of other small ships; Wasps, Mosquitos, Dragonflies and the like. The Captain directed their crew to load up onto the other ships, since the *Queen's Dirk*, like all other elven Men-o-War, was incapable of landing. Shaundar and Sylria boarded a Dragonfly, along with Yathar, and Shaundar found a face that he recognized. He hadn't changed a bit.

"Captain Whitestar!" Shaundar exclaimed happily. "It's good to see you, sir."

Captain Whitestar, who happened to be standing on the Battle Deck of the Dragonfly, glanced over at the voice and his eyes widened. “Mr. Sunfall!” he smiled. “It’s good to see you too, lad.” He bowed. “How’s that girl of yours?”

He grinned. “Doing well, sir. We’re betrothed now.”

“Are you really?” He shook his head. “Glad to hear it. I heard about your *Wings of Aerdrie*, by the way. Congratulations! I was pleased but unsurprised.”

“I take it that you instructed Shaundar at Aces High, sir?” Sylria queried.

Captain Whitestar nodded. “I did indeed have that honour, *Teu’Ruan*. The lad has a gift.”

Sylria smiled. “I have noticed,” she remarked casually. Shaundar coloured a little, pleased but embarrassed by the praise.

“Sir!” called the Dragonfly’s pilot. “We’re making our approach to Selune, minimum tactical.”

“Bring ‘er down nice and easy,” the Captain urged. “Steady as she goes.”

“Steady as she goes, *av*,” the pilot responded, and she began a nice, smooth approach to the moon’s apparently desolate surface. It was

a waning crescent moon from Toril's perspective. Shaundar privately thought that this was to their advantage. That would mean that anyone trying to watch Toril from the dark side would find it too bright to see much, and it also meant that they would be landing in near darkness. The temperature slowly climbed as they hit atmosphere, disproving the illusion of empty cratered space quite completely, no matter how convincing it might be visually. There was no sign of the orcish fleet.

Just as Shaundar began to doubt what he had heard about Selune's illusion, they passed through some kind of invisible barrier and immediately the scenery transformed. The staggering array of amazing architecture was breathtaking, almost a rival to the spectacular beauty of Leuthilspar. Buildings constructed of every imaginable material – wood, stone, marble, alabaster, crystal, even glass – decorated the landscape, which was as lush and green as that of Nedethil. In the distance, the famous Candle Mountain range of Selune raised its glowing, molten peaks to the sky like torches. They produced enough light that Shaundar could see well enough to read by, even though most of this side of Selune was firmly in Toril's shadow. Somewhere in the distance was an amazingly placid lake that reflected the torch-fires of the Candle Mountains clearly in its surface.

Naturally, that is when the tranquil beauty was disrupted by a catapult stone flying at them.

“Evasive manoeuvres!” cried Captain Whitestar; but the green crew was not fast enough, being confused about where to turn, and the

stone tore some sails, due more to bad aim on the part of those who had fired it than any skill on the crew's part.

"Captain!" Shaundar asked, "have you trained your pilot to take command of the sail crew?"

The Captain looked him in the eye. "I have." He called out for the spelljammer to do just that.

When the next stone flew at them, the jammer yelled, "Yaw starboard 15, roll starboard ten!"

The answering affirmatives only proceeded the turn by split seconds. Now the green crew was in familiar territory, and the theory translated to practice well – as had been Shaundar's experience.

"Much better, good job," Captain Whitestar encouraged the cadets. He smiled warmly at Shaundar.

"Well, that's how I got these Wings, sir," Shaundar told him. "The training works."

Yathar called out, "*Queen's Dirk!* When we land, we need to seize control of the catapult. We'll take the crew alive if we can, and destroy the catapult if we can't."

Sylria and Shaundar nodded.

They could see the catapult now, and their crew was loading another stone even as they spoke. They were civilians, not orcish soldiers.

“We’re going to have one more volley, Captain,” Shaundar told him.

“Stay frosty, crew,” the Captain urged.

The determined civilians finished loading the catapult and let fly. This time their ship dodged it easily. And now there were other ships for them to shoot at. But they almost got a third one loaded before they were close enough for Sylria to launch a *web* spell. It covered the entirety of the catapult and prevented the crew from firing; or indeed, from moving around at all. They were caught just like flies.

Shaundar, Yathar, and Sylria all leaped out of the ship before they had touched down completely. What looked to be some kind of town guard in a very sharp – and very clean – red uniform came to greet them, brandishing swords and pikes, but a couple of *grease* spells and a *web* spell later, they were a little less enthusiastic. Yathar stood before his other two companions with his sword raised in a defensive stance.

The leader of the guard hesitated. She was a pale human woman of fair colouring waving her pike with a dangerous lack of confidence. “You are not permitted to land on the Toril-facing side of Leira,” she declared angrily. “You are all under arrest.”

“Save it,” snapped Sylria. “We’re here to kick the shit out of the orcs who have occupied the other side and *grounded all your ships*, you idiots.”

She blinked in total surprise. “I know nothing of this,” she protested crossly. “How do I know it isn’t a trick?”

“You think we would land here otherwise?” demanded Yathar impatiently. By this time, someone had remembered, or figured out, the trick of loosening and dissolving the magical webs with alcohol, and they had set about freeing their fellow Leirans; but the crew and passengers of the Dragonfly had disembarked and more ships were landing.

The eyes of her second-in-command, a fair gold elven male, sparked in sharp realization. “I was wondering why my cousin hadn’t arrived yet,” he said. He sounded worried.

The guard captain looked even less certain now. “If you’re lying to me . . .” she warned at last.

By this point, the Captains were strolling over in her direction. Captain Yvoeth politicked. “The Imperial Elven Navy extends its sincere apologies for this breach of protocol,” he offered formally, bowing to the guard captain. “However, it is entirely necessary. Leira has been invaded and the Goblinoid Forces are occupying the dark side. We had no choice but to land and attempt a guerrilla assault, what with our current small numbers. We hope to keep them busy until our reinforcements arrive.”

“Why would the goblinoids invade here?” the guard demanded. “Did the Torilians put them up to it? We have no quarrel with them!”

Yathar rolled his eyes at the reference to the “Torilians,” but Shaundar said, “Begging your pardon, Captain, but quite frankly, I don’t think they care. There are elves here. That’s good enough.”

The fair elf commander looked to her and his mouth set in a grim expression of determination. “What do you need from us?” he asked, as his eyes met Shaundar’s and the racial instinct to stand against their ancient foe rose within him.

Captain Yvoleth looked relieved. “We need horses, wagons, weapons, food, and soldiers if you’ll send them; and a guide so that we can travel overland as quickly as possible and not get lost.”

“It’s about a week by horse to get to Leira Starport from here,” she informed him dismally. “You might get there at the same time that the rest of your fleet does.”

“I don’t expect our journey to be unchallenged, Captain,” the skipper admitted. “I imagine we have about three days before the scro hear of us, and about four before we cross swords. Someone will inform them, hoping to curry favour.”

“Maybe not,” the elven commander put in. “If people have taken refuge in the bunkers, we might have a clear path the whole way.” Shaundar liked the way he said “we.”

“Bunkers?” Captain Whitestar repeated.

The Guard Captain glared at the elven commander, and he blushed. “In case of Torilian invasion. We’ve had them for centuries, just in case.”

Captain Whitestar just blinked, but Captain Yvoleth laughed. “Well, I bet that’s something the orcs weren’t expecting! Great, if you have bunkers, you have no shortage of supplies to field a resistance force.”

They seemed reluctant to part with the preserved foodstuffs and the armour and weapons, but they did. Unfortunately they had few horses to spare. The elves ended up having to spend pretty much whatever was left of their prize moneys from the last engagement on horses purchased from private citizens, who would on no conditions part with them for free, even to save their own skins.

“Never mind, sir,” Shaundar muttered to defuse the dark scowl forming on his Captain’s face, “I don’t care about the money anyway.”

“That’s not the point, Lieutenant,” he frowned, but that was the end of it.

Captain Whitestar said to Captain Yvoleth, “I will defer to your command, Captain. I’m a flight instructor. I saw exactly two fleet engagements near the end of the last war and that’s the extent of my

combat experience, save a bar fight or two. I've never been in a ground battle. Quite frankly, my cadets and I are out of our element here."

Yvoeth smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. "You know what the good thing is about spelljammers, Captain?" he asked him with a smile.

"What would that be?" Captain Whitestar inquired.

"They're all priests and mages," the skipper grinned cheerfully. "Let's start by separating the mages and the priests. We'll need as much healing power as we can get." They also set about supplying the army with whatever magical components it might require, which effectively bankrupted them. Shaundar kept a handful of coins for a desperation fund later on, but otherwise contributed as much as he had.

However, the horses were fine and beautiful animals; strong and fast, all with good teeth and an excellent gait and carry. Shaundar thought privately that since they had purchased them, they should ship the lot to Evereska or some other such place when they were done with them, rather than sell them back.

They did this all as quickly as possible, but it still took several hours. Shaundar could almost hear the sand sliding through the hourglass in his head, running out of time.

Captain Yvoeth informed them that they would be keeping the standard shipboard watches. They had landed at the first bell of the afternoon watch; they were not ready to go until the start of First Watch.

Marching to battle had to be the most tedious, nerve-wracking process Shaundar had ever had the misfortune to participate in. Armies moved slowly, even at such a reduced size, trundling along like oversized beetles, especially since they were pulling along some mobile siege weapons; two catapults, two ballistae and a battering ram. Complicating matters, not every Navy officer knew how to ride. As a matter of fact, they spent so little time on planetside that most of them did not. They resorted to stuffing as many elves as possible into the limited wagons, and anyone with any modicum of how to ride whatsoever – including Shaundar and Yathar – were to ride as much as possible. It wasn't as though they were accustomed to travelling such distances in the saddle, however, and by the time the Captains called a halt on the first day, they could barely move when they dismounted. They took their rest and made a makeshift camp at the side of a fast-moving river that fed that lovely placid lake. They didn't have any proper tents so most of them slept in the open. Fortunately, the weather was something like late spring, and with the cooking fires burning they didn't get too cold.

They were accompanied by a contingent from the Leiran Guard, led by the elven commander, whose name was Aravel. Shaundar liked him. He was sensible and quiet, and seemed happy enough to take direction from Captain Yvoeth, except when he felt that the needs of his planet nation were not being met. For instance, he suggested

maintaining a low profile as opposed to marching the army directly through the city streets, which not only kept news of their passing to a minimum, but also diminished panic in the populace.

By the third day they weren't seeing a lot of people in the streets anymore. Word had gotten out, Shaundar supposed. Aravel opened up the Guard Stations to them so that they could get some hot meals. As they settled in to camp, Shaundar walked around and stretched in an effort to ease his saddlesores, and Yathar worked through his bladesong stanzas.

Sylria came marching over to where the Captain was standing, chatting with Captain Whitestar, and saluted. "Sir, I've received a *Sending* from Garan," she told him. "He says that 'help is on the way.'"

"Excellent," he nodded. "Send him our coordinates."

Within the half hour, Dragonflies and Wasps were carrying reinforcements down to join them. They represented the crews of about half a dozen Men-o-War. Shaundar rejoiced; this looked like a much more equal fight.

Two gold elves in the feathered Captain's hats strode over to where the other two Captains were standing with purpose. Yathar leaned on his sword and sighed. "Here we go," he said.

"Captain Yvoleth," one of them greeted their skipper. The Captain glanced up from the map he was going over with Commander

Aravel. “*Quessir* Evanara, *Etriel Nierdre*,” he nodded to them politely. “Thank you for joining our fight.”

Shaundar smirked. Yes, the skipper recognized the inevitable political challenge – and he was ready for them.

Etriel Nierdre smiled sweetly. “Actually, that’s what we came to discuss; whose fight this actually is. We felt that something on such a large scale should be a coordinated assault and since all of us are Captains, other orders of precedence should be considered.”

Shaundar scowled. That was a pretty blatant way to say, *You have no noble title; we do, and therefore we’re taking over.*

Captain Yvoeth, however, just nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps you’re right,” he concurred. “Which one of you has more battlefield experience?”

They hesitated, but then Captain Evanara spoke up with, “Likely that would be me, Captain. I’ve been in three skirmishes since the start of the war.”

He raised an eyebrow in what might have been a genuinely impressed look or a mocking expression of awe. “Really? Not bad, not bad.”

“Captain,” piped up Sylria, recognizing the rules of engagement, “how many battles have you been in?”

“Hmm,” murmured their skipper thoughtfully, as though he had not considered this before, “I think it’s now twenty-seven, including Karpri Station a few days ago.”

“Have you been in land assaults before, sir?” Yathar inquired, hardly controlling his smirk and glittering eyes.

“Three of them,” he nodded, “and I commanded the Battle of Westwind.” He looked to Captain Evanara and asked innocently, “How many land battles have you been in, my lord?” He turned so that the light subtly focused attention on the ribbons of the many medals that were attached to his uniform jacket.

Captain Evanara’s mouth and eyes both narrowed. “Not as many,” he admitted darkly.

“Oh.” Their Captain pretended to look surprised. “Well then, Captains, perhaps you’d be so kind as to join us for War Council after dinner? This is Commander Arael of the Leiran Guard, by the way, and I’m sure you’ve at least heard of Captain Whitestar.”

The noble Captains bowed politely. To her credit, *Etriel Nierdre* added, “We’re pleased that you’re joining us, Commander.” Captain Evanara, however, gave a curt nod and stomped off.

Once she had taken her leave to settle in her crew, Yathar shook his head disgustedly. “That shit never stops, does it?” he growled.

“I think you’ve made an enemy, sir,” Shaundar cautioned his Captain.

Captain Yvoleth sighed. “Yes, I think maybe I have. But you know, I want to survive this experience – and I want my people to as well.” He set his jaw in determination. “Make no mistake, Mr. Sunfall; this is a formidable task we’ve set for ourselves. I might make errors and that will cost lives. But I know that to allow someone with no field experience to lead this assault would be mass suicide. So I’ll accept the wrath of the Evanaras if I must.” He smiled encouragingly at Shaundar. “Sometimes – even often – the right thing is by no means the easy thing, Mr. Sunfall.”

Two days later they caught first sight of their enemy. What Shaundar had thought were trees on the hillside *moved*. It seemed to him like the hill was alive with them.

Yathar trained his glass towards them and bellowed, “Enemy sighted, Captain! Five degrees starboard! I estimate maybe two hours.”

The Captain trained his own glass in their direction. “Very good, Mr. Yathar. ALL STOP!” This was repeated up and down the line and the company came to a halt.

Shaundar could see the lights of the city behind them on the hilltop that they were approaching, and he thought he could just barely

make out a couple of masts poking into the weirdly red glowing sky. On the breeze he could smell smoke and there were black plumes trailing into the reddish light. Being about a week later than when they had originally landed, it was now sunset here on the other side of the moon as Selune waxed from Toril's perspective, heading into her gibbous phase. That would not bother either one of them, Shaundar knew. Elves and orcs both had superior vision to humans in the dark. The orange sky and the last radiance of the setting sun silhouetted the invaders against it. They looked to Shaundar like they were settling into position to wait for them.

Apparently that's what it looked like to Captain Yvoeth too. "All right, Marines to the front!" he called out. Yathar moved forward, clasping Shaundar on the shoulder. "Sail crews! You're next! Make sure you all have boarding axes or pikes and crossbows! Pikemen behind axemen! Mages! You stand behind them." Shaundar and Sylria stepped into position. "Gunners! Pick your best and crew those weapons. Once you haul them to the battlefield, those of you not crewing the weapons will join the Marines. If anyone is removed from the Weapons Crews, you will immediately stand ready to take their place. Disperse yourselves in the middle of our forces." They began to move to obey. "Clerics, you'll be last! We need you somewhat behind our forces so that the injured can fall back to you. But first," he smiled, "why don't you ask your gods for their blessing on our little excursion?"

The clerics came to the front of the gathering army and began to chant their holy words and asperge holy water. Shaundar was happy

enough to accept their blessing. Amongst the gods they called upon were Corellon Larethian their Creator, magic and war god; Sehanine Moonbow, who ruled mercy and healing; Erevan Illesere, their god of luck and trickery; and of course Leira.

“Where do you want us?” Commander Aravel asked the Captain.

He looked them up and down. “Mostly cavalry, right? Would you consider it rude of me to ask you to ride with my Marines?”

Aravel sniffed the air with distaste; not at the Captain, Shaundar realized, but at the smoky smell. “It will be our honour to scour the defilers from Leira’s face,” he said, offering a Leiran salute by clapping his shoulder with his sword clasped in his gauntleted fist, then extending it to the Captain. He called out to his women and men in the Common tongue, and soon they were interspersed with the Marines.

“They have the higher ground, sir,” Shaundar pointed out. “They’ll be able to see us for several hex-lengths.”

The Captain nodded. “What can we do about that, Mr. Sunfall?” he queried.

Shaundar knew then that the Captain already had a solution, but he was testing him. “Well,” he said slowly, “I guess we need to find ways to not be seen.” He considered it. “The terrain is absolutely unhelpful,” he admitted. They appeared to be in some kind of farming field. Shaundar thought it might be tobacco that they were growing. “How

about *fog cloud*? That would help. Most of us have *fog cloud* prepared, don't we?" The spell in question created exactly that; a cloud of fog. Because it summoned elemental air, it was often prepared by spelljamming mages to refresh an air envelope. The orc shamans must have used similar magic to improve the air of the Karpri base before landing; according to all reports, the air had long ago turned deadly, and the log of the last survivor had confirmed it.

Captain Yvoeth grinned. "Probably. Good, that won't make our location any less visible, but it will obscure our numbers and forces. Anything else?"

He considered it more deeply. "*Hallucinatory terrain* when we get closer, perhaps?"

The Captain was nodding. "Good. Those are good ideas, Mr. Sunfall."

Captain Whitestar piped up, "I can see that you were paying attention in *Magical Tactics*, Mr. Sunfall."

"*Av, quessir*," Shaundar smiled. "Good class; I figured I might need it someday."

"Let's move out, shall we?" the Captain urged gently. To Shaundar's nod, he bellowed, "MOVE OUT!" and everyone called it down the line and the army began to move.

They marched for two more hours. The city became more visible against the backdrop of the fiery sunset. It glittered like a gem at the top of the hill, a display of amazingly beautiful and intricate architecture. Unfortunately a fair portion of the city was on fire. It looked to Shaundar like someone had set most of the ships in harbour alight and that this had touched off a fire in the dockyards. Aravel's face grew progressively grimmer the closer to the city they came.

As they approached the base of the hill, a shadow suddenly appeared in front of the sun. A catapult stone careened down at them. "Hit the deck!" the Captain roared, and those in the path of the stone fled. It rolled when it hit the ground, smashing one of the wagons, now thankfully empty save for spare supplies. It left a disturbingly deep trench in the ground, cutting a swath through the tobacco plants.

"Keep moving!" the Captain exhorted them. "Moving targets are harder to hit! Mages, let's have some *fog clouds* and cast some *hallucinatory terrain* trees in front of us!"

The host advanced on the Port City as trees appeared in front of them, providing limited cover, and fog and mist began to pool around them, obscuring their size and numbers. Their advance was disrupted a few times with badly-aimed catapult stones; though even badly aimed boulders were capable of terrible damage. A rock landed just in front of several of the Marines and bounced. It killed one of the Leiran cavalry by beheading him, carrying on and rolling over a mage from one of the other Man-o-War crews and then a pretty little Priestess wearing the

diaphanous robes of the clergy of Sehanine. Shaundar winced and Sylria cried out because both of them were crushed like grapes. The stone continued inexorably down the hill behind them, hardly slowed by the elven lives it had taken and bearing their blood into the fields.

“Do not falter!” cried the Captain. “We shall have our vengeance soon enough! Battlepoets, inspire us to victory!”

Yathar’s voice rang out clear and true as he sang the “Ballad of Borka,” where the elven gods had chosen to involve themselves in the First Unhuman War and destroy the orcish-goblin planet. Suddenly Shaundar was filled with courage to match his terror. He roared out a wordless battle cry that was taken up by the rest of their makeshift army. “Forward march!” cried their Captain, and they marched forward without flagging or faltering.

Now they were close enough to see the faces of their foes. There were four catapult crews firing on them; and those crews were surrounded by hundreds of heavily-armed orcs, goblins, kobolds, bugbears and ogres. There was the largest group of black-armoured scro at their head that their crew had yet to see. “Yeoman!” called out the Captain. “Demand their surrender!”

Their Yeoman immediately began signalling in semaphore; to which the enemy responded with a catapult. Shaundar found himself scattering with the rest of their crew as the stone landed in their midst.

“Fine!” snapped the Captain. “Mages, return fire on anything you can reach!”

Shaundar pulled out a packet of bat guano and incanted lowly. Twenty or thirty fireballs blasted into the line of their enemies, including his own, and now they were the ones who were scattering. “CHARGE!” roared Captain Yvoeth, and as one, the elven host screamed and cheered. Shaundar’s voice added to the host, but was lost in the wordless clamour of their declaration of war.

First the Marines started moving; then the cavalry, then the sail crews, then the rest of them followed like a flock of birds taking to the air all at the same time. Shaundar and Sylria charged with the rest of them. He was exhilarated and terrified; his blood pounded like thunder in his head and he could smell his own sweat and that of his companions, singing of bloodlust. The noise filled the whole world.

Their cry was answered with a roar and the thunder of war drums. A very large orange-skinned scro bawled out something in Orcish loudly enough that his basso voice echoed over the battlefield and the kobolds and goblins started charging to meet them.

The Marines hit the kobolds like a tsunami. Shrieking in sibilant reptilian voices, shrill goblin tones, and musically harmonious elven voices followed their initial clash. Shaundar tried to see Yathar in the chaos but couldn’t. But the Marines kept going and the kobolds and goblins fell

back or were trampled. The cavalry behind them ran over them with their horses. Blood spattered the ground.

Semaphore flags raised into the air, directing the elven troops to fire their crossbows. They dropped to one knee and aimed at the oncoming goblin host. Several of them fell but more kept running at them waving their swords, some tripping over the fallen bodies of their fellows.

The scro commander called out something else, un-phased by their onslaught. Now the ogres came forward and started throwing catapult stones at them with their bare hands!

The devastation was horrifying. Someone right next to Shaundar on his left was crushed completely. He was speckled with lifeblood as his companion just disappeared. But the army had a life of its own now, and it rolled on, as relentless as the sea, running over their fallen with no more regard than the sea has for the ships it smashes.

Shaundar screamed in horror and rage, and threw back another fireball. It hit the ogre who had thrown the boulder right in the face, setting it on fire. The ogre's screams as he ran around blindly, desperately trying to put it out, were both satisfying and terrible.

Other mages began to cast their spells and the air temperature probably increased about five degrees as fireballs, lightning bolts and other spells of death and destruction went off, devastating the enemy

host. Flashes lit up the weird sunset like daylight. One of the catapults exploded, to the resounding cheers of the elven army.

That's when the Marines hit the wall of orcs. ogres and bugbears, which they crashed against like a wave breaking on the surf. Shaundar could see that most of the orcs and scro were armed with axes, and now the air was full of the smell of blood and steel, and the metallic sounds of hundreds of swords and axes clashing. It became impossible to tell friend from foe in the chaos, so Shaundar concentrated his fire on siege weapons and ogres. He managed to light up another catapult, taking it out of the fighting.

The sail crews, a boarding party like the Universe had never seen, now entered the fray. Pikes impaled the goblinoid forces like macabre party favours, and axes began to hack limbs from bodies as if they were cordwood. There was blood, dust and screaming everywhere. A blast of fire descended from the sky in a pillar, and it incinerated Captain Evanara in a single flash. Shaundar's heart skipped a beat. They had a shaman, it seemed.

Then he tripped over a body lying on the ground. Getting to his feet, he realized it was Captain Whitestar. He was moaning and his face was white. Both of his legs were gone just above the knees and a huge pool of blood was spreading around him.

"Sylria, cover me!" he cried, slapping her in the shoulder to get her attention. Then he fell to his knees and yanked the cording off of his

uniform. He knew that Captain Whitestar would bleed out before any priest could get to him if he didn't staunch the bleeding right now.

Sylria looked to see what he was doing; gasped, and then she was busy because the goblin host had reached them. She loosed a spray of light and colour in the goblin's face and it fell backwards, blinded; but an orc rose to take its place, an axe raised above his head as he leaped upon them. Sylria let him have five bolts of deadly green light in the torso. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Then Shaundar could no longer afford to pay attention. He fastened his uniform chord around the ruined stump of the Captain's left leg with a very ungentle yank. The Captain screamed and passed out.

Something landed on him. He fought it off with a roar, and found it to be a goblin that was gibbering and shrieking madly. The goblin stabbed at him with a short sword. In desperation he pulled his own short swords and parried the blows. It always looked so artistic when Yathar duelled. This was gritty and furious. The blades flashed, attempting to find something vital. Shaundar kicked the goblin in the face and then, while it was staggering and surprised, he ran a sword blade through its heart. When he pulled the blade free, black blood came with it, pouring out like a river as the goblin whimpered and keeled over.

There was no more time to spare the goblin. Shaundar sheathed the one sword and used the other to tear his baldric free. He saw Sylria

desperately fighting to hold off three kobolds that had her backed up against Captain Whitestar’s unconscious body. He ran to her aid.

That’s when Yathar appeared. He leaped over the heads of the foes fighting in front of them with a cry. He was covered in blood and in the full motion of the bladesong. He cut down two of the kobolds before they had a chance to react, and Sylria blasted the third. “Hurry, tie that off!” he yelled.

Shaundar did not hesitate. He went back to the Captain’s side and tied off the remains of his right leg with his ruined baldric.

“Now let’s go!” Yathar directed, and he cut a path through the fighting with his sword while Sylria and Shaundar cleared the way with green bolts of light.

They found themselves faced with three scro as they made their way to the large orange-skinned commander. One of them met Shaundar’s eyes and said in perfectly understandable, though thickly accented Espruar, “Prepare to meet your god, boy!”

Shaundar didn’t mean to give him a chance to make good on his threat. He blasted him with green death; but the bolts fizzled and did nothing! As he started in surprise, Yathar challenged him with his sword blade. The scro was armed with a war-axe that he wielded with expert hands, and he actually parried Yathar’s thrust.

“Fine,” Sylria snapped, and she pulled a wisp of spider web out of her belt pouch and spoke a word. A few moments later, the three of them were entangled in magical webbing and unable to react.

An enormous war-axe blade smashed aside what might have been Yathar’s killing blow, and the orange-skinned leader was now standing before them. His eyes were bright blue, Shaundar noted; like his own, like the scro he had killed at Karpri. He was covered in blood and tribal war paint. He roared and bared enormous gilded tusks.

Shaundar took the short sword still in his off hand and thrust it into the scro’s side, while Yathar’s sword kept that giant war-axe busy. The scro grunted in pain and his eyes widened, but he did not falter as he continued to fight Yathar off of him. In another time and place, it might have been a beautiful thing to watch; Yathar’s sword dancing in its song of death, and the scro leader smacking it aside again and again with the haft of his axe. The scro whipped his weapon around and brought the blade down with a snarl. Yathar jumped back, but not soon enough. The edge of the axe blade cleaved through the front of his elven chain armour like a razor blade, drawing a line of red down Yathar’s chest and severing the armour into two useless pieces. But that’s when Sylria’s last web spell went off, pinning the scro leader to the ground like an insect.

Shaundar put his blade to the immobilized scro’s throat. “Surrender,” he demanded.

The scro looked at him for a long moment; then nodded, and cast aside his axe as far as he was able to, covered in the thick, sticky net of the webbing. “You have defeated me fairly,” he acknowledged in Elvish. Then he roared something in the guttural Orcish language with that incredible basso voice. He had to call it out three times before it carried through the clamour and chaos. But eventually, the orcs and goblinoids began to look from one to another, confused, and then one by one, they dropped their swords, their axes, their boulders. Just as suddenly as it had begun, the battle was over; and miraculously, the elves were victorious.

Chapter Eleven

Cleaning up the mess took days. Of the roughly 400 elves, humans and gnomes who had participated in the Battle of Leira, at least a hundred and fifty of them were casualties, which included Yathar's axe slice because it required stitches, but not the minor bleeding wound that the goblin's blade had given Shaundar, because it did not. Half the city seemed to be burnt or damaged. When the Scro Fleet had taken over, they had assaulted the city from orbit. This would have counted as a war crime in the Elven Navy, and the perpetrators would have been court martialled, but apparently this was par for the course in scro rules of engagement.

Fortunately the civilian casualties had actually been minimal. Those bunkers that Commander Aravel had referred to sheltered most of the populace, and much of the city damage, Shaundar later learned, was from the Orcish forces trying to dig or burn them out.

The Realspace Fleet arrived later on the day of the battle and captured the Scro fleet in orbit around Selune. Shaundar was trying not to be a little cross that none of those who had fought planetside were being offered any of the prize share, when they did all the hard work.

The elven military was divided into three groups; one to put out the raging fire in the dockyards so that ships could land, one to gather up the wounded and the dead, and one to guard the approximately 300

prisoners. This was the one consolation for their high casualty rate; the orcs had done worse. Shaundar was, surprisingly, assigned to guard detail. He and Yathar were specifically directed to watch the Scro Commander. “He’ll respect you more because you captured him,” Uncle Madrimlian explained when he landed to aid with the clean-up efforts. “We’re learning more about them. It’s cultural. His honour demands that he obey you, since it’s you he surrendered to. We’ll have less trouble this way.” He then smiled and clapped Shaundar on the shoulder. “Good job on that, incidentally.”

Shaundar was not fond of guard detail. He would rather have aided the wounded. The duty of tension and patience did not suit him well. He did his best to get some reading done but he could feel the eyes of the captive boring into him while he scanned the page without really seeing it.

The Commander was big, even for one of these scro; fully seven and a half feet tall. His skin was a burnt sienna colour, and stripped of his studded leather armour, his enormous, muscular arms, easily bigger around at the forearm than the thickest part of Shaundar’s thigh, were crossed with many long peach-shaded scars; whether from bladed weapons or the claws of some animal, Shaundar didn’t know. His pointed lupine ears were pierced like all the other sailors that Shaundar knew, including himself, and the piercings were the standard golden rings; which, traditionally, had enough value in gold weight to pay for a spacer’s funeral. He also had a shellback tattoo on his shoulder – a gammaroid perched on its hind legs – symbolizing that he had been through the

phlogiston between crystal spheres. He was wearing a rough sleeveless tunic under that armour. It was black and the image at its center was coloured red, forming another one of those strange orcish runes. This one consisted of four vertical lines side-by-side, with two vertical lines, separated by a space, beneath them. The same design was echoed in patches on his armour, the backs of his gauntlets, and it was even carved into his tusks and enhanced with gilt. This was the only ornament to his tusks that he bore, though Shaundar had now seen many who encrusted theirs with jewels and other decorations.

Captivity seemed to suit the scro about as well as guard duty suited Shaundar. He acted to Shaundar's eyes much like a caged tiger, pacing back and forth in the limited Leiran jail cell, his massive legs striding across the space in two steps and his steel-toed boots clomping noisily even on the stone floor; back and forth, back and forth. Around his neck, a necklace of different sized and shaped teeth bounced against the top of his breastbone with each step. He swung his arms out to the sides to stretch his shoulders, and barely had enough room. His black, braided hair almost brushed the eight foot high ceiling. He scratched impatiently at the neatly-trimmed beard on his chin, now accompanied by black stubble on his cheeks where he had not intended a beard to grow. Since elven men did not grow facial hair, Shaundar found this mildly fascinating.

After a time, the scro surprised him by speaking. In that same thickly accented, but perfectly correct Elvish, he inquired, "So, how old are you anyway, lad?"

Shaundar did not think it prudent to respond.

He shrugged. “Hard to tell with you elves,” he admitted. That booming bass voice was capable of speaking in surprisingly soft tones. It echoed through the stone jail building but did not hurt Shaundar’s sensitive ears. When Shaundar didn’t answer he returned to his pacing.

“But you called me ‘lad’,” Shaundar could not help but point out after a few minutes.

He met Shaundar’s stare with clear, blue eyes that were piercing and intelligent; thoughtful, even. Something in that look actually reminded him of his own father’s sharp amber gaze. “I’m getting better at it,” he explained. “I’ve learned it’s all in the eyes. Your eyes are those of a boy growing up too fast.”

Shaundar found himself, reluctantly, impressed by the captive’s insight. “You have me pegged pretty well, sir,” he allowed.

“Still a warrior, though,” the scro nodded, sitting down on the cot that was the cell’s only furniture, which bent nearly double and groaned with the strain. “There’s blood on your hands, I think. You would not have hesitated to kill me, and the first time is always the hardest.”

Shaundar said nothing.

“My name is Dorin Bloodfist,” he introduced himself, for all the worlds as if they’d met over drinks at the Leafy Bough.

Shaundar continued to be silent.

The scro looked pained. “I’m not going to bite you, boy; not here, anyway. Do me the honour of giving me your name, so that I may tell my clan of the warrior who defeated me.”

Shaundar didn’t think it could do any harm to tell him. “I’m Shaundar Sunfall,” he said politely, and on an impulse he bowed. “Your other guard is my blood brother Yathar, and the elf maid who pinned you with the *web* spell was Sylria.”

He smiled or grimaced at the bow – it was hard to tell with those great tusks – and stood up to return it. The cot leaped up when his posterior lost contact with it and made a sound like a firecracker. “An honour, Shaundar Sunfall,” he said. “We greet each other like this.” He thumped his chest and then extended his open hand in Shaundar’s direction. Shaundar returned it. Dorin Bloodfist nodded once. Shaundar thought perhaps it was a nod of approval.

“May I make some requests, *harak’cha*?” he inquired. At Shaundar’s questioning look, he elaborated, “I don’t think the word has any proper equivalent in the elf tongue. Loosely, it means ‘honourable foe who has defeated me,’ but that’s really an oversimplification.”

“You can ask,” Shaundar said, “but I can’t promise anything. I’m just a Lieutenant, sir.”

The scro commander nodded. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance that I could have my armour, could I?”

“I doubt it,” Shaundar shook his head.

His mouth thinned into a line around the tusks. “A scro’s honour is bound up in his armour and his axe. I know there’s no chance of getting my axe – relax, boy, I wasn’t asking – but the armour is a symbol of my clan. I suppose it’s somewhat like your elven Houses, Shaundar Sunfall.”

Shaundar pursed his lips. This sounded to him like a trick to improve the scro’s lot so that he was in a better position should he make an escape attempt. “The armour is covered in spikes and studs,” he pointed out. “It would make a good weapon. I don’t think we should allow that, begging your pardon, sir.”

Dorin Bloodfist sighed. “I give you my word of honour, *harak’cha* that I will not try to escape while in your custody. Or that of your blood brother, either,” he added. His gaze was intense. Shaundar looked carefully into his eyes and saw only sincerity.

He nodded slowly. “I believe you,” he said. “I’ll ask as soon as my shift is done.”

The scro nodded. “I appreciate that.” He returned to his pacing.

“You said you had ‘some requests,’” Shaundar asked a few moments later. “What else?”

Dorin Bloodfist said hopefully, “The others aren’t nearly as important, and I don’t want to sound like I’m whining here, but . . . well, as you can see, this cot does not fit, for one thing.” He gestured at the still-bent bed frame where he had sat. “I’d honestly prefer a sturdy hammock if you have one.”

“I’m pretty sure I could arrange that,” Shaundar agreed. It seemed like common courtesy to him, to arrange a bed the orc could actually sleep in. “Anything else?”

The scro added, “We’re mostly carnivores. If there is meat to spare, even jerky or salt pork, I would be glad to have it.” His request was matter-of-fact, even dignified.

Shaundar nodded again. “I’ll ask about that too,” he promised.

The scro commander fell silent again with another nod. Shaundar made an effort to go back to reading, though his heart wasn’t in it.

“You spoke of your blood brother,” Dorin Bloodfist spoke up after several more minutes. “Is that like a *na’kor*?”

Shaundar smiled. "I know enough Orcish, sir, to call out rude insults and swear. I don't know that word, I'm afraid."

He inclined his head in a nonchalant gesture. "'Blood brother' would be the loosest translation, I suppose. You cut your hands and mingle your blood, and you swear an oath. From then on, your *na'kor* is your closest family. He is your brother, your best friend, your comrade-at-arms. He is treated as one of your family and he can take your clan name."

Shaundar smiled and nodded. "Yes, it's exactly like that," he concurred. "But why do you ask?"

Commander Bloodfist chuckled low in his throat. "Think I'm fishing for something I can use against you, boy?"

"The thought did cross my mind," he admitted, a little defensively.

The scro shrugged. "I suppose that's a reasonable supposition," he acknowledged, "but it is not my intent. Dukagsh teaches us to understand our enemy, that we may better fight him."

"Dukagsh?" Shaundar repeated curiously.

"Dukagsh was the founder of our people," he explained, "the one who taught us to be more than common orcs. It is said that he was

the son of Gruumsh.” He hesitated and then asked, “You do know who Gruumsh is, don’t you?”

Shaundar nodded.

“Dukagsh was a writer and a scholar,” Dorin Bloodfist elucidated. “Most scro cite his earliest work, ‘A Scro Manifesto,’ but I am rather fond of his last book, ‘The Art of War.’ It is not dissimilar from your ‘Song of the Blade,’ I think. He wrote, ‘Understand your enemy, if you mean to fight him. Learn what drives him, why he fights and what he believes in. Then you will understand what it is that he believes is worth dying for. Only then will you be able to achieve true victory.’”

“I fight to defend my home, my family and my People,” Shaundar told him simply.

He smiled, and this time, Shaundar could tell it was a smile. “Don’t we all, lad. Don’t we all.”

At that moment, the door of the jail opened and one of the cooks came in with a couple of plates of crackers, cheese and fruit. “Dinner,” he announced.

“Hey,” Shaundar spoke up, “is there any meat to be had? Maybe jerky or salt pork if there’s nothing fresh? Or how about some pemmican?”

The cook blinked at him in surprise. “I think we still have some chickens,” he told Shaundar, “and I know there’s as much salt pork as you want, though I can’t imagine why you want it.”

“It’s not for me,” he clarified, “it’s for the commander, here. I guess orcs are mostly carnivores. I think this would be a lot like gruel to them.”

The scro nodded once.

The cook curled his lip. “I guess we can find something,” he spat sourly, as though there was a bad taste in his mouth.

“My father always taught me to treat my enemy as I would wish to be treated,” he insisted.

Cocking his head from one side to the other in a gesture of acquiescence, the cook agreed. “All right, I guess that’s fair. I’ll be back with some meat of some kind. Should I leave both plates anyway?”

“Probably,” Shaundar smiled. “Look at him; I think he needs more food than I do.”

The cook cast a glance into the cell at the massive scro who filled nearly all of it. “I see your point. Okay, see you in a while.” He left.

Shaundar offered him one of the plates. “Do you want this?”

“I’ll take it,” Dorin Bloodfist accepted. Shaundar pushed the plate underneath the bars. The big scro bent down and picked it up. He ate a couple of the fruit pieces first, then put the crackers and cheese together and ate them in little sandwiches. They looked very odd in his giant hands, which ended in short claws. Shaundar set about his own dinner, though he lacked appetite. Having been subject now to rationing and limited supply, he had learned to eat when he could. The fruit was sliced peaches, and Shaundar thought they were delicious.

A few minutes later, the cook returned with a jar of salt pork. “No shortage, like I said. I hope you like salt.”

“Thank you,” the scro commander said. “Both of you.”

The cook nodded curtly and left. Shaundar said, “You’re welcome, sir.” He passed the jar through the bars. Dorin Bloodfist ate about half of it and left the other half. “I’ll eat this later, if you’ll leave it,” he said, and Shaundar nodded. Absently the scro wiped his fingers on his black uniform trousers.

“So lad,” he inquired, as mildly as if asking for the condition of the weather, “have your leaders decided whether or not they’re going to execute me, yet?”

Shaundar shook his head. “We can kill easily enough in the heat of battle, but we find executions difficult. I imagine you’ll probably be marooned somewhere. Or ransomed back to your people, perhaps.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Well, that’s good. Dukagsh counsels us: ‘Face death bravely and with honour, but do not seek it.’ Or, as he says in his ‘Treatise on Orcish Ethics,’ ‘Yurtrus must come for us all, and we should face Him fearlessly; but do not court Him like a suitor, nor wait for Him like a bride.’” He considered his words and added, “I suppose you may not know that Yurtrus is our god of death. Do you long-lived elves have such a deity?”

“Not really,” Shaundar confessed. “The closest would be Sehanine Moonbow, who guides spirits to Arvador.”

“Arvador; yes, your Heaven, your eternal reward,” Commander Bloodfist nodded. “So what happens to elves who are not worthy of Arvador, lad?”

Shaundar had never given it much thought. He imagined that Arvador was the promise given all elves. Would there be *Tel’Quessir* out there who were not worthy of its beauty and perfection? He supposed that there must be. Where was Rear Admiral Durothil going to end up, for example? “I don’t know,” he answered, ruminating on it. “I never thought about it before.”

“Perhaps you should,” the scro advised. “You are a warrior; the state of your soul should be of great concern to you. You might be called to whatever accounting your people are called to at any time.”

Shaundar pursed his lips and nodded. “Good advice.” Was he worthy of Arvador? By what criteria did the gods judge that?

Dorin Bloodfist narrowed his eyes in deliberation and then said, “Here, lad.” He took a book from one of the enormous pouches at his belt. It was leather-bound and thoroughly dog-eared; much loved or much maligned. “Learn some Orcish aside from swearing and insults.” He pushed the book underneath the bars.

Shaundar picked it up and looked at it. Opening it to the first page, he recognized the Orcish word “*tarrak*,” meaning “war,” and not much else. “‘The Art of War’?” he asked.

The scro prisoner nodded once.

“Thank you,” Shaundar said sincerely. “I will learn to read it.” He flipped through it curiously. It was printed with a brass press; the cutting edge of non-gnomish modern print technology. Some of the pages were folded over to mark them; others were bookmarked or scored with underlines. He was intrigued. He wondered what the passages said that his prisoner was particularly interested in; why he had underlined some paragraphs but not others, why one page had a crease in the corner and another did not. He suddenly wanted very much to understand what this book was about and why the scro valued it so highly. He resolved to study Orcish in earnest.

Yathar showed up to relieve him at First Watch, and they shared a pipe together, enjoying the opportunity to relish the higher-quality tobacco since they were unlikely to be called to their stations during their temporary occupation of Selune. By this time their prisoner was dozing fitfully on the stone floor, having pushed the useless cot as far out of the way as it would go. “Any problems?” Yathar queried casually as they smoked.

“None,” Shaundar told him honestly. “Actually, we’ve been having some very interesting conversation. He’s been teaching me about scro culture.”

“Orcs have culture?” sneered Yathar incredulously.

“We like to think so,” their captive rumbled crossly, cracking an eye.

Shaundar smiled in sadistic amusement at his friend’s startled and embarrassed look. “Oh, did I forget to mention that he speaks fluent Elvish?” he inquired innocently. “I should have thought that you would have realized that, given my limited command of Orcish.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” snarked Yathar as he made a rude gesture at his friend.

“Commander Dorin Bloodfist, this is my *na’kor*, Yathar.”

“Champion,” the scro corrected. “My title is ‘Champion.’ I am pleased to meet you, Yathar Sunfall.” He offered that orcish salute. Yathar returned the greeting somewhat awkwardly.

Their captive sat up and sighed. “That pipe smells very good,” he confessed wistfully. “I don’t suppose you would be inclined to share?”

Shaundar brought him the smoking pipe. Again, it looked very strange in his giant terra cotta toned hand with its short (and carefully groomed) claws, but the scro put the stem in his mouth and drew in smoke with a contented sigh. His tusks did not seem to interfere, contrary to what Shaundar might have expected. “You’re a kind-hearted lad, Shaundar Sunfall. Thank you.”

“I’ll go see if I can track you down a hammock now,” Shaundar told him. “And I’ll ask about your armour. Just give that back to Yathar when you’re done.” He headed out of the jail and looked for the officers.

The city hall had been commandeered as a sort of command post, and the Captains and the other Mithril had set up shop there while they mopped things up. Shaundar cast a glance at the warehouse that they had selected to use as a prison, since there was not nearly enough room in Leira’s jail for all of their captives, and then a long look at the Temple of Leira, which had been converted into a makeshift triage and hospital. He thought he should probably stop in there and see how Captain Whitestar was doing, but he was afraid. What if he hadn’t made it? And then there was the dread of finding out which of his crewmates

were no longer with them. It occurred to him that he had yet to see Garan.

One thing at a time. First, armour and hammock. He headed into city hall.

Captain Yvoleth, the Leiran Guard Captain and Commander Aravel, Admiral Alastrarra, Uncle Madrimlian and his father were there. Shaundar had never been so happy to see familiar faces.

“Quessira,” he said, and saluted.

They looked up from the table they had been studying and Shaundar’s father smiled and his eyes gleamed when he saw Shaundar. He returned the salute. *“It’s good to see you, lad,”* he greeted him with obvious warmth. Unspoken on his lips were the words Shaundar knew he was thinking: *I’m glad you made it. I’m glad you’re alive.*

“It’s good to see you too, sir,” Shaundar smiled back. *I’m okay, Dad,* the smile was meant to convey. *“I have some requests from my prisoner.”*

“I don’t think he’s in any position to request anything,” said Admiral Alastrarra sourly.

“It’s not unreasonable, sir,” Shaundar insisted. *“He would like a hammock, for one thing. The cot in there is useless to him. He’s just too big.”*

The Admiral nodded. “All right, that doesn’t seem inappropriate. Go ahead; grab him a hammock, *Teu’Ruan*. Anything else?”

“He would like his armour, sir.”

“I’m sure he would,” the Guard Captain sneered sarcastically.

“It’s a matter of honour, he said,” Shaundar continued. “He said that a scro’s honour is bound up in his axe and his armour, though he knows better than to ask for the axe. He gave me his oath that he would not try to escape as long as he was under my guard. And I believe him.”

“Not a chance,” Lord Alastrarra shook his head. “Too much weaponry at hand, and too much protection should we need to pacify him.”

“Admiral,” Captain Madrimlian spoke up, “perhaps we should consider it.”

The Admiral raised a surprised eyebrow.

“From what I’ve learned about these scro, they take their honour very seriously,” Madrimlian went on. “He might be more cooperative if we respect his customs.”

The Admiral considered the idea. “I guess I’ll leave it up to your judgment, Captain. Why don’t you interview him for yourself? Bring the armour along and see what you think.”

“Technically it belongs to Shaundar and his companions anyway,” Lord Sunfall reminded them. “They captured him; his things are their spoils of war.” He disappeared into the back of the building and came out with that enormous suit of studded leather armour, with its strange orcish rune tooled and dyed red in leather patches at the shoulders. “Do you want his axe as well?”

“Not yet, sir,” Shaundar gently refused. “Is he going to be ransomed back to the scro?”

“We haven’t decided what we’re doing with him yet,” his father told him honestly.

“If you do, he’ll need that,” Shaundar explained frankly. “If you don’t, then I’ll take it.” He imagined the axe was something like a moonblade. He didn’t feel right taking it away from a living orc; it just seemed wrong somehow, especially after what Champion Bloodfist had said. And weirdly, he wasn’t looking to loot by saying he would take it. It was more a sense that the axe should be safeguarded and respected; something Shaundar knew would not happen if he allowed someone else to claim it.

“Sounds like you’ve got him talking fairly well,” Madrimlian remarked in a voice that sounded a little too casual to Shaundar.

“He realizes I’m young,” Shaundar confessed. “I think he’s trying to teach me that not all scro are monsters, sir.” He held up the leather-

bound book, still in his hands. “He gave me this book. He says it’s called ‘The Art of War,’ and that it was written by Dukagsh, who was a cultural hero. ‘The founder of their people,’ I believe he said.”

“May I see that?” Madrimlian asked. Shaundar handed it to him and he flipped through it with great interest. “May I hold on to this for a while?” the Captain requested. “I’d like to copy it; this is of great use to Intelligence.”

“Of course, sir,” Shaundar acquiesced. Uncle Madrimlian pocketed the book.

“Well, let’s go talk to him,” he suggested.

“Yes, sir,” Shaundar nodded. He saluted the Mithril and fell in step with Captain Madrimlian. Shaundar cast another long look at the Temple as they passed by it on the way back.

“Captain Whitestar is going to be fine, you’ll be pleased to know,” Madrimlian confided in him with a smile, “thanks to you. He’s asking for you when you have time, by the way.”

Shaundar was relieved. “I am very glad to hear it, sir. I don’t suppose you’ve heard about anyone else? My crewmates, or the crew of the *Light of Arvandor*?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, Shaundar. You’ll have to ask at the Temple about that.”

He nodded. He wasn't expecting Madrimlian to have an answer; he was just hoping.

They headed back into the jail.

"I'm Captain Madrimlian," he introduced himself to their captive, who rose to his feet when he came into the jail. "I'm with Intelligence."

"Ah," said the Champion. "Is my interrogation to begin now?" He seemed cautious but resigned.

"Well," said Madrimlian, swinging one of the chairs around to sit on it backwards, "I do intend to question you, of course, but if you're concerned about torture, don't be. I have magical methods of determining the truth of your statements, and even to extract your thoughts if necessary."

Dorin Bloodfist smirked. "I don't know if I find that comforting, or disturbing, Captain. I suppose I will try to think about anything but the answers to your questions."

Captain Madrimlian smiled at the corners of his mouth. "I suppose I would do the same. I understand you have asked for your armour."

"I have, Captain. It's a matter of honour."

Madrimlian nodded. “And you’re not going to attempt to use it as a weapon?”

“I suppose that given the opportunity, I might,” the scro replied honestly. “But if you’re questioning what I told the lad, here, he is my *harak’cha* and I have sworn not to attempt to escape while in his custody, nor that of his blood brother, and my word is absolute.”

Madrimlian mulled this over. “All right then. Go ahead and give him his armour, Shaundar.”

“I’ll unlock the door,” offered Yathar, standing up with the keyring.

“While we’re at it, you boys might as well take out the cot,” Madrimlian suggested. “Please step back from the bars, Commander.”

“Champion,” Shaundar corrected. “He said that his title was ‘Champion’.”

“Champion Dorin Bloodfist, Captain,” the scro introduced himself as he backed away from the cell door with his hands raised.

Yathar opened the door and the two of them removed the cot. “Do you want me to leave the bedding?” Shaundar asked.

“Please,” the scro Champion confirmed. So Shaundar separated the bedding and handed it back to the scro, along with his armour. He

smiled and thanked him, and after placing the bedding carefully in a corner, he strapped on the armour with the ease of long practice. Once so dressed, he seemed a lot more comfortable. It was a bit like watching a turtle put his shell back on.

“Very well, Captain Madrimlian,” Champion Bloodfist rumbled in that deep basso voice. “Ask your questions. I will answer what I may.”

“Let’s start with the ones I don’t think you will answer,” Madrimlian began, sitting down. “Such as how many more of your ships there are in the sphere?”

The scro leader chuckled. “I honestly don’t know for sure,” he said with an odd tusked smile. “About a dozen less now, I would think.”

Madrimlian cast him a thin smile. “You would be correct. We scuttled your ships, after we removed the helms for our use.” He licked his lips and added pointedly, “Except, of course, for the lifejammers, which we destroyed.”

Shaundar shook his head. Lifejammers were a form of helm that drained life force from their helmsmen instead of magic. They could therefore be used by anyone, not just those skilled in arcane or divine magic, but they were cursed. Not only did they drain their victim’s very life energy, but they drove their helmsmen mad, who would then resist all attempts to remove them from the horrible things as it killed them slowly. They were very often fatal.

Dorin Bloodfist's mouth thinned into a line. "I'm glad, Captain. It is standard procedure to keep one as a backup helm in times of desperation, but I hate the things."

Captain Madrimlian met his eyes and nodded. "All right then. How many troops were under your command?"

"Eight hundred and fifty, including our Marines," he divulged. Shaundar exchanged a look with Yathar. That was an even larger army than they had figured.

"What was your purpose in occupying Selune?" Madrimlian pressed on.

"As you might have guessed, to establish a base of operations close to Toril, and to that flight school you elves are so proud of," the scro continued in the same frank manner.

"And how are your people going to take your failure, Champion Bloodfist?" inquired Madrimlian slyly.

"Badly," he admitted. "We were misinformed, but that would only sound like an excuse to our leadership. I will make no excuses, should I be returned."

"There were mages among your troops," the Captain pointed out curiously. This was news to Shaundar, who didn't think that orcs studied arcane magic at all.

“Ogre mages,” Champion Bloodfist nodded. “Oni, as they call themselves. And the Warpriests, of course.”

““Warpriests’?” echoed Madrimlian.

“Priests who also study arcane magic,” he told the Captain bluntly.

“What god do they serve? Gruumsh?”

The scro smiled again. “Sorry Captain, I refuse to answer that question. Our religion is none of your business.”

“Why?” demanded Madrimlian.

He smiled a bit more broadly. “My father always told me never to discuss religion or politics with an enemy.”

“Wise orc, your father,” the Captain said.

“We prefer to differentiate ourselves from common orcs, Captain Madrimlian,” he returned. “We are scro, not orcs. *Ar’hakavarn*, in your language, I imagine.”

Shaundar considered that. *Hakavarn* was Espruar for “orc.” Translated literally, it came from *hakar* meaning “enemy,” and *vaarn* meaning “evil,” which was, in his opinion, an excellent demonstration of just how long the Orcs had made war on the Elves. Adding the prefix *ar* to the word changed its meaning to “high orc.” He reflected that claiming

such a name was not unfair, nor unreasonable in the case of the obviously cultured and educated Scro.

“What about politics, then?” the Captain continued. “What is the name of your leader?”

“I’m sorry Captain,” the scro responded, “but that, too, is none of your business.”

Madrimlian nodded thoughtfully again. “Overlord is his title, is it not?” he wanted to know.

Dorin Bloodfist nodded once, his huge arms folded across his armoured chest.

“What does the title ‘Champion’ mean?” he demanded, taking a completely different tack.

“I am the military leader of my clan,” Dorin told him. “The position is chosen by test of arms, usually to the death.”

“So this was the forces of the Bloodfist clan that we have encountered then?” Madrimlian pressed on.

“Yes,” the scro said simply.

“Where is your homeworld, Champion Bloodfist?”

The scro laughed. “Dukagsh,” he smiled. “And that’s as much as you will get out of me there, Captain.”

“Yes, ‘Dukagsh’,” Madrimlian pressed. “I understand that was the name of a cultural hero.”

“Our founder,” the Champion explained. He made an almost imperceptible gesture in an attitude of reverence.

“Where do the clans come in?”

“Ah,” the scro exclaimed, “that is another question about politics, which I will not willingly answer, Captain.”

Captain Madrimlian did not leave this subject. “How many clans are there? What determines your clan membership?”

The large scro remained silent over his folded arms, glowering.

Madrimlian sighed. “Well, thank you for being mostly cooperative, Champion Bloodfist.” He stood up. “I’ll fetch you a hammock.”

“Don’t worry about it, Captain,” the scro leader refused. “I don’t believe there’s any good spot to hang it in here when I consider it, and I have pillows and a blanket. Now that the cot is out of the way, that will be more than sufficient, thank you.”

“As you prefer,” the Captain accepted. He clapped Shaundar and Yathar on the shoulder and added, “Try to get some reverie, lads.”

“Av, *quessir*,” Yathar agreed. The Captain left them then.

After he had gone, Dorin Bloodfist looked to the boys and asked them, “Do you think that he can really read my thoughts?”

“Yes,” Shaundar admitted, thinking about the training he’d received to conserve his magic at the helm at Aces High.

“That’s interesting,” the Champion remarked. “I have learned the hallmarks of spellcasting and I did not see him perform any. Did you?”

Shaundar smiled. “No,” he agreed.

Yathar put a hand on his shoulder. “You look like you’re ready to fall over and you’re supposed to be back here for Afternoon Watch. Why don’t you go get some reverie? I’ve got things here.”

Shaundar realized that he was, indeed, very tired. “Okay, I’ll do that. Good night. And good night to you, Champion Bloodfist.”

“Good night, lad,” Dorin Bloodfist wished him sincerely. He sat on the stone floor, pulled the blanket around his body and the pillow under his head, and just like that, he seemed to go right to sleep.

But Shaundar did not. He went to the Temple first.

Even now, the smell of blood was overwhelming. Worse than that, there was a sickly-sweet under-scent lingering. It was the smell of decay and infection. The candles were burning low this early in the morning. Someone was moaning softly.

Shaundar entered the main chapel, which had been converted to a hospital by the presence of several cots and hammocks, all filled with wounded people; mostly elves, but humans and gnomes as well. Shaundar took a candle in a brass night holder and began to move from cot to hammock to cot, looking for people he knew.

He saw Lannatyr first, the victim of a burn that covered the left side of her face and most of her left arm. She was actually sleeping; something elves were capable of but generally only did when they could not find rest in reverie. He left her to it without disturbing her, though he did scratch a brief note to let her know he had been there, just so that she was aware that friends were concerned.

Captain Whitestar was not sleeping, nor in reverie. He was reading quietly by candlelight, propped up on one side and dangling a stump of a leg over the edge of it. He glanced up and smiled when he saw Shaundar.

“It’s good to see that you’re okay, sir,” Shaundar whispered in an effort not to disturb the other patients.

“Thanks to you, lad,” he nodded solemnly. He indicated a fabric bag dangling from the end of his cot. “Your things are there, but I doubt you want them. What did you use, your belt and your baldric?”

“My baldric and my uniform cording, sir,” he told him candidly.

“Hell of a field dressing, soldier,” the Captain shook his head and smiled. “Who taught you how to do that?”

Shaundar grinned. “*You* did, sir.”

“Did I?” The Captain laughed out loud. No one seemed to notice except for an irritable nurse who shushed them noisily. “Well, damn good investment in my personal future then! Shaundar, lad,” he said, taking his hand and shaking it firmly in the manner of humans, “I don’t know how to thank someone for saving my life, but if you ever need anything – ever – you just come and see me, okay?”

“It’s not necessary to thank me, sir,” Shaundar replied directly. “I think you saved mine first.”

With that, the nurse came striding purposefully towards them and snapped grouchily at Shaundar, “I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave, Lieutenant. You’re disturbing the other patients.” A loud snore from one of the sleeping gnomes punctuated her declaration as Shaundar stared at her, and the room of oblivious patients, incredulously. But it occurred to him that Captain Madrimlian was right about getting some

reverie, and he figured that now maybe he actually could. “I suppose I should get going anyway, Captain. Take care, sir.”

“I certainly will, Mr. Sunfall,” he assured Shaundar with fervour. “It would be a crime against the Seldarine to squander this gift you have given me! Shaundar,” added the Captain as he turned to go, “you take care too, okay?”

“*Av, quessir,*” Shaundar assured him, and with a nod to the scowling nurse, he left. As he walked back to his barracks, he could smell the sickly-sweet roast pork stench of bodies burning.

When Shaundar reported for guard duty at the eighth bell of the Mid-Morning Watch, their prisoner was being clapped in irons. “They’re transferring the prisoners to a camp,” Yathar informed him. “I understand there is a plan to ransom the Champion back to the Scro.” He scowled grimly and added, “But the camp is being established by Rear Admiral Durothil.”

Shaundar hitched in his breath. That could not be good for the prisoners. He looked to the Champion and cautioned him, “Rear Admiral Durothil is not a kind individual. Be careful, sir.”

Dorin Bloodfist nodded just once resolutely as they clapped the irons around his wrists. “I thank you for the warning, Shaundar Sunfall. Should we ever meet again, I will remember your treatment of me.” He

extended a large orange hand, though the other one followed it due to the handcuffs. Shaundar took it. Then they took him away. He looked like a captured beast in the midst of the elves, all of whom stood at least a full foot and a half shorter than he did, but he marched with his head high and his piercing blue eyes met every pair of eyes in the room. Sylria helped to lead him away. “Briefing in ten minutes in the barracks,” she told Shaundar and Yathar directly.

“See you there, then,” said Shaundar with a nod, and he and Yathar headed back that way. They watched lines of orcs and scro, ogres, goblins, hobgoblins and kobolds, separated by race, being marched into transport barges against the backdrop of the brightening sky. Shaundar saw the *Ruamarillys* standing by in orbit, obviously intended to serve as an escort.

The barracks was noisy, crowded and jovial. Garan came to greet them at the door, much to Shaundar and Yathar’s delight, who embraced him, unabashed. Captain Yvoleth was squatting on a cot where a wounded crewmate, their boatswain, lay. Both of them were chatting away and though the Captain looked weary, he seemed otherwise none the worse for wear. Unfortunately the Matey had also survived; he was lurking in a corner with his arms folded. But unless they were all out aiding in the prisoner transfer, the crew seemed somewhat reduced to Shaundar.

“I hear you guys captured the scro leader,” Garan smiled at them.

Shaundar shrugged. “Yathar beat a path to him, Sylria webbed him and I put a sword to his throat. It was Sylria’s doing, mostly.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly right,” Yathar agreed. “So my question is; why were the two of us guarding him and not Sylria, if the Mithril were concerned about this *harak’cha* thing?”

“Because,” Captain Madrimlian answered as he entered the barracks with Sylria, “scro culture is patriarchal. They don’t consider females to be a serious threat in combat. We were afraid that he would give her trouble.”

Yathar snorted. “Well, that’s stupid. You just ask Tyelatae’s enemies whether or not she’s a threat.” He smiled at Sylria. “Hers too,” he added.

“Exactly,” piped up Garan, who grabbed Sylria and picked her up in a firm embrace. They kissed passionately.

“Speaking of Tyelatae,” Vice Admiral Sunfall piped up as he followed Sylria and Madrimlian into the barracks tent, ducking his head at the door, “you’ll be pleased to know that she’s being fitted for her prosthetic probably as we speak, and she’ll be rejoining your crew after this next mission.”

“That’s great news, sir,” Yathar grinned. Shaundar was equally pleased.

“Admiral on deck!” called Garan loudly, and the crew stood up and saluted. Even the wounded boatswain attempted to prop herself up on her cot and salute.

“As you were, *Tel’Quessir*,” Shaundar’s father nodded to them, returning the salute. “Come gather around.”

The crew seated themselves in an informal cluster around the Admiral and the Captains.

“First of all, *Tel’Quessir*,” Lord Sunfall began, “I would like to congratulate the lot of you on a decisive victory. You are all being awarded the *Spear of Angharradh* for your courage!” His eyes met Shaundar’s and Yathar’s with the glow of pride. The whooping and cheering in response to this pronouncement halted the speech for a full minute.

“Now the Navy has another task for the *Queen’s Dirk*,” he announced.

“Figures,” Garan jested, not quite quietly enough to not be heard. “We’re rewarded for good work with more work.”

Shaundar’s father’s eyes twinkled. “Welcome to the Navy, Lieutenant Oakheart. Captain Madrimlian, if you please.”

The Captain stepped forward. “*Tel’Quessir*, two weeks ago a supply convoy with a Man-o-War escort was destroyed by something we

haven't seen before. There were three survivors in the wreckage, and with the aid of their descriptions, we created this model of their attacker." He produced a wooden model and encouraged the crew to pass it around. When it reached Shaundar, he studied it intently. Its head was shaped like some kind of insect and it had huge grapples on the front of it that vaguely resembled hands clasped in prayer. It seemed to have sled-tracks as landing gear. A name in Orcish was painted in tiny letters along its stern. "It looks like a praying mantis," Sylria remarked, "what with those grapples."

"The name translates to '*The Vengeance*'," Captain Madrimlian explained. "It's a man-o-war class and it was armed to the teeth with some kind of bombard. Your mission, *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*, is to find her, and burn her, sink her, or take her as a prize. Ideally, Intelligence would like to have a look at her, but not at the risk of her freedom and your loss."

"Will we have wingmen, Captain?" Yvoeth asked nonchalantly.

"No," Lord Sunfall answered instead. "The scro are beginning to invade the sphere in numbers and we can't afford to lose that many ships. That's why we're sending you; you're the aces of the Fleet. We credit you with more than fifty ships sunk, captured or burned. Is that correct, Captain?"

"I believe I lost count at forty-seven, sir," Captain Yvoeth admitted with an almost sheepish smile.

“Her last known position was near H’Catha,” Madrimlian continued. “Your Chief Navigator already has the coordinates,” he nodded to Sylria. “Are there any questions?”

Shaundar raised his hand. Madrimlian acknowledged him with a movement of his hand. “Sir,” he began, “will we be receiving replacements before we go? I see a lot of missing faces, *quessir*.”

“Av, Lieutenant,” Shaundar’s father replied.

“Thank you, sir,” he nodded.

“Any further questions?” the Captain inquired.

Garan raised his hand and was acknowledged. “*Quessira*, what shall we do with her crew?”

Lord Sunfall answered, “Capture them if you can, kill them if you can’t.”

“Av, *quessir*,” he returned simply.

“Anything else?”

No more hands were raised.

“Good, then,” Lord Sunfall murmured, standing up. The crew rose with him. “You leave at First Watch. Rest well. Sweet water and light laughter until we next meet.” The crew saluted again as he headed

for the door. As he passed by Shaundar and Yathar he said, “Lieutenants, speak with me for a moment.” They mumbled their affirmatives and fell in step with him as he left the barracks.

When they were outside and near to one of the outhouses, Lord Sunfall turned to face them and he fixed them with his fiery amber gaze. “Your mother doesn’t want me to send you on this one,” he disclosed directly. “But I have no choice but to send you for the reasons I have already mentioned. I could pull rank and remove you both, but you would forever be haunted by a reputation for nepotism and I swore I would never do that.” He seemed almost to be asking them if they wanted him to do this.

Shaundar felt a shiver run down his spine. Disregarding his mother’s intuition in the past had led to nothing but grief. But he knew his duty. “You can’t do that, sir,” he refused gently. “Captain Yvoeth says that you can’t command your people to risk anything that you are not willing to risk. We’ll do our part, sir.” Yathar nodded his agreement.

Shaundar’s father sighed, though whether from relief, resignation or pride, he could not tell. “You’re good and honourable lads,” he praised them gently, which made Shaundar’s heart glow. “But be careful, all right? Please don’t take reckless and unnecessary risks. Not this time.”

“We’ll do our best, sir,” Yathar promised.

He clapped them both awkwardly on their shoulders. “Then good luck to you and Erevan grant you aid. Sweet water and light laughter . . .”

“. . . Until we next meet,” Shaundar finished, bowing properly.

Lord Sunfall nodded and walked briskly off.

“I don’t like it,” Shaundar confessed.

Yathar’s jaw was set. “Me neither. Do you think we should warn the Captain?”

Shaundar shrugged. “Do you think it would change anything?”

“Probably not,” Yathar admitted.

“Then why? Let’s go find a place to get a drink. Here we are on Selune at last and we’ve been so busy working that we haven’t enjoyed any of the local flavour.”

Yathar laughed out loud and thumped Shaundar on the back. “Now you’re talking!” he grinned.

“Hey,” Garan spoke up as he and Sylria caught up with them, “tell me that you at least kept the axe! Laeroth wants me to send him one.”

“He would,” Shaundar sneered. But of course, he had not. He looked up into the sky, shining bright with Selune’s two week day cycle. There would not be a star in the sky when they made sail, and that was a bad omen.

Chapter Twelve

The *Queen's Dirk* sighted the *Vengeance* on the edge of the crystal shell at the third bell of the First Watch, on the morning of the twenty-fifth of Third-Month, 5042 O.C. Everyone who could manage it crowded on to the decks to get a good look. Shaundar studied her and thought to himself what a peculiar looking ship she was. She looked like what might happen if you mated a praying mantis with a snow sled. It was solid metal and painted bright red, the colour of blood, except for the head, the ends of the grapples, the railing surrounding their main deck, and the odd blade-like landing gear, which were all polished metallic silver. She didn't seem to have a fo'c'sle, and one of those blades was also sticking straight up from the main deck in a fashion that resembled the crest of a lizard. She only seemed to have a handful of those bombards, which were the black of solid iron, but Shaundar suspected that more were hidden behind portholes, just like Queenie's stinger.

"All right, you loafers!" called the Captain impatiently. "All hands to your ropes, helm or guns. Battle stations!" The boatswain, fully recovered, piped the call. Not wasting any more time, Shaundar clambered down to the helm.

"That's her, isn't it?" Sylria asked when he arrived in the helm room, her eyes focused on the space around their ship.

"Av," Shaundar nodded.

Shaundar was surprised then by the Captain's voice calling, "All hands! Extinguish all flames immediately! Batten down the hatches!" The boatswain piped a tune Shaundar had never heard other than in drills, which signified that they were about to enter the phlogiston.

Sylria blinked in surprise. "There's a portal opening in the crystal shell," she announced. "I guess the Captain means to follow them in."

Shaundar was taken aback. In all the spacefaring they'd done, they had yet to leave the crystal sphere. But, he supposed, they were directed to "burn her, sink her, or take her as a prize," and he did not recall "unless they leave the crystal shell" being part of those orders. He started running around below decks putting out candles, something he hadn't practiced since drills at Aces High. He regretted not picking up some snuff while they were on Selune, which is what his father said that most elven starhands used for tobacco in the phlogiston. One didn't burn anything in the phlogiston. It tended to explode.

"All hands brace to enter the Flow!" roared the Captain, and Shaundar grabbed a hold of one of the brass handles on the wall provided for the purpose. "Lieutenant Sylria, follow them in!" Yvoeth bellowed, and she called back, "*Av, quessir!*" and entered the portal. Queenie shuddered and shifted. A weird light began to radiate from the hatchway to the deck, and then something exploded.

"Fire in the hold!" Shaundar cried out.

“Main deck!” Sylria called back. “Prayer room!”

Shaundar bolted down the passageway from the thorax to the abdomen. He tripped and fell about halfway there as Queenie rolled and quaked suddenly, but he dragged himself back to his feet and continued running. The toxic smoke was already filling the corridor. He wasn't the first one on site; the stinger crew were dumping buckets of sand on the flames, acquired from the aft fire station. Shaundar dug furiously in his belt pouches and eventually came up with a vial of blended ash and salt, which he kept for just such occasions. He unstopped the vial, threw the contents forth into the flames with one hand while making a mystical sign with the other, and incanted the appropriate phrase. As he spoke the last arcane word, the fire simply went out. A handy spell created by a wizard named Nystul which most spelljammers learned for exactly this situation.

“Thanks sir!” one of the stinger crew said gratefully. “All clear!” Shaundar yelled; then he bent double in a coughing fit. He was a little shaken. It was the altar that had been burning, set alight by the two candles that typically flanked its sides. There was nothing left of it but a smoking ruin.

“Eye ballistae; fire!” Captain Yvoeth commanded, and Queenie shivered with the lesser recoil of the light ballistae as they let loose.

“Lieutenant,” called the Captain, “they have a good lead on us. Give ‘er all that you’ve got. All sail crew to your ropes! And I want a damage report on the double!”

The affirmatives rang out as the pursuit began in earnest. Shaundar rushed back up the corridor to the hatchway nearer to the helm room because it led to the Battle Deck, where the bridge was located. He saluted and waited to be acknowledged. As he did, he stared hard out the forward window, which opened on to the forward deck and Queenie’s front view. Shaundar had never seen anything like the churning, nebulous rainbow light that flowed all around them somewhat like mist and somewhat like a river. It gave off its own incredible luminescence. Studying it for a moment, Shaundar could see eddies of individual colours whirling around each other like river currents. They were following one such current, which was snaking and blue, plunging through the other rainbow swirls. Ahead of them, out of range except for the light ballistae located in the eye portals, was the *Vengeance*. Those strange blades seemed to skim the surface of the blue river of light and guide the ship along, which was being mostly steered by oars as opposed to sails.

“Go ahead, Mr. Sunfall,” the Captain nodded as he and the Matey stared forward to their quarry with predatory eyes.

“The explosion was in the prayer room, sir,” he reported. “Damage was primarily to the altar, which was destroyed. We got the fire out before it could spread. There was a lot of smoke but I don’t think it’s enough to foul the air envelope. Sorry I wasn’t fast enough on the candles, sir.”

The Captain looked at him and smiled. “Shouldn’t have been your job, Mr. Sunfall. You would have been in the Helm Room; that’s Queenie’s other end. Actually, we didn’t do too badly for an unplanned phlogiston entry. Now I would like you to go around and collect everyone’s flints so we don’t have any more accidents.”

“Av, *quessir*.” Shaundar sketched a salute.

“Oh yes, and since you are one of the few who currently has nothing to do,” Yvoeth smirked, “I would like you to commandeering anyone else who is idle and some spice grinders from the kitchen, and I want you to grind us some tobacco.” He tossed Shaundar his tobacco pouch. “Then I’ll teach you how to take snuff, pollywog!”

The eye ballistae fired again. One of the bolts bounced off of the *Vengeance*’s fin blade.

Shaundar grinned. “Are we going to have a Crossing the Flow ceremony, sir?”

The Captain smiled back. “I believe Ptah would be offended if we did not.”

Ptah was a god of travel and stars given lip service by almost all starfarers, so by tradition, He presided over the ceremony of *Crossing the Flow*. Shaundar had heard bits and pieces about this ritual from his

father and uncle, so he had some idea of what to expect, though not specifics; especially since each ship and sailor had its own take on it. Upon entering the Flow, those who had never been through it before, known as “pollywogs,” were allowed to deliver whatever abuse and hazing they saw fit to assign to those who had already crossed the Flow, the “shellbacks;” though this was understood to be repaid in kind on the following day, when the shellbacks hazed the pollywogs. To start with, everyone stripped to the waist so that they could see who had shellback tattoos and who did not. Shaundar was amused, but not surprised, to see that Sylria was a shellback already.

He, Yathar and Garan took great pleasure in teasing Sylria and abusing the Matey. Along with the other pollywogs (who vastly outnumbered the shellbacks on Queenie’s crew) they assigned the shellbacks, mostly senior crew and officers, to such ignoble tasks as emptying the head, scrubbing the scuppers, swabbing the deck, barnacle scraping and polishing all the pollywogs’ boots. Sylria’s smirk as she ran black polish over Shaundar’s boots, a little smudge of polish left on the end of her nose where she had scratched it, was a little disturbing, he had to admit, but there was no way he was going to allow this to spoil his entertainment.

Weapons crews traded off manning the eye ballistae and taking pot shots at the *Vengeance* all the while that this was going on, and they also traded off manning the sails in a Hells-bent attempt to catch her. It was in their best interests to engage before they reached another crystal sphere. Obviously there would be no firing of bombards in the

phlogiston, and that would make her nearly helpless. But they couldn't seem to do it. Their helmsman was fast, really fast, and the strange bug-like ship was as manoeuvrable as they were. The Captain chose not to continue the constant attack and instead had weapons crews launch bolts at random intervals to keep the scro off balance.

Their ship moved differently in the phlogiston than she did in Wildspace. Some of the crew actually were ill with seasickness. Shaundar counted himself fortunate that he was not among them, but Yathar looked a little pale. Unlike some of the replacement crew, however, he seemed able to hold his cookies, and he never spoke a word of complaint.

After the shellbacks had polished all the brass, mended the sails and made dinner – fresh fruit, cheese, and the last soft bread they would enjoy until they entered a sphere again for the pollywogs, gruel for the shellbacks – it was Shaundar's turn at the helm. Piloting Queenie in the rainbow river was an exercise in concentration, keeping her straight and true while the Flow struggled to dominate her. But she was a fine starbird and she kept her course with just a little encouragement.

"You're going to be pretty tired tomorrow," Yathar told him helpfully as he lurked in the door of the helm room. "You didn't sleep today and you're not going to get a chance to sleep until after the initiation and your shift tomorrow night."

“So bring me some snuff then,” Shaundar demanded, “if you’re so concerned about my well-being.”

To Yathar’s credit, he actually did hand him a jar of ground tobacco. “How do we do this again?” he asked Shaundar curiously.

“Ah!” Shaundar exclaimed. “Now your ulterior motive is revealed! Okay, the Captain showed me. You take a pinch of this stuff,” which he did, “and you either just sniff it like that, or you place it on that little hollow near your wrist that appears when you extend your thumb all the way,” which, again, he demonstrated, “and then you inhale it through one nostril, then the other,” which he also showed Yathar.

Yathar tried it and had a sneezing fit.

“That’s pretty common, I understand,” Shaundar said comfortingly as he wiped his own nose with a handkerchief.

“I understand the humans chew this in the Flow,” Yathar remarked when the sneezing stopped. “Maybe I should try that.”

“Go for it if you like,” Shaundar shrugged. “Sounds revolting to me.”

“Why in the Nine Hells did we start smoking in the first place?” he shook his head.

Shaundar shrugged. “Stupid, I guess?”

Yathar's only response to that was a rueful nod and smirk.

Shaundar kept Queenie skimming the surface of the Flow-river because she seemed to travel faster that way, being carried along more easily, but that was the best he could do for speeding their progress.

"What do you think this phlogiston stuff actually is, Shaundar?" Yathar pondered.

Again Shaundar shrugged. "Nobody knows. My dad says that it might be the raw stuff of Creation."

"So the 'raw stuff of Creation' is highly flammable and explosive?" Yathar curled his lip sceptically.

"Sure," Shaundar smiled. "Alchemically, that would represent limitless potential."

"Hmm," murmured Yathar thoughtfully.

The next day, true to form, the shellbacks got their revenge.

The first thing that happened is that dawnfry was served; the last of the fresh fruit, honey glazed nuts, dessert wine and *quinpah* for the shellbacks, hard tack and coffee made with the stalest water they could find on board for the pollywogs. Then the Ensign was lowered and a

black flag with starry points on it was hoisted. “All hands to stations!” cried the grinning Captain. “Prepare to receive the Old Man of the Void!”

The Old Man of the Void was a personification of death like “Davey Jones” in the seafaring tradition. The pollywogs were directed to wear their dress uniforms to receive the gentleman properly, and he was piped aboard in *lolaa* as though they were receiving an Admiral. Shaundar didn’t know which of their crewmates had dressed in the black swashbuckler’s outfit with a feathered hat and a black mask that completely obscured his features, but he couldn’t help but feel a chill when the dark figure boarded their ship. He carried a plain-bladed sword and a crossbow.

Then they were directed to receive Ptah Pharoah and His Consort, Shehanine Moonbow. Ptah was obviously the Matey, dressed up in a skullcap and a Mulhorandi Pharoah’s false beard, carrying an odd staff with bands like the ones in the beard piece, topped with four “floors” that vaguely resembled a pagoda, and a symbol that combined an ankh and *was*. He understood that the ankh represented life and the *was* represented death. His eyes were painted up in that Mulhorandi fashion of exaggeration, and he wore a cloak that seemed to be made of the same stuff as the black flag; which Shaundar could now see was black silk, dotted with stars made of the same silver material as their uniforms.

Shehanine was represented by the fairest, most wispy elf maid in their crew, whom Shaundar knew to be Lyenna, one of the healers and a priestess of Angharradh, the Triune Goddess, Who was a merging of

Sehanine, Hanali Celanil and Aerdrie Faenya. Lyenna was faerie, so her silvery hair and fair amber eyes, with her fair porcelain skin, was exactly what Shaundar pictured when he thought of the goddess. She was draped with gossamer robes that revealed her silhouette beneath them. She was crowned with a circlet that placed a silver disk at her brow etched with lunar craters, and the Moonbow hovered above the disk. In her arms, weirdly, she carried an enormous reeking turnip wrapped in swaddling clothes.

The two of them were seated in prominent thrones on the Main Deck, which were painted with images of stars and nebulae (which Shaundar guessed must have been kept somewhere in the hold, though he didn't recall ever seeing them while loading and unloading,) and then they set about summoning their "Royal Court," which Shaundar suspected was an excuse to incorporate all the shellbacks in "official" capacities; but each one of them was announced as though they were heads-of-state.

The pollywogs were then directed to entertain Ptah Pharoah and Sehanine Moonbow. Some of them were ordered to dance, others to sing, still others to recite poetry. Shaundar was put in a group where they were to act out scenes as described by Sehanine. He ended up laughing hopelessly as he was directed to enact a scavver chewing on Yathar's arm.

Then "trials" began against the pollywogs. As they knelt before the "Royal Judge," they were ordered to kiss the "Royal Baby"; the

swaddled turnip, which was half-rotten and it stunk horrendously. Yathar was charged with “chronic womanizing” and was commanded to wear women’s clothing for the day. Sylria helpfully lent him a bright red dress and painted him up with rouge. It didn’t fit and he, of course, looked completely ridiculous. Garan was accused of “terminal shyness” and they dressed him up in bright yellow, hung a bullseye lantern around his neck and commanded him to blow a trumpet or yell “Look at me!” for a good half hour. Shaundar was charged with “excessive hot-dogging,” and they dangled him from the mizzenmast in a rock climber’s harness for about an hour. Occasionally someone gave him a push so that he would swing wildly.

After that, Sylria, the “Royal Barber” cheerfully cut their hair into ridiculous, completely unwearable messes, and then they were commanded to take the “Royal Bath,” which meant bathing – in their dress uniforms, no less – in a tub of the waste water from the mess mingled with *quesstiasa*. They were dunked three times and required to call out “shellback!” with each dipping.

Then canvas was laid out on the deck and strewn with garbage that would normally have been fired out of the catapult. The shellbacks lined up on either side of the canvas with paddles, floggers, and ropes knotted at the ends. They fastened ropes around the waists of the pollywogs, tied to belaying pins on the other end of the deck, and the pollywogs were commanded to run the gauntlet. After his court martial, this command gave Shaundar a jolt like he had been kicked in the stomach, but not wanting to be accused of cowardice, he did it anyway.

They were not gentle with the paddling but not brutal either. When he was almost at the end of the canvas, someone grabbed a hold of his rope and hauled him back to the start. They did this a few times before they let him go. Seeing that everyone was receiving this same treatment, he almost didn't finish because he was laughing too hard to move.

Last, a bucket of raw phlogiston was dumped over the heads of each of the pollywogs in turn in a "baptism of the Flow;" which Shaundar considered to be a practical solution for ridding them of much of the unsavoury tidbits they were coated in. Then they were to bow before Ptah and Sehanine, who declared them to be Trusty Shellbacks and presented them with certificates. Shaundar's read:

TO ALL STARFARERS WHEREVER YE MAY BE, and to all kindori, star selkies, scavvers, delphinids, dragons, gonn, krajens, meteorspawn, oortlings, and all other living things of the Void; GREETINGS. Know ye that on the twenty-seventh of Third-Month, 5042 O.C., in the Arcane Inner Flow outside of Realspace, there appeared in Our Royal Domain Imperial Elven Navy Ship Nikym d'Quex Etrielle. BE IT REMEMBERED that the said Vessel and Officers and Crew thereof, have been inspected and passed on by Ourselves and Our Royal Staff; and be it known by all ye spacers, marines, groundlings and others who may be honoured by the presence that Teu'Ruan Quessir Shaundar Sunfall, having been found worthy to be numbered as one of our Trusty Shellbacks, has been duly initiated into the SOLEMN MYSTERIES OF THE ANCIENT ORDER OF THE VOID. Be it further understood that by virtue of the power invested in Us, We hereby command of Our subjects to show due honour and respect

wherever they may be. *DISOBEY THIS ORDER UNDER PENALTY OF OUR ROYAL DISPLEASURE.* Signed: Old Man of the Void, Royal Scribe; Her Royal Highness Sehanine Moonbow, Queen of the Stars; and His Majesty Ptah Pharaoh, King of the Void. Witnessed by Captain Yvoleth, I.E.N.S. Nikym d'Quex Etrielle.

The *quesstiasa* and the *elvarquisst* appeared in quantity and everyone set about celebrating in good elven tradition, punctuated only by the occasional firing of the eye ballistae. Garan, Yathar and Shaundar wanted to get their shellback tattoos right away, and Lyenna was a tattoo artist, a skill she made use of in the totemic magic that was the unique purview of her holy order, so she agreed to tattoo them as they drank prestigiously with the other new shellbacks. Garan laughed heartily and clapped Yathar and Shaundar on their un-inked shoulders while his own tattoo was being drawn. "I'll buy us all drinks when we get back to port!" he promised. "My grandmother will be so proud!"

"You're on!" Shaundar chuckled.

"Yep, we'll hold you to that!" Yathar swore solemnly.

Shaundar was more than a little drunk when he came to the helm that night, and bleeding a little from his new tattoo; the gammaroid on its hind legs, which was inked onto his right shoulder. The goo from the waste water was beginning to dry in the ruin of his hair and it was itchy. So was the new body art.

Queenie was forgiving of his inebriation, however, and she responded easily to his will. The *Vengeance* continued to flee before them, and they neither lost or nor gained any distance.

The Captain came to the door of the helm room and Shaundar offered him a drunken salute. Captain Yvoeth didn't seem too steady himself. "How goes it, lad?" he asked. "Are you making any headway?"

"No sir," Shaundar admitted. "I'm far too drunk for that, sir. "

The Captain nodded reflectively. "That's all right, lad. You'll never have another Flow Crossing like your first. Enjoy it."

Shaundar fell silent for a moment, but then he couldn't help but ask, "Cap'n, have you ever been this way before? Do you know where we're going?"

Captain Yvoeth nodded. "A little sphere called Spiralspace is the next one on the Arcane Inner Flow. There are a couple of elven colony worlds there. After that is Grommspace, where the Grommans come from. Gods help me; I hope they're heading for Grommspace and not Spiralspace."

Shaundar nodded grimly. Yes, if the scro were headed to Spiralspace, then that was very bad news for those elven colony worlds.

"I figure," the Captain pondered aloud, "that we'll do our level best to take them out when they enter the sphere. They'll have to slow

down, and take the time to find or create a portal. When they do, we should let them have it with everything we've got before they have a chance to leave the Flow. Even then, we should still have a few minutes. They'll have to prime the bombards at the very least. Too dangerous to do it any earlier. But once they get those guns going, things are going to be touch and go. They'll do a lot of damage. So it's imperative that we hit them as hard as we can as fast as we can." He fixed Shaundar with his steely blue eyes. "I'm telling you this because if you're in the helm when we get there, lad, it'll be easier if I don't have to explain all this."

"Understood, sir," Shaundar said solemnly. "Do you want me to pass this on to the other jammers?"

"It can't hurt, just in case I don't remember that we had this conversation when I sober up," he agreed. "But I'll try to have this talk with them too."

"Av, *quessir*," Shaundar returned by way of acknowledgement.

The Captain cleared his throat. "You know, lad," he began, "your father asked if I'd keep an eye on you and your brother when you were assigned to me."

Shaundar nodded. He had suspected that this was the case and it didn't surprise him. Actually, it even secretly pleased him.

"Partially he wanted me to try to keep you out of trouble," Yvoeth explained with intoxicated candour. "But you really haven't been

any trouble, you or Yathar. Better sailors I could never want. Fine starhands, the both of you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shaundar smiled. The praise gave him a warm feeling in his belly. Or maybe it was the *quesstiasa*.

The Captain smiled back and clapped Shaundar on the shoulder. It was the newly tattooed one that he chose and Shaundar winced. “Sorry, lad, that wasn’t the brightest thing I’ve ever done, was it?” he immediately apologized. “Guess I’m a little more in the cups than I thought. Think I’ll make my way to bed. Have a good shift, Mr. Sunfall; I hope it’s uneventful.”

“Good night, sir,” Shaundar wished him with genuine affection. And with that, the Captain rolled off to reverie.

Queenie trembled again with another volley from the eye ballistae and Shaundar did his best to close the distance to their foe.

Yathar beating to quarters woke Shaundar from his reverie the following evening.

“Battle stations!” the Captain roared. “We’re approaching the crystal shell!” Shaundar shuffled his shirt on and started for the helm room, but then the Captain bellowed, “All mages topsides!” and so he ran for the hatchway, Sylria on his heels.

He saw the *Vengeance*, exactly as Captain Yvoeth had predicted, hovering outside a crystal shell which looked to Shaundar’s eyes like an oversized iridescent marble. Now they were closing the gap and the weapons crews were ready. “Good morning, Mr. Sunfall!” he was greeted cheerfully. “Did you rest well?”

“*Av, quessir*,” Shaundar smiled.

“Good!” the Captain grinned. “Then you’ll be ready for today’s work. Mr. Aelorothi, let the log show that we engaged the enemy at the start of the Second Dog Watch.”

“*Av, quessir*,” the Matey nodded.

“You should probably wolf down some dinner, Mr. Sunfall,” suggested Yvoeth, “while you still have the chance. You too, *Etriel Sylria*.” Shaundar wasn’t at all interested in food on the verge of battle, but obediently they saluted and took themselves down to the mess, where they grabbed whatever was in the huge silver pot, threw it in a bowl and shovelled it into their faces as they returned to the fo’c’sle. It was a stew of some kind.

By this time, the *Vengeance* was already considerably closer to them. For the first time, Shaundar actually realized just how fast the Flow-river was moving.

“Forward weapons, fire!” called Captain Yvoeth, and Queenie bucked in the waves as all her weapons, save the lower abdomen ballista

and the stinger fired. Shaundar noticed that and remarked on it. “It’s in the Flow, lad,” the Captain replied. “The crew on the keel can’t see to fire until we’re in the sphere because it’s under the surface of the river; which reminds me: Mr. Oakheart! Slow to minimum tactical!”

“*Av, quessir!* Minimum tactical!” Garan called back from the helm, and Queenie reared as Garan’s will fought the rapid current of the Flow.

Shaundar put his glass to his eye to see if he could determine whether or not their weapons had done any damage. It seemed to him that the fin blade was crumpled at its aft.

“Good shot, catapult crew!” the Captain confirmed as he examined their foe with his own glass. “Continue to fire at will!”

“*Av, quessir!*” the weapons crews cried. They continued the assault as Garan fought the raging river of the phlogiston. The rigging on the enemy ship was sheered away and that fin blade continued to take a pounding. Before long it was bent into something that resembled crumpled tin roofing.

“Mages stand by!” the Captain commanded. “Prepare spells to engage the enemy!”

Shaundar readied a glass rod and a fur tuft. It seemed to him that a lightning bolt would go farther than a fireball on a metal ship. He risked another glance at their foe through his glass. Now he could see

some kind of dark circle appearing on the surface of the sphere. It was dilating even as he watched.

“Captain!” he cried. “I think they’re opening a portal, sir!”

Yvoeth peered through his glass and swore. “Mr. Oakheart! Full tactical! Follow them in!”

“Full tactical, *av!*” Garan yelled back and Queenie dove into the Flow with determination.

A catapult stone cracked open the head of the red insect. Part of its skull fell away and inside, a very large bombard was revealed. There were scro moving rapidly around it, recognizable by their black studded armour. The forward facing ballistae followed, and holes were punched into the ship’s broad stern.

“Excellent work, Weapons! Keep at it!” Yvoeth cheered. The eye ballistae subsequently fired, and one bolt took out two of the scro working at the bombard in the insect’s head.

They were close enough to the sphere now that the shell no longer seemed spherical, but instead suggested a gently arcing wall, and the dark lens of the portal had expanded to a greater width than the insectoid ship. It began to make its way into the sphere.

“Sail crew!” the Captain called. “You’ll have to fight the current the whole way! Lower the mizzensail and tack to larboard. Mr. Oakheart, take us in after them!”

The crew scrambled to obey. The weapons crews fired another volley. The catapult knocked a piece of the railing surrounding their Battle Deck into the Ether, along with two more scro. The eye ballistae got mostly sail. The forward ballistae missed, but the top mounted abdomen ballista sheered the last of that fin blade right off at the seam, and it flew wildly into rainbow eddies.

It occurred to Shaundar then that he could see no other goblinoids aboard their enemy’s ship; no orcs, no goblins, no kobolds; just scro.

Queenie began to tack and shuffled slowly off of the river current so that she could approach the sphere. Her sails and beams groaned in protest. Things seemed to be moving dangerously fast now as they drew nearer to the shell. Shaundar had a moment of doubt as to Queenie and Garan’s ability to manoeuvre her way into the dark lens on the sphere’s surface. But then the portal was before them and Shaundar could see stars in it.

“Captain!” Sylria cried out. “The portal is closing, sir!”

Sure enough, the lens was now collapsing rapidly.

“PUNCH IT, Mr. Oakheart!” the Captain roared. Sylria leaped down the hatch and within a few moments, Queenie jumped forward in a burst of speed Shaundar didn’t know Garan had in him. They skimmed through the portal just in time, the edges of it dangerously close to Queenie’s wings, which were slightly less broad than the width of the scro ship. Sylria emerged from the hatchway then, panting. “Been saving that spell for emergencies,” she explained with a smile. Now Shaundar realized what had happened. He knew the same spell, which spurred a spelljammer to greater speeds for short periods. “Well done,” the Captain nodded to her.

The sphere they had entered was very dark and there were no nearby planets to speak of. The portal closed behind them and things went black for a moment as Shaundar’s eyes adjusted. The scro ship was still fleeing, but now that they were in the sphere, the distance between the two of them increased at a pace Shaundar had never seen. The Captain’s eyes widened and his mouth tightened. Shaundar was reasonably certain that no one else was close enough to hear him whisper, “Bloody Hells,” under his breath.

“Fire anything you can bring to bear!” Captain Yvoeth bellowed, and the keel ballista, unable to act until now, let loose, and did enough damage to the ship’s head to entirely expose the bombard within. Bolts from the eye ballistae scraped the open deck and took the bloody remains of two crewmen with them into the back of the strange ship’s neck. Queenie’s upper abdomen ballista fired not even a second later

than that, taking out the aft window, but when the catapult released, the enemy ship was moving so quickly that the stone fell short.

The Matey and the Captain exchanged a look that Shaundar did not like. “Reload!” the Captain commanded.

The *Vengeance* moved out of their range, far enough that Shaundar had to get out his glass to see what they were doing, and then she began to come about and head back in their direction at the same incredible breakneck speed. Captain Yvoeth peered intently at her through his own spyglass and bit his lip. “Fire as soon as she’s in range,” he urged the weapons crews.

That’s when a flash came from the bombard in the enemy ship’s head. “All hands down!” barked the Captain as he knocked Shaundar and Sylria to the deck. The sound of the bombard’s burst hit them at about the same time as the thundering roar of the incoming ball, which crashed through the railing on the fo’c’sle and right through into the bridge. Glass and shrapnel flew everywhere, and inside, the screaming began.

“Dear gods, what in the Nine Hells is *that*?” the Matey exclaimed in naked horror.

“Damage report!” demanded the Captain, ignoring his First Mate entirely. As he stood up, Shaundar could see that his back was peppered with spreading flowers of blood.

“The bridge is destroyed, Captain!” called one of the officers inside.

“On your feet, Lieutenants,” Yvoeth told them gently. “We’re going to need you in a moment.”

Shaundar helped Sylria to her feet. Her upper left arm was similarly dotted with shrapnel and he noticed that so was his right forearm, somehow. Weirdly, he felt no pain.

“Mages get ready!” the Captain commanded. “Weapons, fire!”

The eye ballistae shot at the exposed deck revealed in the insect’s head and took out another scro. The fore-mounted ballistae punctured its torso, but the abdomen-mounted ballistae both missed. Their catapult stone deformed the skate-like blade at the enemy ship’s bow. But then two more balls came streaking in. One smashed against Queenie’s starboard wing. She shuddered and a piece of the wing flew off into space. The other ball careened directly into her starboard eye with the sound of smashing glass. “Mages, fire!” bellowed the Captain; and Shaundar let loose with his lightning bolt as the insect-shaped ship rocketed by overhead while the other mages also launched their spells. Energy crackled over the surface of the scro vessel and there were more than a few orcish roars of pain as their air envelopes united.

Now Shaundar saw what that sharp landing gear was for. As the ship passed overhead, the blades sliced through their rigging like razors.

Hemp rope and canvas plummeted down upon them. One of the sails landed right on the Matey and knocked him face first to the deck.

“Damage report!” cried the Captain again as he ran to aid his First Mate. Shaundar also grabbed some of the heavy canvas in an effort to pull it off of the Matey. He noticed struggling limbs underneath the material.

“Starboard wing severely damaged, sir!” Sylria responded immediately.

“I think the extra rigging’s gone too, sir,” Shaundar informed him. With Queenie’s wounded wing, that meant they had lost all advantage of manoeuvrability. “But I’m sure you can see that, Cap’n.”

Yvoeth nodded grimly. “Never hurts to confirm, Mr. Sunfall. Anything else?”

“Sir!” bellowed one of their crew from inside, “I believe we’ve lost the starboard eye ballista!”

They managed to free the Matey then; who seemed none the worse for wear, save that he was pale and shaken.

“They’re doing a lot of damage with those bombards, sir,” Yathar remarked dourly as he hovered at the larboard railing, weapon in hand with the other Marines.

The Captain shook his head ruefully. "Must be something new. But no matter. When they come back around, let them have it. Weapons! Hold your fire until they're within range of ALL weapons! That's four hex-lengths; eight cables!"

"Av, quessir!" the crew returned.

The scro ship came about and started barrelling towards them again. "Steady, *Tel'Quessir,*" Captain Yvoeth urged as he faced the oncoming vessel.

There were three flashes from the insect ship all at once. Shaundar hit the deck but Captain Yvoeth stood fast as three boulder-sized iron balls exploded towards them. One took out their mizzenmast entirely; another bounced off of the Castle Deck above them, raining splinters everywhere; and the big one punched a hole into their abdomen. "Return . . ." the Captain began, but Queenie lurched and listed to the port as the enemy ship deliberately cut a close manoeuvre to their portside. Everyone on the fo'c'sle skated along the wooden deck into the portside railing. Time seemed to slow down as Sylria landed on Yathar and he went over the edge as his sword was knocked out of his hand to land with a clatter on the deck. He grabbed hold of his lifeline, but it wrapped around his forearm and as Shaundar watched in horror, it cut into his arm and sheered it clean off like a steel wire. Then Shaundar hit the railing himself. There was an excruciating burst of pain from his right thigh somewhere and he heard a sharp crack. He clutched the

railing for dear life. There was screaming all around him. One of the voices might have been his own.

To the credit of the weapons crews, they actually did return fire. Ballista bolts peppered the exposed upper deck of the scro ship, raining death upon their Marines, and their catapult managed to put a stone through that same deck and into the deck below.

“Elf overboard!” Sylria cried, throwing another lifeline over the edge. Shaundar stole a look and saw mostly blood, floating in weightless crimson spheres. Yathar had been knocked clear of the gravity plane and was now adrift in the Void. Shaundar almost entirely forgot the throbbing pain in his leg. If someone didn’t rescue him, Yathar’s air would run out and he would be dead in two to twenty minutes.

Yathar’s arm, still within Queenie’s gravity plane, fell to the deck now that gravity had been properly restored, and it landed on Sylria, almost like it was still trying to grab on to someone. She shrieked and threw it off reflexively. Shaundar could still see the ring that Yathar’s mother had sent him for the Solstice glittering on the ring finger.

Captain Yvoleth got back to his feet as Queenie steadied herself and the accursed scro ship came around for another pass. “Mr. Oakheart!” he bellowed. “Prepare to ram them! All hands brace for impact!”

"*Av, quessir!*" Garan called back, and the weapons crews reloaded as the enemy ship bore down on them like the Old Man of the Void Himself. The crew on the decks reached for whatever sails were left, which weren't many. Some of them were starting to look very scared. Shaundar tried to lift himself to his feet. Pressure on his leg caused a fresh throb of pain so intense that he nearly blacked out and he fell unceremoniously on his rump.

"Bring 'er about!" the Captain ordered. "Hard to larboard!"

Garan started the turn, sluggishly because the sails were slow to respond, since there were no longer enough of them to do the task well. He almost succeeded. But the scro came in, once again at that incredible speed. Three iron balls roared in. One blasted through the railing not two feet from where Shaundar was struggling to get up. The Captain saw it come streaking across the deck and before Shaundar could hardly even see what had happened he smacked Sylria aside with all his strength. The shot hit the Captain directly in the torso. There was a terrible crunch, like an animal chewing through chicken bones. Captain Yvoeth's eyes widened in surprise and blood spurted out of his mouth as he tried to speak. One arm and one leg flew clean off and blood exploded everywhere. The only thing recognizable of what was left was his head, his now-dead eyes staring sightlessly at the black starry sky.

There was thin consolation for the loss; Queenie's crews gallantly returned fire. The ballistae dented the scro ship's hull; one

pierced its port bow, and their catapult stone finally smashed that huge bombard in the insect's head into flak.

No one screamed. No one said anything. Dead silence fell. And that's when Shaundar noticed that they were drifting aimlessly in the Void. "Helm down!" he cried at last.

Sylria turned to Matey Aelorothei, who was painted in the Captain's blood and trembling, his eyes wide and horrified. "Captain Aelorothei!" she yelled, which startled him like a jumping rabbit. "What are your orders, sir?"

He blinked at her and shivered. "I don't know what to do," he whispered. "I don't know what to do."

Sylria stared at him in utter contempt, then in clipped tones she said, "Then get your ass out of the way, Mr. Aelorothei. As senior officer, I am taking command! Shaundar, get your ass in the helm!" She made an arcane gesture in his direction and incanted lowly. Light flew from Sylria's hand and sparkled briefly around Shaundar before fading. It looked like the same spell she would have cast on Garan.

Shaundar knew then that if he did not make it to the helm right away, everyone was going to die. The *Vengeance* was coming around for another pass.

Somehow, he got up and he ran, though he almost lost consciousness with every step. He ran to the hatchway and started down

the ladder, but as he stepped down with the right leg, the one that was causing such pain, it simply gave out beneath him and he toppled to the lower deck. There was a wet punching noise and more pain than Shaundar had yet experienced. He screamed. He tried to get up but that leg simply would not work right anymore. Panting with adrenaline, he tried to figure out what was going on, and he saw that his leg was bent at an impossible angle, like it had an extra sideways-facing knee above where the knee should be. There was blood spreading all over his uniform trousers and something sharp and white was sticking out of the wound. *That's my leg bone*, he realized in stunned horror.

“Shaundar!” cried Sylria desperately. “What’s taking you so long? We need you!”

So he crawled the last few yards to the helm room, dragging his now useless leg behind him, his vision a strange combination of red and black. Every movement was agony. He crawled across blood and debris that littered the floor everywhere. The iron smell of it saturated the air, along with the stench of tripe.

Miraculously, the helm was still intact, but Shaundar could see why they were adrift. Garan’s corpse slumped over in the chair. The top of his head was completely gone and what was left of his skull was empty. There was something that resembled a pudding that had spilled out on the floor at his feet, amongst the splinters and wood shards that were all that was left of most of the wall. Gray ooze was sliding down what was left of the star charts on the walls in every direction, except the

starboard side, which was wide open to the black of space. The drawer where they kept their personal stuff had been busted open and the offending iron ball was wedged firmly in what would have been Garan's drawer. Shaundar tried not to vomit as he noticed a little bit of blood and Garan's brown hair stuck to it.

Shaundar dragged himself over the blood and ooze. "I'm sorry, *teu'ravanthas*," he told Garan's body, and he yanked him off of the helm by one arm, and then, bracing himself on the larboard arm of the helm chair, Shaundar lifted himself into it.

His first impression was of yet more agony. Queenie's wing, judging by the pain in his right arm and elbow, was even more damaged than it had seemed. His head ached abominably and he was dizzy and damn near blind, which he guessed was his body's translation of the pain of the destroyed bridge and damaged Castle Deck. Then he realized that he actually *was* blind in his right eye. Ah yes, the starboard eye ballista. His face felt as though he had lost a barfight – the fo'c'sle, he guessed – and the hole in Queenie's abdomen was an excruciating burn in his lower intestines. He forgot his own pain in the agony of the bond.

All about on his decks, the crew were running and screaming. There were too many dead and wounded to count, and the healers had elves spread out over the tables in the mess, the garden, even the Captain's bed. At his thought of the Captain, he felt his heart lurch in horror and sadness, and realized that part of that feeling was not his own, but Queenie's.

He saw Sylria on the remains of the fo'c'sle, now mostly a debris field, commanding the mages to ready spells and the weapons crews to continue their attack. He could also see the *Vengeance*, just now coming about on their starboard side, though Shaundar was certain that it had been much longer than they needed. "I have the helm!" Shaundar yelled out.

"Get us out of here, Shaundar!" Sylria howled.

He turned his head and studied the rapidly oncoming scro ship through both the hole in the starboard wall and Queenie's senses, and even with Sylria's magical boost, he knew this to be hopeless. "I can't do it, Sylria," he said in a voice hollow with resignation. "I can't compete with their tactical rating. They're just too fast."

Sylria looked down at her feet and squared her shoulders. "Then we shall die on our feet," she declared.

Shaundar nodded. Amazingly, there was no fear; just sadness, that he would not see his family or Narissa again. "Sail crew, evasive manoeuvres!" Shaundar commanded. "Hard down!"

As the insectoid ship neared, it raised those praying mantis-like limbs to grapple them, but under Shaundar's power and direction, they dodged the attempt. Shaundar saw then a door that opened in the metal ship at about its "throat," revealing a whole army of armoured scro warriors. Sylria shrieked, "Mages, fire!" and she let off a lightning bolt

herself. There were only a couple of elves left alive topsides to obey Sylria's command, but they responded, and flames and electricity washed over the scro, enough that it stopped them in their tracks and aborted their boarding attempt.

"Bring 'er about!" Shaundar ordered. "Hard to starboard!" Queenie responded sluggishly with all the shorn rigging and shorthanded crew, but she came back around, and as they swooped back towards each other, Sylria's command rang out and defiantly, the *Queen's Dirk* fired another volley and the scro greeted it with a broadside of their own as they both swung starboard at the last moment, Shaundar bellowing the command and praying that it could be heard. The larboard ballistae both missed, but two of the three others dented the hull and the third pierced it once more on their larboard side with the ringing tear of sheet metal. Their catapult did not fire at all; whether because it was damaged, or because there were too few crew left to do so, Shaundar would never know.

The decapitated *Vengeance* had only one gun it could bring to bear on the pass, but it fired that larboard bombard at point blank range, and the fo'c'sle simply collapsed like a sandcastle. Sylria was swallowed into the sinkhole. Shaundar roared in agony and horror but could not hear his own voice in the overwhelming noise.

There was no sail crew left to command, but hoping against hope, Shaundar bellowed anyway, "Hard to larboard!" and though the mizzenmast was shorn away and he knew it, knowing there was nothing

else that could be done, he yelled out, “Prepare to ram! All hands brace for impact!” just as Garan had attempted.

He didn’t flinch as Queenie collided head-on with her foe. Shaundar’s vision exploded into white pain as Queenie’s bow collapsed in on itself. The creak of metal rang out as the mantis-like grapples folded around Queenie’s wings. They pinched closed and Shaundar cried out again as familiar agony wracked his arms and shoulders when both Queenie’s wings were wrenched from her body. The whole world was nothing but suffering as she began to break up. In that moment, Shaundar keenly wished for his own death; anything to make it stop. Then, there was nothing.

Part Three: Raven's Talons

Chapter Thirteen

Narissa would never forget the day the world ended. She was home from Evermeet and visiting her father when she saw the *Daoine* coming in from the *Aerdrie's Pride*. She headed to the dockyards to greet Lord Sunfall; but the look on his face was vacant. It frightened her immediately.

"What's happened?" Narissa demanded.

The Vice Admiral looked at her without seeing her for a moment; then recognition dawned. Suddenly Narissa was terrified. "Narissa," he said in a hollow voice. "You'd better come with me."

Narissa fell in step with him though part of her was shrieking *No! You don't want to know!* They made their way in silence to the Sunfall Manor. He pushed open the door and came in. "Daddy!" Selena yelled happily, and she ran to embrace him; but that same dark look stopped her in her tracks. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Lady Sunfall and Lady Mistwinter stood up. "What is it, Ruavel?" Shaundar's grandmother questioned, her mouth drawn into a thin line.

Lord Sunfall looked down and Narissa noticed now a paper and something bright and metallic in his hands. Her heart froze. He cleared

his throat. “*The Queen’s Dirk* has gone down with all hands,” he explained. His voice broke at the end.

A trembling hand crept to Lady Sunfall’s mouth and something like a soft sigh escaped her. “Gods damn,” swore Lady Mistwinter. Selena’s eyes were huge and horrified. Narissa found herself on the floor, her legs simply collapsing underneath her. “You’re sure?” Dathlue pressed.

“Admiral Cirathorn found what was left of her in Spiralspace,” the Vice Admiral confirmed, his face pale. The Vice Admiral did not add the grisly detail that he had discovered, despite Madrimlian’s kindhearted attempt to be gentle; all they had found of their bodies was Yathar’s arm, identified by the ring his mother had given him.

Narissa clutched her shaking head and moaned. A wave of unreality washed over her. There had been so many nightmares since Shaundar and Yathar had left for the War. Was it possible that this was only a bad dream?

“No,” Lady Sunfall said then; firm, simple, and direct. This was not denial; this was something else. “No,” she repeated, “they’re not dead. I would know.” She met her husband’s eyes then. “Lost, perhaps, but not dead.” Her eyes were dark and veiled.

Lord Sunfall’s lips thinned; then he nodded once, in acceptance. “All right, I will hold out hope then,” he decided.

Narissa agreed. She wouldn't – couldn't! – believe they had been killed, not when Lady Sunfall said otherwise. She touched her goldheart charm and burst into tears. Lady Sunfall put her arms around her, and soon the whole family was fastened together like a bundle of sticks; weak alone, stronger together.

They sat at dinner in silence, and nobody ate much, poking at the food on their plates as though it was compost. Lady Mistwinter was harumphing over her food and her mouth chewed on unsaid words. But finally her resistance broke and she demanded of her son-in-law, "I would hear whatever you can tell us, Ruavel. Is there anyone here who would not?"

Silence greeted her assertion. Narissa knew that no, she did not really want to hear the details; there was no way in which that could be a good thing. And yet, there lingered the desperate, nagging doubt. What if there was something in the details that triggered knowledge that only she possessed? It was nothing but raw cowardice not to bear the burden of knowing, and Narissa knew that if she could have done something and she learned of it later, she would never forgive herself. Four pairs of stony eyes met Lord Sunfall's hawk-like gaze.

He looked at his hands and forced the words from his mouth. "The remains of the *Dirk* were found near the edge of the Sphere," he admitted, "like they had just entered the portal. There was nothing left but flinders scattered over the Void. It took a week to comb the wreckage. We've accounted for thirty dead."

"As in," Lady Mistwinter interrupted, "they found enough of thirty bodies to account for them, but the rest are either missing or you can't tell for sure who they were."

He nodded slowly as Narissa turned faintly green. He bit his lip and then turned to meet his wife's eyes. "We found Yathar's arm," he confessed.

Lady Sunfall sighed sadly and Narissa made a hiccupping little *meep!* But Dathlue Mistwinter was not discouraged. "Did you find the rest of him?" she demanded ruthlessly.

"No," Lord Sunfall admitted.

"Then we don't know that he's dead," said the elder elf with finality, as though that decided everything. "What else do you know?"

"Garan Oakheart is dead," the Vice Admiral informed them grimly. "We know that for sure."

Narissa hiccupped and burst into tears again. Lady Sunfall looked down at her hands folded in her lap. "The Oakhearts will find that very hard," she quavered. "Have they been informed?"

"Someone is doing that right now," Lord Sunfall soothed.

Dathlue bit her bottom lip unconsciously, hard enough to draw blood. “Are they able to confirm Shaundar?” she demanded with only the slightest tremor to her voice.

As in, thought Narissa with a gasp, *did they find enough of Shaundar’s body to confirm that he was dead?* Her breath started hitching in her throat as she sobbed.

Lord Sunfall shook his head. “No,” he said simply. He cleared his throat. “All they found was this.” He held up the metal object that Narissa had noticed underneath the papers. She recognized it immediately. It was Shaundar’s pocket watch, the one his father had given him when he’d become a cabin boy. It was frozen at six minutes after six of the clock. Something black had congealed at its clasp. She didn’t want to know what it was.

“May I see that, please?” Lady Sunfall requested in a wavering voice. Lord Sunfall reluctantly stretched out his arm and she took it in her hand. Her eyes closed as she focused inward. Narissa found herself holding her breath. After a few moments, Lady Sunfall pitched forward and the watch fell from her grasp as her hand just let go. It bounced when it landed on the wood floor and some of that black substance cracked and flaked off. Tears flowed freely from Lady Sunfall’s eyes and ran in rivulets down her face.

“Yathar was thrown overboard when the ship lurched,” she told the family, “and Shaundar’s leg was broken. But as of that moment, they were both still alive.”

“Maybe they were both thrown free,” piped up Selena, who had been silent up to that point, “and picked up when they were looking for survivors.”

They all turned to stare at her at length. Hope crept into Ruavel Sunfall’s eyes. “That seems very likely,” he acknowledged with a firm nod. “That seems very likely indeed.” He smiled just a little, and Narissa grasped hope with desperate, drowning hands.

Narissa tossed and turned and tried for reverie that night, but failed. She spent much of the night weeping on and off like a leaky faucet, seemingly at random, and much of the next day as well. She tried to go to school but found herself completely unable to concentrate. For two hours she stumbled over the lessons, lost the thread of the lecture entirely and warded off the pitying stares of her classmates who looked away when she looked directly at them. Worst of all, Lord Durothil did not seem in the least bit bothered by his son’s disappearance, maiming and possible death. He just pounded on with the lesson like a trip hammer. Finally Narissa could take it no longer, and she picked up her books and walked out without a word. She did not know it then, but she would not return for years.

Narissa didn't know where she was going, but she found herself at the dockyards staring into the sky, hoping against hope that she might yet see Shaundar's ship coming in. She resolved, then, that she would sit at the dockyard and wait for him, so that she would be the first thing they would see when they came home. She watched without doing anything else, like a bride awaiting her suitor at a window. Tears leaked from her eyes sometimes, spurred on by almost random triggers; the sight of a flitter landing, elves in Navy uniforms leaving ships, sunlight glinting off of the rustling leaves of a willow tree, and worst of all, the sight of someone else's goldheart charm. The sun rose and set, and there was no sign of them.

She returned the following morning. And the next. And the next.

Flash – miraculously, Yathar's pale and frightened face leaning over him; then a burst of horrible pain from somewhere, then blessed blackness.

Flash – a gray face with tusks bellowing, "Wake up, faerie!" and huge gray hands on his throat, shaking him.

Flash – pain, screaming, his arms being ripped off . . . no, wait, that was Queenie's wings . . .

Flash – Sylria’s voice asking quietly, meekly, “Where do you think they’re taking us?” and Yathar’s responding, “I have no idea.”

Flash – burning, burning; there was liquid fire on his leg and it was burning; the same gray tusked face, saying, “I thought that would wake you up, elf;” then blackness again.

Flash – Yathar’s face, blurry and pale, saying, “The fever’s broken, Shaundar. I think we’re going to live;” then the sound of someone weeping.

When he awoke the next time, someone was gently pouring water into his mouth. It was brackish and stale, but it was water just the same and Shaundar found that he was desperately thirsty. He drank. His brain was aching and his vision was slightly blurred. But he was pretty sure it was Yathar who was pouring the water.

“Good, you’re awake,” Yathar smiled as he leaned forward, presumably to study Shaundar’s eyes. He looked relieved. But he also looked frightened. His eyes were dark, with deep shadows under them, and his face was a ghastly shade of pale.

“I thought you were dead for sure,” Shaundar managed. His voice was nothing but a hoarse croak. “Where are we?”

“We’re in the brig of the *Vengeance*,” Yathar informed him. “Sylria, could you prop him up a bit so that I can give him more water?”

He realized that he was lying on someone's lap and then Sylria was leaning over him and her long brown hair was tickling his nose. He smiled. "You made it," he whispered as Sylria shifted his position so that he was sitting up a little. Yathar poured some more water into his mouth from a bowl.

"Just a bump on the head," she smiled faintly. "Guess I was the lucky one. Your leg is pretty badly broken. We splinted it but I'm not sure we did it right. You got an infection and a fever. You've been unconscious for a little more than a week. We . . . we weren't sure *you* were going to make it."

He glanced down at his leg and saw that it was roughly splinted and bandaged. How much more damaged it might be than that, he could not say. He noticed, too, that Yathar's arm really was missing, still bound with the remains of what might have been his uniform shirt. He had been pouring the water into Shaundar's mouth with his left hand. It was fairly dark but their elven eyes managed to make the most of the available light. He was freezing. "Did they leave us any blankets?" he asked hopefully.

Yathar smiled more broadly. "If you're cold, that's a good sign; it means your fever has broken for sure." Then his face fell. "But no, there are no blankets and the food is somewhat limited. We've been pretty roughly treated, actually." He got to his feet, now leaning on his left hand to push up instead of his right (a habitual way of moving that Shaundar had not noticed until it changed,) and went over to something that

Shaundar couldn't quite make out with his dubious vision; it might have been a pile of clothing, and he thought by the bright red that it was likely Yathar's uniform jacket. He fished up something there and brought it back. It was a bowl filled with some kind of gruel. "You should eat. I'm sure that Lyenna would tell you to take it easy because you haven't eaten much over the past several days. Though we did give you soup when they brought it and we tried to water down this stuff so that you could take it, but you spit most of it up." He smiled thinly. "Can't say I blame you."

Shaundar reached out his hands for the bowl and found they were thinner than he remembered and they trembled violently. Yathar braced the bowl from underneath as he brought it to his mouth and slurped it down. It tasted like salt and sawdust. He ate it anyway. It was only moments before he honestly felt better. He tried to sit up. Sylria helped him. But he knew it wouldn't last long. Already he was sweating and panting with the effort of it.

"Don't do too much at once," Yathar cautioned him. "I wasn't kidding when I said you were really sick. It won't be easy to recover your strength." His eyes were so grave that they seemed to have turned from green to black. Shaundar abruptly had a flash, clear as if he were still there, of Yathar's horrified eyes as he sailed over the edge of Queenie's rail. He shook his head to clear it, which caused it to throb painfully and his eyes to water.

"Queenie?" he hissed hoarsely. But he already knew.

Yathar's mouth thinned. "Destroyed," he confirmed.

"And our crew?" Shaundar went on. He thought that he already knew that, too, but he needed to hear it spoken; had to have it verified.

"Dead," Yathar acknowledged bluntly. "All dead. We're the last." His voice broke. He put his face in his hand. Weirdly, the stump of his other arm also moved in that direction to no avail.

Shaundar suddenly saw Garan's mostly headless corpse slumped over in the helm with most of his brain on the floor and the rest of it on the walls. It was so real that he even smelled the blood and viscera and sulphurous gunpowder stench. He gulped and his stomach lurched.

"Try not to puke," Sylria said in a quavering voice. "You can't afford it."

He struggled with his rebellious guts, which bucked and danced like a recoiling catapult, until at last they were still. Hot tears of grief and anger flowed down the sides of his face.

A door opened. Shaundar tried to get a grip on himself at once; the last thing their captors needed to see was weakness. His eyes blinked against the sudden brightness of the lantern in the corridor, but it was quickly blocked by an enormous silhouette. Its owner was a scro; gray-skinned and huge, with arms like tree trunks.

“Ah, good, you’re awake,” the scro rumbled in a voice that sounded almost like a lion purring. His unconscious echo of Yathar’s earlier remark was a little disturbing. It was odd to hear the Espruar tongue in such a rough baritone voice. “Maybe you’ll be more forthcoming than your friends.” He grabbed Shaundar’s shirt and with one hand lifted him to his feet. Shaundar was too weak to stand, however, and his leg startled him with the blinding jolt of pain it reported when his weight was put on it. He made a noise that sounded to his own ears like the bleat of a goat.

Yathar was on his feet as well. “He just came to a minute ago,” he was saying. “He’s still not quite aware. You should give him some time.”

The scro backhanded Yathar in the face as casually as one might swat an insect. He crumpled backwards against the wall. Shaundar noticed now a purple bruise all the way around Sylria’s left eye. He imagined this scro punching her in the face the way he had just punched Yathar and his fists involuntarily tightened.

The gray scro chuckled. “Looks lively enough to me,” he snickered. “Want to kill me, elf? Good luck.” He pushed Shaundar before him and made him stagger down the corridor into another, smaller room as he closed and barred the brig door behind him. He was not alone. Two more burly scro awaited him in the passageway, just in case.

It gave Shaundar a small degree of satisfaction to see that the wall of the corridor was dented inwards, where one of their catapult stones had made contact. Obviously they had not had opportunity to fix it yet, which meant they had been burdened with more pressing repairs. It was a bitter and metallic pleasure, if short-lived.

They fastened his wrists to a hard-backed mess hall chair and shone a bullseye lantern directly into his eyes. The gray scro grabbed another chair and spun it around backwards to squat upon it, in a manner that reminded Shaundar of Madrimlian. “What’s your name, elf?” he inquired conversationally, leaning on the back of the chair.

Shaundar’s instincts told him keenly that this orc was as different from Champion Dorin Bloodfist as night was from day. He also knew that once these scro heard the name “Sunfall,” all the Hells would break loose, and either he would end up dead or his father would be forced into a horrible choice that could result in betrayal of the Fleet. His father was, after all, the Vice Admiral; the Realmspace Fleet’s military leader. So he said nothing. The effort of sitting up was already forcing sweat from his skin in a slick coat.

The scro frowned. “Come now, lad, what harm could it be to give me your name?” he asked in an *I’m-so-hurt* tone of voice.

Shaundar knew the answer to that perfectly well and had no intention of telling his captors. He continued to say nothing.

The scro curled his lip. He stood up and grabbed Shaundar's injured leg in one hand. Shaundar could now see that it was splinted with a piece of metal that might have been a railing piece or a light support bar, and that his uniform trousers had been cut away on that side. The scro gripped the point just above his knee with his massive gray clawed hand and twisted as though he were turning on a faucet. Electric agony blasted lightning bolts through Shaundar's body. He cried out.

"Your name!" demanded the scro furiously. His eyes seemed to glow faintly green.

Shaundar spat out the first thing he could think of. "Oakheart!" he gasped. "Garan Oakheart!"

The scro released his leg. The relief was overwhelming. "That's better, Lieutenant Oakheart," he said in a much calmer tone. Shaundar couldn't tell if he was grinning or bearing his tusks. "Now, let's discuss what you know about the forces of Realspace."

"I don't really know anything," Shaundar lied. "I'm just a Lieutenant."

"Oh, I doubt that very much," the scro grinned. "I'm sure you must have seen something. Space stations, other ships, bases; something."

Shaundar again fell silent.

“Perhaps you’d like me to pull your leg again,” the scro threatened mildly, and he sniggered.

Shaundar, who did not appreciate the joke, was pretty sure that would only be the beginning, but he had no intention of betraying the Fleet. He chose to hold his tongue.

The scro began to gently and patiently unwrap the bandages from his wounded leg. Shaundar tried to flinch away but there was nowhere for him to go. His captor grinned again and leaned on his upper thigh to hold it in place. The pressure made Shaundar’s eyes water. He continued methodically unfurling bloody rags. When the metal splint came free he actually eased it to the deck rather than allowing it to just fall, and eventually Shaundar’s wound was exposed. There was still a rather large oozing hole in his right thigh. It seeped both blood and pus and it smelled foul. The area around it was a blotchy, angry red and it was swollen grotesquely. *That’s going to leave a nasty scar*, Shaundar found himself reflecting, and then the scro extended his enormous claw-tipped thumb and drove it directly into the still open wound.

Shaundar’s vision went white with the pain and though he tried to bite it back, the scream burst out of him anyway, just as bloody pus burst out of the wound at the place where the scro pressed his thumb with sadistic glee.

“Tell me,” his tormentor demanded in the same disturbing dulcet tones.

“I don’t know what you want to know!” Shaundar cried as his vision blurred and swam.

The scro released the pressure on Shaundar’s wound and he gasped with relief. “Anything you can tell me,” he encouraged gently. “Ship names, locations, commanding officers, anything.”

Shaundar considered what he could tell them without revealing anything significant; how he could convince them that he was telling them all he knew without actually telling them. The truth was, if he thought about it, being in the Navy and having an Admiral for a father meant that he probably knew a lot of things that were otherwise privileged information, picked up by osmosis if nothing else. “I probably can’t give you ship positions,” he said slowly. “We’ve been out too long. Anything I did know before we hit the Flow is useless now.”

“You’re stalling,” the scro pointed out; which was, of course, exactly what he was doing. His leg had degenerated into an angry throb that twitched with fresh pain that seemed to stretch tendrils from his toes to his bowels every time his pounding heart beat. It was hard to think. He knew that lying outright was not likely to be sufficiently convincing, but if he somehow managed to include just enough of the truth to be credible . . . and then the solution hit him between the eyes like a spitball.

“I’ve just recently been transferred,” he told the scro jailer. “The *Queen’s Dirk* took on a bunch of replacements just before this mission. I

really don't know much, just like I said." He certainly was young enough for this to be convincing.

"In that case," the scro pounced, "why don't you tell me about the state of things at Aces High?"

Shaundar blinked, bewildered. Where had that come from? "What?" he blurted.

The gray-skinned orc leaned forward like a cat eying a terrified mouse it had cornered. "We took you off the helm, Lieutenant Oakheart. We know you were the one flying your ship when you rammed us. If your ship hadn't been so damaged, that might have been very effective, and it certainly has caused us a headache." He nodded once, almost in approval. "But that was far too well done for a replacement . . . unless he just came from that flight school that you elves are so proud of. Care to change your story?"

Shaundar said nothing. He couldn't very well tell them everything he knew about Aces High! They would penetrate its defences and destroy it; and what then?

The scro's gaze narrowed as he realized that Shaundar was not as placid and obedient as he had initially appeared. He nodded to one of the other scro, who brought forth a small wooden cask with a plug in it and a hose of some kind. As Shaundar watched with horrified fascination, wondering what in the worlds they were going to do with it, the scro

leading the interrogation plucked the plug from the cask and the other inserted the hose into the opening, then put the other end in his mouth and drew back on it, forming a siphon. Some of the liquid dribbled out when he pulled back from it, swallowing what had run into his mouth. It was a strange red-purple colour and it was acrid and peppery enough to make Shaundar's eyes water.

Still grinning, the great gray scro took the dripping end from his compatriot and clasped it upward to form a U shape with the hose. "Do you know what this is, Lieutenant Oakheart?" he asked almost rhetorically. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "This is Dukagsh pepper ale. Not suited to the pallid elven palate, I think." This remark produced chuckles from all three scro in the room.

With a nod from the leader, the other two came over to where Shaundar was. One grabbed his chair and flipped it over on its left side, so that Shaundar was lying, still fastened to the chair, with his back to the leader. He was suddenly desperate to see what was going on behind him so Shaundar tried to peer over his shoulder at that bizarre angle, and his left leg kicked out almost involuntarily to try to straighten him around. The other scro – the one who had yet to say or do anything – promptly sat on that leg and locked the right one in a death grip at the calf. The leader then clasped his exposed right thigh on the inside in a grasp uncomfortably like that of a possessive and overeager lover. With the other hand he turned the end of the hose and poured the contents of the cask directly into Shaundar's leg wound.

That translucent reddish purple liquid might as well have been the contents of a Greek fire projector or raw acid dripping from the jaws of a black dragon. It burned every exposed nerve with a searing pain that went on and on and did not stop. He could see his flesh blistering. His balls tried to crawl into his belly as red pain spider-webbed through burning synapses and he bucked and kicked helplessly. Someone was screaming somewhere, a brassy, metallic sound, but there was simply so much pain that he could not process, until it was over, that it was him.

It lasted forever, but eventually it did stop; and as the leader pulled the hose away Shaundar sobbed with relief.

“Now,” spoke the leader calmly, his other hand still resting on the inside of Shaundar’s thigh, “let’s try this again. Tell me about Aces High.”

Shaundar tried to coalesce his thoughts into something recognizable and useful; tried to formulate a lie that had some convincing elements of what he remembered from his training, but plumbing the depths of his mind resulted in the unearthing of a single word:

NO

That word was a wall through which nothing more would pass. And with the discovery of that word, Shaundar found that all of his fear was gone.

“No,” he croaked.

The gray scro studied him and blinked. “No?” he echoed blankly.

“That’s right,” rasped Shaundar, “no.” He was done performing for their sadistic amusement. He would tell them nothing.

The scro’s orange eyes flashed green in anger. He poured more liquid fire into Shaundar’s wound. He couldn’t help the screaming, or the flailing about as his body tried to get away, but when it stopped again, Shaundar found that his anger was a cold, hard knot in his belly and his resolve was unchanged.

“Go to Baator,” he snarled.

“If you won’t talk to us,” the scro warned, “then you’re of no use to us and we’ll kill you.”

“Go for it,” spat Shaundar. He was reasonably sure that if they were going to do that, there had been ample opportunity; and even if they did, he was not going to give them the satisfaction of caving in, nor would he tell them anything they could use against his family and friends. If death was to be his fate, so be it.

The large gray scro saw this in Shaundar’s eyes, and he punched him in the face with all of his frustrated rage. Shaundar’s head bounced off of the back of the chair with a sharp crack, and then once again, there was nothing.

Something cold and wet was resting against his forehead, and it felt wonderful. He opened his eyes to see Sylria leaning over him again, pressing a wet cloth of some kind to his brow. It was red; Yathar's uniform. His whole body felt bruised. His leg was still throbbing angrily.

"Hey handsome," she smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I lost a fight with a giff and a hadozee," he groaned. But he couldn't help but smile back. His lip didn't want to make the gesture. He assumed it was swollen. "And maybe an illithid," he added as his aching head swam.

Yathar came over and he was smiling too. "You must have really pissed them off," he said approvingly. "They brought you back unconscious and dumped you off without a word."

"I wouldn't talk," he explained. And he found some great relief in this. He supposed that every soldier imagined what they would do if they were caught and interrogated by the enemy under torture. He supposed that everyone hoped they would be brave enough to stand up against it. But everyone likely had the same niggling doubt that they would be capable of doing so. Shaundar found great comfort in the realization that he had been so tested, and proven true. He would not betray the Navy, or worse yet, those he loved who served or were protected by it, to save himself from pain. But he also realized that it was not bravery in which he had found resistance. It was anger.

“Well done,” Yathar murmured, squeezing his arm with his left, and only, hand. Shaundar remembered the guard’s comment when he had come for him; remembered that he had hoped that Shaundar would be “more forthcoming than his friends,” and he knew then that all of them had found the strength to stand. Relief washed over him and he smiled proudly at Yathar and at Sylria.

He knew that even if they came for him again – and come they did, five more times before they reached their destination, to beat him, burn him, pour more caustic pepper ale into his wound, hang him by his thumbs and half-drown him – he would not break.

Years later, he would rue his cockiness and pride at that moment, when he thought he had seen the worst that people had to offer. He had yet to experience the horror that was Raven Talon.

Chapter Fourteen

Ironically, Shaundar's torturer saved his life. After exposure to the pepper ale, the infection in his leg all but disappeared. Yathar confessed that they had also flooded his wound while he was unconscious in an attempt to awaken him, and this was the half-memory that he had of the burning in his leg. Either the alcohol or the peppers in the mixture were strong enough to kill the incipient gangrene, and Shaundar began to heal. For some reason they returned the splint too, which Shaundar's shipmates replaced; he assumed so that the scro wouldn't have to carry him around.

Sometimes Shaundar would awaken to hear Sylria crying softly into her uniform jacket. He figured she had more than sufficient justification for that and chose not to say anything, but let her grieve in her own way; especially for Garan, and for Captain Yvoleth, who had been a dear friend. He found himself unable to share those tears. It was as though his heart had turned to stone. For himself, it was dreams, in which he would relive the battle again and again; Captain Yvoleth's death, Garan's body, Yathar going overboard, and the pain of Queenie being ripped apart. He woke up screaming from that one. As Yathar tried to remind him of where he was (not much of an improvement, but some just the same,) the scro jailer pounded on the door with something solid and demanded that they quiet down in there, or he would come in and give them something to scream about.

They managed to keep track of time via the ship's bells; at least roughly, since most of the time at least one of them was still conscious. It was five days later that they awakened to a gravity shift and the scent of fresh air. Shaundar learned that the brig was on the lower deck when they entered the new gravity plane and found themselves, and all their meagre belongings, on the ceiling instead of the floor. Yathar was unconscious when the shift happened and Shaundar found himself trying to shield his friend's body from the sudden upending. He succeeded in preventing Yathar from landing bonelessly on the new floor, but not from getting a good shaking-up.

"Where are we?" Yathar mumbled quietly through his swollen mouth and face as he came back to a semblance of consciousness. He had been the last one to suffer their host's tender ministrations.

"Smells like we're landing planetside somewhere," Sylria remarked.

Yathar clambered drunkenly to his feet, though he was obviously dizzy. "This could be our chance to escape," he explained. "Get ready."

Shaundar made a mental list of the spells he had prepared. They had been divested of their belt pouches and spell components, of course, so many of them were useless, but all a *magic missile* spell required was preparation and the caster's will. He tensed up and saw Sylria doing the same. Weirdly, he suddenly realized that Narissa's braid had been in his belt pouch, and his heart ached with the loss.

They were not given the chance to act. After a rather awkward (and a little frightening) landing, during which the ship rocked and shifted in an odd way from front to back, just after it came down rather hard, the door opened and all three of their jailers came into the brig. The elves were each grabbed by one and their arms were clutched behind their backs (Yathar's stump was forcibly clamped to his side,) and then they were frog-marched out the cargo doors in the keel on the other end of the deck, Shaundar's broken femur notwithstanding. In space, the gravity plane of the ship would have reversed the up and down of the cargo bay, turning the keel of the ship into a ceiling, but for now a chute had been rigged from those cargo doors to slide them down to the ground so that the scro could maintain control of their arms as they slid down with them.

The charnel smells of viscera and burning bodies – unmistakable for anything else – immediately assaulted Shaundar's senses. For a moment his vision blurred and he was looking out over the battlefield on Selune. The illusion passed when he blinked. What was revealed was not much better. There were several ships landed here – more of these mantis-like ships, some Scorpions, some Ogre Mammoths – and there were also perhaps hundreds of covered wagons, from which countless people – mostly elves, but some humans, gnomes and dwarves as well – were being forced to disembark by business-like scro in regulation studded black leather armed with crossbows. There were men, women, and children. Most of them did not look like combatants.

“Move along, there,” commanded the scro who was marching him along - the one who had clasped his left leg while his companion poured liquid fire into his wound; who had also beaten him with the knot of a ship-rope and who had held his head under bilge water while he fought desperately to hold his breath and his vision vanished under dark spots – at the same time that he gave Shaundar a cuff upside the head. Shaundar moved along. He noticed that most of the goblinoids around here, mostly orcs and ogres, who seemed to be enlisted troops to the scro officers, and goblins scurrying everywhere doing all the support work, bore a red emblem that suggested a spider, as did most of the ships. This was not an emblem that Shaundar recalled seeing on the *Vengeance* or the uniforms of her crew.

As he was forced along in a shuffling limp, Shaundar stole a quick glance back at the *Vengeance*, which earned him another hard swat from his captor. He could see why the landing had been so difficult. It was apparent that the ship was severely damaged. The forward-facing skate blade beneath its torso section was partially shorn away, which would have made for a bumpy enough landing as she skidded roughly to a halt as though she were dragging an anchor. They were quite frankly lucky that the whole works hadn’t toppled end over end. But perhaps the severely-diminished topside of the ship had made her less top-heavy; she had no real upper deck left to speak of, and she seemed entirely decapitated, as though roles had been reversed and the female of a mated pair of manti was destined to lose her head. Worse yet, her entire bow, from keel to head, which included most of her torso section, was

crumpled inwards in a concave wedge. It was the exact size and shape of Queenie's forward ram. Despite himself, Shaundar smirked.

His smugness didn't last long. An astonishing line of scro began to disembark the *Vengeance*. Shaundar could not believe how many there were. It was easily half again the numbers of Queenie's crew at full capacity. They'd never had a chance.

A very large, if rather feral-looking scro, wearing red-shaded armour with a black spider symbol on its torso and gauntlets in chromatic opposition to the other troops, was standing at the head of a gauntlet of scro with crossbows, through which the prisoners – all races, ages and genders – were being marched. He indicated with his arm which of two lines they ought to be divided into. Shaundar noticed that most of the dwarves and gnomes were being sent to the line on the right, while most of the children, especially the elven ones, were being sent to the line on the left. Shaundar could see no difference between them otherwise. But he did notice a plume of thick black smoke rising from somewhere behind the barracks-like buildings that the prisoners were being marched towards, and it was closer to the portside line.

One of the elven children being sent to the left queue – a pretty little high elven girl with black pigtails – cried out "*Avar!*" as her father was forced away from her. The scro moved him along fairly quickly, but the little girl would not be deterred. She struggled free from the scro directing her and ran to her father's side.

She never got there. As Shaundar cried out in horror, anticipating the outcome, two of the scro raised their crossbows and shot the little girl. One quarrel pierced her side and the other her throat and jugular vein. She fell gurgling as her tiny hand brushed her father's palm, blood soaking her jet-black hair. Her father screamed and fell to her side. They shot him too, and his body collapsed over hers, punctured in the abdomen, throat and lung. Blood pooled on the ground around them both.

"Anybody else want to get cute?" the red-armoured scro inquired mildly in fluent Espruar, looking around at his charges. In response to the silence, he nodded once, satisfied. "Didn't think so," he smirked.

Shaundar was filed over to the right-hand line, as were Yathar and Sylria, though the scro did hesitate a moment over Yathar. Shaundar could see splatters of blood from the dead elven father in the hair of the dwarf in front of him as they were marched to a riverbed. The elves had their first look at scro women, who were also big when compared to elves, though they looked a little softer than the males and had smaller tusks. They were dressed in black tabards with the red spider blazon, and they were vigorously scrubbing the prisoners with something that smelled like more of that pepper ale. The makeshift soap pooled in the water in violet foam and oil.

"Strip, and place your belongings in this pile," recited a bored-looking green-skinned scro with more than the suggestion of a paunch.

He indicated a pile of random things to the side of him that lay in front of a long sheet metal counter, where several goblins were sorting through it a little at a time. One of them found a gold ring and presented it proudly to the black-skinned scro that was supervising the proceedings, who added it to a box of other gold valuables. There was also a box for silver jewellery and another for gems. Bile rose in Shaundar's throat at this blatant thievery.

The dwarf in front of Shaundar did as commanded, grumbling. "And your beard clip," demanded the green scro pointedly.

"I think not!" barked the dwarf indignantly. His long brown beard was the only thing covering his nakedness.

Now the green scro looked anything but bored. His eyes gleamed and he swaggered over to where they were standing. "Just give it to him," Shaundar urged quietly, recognizing that dangerous look in their captor's eyes. Here was another one who liked to hurt and looked for excuses to do so.

"Hold him," said the scro as he nodded to a couple of the ogre guards, who grabbed the dwarf by the arms. He spat defiantly into the scro's face as he approached.

The scro casually wiped the spittle from his brow, and then he clutched the beard clip in two fingers and pulled as hard as he could. The dwarf roared as a good chunk of his beard was torn free with the clip.

The hairs were as long as the hair on Shaundar's head, and there were bloody droplets and bits of flesh at the end. The scro then calmly tossed the clip and the attached hair into the gold jewellery box. "Move along," he smirked.

The dwarf sputtered a curse that Shaundar, with his smattering of Dwarvish, only half understood. The scro seemed to understand it, however. He directed the ogres to instruct the prisoner as to "the proper state of affairs around here." The ogres dragged the dwarf to the riverbed and began to dunk him, then release him, then dunk him again, as he fought and sputtered. Shaundar recognized this all too well. He looked away.

"Strip, and place your belongings in this pile," recited the green scro again, this time to Shaundar. Shaundar shucked off what remained of his uniform, which really wasn't worth keeping at this point anyway. His *Teu'Ruani* rank insignia was immediately plucked from his collar and thrown into the box of silver.

"Get in the water," directed the green-skinned scro, so Shaundar stepped into the river, which was so shockingly cold that his exposed testicles cramped and tried to flee into his abdomen somewhere. He was taken in hand by one of the large orcish women, who scrubbed him with a brush that reddened his skin. The soap did seem to contain some of the same peppery stuff as the ale had. It stung his flesh, but did not blister it.

Behind him, Sylria and Yathar were removing their things and placing them in the pile to be sorted and looted.

“Yer done,” the rough orcish woman who was washing him drawled, giving him a shove. “Move along.”

Shaundar staggered along. The weather here was not particularly cold or warm – it was an overcast day during what might have been mid-spring – but after the dunking in that cold river, Shaundar was shivering. When he came to the next station, a scro woman with a long glove on her arm was checking the inmates for contraband. He looked away as he saw how she was checking. He endured his own turn with outward stoicism, though inwardly he felt thoroughly violated. Nor was the experience without its own brand of physical pain, kind of like having his insides turned out.

Yathar and Sylria were being pushed out of the river now, naked and scrubbed (Yathar’s bandage had come away in the washing and the stump of his arm was exposed; Shaundar thought it looked like a raw venison roast,) while in the meantime, the now-unconscious dwarf was being dragged over to join the left-hand line. Shaundar looked away when Yathar and Sylria made it to the scro woman with the glove, and hated himself for it.

He was directed to dress in a leaf-green uniform that was too short in both the sleeves and leggings, and tight around the shoulders

and chest, and he was given a pair of wooden shoes. They didn't fit. All three articles of clothing were marked with a number: D-1037.

Their captors sat them in hard-backed chairs and shaved their heads none too gently. Shaundar was not terribly bothered by this – his hair was still a wreck from the Crossing the Flow ceremony, even if he had enough vanity to care – but Sylria cried silently as her long, lovely brown tresses were shorn. Even this was saved by their jailers, divided into colour and length, for what purpose he could not begin to imagine.

Aimed crossbows marched them into neat lines of thirty-six people each. Shaundar began a new line. A scro clerk double-checked the number on his uniform and directed him to what appeared to be some kind of ramshackle barracks, which was marked "D Block: 1037 - 1072" with red ship paint the same blood red of the Mantis ships. He was relieved to see that Yathar and Sylria were still right behind him, assigned to the same building.

They were lined up in front of their assigned barracks and directed to stand at attention. Many of the civilians they seemed to be surrounded by were confused as to what, exactly, they meant by this. Shaundar tried to explain and was punched in the mouth for his pains.

Goblins issued them each a bowl. Shaundar's was a wooden one, while Sylria's was ceramic and Yathar's tin. Sylria's had a chip in its lip. They weren't the same size. All of their future bunkmates were also issued bowls of various materials, sizes and conditions.

They were directed to continue to stand at attention and left there for more than an hour. Shaundar, struggling to maintain his endurance while standing on his still-broken femur, was reminded distinctly of Lord Durothil and his books of so many years ago. There was no purpose to this other than to make the prisoners suffer.

He had a good opportunity to look around a little while they were standing pointlessly in front of the barracks. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds of these ramshackle wooden buildings, with hundreds, perhaps thousands of green-uniformed prisoners. Smoke and a metallic scent was emanating from a nearby building, and prisoners and orcs were loading carts with that round iron bombard shot on one end of it and driving them away. The land beneath his feet was swampy and spongy, and that same river ran through the camp, bringing that violet foam with it. That charnel scent of burning bodies still permeated the air. More disturbingly, Shaundar believed he could see the prisoners from the left-hand line in an open pen near to the place where he could see the black death-smoke pluming into the air.

The sky was full of a large planet and a cluster of oversized stars that were likely asteroids and in the distance was a rather pretty mountain range with snow about halfway down.

At last, as the sun on this world began to make its descent in the sky, the red-armoured scro appeared. Again Shaundar was struck by his hulking size and enormous, jutting tusks, surrounding a rather hairy face

even for a scro, and he wondered if their jailer had some common orcish blood.

He stood before them, his grey-green eyes scouring them for weaknesses. Shaundar felt his eyes linger on his splinted leg-bone and he straightened up subconsciously. His eyes also lingered on Yathar's missing arm, but the go-to-hell look on Yathar's face caused him to smile and he moved on to Sylria with what seemed to Shaundar a disturbingly appreciative gaze.

"Welcome to the Raven Talon Prison Camp," the feral scro began, folding his hands behind his back in a manner that Shaundar associated with an Admiral giving a speech. "I am Prison Warden Garik Bloodaxe, and I am in charge of this facility. You are here at the pleasure of the Scro Empire, and you will only be kept alive as long as you continue to be of use to the Empire." He began to pace up and down in front of their line-up. "How you will be of use is to work. Those who do not work, or cannot work, are no longer of use to the Empire." He nodded in the direction of the plume of reeking black smoke. "Troublemakers are also of no use to the Empire." He stopped pacing and rocked back and forth on his heels as he scrutinized them. "Work begins at 4 a.m. every morning. It ends at 6 p.m. You will be expected to wash regularly and keep your bowl and bunk clean. You will assemble for roll call prior to every workday and at the end of every workday. You will identify yourself by your number only. Do as you're told, and you will survive. Do not, and you will find yourself on the pyre." He nodded to one of the

ogres, who cuffed Shaundar upside the head again and bellowed, “Now, march!”

Shaundar randomly chose a direction and started marching. His leg had gone numb by now, which turned out to be a blessing. They were marched around the perimeter of the camp for two hours. Shaundar did his best to try to determine possible escape routes and weak points, and was deeply disappointed. These scro had an efficient system. The entire perimeter was surrounded by brambles of legendary size and sharpness. There were guard towers at every corner and the centre of three of the four walls. There was only one gate in or out. Shaundar had some hope for the spelljamming ships, but they were well-guarded by their ship’s crews; not much chance there.

At first, Shaundar wondered at the wisdom of marching them around so that they could get a good look at all the defences and possible weaknesses; but he quickly figured it out. It was like some macabre tour of the Raven Talon camp, intended to demoralize and horrify. It worked. Shaundar saw some of the thinnest people he had ever seen shuffling around, digging latrines, fortifying defences, and hauling carts of that iron shot. Most of them looked ready to fall over and die; some of them looked like the wind might just blow them away at any moment. Their eyes were glazed and dark and utterly without hope.

As they came closer to the black smoke plume, Shaundar saw first the open pen he thought he had noticed before, and confirmed that it was indeed crammed full of people, many of whom were children, who

were now getting rained on in a steady, depressing drizzle. The dwarf was among them, still unconscious. The fence held him up because it was so packed that there was no room for him to lie down.

Then Shaundar saw the altar. It was a huge edifice of black stone on a raised dais, around which several stone bleachers had been arranged; enough that the crews of five dreadnaughts could witness the festivities. On the altar a huge eye was carved, unwinking and somehow disturbing to look at. Surrounding that altar was a pool of blood that had stained the ground black in an irregular, oozing circle more than a hundred feet in diameter. The altar had shackles and chains at all four corners, and dangling from the stone on hooks like macabre barbecue tools were various implements of pain and torture.

Behind the altar was a rack with room enough for the flogging of ten at a time with another pool of black dried blood oozing from beneath it; and beyond that was an earthen platform with a dozen metal poles emerging from it. At the foot of each was a pile of kindling, and nearby an enormous stack of wood. Ravens perched on the rack watched them with hungry eyes.

Shaundar shuddered.

Last, they finally saw the source of the huge black reeking plume. There was a pit as deep as any quarry, except that it was filled with bodies; bodies of elves, bodies of dwarves, of gnomes, of humans. They were in various states of decay, and they were smouldering; some just a

little, some blazing merrily away. The ones not actively burning were covered in flies and in ravens. There had to be thousands of them, swarming over the carrion and helping themselves to the eyes of the freshest victims, occasionally startling and rising into the air in a black cloud, squawking indignantly. Shaundar saw one raven pulling the eyeball from the socket of a partially-charred elven boy who might have been Yathar’s little brother. The other one was crawling with maggots. He retched, but there was nothing in his belly to sick up. The ogre directing their little parade chuckled.

They were marched back to their barracks and they stood for “roll call.” They were expected to call out their numbers in order and then await instructions. Those instructions seemed to be entirely geared to humiliate and demoralize. They were directed, seemingly at random, to take off and put on various items of clothing, and were whipped if they disobeyed or even hesitated. Shaundar, who had been traipsing around in the mud with bare feet because the wooden shoes he had been given did not fit, was directed to put them on, and unable to cram his feet into the tiny openings, he was given a dozen lashes. They didn’t fasten him to the rack, they just struck him where he was and let the riding crop fall where it would. He ended up kneeling in the mud, covering his delicate pointed elven ears with his hands after a stray stroke cut one of them rather badly.

Only then – it had to be at least eight o’clock, by Shaundar’s reckoning, and it was completely dark outside – did the scro serve supper, which consisted of a ladle of water and a single scoop of some

unnameable gruel for each prisoner. By this time, Shaundar was so hungry that he didn't much care what was in it, and since no silverware was provided, he just slurped it out of his bowl like a dog. He could see that the others in his barracks were doing the same.

Only then were they permitted to enter the barracks, their clothes now thoroughly soaked from the steady drizzle of rain. The bunks were stacks of slats on more slats; no blankets, no pillows, not even a little straw to ease the hard wood. Counting the different sections, Shaundar determined that they expected three people to crowd into each, though it looked like there was actually room for only two. He took the top bunk farthest from the door with some difficulty, and made room for Yathar and Sylria.

Sylria handed him her shoes. "Maybe we should trade," she suggested. "These are like dress-up shoes on me."

Shaundar handed over his shoes with a smile. His shoes fit her perfectly. Hers were still more than a little tight, but at least his feet would actually go in them.

"You guys are Elven Navy, aren't you?" one of their bunkmates asked; a reedy-looking high elf male with blue-green eyes who also bore the signs of recent processing, including bloody razor-marks on his head.

"Yeah, that's right," Yathar replied.

“Well, where in the Hells were you when Spiral was invaded?” demanded a high elven female angrily with dark blue, almost purple eyes.

“Getting our ship blown to flinders while we fought the scro,” Shaundar snapped back, not being in any mood for this sort of crap. She seemed to back down. Her eyes looked away from his.

“Is that where we are? Spiral?” Sylria asked. “We were brought here in the brig of one of those bug-ships.”

“Mantis,” clarified the first high elf. “They call them Manti. And yes, this is Spiral. Or at least it was.” His voice was thick with sorrow.

“What, exactly, is this place?” Yathar questioned the elves who had spoken to him. “What is going on here?”

“It’s an internment camp,” the female explained. “Spiral is dying. The invaders get farther every day.” She put her head down and started to weep. The male elf put a hand of comfort on her shoulder. “A fleet and a huge army landed,” he elucidated to the three Navy elves. “We were completely unprepared. It’s been peaceful here for thousands of years. Every now and then you’d hear about an orcish raid, but mostly our ancestors drove them to the hills millennia ago. They had weapons that plumed fire like a dragon and great metal tubes that exploded and projected balls of iron and nothing could stand against them.” Shaundar nodded. Of course they were talking about Greek fire projectors and those strange, efficient bombards, and this description, more than

anything, confirmed the elf's story about Spiral being a peaceful, even pacifistic world. The elf shrugged. "So they need a place to put us prisoners, and make sure they can control us, and now we're here." He then did something Shaundar did not expect, and it took him aback completely in this bizarre setting. The elf bowed in a formal, friendly elven fashion. "I'm Tyrel," he introduced himself. "This is my sister Tianna."

Tianna blinked through watery eyes at him and said nothing. The small finger of her left hand was stuck into her mouth and her expression was almost that of a guileless infant. It was disturbingly vacant and Shaundar looked away.

Realizing he was being rude, Shaundar returned the bow. "I'm Sha – I'm Garan," he introduced himself. "This is Sylria and . . ."

"Renaith," Yathar piped up, giving the name of one of the younger Marines who had died aboard the *Queen's Dirk* and offering his own bow. Shaundar was relieved that Yathar possessed enough foresight to lie about his identity as well. He doubted that Rear Admiral Durothil would care much about his son's incarceration, but the scro wouldn't know that.

"Well met," he nodded. "Too bad it's under these circumstances."

"Agreed," said Shaundar.

“So, what do you think our odds are of getting out of here?” Yathar inquired mildly, as though remarking on the state of the weather. He had clambered up into the bunk now; no challenge for him even with his missing hand after years of navigating rigging.

Tyrel barked a sharp cynical laugh. “Where would we go? The whole planet looks like this.”

“Up,” said Yathar firmly.

“That’s a summer daydream,” Tianna snarled, her vacant eyes now sharp and angry. “Don’t give us any false hopes. That’s the last thing that we need.”

“You’ll have to excuse her,” Tyrel apologized. “She lost . . .”

Tianna put her hands over her ears and yelled incoherently in denial of whatever it was that Tyrel had been going to say. With that, the door burst open and orc and ogre guards charged into the room and began whipping everyone. Recognizing Tianna as the source of the noise, they beat her to a bloody pulp of unconsciousness before they left.

Gently and tenderly, Tyrel placed her on one of the mercilessly hard bunks. When Shaundar went to help, Tyrel slapped his hands away. “You’ve done quite enough, thank you,” he snapped.

“Let’s try to get some reverie,” Yathar suggested; by which he guessed that some of his crestfallen sense of shame and helplessness must have shown on his face. “We’ll need our strength tomorrow.”

But there was no rest that night. About moonrise, the screaming began.

Shaundar awoke with a start and he reached for short swords or spell component pouches that were no longer there. He pretended not to see Yathar’s dismayed expression as his non-existent right hand reached for a long sword that was not present. The screaming was not in the room with them but came from somewhere in the distance; though the sound carried and echoed grotesquely through the dark.

“Please . . .” a feminine elven voice was begging. “Please . . .” but her pleas went unheard or ignored, and then a horrible, burbling shrieking started up again that rose in pitch and volume like a tea-kettle; until, just as suddenly and perhaps even more horribly, it stopped, cut off in mid-cry.

Shaundar realized in the silence that he was panting and his heart was trip hammering in his chest.

Nobody quite dared to ask, “What was that?” Shaundar thought he knew. He thought he knew it pretty well. In his mind’s eye he saw that black stone altar, the chains, and a vivisection without anaesthetic.

After several minutes of silence, he dared to lie down again and try to sleep; but Yathar was weeping silently now, and he hid his face so that Shaundar couldn't see.

"What is it, *teu'ravanthas*?" Shaundar whispered.

For a long moment Yathar said nothing. Then he met Shaundar's eyes and raised his stump of an arm pointedly. "I'm never going to be a bladesinger again, am I?" he murmured.

Shaundar clasped his shoulder encouragingly. "I don't believe that," he said quietly. "They'll give you a prosthetic arm when we get back home, and Tyelatae says the enchantment makes it move just like a real limb. Or you might be able to get it regenerated. And even if not, you'll just have to figure out how to do it with your left hand, that's all."

Yathar smiled faintly at him. "Always the optimist, aren't you? Ah, but you're right. I'm sorry. I have no right to lose hope."

But Shaundar was not entirely convinced of his own words. They seemed to be in a very good and solid trap here, and he was beginning to doubt that they would ever make it home again at all. Still, Yathar needed him to be the strong one for once, and after all the times that Yathar had defended and fought for him, Shaundar was damned if he was going to fail him. He would be strong enough for both of them.

An hour later, just as Shaundar was beginning to drop off to a fitful doze again, a different voice began screaming in pain and terror.

This one was an elven male. It went on for several minutes before finally cutting off just as abruptly as the last.

After that, Shaundar did not reverie, or sleep, a wink.

Chapter Fifteen

Shaundar found himself being whipped into consciousness from his semi-doze while it was still dark.

“Get up, *gurt!*” snarled the ogre with the whip. “Roll call!”

Shaundar got up, cradling his bowl protectively in one hand. He shuffled on his shoes at the command of the overseer and clambered outside with the rest of the barracks for roll call. It was Sylria they singled out with the bizarre commands this time, watching her dress and undress in the weird firelight of the camp and the greying morning sky, and leering at her breasts in a way that Shaundar did not like.

Breakfast turned out to be acorn coffee, black, sharp and bitter, and it did nothing to assuage the growling that had begun in Shaundar’s belly. Shaundar was still an adolescent – a growing boy – and he often had second or third helpings at mess when there was no rationing. They had not eaten well in the brig of the *Vengeance* either and this was beginning to tell on him.

They were then directed to wash in the freezing cold river. Neither soap nor washcloth was provided. Shaundar, knowing the perils of filth well as a star-sailor, cleaned up as best he could. The mark on his ear bled out some more once the scab had been unintentionally scrubbed off.

Standing once again in the line and shivering, they were then given their work assignments. Sylria and Tianna, who was barely walking, were assigned to “the Crematorium,” what is what Shaundar presumed they had the audacity to call that horrible smouldering pit, and he, Yathar and Tyrel were assigned to “The Factory,” which turned out to be the building that manufactured that strange iron shot.

Inside the building was an industrial hell. The temperature had to be equivalent to the surface of a sun. Huge, kiln-like forges fed by shovelling coal and massive bellows heated crucibles fit only for giants or dragons, which were then tilted by means of a pulley system to pour molten iron into ceramic moulds, forming that perfectly round shape. The moulds were then pried apart and the round shot rolled down a slide into carts, which were hauled out of the other side of the building.

Yathar, with his missing hand, was assigned to coal-shovelling, which he could manage mostly one-handed, occasionally bracing the handle of the shovel against his body with the remains of his right arm. Tyrel was directed to haul on the pulley of a crucible, and Shaundar had the bad luck, he assumed because of his size, to be told to work the bellows. They were big enough that he had to stand underneath them, hauling down one handle with both hands to oxygenate the infernal flames, and then pushing it back up with both arms and his back and shoulders to refill the bellows with air. He quickly learned to draw down on it with his whole body with his right leg stretched awkwardly out beside him, allowing gravity to aid his work, and let the filling air push him back up as he braced himself with his calves and thighs (sheer

agony!) to minimize the strain on his body. But by the time the overseer reappeared to whip them out to lunch, he was trembling with exhaustion and sweat was running freely into his eyes.

Lunch was eaten outdoors, and it consisted of a single piece of slightly mouldy bread. No water was served. Desperately thirsty, Shaundar dunked himself into the river and used the bowl to slurp up as much water as possible while he washed the heat and sweat from his body. It tasted foul and a little soapy but he drank it anyway; drank until he got a cramp. Yathar and Tyrel joined him, and soon everyone assigned to their work crew was in the river. This was permitted by their captors, who regarded them with calculating, sinister eyes. Then it was back to work. Shaundar had half-hoped that they would be assigned to different jobs after lunch to give their exhausted muscles a break, but it was not to be.

Shaundar could hardly believe it when the end of the day arrived at last, having sunk into a trance of pain and misery in which he ceased to notice his screaming and trembling muscles, his weariness, the blistering heat, or the ever-present, ever-fucking ache in his gimped right leg. Blearily he limped back to the barracks, driven by the overseer's whip.

Supper was served after roll call, and it was more of the same gruel that they had been served yesterday. He was so exhausted that he didn't want it in the least, but he forced himself to choke it down anyway, knowing that if tomorrow was anything like today, he would need as

much energy as he could get. This time he did not try for reverie once they had laid down upon their bed of slats; he simply passed out.

Halfway through the night, the screaming began again. Sylria sobbed quietly for the rest of the night as the shrieking rose and fell and rose again, and Shaundar lay awake, staring into the darkness with pupils like black holes, holding Sylria's hand because there was nothing else he could do.

Morning was exactly like the previous morning. By now Shaundar was hungry enough that he could think of nothing else. He drank the acorn coffee to the last drop and licked out the bowl with no sense of shame at all. Then it was back to the Factory, and back to the bellows. Lunch was hard and stale rye bread. Dinner, just for a change of pace, was gruel. Then it was back to the barracks, to be awakened once again at what Shaundar guessed to be midnight by agonized screaming.

"We have to get out of here," Yathar confided to Shaundar quietly as the screaming continued.

"I'm with you if you have any ideas," Shaundar agreed.

"I do," said Sylria with a determined voice. "Those ships out there. We can make a break for it. Steal one of them. We're spelljammers, aren't we? We can run away with it."

Yathar was shaking his head. "It's a good idea, but we don't know what kind of fleet they have out there. Tyrel said a large fleet

landed. They'll probably shoot us down as soon as we leave atmosphere. And we don't have enough people to crew any weapons, even if we were to take the whole barracks here."

"What about the troop transports?" Shaundar had seen them coming and going. They looked just like the wagons that brought in prisoners, only they bore that spider blazon. "Is there any hope we can sneak aboard one?"

Sylria shook his head this time. "It's no good. They're too well guarded."

"Well, let's keep our eyes open," said Yathar. "If they keep feeding us like this, we're going to be too weak for escape attempts in a week or two."

"Agreed," Shaundar nodded; as did Sylria.

"They're sacrificing the people in the pen on the altar," Sylria told them with haunted eyes. "They're calling on their gods; Gruumsh, Ilneval and Dukagsh. They're torturing them to death."

Shaundar was silent. He had seen the altar, and he had heard of such horrors, of course; it was part of the elven war machine's rhetoric to inspire a desire to fight orcs. But especially after meeting Dorin Bloodfist, Shaundar had not entirely believed it. Now here it was, as real as his own flesh, which was crawling as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

They had to get out of here, and they had to tell the Navy what was going on so that they could stop it.

The next day passed in a haze. By now Shaundar's belly was a ravening tiger, roaring and pacing violently up and down in its cage, waiting for a chance to escape. He had to blink away the urge to knock Tyrel down and take his gruel at dinner, and this badly frightened him.

But that night, instead of being awoken by screaming, something else went horribly wrong.

The door of the barracks banged open, and before Shaundar had a chance to realize what was going on, the room filled with bodies. A hulking silhouette filled the doorway against the backdrop of the torchlight and then his arms were being grabbed and he was being forcibly hauled off of the bunk. So were Sylria and Yathar. He didn't know what was going on, but certain that it couldn't be good, he wrestled, writhed and fought. Someone screamed and a slap silenced her. He didn't think it was either Sylria or Tianna, but he couldn't be sure.

He smelled overwhelming musky body odour and heard low baritone and bass voices grunting in the guttural orcish language, and hands the size of bread paddles seized his arms. Someone belted him across the back of the head and his ears started to ring. He tasted metallic blood in his mouth and guessed that he must have bitten his tongue.

“Stay still, *gurt*,” the creature who had him commanded. “It will only go worse for you if you don’t.”

Shaundar had no intention of staying still. He twisted like a snake and bit one of the paddle-sized paws that had a grip on his arms hard enough to draw blood.

There was a roar of frustration and pain and then blows rained upon his head as his attacker slapped him back and forth with both sides of one of those huge mitts until he was dizzy and disoriented, laughing in a meaty chuckle all the while. “You’re a feisty one, I see!” he chortled, as though pleased by Shaundar’s resistance. “Well, that makes it all the more fun.”

He tossed Shaundar’s body over one of the middle bunks like a sack of flour. He barked a command to one of his fellows, who then clamped Shaundar’s wrists in a vice grip. Then Shaundar heard a shuffling sound and a thump, like cloth rustling and something hard hitting the floor. A moment later his uniform trousers were yanked from behind and noosed around his knees, and then those paws, one still slick with blood, dug firm claws into the front of his hips and something long, hot and hard was thrust into his anus in an explosion of red pain that felt as though he were being disembowelled. His attacker’s tusks sank deep into his shoulder, just above his shellback tattoo, as he was violated again, and again, and again. The orc chuffed and grunted rhythmically in his ear with his tusks firmly clamped on Shaundar’s shoulder as blood ran freely down

Shaundar's back and arm, and the reek of the orc's body odour and Shaundar's revulsion at what was happening nauseated him.

After what seemed like an eternity in hell, the orc began to moan and shudder, and his rhythm began to falter. With a throaty howl of pleasure, he released Shaundar's shoulder and spurted his seed into Shaundar's raw and bleeding insides.

"There you are, you stinking *gurt*," the orc panted into Shaundar's ear after a few moments. The stench of his breath and Shaundar's own blood made Shaundar's stomach turn over. "How do you like that? I bet that's just the way you like it." Sated, he pulled away from Shaundar and put his trousers back on and fastened his belt. He clapped the one who had held Shaundar's wrists on the shoulder and the two of them seized Yathar and tossed him over the bunk. Now it was Shaundar's attacker who held Yathar down while the other one raped him.

Shaundar tried to get to his feet and found he couldn't, so he crawled away into the darkest corner he could find, and he lay there trying to get his bearings, trying to breathe, trying to clear the fog from his swimming head, trying not to think about the warm fluid running down the back of his legs that might have been blood or something else. All the while he could hear Yathar's outraged and terrified screams and Sylria's sobbing. Unable to bear it anymore, he launched himself wildly at the orc raping Yathar with no plan or finesse at all, an animal cry of rage

ripping from his throat. He was smashed aside by one of the ogres so hard that his vision went completely black.

When he came to, the orcs and ogres were gone and there was nothing left but broken bodies and broken souls.

Shaundar curled up into a ball in the corner he'd fallen in, thought about Narissa, and wept.

They couldn't look each other in the eye the next day. They were amazingly quiet and complacent at roll call. Tianna stared straight forward, her eyes as glassy as if she had already died, and she did not drink any of the acorn coffee. Sylria said nothing but tears leaked continually from her eyes like a melting mountain trickle.

Shaundar was not in the least bit hungry or thirsty either, but he made himself drink the bitter acorn liquid anyway. There was not a single part of Shaundar that did not hurt and his insides felt like they'd been cauterized. He was not walking right and he was not certain he ever would again. Worst of all, the sign of his shame was clearly visible as a discoloured bloodstain on the back of his trousers. As he limped off to the Factory, he could see the guards, even the goblin lackeys smirking as they saw his stained green uniform pants. He felt soiled, polluted. He was damaged goods.

With nothing but time to think, he found himself lamenting over and over again that he had not lain with Narissa. He had imagined that his first acquaintance with anything sexual, aside from the nocturnal dreams typical of all young males, would be a sweet wine to be savoured at a special occasion, made all the more enjoyable by anticipation. Now he could not get the acrid stench of that orc or the sound of its lusty grunts out of his head.

Tyrel did not accompany them to the Factory. Tyrel would never accompany anyone anywhere again. He had died in the night from one of the many injuries inflicted by the rapists; whether it was the head wound that had killed him, or what was likely severe internal bleeding, Shaundar could not say. He was deeply sorry for him, but he had taken Tyrel's shoes just the same, because they looked bigger than the ones he'd traded Sylria for; and they were.

A hollow despair was beginning to fill Shaundar's soul. Was there any hope at all that they would get out of this place? Or were they doomed to die here, die slowly of starvation, disease, exhaustion and torture?

He knew now that his and Yathar's caution in giving false names had been wasted. They didn't care what their names were. They wouldn't have cared if Yathar were King Zaor himself and he was the Court Jester. All he was to them was a number, D-1037, a *gurt*, a plaything to sate their sadism upon, and if the many slow deaths of this

place didn't kill him, he would end his days as more viscera on the sacrificial altar.

He found fresh blood on his trousers at lunch after pumping the bellows all morning. It didn't appear to be enough to kill him, but it was a definite cause for concern. He tried to wash it off as best as he was able in the river. Since no soap was provided, Shaundar's clothes now smelled of faintly stale sweat and a touch of mildew – as did he. In a way, he was glad he had been shaved bald; likely his hair would be in greasy strings by this time otherwise.

Hunger eluded Shaundar most of the day, so at dinner he was able to consider the gruel they were being fed. He was reasonably certain that there was some kind of blood in it and bits of meat or meat-like substances of some variety, though Shaundar did not examine them too closely, figuring it best that he not know what kind. He found himself wondering why. Surely it took more effort, or expense, to acquire meat, even if it did turn out to be horse intestines or something, than they wanted to spend on the lot of them, judging by the lack of basic provisions, the ill-fitting uniforms, the tight sleeping quarters, and so forth? So why go to that kind of trouble?

Tianna continued to stare vacantly into space, and she did not eat any of the gruel that night either. Sylria tried to get her attention a couple of times as she ate her own, to no avail.

It wasn't until he was dropping off into what passed as sleep in this place that it came to him. Orcs and scro were highly carnivorous, he recalled from when he was guarding Dorin Bloodfist. This probably was subsistence-level gruel for them, and it likely had not occurred to them that elves did not require as much meat as they did. However, this created another problem. Elves needed a lot more vegetables or fruits than orcs. They were very susceptible to the Spacer's Disease, which was one reason why most of the larger elven spelljamming ships had gardens. If they didn't find a source of fruits or greens very soon, they would die of scurvy long before they starved to death.

That night, the rapists came again. Shaundar snapped to full consciousness right away as soon as the door opened. He was ready. He punched one of the assailants in the face and kicked another in the crotch as they reached for him. That turned out to be a bad idea. They decided to make an example of him and they took turns gang-raping him as roughly as they could, and Yathar as well when he came to Shaundar's defence. They rode him like a horse, sating themselves one after another, and by the time they were done Shaundar felt like his insides were raw hamburger and he was sick, bruised and shuddering.

"Why did you do that?" one of their bunkmates asked him as he struggled to collect himself. "You knew you couldn't win. Why make it worse?"

"Because," Shaundar explained through his swollen mouth, "I refuse to *allow* them to hurt me. If I don't fight them, I'll never be able to look at myself in the mirror again."

"Fight them less hard," Sylria recommended with a nervous titter. She had not been assaulted this time.

Shaundar grinned, though it made his bruised face hurt. "No," he said simply.

Tenderly Sylria tried to help him up. He was reasonably certain that he passed out for a few moments. When he came to, many hands were lifting him gently into his bunk. This simple gesture of compassion from his fellow prisoners broke through his defences on a level that the cruelty of the orcs had not, and once again he wept.

He slipped in and out of consciousness most of the night while Yathar and Sylria tried to clean him up with their green uniforms. But he did manage to drag himself from his bunk the following morning for roll call, though he could hardly hold his bowl in his trembling hands and one eye was completely swollen shut.

Rage seethed and swelled beneath the surface. Shaundar found he was grinding his teeth subconsciously and tried to make himself stop because it hurt his already bruised and swollen jaw. He pumped the bellows, gasping for breath as the repetitive movement strained a bruised

or cracked rib, and thought about ripping some orc's face off with his teeth.

He happened to glance over at the long counters full of moulds filled with solidifying iron as he was considering whether or not to ask to go to the latrines, when inspiration hit him.

He glanced around quickly. There were only three overseers in the whole of the Factory, so an elf could sneak a few seconds of a break if he had to. Thus far Shaundar hadn't – he generally found it easier to operate in an automatic pseudo-trance state – but now he glanced over at Yathar and hissed, "Cover for me!"

Yathar looked to see where the nearest overseer was and positioned his body as much as possible between him and Shaundar.

Quickly, Shaundar unfastened the drawstring of his pants and pissed carefully into his wooden bowl, which was sitting on the floor near to his feet, awaiting lunch.

He then picked up the bowl, nodded his thanks to Yathar, and headed over to the overseer. As he did so, he passed by one of the counters on which the moulds of shot were cooling, and with a flick of his wrist he tipped the contents of the bowl into the line of small holes at the top of each cell where the excess metal was allowed to expand, later to be ground off. The mould emitted steam in an angry hiss. Shaundar

glanced up at the overseer to check whether or not the ogre had noticed, but in all the noise and smoke of the Factory, he seemed oblivious.

When Shaundar approached him he turned sour yellow eyes to look at him. "Latrines?" he asked abruptly before Shaundar had a chance to say anything.

"Yes, sir," Shaundar replied.

"Five minutes," agreed the overseer, gesturing out the door behind him with his great oversized tusked head. Shaundar nodded and scurried to the latrines as quickly as his gimped leg would allow. He finished the piss he had started in his shallow wooden bowl, trying not to smirk. It was then that he noticed that some of the weeds that were growing at the edge of the commode, which was open so that the guards could watch their prisoners at all times, were watercress; a perfectly edible green plant with rounded leaves. "Well, fancy that," Shaundar grinned, and once he had finished shaking off, he picked as much of it as he could fit in both hands and crammed it into his mouth. The bitter green juices running down his throat tasted like ambrosia.

He hurried back to the Factory before he was missed and went back to work at the bellows, trying not to grin like an idiot. "What was that about?" Yathar inquired as he passed by with a shovel full of coal.

"I'll explain later," Shaundar promised.

And he did.

"Sabotage," he smirked cheerfully at Yathar as they clambered into their bunks after evening roll call, though he whispered under his breath.

"What?" Sylria asked.

"That's what I was up to today at the Factory," he told Yathar.

"How does that work?" he wanted to know.

"Hot water and steam causes a gas to release when it comes in contact with molten iron," Shaundar explained. This was something he had learned from his alchemical studies. "Urine isn't that hot but it certainly produces steam if contacts hot molten metal. If gasses are released when a metal casting is trying to settle they can cause divots and air pockets." He bared his teeth fiercely. "Worst case scenario, nothing happens because I didn't get enough piss into the moulds; or they notice and have to recast a few more balls so it costs them more in time and resources. Best case scenario, they don't notice and the damn things misfire in combat." He smiled entirely without humour. "My contribution to the war effort."

"That's brilliant," Yathar beamed. "Let's pass the word."

"I wish there was something I could do to help," Sylria sighed.

"You could pick us some weeds," Shaundar suggested. "I noticed today that the commodes are surrounded by watercress. You're outside more than we are."

"I've been eating dandelions," she confessed. "They grow by the altar under the bleachers. I'll get you some. I'll put them in my shoes or down my pants."

"I'll take the ones that were down your pants," jested Yathar with an exaggerated leer as he wagged his eyebrows suggestively. This surprised a sharp, barking laugh out of Sylria and Shaundar both.

Shaundar again dozed lightly, expecting the rape gang to return; but that night they didn't.

In the morning, Tianna didn't get out of bed, whether due to inability or sheer lack of desire, Shaundar couldn't say. The guards came into the barracks and whipped her until she looked like she had been carved for a roast, and still she didn't move. She just gazed into hell with her glassy blank stare. At last the guards picked her up and carried her away. Sylria started to cry and couldn't seem to stop.

The rest of the day was a considerable improvement, however. It wasn't only Shaundar who made an effort to sabotage the ammunition manufacturing that day. Yathar also risked the notice of the overseers and poured his urine into hardening moulds. Shaundar wasn't sure how, because he never saw Yathar speaking to anyone about it, but word did

spread and he saw several other Factory workers passing by the moulds and tipping their bowls over them. Shaundar took a joyless, metallic pleasure in knowing that he had started this. Maybe it would come to nothing, but at least they were doing something; fighting back somehow.

He ate handfuls of watercress that day and picked handfuls more for Sylria, capitalizing on her idea and stuffing a bunch in his shoes and down the front of his pants. All in all, it was not a bad day as far as things went in the Raven Talon Prison Camp.

The three shared their stolen greens that night after roll call, which were wilted but still quite edible. Shaundar's body lusted keenly for the fresh-picked greenstuff and he was pretty sure, to judge by the alacrity of consumption, that so was everyone else's. "Thank you," Shaundar said quietly to Sylria as he inhaled dandelion leaves.

"I'm just pleased to be doing something," she admitted.

That's when the distant screaming started up again, and as it did, Sylria burst into tears. "Oh gods," she wailed, "Tianna's in the sacrifice pen. I wonder if . . . ?"

"Don't think it," interrupted Yathar sternly. "Don't even think about it. There's nothing you can do about it."

"She just sat there," Sylria cried. "She just sat there all day. She just gave up. And guys, I'm not sure that she isn't right! Nobody knows

where we are. Do we have any hope at all? Are we just prolonging the inevitable?”

Shaundar wasn't sure either, but he was emboldened by their limited successes that day. “There's always hope,” he said quietly.

Yathar put his hand on Sylria's shoulder. “Even if we are,” he told her, “I have no intention of giving up. I think Shaundar has the right idea.” He met Shaundar's eyes briefly to nod almost imperceptibly and then turned back to Sylria. “Let's not do the job for these swine. Let's make them pay for every pound of flesh. And if we're going to die anyway, let's go down fighting.”

Shaundar placed a hand on Sylria's other shoulder. He said nothing, but he nodded his agreement and encouragement.

Sylria looked at them both and hitched in her breath. Through her tears, she nodded. “Okay,” she whispered. “Okay.”

When the door of the barracks burst open a few minutes later, Sylria shrieked like a banshee and kicked and fought with her shipmates.

Chapter Sixteen

Laeroth Oakheart had been devastated when Admiral Alastrarra had come to tell their family about the fate of the *Queen's Dirk*, clad in his dress whites and with his hat tucked under one arm. His mother had cried, but he found himself shocked into disbelief. Garan was his big brother, solid as . . . well, the heart of an oak tree. When their father had been killed unexpectedly fighting pirates Laeroth had been very small and very confused, and it was Garan who had stepped in to take care of him and tell him that everything would be okay – not perfect, but okay. In many ways, Garan had replaced their father, whom Laeroth could now barely remember. Laeroth idolized his big brother; was constantly trying to be strong like him. And now they brought home his brother in sail canvas and begged them not to open it.

Laeroth had almost done it anyway. He couldn't believe it, that Garan was actually, really dead, and so he needed to be sure. He had crept into the church of Sehanine where Garan and the other dead of the *Queen's Dirk* were laid out in state, canvas pod after canvas pod covered over in the green and gold Man-o-War flags of the Navy, while the priestesses and priests, and volunteers among their surviving loved ones carefully cut, hauled and stacked the many sandalwood and camphor trees needed for such a great funeral pyre. He had gone to the anonymous pod marked with his brother's name with full intention of pulling back the flag and loosening the stitches over the body's face with

his pocket knife and making sure it was him under there and not somebody else, mistakenly marked. His mind had concocted a thousand different ways in which the body could have been misidentified, each more improbable than the last.

But when he had come close to the body, the smell had stopped him. Anything that smelled like that had to dead. And if his *brother* smelled like that, he didn't want to see what he looked like.

That's when the tears had finally come. And after that, he had volunteered to help with the funeral pyres. He needed to do something, even if all he could do was to see to his brother's remains.

Laeroth sang at his brother's funeral with all of the Navy families in Theraspar; sang the sacred songs to aid the spirit of his brother in his journey to Arvador, and the songs of praise to Sehanine Moonbow for guiding and watching over the spirits of the elven dead. He saw a sea of pale and sorrowful faces, some covered in tears, some just glassy and stunned.

He saw Narissa there standing beside her father looking crumpled somehow, like a discarded handkerchief. *Right, Shaundar and Yathar*, he thought to himself, slightly stunned by the realization that they would not be returning either. He felt badly for her. He was pretty sure that the whole world knew that she and Shaundar were engaged to be married; Narissa was so happy, showing off the goldheart charm Shaundar had given her, one that he had inherited from his grandmother,

she said. He had been bitterly jealous at the time because he had harboured secret feelings for Narissa from the first day he had met her. One might expect that part of him would half hope that he might now have a shot with Narissa with Shaundar out of the picture; but to Laeroth's credit, all he thought of at that moment was Narissa's sorrow.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Narissa,” he murmured as they mingled together after the ceremony, sipping punch and nibbling at snacks that nobody really wanted.

She blinked at him a moment; then she shook her head. “Thank you,” she said, “and I’m sorry for yours too, Laeroth; but Shaundar and Yathar are missing in action. Their deaths aren’t confirmed yet.”

“Oh,” he exclaimed softly, and he bit his lip. How much worse would that be, he wondered? He had trouble believing that Garan was really gone as it was. Had they not found their bodies? If not, were they adrift in the Void? Or had something else happened to them?

Narissa seemed to notice his awkwardness and she gave him a watery, *I’m-okay* smile. She said nothing, but instead squeezed his hand, he assumed to either reassure him that she was fine or to offer encouragement or support, and wandered off to speak to Lady Sunfall and Selena. He smiled at Selena but she didn’t return it. They had broken up rather messily not too long after Yathar and Shaundar had dropped out of school and joined the Navy. Laeroth didn’t even remember what they had been fighting about now. He suspected that he

had said something insensitive about her brother, something he now felt like a complete idiot about.

A stab of guilt touched him, not for the first time. He remembered the day that Professor Durothil had made Shaundar stand for nearly an hour with his arms out, holding books, punishing him for trouble that Laeroth had started. He had never again pestered Shaundar at school, but he couldn't help but resent Shaundar and so he had not quit bothering him *outside* of school. Shaundar Sunfall had everything that Laeroth wanted. He was smart, good-looking and athletic. Laeroth had always struggled at school, and he didn't think there was anything spectacular about his own mouse brown hair and faded blue eyes. He wasn't even Shaundar's equal in the athletic field, really; he might have been stronger, but he was not nearly as lithe or as fast, and Shaundar had gained in strength and size as he had grown. Worst of all, Shaundar Sunfall had a father, one who had survived the same pirate attack that had killed Lord Oakheart; and he also had the love of the girl that Laeroth wanted; though when he was that young, Laeroth hadn't really understood his own motivations. Everyone said that a half-blood like Shaundar Sunfall would never amount to anything. So how did he best Laeroth in *every single field*?

But Garan had shown Laeroth the error of his ways. Garan, who served aboard the *Aerdrie's Pride*, "the finest Armada in the Fleet," (at least according to him,) had laughed at Laeroth's pretensions. "We have elves from all over the Universe in the Navy," he had snickered. "If you really think that race is so important, you're a fool." And because Garan

believed this, Laeroth had questioned what he had been taught by most of the Admirals and Captains he had grown up with, and concluded that Garan was right.

When Yathar and Shaundar had left the Academy in such spectacular fashion, Laeroth couldn't help but speculate as to whether or not he might have contributed to that decision. And, he realized with a start, if that were so, then their disappearance was at least partially his fault.

He would have apologized to Shaundar if he could have, thin as that apology might have been after all the years of harassment. Laeroth had, of course, been present at the awards ceremony where the crew of the *Dirk* had been awarded medals for the now-famous Battle of Glyth's Rings. He had meant to track down Shaundar then, but had not succeeded. Perhaps that was just as well; he was a little resentful of the fact that Shaundar Sunfall was now apparently outshining *Garan* as well, and he thought it might make his apology difficult and unconvincing, though it was sincere. So Laeroth learned the bitter regret of having not said things he should have said, only to have the chance to do so torn away from him by fate.

Narissa was not in school the day after the funeral, but Laeroth wasn't concerned until she didn't show up for a couple of days. Then he asked someone if they'd seen her, and he heard how on the day after the news had reached them, when Laeroth had been given the day off to make arrangements for Garan and he and his mother had spent that

awful day just staring blankly at each other, Narissa had picked up her books and left, and had not returned since.

He went looking for her. Eventually he found her sitting at the docks with her magic books spread around her – none of which she was looking at – staring up at the sky and seemingly watching the clouds shift and roll.

“Hey there,” he mumbled to get her attention.

Narissa didn’t see him right away; being lost in whatever thoughts gave her that sad and troubled look (Laeroth could make some guesses) and then she focused on his face and recognition, though slow, flashed in her eyes. “Oh, hello Laeroth,” she said tunelessly. He couldn’t help but wish there was more joy in her at the sight of him, but he knew now that her heart was not his, and never would be. “How are you?”

“Holding up,” he admitted with the same unlikely *I’m-okay* smile she had given to him at the funeral. “And you?”

“The same,” she confessed. Her eyes strayed back to the sky.

“What are you doing here?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Waiting,” she replied simply.

“Waiting?” he echoed blankly.

She met his eyes again. “I’m waiting for Shaundar and Yathar,” she said. When he continued to look blank, she explained, “I want to be the first thing they see when they get home. I want them to know how much I love them.” Her eyes filled with tears that she did not shed.

Laeroth sat down beside her. This faintly horrified him. “Narissa,” he began slowly, “you know they wouldn’t want you to do that.”

“I know,” she sighed, “but I don’t want to do anything else.” Now the tears came, hot and full like a river overflowing its banks in the spring, and it was Laeroth who went to her and held her to his shoulder as she cried. He cried too, at last accepting his brother’s death as real, and they clutched at each other like birds in a storm.

But he couldn’t convince her to leave the docks. Every day Laeroth would detour past there on the way home from school – something he had lost all interest in, but since he didn’t really have anything else to do with his time, and since it got him away from his house, where the pall of death and desolation clung to the place and his mother stared for hours out the window as the sky darkened and Laeroth kept up the tidying and the meals, he persisted in going anyway – and there she would be, not reading her magic study books, or not embroidering or not beading or not playing her harp. He brought her meals and tried to distract her from her sorrow. He brought board games and *kholiast* cards and even tried to convince her to drink with him – anything to break that dark fascination with the empty sky – and she

would listlessly poke at any food brought, or play at games with all the enthusiasm of an automaton, clutching her goldheart like a talisman. Laeroth persisted anyway.

Sometimes he would come by and Lady Sunfall was already there, standing over Narissa and hugging the girl to her body protectively, her gaze equally drawn to the heavens. Sometimes he would even see Lady Durothil, who crept quietly out at the hour of twilight and stared sorrowfully up at the sky for a while, then leave as quickly as she had arrived. Even Lord Sunfall would stop and do this every once in a while; though it was like he didn't want to, because after a few moments he would shake his head as though trying to wake himself up from a dream, mumble something like "Stupid" under his breath, and carry on.

One night, he was just heading home after seeing Narissa back to her house, and he almost literally ran into Lady Mistwinter. She met his eyes and smiled. "Laeroth Oakheart," she acknowledged him. He looked into her eyes, wondering what the milky film in them might be, and he realized with a start that they were the fabled moonbows that elder elves developed when they were at last called home to Arvandor.

She nodded solemnly. "Ah, you see," she said. "I was hoping to wait until Shaundar and Yathar came home, but I don't think I can. Arvandor calls me, lad. So will you do a favour for me? I can't ask Selene or Selena or Narissa or even Ruavel; they've all had their fill of sorrow as of late."

He nodded. “Of course, Lady Mistwinter,” he promised.

She smiled faintly. “You’ve grown so much beyond your father, Laeroth. You’ve become quite a fine young man. Will you tell Shaundar and Yathar when they get back that I love them, and I am proud of them?”

“I will,” he swore.

“I’ll tell your brother that you love him,” she promised in return, “when I get there.”

Surprised by grief, he began to weep again, as though someone had turned on a faucet; and when he looked up from wiping his eyes, Lady Mistwinter had disappeared, and no one ever saw her again in this world. Thus was the way of elder elves; they did not die, but eventually, they became more spirit than flesh, and then the draw to Arvandor marked them with moonbows and called them home. They called it *ghaatii’ren*, “going West.” It made the death of the young all the more tragic.

Before that point, Laeroth had believed that Narissa’s hope of Shaundar and Yathar’s return was a pipe dream. The *Queen’s Dirk* and her crew were gone; they just hadn’t found all the bodies, and he wanted Narissa to realize that there were still things worth living for and she had to let Shaundar and Yathar go. But the way Lady Mistwinter had spoken with such confidence that Shaundar and Yathar were on this side of the

Veil, and Garan was not, made him doubt. Maybe Narissa was right. Maybe they would return.

Nothing changed until spring of 5043 O.C.; almost two years later.

Shaundar's leg had not healed properly. Though he was grateful that he still had a right leg at all thanks to the efforts of his friends, it probably ought to have been amputated because it had healed crooked. He always limped these days; though cold and weariness made it worse. And it was what passed for winter here in Raven Talon, though it didn't seem to snow much. It was just really wet and really cold; cold that got into your bones until you didn't think about it anymore, you just endured a numb aching misery. At least, that is, until you spent morning in the Factory, cooking to death. Then at lunch, you went back out into the horrible wet cold, more often than not getting rained on, and then back into the broiler, until dinner, also in the freezing rain, so that you could go shiver in your bunk until morning, your breath pluming mist into the dark. There was no longer enough meat on their bones to hold in much body heat, so even huddling together, smelling each other's stink, did very little good. The rags that their green uniforms had become dangled off of them like old man's beard from tree limbs, or like cobwebs from something rotten and forgotten in a basement somewhere. He thought they looked very much like the mummies he had seen illustrated in some

book in the long-ago days of the Academy; withered husks of dried, cracking skin stretched over bones.

He supposed in many ways he should be grateful for this. The rapes had become less and less frequent as they slowly withered, for one thing. He could understand why. There was nothing attractive about a walking skeleton with skin, nothing soft and pliable, especially skeletons as filth-ridden as they all were now. Sometimes in the chaos of the rape-gang, one or the other of them would be grabbed in the dark; but last night, Shaundar had been grabbed and dropped again, just like a hot potato, and the ogre that he picked him up had wiped his hands on his tunic in disgust and exclaimed, “Fuck, I almost gave it to a *skinny!*” And he’d laughed. That’s when Shaundar knew how desperate their situation had become.

Shaundar realized that he had been scratching absently at the lice in the fold of his thigh near his scrotum again, and he made himself stop impatiently. Scratching didn’t help so there was no need to risk infection. He had seen it; repeated scratching breaking the skin, causing bleeding, which made an open wound for the filth-ridden river to get into, which caused skin infections, then gangrene, then death. It was a horrible way to die and the swine would wait it out, too, rather than take the victim mercifully to the altar.

There was screaming coming from the altar but Shaundar barely noticed it. There was always screaming coming from the altar now. About three months into their imprisonment (or was it six? Time seemed

to have lost all meaning) the swine started changing the way they handled sacrifices. Rather than offering victims in massive, spectacular ceremonies, the chief torturer would take one victim at a time to the altar every hour, and use their suffering as a ghastly sort of clock. Each victim would take an hour to die – the torturer saw to it – and then a fresh one would be brought.

He was on his way to the Factory after roll call, but he and Yathar both stopped at the river on the way and picked some watercress and some bugs. Shaundar found a fat, juicy leech and ate it like a truffle, while Yathar crunched on the lacy wings of a dragonfly. Eating bugs to supplement their diet had been Sylria's idea, Shaundar believed. It had started with a bowl of gruel that had been abandoned and forgotten by some now-dead bunkmate, and of course, the maggots had gotten to it. All three of them had stared at the maggoty gruel with mad, ravening hunger and deep regret, and then Sylria had pointed out that maggots actually were edible, if you didn't poison them with lye and the diseases of the dead. That was all the justification it had taken for the three of them to dig their hands into the crawling, writhing gruel and eat it as if it were caviar, while fresher victims that had replaced the dead from their barracks looked on with undisguised horror. They didn't understand yet, but they would. They would.

It turned out that there were lots of edible insects out there, if you knew what you were doing, and Shaundar had been taught much by the Aces High survival course. Over the time they had been in Raven Talon, Shaundar had eaten maggots, leeches, earthworms, dragonflies,

scorpions with their stingers removed, mealworms, pillbugs, centipedes, slimy snails, waterbugs, termites, junebugs, weevils (which he was already accustomed to from spacefaring,) house spiders that still wriggled as you swallowed them, and fat, juicy ants like candy. He had also eaten dandelions, watercress, grass, willow strips, plantain, wild mint and wild mustard, pond scum, and the first cattail shoots of early spring. There had been pennyroyal too but Sylria had eaten most of that – just in case. They had all dreamed of eating waterfowl or rats, but they had nothing to cut them with.

He made it to the Factory and took up his position at the bellows again. This had become harder and harder over the time they had been here as more and more weight dropped off of him (how long had it been now? Once he had known, but it no longer seemed important.) But his efforts to sabotage the ammunition manufacturing for those strange bombards, which were actually called “cannons,” were alive and well. The swine couldn’t figure out why they constantly struggled with splatter, divots and air pockets. One expert suggested that it was the kind of iron they were using, so a different kind had been acquired. Another suggested it might be the moulds themselves, so they were changed. A third thought it might be the temperature in the Factory, so vents had been created. A fourth, probably closest to the truth, thought it had to do with the moisture content of the Factory building, so all the new vents were closed up and all the cracks sealed. Shaundar had passed out from heat exhaustion that week, which had almost killed him because he was whipped until he got up and went back to work, but naturally, none of

these stopgap measures had helped. No one seemed to notice the steady line of prisoners dumping bowls into the moulds where the sprue from the cooling cannonballs were intended to expand.

There was not a single one of the original prisoners of barracks Block D: 1037 – 1072 left aside from the three of them. Every last one of them had died, whether from abuse by the guards, the rape squads, malnourishment, exhaustion, infection, disease or simple malaise of the spirit. Another batch had been brought into to replace them; Shaundar, Sylria and Yathar had survived them as well. Now there were actually some empty bunks in their barracks. Shaundar guessed that the pogrom had almost wound down by now and they had succeeded in killing nearly every elf on the planet. This made him sad, when he allowed himself to think about it. Mostly these days, however, his emotions were carefully wrapped in gauze of apathy and numbness. It worried him vaguely because he knew that he should be feeling much more when something happened, such as that one sacrifice of that little elven girl where the *tarrack'zabu*, the “Warpriest,” had first raped her on the altar for all to see, then slowly disembowelled her by the gentle unwinding of her intestines through a hole he made in her abdomen with an awl; but mostly Shaundar was just numb.

But something felt different in the camp today. Ships that had been parked for months, perhaps years, were taking off, and the ogres and the swine were squeezing into uniforms that no longer quite fit their expanding paunches, the legacy of their easy living at Raven Talon. Something was up; of that, he was certain.

His suspicions were confirmed when he was intercepted by one of the ogre overseers as he came in from the latrines (and another trip to pour urine into hardening ammunition.) “You there! *Gurt!*” called the massive creature. Shaundar looked at him blearily to confirm that he was the *gurt* being spoken to. He now knew it to be a racial slur for elves that translated directly to “twig,” which referred to their affinity for trees, regarded with contempt by the swine, and also to their by-comparison slight builds, *a little more slight around here*, Shaundar thought to himself. They were also occasionally called *spirra*, which meant “dandelion,” and it referred to their habit of eating the things whenever they saw them; that, and it suggested that elves might be like weeds, growing all over the place where they weren’t wanted. *Well, spirra tend to grow even in adversity*, Shaundar thought smugly to himself; but of course, even dandelions could be poisoned and starved, as he had been.

By now Shaundar knew enough Orcish or Ogre to respond in kind, but he refused to use it. “*Avavaen?*” he queried mildly.

The ogre scowled. “The Warden wants someone to clean up his ship,” he told Shaundar. “Get some cleaning stuff from the storage shed and go do it.”

“Where is the Warden’s ship?” Shaundar asked entirely without interest.

The ogre cuffed him upside the head and pointed. “In that hanger, you stupid *gurt!*”

Shaundar had seen the hanger before, and had known it for a spelljamming hanger, but he had never seen the ship inside of it. Behind the Factory but before the Crematorium, it looked to be just the right size for a Damsel fly or a Dragonfly. He had also seen several flying shapes around it at night, looping after the many flies and moths that filled the air here during the hot and muggy summer months.

“Bats?” he asked the ogre.

“Yeah, so get a scraper!” the overseer replied. “And get going!” He aimed a good, hard kick in Shaundar’s direction, but Shaundar scrambled out of the way. Such a kick was likely to break bones in his current state, and he couldn’t afford to have that happen.

He gathered up the cleaning supplies as requested – bucket, mop, scrub brushes, soap, water, and scraper – and he hauled them over to the hanger, alarmed by how much more difficult that was now than even last week. Something was bothering him about the bats. It was itching at the corner of his awareness, but he couldn’t quite place it.

He opened up the hanger and went in. He was right; it was a Dragonfly, painted blood red and flying both the spider standard, which Shaundar now knew to be the symbol of their Fleet, the Tarantula Fleet; and also a red rune symbol on a white field that resembled two crossed axes, drawn in lines. He wondered in that disconnected way that his thoughts seemed to have fallen into as of late – a kind of disjointed, fuzzy stream-of-consciousness – whether that might be the symbol of the clan

that the Warden belonged to. Hadn't he said his name was Bloodaxe? Shaundar couldn't remember, it had been so long ago.

For a moment, a possibility washed through Shaundar's mind like a tsunami. For a moment, he saw it as clearly as if he had already done it. *I could take the ship*, he thought. *I could pilot it out of here*. He glanced feverishly down at the legs of the ship, and saw that they were perched delicately on the ground with only landing blocks holding them in. It would be easy enough. He might destroy half the ship as he went through the hanger roof, but did that really matter?

He actually took three steps towards the ladder and laid his hand on the bottom rung before a thought rang through his mind which literally stopped him with one foot extended out in front of him like a weird dance step. That thought was, *What about Sylria and Yathar?*

He froze there for several seconds, trembling. Gods help him, he almost did it anyway. Almost finished climbing the ladder, almost abandoned his blood brother and a dear friend to this fate worse than death, worse than the Nine Hells, in his desperation to save himself. But then he tore himself away from the ladder with a sob in his throat, slick with sweat. *I can't leave them*, he realized, and he wept then because he knew that this was why they had not been separated and he knew he was lost.

Still weeping, but knowing he wanted to live still a little while longer, he took a look at the rest of the ship and realized what the

problem was. Bat guano. There was a colony of bats nesting in the roof of the hanger and they were shitting over absolutely everything. A film that looked like ashes covered the deck of the ship, the railings, the fo'c'sle and the ground. Most of it was dry, but some of it was wet and gooey still. Shaundar obediently took out the scraper and began to clean.

Still distracted by his near-escape, it took him a couple of hours to start considering the bat guano again. There was something about that, wasn't there? There was something he knew about bat guano, something important.

It was nearly an hour later that it struck him. Not like a tsunami this time, but more like an electrocution. Dear gods, how could he have forgotten such a thing, even for a moment? Bat guano, of course!

Something else fluttered now in Shaundar's breast, like a wild bird beating wings in its desperation to escape. It was bitter and intoxicating all at once; wonderful and terrible. He fought to pommel it into submission – he couldn't afford it right now; the guards would see it on his face, it was dangerous, he didn't need it – but it would not be subdued. It was almost foreign to him now, after so long in this horrible place.

That something was hope.

Later that night, Shaundar gathered Yathar and Sylria quietly to him – something that was no longer appealing because they stank as

much as he did, which was considerably – and he asked so softly that it might have been the wind, “When we were captured, had either one of you prepared a fireball spell?”

“Of course,” said Yathar. “We were about to go into battle.”

Sylria nodded.

With trembling hands, Shaundar took off his shoes and showed them the bat guano he had hidden there.

It took three days to finish cleaning the hanger; just long enough for all three of them to end up with a pair of guano-filled shoes. And then they waited. Shaundar wasn't exactly certain what they were waiting for, but a strong intuition told him to do so, when he had begun to believe that all those sorts of senses that he might once had possessed had gone West. It was as though time had been wound down like an old watch, and now somebody had wound it up again. They waited, and they watched, looking for the best possible opportunity. They would have warned others in their barracks, but they didn't dare. Someone might reveal the secret, and they would only have one shot. Failure would, of course, mean their lives.

It was all Shaundar could do to keep his emotions off of his face. It had been so long since there had been any hope at all that he was

certain that he was beaming it out like a lantern. He focused on keeping his expression dull and his walk like the drudge of a zombie.

Yathar dug under the slats in their bunk, where he had hidden the metal brace that had once supported Shaundar's leg, removed when it had ceased to help. He slid it carefully in next to the rail of the bunk. It was not nearly so well-concealed there, and its placement was therefore risky, but he was sure (and Shaundar agreed with him) that it was time to keep it as accessible as possible, in case there was opportunity and need to use it as a weapon. Shaundar thought it would work reasonably well. It had been sturdy enough to hold his femur together for a while, after all, and support his weight. As likely as it was that its silver gleam would be noticed lying beside the rail, Shaundar felt better having it close by.

Over the next week, activity among the soldiers, sailors and guards remained high, as more and more of the grounded ships took off. After evening roll call the three Navy elves crowded together on their bunk and whispered about it.

"What do you think is going on?" Yathar wondered aloud.

"The Fleet's being recalled," Sylria answered with certainty, "but I'm not sure why."

"I think they're getting ready to leave Spiral," Shaundar speculated. "Why else would we have empty bunks?"

Sylria nodded thoughtfully. "If you're right, and I wouldn't doubt it, then we don't have much time. Do you think they'll try to bring us with them or finish the job?"

"I don't think they have the room or supplies to take us anywhere," Yathar said matter-of-factly.

No one said anything to that, but they knew what that meant.

"Just be ready then," Shaundar recommended. "We need to be ready to move at any time."

The time came two weeks later.

Having pointed out the hanger where Garik Bloodaxe's ship was stored, they all watched it avidly, and they noticed orcs going in and out, hauling supplies, when it had remained undisturbed up to that point. They also saw the ogres and the swine getting more agitated as first goblins, then spare combat troops were slowly drained off as though their commanding officers were tapping a tree for sap. This secretly pleased Shaundar; it suggested that the Tarantula Fleet was involved in a major conflict, and it was going badly for them.

The rumours going around the camp supported that hypothesis. When the guards thought they weren't listening they would talk quietly among themselves, but Shaundar now understood enough Orcish to follow the gist of the conversation, and his hearing was keen. There was some kind of artifact in the Sphere and the local elven fleet (Shaundar

didn't even know that there was one; so where had they been all of this time?) wanted it, and so did the commanders of the Tarantula Fleet, and they were warring over it and all hands possible were needed to aid the war effort. To complicate matters, there was a Gnomish world in the Sphere that had become involved in the conflict, though Shaundar gleaned that they had not gotten involved on either side. He also gathered that things were not going well for the scro. He wasn't sure how any of this would help them other than the news that the Navy was, indeed, in the Sphere; but how many, and how far, remained to be seen. Still, he filed it away, knowing it was a change, hoping to take advantage of the chaos when the opportunity was right.

They were awakened a few nights later by a sonic boom.

Shaundar flashed to full awareness immediately, having been listening for it subconsciously; and he noticed that both Yathar and Sylria were instantly awake as well. A couple of other bodies in the barracks shuffled and moved uneasily in their sleep. Then the world filled with noise as the ship that had broken the sound barrier when it hit atmosphere landed inside the fence of the base.

This had happened before, more so recently, but it was never at night, and it was still infrequent enough that half of the barracks woke up to the strange noise. Shaundar tensed, knowing this could be a help or a hindrance, or perhaps both at once.

Chaos erupted at the officer's cabins as the messenger went to share news with Warden Garik Bloodaxe and the other officers in charge. Shaundar strained to hear the conversation and gathered his shoes to his chest, where the precious bat guano was hidden. After a few more moments, there was the sound of running, heavy booted feet and the ship, which, judging by the quick glance Shaundar got through the crack in the door from his bunk, might have been a Mosquito, took off again. Then the Warden barked some order at his officers, and a hand-cranked siren sounded. "The elves are coming and the Fleet is broken!" called out one of the Warpriests; Shaundar recognized his voice from the torture-ceremonies. "Kill the prisoners and get to your ships!"

All the prisoners in the barracks woke up and some began to cry out, others to shiver and still others to flex and tense, waiting for an opportunity. "Get ready!" called out Yathar. Shaundar hoped like hell that some of their fellow inmates would be alert enough, and brave enough, to seize their chance.

It came when horrible gurgling screams began in the next barracks building. The door of their barracks burst open once more, only this time the gang that filled it clutched knives and swords. *Even in this, it's all about efficiency*, Shaundar thought in disgust. *They can't be bothered to shoot us. Too expensive. They mean to slit our throats instead.*

Well, not if he could help it.

He hopped down off of the bunk, and Sylria followed. “Now!” he cried, and all three elves dipped their hands into their shoes and flung the bat guano, screaming the incantation in unison.

Flames erupted from their fingers and expanded into great red balls of fire. The first one blasted directly into the torso of the ogre in the lead, which burst into flames and began making an ursine roar. The second ball penetrated into the burning hole created by the first fireball, and the ogre literally exploded. The third careened out past his falling body parts and the two orcs standing directly behind him were set alight. They fled, squealing. A smell like burnt pork permeated the air.

Shaundar had no idea where he found the strength, but in seconds Yathar had vaulted off the bunk with the metal brace in his hand. Shaundar didn't think he was consciously aware of it, but his blood brother was humming the tune of the bladesong under his breath. His heart filled with desperate joy at the sound.

They ran for the hanger; and when two orcs rose up in their way armed with crossbows, Sylria screamed and Shaundar roared, and she released another fireball, incinerating one; while Shaundar spoke words he barely remembered, shooting green bolts of energy from his fingertips. The orc staggered around, stunned, with his mouth open in a gaping O of surprise, until Yathar stabbed him in the throat with the brace and he fell with blood pouring from his carotid artery as though someone had dumped over a can of orcish ship paint. They ran for their lives. But Shaundar quickly started lagging behind because of his screwed-up leg.

“That way!” he gasped, gesturing ahead of himself because he couldn’t keep up with his companions.

Sylria and Yathar made it past the Factory without incident, but a random patrolling ogre suddenly stepped out from inside the building and kicked Shaundar directly in the torso before he could react. Something burst with a loud *crack!* as Shaundar hit the ground and found he couldn’t breathe.

He gasped out the incantation to a second *magic missile* spell and extended his hand before him. About to leap on him, the ogre instead was knocked backwards by the energy bolts with a grunt, but it was on its feet before Shaundar could catch his breath. *This is it, I guess*, Shaundar had time to think as he looked into the ogre’s eyes and saw nothing but his own death. But then Yathar was standing over him, sputtering in incoherent rage and waving the metal brace, and Sylria was chanting the key words to invoke another fireball. Before she could complete the spell, however, a wave of elven prisoners, armed with nothing but their hands, feet and teeth, ran over the ogre like a tidal wave and literally tore him apart.

“Come on! Follow us!” called Yathar to the prisoners behind them, and he ducked himself under Shaundar’s right arm and half-dragged, half-carried him the rest of the way. Shaundar was still having trouble breathing.

When they arrived at the hanger, they found to their horror that the door had been padlocked shut. Yathar dropped Shaundar and started hammering at the lock with the metal bar he carried while Shaundar gasped and wheezed and tried to get the black spots to go away. “Yathar, wait!” Sylria called after a few seconds, and then she spoke a simple incantation, one that Shaundar had known from childhood, that released the padlock and opened the door.

“Glad you’re here to do the thinking,” Shaundar panted, and Yathar cast a warm grin in her direction.

Like the antagonists in a bad dream, a handful of orcs and ogres came after them, perhaps following the prisoners that had escaped D-Block, and one of them pointed and began to cry out some sort of command. But he never had a chance to finish. Pushed beyond all limits, Sylria snarled out an animal howl of rage and threw her previously-aborted fireball directly into the cluster of goblinkin. Now it was they who were screaming in pain and terror as their arms, legs and faces began to blaze merrily.

Yathar threw himself in front of Shaundar. “Get on the ship!” he rasped. “We’ve all cast spells; you’re the only one who can still fly ‘er.” He raised that metal bar as though he were preparing to reposte and bawled out loudly enough to strip his tonsils, “*Come get me, you bastards! I’ll kill every fucking one of you!*”

Shaundar knew he was right; and so he ran up the ladder, dragging his gimped-up right leg behind him, then down the hatch into the cargo hold and down the hall into the bridge, where the spelljamming helm was located. He just about passed out as he reached it. It was nothing fancy; just a hard-backed chair with some cushions on it in the same lurid blood-red colour scheme as the rest of their fleet. Shaundar threw himself into it without hesitation and reached out atrophied senses to commune with the spirit of the ship.

He was almost afraid that it would reject him, this being a scro ship; but it did not, though certainly there was not the same keenness of the bond as he might have felt with Queenie. He became aware of his hanger being filled with elves, and of the one-armed elf fending off the orcs at the entrance. Even in his weakened condition, Yathar was magnificent as he danced the bladesong with his unorthodox weapon; he was deadly grace in motion, a master of his craft. Their enemies could not get past him.

Shaundar felt the welcome thrum of the spelljamming engine firing up and heard the low, harmonious hum in his bones like the siren song of a previous life. He was unaware of it but tears of joy started running in rivulets down his emaciated cheekbones. "I have the helm!" he cried out in exultation. "Let's go!"

Yathar broke and ran for the ladder. Sylria, already standing on the Dragonfly's deck, covered his escape with her third and final fireball, which exploded in the bat guano still on the floor, sending the ogres and

swine sailing into the air like tenpins. Chaos ensued as the survivors started beating any elf within reach. Shaundar felt a twinge of regret as several of their bunkmates were cut down like the chaff in the wheat. But when Yathar succeeded in scrambling up the ladder at last, Shaundar wasn't about to wait a single moment more, and he called out, "All hands brace for impact!" as he blasted right through the hanger ceiling without hesitation. It shattered into splinters all around them, and one beam just about beheaded Sylria as it fell, but then, miraculously, they were clear of the hanger building and fleeing into the freedom of the sky, with several confused bats and even a few extra escaped prisoners in tow. One of them was clutching the ladder and shrieking as the Dragonfly took to the air and a couple of the others who had managed to get aboard helped her fall onto the deck.

Shaundar expected trouble when they got into space, but found none. It seemed that every ship on the planet was in flight from it, and there were a lot less than he had feared. They were far too concerned with their own escape to take much notice of the stolen Dragonfly. "All hands on inner decks!" Shaundar commanded, figuring that they would stay undetected longer if no one could see *spirra* running free on the outer decks.

He noticed that the so-called Tarantula Fleet was drawing into a formation; at least, what there was of the fleet here, which only seemed to amount to a handful of ships. Shaundar reasoned that they were likely headed in exactly the opposite direction from the way the three elves wanted to go, fleeing the Elven Navy fleet. He supposed it said a lot

about the scro, that even this emergency evacuation was proceeding in such an orderly fashion. He began to edge along to the rear of the formation, trying to make it appear as though he were looking for a good position.

Yathar lay gasping on the deck, his body vibrating as though electrocuted, completely spent. Sylria, however, came down slowly into the bridge. “We did it,” she mused in the voice of someone who didn’t quite believe where she was and what she was doing. “Sehanine be praised; we did it.” She started to cry.

Shaundar, who no longer believed in Sehanine, said nothing and concentrated on breathing slowly and steadily. He found that breathing too deeply pulled on whatever was injured in his chest, and caused a kind of grasping pain-and-pressure sensation that reminded him of having his arm twisted hard by Laeroth Oakheart.

One of the escaped prisoners who had hitched a ride pushed his way past Sylria and onto the bridge. He was thin but not skeletal, and his uniform was still discernibly green, so he could not have been at Raven Talon for more than three months or so. “We have to get out of here,” he urged. “You have to fly faster. I don’t know what you’re doing, but . . .”

“Listen,” Shaundar wheezed, “right now they don’t know that we’re not orcs. As soon as they find that out, they’re going to start shooting at us. I would rather be farther away when that happens. So

I'm going to get into the formation until they leave. Then we're doing an about-face and fleeing at full tactical."

"I think we should get out of here right now," the escapee insisted.

"I don't recall this being a democracy," Sylria snapped. "You hitched a ride with us; we Captain the ship."

The prisoner studied her with an appraising look. "I think I'm in much better shape than either one of you if I decided I wanted to take over," he remarked oh-so-casually.

"Except for one thing, genius," Shaundar snarled, disgusted by the necessity of this whole ridiculous conversation. "We're *mates*. You want to fly the ship, you need us, and that means we call the shots." He grinned savagely. "If you disagree, you could attack me right now, but . . . unlike most casters I can still cast spells today . . . so I'll stand up and put a *magic missile* . . . between your eyes. We can . . . go to hell . . . together . . ." He found that it simply hurt too much to continue speaking.

Sylria scowled. "Shaundar, are you hurt?" She went to him and started looking him over.

"Av," he admitted. "Something in my chest."

She tore aside the rags of his uniform to reveal a very dark, and rapidly spreading, bruise that covered most of his torso. "That can't be good," she murmured thoughtfully.

"Probably cracked some ribs," he speculated mildly. He didn't have time for that right now. If he didn't manoeuvre things just right, they were all going to die. Slowly he crept further and further towards the rear of the fleet. It was all he could do not to heed the advice of his uninvited critic. Every instinct cried out at him to flee as quickly as he could, before they realized what had happened and came after them, but tactically he knew better and so he reined those instincts in tightly and bided his time.

But they didn't wait long. When two Damselflies painted blood-red and bearing the Bloodaxe standard came up from Spiral's surface, he sensed rather than reasoned that the time had come. "All hands; bring 'er about!" Shaundar commanded sharply. "Prepare to go to spelljamming speed!"

"*Av, quessir!*" cried Sylria with hard stars of joy in her eyes, and she left the bridge, presumably to aid with the mainsail. His command also reached Yathar, who had remained lying semi-conscious on the upper deck for such a length of time that Shaundar had to resist the urge to demand that Sylria go and shake him; although he hadn't quite dared. He dragged himself to his feet, bellowing, "*Av, quessir!*" with Sylria, and together they swung the mainsail about.

Shaundar flipped the little Dragonfly about and made for open space with everything he had. For a few moments, just as Shaundar hoped, the scro fleet preparing to escape Spiral did nothing. Then two Scorpions on the end broke formation and came about. "Pitch down 40!" he exclaimed as they fired off the heavy cannons that had replaced their heavy catapults. But he needn't have bothered. One cannon jammed, and the iron ball fired from the other one veered off and fell short. With that, Shaundar finally cleared enough distance between them and the rest of the fleet that the Dragonfly accelerated to spelljamming speed, and Spiral fell away behind them.

A broken, ragged cheer erupted from all the former prisoners, and Shaundar's breath hitched painfully as he sighed with relief. Whatever happened from this point on, whatever dangers might await them, praise whatever gods might be listening, they were free.

Chapter Seventeen

"Do you think the cannons didn't fire properly because of our sabotage?" Sylria asked wistfully.

Shaundar barked out a sharp laugh that was cut short due to a spasm of pain in his chest. "I can only hope," he smiled grimly.

"So now what's the plan?" demanded their passenger. He folded his arms expectantly.

"Plan?" Shaundar laughed in disbelief. "There is no plan. Flee the orcs; try to find the Navy Fleet. That's the limit of my plan."

"Why bother?" he wanted to know. "What good will they do? They sure weren't much help to Spiral, were they?"

Shaundar resisted the urge to put a fireball through the elf's face. "They have siege weaponry," he explained patiently, "which they will aim at the swine on our behalf."

Their uninvited critic seemed unconvinced.

"Perhaps you have a better idea?" Sylria inquired archly.

He frowned. "I better go check on the others," he muttered, and he left the bridge.

Once he was gone, Shaundar looked up at Sylria. "Of all the possible people who might have escaped with us," he groaned, "why did we have to get the jerk?"

"I guess there's one in every bunch," Sylria sighed.

A very thin older elf whom Shaundar didn't recognize (not surprising, really; he had stopped actually looking at his bunkmates after a while because it was just too difficult to watch so many people die when you knew them) stuck his head in the doorway of the bridge. "Who's in charge here?" he asked brusquely.

Inwardly Shaundar groaned a little deeper. *I didn't ask for this!* he exclaimed to himself; but aloud he replied, "In as much as anyone can be said to be in charge, I guess that would be me. My name is Shaundar." He avoided giving his military rank, since it was obvious that the Navy was not well regarded on Spiral (and currently, Shaundar was not sure that he didn't agree with them.)

"Nice to meet you Shaundar; I'm Corethi," he nodded, and he offered a formal bow. Sylria grinned delightedly and returned it, and even Shaundar smiled a little and bowed from the waist.

"First, I'd like to thank you lot for saving my daughter's life, and mine." He choked on the last couple of words and wiped tears impatiently from his eyes before he was able to continue. "But now we

have a bit of a problem. Did you know that there is no food aboard this ship?"

Shaundar blinked at him in disbelief. "We saw them loading supplies for a couple of weeks," he told Corethi frankly. "Why would they not have loaded food? I don't understand."

"Maybe they were just intending to use it as a shuttle," Sylria observed with wide eyes. "Maybe they were going to join up with a larger ship."

That made perfect sense. Shaundar wanted to scream. This should have been perfectly obvious, so why had it not occurred to them until now? He supposed that it was simply that they hadn't wanted to think about it. But now the priority would be to find another ship of some kind, or maybe make planetfall somewhere. "Tell me that we at least have water," he begged Corethi desperately.

He nodded. "That we have," he answered.

"Okay then," Shaundar sighed, somewhat relieved. The corner of his mouth twitched up. "Do you think anyone feels up to trying to catch those bats?"

Corethi's mouth matched the smile. "I will certainly try," he promised.

There were a total of nine escaped prisoners aside from themselves. Corethi had been a ranger in his "other life," as he put it, and he had been involved with an underground resistance movement on Spiral when the orcs had captured him. His daughter's name was Marina, and she was a budding mage of about the same age as Shaundar and Yathar. The critic was Trevan; and there were also Theris and Lysander, a young, recently-married elven couple who looked like they might be in better shape than anyone else. Theris happened to be a cleric in the service of Sehanine. There was a somewhat frail, but obviously tough, elderly female elf whose name was Raerae; a twitchy-looking young elf maid named Marafel; a soft-faced, soft-handed gray elven woman called Nashavara, sitting with her hands folded demurely in her lap as though she were waiting for a coach; and a sturdy dwarven fellow, shaved bald from head to foot and looking none too happy about it, who gruffly introduced himself as "Grimmauld Stormhammer, how do ya."

"I thought that dwarves recited their lineage when they introduced themselves," Shaundar remarked.

"I didn't think anyone wanted to hear it," Grimmauld growled sourly, blushing.

"Well, we want to hear it," Yathar spoke up. Sylria and Shaundar nodded in encouragement. Grimmauld brightened instantly, and recited what sounded like a very impressive lineage in the distinguished history of the dwarves. Later, the only part of it that Shaundar was able to remember clearly was "son of Therana the Dragonslayer, daughter of

Thorin,” because the mentioning of a female ancestor in a male dwarf’s lineage was unusual. They complimented his illustrious bloodline.

Though Shaundar’s faith was severely damaged, he had no doubts as to the power of the faith of others, and so they carved Theris a crude Moonbow symbol from a wooden slat with a steak knife so that she would have a focus for her prayers. She called upon what healing powers she could muster, but Shaundar’s bruised torso just reduced a little in colour and swelling. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I guess something must be seriously damaged in there that I can’t see. Maybe when we catch up with the fleet . . .”

“I’ll survive,” Shaundar said dismissively. At least he could breathe a little now. Realizing that the young Priestess seemed completely disheartened, he added, “I’m grateful for the help.”

“Listen, Shaundar,” she began, clutching at his arm just a little too tightly, revealing just how frightened she was, “I have a prayer which creates food. It’s only gruel, though, and it isn’t much. Just enough for nine people.” She bit her lip. “It’s why we don’t look as thin,” she explained lamely.

Shaundar smiled at her with genuine relief. “That’s nine more people than we might otherwise feed,” he said encouragingly. “Why don’t you get some bowls together?”

Cheering instantly at the idea of having something to do, Theris headed for the galley, which was just off of the bridge. "I'll help," volunteered Raerae, who walked gingerly, as though she were made of glass and afraid that she might break.

"So how are we going to feed everybody if she can't create enough food for us all?" demanded Trevan.

Yathar was ready for him. He handed Trevan a cargo net. "Go catch some bats," he advised.

Trevan glared at him. "Why don't *you* go catch some bats?"

Yathar smiled humourlessly. "That's a difficult task for an elf with one arm. Besides, I have to help Shaundar fly. Unless you know how to work a jibboom."

Of course he didn't, and he fixed Yathar with a baleful glare. "And if I refuse?" he challenged.

Yathar shrugged. "Suit yourself. But if you don't contribute to the work effort somehow, I'm going to ask Theris not to feed you."

"I think she would feed me anyway," he argued, but uncertainty flickered in his eyes.

"She might," Yathar admitted, "but if she does, I'm going to take it away and give it to somebody who is working. So go find something to

do besides whine." He and Shaundar both cast him such a dark look that he paled and left quickly.

Theris came out from the galley with a hot, steaming pot of something that smelled nothing like the dubious cuisine of Raven Talon. Raerae had a ladle and a stack of bowls. Gruel or not, Shaundar immediately started to salivate uncontrollably.

The Priestess studied them both with a disapproving frown. "Would you really take his food?" she asked softly.

"Maybe," Yathar sneered. Then he shrugged. "Probably not. But don't tell him that, otherwise he'll stretch a hammock out on the upper deck like he's on vacation."

"Do you really think so?" she asked them disbelievingly. "When there's so much to be done?"

"He reminds me of my father," Yathar growled. "Yeah, I think he would, and I think he would complain the whole time about the poor job we were all doing."

There was a tap at the helm room doorframe. "Excuse me," began the grey elven woman Nashavara politely, "but does anyone know where to find the latrine?"

Shaundar and Yathar looked at her blankly for a moment. Then Shaundar piped up with, "I don't believe a Dragonfly has a latrine as part

of its standard design, *etriel*. You use a chamber pot and we jettison the contents once a day.”

She wrinkled up her nose. “All right,” she nodded primly, looking disgusted, and she went out, presumably to do her business.

Shaundar stared at the place where her back had gone for a few moments, dumbfounded. “Did she not just come out of the same place I did?” he muttered.

“As far as I know,” Yathar reflected. “Maybe she just got there. Lucky lady.” He shuddered.

“Theris,” Shaundar began; which he had to repeat because the flowing saliva now dribbled out of the corner of his mouth and he had to stop to wipe it away, “Theris, I think we need to gather everyone in here and have a meeting.”

“I’ll get them,” offered Raerae, setting the bowls down and dropping the ladle into the magical, intoxicating pot. “You *eat*, son. Theris honey, you feed these hungry folks just as fast as you can.” And she patted Theris on the arm and she left the room.

“Sylria first,” Shaundar told her, though he was restraining himself from jumping off of the helm and sticking his face into the pot up to his ears.

“That’s not necessary, guys,” she said; but she stood by the pot anyway, waiting with shaking hands.

Theris met their eyes. “I’m going to share out what I have equally, so it’s not quite enough,” she apologized.

“That’s all right,” Shaundar nodded. “There’s still the bats. We’ll figure it out.”

Theris carefully divided the gruel into ten bowls. “Why not the full dozen?” Yathar wanted to know.

She shrugged. “We can do without today, Lysander and I,” she replied nonchalantly. “We’re not starving yet.”

Yathar wiped impatiently at the tears that formed in his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Bowls of hot, steaming gruel were placed into their hands. Shaundar slurped his up like an animal. It tasted like ambrosia and it felt like heaven in his esophagus and stomach; warm like the oatmeal he used to eat as a child.

As the others came in, all conversation stopped for a few minutes while food was eaten (or perhaps *inhaled* might have been a more accurate description.) A few people wept. Lysander reached for a bowl and there was a brief exchange between them as Theris refused him, but it seemed to straighten out quickly enough when she cried,

“You’re going to fill your face while these people are *starving?*” and guiltily, he sat back and let others eat. Nashavara didn’t seem to be in too bad of shape either, but she didn’t pass on the food.

When everyone was finished, Shaundar cleared his throat. “May I have everyone’s attention for a moment?”

They all looked up at him; Trevan scowling, Nashavara with the polite look of expectation of a lady waiting for service in a restaurant, and Marina with wide eyes filled with cautious hope.

“Here’s the situation,” he began, “as best as I can figure. We have escaped from the Raven Talon Prison Camp.”

There was a thin cheer, followed by some ragged applause as Corethi pointed out, “Thanks to you and your friends, son.” Shaundar felt a surge of gratitude towards him. As much as this commentary was sparked by genuine thankfulness – of that Shaundar had no doubt – part of it was also spurred by the recognition that someone had to take charge, and since he had volunteered, Corethi was helping to reinforce his command by instilling feelings of loyalty. It was nothing Shaundar hadn’t picked up in his officer’s training.

Trevan did not applaud; nor did Lysander, who was blinking sullenly at the empty bowls.

“But,” said Shaundar, raising his hands for silence; and he got it, “we have no food aboard this ship, though Corethi tells me that there is water . . .”

“Lots of it,” Corethi assured him. “I’m not a sailor, but I’m guessing that it would probably last a full crew several months. The cargo hold is mostly full of barrels of it.”

“Good,” Shaundar nodded, pleased by this. “That’s one less worry anyway. Now, for those of you who have not met her, this is Theris . . .”

Theris lifted her hand and smiled.

“. . . and she’s a Priestess of Sehanine. She can create enough food to sustain nine people a day.”

Trevan interrupted, “But there are twelve of us.”

“So I see,” Shaundar acknowledged. “So it’s not enough. So we’re going to have to find other methods of feeding ourselves to thicken the soup, so to speak. Like maybe the bats. Raerae, are there sharp knives in the galley?” He suspected that the old bird was tougher than she looked, despite her age; kind of like his grandmother.

“Yes, there are several,” she confirmed primly.

“Good. I assume that most of you have hunting experience? We are elves, right?”

“*Spirra*,” joked Marina; but it wasn’t funny and even her face fell after a second. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

Nashavara raised her hand. “I have no hunting experience, I’m afraid, young man,” she confessed in the airy tones of a born noble. “But I will find a way to make myself useful.”

Shaundar smiled. It was not what he had expected from this obvious aristocrat. Very good. “*Etriel*,” he said, “I am sure you will. Now, there’s something else.” He had been thinking about this carefully despite his hunger. Something about regaining his freedom had awoken his intelligence in the aching fog of his mind and now it was working at the problem with both the speed and tenacity that had won him a record run at the Aces High obstacle course. “I have no idea where we are. I wasn’t consulting star charts when I fled the swine; I don’t even know if we *have* star charts. I’m sure Sylria can find them if we do have such a thing . . .”

“I’ll look, and I’ll see if I can pinpoint our position,” Sylria offered immediately, and she began to root through the drawers scattered around the bridge.

“Also,” added Shaundar, “I was unconscious and in the brig of a scro ship through most of my journey through this Sphere, so I know

nothing about it, either. So we may be in Wildspace for quite a while. Or, we might make planetfall tomorrow. I will try to take us as far away from the swine as I can.” He saw the small ocean of frightened faces as they listened intently and nodded. Yes, they understood the problem.

“A ship this size carries enough breathable air for ten crew of normal size for four months,” he explained. “After that, it gets stale and nasty. A few weeks after that, it turns to poison. We have two overloaded so it will deplete a little faster than that. We need to make planetfall somewhere in the next four months. And if we see a likely body where we might find animals to hunt or plants to gather, we should land on it. Doing so will likely refresh our air as well.”

“What about that elven fleet we heard about?” Lysander demanded suddenly.

Shaundar nodded. “Good question. I assumed that any direction the scro were heading away from must be the way we want to go. That’s why I did what I did when we left Spiral. But we’ve been spelljamming for about two hours. I expected to encounter them by now, if they were close enough to make the scro fleet flee like that. So that gives us one of three possibilities. The first, and the most likely, is that I didn’t flee in a completely straight line or that the Elven Fleet weren’t coming from one, which means that they are nearby but we might have to go looking for them. The second is that they are farther away than the scro figured; which is likely in the fog of war. The third is that they were

destroyed in whatever conflict the swine were calling for reinforcements from the camp for.”

“But,” began the twitchy-looking female – Marafel was her name, Shaundar recalled – “if the Elven Fleet was destroyed, what do we do?” She looked terrified.

“Here’s my plan,” Shaundar said, casting a look at Trevan, who wisely shut his mouth. “Provided we can find a star chart – and I’m sure there is one; all jammers have star charts – we’re going to do our best to pinpoint our location. It may involve stopping for a few minutes. Then, based on what the star charts tell us, we’ll plot a course for something recognizable, zigzagging up and down to see if we encounter the Elven Fleet. I heard there was a Gnomish world in the Sphere somewhere; maybe we’ll head there.”

“Ironpiece,” spoke up Grimmauld at that point. “You’re talking about Ironpiece. I heard it’s a flatworld.”

“Are you a spelljammer?” Yathar asked him with interest.

He chuckled. “No sir, but my clan does a lot of trade with ‘em. Or did.” He looked so completely downcast that Sylria touched his shoulder before she could think about it.

“Sounds like I might be,” Shaundar agreed. “Okay, I want you to think about anything else you might have picked up about the Sphere from talking to the spelljammers, Grimmauld, and find a way to write it

down. Write down everything, no matter how insignificant you might think it is.” At least they would have something to go on, then. Of course, there was a possibility that they might refuse the refugees aid. They hadn’t sided with the elves against the scro, or so Shaundar had heard. But he saw no need to point this out.

“In the meantime, I want everyone who isn’t hunting to loot the ship for anything useful we might find. Paper and ink for writing, weapons, things to burn for fuel, fishing gear, anything vaguely resembling an edible substance. I’ll eat the spiders and the chiggers if you won’t. I’m not too proud.” Not anymore. “Don’t leave a big mess when you’re searching because filth breeds disease; not that any of us are clean.” He scowled. “Some of you are in better shape than others. Does anyone not have lice yet?”

Nashavara raised her hand.

“Then try to stay away from the rest of us, because we do,” Shaundar admitted. “No sense in spreading the things.”

Yathar asked, “Theris, I don’t suppose you can do anything about that, can you?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, no.”

He nodded, resigned.

“One more thing,” Shaundar added. He was starting to sound hoarse now. He supposed he had not spoken so much at once since before Raven Talon, and maybe not even then. “Do we have any more mages besides Yathar, Sylria, and me? Oh yes, and I understand Marina is at least an apprentice. Or clergy, perhaps?”

There was silence and some shaking heads.

“Okay,” he accepted this calmly, “that means that Sylria, Yathar and I take turns at the helm, with Marina as backup.”

“Why just backup?” she demanded.

“The more accomplished a mage you are, the faster you travel,” he explained, “and we need to make sure we stay ahead of the scro fleet.”

“But right now we’re searching for the Elven Fleet, so we need to go slowly anyway,” she protested. “Don’t we?”

Shaundar considered this. “You could be right,” he admitted. “Okay, once I’ve been used up, so we can make sure we’ve put some distance between us and the enemy, you’ll stand to the helm. *Av?*”

Marina grinned. “*Av, quessir!*” she returned, and sketched a passable salute. It made his heart ache.

“Now,” he concluded, “does anyone else have anything to add? And are there any questions?”

Corethi said, “I was a ranger. I know a thing or two about hunting.”

“Good,” he smiled. “You take charge of the bat hunt and direct the other hunters. And you’re also in charge if we find more wildlife. Anyone else?”

Raerae raised her hand. “I was an adventurer in my youth,” she explained. “I can fight. But my bones are brittle, especially after the camp. I’m willing, though.”

Yathar laughed. “Our Captain would have said that a warrior is made in the mind, and not the body, anyway,” he assured her.

Marafel waved her hand in the air. “I was a thief,” she admitted. “I can scrounge very well. I know how to cook rodents safely. And I can make things stretch.”

“Good,” Shaundar nodded. “All of those skills will come in handy.”

Trevan raised his hand. Shaundar knew what was coming, but acknowledged him anyway. *Let him get it out of his system*, he thought to himself. “Your Captain,” he echoed. “You’re Navy elves?”

“Avavaen,” Shaundar said.

“So where is your Captain?” he demanded smugly. “And where is the Navy? And why didn’t they come to Spiral’s aid?”

That started a dangerous low murmur among the Spiral natives. Shaundar figured they would stop this before it could get started. “Our Captain is dead,” Shaundar answered directly. “Our ship was destroyed after we chased a dangerous man-o-war into the Sphere. We had no defence against the cannons. As to your second question: well, I don’t know. We were cut off from the rest of our Fleet because our orders were to seek and destroy that particular man-o-war. I know nothing about the Spiralspace Navy Fleet because I’m not part of it. And as to why they didn’t come to Spiral’s aid, I have two guesses. You had better hope that the first is the right one, which is simply that they didn’t have enough ships in the Sphere to challenge the Tarantula Fleet, and they needed reinforcements before they could launch an assault. The second guess is that maybe they were as soundly defeated by the cannons as we were.” He grimaced. “And if that’s the case, Trevan, then I hope that Theris will pray for us a lot, because the gods will be the only hope that the *Tel’Quessir* have.”

Trevan shut his mouth with a snap. Corethi nodded solemnly. “Thank you for laying it on the line for us,” he said honestly. “I like to know what the situation actually is. How do I address you, sir? Since you have taken command of the ship, I guess that makes this an Imperial Navy vessel, does it not?”

A wave of unreality washed over Shaundar, that such a respectable elder elf had just called him *sir*. “Shaundar,” he answered simply. “I’m just Shaundar. But I was a *Teu’Ruan*; a Lieutenant. We all were.”

“Captain,” Sylria inserted gently. “He’s in command; you call him *Captain*.”

“Captain,” Corethi nodded. “*Av, quessir*.” He saluted. And awkwardly, Shaundar returned it.

Sylria did find the star charts. They were exactly where they should have been; in one of the drawers near the helm. But they weren’t much help. They were written in Orcish. They now understood a smattering of Orcish if they heard it spoken, but they still couldn’t read it. Shaundar found himself feeling a little resentful that Uncle Madrimlian had taken that book that Dorin Bloodfist had given him.

So Shaundar and Sylria studied the charts to see if they could get anything useful out of them. There seemed to be a lot of worlds in Spiralspace, and that created a problem. The symbols to denote size, shape and elemental type were a universal shorthand among spelljammers, and in this the scro seemed consistent; but which one was which depended on which side of the shell they had entered on; and as to that, they had no idea.

"To the best of my knowledge," Sylria told him, "we were a week and a half to two weeks into the Sphere. But I can't be sure which because I was unconscious for the first while too. And I don't know what kind of speed we were doing near the planetary bodies, and I know there was at least one course change somewhere along the line."

"In other words," Shaundar interpreted, "you have no idea."

"Exactly," she admitted.

Yathar was no more help than Sylria. "I was out for most of the first part of it too," he confessed.

"Well, we have a couple of things going for us," Shaundar pointed out. "The sphere's primary body is actually a sun, so it will be easy to use the sextant in conjunction with the compass."

Sylria nodded. "Yes, no doubt as to whether we're moving towards the centre of the sphere, or away from it."

"Spiral was spherical," Yathar pointed out, "so we can eliminate anything in the sphere that isn't." Awkwardly he put a thin pencil line through eight of the fifteen planetary bodies in the sphere. Shaundar remembered that Yathar was right-handed and had not had any chance to practice writing with his remaining left hand during their imprisonment. "I think we can also eliminate the Sun, because it's a fire world, and this water world right here." He drew lines through them as well. That left five spherical earthworlds. Some were Type B and some

Type C. Shaundar had not been able to tell what size Spiral was when they left it in such a hurry.

“Part of the problem is that the sphere is so small,” Sylria lamented. “Ten days to the planet closest to the edge of the sphere, and ten days from there to the sun. So we really could be anywhere.”

Something sparked in Shaundar’s brain; a flash of inspiration, perhaps. He tapped the planet closest to the crystal shell, which, according to the chart, was a Type C earth-based diskworld. “This is the only flatworld in the sphere, right?”

“According to this chart,” Sylria confirmed. Light sparkled in her eyes. “That’s got to be Ironpiece, doesn’t it? Grimmauld said that it was a flatworld.”

Yathar smiled. “Good name for a planet that’s coin-shaped, I suppose.”

“Okay, so here’s my thought,” Shaundar grinned. “We spend the next twelve hours with Marina in the helm looking for the Navy fleet. If we don’t find them, one of you takes the helm and we make for the edge of the shell. Then we find our way to Ironpiece from there. Or, we find a portal out of the sphere.”

“Dangerous to enter the phlogiston without food,” Yathar pointed out.

“We were only in the Flow for a few days between here and Realspace,” Sylria reminded them hopefully. “And with a large gnome population and a planet named Ironpiece, I’m sure we can’t be too far from Krynnspace either.”

Shaundar nodded thoughtfully. It was a good point. “Either one would work, I’m sure,” he concurred. It was his belief that they needed to reconnect with the Navy for many reasons; first, because if they didn’t know about what had happened to Spiral yet, then they needed to; second, because the Navy would have resources to aid and protect the elves who had escaped with them; third, because it was their best ticket home.

Home. What a magical thought! Suddenly Narissa appeared in his head so vividly that he could actually smell her perfume. For the first time in a very long time, he didn’t immediately force himself to quench the thought. He was so homesick that he was nauseous.

But, he was getting ahead of himself. First they had to survive their escape. “Let’s see how we’re received at Ironpiece,” he suggested. “That is, if we don’t find the Navy first.”

They didn’t.

During that time between, a bat was actually caught, almost by accident. Marina looked more surprised than pleased by the fact that she had managed to catch one of them in her cargo netting, which she had

thrown reflexively into the air when one had swooped low, attracted by the movement. It flapped and flopped around on the deck while Marina stared at it, her mouth in a perfect O, until Corethi grasped it in one sinewy hand and slit its throat with the other.

“Great job!” Shaundar cheered from the helm, since he was able to “see” all decks due to his link to the ship.

Marafel smiled. "I can show you different ways to cook that," she offered. "I used to catch rats and bats and mice for food."

Corethi handed her the corpse. "Do you need more?" he inquired.

"It couldn't hurt," she shrugged.

"I'll see what I can do," he smiled.

Marafel went into the galley with Raerae and before long, they smelled something *meaty* cooking. Shaundar found himself drooling helplessly.

In the meantime, Nashavara returned from a room off of the other side of the bridge with an armload of stuff. “Well, I found some things, Captain,” she told Shaundar. “I don’t know if any of them will help or not. I suppose those must be your quarters, there.” She gestured behind her with her head.

"Thank you," Yathar smiled. "What have you got?"

She placed her things on the spelljammer's table. Shaundar saw paper, ink, pens, sealing wax, two leather-bound books, a telescopic viewing glass, and wonderfully, magically, flint and steel, a long-stemmed pipe and a pouch of tobacco.

Yathar hitched in his breath. "Is that what I think it is?" He touched the tobacco pouch as if it were the Holy Grail.

"Praise Corellon, I think so," Shaundar sighed, and within moments the pouch was open, there was a pinch of tobacco in the pipe, and they were striking flint to steel to spark it up.

Yathar puffed contently to get it going and smoke trailed from his mouth and nose. "Ah, wonderful," he sighed happily, and he passed the pipe to Shaundar, who drew carefully from the stem and held the smoke in his mouth until it drifted naturally from the corners like a fine mist. He did not inhale, knowing that his broken chest was in no condition for such a thing. It was brandy-flavoured and it reminded Shaundar of his father. He passed it to Sylria, who puffed at it with her eyes closed in an expression of perfect contentment. Before long, half of the group had joined them and a cloud of pipe smoke filled the bridge.

Shaundar would not be able to explain to anyone else just how magical and healing that first pipe was, after escaping Raven Talon. But there was just something about it that celebrated *life* in such a powerful

and primal way. There was no immediate survival need being filled; something was being experienced for simple enjoyment, and it was being shared with others who had been through the same kind of hell that he had been. Maybe that, in and of itself, was the point.

They did not find the Elven Navy in Shaundar's entire shift. He had intended to take the full twelve hours of which a spelljammer was ultimately capable, but Sylria insisted that he not exhaust himself with four possible helmsmen available, and Raerae had backed her. So after eight hours of flying, Shaundar and Sylria instructed Marina in the essentials of spelljamming. She took to it with an expression of such joy that Shaundar knew they had made another convert, and he found himself doubting that she would spend much time planetside ever again. He was just starting to nod into sleep despite the pain in his breastbone – reverie was not something that elves wanted to do when they were in Raven Talon; there were no memories there that anyone wanted to relive – when something drew him completely awake. He was totally disoriented for a few moments; was he still in Raven Talon? Had all that been a terrible nightmare? Was he back on the *Queen's Dirk*? What had awakened him?

Then he realized that it was the sensation of their ship coming out of spelljamming speeds and falling into tactical velocity; meaning they were near another large gravitational body.

He hurried to the bridge, and he just about collided with Yathar. “Good, I should have expected you’d wake up right away,” Yathar nodded to him as they disentangled themselves.

“What is it?” Shaundar wanted to know.

“I think it’s a patrol ship,” he said honestly; and Shaundar could now see that the corners of his mouth were drawn as taut as a tacking sail and he could see the whites of Yathar’s eyes.

Shaundar swore and clumped off to the bridge as fast as the bad leg would allow. “Wake up Sylria!” he ordered.

“She’s already there,” Yathar informed him, falling in behind.

Shaundar roared out, “Sylria, stand to the helm!” Then he stopped for a painful coughing fit spawned from inhaling deeply enough to bellow.

“*Av, quessir!*” came her high, clear voice in response, and by the time Shaundar made the bridge, the transfer had taken place, with barely a shiver in the Dragonfly’s flight. Marina was looking disappointed and frightened.

“Well done on the transfer,” Shaundar wheezed a compliment to bolster her morale, while he took the glass that had been discovered in the Captain’s quarters and put it to his eye to gaze out of the Dragonfly’s eyes; which were actually windows.

“Two points off the starboard bow,” Yathar told him, gesturing.

He looked; and sure enough, there was a splotch of red paint marring the starry Void. He couldn’t quite make it out – not at this distance – but he was reasonably sure that it had the profile of a Scorpion.

The bridge began to fill with people who had come to the sound of Shaundar’s yelled command. “What’s going on?” demanded Trevan.

“Stay off the bridge,” Yathar told him. “Battle conditions. Senior officers only.”

“I don’t recall electing you to be a senior officer!” snarled Trevan in reply, pushing farther forward.

Yathar grabbed him in a one-armed choke hold that nevertheless stopped the now-heavier elf in his tracks. “Listen,” he said conversationally to the struggling elf, “I have had just about enough of you. Stay the fuck out of our way and let us do our jobs or I swear to Corellon I will jettison you. Do I make myself clear?”

“*Cryshal*,” rasped Trevan with a withering look of hatred in his eyes. But there was fear too.

Shaundar caught all this out of the corner of his eye. “Shut up for a minute,” he said absently as he watched the enemy ship move against the starry backdrop. He wasn’t as good at mathematical

calculations as Sylria was, but he wasn't any fool either, and his intuitive sense of numbers was usually excellent. "Sylria, I estimate that our friend there is doing about SR 4. Confirm?"

Sylria closed her eyes and took her gaze out into the stars through their Dragonfly's senses. Shaundar knew she was calculating the same things that he had tried to grasp in a glance; relative distance of their foe, assuming it was indeed a man-o-war sized Scorpion; triangulated against the backdrop of the stars and its movement in relation to them. "Confirmed," she nodded.

"Then we can outrun them," Shaundar nodded back. "Yathar, get up to the deck and see if you can teach some of these folks how to tack."

"*Av, quessir,*" he agreed with an almost unconscious salute. He pointed to Lysander, Nashavara and Trevan. "You three come with me. You look like you're in the best shape." They went obediently, even Trevan. A few moments later Yathar called out, "Ready for your orders, Captain!"

"All right," Shaundar began, "Yaw larboard 90, pitch down 25."

"*Av, quessir!*" cried Yathar, and slowly and awkwardly due to the completely green crew, and their weakened condition, the Dragonfly made the turn.

“Sylria, get us out of here,” Shaundar commanded. “Maximum tactical.”

“Max tactical, *av, quessir*,” echoed Sylria back, and she engaged all of her power and energy to move the ship as directed.

Shaundar watched the enemy ship through his glass. It reacted to their course change by trying to follow them; but Sylria gradually outdistanced them. When they returned suddenly to spelljamming speeds, knocking the smaller elves like Marina, Marafel and Raerae off of their feet, Shaundar breathed a sigh of relief. But his relief was short-lived, because there was a sharp crack and a gasp of pain behind him. He turned to look and saw Raerae spread-eagled on the deck, clutching at her left hip.

“Elf down!” Shaundar cried, going to her aid. “Theris to the bridge, right now!”

Theris came on to the bridge and fell to Raerae’s side. “Please move your hands so that I can see,” she instructed the elder elf, who obeyed with her face in a rictus of pain. After some poking and prodding, Theris announced that Raerae’s hip was, indeed, broken, and she chanted a prayer to Sehanine and healing light radiated from her hand.

“Sorry, Captain,” Raerae gasped as normal feeling returned to her hip and leg. “I guess I zigged when I should have zagged.”

“My fault,” Shaundar admitted. “I should have warned you to brace yourself; how could you have known?”

“You can’t think of everything,” Marina spoke up quite reasonably. “Did we escape?”

“I think so,” Shaundar nodded; though he knew that there were ways to track a fresh spelljamming trajectory if you were clever and determined enough. “I suppose time will tell.”

Theris asked softly, “Captain, Yathar really will jettison Trevan, won’t he?”

“My father explained this to me once,” Shaundar sighed, “and I didn’t understand it then, but now I do. Trevan’s attitude is dangerous. A ship’s crew must pull together to survive; us maybe more than most. Yathar will kill him if he must to save the lives of everyone else.” He grimaced. “And so will I.”

“That’s hard,” Theris whispered sadly.

Shaundar said nothing. Yes, it was hard. And yes, he would do it anyway, and he knew it.

They fled into the Void.

Chapter Eighteen

Before long, Shaundar had Sylria change course, just to be sure that they were not being followed. Then he called another meeting.

“I’m changing the plan,” Shaundar explained. “I believe that with potential patrol ships around, we dare not continue to search for the Navy. So we’re going to head directly for the edge of the crystal shell, and then, because it’s dangerous to enter the phlogiston without food because we don’t really know how long we would be there until we found another sphere, we’re going to head to Ironpiece.”

Lysander remarked, “I thought that you didn’t know where we were. So how do you intend to find it?”

Sylria was ready to field that one. “By charting the stars,” she elucidated. She spread out the sphere’s charts and indicated the edges of the sphere. “We still can’t read the Orcish,” she admitted, “but there appears to be a sort of zodiac in this sphere. Twelve constellations. This one looks sort of like a beholder to me.” She tapped the chart where several connected dots formed a loosely circular shape with curls like commas sticking out of its head. “I even remember it from Spiral; don’t you?”

“We do call that one ‘The Beholder,’” Corethi smiled. “It’s huge in the sky in the spring. And the sun rises where the Starbeast travels.

That's this one, which looks like a giant four-legged beast." He indicated the other side of the chart.

Sylria met his eyes with a smile. "Good to know! That gives us points to navigate from; landmarks, if you will. Now, we're proceeding on an assumption, and before I continue I'll confirm with you or Grimmauld; that star that has been really bright at dawn and dusk, which seemed especially close this past month and, as I recall, was last spring too; is that Ironpiece?"

"It might be," Grimmauld mused. Corethi said, "We don't call it that but I suppose the name is similar enough. We call it 'The Coin Star.' You mean to tell me it's not a star at all, but another world like Spiral?"

Shaundar resisted the urge to slap his forehead, and gently reminded himself that these were groundlings. "Stars that seem closer than other stars and don't really flicker in the night sky are often planets," he clarified. "Does it flicker in the night sky?"

Corethi shook his head with a rueful smile. "No," he said simply.

"Okay, that likely confirms it," Shaundar grinned. "What it means is that Erevan is with us and luck is in our favour. Spiral is currently closer to Ironpiece than it will be at any other time of year. By heading to the crystal shell and then doubling back, we should be able to find Ironpiece within the month."

"A month!" cried Trevan in dismay.

Sylria explained, “It’s ten days from the crystal shell to Ironpiece, according to this chart. And since we know that it’s technically in the region of the Beholder constellation; that’s in this arc of space,” she indicated it on the map by bracketing a section between her hands; “and so are we, we should be able to find it by travelling back from the shell. But, we don’t know *where* it is in relation to where we are in this section, and we won’t be able to see it from the shell, so what we have to do is double back at least nine and a half days, starting from here,” she indicated a spot in Ironpiece’s orbital ring that was in line with the space directly between the previous constellation, something that looked like a humanoid with a lumpy head, “and ending, if we haven’t found it by then, here,” and she tapped her nail against a spot that would line up with the border of the next constellation, something birdlike. “So, at least ten days to the shell, at least a couple of days skimming the edge of the shell, nine and a half days back, and then a few days following Ironpiece’s orbit until we find it.”

“And what if we find the scro before that?” Lysander asked, casting a look in Trevan’s direction. Shaundar sighed, knowing that the unholy alliance between the two had now been cemented.

“We’ll just have to pray we don’t,” Shaundar admitted. “Our other option is to take our chances with the phlogiston by finding a portal in the shell once we get there. But I have no idea where we’ll end up or how long we’ll be in there. Could be Grommspace, could be Krynnspace, might be Realmospace, and it could be something I know nothing about at all.”

“I’m sure the gnomes will help us,” Nashavara assured them. “They have always been friendly in the spaceport cities.”

“What is the phlogiston, anyway?” Corethi inquired.

Yathar replied, “It’s a rainbow river, extremely flammable, that runs between the crystal spheres. Or maybe they float on it. It limits access to other planar contact so it might limit the amount of food we can conjure; though that does seem unlikely for such a simple prayer. But I’m not a priest so I don’t know for sure. And we’d have to actually sail there; it’s liquid. I don’t know if we can do that.”

“In this case,” Shaundar said, “because I don’t know what the right answer is, I will put it to a vote. So hands up if you want to take our chances with the phlogiston.”

Trevan and Lysander hesitated a moment but put up their hands. Marafel did as well.

“Okay, and hands up if you want to try for Ironpiece.”

The rest of the hands found the air.

“So be it,” Shaundar nodded. “Theris, a prayer for guidance probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

She led them in a prayer to Sehanine. Shaundar followed along, knowing that it would give them all comfort, whether or not it gave him any.

The bats ran out about a week later. Weirdly, Shaundar never did get tired of the strange broth they made from them (which you could call “batwing soup,” he supposed.) But within a couple of days of the rotating schedule of gruel distribution, he felt as though he were starving again; which, he supposed he was, just like everyone else.

Theris often went without so that others could have more, and so soon she was gaunt like the rest of them, waning like a moon. Lysander did so as well, but Shaundar had the distinct feeling that this had been forced upon him by his compassionate wife; or maybe that he had been manipulated into it through guilt. Nashavara, who had turned out to be a lovely and clever elf despite the prejudices that Shaundar and Yathar held towards elven nobility, often voluntarily skipped meals as well. Raerae began to look pale and translucent, somehow. But two things worried Shaundar more than anything else. One was that Lysander and Trevan began to whisper to each other in dark corners of the ship, and fall silent when others went by, and what they were whispering about was concerning. The other was that Shaundar believed that Lysander might be going crazy.

Having seen them sneak off for their palaver, Shaundar used the senses of the ship to spy on them, and Yathar and Sylria did the same. None of the spelljammers thought it prudent to explain that they could do this to the others; even Marina chose not to mention it for whatever reason, and whether that was because she was unaware or because she recognized the value of keeping silent about it given the current situation, Shaundar could not say.

When they thought they were alone, the two discontents lamented the tyranny of the Imperial Navy; they expressed a deep mistrust for the three Navy elves; Lysander was certain that they had food hidden somewhere, since they didn't appear to be losing any weight; or sometimes, Lysander was convinced that they were working for the scro and would just take them all back to Spiral after cruelly starving them in this little space jaunt. Either that, reasoned Lysander, or this was some kind of illusion or mind-control created by the scro to trick information out of them, or maybe just to torture them a while by the belief that they would escape. Trevan fed the delusion, either not knowing or not caring that he was threatening to tip Lysander over the edge. Shaundar desperately wanted to warn him. He had seen how Lysander's eyes rolled in their sockets and how he muttered to himself when no one was watching and startled at nothing, but he knew how Trevan would take that and so he held his tongue.

It was towards the end of the week that Lysander ran full tilt into Shaundar as he limped along the deck. It was a habit he had taken up to

try to work his bad leg, which, he had learned, tended to seize up and cramp when he was still for too long.

“I know what you’re doing,” Lysander accused Shaundar with furious rolling eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Shaundar demanded warily.

Lysander shook a finger at him in a scolding gesture that reminded Shaundar of his grandmother. His face was frozen in a grinning rictus. “You know perfectly well what I’m talking about.”

Corethi started coming over.

“No, I really don’t,” Shaundar assured him in a soothing tone. The light in Lysander’s eyes was disturbingly bright.

He laughed in a sharp caw that had more in common with the voice of a crow than an elf. “Sure you do,” he smirked. “Sure you do.”

Corethi cleared his throat. “Lysander,” he began reasonably, “leave Captain Shaundar alone. As far as I can tell, all he’s trying to do is get us all someplace safe.”

Again Lysander barked laughter. “You’re working for *them*,” he accused. “You’re just going to take us back to Raven Talon.”

Corethi scowled. “Now why in the Abyss would he do that, Lysander?” he demanded calmly.

“How should I know?” returned Lysander. “Extra favours?”

Yathar, who had also quietly joined them, snapped suddenly, “Yeah sure. Look at us. I’m sure we’re benefitting from extra favours from the orcs.” He indicated his ragged, filthy, emaciated body.

Theris came up to where they were standing and put a hand on Lysander’s shoulder. “Honey,” she said in a soft, worried tone, “there’s no orcs here. We got away. We just have to stay out of their grasp a while longer.”

“We’re all on the same side here,” Corethi reassured him.

Theris’ touch seemed to soothe him. He grasped her hand on his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Well, I’m watching you,” he informed Shaundar mildly. And he wandered off.

“I’m sorry,” Theris apologized on his behalf. “When they were just taking elves, before they started taking everyone, we were being hidden by some dwarven neighbours and they betrayed us. Now I guess he’s become paranoid.” Her eyes were wide and afraid.

Shaundar put a hand on her shoulder. “I can’t say I blame him. But why don’t you guys stop skipping meals and put yourselves back in the regular rotation? We’ll all be equally hungry then and no one can be accused of having special privileges.”

“All right,” she agreed with a sigh.

The gnawing in Shaundar’s belly brought him back to his first weeks at Raven Talon, and he began to dream about it regularly, in such vivid detail that he often awoke with a scream in his throat and the firm belief that he was still there. Then everything would come flooding back as the sweat cooled on his skin. He didn’t blame Lysander for his convictions. Sometimes he wondered himself.

A couple of days later, Marafel found the beer.

She came into the Captain’s quarters, which had actually become quarters for the three Navy elves, Corethi and Marina, and gently shook Shaundar awake. “Captain,” she murmured to his startled face and wide eyes, “I found something. Something good.”

Shaundar blinked at her for a few moments as he tried to remember where he was, and then he shuffled on what was left of his pants.

She led him into the cargo hold, which was comprised of most of the inner deck of the Dragonfly’s elongated abdomen. Barrels of water were the primary inhabitants of the deck. Three were empty now.

“Not all of these are water,” Marafel announced; and sure enough, hidden behind several of the water casks were barrels filled with something that smelled malty. “There’s also a couple that smell spicy,” she informed Shaundar with a grin.

“Show me,” Shaundar requested.

She took him to the far corner; and there were several casks that smelled like that ghastly peppery substance that had burned Shaundar's leg, and saved his life. There appeared to be about a third as many pepper ale tubs as there were casks of regular beer.

"I think they mix it," Marafel speculated.

Shaundar chuckled to himself. "The orcish equivalent of *quesstiasa*, maybe?" He smiled. Well, beer provided some kind of nourishment, didn't it? "Good find," he complimented her, clasping her on a very thin shoulder. "Let's mix up this stuff, whether they do or not, and include it in the rations."

Shaundar asked Trevan, Corethi and Lysander to handle the barrels, having learned by then that whatever was broken made it impossible for him to lift or handle anything heavy without excruciating chest pain. He suspected that his sternum was busted; though why Theris' prayers had been unable to heal it entirely, he could not say. He often wondered in one of the many gray dozes between nightmares whether his flagging faith was the reason, but he never once spoke the thought aloud.

Nobody turned down the beer, even though it was a little sharp with the spicy ale mixed into it. However, Shaundar persisted in the mixing of the two different alcohols in a desire to make it stretch as far as possible, knowing they were likely to burn their mouths and throats if they left the peppery stuff to be drunk on its own. He was happy to agree

that anyone not receiving gruel that day could have a double ration of beer to help make up for it. But he found out the hard way that two tankards of the strong orcish liquor were enough to make him thoroughly drunk if they were taken at the same time, and he had to defer his spelljamming shift until after it had worn off. It did, however, leave a pleasantly warm feeling in his belly and he was able to sleep without dreams for a couple of hours; a blessing that was definitely worth the price of the mild hangover that afflicted him upon awakening. It also seemed to reduce the ache in his leg and the constant sharp pains in his chest when he breathed deeply.

It was five days later that they finally found the crystal shell. Yathar was in the helm at the time and it was actually sharp-eyed Marafel, once again, who discovered it. "Captain, what's that?" she asked him, pointing out into the starry Void.

"What's what?" inquired Shaundar, trying to follow where she was indicating; but then he saw it. "Good eyes," he complimented her happily, and then he bellowed, "Shell sighted!" It appeared as a shimmering iridescence in the black; almost invisible, unless you knew what you were looking for.

Sylria and Yathar cheered; as did Corethi, and Marina, who knew what that meant maybe better than most of the others. Raerae and Theris applauded.

“Sylria,” Shaundar smiled, “determine our position and plot us a course along the edge of the shell to the beginning of the Beholder sector. All stop.”

“All stop, *av*, Cap’n,” replied Yathar, and he held the Dragonfly in position as Sylria called out her affirmative and began going over the charts.

“So we’ll be all right now,” asked Nashavara. “Won’t we?”

Shaundar shrugged. “It’s a start, anyway.”

Sylria soon called out coordinates and with some help from Corethi, Shaundar set the mainsail while Yathar piloted the ship around to the appropriate bearing. They set out again almost immediately.

Trevan approached Shaundar from behind. “Not bad, Captain,” he said in a voice that, strangely, did not seem in the least sardonic.

“Don’t tell me, tell Sylria,” he said. “She’s the one who navigated us here.”

“I’ll be honest,” he confided. “I wasn’t sure you guys could do it.”

“Well, don’t thank us yet,” Shaundar cautioned him. “Now we have to find the middle point between the two constellations, then

backtrack it towards the centre of the sphere until we cross Ironpiece's orbit. And we still have the bulk of the journey to go."

From the corner of his eye, Shaundar could see Lysander leaning on the ship railing, staring unmoved into the Void. He had a tankard of orcish grog in his hand. Shaundar was reasonably sure, though he couldn't have proved it, that he had already finished off two of them that day. It wasn't a good sign.

Later that evening, he took a steak knife from the kitchen and strapped it to the outside of his gimped thigh, underneath the remains of the Raven Talon uniform pants so no one else could see it. Just in case.

Five days later it finally happened. Shaundar never was sure, exactly, what the final spark was that set him off like the gunpowder. He could only guess that for Lysander, there had simply been too much for too long. How long had they survived in Raven Talon, with Theris' prayers to feed them? It could have been months. It could have been years. How many people had they watched die? How many times had hope been offered them, only to be snatched away? Theris had her faith to sustain her, but what did Lysander have?

Shaundar was in the grip of a fairly vivid nightmare in which he was reliving the destruction of the *Queen's Dirk*, but something dragged him back, kicking and screaming, into consciousness. It took him a few

moments to reorient himself. Then he realized that the fire-and-brimstone scent of burning gunpowder had not gone away.

"Fire in the hold!" he cried out, and he leaped to his feet and lurched out to find the flames.

Shaundar discovered Lysander scattering gunpowder over the upper deck, whistling to himself as if he were on an evening stroll. His clothes were wet. The weapons deck was already blazing merrily, fouling the air more with each passing second. "Lysander! What in the Nine Hells are you doing?!" he roared.

Lysander spared him not so much as a glance. "I'm not going back to the orcs," he informed Shaundar mildly.

By now several of the others were gathering on the deck. Sylria saw the fire and grabbed Grimmauld, Trevan and Corethi. "We have to get that out right away or it will poison our air!" she told them. "Come on and help me get some water!"

Theris came on to the deck and gaped openly at her husband. "Lysander, please stop this," she begged.

He smiled at her without really seeing her. "It's okay, Theris," he murmured beatifically. "I'm *going* to stop this. Those scro are never going to hurt us again." He continued to scatter the gunpowder. He was already at the stern and the whole deck was sooty and black. He had a small bag of the stuff and he had cut a slice in the bottom, through which

the black grains poured in a steady stream like sugar. They glittered in the flickering firelight and made a soft, sandlike rustle as they were decanted onto the hardwood. Behind Shaundar, the fire blazing on the weapons deck growled hungrily. The same light that sparkled in the gunpowder looked like the flames of the Hells in Lysander's eyes.

"Lysander," Shaundar reasoned, "if you keep on like this we're all going to die. Give me the powder bag." He extended his hand.

Lysander smiled. "That's the point, Shaundar," he was informed. "That way the orcs won't be able to hurt us anymore."

"We've gotten away from them," Shaundar insisted breathlessly. "We're going to the gnomes. They won't be able to hurt us there."

Lysander shook his head in the same kind of patient way that a parent does when trying to correct a child's mistaken impression. "We're going around in circles. And even if we weren't, it's only a matter of time before the scro reach the gnomes anyway. You said so yourself; there was no defence against the cannons."

"There *was* no defence, but that doesn't mean that the Navy hasn't come up with something now!" he insisted.

But Lysander seemed not to hear. "No, it's better this way," he said firmly. He took the flint in one hand and the steel in the other.

Theris was crying now. "Lysander, please stop."

He looked at her with concern. “Don’t cry, love,” he begged her. “It’s going to be okay.”

That’s when Shaundar realized that he could smell lamp oil, and an icicle of fear stabbed him in the belly as he understood why Lysander looked wet. “I could use some help up here!” he cried, and without giving him any further chance to prepare, Shaundar jumped Lysander and tried to restrain him.

It was no good. Shaundar was just too thin and too weak, and Lysander had the strength of a madman. He shook Shaundar off like a rag doll. Marafel leaped into the fray, only to be similarly tossed aside. Cleverly, Marina picked up a pinch of the gunpowder and chanted a fairly common incantation to induce sleep, but Lysander shrugged that off as well. Finally, in desperation Shaundar raised the steak knife. “Lysander, I swear before the gods I will kill you before I let you burn this ship! *Stop!*”

Lysander’s eyes watched the firelight reflecting off of the blade and he laughed out loud. There was no reason in either his laugh or his eyes. “Come and get me then,” he giggled. His hands moved together to strike the flint to steel.

Time seemed to slow down into a viscous surreality. Shaundar saw those hands coming together and he vaulted himself at Lysander with a scream in his throat. But with the bad leg he was too slow. He drew back the knife and thrust it into the hollow right beneath Lysander’s ribcage just after the small steel bar had scraped the stone. Blood flowed

freely from the protruding blade as Shaundar caught the scent of ozone and a small blue spark cast itself down like a star onto the gunpowder and lamp oil at Lysander's feet.

Shaundar fell rather than dove backwards, pinwheeling his arms desperately. The blue spark touched the powder, and as Lysander looked down to see where it had landed, it exploded in a blinding flash. Lysander didn't so much catch fire as transform into an elven blowtorch. Shaundar threw his arm up in front of his face. Something hit him with the force of a trebuchet and then he was at the bow of the deck lying on the floorboards and the flesh of his arm was blistering.

Time came back into focus. A curiously-muted high keening noise was coming from Theris like a whistling tea-kettle. She was trying to pull her husband out of the flames. Shaundar saw that she was also catching fire; her ragged uniform and the fuzz of hair that had come in on her head since their escape were alight and her flesh was red and blistered. He could smell cooking meat. For a second he could only watch, horrified. What could he do? The blaze was spreading rapidly over the gunpowdered deck in a wave of yellow-white flames that reminded Shaundar of autumn burn-off. Soon the whole ship would be irredeemably ablaze.

Then it hit him. He clambered up the weapons deck, thrusting his fingers into burnt ashes and pinching some in a vice grip. The tips of his fingers sizzled.

He whirled around to face the incandescent flares that had once been elves and the puddle of flames that was expanding around them. He just hoped the salt in his sweat would be enough to make this work!

Wiping his ashen fingers through his dampened brow, he incanted Nystul's words of enchantment and prayed to the elven luck-god, Erevan.

Erevan was listening. All the fires went out with a disgruntled hiss.

Lysander was already dead. Theris died three days later. She lay on a bunk while the survivors took turns pouring cool water over her, an unrecognizable mess sloughing off red and black cooked flesh that smelled like barbecued venison, her chest slowly rising and falling in defiance of the inevitable until at last, she heaved out a final sigh. Shaundar supposed that the best thing that could be said about the situation is that she died without ever regaining consciousness. He recited what he could remember of the Navy funeral ceremony over their bodies and committed them to the Void before the remaining crew could get desperate enough do something unthinkable.

In one fell swoop the situation had gone from manageable to nearly hopeless. Their one weapon was a smouldering pile of rubble; a good deal of the upper deck was a scorched mess, such that the weapons

deck was too dangerous to walk on and much of the upper deck itself was questionable; the air was faintly smoky and full of the charnel scent of charcoal and burnt flesh; and their healer was dead and their main food source no longer existed.

Shaundar tried not to let the others see his dismay, but he was losing hope quickly, and his sleep had gone from bad to worse. Nightly he was visited by visions of Lysander who was nothing but a charred skeleton and some muscle and tendon, who asked him over and over again, *Why didn't you stop me, Shaundar? You knew I was crazy. Why didn't you stop me?* And sometimes, Theris would join him, mostly burnt meat except that her blue eyes were clearly visible, and they were full of rage and she said, *You killed my husband. Why didn't you stop him? Why didn't you stop me?*

With nothing left for nourishment except the beer and the peppery ale, Shaundar gave up rationing and the crew spent most of their time lying-down drunk. The only time that he was sober was when he was spelljamming; he insisted that nobody take the helm while that hammered. Thus, even that became an exercise in pain as he nursed the hangover that was now as inevitable as Theris' death and rubbed at the ache in his belly. More worrisome, that pain in his chest had gotten worse and he had developed a wet cough. It was just as well that they had smoked all of the tobacco by then.

Tracing their position backwards from the shell was more difficult than they had hoped. When Sylria admitted that she was too

drunk to be entirely certain of where they were, Shaundar didn't inform the crew of that either. There was no need to panic anyone. They travelled along the edge of the shell for two days after Theris' death, judged that to be far enough, and began to make the flight in towards the centre of the sphere. But within a few days, deprived even of the limited food of Raven Talon, their crew lacked the energy to do anything except lie around listlessly and drink. And the beer supply was dwindling fast.

A week after the deaths of Theris and Lysander, Shaundar woke up to find that Raerae was gone. He hunted all over the ship, fearing that he would find her unconscious in a corner somewhere. Instead he finally found a note on the Captain's work desk.

Dear Shaundar, she wrote, I have been hearing Sehanine calling these past several days and I have decided to go West. Don't weep for me; I have lived a long and productive life and I have no fear. I hope you beautiful young people all survive this and enjoy some of the experiences in your future lives that I have enjoyed. Please don't mourn. I will ask Sehanine to look out for you. Sweet water and light laughter until we next meet.

That was the breaking point. Shaundar crumpled up the note in his hand and choked back a sob. He knew in his heart that she had made this choice so that there would be more beer for the rest of them. He knew then that he had failed her; failed her just as he had failed Theris and Lysander.

Sylria came into the room and demanded what was wrong, but he couldn't speak. Eventually she pried the crushed note from his still-blistered fingers. Then she started to sob too. They held each other and just cried together for a very long time.

They were startled when the Dragonfly suddenly decelerated to tactical speed. Something was out there! Almost immediately there was a tap at the door. "Scuse me, Cap'n?" Grimmauld interrupted as he cleared his throat. "I guess you can feel that we're not doing spelljamming speeds anymore. We've sighted something. We're thinking it might be another ship."

"Really?" breathed Sylria hopefully. Shaundar wiped his face with one of the blankets and followed Grimmauld hurriedly to the bridge. Grimmauld either did not notice his tears or discretely chose not to say anything. Shaundar put the glass to his eye and stared out into space.

It appeared to be two ships, actually. There was the wreckage of a Nautiloid, and it was in tow to a mostly-intact Squidship.

"Praise the gods!" Shaundar breathed. "Sylria, go run up the distress flags! Grimmauld, go stand on the deck and wave your arms as vigorously as you can!" He lurched into the galley, grabbed one of the until-now useless iron cookpots, and lugged it up to the main deck, snatching up another bag of gunpowder on the way. He then put a small bit of the powder carefully into the pot and struck flint-and-steel. The

spark made a tiny explosion well-contained by the cauldron. He nodded, satisfied, and prepared another poke of powder for the next round.

“What are you doing?” Trevan demanded.

“Distress signals!” he explained. “There’s a ship out there and it’s not Orcish! There are a few different things that are recognized as distress signals; I want to cover as many bases as I can. Go stand on the bow and wave your arms like Grimmauld is doing.”

Trevan hesitated; but then he nodded. “Praise Corellon,” he said. “*Av, quessir!*” And he obeyed with a hopeful smile on his face. He was drunk enough to overbalance himself and trip, but soon such things would cease to matter.

Sylria whipped the square-and-circle flags up the mainmast so fast that Shaundar was certain that she must have burnt her palms. Good. Shaundar waited yet a few more seconds before he touched off the next round of powder, knowing that when adrenaline was flowing through your veins, your sense of time was skewed and things that seemed to take forever actually happened in a matter of moments. The traditional interval was one minute between flashes (naturally, the sound would not carry unless their air envelope was in contact with the other ship.) If he was too far off of that mark, he might confuse their potential rescuers. He could do nothing but guess, however; the ship’s timekeeping glass was not that accurate, and his beloved pocket watch

was gone, either taken by the scro of Raven Talon or, he hoped, lost somewhere in the Void.

It seemed like an eon went by as they approached the two ships, which did not seem to react at all to their presence at first. Shaundar kept touching off powder at what he believed to be one minute intervals. Grimmauld and Trevan waved their arms so enthusiastically that Shaundar was amazed that they didn't fall right over the railing.

The ships turned and started moving towards them.

Everyone was clustered at the bow or in the bridge and a cheer broke out as they saw the ships heading in their direction. Shaundar thought that with a Squidship, they were likely human. It had been so long since he had spoken the Common trade tongue that he found himself running through the words of greeting just to make sure that he still knew them.

He trained his glass on the approaching vessels; and then he saw something that froze his blood in his veins. He uttered a curse that would have blistered paint. "Bring 'er about! Get us out of here! Max tactical!" he howled, limping over to the mainsail to begin tacking. "Dammit, Trevan! Grimmauld! Help me!"

Trevan just stared at him for a few long moments. "Have you gone completely insane?!" he exploded at last. "How are we going to get rescued if we run away?"

“That’s no rescuer,” he moaned. “They’re flying the flag of the illithid. Mind flayers!”

“Damn,” murmured the dwarf with a stricken look; then he started lending Shaundar a hand with the mainsail. Yathar shot the Dragonfly into reverse and began the turn. Shaundar could hear him swearing in a steady streak of vitriol, though he couldn’t precisely make out the words.

It was too late. The illithid-occupied ship gained on them rapidly, and when they finally got turned around, a warning shot was released from their catapults across the little Dragonfly’s bow. They had no weapons to return fire with and the message was unmistakable.

All the strength left Shaundar’s legs and he sank to the deck. There was nothing else to be done. “Stand down,” he commanded. “All hands stand down. Sylria, run up the white flag.”

She looked at him with eyes utterly devoid of hope. “*Av, quessir,*” she whispered, and she pulled down the distress flags and ran the white cloth into the sky.

“What are illithid?” asked Marina quietly.

“Squid-faced aliens who think all demihumans look like slaves or dinner,” Grimmauld groaned bluntly.

As the two ships closed the distance, Shaundar could now see that there were purplish and maroon-coloured, cephalopod-headed aliens in robes moving among the humans on the Squidship. Well, he supposed they might have been half-elves too; their heights and builds were about human-sized. As directed by signal flags, the Dragonfly came up on the Squidship's starboard side and moored up. The mind flayers waggled their tentacles greedily.

Two of the illithid boarded the Dragonfly while their human servants looked on with glassy, stunned expressions. One of them squinted and then Trevan staggered backwards clutching his skull. It reached for him eagerly and grasped his head with its tentacles.

Shaundar began chanting to summon *magic missiles*, but before he could complete the evocation, the other mind flayer flexed its tentacles and it felt roughly as though someone had tried to crush his head with a sledgehammer. He reeled and fell on his rump. Then he felt, for a moment, the loveliest sensation; as though if he just let go, all of his problems would go away and someone else would take responsibility for all of this. It was like he was floating away gently on a cloud. He shook it off, knowing that it couldn't be at all good in this situation, and the illithid seemed to draw back from him a moment, as though in surprise.

Trevan produced one of the sharp kitchen knives from somewhere. Shaundar supposed that he had picked it up for insurance, just as he had. Trevan thrust it viciously into the torso of the illithid attacking him, but it did him no good. Purplish blood stained the front of

its robe, but the mind flayer already had its tentacles firmly around Trevan's skull and two of them began to borrow into his temples and it literally sucked Trevan's brain out and into its lamprey-like maw. Trevan screamed in agony. Someone on the Dragonfly shrieked with him. Shaundar looked away.

"You are a wizard?" asked the illithid in a mind-voice that sounded watery and strange. It seemed to Shaundar like it was in Espruar but he didn't think it actually was.

"Avavaen," he replied.

"We need wizards", it informed him. *"You will come with us and pilot this ship's helm."*

"No," said Shaundar.

He could swear that the illithid looked surprised. Its eyebrow ridges raised and its pale white eyes seemed to widen. *"No?"* it repeated in a telepathic echo.

"That's right," Shaundar confirmed. *"No, I won't help you. I have no reason to help you."*

"Your life is a good reason to help us," it pointed out smugly.

Shaundar grinned in a manner that was more like bearing his teeth. *"Not enough,"* he growled. *"You just randomly killed one of my*

crew. I have no assurance that you won't just do the same to the rest of us, especially once we get you wherever you're going."

"We could force you to obey with our psi," it reasoned.

"I don't believe you," Shaundar denied waspishly. "I think you just tried that, and failed."

"We could kill you now," its companion suggested. Trevan's body lay on the deck with a look of stunned horror frozen on his face.

"Then get on with it," Shaundar snapped. "I have nothing to lose."

"Are any of the rest of you wizards?" the first illithid inquired of the crew of the Dragonfly.

"Yes," Sylria confessed, "but we won't help you either without his say-so." She folded her toothpick-thin arms and glared at them angrily. Before long the illithid were confronted with a sea of stony faces.

"What do you want?" demanded the mind flayers at last.

Shaundar knew that he had won the stand-off. "You can't eat any of my crew," he told them firmly. "You let them go free at the first free port we reach, and in return I, Sylria and Yathar will pilot you wherever you need to go."

“Cap’n, what are you doing?” whispered Grimmauld; but Sylria was just nodding grimly.

“Furthermore,” he added, “no mind control or I swear that as soon as I get my mind back I will blast everything that I see and then trash the helm entirely. Beside the point,” he smirked, “that’s not in your best interests anyway. If I don’t have full control of my faculties, I won’t be able to pilot properly.” He folded his arms and waited for them to decide. He determined that if they did not agree, he was ready to find out what Arvador was like for himself.

They turned towards each other and wagged their tentacles. Shaundar had the impression that they were silently discussing the situation and his demands. “Oh, one more thing,” added Shaundar, almost as an afterthought. The aliens turned their octopus gazes in his direction. “You have to include all of my crew in proper food and water rations for humanoids.” He recalled someone – it might have been Uncle Madrimlian – cautioning him that illithid would hold to the precise letter of any agreement, so if he had to negotiate with them, be sure he clarified everything. “In return, they will work just like any other crew member. But no mind control, not on them.”

“*You are very demanding for someone in your position,*” one of them remarked sourly.

“Like I said,” Shaundar sneered, “I have nothing to lose.”

“All right,” the other one assented. *“We agree to your terms, elf. Now come aboard.”*

And they did. The damaged Dragonfly was abandoned but it was stripped for supplies first. Mostly they just took the water, the gunpowder and the ammunition.

Shaundar had wondered why in the world mind flayers needed mages. As far as he understood it, they had their own helmets, designed by the mysterious Arcane, which took advantage of their innate psionic talents. But the answer was soon evident. Apparently, there had been a clash between the Nautiloid belonging to the illithid and the Squidship that had belonged to the human slaves. Who had started it was unclear, though Shaundar guessed it was likely the mind flayers, looking for food. The Nautiloid had not been badly damaged in the conflict but a lucky shot had taken out its psionic helm. The Squidship and its helm were still functional, but the illithid had no mages, or clerics, for that matter, and therefore, they had no ability to pilot it.

There was one spelljammer still alive from the original crew, and when Shaundar came down to relieve her, he could see that she was falling-down exhausted. She was a human woman with long coppery hair who might have been attractive, were she not as thin as an elf and glassy-eyed with the blank stare of someone who was sleepwalking. “The cavalry has arrived,” he joked; and he was reasonably certain that his Common Tongue was correct, even with his elven accent, but she did not even look at him.

Shaundar pinched his mouth in a thin line. He turned to the illithid who had followed him. “You’re going to have to stop the ship and direct her to stand down the helm before I can take over,” he informed his new captor. “I can do a moving transfer but not if the other pilot can’t.”

It looked with its strange pale, pupiless eyes at the woman. She jolted as if shocked. Then the ship slowed to a halt and she stood up jerkily from the helm, as though she were a construct.

Shaundar clasped the woman’s shoulder with one hand as he took the helm, but she did not respond at all. Immediately he felt the aching pains and bruises of the Squidship. Its most serious damage felt like broken ribs, which likely represented significant damage to the starboard hull, so he was reasonably sure that the illithid were aware of that. But once he had taken the helm, he met the mind flayer’s alien gaze steadily and did not move.

“*What?*” it demanded. The woman stood at his side, not patiently, but more like a wind-up toy waiting for someone to turn the key. Shaundar saw with revulsion that she was drooling.

“First, we eat,” he informed the mind flayer firmly. “Then we fly.” He began to rustle through the papers scattered over the spelljammer’s table. Ah, star charts of the sphere, written in Common. He could read Common. He fished one out and studied it. Well, based on the markers that indicated their current position, it looked like it was,

indeed, Ironpiece that they had been chasing, and that they were steering for the right heading after all. They were off maybe four hours from Sylria's calculations. Not that it mattered now.

Shaundar felt that floating-balloon sensation in his head again. In a rage he slammed his hand down on the spelljammer's table hard enough to smash it into three pieces that clattered when they hit the floor. Star charts flew like oversized leaves. "No!" he roared. "We have an agreement. Do that to me and I'll be useless – like her." He nodded in the direction of the living zombie who had once been a human woman. "And if you don't get us some food imminently," he added in rough, but controlled, tones, "I am likely to pass out at the helm and then you'll have a real problem." It was true. He could feel his consciousness ebbing into black spots with the effort of this exertion.

The illithid left the helm room. And a few moments later a glazed-looking human boy who had to be about Shaundar's equivalent age brought a pot of steaming hot soup and bowls.

Shaundar never did know what was in that soup. He didn't dare to ask. But quite frankly, he would not have cared at that moment in time if it had been cream of elf ear. He smelled it coming from outside the door. He started to drool as helplessly as the pilot he had replaced. His hand shook so badly when he was handed the first bowl that he dumped about half of it onto his lap before he was able to get it to his mouth. It burned his legs and his tongue but he didn't care. Tears ran freely from his eyes as he dipped his bowl in the pot for a second helping.

His former crew were all gathered around him drinking soup themselves and weeping helplessly. “Thank you, Shaundar,” whispered Marina; and a chorus of thanks ensued. Shaundar wasn’t really sure what they were thanking him for.

When the soup was gone, Shaundar turned to the illithid and asked, “All right, what’s my heading?”

The mind flayer told him. Shaundar requested the charts that he had spilled to the floor and examined them, and with Sylria’s aid he triangulated their position and the coordinates he had been given. His eyes widened. He had heard of their destination.

They were ten days in space after that, and comparatively, those days weren’t so bad. Shaundar, Sylria and Yathar took eight hour shifts at the helm and then pulled ropes for four hours, and the remainder of the refugees worked twelve hour labour shifts. They never saw the original helmswoman again. Shaundar suspected that he knew why. Once they actually passed a scro patrol, and though Shaundar’s heart tried to pound itself out of his chest, they were left alone. Obviously the scro had no quarrel with the illithid.

The escapees reveried and slept together on the helm room’s floor, which was just fine by Shaundar; he didn’t want to let his charges out of his sight, and associating with the empty husks who used to be the Squidship’s crew was disturbing in the extreme. The mind flayers kept to their end of the agreement. None of them were molested, especially

after that secondary attempt to dominate Shaundar had failed. And the illithid did feed them regularly. There was soup, stew, porridge, bread and fruit. They tried to feed them hard tack and jerky but most of them had a touch of scurvy by then, so their teeth were too loose to eat either one without soaking them first. They were quickly removed from the menu.

“Do you think they’ll actually let us go when we reach the next port?” Grimmauld wanted to know. Shaundar realized that his beard actually looked something like a proper dwarven beard now, albeit a short one. His hair was dark brown. Shaundar ran a hand absently over his own head. It felt a little like peach fuzz. He guessed that dwarves grew hair faster than elves did.

“Maybe,” Shaundar shrugged, “but I think it’s unlikely.”

Grimmauld nodded as though he had been expecting this. “So, should we be ready to make a break for it, then?”

Shaundar nodded. “Yes, I think we ought to be.”

“Okay, I’ll spread the word,” he agreed; and he went to speak quietly to Corethi. Corethi nodded and spoke to Marina. And so forth. Shaundar didn’t bother to mention that he thought that escape was improbable. He was sure that the others knew it; or at least, that they suspected it.

Shaundar was on the upper deck serving his four hour labour shift when they pulled into the famous spaceport known as the Rock of Bral. He had heard of the place, of course. It was a crossroads of the Spheres, really; run by a merchant Prince named Andru who was the descendant of a petty pirate tyrant, and about as mercenary as a port could get and not run afoul of the Navy. It was known to have its own spelljamming propulsion system so that it could migrate from sphere to sphere as whim (and profits) dictated. Rumour had it that you could find anything there. It looked very similar to Dragon Rock from a distance. Shaundar strained to see if he could spot any Elven Navy ships on the way in, but if there were any present, they were hidden or invisible.

He began mooring up the ship with the aid of the dockhands – in this case, two ogre magi and a giff – while a human male with a scruffy beard and a peg leg made his way over to the illithid Captain and spoke with it a moment. Some gold was exchanged and they were left to their own devices. Shaundar tensed and prepared himself to make a break for it. If there had been a Navy outpost, he would have run for it, but since there didn't appear to be one, he would throw himself and his crew at the mercy of the human Dockmaster.

His meagre quadriceps bunched in preparation for the leap, but then something stopped him dead, something he had glimpsed out of the corner of his eye. He actually staggered and overbalanced for a second as his head whipped around, almost involuntarily, to follow what he had seen. Then he shook it to clear his thoughts.

It simply couldn't be; it *must* be a hallucination, born of desperation and desire.

But what if it wasn't? Oh, what if it wasn't and he didn't do anything about it?

He saw an elf; an elf in a Navy uniform; an elf he recognized.

He was walking away.

Shaundar mustered all of his strength and directed it into the force of his cry. "*Blackjack!*" he screamed.

Everyone on the ship and dock turned to look at him; the illithid, the ogre magi, the giff, the Dockmaster; even the vendors and whores hawking cheap wares to the disembarking sailors of the ships of a thousand worlds. And Blackjack turned to look too. He put a hand over his eyes so that he could see more clearly. Shaundar guessed that it didn't help, because then he came strolling over. As he stepped up towards them, Shaundar could see that it was, indeed, true; that it really was Blackjack, by all the gods that ever were. Blackjack was squinting at him with a quizzical expression.

Recognition and something else – horror maybe – dawned in his eyes. "Shaundar?" said Blackjack with a question in his voice, as though he were not entirely sure.

Shaundar fell to his knees and sobbed like an infant.

Part Four: Homecoming

Chapter Nineteen

It hadn't really taken much for Blackjack to force the illithid to turn over the three Navy elves and the other Raven Talon refugees. Blackjack had simply advised them that the Elven Navy would take great exception to an attempt to leave Bral's airspace with naval personnel and refugees under their protection on board. When one of them pointed out that the Navy's fortunes had been failing in the Sphere as of late, he had smirked without humour and suggested that a single elven Man-o-War full of wizards would not have much difficulty taking out a lone corvette like a Squidship, and that a frigate like a Nautiloid would make an even easier target. The mind flayers handed over the prisoners without any further protest. They all wept. Yathar uncharacteristically fell apart as soon as he saw the uncle who had been more like a big brother all of his life. Blackjack held his nephew while he cried, to his credit not flinching from the filth or the lice or the creepiness of being embraced by a one-armed living skeleton.

Blackjack did not waste his breath to ask the questions that Shaundar later realized must have been eating at him like a termite. Instead he just took charge of the situation. "*Etriela, quessira, sir,*" he began politely, the last addressed to Grimmauld, "I'm Lieutenant Durothil of the Elven Imperial Navy. We're going to see you all to a hospital right away."

They were taken to the elven base on Bral, through the door of the Elven Embassy located in the centre of a thick deciduous park area, which was why Shaundar hadn't seen it coming in. Shaundar was frankly amazed by the scope of the Bral Navy base. The moment they stepped through the entrance they found themselves in what appeared to be a beautiful natural forest.

"You elves and your trees," remarked Grimmauld in an ironic tone that was also, perhaps unconsciously, tinged with wonder.

"It's just an illusion," Blackjack confessed, "or so I have been told. You're probably the first dwarf to ever see it, sir." He led them through the open "woods" into a large, graceful building that might have been a temple. It turned out to be partially that, but mostly, it was the hospital that Blackjack had promised.

The young Priestesses and Priests went to work on them immediately. There were prayers to cure their diseases and drive away the vermin, prayers to restore their depleted bodies, and prayers to heal their wounds. There were no clergy with the power to restore Yathar's arm, so artificers began the crafting of a prosthetic almost right away. Shaundar wondered if that was because Blackjack mentioned that Yathar was his nephew, knowing the power of the Durothil name. He hoped not but some cynical part of him was aware that this was likely.

During the process of their restoration, Shaundar felt very strange; tainted or dirty somehow, perhaps. The young cleric working on

him stared at him with a mixture of what he thought might have been horror and revulsion. He felt like vermin himself under that stare. “Please don’t look at me like that,” he snapped after a couple of hours of this. “I know how I must look.”

Something new – guilt, and something else, perhaps pity – flashed through the medic’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said simply. Shaundar decided that he liked the pity even less than he liked the revulsion. “I’m going to get some air,” he spat, and he wandered off to get away from that stare. He took a walk in the illusionary woods, marvelling at all the green that he thought he would never see again. He was confused and angry.

After a time he found his way back, and for the first time in years he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass of the temple windows. He recoiled. The transparent skeleton with skin stretched over it reflected in the glass was wraithlike and hardly recognizable. No wonder the cleric was horrified, and no wonder Blackjack had needed a closer look. His wild eyes bugged from his skull and the fuzz of blond hair that had grown back in the weeks since their escape only served to make his reflection seem ectoplasmic, somehow. It was disturbing. He would not have believed before now that something that looked like he did could actually still be alive.

But alive he was. Alive, and against all possible odds, he was free. Was he really here? Or was he hallucinating? Could this place truly be real?

A different cleric came out to meet him. This one was a diminutive young Priestess whose rich midnight hair was level with his solar plexus. She looked up at him and smiled a little. “We’ve drawn you some baths,” she offered gently.

“Thank you,” he returned with the ghost of a smile on his emaciated face. He was glad that the first cleric had not returned. “I cannot tell you how desperate I am for a bath. Where do I find it?”

She led him into an atrium where the kind souls had drawn up several large tubs of steaming water. But all of a sudden he wasn’t certain that he wanted anyone to see him naked. “Would you mind turning your back?” he asked her quietly.

She seemed surprised, but she did so. He stripped off the rags of the Raven Talon uniform, still the only clothing he had, and eased himself safely into the water. “Thank you,” he sighed, and he began to scrub vigorously until the water turned a sludgy gray with soap residue and his filth. He had not looked at his body without clothing on it since he was on the *Queen’s Dirk*. His legs were matchsticks. The right one was misshapen and badly scarred where the bones had punctured the skin. He could see his kneecaps and the clear line of his hip bones, he was so thin. His belly and pelvis formed a hollow from which his penis and testicles dangled ludicrously. He had new nebulous scars whose origins he could not remember. His ribs had trenches of open space between them and his torso was still purple and black in a sunburst pattern dotted with green and yellow. It had not healed in the slightest.

The Priestess noticed his chest and frowned; then she reached a hand out and touched the sunburst bruise gently. Her fingertips glowed briefly with a soft golden light but nothing else seemed to happen. She grimaced. "What is this?" she asked him with concern.

"I was kicked by an ogre a couple of weeks ago," he explained. "It hasn't healed yet."

She scowled so deeply so that she actually formed a furrow in her smooth elven brow. "Magical healing didn't touch it either," she admitted. "I thought I would try to take the liberty. Are you sure it was just a kick from an ogre?"

Shaundar nodded. "Quite sure," he assured her. "I guess you haven't been kicked by an ogre? I would hardly say it was 'just a kick.' It hurt like the Abyss." The last was almost lost in the hacking cough he had developed lately. It was extremely painful.

She pursed her lips, chagrined. "I didn't mean that, exactly," she elaborated. "It was a bad turn of phrase. It's just odd that magic couldn't heal it. I wondered if it was a curse."

Shaundar shrugged his bony shoulders. "Maybe. It didn't seem like anyone in the prison camp was healing well. Maybe the whole place was cursed."

The cleric cast a quizzical glance in his direction; but, he noticed, her eyes did not linger overlong, which made him feel a little better. "The

Rear Admiral is bursting with questions. So is your . . . cousin? Blackjack?” Shaundar nodded. “But we felt you needed medical attention first. I understand from what your cousin was saying that you’re in charge?”

“I have been, yes,” Shaundar admitted.

She smiled encouragingly. “Then the Admiral wants to see you as soon as you’re up to it.” Then she added hastily, “But she said it could wait until tomorrow if you needed it to.”

Yes, that’s what being in charge meant, wasn’t it? “It probably can’t, actually. There’s information she’ll need to know. And I have questions.” He looked down at the rags on the floor. “I don’t suppose I could find a clean uniform around here, could I? I doubt it will fit, but I could belt it or something.”

The healer nodded. “It might be a little short; you’re pretty tall, even for a Realmspace elf.” She touched his shoulder then, a gesture which surprised and pleased him. “The weight should come back fairly quickly. We’re going to do daily prayers of healing and restoration to speed that along. We noticed you all had a touch of scurvy too. We’re hoping it’s been cleared up now.”

Shaundar poked at his teeth and found they no longer felt loose in his gums. “Seems to have been, thank you.”

She licked her lips thoughtfully. “I’m not sure what to do about that chest injury. I’ll see what I can figure out. And I’ll find you a clean uniform.” She left to go and do that.

From somewhere else in the atrium, Shaundar could hear Sylria weeping softly. Was she finally looking at the ruin of her body, as he was? He left the bath, dried himself and sought her out.

Sylria had her bony hands over her face and was crying quietly. Shaundar had not seen her without clothing for quite some time either. She was as horribly thin as he was. Only the barest hint of her breasts remained.

She looked up at him, startled, and tried to cover up. “Don’t,” he said softly.

“It’s awful,” she cried. “I didn’t realize how *awful* we looked until that healer started looking at me . . .”

“Me neither,” he murmured, “but we’ll heal.”

“Are we really here, Shaundar?” she demanded. “It feels so unreal, I can hardly believe it.”

He put his skinny arms around her, and held her, and didn’t answer. “I don’t think you look awful,” he said instead, and he meant it. To him, she looked like Sylria; tough but delicate, dangerous but gentle. And nothing was different about her star-blue eyes.

They met each other's gaze for a long moment, and then suddenly, Sylria's tongue was in his mouth and they were kissing passionately. Lust filled his throat and his loins with such fervour that he reeled with it. It was the last thing he had been thinking about, but now it simply could not be denied. He climbed into the tub with her and went right on kissing her. He ran his hands through the soft fuzz of her brown hair. She smelled faintly of lavender and something more subtle and entirely intoxicating. He kissed her nipples and ran his tongue over them. Her hands started stroking his manhood and he moaned aloud as delicious pleasure flashed through him like bolts of lightning. "We're alive," she whispered; and yes, that was it, they were *alive*, and this was *life and love and joy*.

She guided his hand to that secret place between her legs and the little button nestled within. "Touch me," she murmured; and he touched her, hesitantly at first, but gaining force and confidence as she writhed against his fingers beautifully. At last she arched her back and let loose a glorious cry, and in that cry Shaundar heard the first songbird of spring, the first cry of a baby and the birthing flare of a newborn star. Tears leaked from his eyes, and when Sylria turned her gaze back to him, he could see that she was weeping as well.

She smiled warmly and radiantly and gently pushed him on to his back. Then she climbed on top of him and they fit together so perfectly, his hardness and her softness that he gasped with the simple joy of it. She rocked back and forth, slowly at first until he found the rhythm, and then harder and faster, until they were bucking and thrashing and he

could hardly breathe. She cried out again, clutching his shoulders hard enough to leave marks, and ecstasy exploded within him and he came with the force of a comet. A purely animal cry escaped him and stars exploded in his vision. Their voices mingled together and for a moment Shaundar was aware of nothing but liquid light and pure, unfettered joy.

Then he was back in his own body and gasping for breath as his lungs struggled for air and his heart tried to beat its way out of his chest, every thump bringing a new throb of pain. His legs were numb and his balls ached exquisitely. And he would change none of it.

“Are you all right?” Sylria asked him breathlessly.

He smiled and panted, and his hand found the side of her face and gently traced the line of her angular cheekbone. “I’m alive,” he whispered. And he really was.

He reported for debriefing. Admiral Silmara was almost as tall as Shaundar, and she was beautiful. Shaundar felt like some kind of troll in her presence. He stood before her in his new, not-quite-long-enough and decidedly baggy uniform with its silver crescent at its collar, and he saluted. It felt awkward after all this time. The Admiral returned the salute as she looked back at him with thinly-disguised horror. “Lieutenant Sunfall,” she nodded. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you *etriel*,” he said quietly and took the seat she indicated.

She could not seem to stop herself from gaping at him for a second, but then she folded her hands before her on the desk and her blue eyes scrutinized him. “I understand you’ve been MIA, presumed dead, for quite some time,” she began. “Where have you been?”

Shaundar started to tell her and then stopped. How to explain? “We’ve been in a huge Orcish prison camp on Spiral, *etriel*,” he told her. “They called it Raven Talon. It’s a work camp; an ammunitions factory.” He went on to detail as much as he could remember about their numbers, ships, forces and location. “I don’t know if you’re aware, *etriel*,” he added, “but Spiral has been entirely conquered by the scro.”

“Yes, we’re aware,” she admitted.

He looked down and bit his bottom lip. With a sigh, he plunged on. “*Etriel*, you will probably think this a presumptuous question, and I suppose it’s not my place to ask, being just a *Teu’Ruan*, but my crew who escaped with me want to know and I feel they deserve an explanation: if you knew about it, why didn’t you do anything about it?” His voice cracked just slightly at the end. He cleared his throat.

The Rear Admiral sighed. “My predecessor, the Admiral of the Sphere, didn’t have a good relationship with the ruling house of Spiral. We didn’t find out about the invasion until it was too late. We amassed a

fleet to deal with the problem but the Orcish fleet was simply too big for us to challenge effectively. We sent word to Realmspace but with the War in that sphere, they didn't have any reinforcements to spare. Then an artefact entered the Sphere that might have won the War either way. I'm not going to give you the details of what and how, Lieutenant, but suffice it to say that the orcs also found out about it and we fought over the issue. The gnomes got involved as well. Most of our fleet was destroyed. I was expecting to hear back from my Admiral a few weeks ago, but have not, and I can only presume that he is dead and the flotilla he amassed is lost. We don't have the artefact and there are only a handful of our ships left. The only good thing about this whole situation is that we don't believe that the scro were able to obtain the artefact either. Rumour has it, however, that they are expecting the reinforcements that we were unable to get. I think we are going to have to retreat entirely from this sphere. And with what you've just told me, that pretty much confirms it." She looked at him, unblinking. "We've had a long-standing treaty with Prince Andru, who allows us to keep this base here as long as we participate in the mutual defence of Bral. I'm going to suggest that he might take the Rock to Realmspace, where things are a bit safer, at least for now." She stopped.

Shaundar nodded his acceptance. Yes, this all made sense. He wasn't sure if he felt better, knowing that Spiral had not been just abandoned, or worse, knowing that it meant that the War was going very badly for elvenkind. "Thank you, *etriel*," he said to her. "I appreciate your generously thorough explanation. I will tell my crew."

The Admiral returned the nod. “It’s evident you and your people have been through a lot, Lieutenant, and I felt you deserved to know. May I ask a couple of questions?”

“*Av, etriel*; of course.”

She asked him how they escaped, and how long they had been in space, and how they had come to be in the clutches of the illithid. He told her. He found it was easier if he kept things down to a simple report; just the facts, nothing emotional. He also told her that they were forced to work in the factory and of their attempts to sabotage the work. He was gratified when she informed him that she had wondered why so many of the scro cannons seemed to be misfiring as of late.

She stood up then, and Shaundar also limped to his feet. “Thank you, Lieutenant, for briefing me right away. I am sure you must be hungry and exhausted, so I will not take up any more of your time today. There’s soup being served in the galley. I’ve had it before; it’s really quite good.”

Shaundar’s mouth started to water immediately. “Thank you very much, Admiral.”

“Dismissed,” she nodded, and Shaundar saluted and headed for the galley as fast as his uneven feet could carry him. He stood in the soup line and drank the entire bowl, then scooped the last traces of it out with his fingers. It was barley and *beef*; delicious.

The galley elf dishing out the soup was staring at him. “You could have some bread to go that with, you know,” he suggested. “Or you could just have another bowl. There’s lots.”

Shaundar took his dripping face from the bowl. He felt like an idiot. “I didn’t think of it, I’m sorry,” he confessed. “I would love another bowl, please. And a piece of bread too.” Oh, miracles, bread! “And is there *butter* to put on it?” he queried hopefully.

The galley elf dished out another ladle of soup and buttered a piece of soft, white bread for him. Shaundar wiped the drool from the side of his mouth. “I’m only supposed to give you one piece of bread at a time because they think your stomach has probably shrunk,” the galley elf admitted. “And you can only have two bowls of soup. You might find this helpful.” He handed Shaundar a spoon. For a moment he stared at it as though it were an alien artefact. What was he supposed to do with this again?

And then he remembered and his angular cheeks reddened. What kind of animal had he become, that he couldn’t remember what a *spoon* was for? He quietly thanked the galley elf and then did his best to recall how to eat like a civilized person. But he could not stop himself from wolfing down that wonderful white buttery bread.

Their diet for the next couple of weeks was largely milk, soup and a little bread so that their bodies could get used to proper food again. Fortunately, with the magical restoration prayers, the little healer's predictions turned out to be accurate and they did put weight back on rapidly. By the time that the Rock of Bral was ready to leave Spiralspace, they didn't quite look like skin-covered skeletons anymore, though they were still rather gaunt. However, Shaundar found himself haunted by nightmares in which he was back in Raven Talon, and most nights he woke up screaming. Furthermore, no progress whatsoever was made with Shaundar's broken breastbone. And the cough was getting worse.

Finally the tiny healer came to see him with a taller elf who might have been her brother, which she confirmed in her introduction. "He's a medical artificer," she explained.

"Ah," observed Shaundar, "you're the one who's building Yathar's prosthetic, right?"

"That's right," the taller elf confirmed. "We're here to discuss an idea with you."

Shaundar gritted his teeth. "You're here to tell me that I'm going to have to lose the leg, aren't you?"

"No, not yet," the little Priestess piped up. "We do intend to try re-breaking it and re-healing it because it didn't set properly, but we'd

like to wait until you're a bit stronger. Today we're here to discuss your sternum."

Her brother took over. "Lia believes that your sternum has become necrotic and it's just rotting in your chest, which is why it's not healing and why you have developed that cough."

"Can that actually happen?" he queried disbelievingly. "I've never heard of such a thing."

The diminutive cleric chimed back in. "It's not supposed to when you invoke divine healing, but in your case it has and my prayers don't seem to be helping you. It could be some kind of curse, but if it is, it's one too powerful for me to lift. And that means that we have to get that bone out of there before you get a systemic infection."

"Which is why I'm here," her brother added. "What we're proposing is a prosthetic breastbone, crafted of mithril."

"You can do that?" Shaundar asked incredulously.

"I never have," the artificer said slowly, "but I am confident that I can. It will require surgery, of course. We'll take out the damaged bone and magically craft a mithril replacement with a *fabricate* spell."

"It's dangerous," the cleric admitted. "But I think that leaving things as they are is more dangerous."

Shaundar nodded. The unchanging bruise and the cough had secretly alarmed him too. "Okay, when do we do it?"

"As soon as we can," said Lia with a smile of encouragement. "Now, if you're willing."

"All right," he agreed.

The hospital actually had a clean room for operating. They brought him in and told him to undress, and then he was directed to wash thoroughly, especially around his torso. He was pleased to see that the canyons between his ribs had filled in somewhat. Yathar came in to the room with him. He also looked healthier; gaunt but not skeletal. "I heard," he said, and he sounded concerned.

"You're staying?" Shaundar asked him.

He nodded.

"Good," Shaundar smiled.

The artificer laid out his tools: a couple of blocks of pure, refined mithril, exceptionally rare and very expensive; several tiny mithril screws; several sharp knives of various shapes and sizes; a drill; and two blocks of wet clay. Lia also prepared her tools; surgical knives, clamps, ties, and bandages.

“So the plan is that we’re going to knock you unconscious with a spell called ‘*Anaesthesia*,’” explained the artificer. “It’s necromancy but it’s harmless; it produces unconsciousness and removes pain. It paralyzes you as well, so that you’ll stay still while we work, but you won’t be conscious so you won’t notice. Then we’re going to open up your torso and remove the damaged breastbone. If it comes out nicely, I’m going to take a casting of it – that’s what the clay is for – so that I can reproduce it as closely as possible with the mithril. If it doesn’t, I’ll take some quick measurements and do my best. It won’t take long because it will be done magically. I would prepare it beforehand, like I do with arms and legs,” he nodded in Yathar’s direction, “but I can’t because I have to get a look at what I’m working with first and where it’s supposed to go. Are you with me so far?”

Shaundar nodded.

“Once it’s done,” he continued, “I’m going to bolt it into place with these screws. That will require me to drill into the connecting cartilage between your ribs and sternum; or if the infection has spread, to the ribs themselves. Lia will be standing by to make sure I don’t break any of those delicate cartilage pieces and to fix them if I do.” She nodded to Shaundar at this. “Then,” he went on, “all going according to plan, we’ll seal you back up and that will be it. With healing magic being applied right away, you probably won’t even have a scar.”

“So what’s all this stuff for, then?” Shaundar inquired as he indicated the surgical equipment.

“That’s in case things don’t go according to plan,” Lia explained.

“Ah,” said Shaundar.

“Are you ready?” she asked him.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he sighed.

Lia’s brother palmed something that appeared to be a lotus flower, spoke an arcane word that Shaundar knew to mean “repose” or “sleep,” and passed his hand over Shaundar’s eyes; and then there was nothing.

When he came to, Lia and her brother were both standing over him, and Yathar and Sylria were sitting at his side. Blackjack was lurking in the far corner of the room near the door. Sidewheeler, perched as always on Blackjack’s shoulder, chattered excitedly when his eyes opened. He had expected pain but was surprised to find that there was none. He was still a little groggy.

“How are you feeling?” Lia asked him.

“Pretty good, actually,” he replied. He glanced down at his torso and found that not only was there no scar, but the bruise was completely gone. There was no evidence that it had even been there at all. Experimentally he tried a deep breath, and found that it felt good. “Looks like everything went well,” he smiled.

“There was some infection in your lungs,” Lia confessed, “but I’m pretty sure we cleared it up. I’m glad we didn’t wait. That could have gone systemic at any time and being so close to the heart, and you being so undernourished . . . well, it would have been very touch and go.”

“Shaundar would have made it,” Sylria smiled.

Yathar laughed. “Sheer stubborn would have sustained him,” he agreed.

Blackjack simply gave an affirming nod. What he was in accord with, exactly, Shaundar couldn’t say.

“Thank you,” Shaundar said to the two healers with genuine gratitude. “Thank you for saving my life.” And he laughed out loud. He really was going to live, wasn’t he? “Say,” he inquired, “do you think you could teach me that *Anaesthesia* spell?”

Prince Andru must have decided to take the Admiral’s advice because word reached them that the Rock was indeed headed to Realmospace. Shaundar was delighted. They would have a free lift *home!* Home was something he barely allowed himself to think of yet. He didn’t want to get his hopes up, only to have them snatched away. He thought of Narissa and ached with the desire to touch her as he had touched Sylria, and these thoughts continued to broadside him despite his determination not to dwell on them.

Just before they entered the phlogiston, the three Navy elves were summoned before the Admiral again. This time she was accompanied by an elder elven male with silver hair who wore a Commander's crescents. He nodded politely to them. He had a slate and chalk in his hands and a large chest set out on a table. The three *Teu'Ruani* saluted them both.

The Admiral smiled. "I imagine you were paid out at the last time that the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle* was in port?"

They exchanged a look between them. "*Av, etriel,*" Shaundar replied.

She nodded. "According to *Teu'Ruan* Durothil that would have been at the end of 5041 O.C., am I correct? Just before your mission to find and destroy the *Vengeance*?"

"*Av, etriel,*" Shaundar repeated.

"Well then, it seems we owe you just over two years worth of back pay. Did you rate as trained crew before you battled the *Vengeance*?"

Rating as trained crew required at least 90 days in space and your shellback tattoo. "Lieutenant Sylria did, *etriel*, but we didn't," Shaundar replied.

“All right, so that’s what? Three months as average crew before entering the phlogiston for you two *quessira*?”

“Av, *etriel*,” Shaundar affirmed.

“And as I recall we pay our junior officers a bonus of a gold piece per day – right, Gaeredan?”

The elder elf nodded once. “You are correct, *etriel*.” He started working out some computations on his slate. “Since the last docking of the *Queen’s Dirk*, it’s been two years, two months, sixteen days . . . by my calculations we owe each of the young *quessira* nine hundred and thirty-seven gold, and the young *etriel* receives six more gold than that.” He opened the chest and began to count out money.

Sylria was agape. “*Etriel*, we don’t even have anywhere to put this at the moment,” she protested. “And it’s not like we were on active duty during our imprisonment.”

The Admiral fixed her with a stern gaze. “That’s not what I heard. I am given to understand that during the time of your incarceration at the Raven Talon work camp you made continual efforts to sabotage the enemy’s ammunition manufacturing. Was I misinformed?”

“Well, no, *etriel*.”

She nodded as if this decided the issue. “Good enough, then.” Gaeredan did not pause in his counting for any of this. Once it was completed she asked, “Do you want us to keep some of this here in chests for you, or do you want it in platinum or gems so it’s easier to carry?”

Shaundar looked to his companions and said, “I think for now the chests would be the easiest, *etriel*, and thank you.”

“Now then,” smiled Admiral Silmara, “you can’t stay cooped up in this hospital forever. I understand my healers aren’t going to start working on your leg now, *Teu’Ruan* Sunfall, until we’re through the Flow, so why don’t you go out and do something?”

They promised the Admiral that they would do exactly that, and took their leave; but as they did so, Shaundar turned and asked, “*Etriel*, what’s going to happen to the people of Spiral that we brought with us?”

The Admiral scowled. “I don’t really know,” she confessed. “They’re still recovering and so they’ll be staying here until the healers say we can release them, but after that . . . I don’t know.”

His brow was furrowed as he considered the problem. As weird as it was to him to fall back into the routines of the Navy, the Navy would look out for him and Sylria and Yathar. They had means to look after themselves. The Spiral refugees had nothing.

An idea came to him. He cast a wry grin in the Admiral's direction that would almost have been recognizable by his professors. "Admiral," he began, "I commandeered that Dragonfly in the name of the Navy. So doesn't that mean that while I was in command, it was an Imperial Navy ship?"

Admiral Silmara knew a con job when she heard it. "Yes," she responded warily.

"That makes the refugees part of my crew, doesn't it? At least for the time that they were under my command?"

She considered the idea. "I suppose it does at that," she replied.

He smiled. "That means that they are owed some pay too. And I think you should pay them as average crew, *etriel*. Technically they're all green, but they had no Ables to assist them."

The Admiral chuckled. "I can see the logic in your argument, *Teu'Ruan*. All right, how much do we owe them?"

"Well," he grinned, "we were in space for thirty-nine days."

She nodded to Gaeredan, who didn't require his slate for this. "The standard rate for average crew is four gold pieces a month and they were out for a little more than a month and a week. I guess you could call that a quarter month. Five gold for each of them." And he started to count it out from the large wooden chest.

Their fellow refugees were surprised and frankly delighted by this gesture. “Well, that’s right kind of yer Navy,” Grimmauld grunted. “Right generous. Let me stand you all to a pint of ruby ale. It’s the finest ale in all creation, and where there’s dwarves, we’ll find it.” Shaundar, who had no interest in being stared at by more elves, thought this was a great idea.

When they left the base and stepped out into the forest, all the trees were alight with their autumnal shades, perhaps in reaction to being in the phlogiston. Birches cast golden leaves gently to the forest floor, oaks were blazing orange and ripe with acorns, ashes were aflame with various shades of red tinged with orange and gold, and laurels were green bleeding into red and then browning. Shaundar didn’t think he had ever seen anything quite so beautiful. He reached out and touched a laurel leaf. The fresh bay scent lingered faintly on his fingertips.

“Look!” Sylria exclaimed, pointing up into the branches. “There are even songbirds!”

And there were. Shaundar noticed them now; finches and robins and even a nightingale. They twittered as though they were settling in for twilight. “Wow,” he breathed. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen birds other than ravens and crows. Corethi laughed out loud with sheer delight.

They meandered down the forest path, struck with wonder, and soon they found themselves at the edge of the forest staring into the

hustle and bustle of the city. They were looking out into a market square, where beings of various species hawked their wares and made purchases. Two Navy elves in shining armour, obviously serving guard duty, nodded to them as they approached the border of the woods. Star-gulls cried as they circled above them, looking for discarded foodstuff.

Sylria reached out and took Shaundar’s hand. “For courage,” she explained. Shaundar gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. They ventured into the market hesitantly. Shaundar half-expected on some level to be shot for leaving the perimeter. He shook his head to clear it. They stepped cautiously into the fray.

Gabble in a thousand languages assaulted their senses. A fruit vendor offered them blue apples, first in Espruar and then in Dwarvish. A Halfling bard sang a soft ballad accompanied by a lute. Yathar sighed, and Shaundar put a hand on his shoulder, knowing that he was lamenting both the loss of his lute, and the loss of one of the hands needed to play it.

There were a lot of mind flayers walking around and conducting business, which, in light of their recent experiences, couldn’t help but make Shaundar a little edgy. It was very much a bustling market district in a busy spaceport. The plethora of cultures and species present was impressive. “Are they allowed to be here?” Nashavara asked nervously of the illithid. Shaundar nodded.

Grimmauld turned and said something to the fruit vendor in Dwarvish that sounded like a question. He nodded, spoke a reply and indicated up the street. Shaundar knew enough Dwarvish to understand the “thank you” that Grimmauld responded with.

“Come on!” he said cheerfully to the group. “I’m told there’s a fine dwarven establishment up that way.”

They followed him. Shaundar noticed that even in the busy cosmopolitan spaceport street they were getting more than a few odd looks, and people were whispering behind their hands as they passed. He tried not to let it bother him.

Along the way they found a tobacconist, and so they replaced their pipes and tobacco, and purchased some proper snuff for the first time. Knowing nothing about it, Shaundar went with the hairfoot Halfling proprietor’s suggestion, which was rose-scented snuff, “our most popular snuff among elves.” He pinched it and found it exquisite. They gently turned down the tobacconist’s offer of lunch and continued on.

They also stopped at a magic shop to replace their spellbooks, ink and quills, and some of their harder to acquire magical components. The human proprietress gaped at them openly as they shopped.

It was Yathar who pointed out the piercing parlour. “Let’s go in there,” he said, and they did. He told the aging gnomish jeweller within

that they wanted to replace their gold hoop earrings, and they each needed one to be threaded through a black pearl.

Sylria sniffled and wiped at her eyes, and Shaundar nodded solemnly. A black pearl was traditionally worn by sailors who were survivors of a sunken ship.

“What happened here?” the jeweller inquired as he put the black pearl on Shaundar’s earring. He was touching the spot on Shaundar’s ear where the whip of the scro had cut him on his first day at Raven Talon, when he had not been able to fit his feet into the wooden shoes he was given. Its legacy was a long white scar that matched the scars from his court martial. He had seen it in the mirror.

Shaundar hesitated. “Zigged when I should have zagged,” he said simply. What else could he say? What would the friendly little gnome say if he told him the truth, when he knew he was just making conversation? “You should all get your ears pierced too,” Shaundar recommended to their companions. “You’re all starhands now.”

“I do believe that I will,” Marafel smiled. And all of them did so, even Nashavara.

At last they made it to the dwarven bar, which was marked by a sign with a foaming gold mug on it and a legend in Dwarvish. Shaundar was much better at reading Dwarvish in print than he was at picking it out

by listening to it. Aptly enough, the place was called, “The Golden Tankard.”

Inside, the establishment was largely occupied by several grizzled and tough looking dwarves in the same uniform; a tabard with a silver axe standard on a black background. A couple of them were missing eyes, hands or legs, but all of them were armed, mostly with axes but not a few with crossbows. They were loud, rowdy, raucous, and drinking like fiends. All conversation trailed to a halt as the elves and Grimmauld entered the bar.

Grimmauld was undeterred. He put his hands on his skinny hips and demanded in Common, “Something wrong?”

A dwarf with an eye-patch and a bright red beard stood up and wiped foam from his chops. “Don’t see a lot of elves in here,” he rumbled, “especially Navy elves.”

“I told my friends I would stand them to a pint of ruby ale,” Grimmauld replied, “to celebrate our survival. Seems the least I can do for elves that saved my life. And I told ‘em that dwarven hospitality beat elven hospitality any day. Are ye makin’ me a liar?”

Silence fell for a few seconds. Then the bartender, a distinguished looking dwarf with a long, gray beard, called from behind his counter, “Not here. Come and get yer drinks, and be welcome.” He nodded to the elves.

Shaundar had just been about to leave. He knew they were in no condition for a brawl if these hardy marines decided to take it there, and without their spellbooks, they had not been able to prepare more spells to replace the ones they had already cast. “That’s all right,” he said warily. “We don’t need any more trouble than we’ve already had. If we’re bothering you, we’ll just take our ale and go.”

“Ye won’t, be gods,” Grimmauld growled. “You saved my life, and if these folks are dwarves at all, they’ll treacha with the respect and courtesy ye deserve.”

“Yer from Spiral, aren’t you?” inquired a dwarf maid in the same uniform, but wearing a silver axe charm around her neck. Her blond hair and beard were in fine braids with silver clips, but even if she hadn’t spoken, Shaundar would have realized that she was a maiden by her generous bosom, which swelled roundly under her tabard. Sometimes, because of their beards, it was difficult for him to tell.

“I was,” Grimmauld acknowledged with a nod. “Grimmauld Stormhammer, I am.”

“I’m Brunahilde Goldminer,” she introduced herself, “Priestess of Haela Brightaxe. And ye’ll be welcome here and further, ye won’t be buying a bit of yer liquor. The Dwarven Boarding Company will be honoured to buy yer drink tonight.”

“We can’t let you do that, noble dwarf maid,” Sylria gently refused.

But the whole attitude of the bar had changed. “Ye will so,” insisted the red-bearded dwarf with the eye-patch. “We saw action on Spiral. Nasty business. And we heard that the elves had survivors of one of those prison camps here on the Rock. That’d be you folk, I’d guess?”

“It would be,” Yathar confirmed with sharp eyes that challenged him to make something of it.

“Well then, let us buy yer drink as an apology for our failure,” he continued. “Damn orcs are bloody tough and there were just too many of ‘em. And I saw some of them places. T’would be an honour to buy ale for elves tougher than most of the dwarves I know.” He peered around the bar with his one eye. “Present company included.”

Shaundar allowed a hesitant smile to creep across his face as he realized that the dwarven marine was serious. Grimmauld nodded with satisfaction and marched himself up to the bar. “Thank you,” Shaundar accepted gratefully. He joined Grimmauld and grasped one of the tankards.

Sylria, always better at diplomacy, radiated a smile and added, “It will be our pleasure to drink with such brave and distinguished dwarves.”

They roared laughter. “Ye elves and yer flowery tongues,” Brunahilde chuckled. She fished one of the ales off of the bar that the barkeep was drafting from a tap at the far end, and plunked the foaming liquid into Sylria’s hand.

Shaundar took a solid swig of the dwarven ale. It was potent, matching the reputation of dwarven drink, but it was also the smoothest ale Shaundar had ever tried. “Fantastic,” he pronounced it, wiping away the foam. This produced cheering and hearty clapping on the back that nearly knocked him over and left bruising. But he didn’t complain.

The dwarves were not stingy with the drink and Shaundar felt it impolite to refuse. Before long he was abysmally drunk and most of his companions were as well. They were also offered something which the dwarves called “stone cake,” which turned out to be a heavy pound cake full of molasses and fruit. Shaundar knew that the healers wouldn’t suggest that they eat it, but he did anyway and found it absolutely delicious.

They had to be carried back to the hospital, which the dwarves did cheerfully as Shaundar practically fell over himself apologizing. Yathar just laughed and went on laughing. That stopped abruptly when the guards at the edge of the forest that they had seen earlier stopped them and explained that this area was out-of-bounds to the dwarves.

Yathar snarled, “These folks are just seeing us home, you lout!”

The guard speaking reddened, but persisted. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm just following my orders."

"Never mind," said the one-eyed dwarf with the red hair. "You elves keep yer damn secrets. But ye folks are welcome back any time. Cap'n Thorvin Skyhammer's my name, and the Dwarven Boarding Company will be glad to be of service to ye."

"I'm Ssshhhaundar Ssssunfall," Shaundar slurred. "Likewise, and thank you." And he shook hands with the dwarven mercenary.

Brunahilde planted a kiss on Grimmauld's mouth. "Come back anytime," she invited. He blushed to his roots and assured her that he would, he would indeed.

"If you won't let them in," Yathar snapped, "then you'll have to carry us. I'm too damn drunk to walk."

"It will be my honour, sir," said the guard patiently, and the two of them took turns carrying the inebriated refugees back to their rooms. Shaundar didn't see it. By the time they came for him, he had passed out under one of the oak trees. Mercifully, for the first time since their arrival on the Rock of Bral, he slept through the night without nightmares.

The hangover and the stomach cramps he had from the stone cake the next morning were murder, but in his opinion, it had definitely been worth it.

Chapter Twenty

The Rock of Bral headed for Selune's Tears, thirty days into RealmSpace. Blackjack parted company from them when they first entered the Sphere so that he could report to Lionheart Command, as his orders directed him. Shaundar had hoped that they would pass near to Garden, but it was not to be. Yggdrasil's Child was on the other side of the Sphere from their entry point.

It was probably just as well. The healers had started working on Shaundar's leg. They had re-broken it in two places and, he was given to understand, shaved the bone down where spurs and lumps had developed, and they didn't dare apply magical healing in case it healed up with the same deformities it had acquired originally, since his body was now accustomed to the bone growing that way. So he was bedridden for a week and they immobilized him as much as possible. They wanted it to be two weeks, but he simply couldn't do it. He had demanded Yathar and Sylria's help and cut loose the cords that suspended his leg above his cot like some weird oversized fruit. Lia looked exasperated, but she had talked him into a compromise; a brace of steel bands and a pair of crutches. He hobbled up and down the halls of the hospital and the paths of the forest restlessly.

They were all prescribed a regimen of physical exercise as therapy. Much of their muscle tissue and tendons had deteriorated, and

though healing prayers could help, only by putting their bodies to use could they recover completely. Shaundar was just pleased to have something to do. Yathar told him that many of the exercises, particularly the stretches, were familiar to him from his bladesong training. The healers seemed to think that their recovery once they started the exercises was amazing, but to Shaundar, Sylria and Yathar it seemed agonizingly slow.

It had been a little over a month since they had reached the Rock of Bral, and they were still quite thin, but not dangerously so. People still offered them lunch occasionally when they went out, but the staring had stopped, so they indulged their need to get away from the constant fussing and medical institutionalism of the hospital more frequently.

Sometimes Shaundar went to the elven officers' pub for a drink, but he never stayed long. It attracted him because it was near to the forest (and as much as Shaundar was active and restless, powering yourself along cobblestone streets with crutches took work,) but he, or all three of them, were studiously ignored. It was as though the other elven officers were afraid that whatever hex plagued them might be catching. The truth was he didn't want to talk to them anyway. They seemed like constructs to Shaundar; untouched, seemingly perfect, and utterly phony. He had never thought about it before, but now he realized that most of the officers in the Imperial Navy were aristocracy. What did they know about pain, and hunger, and suffering? They were artificial golden people, disconnected from the realities of war, and the contempt with which they gazed down their noses at Shaundar was a feeling that was

completely mutual. He usually stayed long enough to get drunk, and then staggered back to his room, which was a feat of impressive dexterity on crutches, to fall into a blissful state of limited consciousness untroubled by dreams.

Then one day, Shaundar limped into the pub to see his uncle Madrimlian seated at the bar. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Madrimlian turned when he came in but Shaundar supposed his recovery was incomplete as yet, because it was a few moments before recognition flashed through his uncle's eyes. He stood up from the bar so suddenly that he spilled his wine, but didn't even notice. His eyes widened and his mouth was agape. "Shaundar?" he queried.

Shaundar tried to confirm this, but not a sound came out of his mouth.

Unabashed, Madrimlian strode across the room in three steps, and clasped Shaundar in an amazingly strong embrace. "My gods, lad!" he exclaimed. "We thought you were dead! Where have you been?"

Shaundar opened his mouth to tell him, but this time instead of it locking up in his throat, what came out was a broken and entirely unfunny laugh.

Captain Madrimlian pulled back and looked at him in the strangest way. Shaundar couldn't blame him. That laugh had sounded bizarre even to Shaundar and even he didn't really know why. "Spiral,"

he rasped simply, and cleared his throat. “I was on Spiral. We were on Spiral.”

The corners of Madrimlian’s mouth turned down in a deep scowl. “It’s gone, isn’t it?” he asked Shaundar.

“It might as well be,” he admitted. “The swine have it. And they’re trying their best to kill every elf on the planet as cruelly as they can.”

Madrimlian looked at him for a long moment and his face paled noticeably. “That’s very bad news indeed,” he said at last. “Where’s Blackjack, then? Did you see him? Oh, I’m a fool, Shaundar, you’re on crutches and I’m making you stand here to talk to me. Why don’t you sit down?” He made room at the bar, moving one of the barstools aside, which was now dripping with spilled wine. “Do you have a towel?” he inquired politely of the barkeep. “I seem to have spilled my wine. And I’ll take another please. What are you drinking, Shaundar?”

The bartender handed Madrimlian a cloth and looked to Shaundar. “Your usual, *quessir*?” he asked.

“Not today,” Shaundar refused gently. Rum was cheap and good for getting very drunk, but he needed to brief the Captain and it wasn’t ideal for keeping your wits about you. “Just some light wine will be fine. Or, I don’t suppose you have some dwarven beer?”

The barkeeper sniffed at him with distaste, and pulled out a bottle of light summer wine, which he poured for the both of them. He left the bottle.

Madrimlian looked up from wiping up the wine with a raised eyebrow. “Dwarven beer?”

Shaundar shrugged. “It grows on you.” He cleared his throat again. “I’m amazed that you didn’t see Blackjack, actually. He was on his way to Lionheart.”

“I wasn’t at Lionheart,” Madrimlian told him; which Shaundar found reassuring. Knowing that he had not seen Blackjack had given Shaundar a jolt of concern. “We heard reports of a big asteroid making its way through the Sphere and I came to investigate. I’ve been planetside for about half an hour. When I found out that this is the Rock of Bral, I came to look for Admiral Cirathorn.”

“You won’t find him,” Shaundar said bluntly. “They’re pretty sure he’s dead.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you know?” Madrimlian invited.

“You’re better off talking to Admiral Silmara about that,” he admitted. “She gave me a brief explanation but she knows more than she’s telling me.”

“Okay,” Madrimlian nodded. “Then why don’t you tell me about Spiral?”

Shaundar was silent for a long time. Unbidden, unexpected, unwanted, he was suddenly looking out over two long lines of people, mostly elves; one line destined to live and suffer; the other to die. Sweat beaded on his brow and he shuddered involuntarily.

“That bad?” Madrimlian asked softly.

He sighed. “*Avavaen*,” he confessed. He downed his wine. Then he swallowed, carefully blanked his expression and in a flat, emotionless tone he delivered the situation report. When he was finished, he noticed that most of the pub had fallen silent and were watching him. He curled his lip at them. “See something interesting?” he demanded sharply, and their eyes fled his.

Madrimlian cast him a thin smile. “Thank you, Shaundar,” he said to him, clapping his shoulder. “I’m glad we know. I’ll pass it on to my superiors.”

Shaundar nodded.

“I’m really glad you’re okay,” he smiled. “We found the wreckage of the *Dirk*. Everyone was convinced that you were dead . . . except your mother, of course.”

He smiled back. A hot knife wrenched itself through his guts at the thought of his mom. “Mom would know,” he murmured, and without warning the tears came. He took a deep breath. No, he was not going to do this; not here where all these lousy officer bastards could watch him. He swallowed the tears forcibly down and smeared his eyes on his uniform sleeve.

Madrimlian put his hand back on Shaundar’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, I have to go and speak to Admiral Silmara,” he apologized, “but I promise you that I will come and see you directly afterwards.”

“How . . . how is everyone?” he stammered. “How is the War going?”

“We’re holding them off here in Realspace,” he assured Shaundar, “though it hasn’t been easy. Your family’s fine. Nedethil is untouched.”

Shaundar sighed in relief.

“I’ll be back later,” he promised. “I wouldn’t leave at all but I have my duty.”

“I understand,” Shaundar reassured him.

Captain Madrimlian drank the rest of his wine, gave Shaundar another long hug, and headed into the base.

Madrimlian did go to speak with Admiral Silmara; and he thought long and hard on both what he had heard, and on the images that he had seen in Shaundar's mind when he spoke to him. Madrimlian was a veteran of both of the Unhuman Wars now, but he had never seen anything like the horrors that had flashed through his nephew's thoughts as he reported the facts in that toneless voice, which completely belied his inner turmoil. His heart ached for him bitterly. He wanted to gather the boy up in his arms and soothe all his sorrows away; but he knew that some things could never be unseen or undone.

Three days later, Shaundar looked up from his stretching exercises because he felt someone's eyes on him, and he saw his father watching him.

They met each other's eyes. Vice Admiral Sunfall's expression was indecipherable by his son; stony and cold. Was that disgust? Disapproval? Disappointment? He couldn't tell. Shaundar didn't speak. He didn't trust himself to do so.

"Sir," breathed Yathar, who was standing up from the split-legs stretch he had been practicing. His flexibility was improving. "It's good to see you, *quessir*."

Vice Admiral Sunfall went to the boys and gathered them both tightly into his arms without a word. Shaundar dropped the thick rubber

band he had been doing arm stretches with and embraced his father eagerly. Once again he locked the tears that threatened to escape into his chest. He would not embarrass his father by crying all over him like a little boy.

“I cannot tell you how good it is to see you lads,” Lord Sunfall choked out hoarsely. “I came as soon as Blackjack told me.” He clutched them firmly enough that it hurt. Yathar started weeping silently onto Lord Sunfall’s shoulder. Shaundar found that while that gave him permission to do so, now he was simply unable to cry. The tears had withered inside him like dead leaves.

Madrimlian was leaning on a tree, observing quietly.

Shaundar’s father touched first the scar on his ear, and then the black pearl on his earring. His mouth thinned into a line. “Were there any other survivors?” he asked, once again the Admiral.

“Sylria, sir,” said Shaundar. “Lieutenant Sylria. That’s all.”

“She’s here with you?” he inquired.

Shaundar nodded.

He returned the nod, and they all fell silent. No one knew what to say.

“Are you hungry?” Lord Sunfall asked them. “Can I buy you some dinner?”

Shaundar was not in the least bit hungry. But he accepted the invitation anyway.

Yathar wiped his face. “I would rather not go out, *quessir*,” he said roughly. “Can we get something from the market and come back here to the forest?”

“Why don’t you let me pick up something for everyone?” Madrimlian offered. “Then you don’t have to go out.”

“Is that all right?” Lord Sunfall asked of the boys. When they nodded, he thanked Madrimlian for his suggestion, and Madrimlian went out to do exactly that.

After another long silent moment, Admiral Sunfall said, “I brought some tobacco from home. Would you care to share it with me?”

“Sure, thank you, Dad,” Shaundar accepted gratefully. As they were loading their pipes, Sylria returned from the privies. She smiled to see them. “Vice Admiral, *quessir*,” she greeted him with a salute. “It’s good to see you.”

“I am glad to see you’re alive and well, *Teu’Ruan*,” he smiled with genuine warmth.

“Do you want some time alone with your sons, sir?” she wanted to know.

Yathar said, “I don’t want you to leave. Come smoke a pipe with us.” He was putting the passable long sword he had replaced his fine bladesinger’s blade with back into its sheath. Yathar had even taken up practicing his bladesong stanzas again, which gave Shaundar no end of joy and relief for his friend.

She looked to Lord Sunfall for confirmation. He just offered the pouch of tobacco to her in reply. So she came to fill her pipe as well with a smile. Shaundar automatically reached out to strike flint and steel for Yathar, who of course could not do so with one hand. He puffed contently to get it going and nodded his thanks. Lord Sunfall watched them do this without comment as he smoked. Shaundar was reminded of smoking on the balcony with his father just after he had officially joined the Navy, and a warm coal of bittersweet happiness settled into his belly.

Awkwardly, the Admiral cleared his throat. “So . . . how did you break your leg?” he questioned Shaundar softly.

He looked at his feet. “It happened in the battle with the *Vengeance*,” he explained, “but they had to re-break it because it healed badly.”

“Ah,” Lord Sunfall grunted. “Well, your mother might be able to help there.” He glanced over at Yathar. “And your arm . . .?”

“Same battle,” Yathar informed him. “I went over the side and the rope curled around and . . .” he trailed off. Now his gaze was cast down and then he said with artificial brightness, “They tell me the prosthetic is almost finished. The artificer does good work. He replaced Shaundar’s breastbone.”

The Admiral glanced over at Shaundar with a somewhat alarmed expression. “Kicked by an ogre and for some reason it went necrotic,” he explained immediately. “Probably malnutrition. It’s fine now. It doesn’t even hurt anymore.” Actually, he hadn’t even thought about it for several days, until Yathar mentioned it.

Lord Sunfall nodded. “Well, I’m glad to hear that. That’s good.”

“How’s my mom?” Yathar burst out suddenly.

A smile touched the edges of the Vice Admiral’s mouth. “She held out hope because of Selene. She’s about to be a lot better soon. I sent Blackjack back to Nedethil to spread the news. Sometimes being an Admiral has its privileges.” Shaundar noticed that he did not pass on news about Yathar’s father, and Yathar did not ask.

“How’s Mom?” demanded Shaundar. “How’s Grandmother? And Selena, and N-Narissa?” He could hardly say their names. He cleared his throat again.

Lord Sunfall looked downcast and Shaundar’s heart leaped into his throat and started trying to strangle him. “Of course, you haven’t

heard,” he said. “Your grandmother has passed West.” His eyes were sorrowful.

Shaundar suddenly heard his grandmother’s voice echoing back through time, saying, “*So while I’m still here, I just want to tell you that I love you and I’m proud of you.*” He bit his lip. “She knew,” he nodded. “She knew and she warned me in her own way.” He knew that she was very old, and he didn’t begrudge her Arvandor, not a bit; but she had seemed as eternal and steadfast to him as a mountain, and knowing that she was gone grieved him deeply and shook up his world-view. “Is everyone else okay?” he whispered.

“Yes,” he assured Shaundar quickly. “Other than that everyone has been desperately waiting and hoping to hear from the two of you.” A faint smile wavered over his mouth. “I’m afraid that Selena is not doing well at school because she’s been distracted by worry. And Narissa has been waiting at the docks for you every day since your mother told her that you were still alive.”

“I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I didn’t mean to make everyone worry.”

“Are you crazy?” Sylria interrupted, aghast. “How is that *your* fault, Shaundar?”

“It isn’t,” Shaundar father concurred. “Of course it isn’t. I didn’t mean to imply that at all.” He was taken aback.

Madrimlian returned with skewers of meat and vegetables. He had more than enough for all of them, Sylria included, as though he had known that she would be joining them. They were honey-glazed; delicious. The smell tempted Shaundar into hunger after all and he ate them with real enjoyment. The meat was juicy and tender and the little tomatoes burst delectably in his mouth.

Lord Sunfall watched his son eat with discerning eyes. He opened his mouth to say something and closed it again. With curiosity, Shaundar glanced at him but he just smiled. “I’m just really glad to see you, son,” he explained. Shaundar knew that wasn’t what he had been thinking about, but he chose not to press the issue.

“I wish you hadn’t sent Blackjack to Nedethil, Ruavel,” gently grumbled Madrimlian.

Lord Sunfall glared at him. “I suppose we could still intercept him, but why not?” he demanded.

“I wanted to tell them about the Permafrost Project,” he explained.

The Admiral blinked at him. “Permafrost Project. Ah. I see.” He thought about it a moment, and then nodded slowly.

“What’s the Permafrost Project?” inquired Sylria.

“Before he answers that question,” Lord Sunfall said, “you should know that this project is classified. You are not permitted to pass even the information we are about to give you to anyone.”

Yathar looked deadly serious. “Understood, *quessir*.” Everyone nodded their agreement.

“Go on, Captain,” the Vice Admiral urged.

Madrimlian licked his lips. “Like your father said, Shaundar, it’s a top secret project, and the three of you would be ideal for it. I can’t tell you exactly what it is unless you decide to join it. It would mean continuing to let your families believe that you were dead, or missing. And it’s very dangerous. But I can promise you payback. I can promise you vengeance.” His eyes were fierce and angry.

Yathar looked intrigued, but Shaundar’s heart just ached. “I just want to go home,” he sighed. He was so homesick that he actually felt nauseous. “I think I’ve earned it. When can we go home, Dad?”

Ruavel Sunfall actually *beamed*. “Now, son. We can go home now.”

Shaundar didn’t hesitate, and neither did Yathar. Yathar leaped to his feet and aided Shaundar in his struggle to do so. “We’ll get our things, with your permission, sir.” The Admiral nodded, and they made for their rooms. “Are you coming, Sylria?” Shaundar asked her.

Sylria hesitated, and Shaundar stopped where he was. A slow, sad smile was spreading across her face. “I want to go home too,” she confessed. “I thought that once I found some other Navy ships, I would find my way back to Oerth. See my parents.” She bit her lip. “We already lost my brother. That’s why I joined the Navy. Now they almost lost me. I . . .” She cut herself off and started to cry.

“That’s all right,” Yathar soothed her, going to her side. Shaundar limped over as well. “Of course you have to see your parents! We’ll see you again soon enough; won’t we, Shaundar?”

Shaundar did not want to part from her. He had a terrible sinking feeling like he might never see her again. But what could he say? Would he keep her from her family, when he so desperately wanted to see his? What right did he have, anyway? “That’s right,” he lied quietly. “They deserve to see you, and you deserve to see them.” And that wasn’t a lie.

She smiled sadly through her tears. “I don’t want to leave you guys,” she admitted.

“We don’t want you to leave either,” Shaundar replied. “But we can’t make you stay apart from your parents while we see ours. Go and come back soon, okay?” He touched the side of her face tenderly, and he realized in that moment that while he still loved Narissa with a burning desperation, he loved Sylria too.

“Seldarine bless you, Shaundar and Yathar Sunfall,” she murmured. She hugged Yathar, and then stood up on her tiptoes and kissed Shaundar on the cheek. “Go, then,” she whispered. “When you get back, I won’t be here.”

He wrapped his arms around her and held her for a long moment, aching. “Sweet water and light laughter . . .” he sighed.

“Until we next meet,” she breathed.

Then he whirled about on his crutches and limped off to his room to collect his things. He let no one see the tears.

The healers didn’t want to release them, but Shaundar’s father was not an elf to cross, and with a mixture of charm and intimidation, accompanied with assurances that really, Lady Sunfall was an outstanding Priestess and healer and that they would be in good hands, they were finally permitted to go.

Shaundar then turned to his father. “*Quessir*,” he began, “what about the other refugees?”

“There are other refugees?” he inquired, surprised.

Yathar cleared his throat. “Five others made it to the Rock of Bral with us, sir. We commandeered a Dragonfly from the Scro under Shaundar’s command in our escape.”

“They’re my *crew*, sir,” Shaundar explained. “They have nothing now that they’ve escaped Spiral. I’d like to see them established somehow.”

Lord Sunfall nodded thoughtfully. “Of course,” he agreed. “Come with me.” And he made his way to find Commander Gaeredan.

“This is for my son’s crew from the Dragonfly,” he explained to the Commander. He gave him a sparkling palm-sized green gem, one large enough to raise the Commander’s eyebrows. Whether it had been the ill-gotten gains of Ruavel Sunfall’s adventurous youth, or an heirloom from Myth Drannor, Shaundar couldn’t say. “That’s to fund them for a new start, whatever they might want to do. Courtesy of their Captain. And if they decide they want to join the Navy, you tell them to contact me personally.”

“*Av, quessir*,” responded the Commander. “You are very generous. I’ll see they get it.”

He nodded brusquely. “Please contact us when *Teu’Ruan* Yathar’s prosthetic is ready,” he requested. They took their leave.

Uncle Madrimlian met them at the docks. “Are you coming with us?” Yathar asked him.

He shook his head. "Duty calls. I'll report back to Lionheart, not that they need me to do so since they've seen Blackjack, but I'm sure something else will require my attention. If you change your minds about the Project, let me know. Find me here and I'll see they send word."

Shaundar knew that he wouldn't change his mind, but he nodded anyway. "Okay, thank you, Uncle," he said politely. They saluted him as he returned to the base, this time without the usual casual familiarity. Shaundar wanted to convey his genuine respect.

Madrimlian smiled widely, nodded once in acceptance of the gesture, and returned it. But his smile faded once they had turned away. He wondered if they would be okay.

They loaded up in the *Stardancer*. Shaundar almost thought that he saw Garan seated in her helm for an eyeblink, but then he saw the actual helmsman. It was no one he recognized. Because he was not Garan, Shaundar had no strength with which to make conversation, and he simply watched in silence as the Rock of Bral drew away beneath them at his father's command. But then he saw the *Aerdrie's Pride*, her beautiful golden and green frame as amazing and as stunning as she had always been, floating gently in the wake of the asteroid that was Bral, and he smiled.

"I didn't realize how much I'd missed her," he confessed to Yathar.

“Me neither,” Yathar agreed. His smile matched his blood brother’s.

“There’s been some changes,” the Admiral pointed out. “More weapons now, of course. We’re testing out some new weaponry in response to those ‘cannons’ the scro have been using. We call them ‘accelerators.’” He pointed out two long tubular brass structures that Shaundar did not recognize. “They speed up anything you put into them until it travels at a lethal velocity, which then hits the enemy ship.” He smirked. “Research and Development provided us with steel balls for ammunition, but we tend to dispose of our garbage that way.”

The thought of pelting the Scro with lethally-accelerated filth and chamberpots appealed to Shaundar and Yathar. They laughed nastily.

The pilot brought the flitter around to one of the flight decks and set her down with a slight bump. Shaundar thought achingly that Garan could have done it better. “Touchdown, sir,” the pilot announced.

“Thank you, *Teu’Ruan*,” nodded his father, and they disembarked.

In many ways, it was just like the first time that Shaundar had stepped on board the *Aerdrie’s Pride*. Matey Aliatha Leafbower and the burly green elven Boatswain’s Mate, who had once raked his back with a cat-o-nine-tails, after first urging him to eat coca leaves which he had

refused, even came to meet them. They hadn't been introduced at the time, but Shaundar had come to know him during his service aboard the *Aerdrie's Pride* later on. His name was Thersylvanna.

Shaundar leaned on his crutch with one arm and saluted the First Mate with a smile. "Glad to see you're still among the living, Matey."

Her cinnamon eyes twinkled in response to this greeting as she returned the salute. "I might definitely say the same, Lieutenant," she beamed.

Yathar turned his gaze to Thersylvanna, who now wore the single brass crescent of the Boatswain. "I guess Bo' sun Naivon didn't make it, huh?" he asked with genuine sorrow.

The brawny green elf bowed his head. "He fell in the battle with the Wa," he sighed. "It was a waste. But I'm right glad to see the both of you lads. *Quessira*," he corrected himself, and saluted.

Shaundar returned it and grinned. "Today I'm happy to be one of 'you lads,' Bo' sun."

"I'm sorry for the loss of the *Queen's Dirk*, sir," he said with regret. "*Teu'Ruan* Oakheart is sorely missed."

"By us too," Yathar concurred. Shaundar sighed.

“Nothing to report, Skipper,” the Matey told Shaundar’s father.

“Excellent,” he nodded. “I think we’ve had enough excitement for a while. I am ready to relieve you.”

“I am ready to be relieved,” *Aia’Ruan* Leafbower recited.

“I have the deck and the conn.”

“The skipper has the deck and the conn!” bellowed Thersylvanna, and the cry was taken up. Shaundar had the oddest sense of déjà vu.

“Sir,” Shaundar spoke up to his father, “I would be delighted to serve a turn in the helm for old times’ sake.”

“And I’ll be pleased to be assigned to the Marines in case we run into the orcs, sir,” Yathar told him.

Shaundar noticed the Matey looking incredulously at Yathar’s missing arm. His eyes narrowed. “Make no mistake, Matey,” Shaundar growled, “Yathar is still the deadliest bladesinger I’ve ever seen, with or without both arms. He fended off at least twenty scro and ogres with a metal brace so that we could escape the prison.”

“I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I’m sure he is. I didn’t mean . . .”

Vice Admiral Sunfall cleared his throat. “Of course,” he confirmed. “As the senior Lieutenant among them, Yathar, you will be

taking command of the ship's Marines. And Shaundar, until we get home, you're the Lead Spelljammer. Do you want to stay in my cabin, since the voyage is so short?"

Shaundar smiled back. "Av, *quessir*," he agreed.

"I'll hang some hammocks, *quessira*, with your permission," Thersylvanna offered; and Lord Sunfall dismissed him to do so.

It was Shaundar who took the *Aerdrie's Pride* away from the Rock of Bral, sinking into her helm like the bed of an old lover. He could feel her welcome his presence and he could feel that she had been damaged some, and repaired some, since he had last taken her helm. Kind of like him. It was like coming home, falling into the old routines; studying charts, standing in the chow line, seeing old friends again like Lianna, who laughed out loud and kissed them thoroughly when she saw Yathar and him coming for their dinner. He spent the rest of the day buzzing around in a state of almost intoxicating happiness. He even drew a cartoon for the first time in years, showing the Matey and his father puffing with pride on the *Aerdrie's* deck.

But that night, he woke his father and Yathar in alarm by screaming himself awake from a nightmare in which the *Queen's Dirk* was shattered by cannon fire and his father lay dead on the bridge, buried underneath a pile of rubble with his moonblade fallen at his side and a very pale and unmoving hand still reaching for it.

When Blackjack came from Lionheart Command at Lord Sunfall's orders, he gathered the Sunfalls, Lady Durothil and Narissa together. Narissa could scarcely breathe. She knew that the news would either be wonderful or terrible. She knew that her salvation or destruction waited on his word.

Blackjack didn't keep her waiting. He looked right at her, with her hands and teeth clenched, and he announced, "They've been found, and they're alive."

A little sound escaped her; something like a squeak and a scream, and she promptly burst into tears. "Praise the gods," exclaimed Selena, and the noble *etriela* both began to weep soundlessly.

"When, Blackjack?" queried Lady Sunfall. "And where?"

"They turned up on the Rock of Bral in Spiralspace," Blackjack explained. "They were slaves on an illithid ship. They hadn't been there that long."

Lady Durothil, who had nodded grimly at the mention of the mind flayers, then glanced up, surprised again. "If that's so, where have they been?" she demanded.

Blackjack sighed and took a quick drink of the wine he had been offered when he sat down at the Sunfalls' table. "I don't entirely understand it, I don't think," he admitted, "but I'll tell you what I know."

Lady Sunfall nodded. "Please go on," she urged softly.

"They were taken prisoner after the destruction of the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*," he said. "Somehow they ended up in a prison camp on the world of Spiral. A place called Raven Talon, they said." He sighed and ran his hands over his head and through his untidy hair. "I don't rightly understand what happened there. I'm pretty sure they were tortured. I know for a fact that they were starved." Lady Sunfall sniffled and Narissa sucked in a horrified gasp. "I don't mean to upset you, *etriela*," he apologized, "but you need to know. They're a mess. They've been through hell." He pursed his lips. "Yathar has lost his right arm, and Shaundar has a smashed up leg that the healers are probably re-breaking right now. He also lost his sternum; it's been replaced with a mithril prosthetic."

"My goddess," whispered Lady Durothil, her hand hovering near her mouth.

"I'll heal them if I can," Selene Sunfall murmured.

"When are they coming home?" Selena demanded.

“Shouldn’t be long,” Blackjack assured them. “Lord Sunfall sent me right here and he was headed for the Rock of Bral when I left Lionheart. Probably not more than a couple of weeks.”

Lady Sunfall nodded gratefully. “Well, they’re alive, and they’re coming back to us, and that’s all that matters. We’ll make it work, no matter what happened to them.”

But she was wrong.

Narissa continued to go out to the docks each day to wait for Shaundar and Yathar to come home; only now, she waited with hope and joy. Lady Sunfall would often come out and join her. She could barely concentrate on anything. Anxiety plagued her. She bit her nails down to the quick and stopped eating.

Nine days after Blackjack’s arrival, Narissa looked up into the sky to see the *Stardancer* coming in to land.

She could barely breathe. Her heart felt as though it were going to explode. Unconsciously she found herself on her feet, clutching her goldheart charm so hard that it left an imprint in her sweating palm.

With agonizing slowness, the *Ruatri* found her way to the dock that was used primarily by the *Aerdrie’s Pride*. She carefully set down one foot, then another, then the other two. Narissa smiled. She

recognized her beloved's flying style. Only he could, or would, treat the flitter with such gentleness. Now she was running towards the *Stardancer*, the books she'd brought to the dockyard abandoned, tears already running down the sides of her face.

Lord Sunfall stepped off the ladder first, and he waved a hand at her. Yathar followed him. She stopped in her tracks. He looked terrible and his missing arm, gone from the middle of his forearm, was like a hole in space, even though she'd been warned, even though she had tried to visualize it clearly in her mind so that she wouldn't stare. He was so thin! Arms that were the envy of most of the boys Narissa knew had become twigs, and his eyes stared all around him as if he couldn't believe that Nedethil was real.

His staring green eyes found her and light appeared in them. He waved with the hand that he still had.

Then Shaundar emerged from the flitter.

They looked at each other across the veil of a thousand years. Narissa wanted to burst into tears again. He, too, was terribly thin and worn. He wore cares on his face that Narissa had never imagined. It was an expression that she associated with the elder lords that she knew, only glimpsed when they were deep in their cups and exhausted. His hair was clipped shorter than she had ever seen it and he was limping along on a pair of crutches. His right leg was in a cruel steel brace.

He saw her with those sorrowful, shattered eyes and he mouthed her name.

She choked on a sob, and as Lady Durothil folded Yathar into her arms, crying helplessly, she ran to Shaundar and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest.

Weirdly he didn't respond at first. He just looked at her with that horrible stare. She pulled back for a moment to meet his eyes. "Shaundar?" she whispered through her tears.

He frowned, and then leaning on one of his crutches he brought his fingers up to her cheekbone and touched it hesitantly, almost as if she were a bubble that he was afraid to pop. Then he ran his fingers – which were vibrating; she could feel it – along the edge of her jawline and then through her hair. He did that once, twice, thrice, as though trying to reassure himself that she was real.

She reached up a hand to touch the side of his face, too, now terrified by his distance and his coldness. She saw the black pearl in his earring and what could only be a whip scar marring his ear. "I love you," she wept helplessly. "I've been waiting for you. Shaundar, it's me."

"Narissa?" he whispered, as though he could hardly believe it; and when she nodded, he threw his arms around her, dropping both crutches and, she was sure, jarring that broken leg sharply, and then she

was folded in an embrace that nearly crushed her and he was sobbing as though his heart were broken.

Chapter Twenty-One

They brought their boys home with many embraces and many more tears. Nobody really knew what to say. It was Selena who cleared the way. “I’ve missed you, big brothers,” she announced when they came to the manor door as she hugged them both, as naturally as if they’d been away for the summer touring on the *Aerdrie’s Pride*.

Shaundar put his arms around his little sister with fierce protectiveness and kissed her on the head. His tears were drying now, but he kept reeling under waves of unreality. Was he really here? How could everything look so much the same, when everything was different? Why didn’t he feel like he was a part of this anymore?

“I’ll put on some tea,” volunteered Lianna, who of course had come to join them. The *Aerdrie’s Pride* had apparently taken leave for a couple of weeks. Shaundar guessed that it was so that his father could be home with them, and knowing how pressing the War must be, he was strangely touched.

Blackjack was waiting for them in the sitting room. Yathar smiled to see him and he smiled back. “I got something for you guys,” he told them. He handed them each a big leather-bound book. Shaundar opened his immediately. It was a spellbook, inscribed with some of Shaundar’s favourite incantations.

“I figured that you likely lost yours,” he explained, “so I thought I’d help with that. Can’t have two of the best mages in the fleet deprived of magic.”

Shaundar was speechless. This was not a cheap gift by any means. Wizards guarded their spells jealously and often required considerable compensation to part with them; and at any rate, each magical formula required special inks and research to inscribe. Even if Blackjack had copied over most of his own spells, it would still be time-consuming and expensive. “Thank you, Blackjack,” he and Yathar chorused.

He found a seat on the daybed so that Narissa could join him, and carefully she snuggled in on his left side, away from the awkward leg brace. He saw with a pang that his grandmother’s rocking chair had not been removed yet; or they had no intention of doing so.

Lady Sunfall saw her son glance over at the chair and she cleared her throat. “Your father told you that your grandmother has passed West?” she asked softly.

He nodded. “Was it a good wake?”

“The whole town came out for it,” she assured him.

“I’m glad,” he said quietly. A weird silence fell.

"Would you *quessira* care to join me on the balcony?" Lord Sunfall invited the boys to break the silence, and Shaundar struggled to his feet with Yathar's help.

"So you guys haven't heard, I bet," Blackjack began as he chuffed at his pipe.

"Heard what?" Yathar inquired.

"King Zaor was assassinated," he informed them grimly.

Shaundar was shocked. "How?" he demanded.

"A sun elven lord was responsible," Shaundar's father explained sourly. "It happened right in the Royal Garden."

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir," Yathar consoled. "I know that he was a close friend of yours."

"Her Majesty must be crushed," Shaundar mumbled in sympathy.

"She's heartbroken," Lord Sunfall confirmed in a tone that was perhaps sharper than he had intended. "She's still in mourning."

Shaundar glanced inside the glass doors and saw Narissa looking out at him with huge eyes.

"I'm going in," he announced, and he tapped his pipe into the ashtray half-smoked and shuffled his way inside. There he wrapped his arms tightly around Narissa again as he balanced on the crutches and pressed her firmly to his chest. Narissa started crying again as she leaned her head against him, smelling his familiar scent of brandy smoke and subtle masculine musk. Selena squished herself into the hug as well and they made room for her. Yathar watched them thoughtfully.

A knock at the door made them both startle. "It's just the door," Selena informed them with an odd look.

"I'll get it," Lady Sunfall volunteered, and when she opened it, Admiral Alastrarra was standing there. All the male elves in the house saluted. Selena did not, perhaps in silent protest of her decommissioning at the beginning of the War. Shaundar drew himself up as straight as possible. Always uneasy in the Admiral's presence, he found today that he was downright petrified.

Narissa beamed a radiant smile at her father. "They're home, Daddy," she explained happily, nestling against Shaundar like she never wanted to be apart from him again.

The Admiral returned the salutes. "Tel'Quessir," he nodded. "It's good to see you Shaundar, Yathar. Welcome back."

"Thank you, sir," they mumbled.

"Are you staying for dinner, sir?" Lianna asked him cheerfully.

"I would love to but I can't," he refused politely. "We're shipping out this evening. I just came to speak to the Sunfall lads for a moment."

"*Av, quessir,*" said Shaundar.

"Perhaps you'd both speak to me on the balcony," he invited; and they nodded and joined him as the other Navy elves left them their privacy.

Lord Alastrarra sighed. "The War is going badly. You know this, of course."

Yathar's mouth twisted into an ironic smirk. "With all due respect, I think we probably know that better than you do, sir."

"Well, that's just it," the Admiral muttered. "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell people about Spiral. It would be very bad for morale." His gaze was sharp and direct.

Shaundar scowled. "What are we supposed to tell people then, sir, when they ask us where we've been for the past two years?" he demanded a little crossly.

"You can tell them you were in an orcish prison camp," Lord Alastrarra acquiesced, "just don't tell them about Spiral being conquered. All right?"

“No sir, it’s not all right,” Yathar snapped, “but I don’t suppose we have a choice.”

Anger flashed through the Admiral’s ocean green eyes. “I’m sorry you don’t like it, gentlemen, but I have more than just you to think about. The well-being of the Elven Nation is at stake.”

“I think you’re making a mistake, sir,” Shaundar said quietly, “but I will obey my orders.” He saluted clumsily as he attempted to maintain his precarious balance on the crutches.

The Admiral’s gaze softened into a mere frown. “Good then,” he scowled. “Good evening to you lads.” He left as abruptly as he arrived.

Yathar tapped his pipe out hard enough to crack the bowl. He swore and threw it over the edge of the balcony. “I don’t think it has anything to do with morale at all,” he snarled cynically. “I think it has to do with the Mithril’s pride.”

Shaundar slowly nodded his agreement. “Welcome home, lads,” he sneered sarcastically.

“What did Dad have to say?” Narissa inquired when they came back into the house.

“Nothing,” snapped Shaundar morosely. Narissa flinched at his tone. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I don’t mean to snap. I’m just really

sore.” That much was true. The re-broken leg hurt every bit as much as the original break had.

“Well, good gods, sit down,” Lord Sunfall commanded. “Selene, can you do anything for this?”

Shaundar limped himself back over to the daybed again and his mother came over and knelt down at Shaundar’s feet. “This might hurt some,” she warned him, and she ran her hands underneath the brace to feel the course of the bone. She was right; it did hurt. He bore the pain stoically. He had learned not to display such things. It made you a target.

She smiled. “Yes, I can,” she admitted happily, and she began to intone a prayer. Light radiated from her hands and there was, for a moment, a very odd pain-heat sensation somewhere deep in the marrow. Then something shifted with an audible clunk, and for the first time in years, his leg felt whole.

She felt its course again, nodded once, satisfied, and unfastened the brace. “See if that will hold you,” she encouraged; so he stood up gingerly. It was fine. He took a few steps and was pleased to note that the world didn’t lurch as though he were on horseback anymore.

“Try not to favour that,” his mother urged. “It’s probably become a strong habit by now, but don’t.”

He nodded and made an effort to walk properly.

“Looking good,” said Yathar with a bittersweet smile. Narissa and Selena were beaming and Shaundar’s father smiled with relief. If only his spirit had mended so easily.

“Dinner’s ready!” announced Lianna cheerfully, and as they took their places at the table she served up something that Shaundar had dreamed about for the past three years; enormous bowls of fresh green salad. These were full garden salads with various greens, radishes, carrots, turnips, cucumbers, green onions, cilantro, almonds, and fat little star-prawns from deep within Garden’s roots. They were lightly touched with a lemon and vinegar dressing and there was even a dipping sauce for the prawns. Shaundar wiped away the drool from the side of his mouth and shoved a handful of the salad into it. Flavour and texture exploded on his tongue – the fresh, clean chewy-green taste of the leafy parts, the smooth, wet and cool cucumbers, the solid woody turnips and earthy carrots, the crunchy sweet almonds, the spiciness of the crisp onions and radishes and light, leafy cilantro, and the fleshy, rich texture of the plump shellfish; all of this interspersed with sweet and sour vinegar and lemon mixed with honey. He practically moaned with pleasure. He chased this by dipping his fingers into the sauce and running them over his tongue. It was some kind of sweet tomato sauce. He closed his eyes to focus more keenly on the taste. Delicious!

It was several minutes before he realized that the room had fallen silent; and when he opened his eyes, he saw that everyone was staring at him; everyone, that is, except for Yathar, who was looking down into an empty bowl with flushed, red cheeks.

He looked around, trying to figure out what the problem was. It took him a few moments, but then it came to him. Everyone else had a fork in their hand.

He blushed too. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, embarrassed, and took up the fork at the side of his bowl. It felt strange in his hand. He resumed eating more slowly with the fork, stabbing fruitlessly at the leaves and vegetables until he got the hang of it again, and tried not to have an orgasm with every bite.

Narissa put a gentle hand on his arm and studied him with huge oceanic eyes; so much like her father's, and yet so different. He looked away. He felt like a freak. Dinner proceeded in an uncomfortable silence broken only by the scraping of silverware on dishes and the sounds of chewing.

He was standing in the line at Raven Talon, preparing to be filed to the left or the right, the charnel house scent of burning bodies, mud, disease and rot in his nostrils. A little elven girl was shrieking for her father. Shaundar saw that it was actually *his* father that the elven girl was crying out for, being moved along in the starboard queue. "Dad, get out of here!" he tried to warn him, but no sound came out. Shaundar struggled to run to his side but his right leg was all twisted and broken and it wouldn't move.

The little girl with the black pigtails broke free of the portside line crying out, “Avar!” “NO!” shrieked Shaundar, knowing what was to come. As the scro raised their crossbows, everything slowed down to a wretched crawl, and as the bolts pierced the little girl’s ribs and throat, she turned to face him and Shaundar could see that it was his *sister*, dear gods, it was *Selena*, who fell at their father’s feet with her tiny hand still reaching for his.

“Shaundar!” his father cried, and the scro shot him too.

“Shaundar!” his father roared again, blood spilling from his mouth as he fell to the ground over top of Selena; then someone was grabbing him and shaking him.

He would kill every last one of these fucking pig-faced bastards! He writhed and roared and struck out with his hands.

One of the orcs slapped him across the face; and that’s when he woke up.

The person who had slapped him was his father. His expression was horrified. Shaundar was hopelessly entangled in his blanket, which, like his pyjama trousers and hair, was soaked with sweat. He was at home in his own bed, the familiar line of his window beside him carrying only the scents of late spring flowers and a light fresh rain. His heart was pounding fit to explode, he was gasping for breath and the flesh around his father’s left eye was darkening and swelling.

“Oh gods, Dad, I’m sorry,” he panted. Guilt swelled in his belly and throat like an infection.

Now everyone else was filling the room in a flood, all of them with wide, frightened eyes. Shaundar wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear.

“It’s all right,” Lord Sunfall was saying. “Must have been some nightmare! You were screaming.”

Shaundar hung his head. “The worst,” he muttered.

“Do you want me to stay?” his mother asked him with wide, concerned eyes.

Be damned if he was going to go crying to Mommy as if he was ten! “No, that’s all right, I’ll be okay,” he assured them as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to wake everyone.” That was all he needed; everyone fussing over him, worrying more than they already had. At her hesitance, he forced a wavering smile. “Please go back to bed. I’ll be fine.”

“All right, son,” nodded Lord Sunfall slowly. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” he lied. “I’ll find some witch hazel for that in the morning, Dad.”

Shaundar's father seemed surprised, and then he touched his eyebrow to find the puffy flesh there. "It's fine, Shaundar," he promised his son. "Try to get some reverie." And he gently ushered everyone out; even Narissa, who watched him again with those enormous, frightened sea-green eyes. As soon as they were gone and the door safely closed behind them, Shaundar began to shudder with silent sobs, buried in his pillow like dreams.

A few moments later, Yathar opened the door and came in. "I can't reverie, or sleep at all," he confessed. "May I join you?"

Shaundar shoved over and made room for Yathar on his cot. There was still more room than there had been in Raven Talon, and here they had a mattress and blankets.

Lord Sunfall headed back to his room with his wife, wiping angrily at his own tears. Guilt made him nauseous. He *knew* to trust in his wife's intuition. He had *known* that he was sending his son and his blood brother into disaster. Why had he done it anyway? What foolish conceit had demanded that he avoid all possible accusations of nepotism, even at the expense of his common sense? Hadn't he even taken *pride* in his decision, knowing that like Shaundar said, he would not ask the elves under his command to risk anything that he wasn't willing to risk himself? Or rather, he amended, that he wasn't willing to ask his *son* to risk. A parent had two sacred trusts; to try to guide their children to be moral people, and to keep them safe. He had more than failed at the second. He had *destroyed* his son, and he would never forgive himself.

Like his son, like his son's blood brother, he remained awake for the rest of the night, staring into space as light bled into the sky and seeing Hell instead.

Dawnfry the next day was equally awkward. The boys both reached for their food once again before remembering silverware. Yathar had developed a habit of inhaling his food as though it might disappear, and Shaundar had to resist moaning over flavour and texture. Why had he never really tasted food before? He was amazed by the subtleties of it; the many different options and how they all worked together. It was truly a magical thing. He wished he could have articulated this to his family. Perhaps then they might have stopped watching him like he was some kind of fascinating beetle.

"Am I bothering you?" he snapped instead towards the intent pairs of eyes. They blinked in surprise. "Or am I just that interesting?"

Selena swallowed. "I'm just glad to have you home," she told him in a wounded tone, "and I'm having trouble believing you're really here. And you look different. I would be lying if I said you didn't."

He looked down at his plate, his face hot. What in the Nine Hells was the matter with him, anyway? Why was he so snappy and paranoid?

"I'm glad you're both enjoying my cooking," Lianna smiled weakly. She was looking away now, and Shaundar knew then that while

Selena might not have been, Lianna had been staring at the way he was eating.

“They didn’t feed us well,” he explained; and then stopped. How much information was too much? How could he explain the ruthless efficient cruelty of Raven Talon without revealing the sheer scale of the place? He clammed up and now the lump in his throat that he was trying to swallow around cured all hunger. He forced the rest of dawnfry down anyway.

“What are your plans for the day?” his mother inquired.

Plans! Yes, he supposed he should go *do* something, shouldn’t he? He considered it, looking over at Yathar. “I should probably do some sort of exercise,” he began slowly. “The healers wanted us to do that, especially now that I can walk again.”

“Let’s go swimming at the willow!” cheered Selena with delight sparkling in her eyes. “You’re not going to make me go to school today, are you, Daddy?” Her eyes had that legendary *can-I-keep-the-puppy* look.

Swimming! Well, it was probably very good strength and endurance training, but then everyone would see his scars. He considered it. Perhaps if he kept his shirt on while they swam . . . “Sure,” he nodded. “Let’s go swimming.”

“Go ahead,” Lord Sunfall nodded to his daughter. She squealed and ran to fetch towels.

“Sounds like fun,” Narissa smiled, and she took his hand and squeezed it. He clasped her hand in his and brought it up to his mouth to kiss. Her delicate fingers and soft, golden skin were a small miracle. The scent of her rose perfume wafted over him and for a moment he had to close his eyes.

“I’ll see if I can find some witch hazel at the grove,” Shaundar promised his father.

Lord Sunfall waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it Shaundar, it’s fine,” he reassured him; and his mother piped up, “I have witch hazel already and it’s been tended to. If it really bothers you, son, I could pray on it.”

“Would you please?” he asked her, and she nodded and mumbled a short prayer and touched her hand to her husband’s eye. The black and purple bruise disappeared almost instantly.

“Thank you, Mom,” Shaundar said gratefully. With that, Selena appeared with the towels.

“Let me make you some lunch to take with you,” volunteered Lianna, getting up, and a few minutes later she returned with a basket of cucumber sandwiches. “No silverware required,” she jested softly with a gentle smile. Shaundar returned a strained smile in response, mostly still just humiliated. They headed off down to the willow grove.

It was like going back in time to a mystical fairyland; untouched, unsullied, except for where the willow had broken so many years ago, a veteran of their monkey-wrestling. But even that seemed perfect somehow. Violets were blooming around its base and the wild lilacs and wisteria were just starting to open their petals. Soon the roses would follow. The creek ran along as it always had, gurgling affectionately as though it were glad to see him.

The girls carelessly tossed the towels over the willow boughs. Selena flung her clothes into the tree branches and dove into the water. “Bah! Cold!” she exclaimed with a heady laugh. Narissa giggled and carefully stripped, hung her clothes in an orderly fashion on one of the low-hanging branches, and stepped carefully in. “It’s not bad,” she disagreed, but Shaundar could see that she was lying because her lovely golden-pink nipples narrowed into points. He stared at her for a long moment. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen; a goddess made flesh.

Yathar shrugged and flung off his clothes as carelessly as he always had, and then leaped in. He found himself drifting to the left and had to compensate somewhat. When he came up for air, Shaundar could see Selena and Narissa studying his new whip scars with wide eyes and pursed lips, and that decided him. He sank into the water with his clothes on. The tunic billowed heavily around him. The water was indeed cold enough to scare his testicles, which then tried to crawl into his abdomen. He dipped his head under the water and let the cold liquid cleanse his mind as well as his body.

They swam around together for a while, but Shaundar felt the weight of Narissa’s eyes, and eventually she came over and put her arms around his neck. He naturally put his arms under her bottom to hold her up in the water and was delighted by the naked buttocks in his hands and the creamy breasts with their perky nipples that were pressed against his chest.

“Shaundar,” she began softly, “why won’t you take off your shirt?”

He looked away and didn’t answer.

She laughed bitterly. Her eyes flashed. “Do you think I care about scars?” she demanded. “How shallow do you think I am? It was a prison camp and you’re a *soldier*, you don’t think I know you have scars? You think you succeeded in hiding those scars from your court martial so many years ago?” She grasped his face in her hands and forced him to meet her eyes. “I love you!” she cried. “I don’t care about scars! Don’t hide from me, please.” Those beautiful eyes, the colour of the ocean surrounding Evermeet, brimmed over with tears.

She was right; this was stupid. He nodded. Slowly he released her into the water and then he removed his tunic.

Narissa looked, and then she bit her lip and the tears escaped, overflowing her sea-green eyes like waves washing up on shore. He had new whip scars too, of course; and then there were the flak scars on his

arms, the raking parallel claw lines along his ribs where an orc had grabbed him from behind, and right above his shellback tattoo were two slashing tusk marks, the legacy of the first time he was raped. She saw the claw marks first, being more than a foot shorter than he was, and ran her trembling fingers over them. Then she noticed the bite marks and touched them with her other hand. Her pupils were like black holes. “Oh Shaundar, what happened?” she breathed, horrified.

He flinched away from her then. Fury filled his belly and throat like a hot desert wind. “That question,” he snarled, “is why I didn’t want to take off my clothes.” He blundered out of the water and into the woods. It was Yathar who went after him.

Narissa put her face in her hands and sobbed. “Shaundar, I’m sorry!” she called out. “I won’t ask again! Please come back!”

Selena’s eyes were grave as she watched her brother flee. She wished she knew what to say to him or to Narissa, but she didn’t. “I’m sorry,” she told Narissa. “I guess I didn’t think this swimming thing through.”

Narissa just wept.

Shaundar was never sure how he ended up at the Gray Leaf Inn, but that’s where Yathar found him; torso safely covered again, dripping wet, and doing his level best to get as drunk as he could as quickly as

possible. He had finished off a tankard of *alu'quesst* and was working on his second by the time Yathar came in.

He sat beside Shaundar without a word and watched him polish off the second mug. "She didn't mean any harm," he pointed out to Shaundar at last.

Shaundar sighed. "That only makes it worse," he admitted.

Yathar ordered an *alu'quesst* as well. The bartender brought it without comment.

"I haven't been to bed with anyone since the prison camp," Yathar admitted.

Shaundar just looked at him over the edge of his mug. "Why not?" he asked bluntly. "Have your lady friends been weird because of . . ." he indicated Yathar's amputated arm.

Yathar shook his head, then changed his mind and shrugged. "Not really," he said. "It's just . . . I don't want anyone to touch me. Anyone. At all."

Shaundar met his gaze and nodded. Yes, that was part of it, wasn't it? He was afraid that Narissa would see his scars, but worse yet, he was afraid that she would see what had happened to him in his eyes somehow, and reject him as damaged goods. And being touched like that scared him. It was different with Sylria; maybe because she had been

there too, maybe because of the timing; maybe because she had taken the lead in that situation, but the truth was, as much as he wanted to touch Narissa, he was terrified of her touching *him*.

He met Yathar's eyes and saw the pain in his own reflected back. "I thought everything would be okay once we got home. But nothing's okay, is it?"

"No," Yathar agreed.

They got drunk together until they passed out in a sweet, dreamless oblivion sometime in the middle of the afternoon.

Shaundar tried to avoid Narissa the next day as he nursed a head that felt as though it were made of iron, but she was having none of it. Before dawnfry she was there.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "You don't have to talk about it until you're ready. I promise I won't ask again."

He nodded and sighed. "I'm sorry too," he told her remorsefully. If only it were that simple! Even if he had wanted to talk about it, he didn't want to burden her with such things. He didn't want to damage her heart and soul with the things he had seen and been through. She was perfect, beautiful. He had gone to war to protect her, and to win her hand. He could see now that there was a poison in his spirit, some kind

of illness, and he didn't want her to catch it. Besides, what was he allowed to tell her and what was too much information about Spiral? What he needed to do was just get over it; put it all behind him, forget it ever happened, and get on with his life.

She came to him and enfolded him in her arms to lean her head on his chest, against his heart. He clutched her like a lifeline.

That day was much better. The five of them – Shaundar, Narissa, Yathar, Selena and Blackjack – went for a long, leisurely walk in the woods in the morning, during which Blackjack filled them in on details of the War and Selena chatted about her magical studies, and then they headed for the Leafy Bough for lunch and some afternoon wine. The bartender greeted them with a friendly smile, genuinely happy to see them, and she stood Shaundar and Yathar to whatever they were drinking for the day “to celebrate your triumphant return from fighting the Orcish Horde!” So they were a little bit tipsy when they arrived at home for dinner, but not drunk. Shaundar firmly reminded himself to take it slowly and use the silverware, and he managed, he thought, not to make a fool of himself.

The *Vengeance* had been put down like a rabid dog. After Queenie's wreckage had been discovered, King Zaor had requested that every ship in the Fleet that could be spared seek it out and destroy it. This was the last request he ever made of the Navy, and it had been done; which turned out to be valuable to both Intelligence and Research

and Development, who studied these new “cannons” with a jaundiced tactical eye.

King Zaor’s assassination had shocked everyone, of course, and there had been some investigation into whether it might be connected to the War; but it turned out to be planetary-based political issues over silver elven royalty in place of the gold elven “divine right,” and concerns over some progressive political manoeuvres in favour of half-elves. Exception had been taken, according to rumour, over one of the princesses giving birth to a half-elven daughter, and she had been exiled.

“That wasn’t Her Majesty’s will, or so I heard,” Blackjack assured them, “but given the situation, she really had no choice.”

Shaundar was, quite frankly, disgusted by the whole affair. “Here we are fighting to save the elves from the gods-be-damned orcs,” he growled, “and they’re determined to kill each other. Almost makes it all feel pointless, doesn’t it?”

There had been some significant battles; another one at the Karpri station, one on the dark side of Selune, one near the Colour Spray Nebula. The Colour Spray one had gone badly but they’d achieved a marginal victory in the other two. In other words, in Realspace anyway, the elves were holding their own. “Things aren’t as good in Greyspace, or so the rumour mill says,” Blackjack confessed over wine in the Leafy Bough. “And of course . . .” and he trailed off. Shaundar realized that he

had been commanded to keep silent about Spiralspace too. Bile rose in his throat.

After dinner he went out to chop wood for the kitchen stove while Yathar practiced his bladesong stanzas, and found that he enjoyed the physical work immensely. It was soothing in its rhythm and simplicity. With food in his belly he found an amazing reserve of physical energy. All that hard labour at Raven Talon had bestowed some positive effects, he supposed. He was thin but his muscles were like cables; lean, corded and strong.

Narissa stayed to watch him. “Aren’t you bored?” he asked her after a while.

“No,” she smiled. “I’m just glad you’re home.”

He smiled and turned to put his arms around her and kiss her, and that’s when he saw Laeroth Oakheart coming up the walk. What on earth was he doing here?

Shaundar kissed her on the cheek and stepped past her to offer Laeroth a formal bow. Yathar came over to join them and did his best to do the same, only since it involved clasping one’s hands to the heart and opening one’s arms and palms outwards as one bent at the waist, it didn’t look quite right.

Laeroth returned it, without batting an eye at Yathar’s amputation, Shaundar noticed. He thought how much bigger and more

frightening Laeroth had once looked to his eyes. Not so now. Shaundar was taller and broader about the shoulders, even after the prison camp.

Narissa's eyes lit up and she waved cheerfully. "Hi Laeroth!" she said.

Shaundar looked at her curiously. "I didn't know you guys were friends," he remarked.

"Not until just these past couple of years," Laeroth informed him with a hesitant but friendly smile. "We started talking after the funeral ceremony."

"I'm sorry about your brother," Shaundar told him sincerely as the image of Garan's headless corpse sagging over the helm flashed through his mind.

Sadness settled in Laeroth's eyes. "Thank you, Shaundar," he mumbled. "I miss him."

"We do too," Yathar agreed. "He was our friend."

"I want to ask you about it," Laeroth confessed, shuffling his feet, "but . . ."

"He died bravely," Shaundar assured him. "He was trying to ram the *Vengeance* and a cannonball cut him down on the turn. He died at his post." He put a hand on Laeroth's shoulder and gave it a squeeze so

that he would meet Shaundar's eyes. "Your brother was a hero," Shaundar declared with absolute sincerity, "and I aspire to be more like him."

Laeroth's eyes filled with tears and he nodded and looked away. Shaundar gave him a discrete moment to collect himself. "Thank you," he gulped at last. "I do too, you know." He looked down and steeled his feet like he was bracing himself, then he looked back up at Shaundar. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry," he burst out. "I'm sorry for harassing you when we were kids. I was a fool."

Shaundar nodded his acceptance. "Forgiven," he said.

Laeroth seemed relieved. "I've been sitting on that for a while," he admitted, "but it just never seemed like the right time." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to tell you . . . the reason why I'm here . . . well, I saw your grandmother the night she passed West."

"Did you?" he replied curiously.

Laeroth nodded. "She gave me a message for you; and Yathar too. She said – let's make sure I get this right – she said, 'Will you tell Shaundar and Yathar when they get back that I love them, and I am proud of them?'" He smiled and inclined his head with satisfaction. "Yes, that was how she said it."

Shaundar could just see his grandmother's face and hear her voice, strong and powerful even in her advanced age. Suddenly grief and longing welled up in his chest. "Thank you for that," he whispered.

Yathar, who had gone back to cigars since he broke his pipe, pulled them out of his belt pouch and offered one to Laeroth. "Never got the taste for it, but thanks anyway," he refused with a smile. Shaundar took one and they smoked quietly.

"Did you want to come in for a cup of tea or something, then?" Shaundar offered.

"Sure," Laeroth nodded.

They and Laeroth spent the whole evening sharing memories of Garan and then laughing about school. It was interesting because they were each seeing a new and unfamiliar side of Garan. His military shipboard life was something that Laeroth didn't know much about, and Shaundar and Yathar didn't really have any idea what Garan's life was like at home. Narissa sat between them all and worked on some beading. Something about this made Laeroth smile. It was a smile that Shaundar liked because he genuinely seemed to be happy for Narissa's happiness. By the end of the night Shaundar was surprised to find that he had begun thinking of Laeroth as a friend.

Shaundar's father walked in close to bedtime. "I have something for you lads," he began. He presented them with two small boxes.

Within them was a medal for each of them; a *Drop of Corellon's Blood*. "These were technically awarded at the memorial service for the *Queen's Dirk*," he explained. "I didn't figure you wanted a big ceremony so I just took them on your behalf. I hope that's all right."

He was absolutely right; they didn't want some kind of elaborate awards parade. Shaundar told him so and thanked him, relieved to be spared.

"I have a couple of other things you might want," Lord Sunfall added. He handed Yathar a familiar long sword.

Yathar was astounded. "You saved it!" he exclaimed. "Thank you very much!" He replaced the functional long sword he had picked up on the Rock of Bral immediately.

"There was this as well," the Vice Admiral added, and he handed that odd silver ring to Yathar that he had received at Yuletide before the Battle of Glyth's Rings.

"Thank you for that too," Yathar smiled. "My mother gave that to me. Would you put it on for me?"

"I'll do it," Shaundar offered, and he found a finger on Yathar's remaining hand where it fit.

Lord Sunfall cleared his throat. "I don't know if you still want this, son," he said to Shaundar. "I don't really even know why I saved it."

It doesn't work anymore." And miraculously, he gave Shaundar the pocket watch he had gifted his son with so long ago. Its face was a little dented now. *Just like me*, Shaundar thought to himself. He took it in his hand. "Of course I still want it," he smiled. "Thank you, Dad." He put it in his belt pouch. He was delighted. The orcs hadn't gotten it after all.

He went to bed that night feeling pretty good about life.

But then there was another nightmare. This one was familiar because he'd had it before on and off over the past several years. It was the last battle of the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*, played over in detail like a gruesome encore. Again he saw Yathar going over the side, the lifeline sheering off his arm, the sword falling on the deck and the arm grabbing Sylria as though it were trying to save itself; again he saw Captain Yvoeth crushed under a cannonball like an egg; again he smashed into the railing and listened to the sound as his leg snapped; again he crawled through the viscera to take his place at the helm, pulling aside Garan's decapitated body with brains spilling from his skullcap like an overturned pudding; again the fo'c'sle collapsed like a house of cards and took Sylria away in the landslide; again he was ripped apart as Queenie was torn to pieces. This time it was his mother who pulled him, shrieking, from this dark and poisoned reverie. Again there were the apologies, again the insistence that he would be okay.

He really tried to be, but sleep eluded him for hours. Finally he went downstairs, poured himself a couple of shots, and went back to bed. He found this to be sufficient balm to chase the nightmares away, and he

slept. The following night he didn't wait for the nightmare. When he decided he was going to reverie, he downed the shots and then tried to rest. And it worked. For a while.

But within a month, the shots had become a glass. And within three months, the glass had become a bottle.

That's when everything exploded.

Chapter Twenty-Two

They say that time heals all wounds. But they're wrong. When a wound gets infected, it festers. It rots. Sometimes, like in the case of a bedsore, it borrows deeper into the body, and what appears on the surface to be a minor injury turns punky underneath like an overripe squash. Sometimes, infection gets into the blood and works its way to the heart, causing fever and death. In the first case, only surgery to cut out the infection will save the flesh from necrosis, and in the second, only powerful medicine will arrest the infection before death takes the wounded. But how do you heal an infected wound of the soul?

Four months after their return home, Shaundar and Yathar were lying in bed until almost noon, nursing their hangovers. Shaundar often had anxiety in the morning and found that the best way to deal with it was to sleep through it. Even he was beginning to become concerned with himself, however. He was aware that he was drinking too much. Who else needed an entire bottle of spirits in order to sleep every night? And he *needed* it. Without it the dreams came to him, and if he hadn't been drinking the night before, by noon he was pale and shaking. They had started with *quesstiasa* and gone progressively to brandy and then rum due to expense. But the past couple of nights they'd both wanted their own bottle. And Shaundar was terrified.

But he had to rest, and if he wasn't drunk, then no reverie came, sometimes for days and days at a time. He had quit drinking for a week when they had realized that they could no longer afford to drink *questiasa* at this rate, and he hadn't slept more than maybe an hour each night, no matter how long he stayed in his bed. When Lord Sunfall had appeared demanding that he get *up*, and go do *something*, damn it, Shaundar had snarled something almost incoherent at him that he no longer remembered, sleepwalked through the day, and invested in a brandy bottle for the evening. Blissful darkness! Much better.

Ironically, both he and Yathar looked healthier than they had in months. One would never know to look at them both that they had ever been hungry in their lives. One might actually ask what their parents had been feeding them, to produce such large elves. With nothing better to do with their time, they had been exercising almost constantly, when they weren't grilling Narissa for information from the advanced magical studies she had learned from her great-uncle on Evermeet.

And speaking of Narissa . . .

Shaundar had thought of Narissa each and every day in Raven Talon, though he had tried not to. She had been his talisman, his lifeline, his salvation. But over the past few months, the silences between them had been growing longer. She had chatted at first about her magical studies, her crafting projects, her hopes for the future. But he chatted about nothing. What was he going to say? "I'm glad you had such a lovely summer vacation on Evermeet; at about that time I watched one of

my bunkmates die of gangrene from her frostbitten feet because her wooden shoes didn't fit while I was shivering so badly trying to keep warm at night that my chattering teeth kept me awake?" "Gee, those six months of war rationing must have been rough; I was eating mouldy bread, thin gruel and maggots?"

No. Better to keep silent.

They spent a lot of time laying on the roof together and watching the stars, just as they had before the War. But the silence between them was not companionable. Shaundar held her to him and wished he could speak. Sometimes she would cry when she thought he wasn't looking. He wished he could.

Shaundar knew that Lord Alastrarra had started leaning on Narissa not to see him anymore. He knew because he had overheard a screaming match between them when he had come to pick her up to take her to dinner. "He's no good for you, Narissa!" he had yelled in exasperation, but he was cool and polite to Shaundar's face. Shaundar was beginning to believe that he was right. He was disgusted with himself; how could he blame Narissa's father for being disgusted with him?

Often he went for long walks by himself because he just didn't want to be around people. He avoided his mother because she seemed to know exactly what he was thinking, and he didn't want her to know. Every time he saw her out of the corner of his eye it seemed she was

crying. He didn't want to make his mother cry. He didn't want to make Narissa cry either. Last night he had seen her talking with Laeroth and crying while he had been out walking in the rain. Laeroth had put his arms around her and held her in a way that he no longer knew how to do. He was angry, and bitter, and jealous, and he hated himself for all of it. Why shouldn't she find comfort with Laeroth, since he could provide none?

He had enjoyed a bit of a reprieve, though, because his father had been sent away on another patrol this past month, so his disapproving eyes had not been turned upon Shaundar for a couple of weeks. He knew his father was becoming disgusted with him too. And he was expecting an argument, because his father was coming home this morning.

Shaundar dragged his hung-over body from his daybed, sucking distastefully on the pasties, and poured himself a little hair of the dog and a fruit juice. That accomplished, he set about heating himself a bath. The Sunfalls did have house servants but he didn't want their help. Navy elves were self-sufficient. He didn't think he had bathed in several days and his mother had carefully pointed this out last night. He might have forgotten even so, but when he saw Narissa later in the evening she had gently mentioned it too. He supposed he didn't smell very good.

"That's a good idea!" Selena informed him as he headed to the bath with a towel over his arm. "You smell like a horse's ass."

Shaundar chuckled. He still liked being around Selena, he found. She didn't cry around him, didn't want or need anything from him and still teased and insulted him; something everyone else was careful not to do.

He carefully closed the door and stepped into the bathtub, where he set about cleaning himself as quickly as possible. He didn't want to look at his body. He didn't want to see the scars. It seemed as though every time he caught a glimpse of them – or accidentally touched them when dressing or undressing – the memory of the rapes would come flooding back and he felt nauseous and weak.

Drying, again, as quickly as possible, he put on a clean uniform. Only now, with everything safely covered, did he dare risk a glance in the mirror. His hair had grown out and it was beginning to hang in his eyes a little. He was considering whether or not to cut it or leave it to grow, but the truth was, he wasn't sure that he cared one way or the other.

Shaundar's mother was not nearly as skilled a cook as Lianna, which is part of the reason they always got Lianna to cook when the *Aerdrie's Pride* was in port, but she wasn't unskilled either. Dawnfry was a plate of fresh fruit, which required no silverware and had lovely taste and texture. Perhaps Lady Sunfall was trying to tempt her son out of his depression with food. He gave himself extra time to eat these days because he still thought anything that wasn't gruel was ambrosia, and he ate it slowly and carefully, tasting every bit of it.

“Glad to see you’re enjoying dawnfry,” his mother said conversationally as she joined him with her own fruit plate. She had stopped asking him how he had slept, or even how he felt in the morning. She knew the answer.

“It’s good,” he nodded between bites.

Yathar joined them and began systematically stuffing his face. Just as Shaundar relished every slice and portion, he was reasonably sure that Yathar had no idea what his food tasted like. He was making sure to put as much of it as possible into his stomach as quickly as he could.

Selena came running in. “They’re landing!” she announced.

Shaundar broke character by quickly inhaling the rest of his plate and slamming back some morning coffee with Yathar. It was still hot enough to burn his mouth. He swore. But then he and Yathar headed out the door to help unload. He remembered to kiss his mother on the cheek as he left. This was not something he remembered to do all the time lately and he was glad, later on, that he had done so. Her smile was radiant like the moon.

There was something about this that reminded Shaundar of being a little boy, when he and Selena would run out to “help their father unload”; which of course meant getting in the way and pestering him for stories, treats and gifts. He didn’t often remember childhood these days

– it seemed so long ago and far away, like it had happened to someone else – and it was a good feeling. He smiled a little.

Laeroth waved to them as they approached the docks. Shaundar returned it a little uneasily. He wasn't sure how he should react to him today.

"Figured I would come and lend a hand," he explained to Shaundar cheerfully.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

Laeroth shrugged. "I've got an hour."

Shaundar nodded and held out his hand to Yathar, who was sticking a cigar into his mouth. Yathar gave him one, and Shaundar lit them both.

The *Ruatri* landed and Lord Sunfall stepped out, followed by Uncle Madrimlian. The boys saluted automatically.

Vice Admiral Sunfall looked steadily at his sons. "I'm amazed to see you up before noon," he said dryly.

Yep, that was pretty much what Shaundar had expected. He curled his lip. "I'm glad you have such faith in us, sir," he snarled.

Lord Sunfall sighed. "Thank you for coming out to help, lads."

Uncle Madrimlian smiled at them. "*Quessira*, I may have something that will cheer you up." He brought out a long wooden box. When he opened it, they saw a gleaming silver hand on the end of a silver forearm resting inside on sheepskin.

Yathar studied it with wide, curious eyes. "That's really neat," he said after a few moments. "How does it work?"

"The artificer tells me that you just attach it to your arm and speak the command word, and it fastens on until you say it again; unless someone dispels it, of course," Madrimlian explained. "He also wanted me to extend his apologies that it took so long. He tells me that fingers can be difficult, and then you gained so much weight in that short time that he had to make some adjustments."

Yathar fished it out of the box it was nestled in. It looked like some kind of weird metal spider from this angle, its fingers curling like legs. "What's the command word?" he asked.

"It's on the inside where it attaches," replied Madrimlian. Yathar turned it around to look, then spoke the incantation and pressed it to the stump of his arm. It shifted slightly to connect itself with a sucking noise, and the fingers came to life like a bizarre wind-up toy.

Yathar smiled and flexed his new hand. He hooked the first and second digits and fished the cigar out of his mouth. This seemed to

amuse him and he laughed out loud. "How dexterous is this?" he wanted to know.

"I'm given to understand," Madrimlian smiled, "that it should work almost exactly like your natural hand. It's even warm to the touch."

He put the palm against his cheek, the cigar burning away between the fingers. "So it is," he agreed. "Warm metal. Weird." He chuckled happily. "Thanks for bringing it, Uncle Madrimlian! Let's get this flitter unloaded!"

For the rest of the morning Yathar took great pleasure in taking on tasks that required two hands to accomplish successfully, like hauling awkward oversized crates; even when the biceps on his right arm started quivering in protest against labour they hadn't done in years.

The afternoon was much less jovial. Everyone except Laeroth and Selena, who had gone off to school, went back to the Sunfall Manor for lunch and drinks. Lord Sunfall took off his boots and loosened his collar and poured himself a brandy to go with the meal. He turned his gaze to Shaundar and he announced, "So now that Yathar has his new arm, you two have been offered a post on the *Ruamarillys* with your Uncle Madrimlian. Marine Commander and Lead Jammer, if you want it." He beamed at them with the smug expression of a professor bestowing a diploma.

"I need extra hands after the battle near the Colour Spray Nebula," Madrimlian elaborated. "Your seniority and combat experience warrant command positions in my estimation, and the Admiral agrees." He smiled too.

It really was an excellent opportunity – better than elven youths should have had the right to hope for, really – but panic rose like acid in Shaundar's throat. "I don't think I'm ready to go back to active service yet," he admitted.

"Me neither," Yathar chimed in with a glance at Shaundar, looking relieved.

Madrimlian nodded, unsurprised, but Lord Sunfall's piercing hawk-like eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. The grip on his brandy glass tightened for just a moment. Shaundar recognized the signs and he almost welcomed it. Here it was, at last.

"Shaundar," he began, "when are you going to get on with your life?"

Shaundar shook his head. "I don't know," he said honestly.

Lord Sunfall downed the rest of his drink and struck the table with the glass, as though for emphasis. His golden eyes shone with an intensity that would have frightened Shaundar once. Not so now. "Listen, boy," he growled, "you can't drink all night and lie around in bed all day! You're wasting your life!"

“It’s my life to waste,” Shaundar snarled back.

Shaundar’s father set his jaw in that characteristic stubborn Sunfall fashion and he got to his feet. “Ruavel . . .” Lady Sunfall began cautiously, reaching out a hand to touch his shoulder. “Stay out of this, Selene,” he snapped back. “This is long overdue.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Shaundar. He was on his feet now too and his expression matched his father’s. His blue eyes were blazing like supernovas.

“Shaundar,” he spat, “you need to stop moping around here feeling sorry for yourself! You have forgotten your duty to the elven people! You swore an oath, a sacred trust . . .”

Shaundar would remember later that his father had continued speaking, but at this point white rage filled his head and his vision blurred with the intensity of it. There was no conscious decision to do it, but as he howled in inarticulate rage he picked up his glass and threw it through the liquor cabinet. The glass panelling shattered and fragments exploded everywhere. The coffee table soon followed it. The antique cabinet, which was made of duskwood from lost Cormanthor, splintered into flinders with a horrible crash as the solid oak table went through it. Liquor exploded into the air in an acrid spray that was the colour of blood. The brandy glass that Shaundar’s father had been drinking from fell to the carpet intact, but lay on its side as though wounded.

“Duty!” whispered Shaundar, his face pale as death and his eyes full of fury. “Duty!” And a stream of vitriol that he didn’t know he had been harbouring spewed out of him like pus being squeezed from a wound. “You think I don’t know about *duty*? After all this time, this is what you think of me? You think I don’t remember the Oath I took?” His eyes rolled back in his head and he recited, “‘I, Shaundar Sunfall, do swear by the Sword of Corellon Larethian to serve the *Tel’Quessir* with arm, sword, bow and spell to the best of my ability. I will, if necessary, lay down my life in defence of the People and follow the commands of my superior officers and the royalty of elven nations as best as I am able, until I hang my sword upon the Tree of Swords and Jewels in Arvandor.’”

“That’s how it went, wasn’t it?” he continued as Lord Sunfall stared at him in stunned horror and Lady Sunfall started to cry. “Now you tell me, *my lord Admiral*, exactly how I have failed to uphold this Oath? Tell me how I have failed in my duty to the elven people?” At the continued silence, Shaundar bellowed, “Well? TELL ME!”

“Shaundar,” his father started, but Shaundar wasn’t finished.

“You can’t, can you?” he hissed. “You have no idea how I have failed, but I’ve failed just the same, haven’t I? Nothing I’ve ever done has been good enough, has it? It’s always ‘try harder, do better, and that’s good, *but . . .*’ Well, I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment to you, father. I’m sorry I fuck everything up. And do you know what? I have nothing left to give. I’m a hollow shell. I’m empty inside. There’s nothing else.”

Still shaking with rage, he spat, “Go fuck yourself, *sir*,” and stormed upstairs to his bedroom.

He looked around at his familiar room; the window over the daybed, the portrait of his parents at their wedding, the portrait of Selena as a baby, the weapons rack, now adorned with his nicked and blooded short swords, the short bow and arrow on the wall, the chest of drawers, a portrait of Narissa, the bookshelf, the charcoal sketches, and the model of the RealmSpace system with the ships of the Fleet; which, of course, were now outdated. One by one, he grabbed all of the ship models and hurled them out the window with all the force he could muster. He decided suddenly that he just couldn’t be there anymore. He began to shove things into his magical haversack. With the exception of the portrait of his parents, he smashed anything that he didn’t want to keep.

Yathar came up to watch him wreck his room. “What in the Nine Hells are you doing?” he demanded.

“Leaving,” Shaundar spat. “I’m leaving.”

“Okay,” Yathar nodded, and he began to gather up his things too.

Together the young gentlemen stormed past Lord and Lady Sunfall and Captain Madrimlian. Shaundar’s father reached a hand out to him. “Listen, boy . . .” he said now more gently, but Shaundar was done listening. Still speechless with rage, he held up his hand to stop whatever

was coming and fixed the Vice Admiral with a glare that would have withered an oaken wood. Lord Sunfall shrunk back from him, defeated. And with that, Shaundar Sunfall left the home of his parents, never to return.

He went to the Gray Leaf Inn. He had no shortage of money between his pay and his allowance, so he rented a room. He didn't know how long he was going to stay. He didn't know when, or if, he was going back to active duty in the Navy. He didn't know if he would ever see his parents again. And tonight he was beyond caring.

Once his things were safely stored away, he went down to the bar and ordered a bottle of rum. He and Yathar polished it off in short order. They chased it with a second, and a third. Before long, Shaundar was drunker than he had ever been in his life. His last memory of the evening was of standing over the midden-pit, vomiting his guts out between swigs from the open neck of the rum bottle, and then everything dissipated into a red sodden haze that faded into black.

All that Shaundar could think of the next day for several hours was what a blessed release that darkness had been.

Shaundar had convinced Narissa to go back to school; something her father approved of heartily. So she completely missed the explosion at the Sunfall Manor. Like Selena and Laeroth, she walked into the

shattered sitting room after the fact, as the servants and the Sunfalls swept up and picked up splinters of wood and shards of glass.

She looked at the wreckage of the room, with the oak coffee table lying on its side in the corner, and a horrible chill stole over her. She could feel the absence of Shaundar in the house.

“What happened?” Narissa asked them, suddenly terribly afraid.

Lord Sunfall looked up when she spoke, but looked away again. Lady Sunfall just bowed her head. It was Captain Madrimlian who spoke. “There was an argument,” he explained. “Shaundar was very angry. He smashed the liquor cabinet and his room and he left. Moved out, I think. He took everything he didn’t destroy.”

Her heart started pounding. “Where did he go?” she demanded.

“He’s at the Gray Leaf Inn,” he informed Narissa reassuringly. “Let him be.”

She nodded, relieved. “Thank you,” she sighed. “I was afraid that . . .” She wiped away the tears that her eyes were leaking.

Laeroth put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll go to the Inn,” he offered. “I’ll make sure they stay out of trouble.” Narissa nodded to him gratefully and he left to do just that.

Captain Madrimlian stood up and brushed off his uniform trousers. “I’m just in the way here,” he said. “Why don’t we go out on the balcony with some tea?”

“I’ll help clean up,” Selena volunteered. She stared at the smashed cabinet and the heavy, broken, discarded coffee table. “Did he *throw* that?” she queried incredulously.

“Yes, dear,” her mother nodded.

“Wow,” she breathed, awestruck at this evidence of her brother’s physical strength.

“People can achieve some incredible feats of strength when they’re angry or frightened,” Captain Madrimlian offered by way of an explanation, “and I think your brother was both.” He nodded to Narissa, and they took some tea and went out onto the balcony together.

Narissa immediately burst into tears once the glass doors were safely closed and the Sunfalls could no longer hear. Madrimlian put a hand on her shoulder.

“I can’t stand this anymore!” she cried. “I thought everything would be okay as soon as they came home! What *happened*, Captain? What happened to them to cause this?”

Madrimlian bit his lip. Narissa pressed the issue. “You *do* know, don’t you? I didn’t think you did, but you do! Please, they’re like your

nephews, aren't they? If you love them, please tell me what happened, since they can't or they won't!"

"It's not pleasant," he warned. "They don't want you to know."

"But how can I help them if I don't?" she cried out in desperation and agony.

Madrimlian sighed. He said, "I'll tell you what I can. I hope that you *can* help them, Narissa. I don't know what else to do, either. And you must understand that what I know is stolen from glimpses of their thoughts. They don't know that I know."

"I understand," she said, her eyes solemn. Madrimlian could see what Shaundar saw in those eyes. And he saw that she did, indeed, understand.

So he told her.

Shaundar didn't awaken the next day so much as return to consciousness. It was a reluctant return. He hurt everywhere. It wasn't the worst physical pain he had ever experienced – no, physical pain and Shaundar were no mere acquaintances now – but it certainly wasn't pleasant.

He was astonished to find that he was lying on a cot in an unfamiliar room. His aching, throbbing head first had trouble with the setting. Where was he? Why was he here?

More astonishing, someone was placing a cool cloth on his forehead. It felt like the touch of Arvandor. He looked up and saw, of all people in the world, Laeroth Oakheart. He looked at him quizzically. Then a wave of nausea struck him.

Without a word Laeroth provided a bowl, one that already had something foul caked to its sides, and Shaundar puked into it for several minutes. Laeroth gently held his head and made sure none of the vomit got on the blankets.

“Thank you,” Shaundar gasped at last as he fell back into his pillow, trembling and exhausted.

Studying him with appraising eyes, Laeroth lifted a glass of water to his mouth. “Drink this slowly,” he advised. “Your stomach isn’t going to want it, but do it anyway and eventually you’ll feel better.” As Shaundar reached to obey he was cautioned, “Just little sips.”

Shaundar complied. The water was lukewarm. When taken slowly, it actually did help.

“When you can hold that down,” Laeroth promised, “I’ll bring you some willow bark tea. Should take the edge off of the headache, anyway.”

“Where’s Yathar?” Shaundar asked him with some concern.

“Sleeping it off over there,” he replied, indicating a far corner of the dark room. Shaundar looked and saw Yathar’s unconscious form draped over a second cot. He was snoring.

“Leave him sleep then,” Shaundar recommended. “He needs it.” Shaundar could now see, as things came into focus between the red pounding flashes of pain in his head, that the shades in the room had been firmly drawn and sheets had even been carefully wadded around their edges to keep the room safely dark, like a womb. “What are you doing here?” he wanted to know. It came out more aggressively than he had intended.

Laeroth didn’t take offense. “Narissa sent me to make sure you didn’t get into too much trouble,” he explained.

“Ah,” Shaundar grunted. He cast a thin smile in Laeroth’s direction. “I don’t remember most of last night after I came to the bar. We didn’t, did we?”

“No, you got into more trouble when you were sober, I think,” Laeroth assured him. “Mostly you and Yathar did your best to pickle your livers in rum, swore and cried. I think you would have picked fights if the opportunity had arisen, but I warned people away and so did the bartender.” He frowned. “You might want to apologize to him, though. He didn’t get a lot of business aside from you two last night.”

Shaundar nodded, contrite. He would indeed apologize and spot the innkeeper a few gold pieces for his trouble. “How do you know how to do all this?” he asked. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

Laeroth grimaced. “My mom,” he divulged honestly. “She didn’t take Garan’s death well.” He met Shaundar’s sympathetic eyes and added, “Believe me, this is an improvement. And she doesn’t do it all the time, just once in a while.”

“I’m glad you came,” he said gratefully to Laeroth. “I’m glad Narissa didn’t. I – I don’t want her to see me like this.” He fought back tears. That was all he needed, to weep out what liquid he hadn’t pissed out with the alcohol last night. He sipped at more water instead.

Laeroth sighed. “I’m not sure this is the right time, Shaundar, but I want to talk to you about Narissa.”

Shaundar nodded slightly, even though it set his aching skull to pounding. He had been expecting something like this. “You love her, don’t you?” he burst out.

“Yes,” Laeroth confirmed. “Yes, I’ve loved Narissa since we were children. Like you.” He chuckled, just a little bit ruefully. “But she doesn’t love me. That’s not what I want to talk to you about.”

“Okay,” murmured Shaundar warily. This was not what he had anticipated. “Then what is this about?”

"Maybe I'll get you that willow bark tea first," Laeroth decided. "You seem to be managing the water. I'll be back in a few minutes." He wet the cloth again, squeezed it and put it back on Shaundar's forehead before he left the room.

Shaundar lay there in the dark, and through the fog he considered his actions of the previous night and was ashamed. None of what he had said to his father was untrue, but he had really hurt his mother and there had been no need to trash the house. Why had he done that? Why was he so damn *angry* all the time? His father really did have a point, damn it. When was he just going to get on with his life? What kind of coward was he, that after almost two and a half years away from the action (including Raven Talon, of course,) he couldn't seem to bring himself to get back to fighting the War?

Laeroth returned, and compassionately he had mingled the willow bark with peppermint. Not only would it mitigate the nasty bitter taste of the medicinal willow, but it would lower his fever and settle his stomach.

"That smells great," Shaundar smiled with recovering enthusiasm. "Thank you."

"Sip that too," Laeroth encouraged. "Your stomach won't want that right away either."

Shaundar figured that he knew what he was talking about and listened. He found that the tea was slightly sweetened with honey too.

Laeroth went to Yathar and studied him, then inclined his head once in grim satisfaction and returned to the side of Shaundar's cot.

"He's okay?" Shaundar fretted.

"Oh yeah, he's fine," Laeroth assured him. "I think I'll leave the tea though. He'll have a thick head when he wakes up, too. By the way, tell me when you start feeling that willow bark and then we'll talk if you're up to it."

"We could talk now if you like," volunteered Shaundar. He thought it was unfair to leave Laeroth waiting and hovering.

But Laeroth smiled and shook his head. "No, you'll want your wits about you and I think that's only fair. And don't feel obligated to talk to me. I want to do this soon but I can wait until you're ready."

So they sat in companionable silence for several minutes. Maybe it was as long as half an hour. Laeroth did disappear for a couple of minutes during that time but he came back. Shaundar lit himself a pipe while he waited for the medicine to work.

When the red pounding in his head had diminished to a dull throb, he looked to Laeroth and said, "Okay, I'm ready."

Laeroth came back to the cot. He was silent, gazing in an unfocused way into his folded hands, as though considering how to begin. At last he started with, "I don't know what happened to you while you were MIA. No one really does, I think. We have some guesses. Some of them are better informed than others. I think it's evident that the orcs starved you, for instance, and we're reasonably certain you were tortured. Is that so, Shaundar? Were you guys tortured?" Shaundar closed his eyes and nodded. Laeroth simply returned the nod without comment and continued. "I think it's reasonable to expect that healing will take time. But you need to get it together for Narissa's sake." He saw Shaundar's wince and added quickly, "I don't mean what your father means. I mean that you need to stop shutting Narissa out. You need to talk to her and tell her how you really feel, whether you think she wants to hear it or not."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Shaundar asked him. "Shutting her out?"

"That's what she thinks you're doing," he amended. "And I think maybe she's right. You have to talk to somebody. If not her, then who?"

He hung his head. "I don't want to taint her with the things I've seen."

Laeroth said, "I think she's stronger than you think. And if you don't let her in, you're going to drive her away."

Silence fell between them for a moment, and then Shaundar exclaimed, “Why are you telling me this? If you love her, don’t you want her to love you? Wouldn’t it be better if I weren’t in the picture?”

Laeroth winced. He licked his lips. “That’s closer to the truth than I want to admit,” he confessed. “I’ve been very jealous of you, Shaundar, for more than just that reason. But you didn’t see her when you were gone. I love her, but her heart isn’t mine; it’s yours. So I want to see her happy.” He met Shaundar’s eyes. “Does that make sense?”

Shaundar smiled faintly. He was pleased by Laeroth’s answer. It was how he felt about Narissa. He wanted to be with her, but more than that, he wanted her to be happy, even if that happiness didn’t involve him. “Yes, it really does.” He reached out and clasped Laeroth’s hand. “Thank you. Thanks for being a friend.”

Laeroth grinned back. “You don’t have to thank me for that, Shaundar. I’m pleased to call you ‘friend.’” He stood up. “I’ve had the barmaids draw you a bath. You’re going to want to clean up a little before you see Narissa. You smell like a wine cellar.”

Shaundar chuckled. “Sure, I’ll do that. Thanks again.” He looked to Yathar’s snoring body draped over the cot. “You’ll stay with him until he wakes up?”

“You bet,” Laeroth promised.

As Shaundar and Yathar drowned their sorrows at the Gray Leaf, Narissa cried herself to sleep. She was dismayed and horrified by the things that Captain Madrimlian told her. It wounded her deeply to think of how they had been so badly hurt. She supposed she could understand why Shaundar was so distant. She wished that she had tried harder to discourage them from going off to war.

She went to school, because she knew Shaundar would want her to, but not a single thing stayed in her head all day. She fought tears most of the morning. Seeing her struggling, a well-meaning girl-friend advised during lunch, “Ditch him, Narissa. He’s bad news.” That turned on the waterworks again and she sobbed so long that she missed the bell entirely. Instead of going back to class, she gave up and went home.

Having had such rotten reverie she fell asleep without intending to as she rocked in the rocking chair in her sitting room, her arms clasped around herself as though trying to give herself an encouraging hug. When she started awake later on, the sun was going down.

But the rest had been healing, and she awoke with an idea and renewed determination.

One – she loved Shaundar with all of her heart.

Two – she believed that Shaundar still loved her too, but was so wounded that he didn’t know how to deal with it.

Three – irrationally, Shaundar was harbouring deep feelings of shame and guilt for what had happened to him. Irrationally, he honestly no longer believed himself worthy of love.

Four – she needed to show him, in a way that could not be denied, that she still loved him, whether he felt he was worthy of that or not.

So Narissa dressed herself as she used to when she went to wait for Shaundar at the docks as he came home from touring with the *Aerdrie's Pride*. She did up her hair, bathed, perfumed, and put on an outfit that she knew that Shaundar liked.

Her eyes were puffy and red from weeping, so she took silver spoons, ran them under cold water from the pump, and put them on her eyes to reduce the swelling, as one of her school friends had showed her once. When she met her gaze in the mirror, she thought that you could hardly tell. And that was good, because Shaundar would know otherwise that she had been crying and this would add to his shame and guilt.

She met her own sea-foam eyes and was pleased to see that her gaze was fierce and steady. She touched her goldheart charm. "Courage, Narissa Alastrarra," she told herself firmly, "and don't you dare flinch."

With that, she went to reclaim her betrothed from the edge of the Abyss.

So it was that when Shaundar came out of the bath, cleaned up and dressed in comfortable civilian clothing, Narissa was waiting for him.

“Hi,” he said shyly.

“Hi,” she murmured back.

They looked at each other for a long moment; and then Narissa smiled and reached out to take Shaundar’s hand. She brought it to her mouth and kissed it, noting the marks on his knuckles that she thought might have come from crossing swords with the enemy, but not drawing attention to them.

“It’s a beautiful evening,” she pointed out gently with a glance at the clear, purple twilit sky. “Would you take a walk with me?”

He smiled. “I would love to,” he accepted happily. “I need to tell Laeroth that I’m leaving, though. He’s keeping an eye on Yathar for me. He’s . . .” He looked down at his feet and then steeled himself to meet her gaze. “Well, to be honest, we were really drunk last night and Yathar’s still sleeping it off.”

“No he’s not,” Narissa assured him as she fell in step with him, side-by-side. “He’s awake now. Laeroth is taking care of him. I told them my plans. He’s in good hands.”

Shaundar accepted this with a nod and the two of them stepped out into the summer night. “Laeroth is a good elf,” he said with feeling. “He really grew up, didn’t he?”

“I guess we all do,” she returned with a smile.

They walked together in a pleasantly comfortable silence for a while. Shaundar listened to the crickets and the frogs chatter as dark began to set in. Monkeys gibbered conversationally in the distance. The air was full of the scent of roses, jasmine and starglow, and stubborn, late-blooming wisteria.

Shaundar realized that Narissa was heading for the willow grove when they came to the edge of the wood. The creek burred soothingly and the leafy branches enfolded them, as though they were cloaking them from the eyes of the world. Shaundar approved.

“I’m sorry,” he burst out suddenly.

“Sorry? For what?” she asked.

He looked at his boots. “I haven’t been myself lately. Laeroth tells me I’ve been distant and cold towards you. I really don’t mean to be.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m a mess,” he confessed. “I feel so lost.” He choked on the last word and blinked back tears. “I feel like I’ve lost myself. I don’t know how to find my way back. I need your help.” He wiped angrily at the tears that escaped his eyes.

Narissa wanted to burst into tears herself but she knew she was walking a delicate tightrope with his feelings, and one mistake would destroy everything. So instead, she took both his hands and made him look her in the eye. “I want you back, Shaundar,” she told him with all the power of her heart. “I love you and I want you back. I will do anything I can to help you.”

Shaundar let out a strangled cough that sounded as though he were choking on something, and he crushed her to his chest hard enough that it restricted her ability to breathe. His arms were even stronger than she remembered them. “I love you too Narissa,” he whispered. “With all my heart, I do.”

She tilted his face so that he was looking directly into her eyes. She ran her hand over his quivering jaw. “Kiss me,” she begged him. His periwinkle blue eyes sparkled and he kissed her as though his life depended on breathing her breath. His mouth tasted of the salt of his tears. To him, hers tasted like dewdrops in the spring.

Who began caressing who first? It was impossible to say. When he pressed her body to his, Shaundar sensed a pliability that he had never felt from Narissa before. She melted under his touch like mountain snow in a spring sunrise. Her mouth was ripe and hot and as full of eagerness as Shaundar’s own, completely open and yielding to his kiss. Her scent was as inebriating as the strongest *quesstiasa*, mingling with the roses and the wisteria. He felt her firm breasts pressing against his chest and felt himself grow hard.

She pulled away and gazed into his eyes with unabashed love and desire. “Make love to me,” she demanded with those eyes as deep and as dark as the oceans of Karpri.

“But your father . . .” Shaundar reminded her in a throttled groan. His lust and his need were a tangible force. He had wanted to hear those words for so very long . . .

Narissa wanted to weep again as she realized that even though he was drowning and he needed this desperately to make him whole, he would still struggle to protect her honour. Her heart lurched with the overwhelming force of her love for this noble, honourable and amazingly strong elf. “To the Hells with my father,” she whispered. “Love me, Shaundar.”

He studied her eyes for a long moment, just to be sure that she meant what she said. She smiled and declined her head on her delicate neck just once.

She expected to be crushed again; but she wasn’t. Instead, he let out a sigh that made her shiver in her heart and her womanly parts at the same time. It was a sigh of relief, of joy, of desire, of hope.

Shaundar touched her flaxen silk hair in his fingers, wondering at its golden beauty as it shimmered like a spiderweb in the light of the rising moon. He brought it to his face and breathed deeply. Even it had that delicious smell that was Narissa. He started kissing her porcelain

face as though she really were the doll she appeared to be; fragile, delicate, and beautiful.

Ah, but his hands told a different tale. He ran them over the small of her back, down to her buttocks, rubbing and caressing in a way that was almost possessive. She felt the place between her legs open and bloom like a flower, and she could feel the warm, secret wetness there. Now it was she who kissed him with desire in her mouth. He moaned softly and pressed against her, and she could feel the stiff rod of his manhood against that damp flower. His dexterous fingers unfastened the latch-hooks on the front of her dress to reveal her breasts.

Shaundar marvelled at the gentle swell of those lovely, young breasts; golden skin and soft, peach-coloured nipples. He kissed each of them with the reverence due a holy idol, then cupped his hands around them and suckled them. She gasped aloud.

Narissa grasped his shirt in both hands and made to pull it over Shaundar's head.

He stopped and pulled away from her.

"No!" she protested bitterly. This startled him enough to freeze him in place. His expression was puzzled.

Narissa knew that this would be the defining moment, and she prayed that Hanali would help her to get it right. She gently pushed his canvas shirt up past his nipples to his armpits, where it bunched and

folded in on itself. “This is the body of a soldier,” she said. One by one, she kissed each and every single scar, from the smallest burn, flak, and whip mark to the claw rake. “These are battle scars,” she continued. “And I love them, each and every one. They were earned with honour. They mean that you are alive to come back to me.” She met his eyes again, and Shaundar thought they had never blazed with such passion. “I fell in love with a soldier,” she told him, “and I am proud to be the betrothed of *Quessir Teu’Ruan* Shaundar Sunfall, war hero.” She tugged at the shirt until he allowed her to pull it over his arms and head, and she made sure to kiss the slashing bite marks above his shellback tattoo, the ones he was the most ashamed of.

He started to cry. His tears were hot and fierce and he was helpless to stop them. He had never loved her so much as he did then. Maybe he could be healed after all.

The night was a little chilly by the side of the creek, but neither of them noticed as they fell to the ground together, and soon it was impossible to say where one ended and the other began.

When it was over, Narissa knelt at Shaundar’s side feeling the not entirely unpleasant throbbing of her given maidenhead, and watched his chest rise and fall as he drifted off to sleep. She ran her fingers gently over his body and wept tears of joy as he smiled. It was a smile of unconscious bliss, one she hadn’t seen since before the War. Happy, relieved, she pressed herself against him and curled up to drift off into reverie herself, knowing that at last, things were going to okay.

But she was wrong.

The door of the Block D barracks burst open and the building filled with orcs and ogres. Shaundar couldn't remember why they were there. Then he was being hauled out of the bunk with Sylria, Yathar, and to his horror, Narissa as well, and it came flooding back to him.

It wasn't going to happen! The enemy were not going to soil Narissa as he had been soiled! He kicked and bucked and screamed, but he was unable to free himself as the foul beasts descended upon first Sylria, then Yathar. Then they took Narissa in their vicelike grasp and pinned her to the ground, laughing mockingly at his howls and her cries as she called out his name. They started tearing off her clothes with their filthy clawed hands and biting her all over as her cries became more and more desperate. Over and over again she shrieked "Shaundar! Shaundar!" He struggled for all he was worth. He gave it everything he had; every last ounce of strength. The fiends dragged him across the floor and his yells degenerated into a desperate, inarticulate screech.

Then he was back on the *Vengeance* and the scro interrogator was holding his face under the water as his lungs struggled desperately for breath. He knew if he didn't manage to get his head above water soon he would drown. He came up roaring, his fists flailing. And he looked around and found that he was in the hollow, back on Nedethil,

and the water he was flying out of like a dark phoenix was their watering hole.

He started and stared all around him, completely bewildered and disoriented. Then he heard a sound that stopped his heart. It was the sound of Narissa sobbing as though she were terrified.

Shaundar's eyes found her collapsed in a heap at the side of the pool, shaking and pale. And to his utmost horror, she had scratch marks oozing blood on her breast, wrists and shoulder, and her lip and cheekbone were swelling.

He collapsed to his knees. "No," he whispered. His hands clutched at the sides of his face, and though he was completely unconscious of it at the time, his fingernails drew blood in little crescent moons from his jawline.

Narissa went on sobbing and shivering. Her hand wandered to her swelling lip and she started crying harder. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

Shaundar staggered to his feet and backed away from her, holding up his palms in a warding-off gesture. He had to get out of here. He had to get away from her before he could hurt her again.

He would never know how he got from the willow to the inn. He remembered none of it. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the cot in his rented room, naked and retching into the bowl he had used earlier.

“What happened?” Yathar demanded; but he couldn’t speak. If someone had handed him a knife in that moment, he would have thrust it into his throat without the least hesitation. But nobody did. Instead, Yathar tried to get the story out of him as he gibbered and blubbered. At last he fell to silence and simply stared at the wall blankly until the sun started to bleed light into the sky.

That’s when Lord Alastrarra found him.

He didn’t say a word at first. Eyes flashing, cheeks flushed with fury, he strode into the room and slapped Shaundar across the face as hard as he could. Shaundar’s head rocked backwards, but he didn’t fight or protest. He didn’t even resist. Perhaps if he had, things might have turned out differently; but that unresisting acceptance drained all the violence out of Admiral Alastrarra.

Yathar, however, was not nearly as compliant as his blood brother. He made his way to Shaundar’s side and growled, “I’ll ask you not to do that again, sir, or you’ll be wearing a splint to my court martial.”

The Admiral ignored Yathar almost completely. “You bastard,” he seethed. “You half-blooded waste of flesh. Numilor was right about you all along. I was starting to think that he was seeing what he wanted to see, but I see that I was wrong. The best thing you could have done for anybody would have been to stay dead. You destroy everything you touch.

“So I tell you this,” he continued. “If you touch my daughter again, Lieutenant Sunfall, I will exile you to the asshole of the Universe for the rest of your life. Someplace like Permafrost, perhaps.

“Do her and your beleaguered family a favour. Get off this planet and don’t come back.” And with that, he stormed out.

Yathar watched him leave, stunned, which was probably for the best, because by the time the cursing and vitriol started coming out of his mouth, the Admiral was long gone. This time it was Yathar who smashed things, until the poor innkeeper finally lost patience and threw them both into the street with their belongings.

But Shaundar did not curse or spew vitriol. His pallor was a deathly gray. Because he knew then that the Admiral was right. All those who had denounced him, who had called him useless or a ne’er-do-well; they were right.

He *was* a half-blooded waste of flesh.

He *did* destroy everything he touched.

The best thing he *could* have done was to stay dead.

“He’s right,” Shaundar told Yathar in a hollow voice.

“He’s not right,” Yathar insisted.

He met Yathar's eyes with an empty, horrified expression that chilled Yathar's blood. "I hit her," he said.

Yathar sucked in his breath. "You did what?"

"I hit her," he repeated. "I was having a nightmare and I hit her."

Yathar fell silent for a long moment. Then he howled a wordless cry of pure rage and punched his metal fist through the horse trough.

"I *hate* them!" he sputtered. "They've cursed us somehow! We're so messed up . . . I just want to flay every orc I see from stem to stern! Gods damn it, I want *revenge*, Shaundar!"

Shaundar agreed completely. Hatred rose like bile in his throat. Yes, the enemy had taken everything from them, and he wanted some *payback*.

Then the solution struck Shaundar between the eyes like a stone. The Admiral had suggested that he might be exiled to the "asshole of the Universe; someplace like Permafrost, perhaps."

He would choose his own exile. And he would make his worthless life mean something after all.

"Let's talk to Uncle Madrimlian, then," he proposed.

Madrimlian knew that the lads weren't joining the program for the right reasons. But he also knew that only the hope of revenge was keeping them both from descending into a black, perhaps suicidal despair. Neither one believed they had anything else left to live for; and maybe they didn't at that. He thought about it long and hard, even then uncertain that he was doing the right thing; but given the options, he agreed to take them on.

Narissa didn't know that when she set sail that night, the *Ruamarillys* was taking the elf she loved away. If she had, she would have run after them, telling them that she was sorry, that she knew that it had been an accident, that she had just been overwhelmed and frightened by the situation. If she had known what her father had said, she would have disowned him on the spot and begged Shaundar to take her with him. But she didn't know, and so the *Starflower* carried Shaundar and Yathar into the Void silently. No one came out to the pier to watch them go; no one at all.

That was about what Shaundar Sunfall expected, and felt he deserved.

Appendices

Appendix 1: *Espruar* Glossary

aerakiir - "starsinger" - the name of Blackjack's flitter.

Ahk'Faerna - (plural) "duty of Art" - once used to describe the army of wizards and sorcerers employed by the elves during the time of Cormanthyr and Myth Drannor as a whole; an *akh'faern* serves in the *Akh'Faer*.

alu'quesst - "water-nectar" - elven grog; see *quesstiasa*

alusfaen - blood; literally translated, "Water of Life."

alusfaen'inar - blood brother; those who have taken a blood brother oath are considered to be brothers as much as biological kin are. See also *teu'revanthas*.

Alu'Tel'Quessir - "people of the water" - sea elves, adapted to aquatic life

Ar'hakavarn - "high orc" - a scro. See *hakavarn*.

Ar'Tel'Quessir - "golden people" - sun or gold elves; *Ar'Tel'Quess* (adjective) "of the sun elves"

Arvador - the elven afterlife; heaven, where the gods dwell. It is thought of as a beautiful sylvan forest.

av - "aye" - a short form of *avavaen* used in the Elven Imperial Navy and other elven naval forces, which carries much more clearly across the length of a ship; see *avavaen*

av, quessir - "aye, sir" - see *av*

avar - father, daddy

avara - mother, mom, mommy

avavaen - yes; see *av*

Arshaalth - "high axe" - a rank within the *Akh'Velehr* and *Akh'Faer* between *Nikerym* and *Kerym*. Roughly the equivalent of a 1st Lieutenant.

beryn fin - "time of discovery" - elven adolescence. Since it lasts for several decades, elven youth can hardly be called "teenagers," although this period in their lifespan is roughly equivalent. An elven adolescent is referred to as a *berynfiness*; plural *berynfinessi*. See also *malawain*.

daoine - "starshine" - the name of Garan Oakheart's flitter.

elvarquisst - a sacred elven wine, used for ceremony and ritual by the elves but prized by all for its quality. It is ruby-colored and magically distilled from sunshine and rare fruits. "Utterly smooth, the liquor is nonetheless flecked with gold and has an iridescence of both color and flavor. It is highly prized at all times, but in the autumn rituals it is savored as if it is the gift of one final, perfect summer day." Translated literally, "green-father-wine," perhaps implying a correlation to Rillifane Rallathil.

Espruar - the name for the elven language and alphabet.

etriel - 1. a noble elf-sister, a term of respect used for a noble elven lady or maid 2. she 3. female, a female 4. a title of respect within an elven military force, equivalent to "ma'am"

Etriellyth - "Little Lady," or "Queenie" - an affectionate nickname for the *Nikym d'Quex Etrielle*, the Man-o-War on which Shaundar served.

Evaliir'Kerym - "(great) song of the blade" or "bladesong" - a uniquely elven martial art that combines swordsmanship with arcane talent - practitioners are called *kerymaeri*, or "bladesingers".

ghaatil'ren - "going West" - the term given to the end of an elven lifespan; when an Elder elf, with the moonbows of Sehanine in her eyes, is called home to *Arvandor*, she simply walks off, travels "West," and disappears, never to be seen again.

hakavarn - "orc" - from *hakar*, meaning "enemy," and *vaarn*, meaning "evil". The roots of the word make the elven view on orcs abundantly clear.

Hinue ath Tel'Kerym - "Song of the Blade" - the manual that details the code and practice of bladesong, a uniquely elven martial art; see *Evaliir'Kerym*

kerymaera - "bladesinger" - someone who practices the art of bladesong (*Evaliir'Kerym*); plural is *kerymaeri*; adjective is *kerymaer*

kholiast - "mistress of stones" - a complex gold elven card game involving more than 1000 cards and a complex system of counting.

Khov'Aniless - "the Trio Nefarious" - the name given to the three mycaloths Aulmpiter, Gaulguth and Malimshaer who helped to rally the Army of Darkness that destroyed Cormanthor and Myth Drannor.

malawain - "unawakened" - in elven culture, an elf is considered an adolescent, or *berynfiness*, until s/he has a spiritual epiphany. Those who pass the age of majority (about 100 years) without having such an epiphany are called the *malawain*. They are viewed with some pity by other elves and often don't fit in. See also *beryn fin*.

Nikym - "dagger" - a title of rank in the *Akh'Velehr* or *Akh'Faer* given to the commander of a section, below *Shaalth* and above *lolaa*. Roughly the equivalent of a Platoon Leader.

Nikym d'Quex Etrielle - "The Queen's Dirk" - name of the ship on which Shaundar, Yathar, Garan and Sylria served under Captain Yvoleth.

niri - "little bears" - a large rodent native to Nedethil, about the size of a marmot; singular is nire (pronounced nee-RAY)

N'Tel-Quess - "not-People" - the term that the elves use to describe non elven races. See also *Tel'Quessir*, *Sha'Quessir*.

quessir - 1. people 2. a term of respect used for an honorable elven male, often of noble lineage; "my lord," or "sir" 3. he 4. male, a male 5. a title of respect within an elven military force, equivalent to "sir"

quesstiasa - "nectar wine" - a potent elven spirit distilled under moonlight from fruit nectar and honey; used by the Imperial Elven Navy as part of their grog mixture instead of rum; see *alu'quesst*.

quinpah - a light elven dessert pastry, crispy on the outside and soft and buttery on the inside, glazed with honey.

reverie - a trance state that elves use instead of sleep to rest and rejuvenate, in which they often sit instead of lying down, and their eyes often remain open. This is one of the ways in which elves maintain clear memories of all their experiences despite their very long lives.

Rualith - "little star" - Shaundar's childhood name. It is customary among some elves to give a child an affectionate nickname in childhood.

Ruamarillys - "starflower" - the name of Captain Madrimlian's elven Man-o-War ship.

ruan - "starhand" - a sailor of the stars; a spelljammer. See *Appendix 3: Ranks of the Imperial Elven Navy*

shalaquin - a long-necked elven instrument somewhat akin to a vielle. It is plucked or strummed like a lute, and string tension (tuning) is controlled by a ratcheting wheel.

Sha'Quessir - "elf-friend" or "friend of the People" - a non elf honored by a place of status and respect in elven society, usually by virtue of some great deed done for the Elven People or their allies.

Tel'Quessir - "the People" - the name that the elves use for themselves.
See also *N'Tel-Quess*, *Sha'Quessir*.

Teu'Tel'Quessir - "silver/spirit people" - silver or moon elves;
Teu'Tel'Quess (adjective) "of the moon elves"

teu'revanthas - "soul-friend" - a friend of the spirit, so close as to be almost family. See also *alusfaen'inar*.

Appendix 2: Orcish Glossary

gurt - "twig" - racial slur for an elf, referring to their thin and frail builds when compared to orcs and *scro*.

harak'cha - "honourable foe" - an honourific given to an enemy who has defeated one in honourable combat. The title is one of respect and carries an implication that the *scro* or orc who uses it will obey the one called by it, within reason.

na'kor - "blood brother" - a sworn blood brother and brother-in-arms. This term has great meaning in *scro* society. A *na'kor* is considered to be your closest kin, and loyalty to your *na'kor* is the highest virtue there is among the *scro*, having precedence above all other oaths and fealty-bonds.

scro - the name that the orcs descended from Dukagsh use for themselves. They tend to be stronger, more intelligent, and more cultured than average orcs.

spirra - "dandelion(s)" - a racial slur for an elf or elves, referring to the dandelions that they ate whenever possible in Raven Talon Prison Camp and to the fact that they grow where they are not wanted, like weeds.

tarrak - "war" - an extended conflict between multiple peoples or nations.

tarrak'zabu - "warpriest" - a priest who serves Dukagsh, founder of the *scro*, trained in both arcane and divine magic. Only males may serve in this role. See *zabu*.

toregkh - a necklace of teeth taken from enemies whom a *scro* has killed by biting out their throats with his tusks. Though this practice is considered barbaric by many other cultures, to the *scro* it is a sign of respect for the foe so slain.

zabu - "priest" or "shaman" - a name given to a male orc or *scro* who serves divine powers. See *tarrak'zabu*.

Appendix 3: Ranks of the Imperial Elven Navy

The Imperial Elven Navy is structured very similarly to the British Royal Navy of the Napoleonic Wars.

There is a firm division between the officers and the enlisted. Officers tend to come from elven nobility, while the enlisted come from commoner elves. The only exception to this is if a common elf distinguishes himself in combat; but at that point, if he is receiving a promotion to an officer's rank, odds are that he is also receiving a knighthood (or equivalent) from an elven Crown somewhere; which makes him noble.

There are several officers' ranks but only two enlisted ranks.

Officers:

Grand Admiral - *Ar'Cor'Ruan* "highest (gold) legendary starhand" - this rank is given only to one elf; the commander of the Imperial Elven Navy

Admiral - *Ary'Cor'Ruan* "high (silvery) legendary starhand" - this rank is given to the commander of a fleet in each individual crystal sphere

Vice Admiral - *Teu'Cor'Ruan* "high (silver) legendary starhand" - an Admiral, in a larger fleet, will have two sub-Admirals who answer to her. The *Teu'Cor'Ruan*, or Vice Admiral, commands the portion of a fleet that engages the enemy in combat. This position is given to the sub-Admiral with the most seniority.

Rear Admiral - *Cor'Ruan* "legendary starhand" - an Admiral, in a larger fleet, will have two sub-Admirals who answer to her. The *Cor'Ruan*, or Rear Admiral, commands the portion of a fleet that remains behind while the first portion engages the enemy in combat. This position is given to the sub-Admiral with the least seniority.

Captain - *Ar'Ruan* "high (gold) starhand" - the commander of a ship. The Captain designated to command a flotilla or other small group of ships, though technically not of any higher rank than any other Captain, is referred to as a Commodore (*Ar'Ruan'Enna*, or "high starhand one").

First Mate - *Ary'Ruan* "high (silvery) starhand" or, more commonly, *Aia'Ruan* "second starhand" - the second-in-command of a ship.

Lieutenant - *Teu'Ruan* "high (silver) starhand" - most of the senior officers aboard a ship will carry this rank.

Midshipman - *Sy'Ruan* "copper starhand" - this is the most junior of the officer's ranks, assigned to the children of officers when they join a ship, and automatically conferred on anyone designated as a spelljammer.

Enlisted:

Master or Commander - *Ruan'lian* "starhand-master"; sometimes *Ruan'lianna* "starhand-mistress" (only correct for a female commander, though *Ruan'lian* is also correct) - this rank is given to the enlisted leadership; for example, the Boatswain, the Artillery Commander, the Sail Master, etc.

Enlisted Crew - *Ruan* "starhand" - you need to be considered experienced crew to carry this rank, however.

Green Crew - *Koeh'lyth* "earth-child" - until elven crew have earned the designation of *Ruan*, they are called by this elven variation of "groundling"; unless, of course, they are officers' children and begin their careers as *Sy'Ruani*.

Appendix 4: *Sunfall / Durothil Family Tree*

