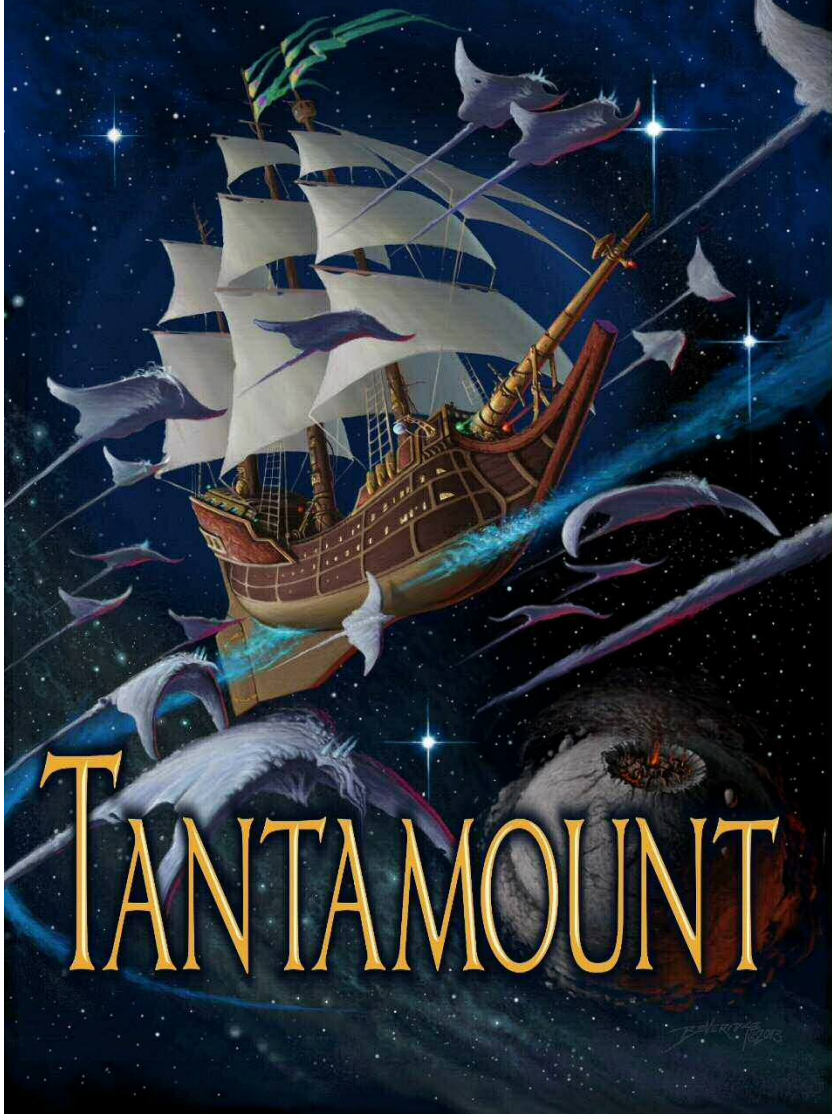


THOMAS J. RADFORD



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TYCHE BOOKS LTD.

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Published by Tyche Books Ltd.
www.TycheBooks.com

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First Tyche Books Ltd Edition 2014

Print ISBN: 978-0-9918369-9-4
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-928025-00-9

Cover Art by James F. Beveridge
Cover Layout by Lucia Starkey
Interior Layout by Ryah Deines
Editorial by M. L. D. Curelas

Author photograph by Devin Hart

CIP data has been requested

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Any resemblance to persons living or dead would be really cool, but is purely coincidental.

DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to my grand-father, Phil Wright, who inspired my love of story telling. He doesn't read fantasy. But he said he might read this one.

CHAPTER 1

Kitchen cutlery burst through the wall, rupturing it and showering splinters across the room on the other side. A knife struck the wall, digging into the wood only inches above where Nel's head rested in her hammock. Her eyes focused in shock on the blade, still shaking with momentum, arms grabbing for the sides of the hammock and fighting the urge to sit bolt upright in bed. She rolled to the side, got tangled in the hammock and hung upside down for a moment before dropping to the cabin floor. Yells streamed through the wooden panels of her cabin walls. Or what was left of them. Swearing aloud herself, Nel got her hands to the floor under her and started to stand up. Another projectile rocketed through the hole in the wall and Nel dropped back to the floor, sprawling ungracefully with her face against dust and grit. She spat it out furiously, her eyes going to the unwelcome addition to her cabin. A fork.

A *fork*. The tines were embedded in the wall, the handle still quivering from the force of the impact. A fork. That made sense, the galley was right next to Nel's cabin, sandwiched between her own and the captain's. Nel stared at it, eyes narrowing.

“Gabbi!” she shouted pulling her legs up and crawling towards the cabin door. The yelling continued unabated; she could make out at least three distinct voices, all of them intertwined and trying to

drown out the others, rising higher and higher in an effort to be heard.

Nel stumbled out onto the deck as the ship pitched under her feet. She had to grab for the frame of the cabin doorway. More yelling and screaming outside, the crew grabbing for lines and purchase as the ship heaved, tossing them from their posts. The deck rolled under Nel's feet, tilting and shuddering. The whole horizontal plane shifted for a moment and Nel thought the ballast in the hold was going to go. She looked up at the stars, the sparkling pinpricks of light in the inky miasma that was deep space and waited for the world to turn topsy-turvy. However, the ballast and its artificial gravity held, keeping them all from being thrown overboard.

Gravity was a damned convenient thing to have in space. Murder to sail a ship without it.

Another crash came from the galley. Nel turned and glared that way. It sounded like every pot and pan inside the narrow room was being thrown around, which likely was not too far from the truth. However, if Gabbi's little temper tantrum was rocking the ship the way it felt like it was then Nel was going to put a stop to it. If that meant putting the boot into her cook then so much the better.

She took a step and the ship swayed again, pitching the other way and ending on a lean. The ballast was definitely shifting now, the ship's gravity plane with it. Nel made a dive for the galley and hooked the entry, pulling herself in and taking her first look at the commotion that had woken her.

The ship's cook, Gabbi, faced off against Nel's navigator. Gabbi was a small woman, dark and petite, if you were being polite. Rotund and stout if you weren't and chubby if you were being honest. Right now Gabbi's puffed up cheeks were red, but not from any sort of good humour—she was enraged and brandished a soup ladle in one hand to prove it. The ladle was making threatening motions towards her crewmate.

The crewmate in question was Loveland Quill, an unfortunate name that the navigator was sensitive about. Being a Kelpie, one of the non-human misfits on the *Tantamount's* roster, the snake-

skinned Quill literally wasn't the most likeable crewman aboard. This also wasn't the first time someone had turned violent on him. Right now Gabbi was trying to cram all of the ship's cooking utensils down the navigator's throat. Half a dozen long-handled copper pots circled around Gabbi's head, kept there by the sheer force of her will.

Bloody thaumatics, Nel thought grimly. Thaumatics was what people like Quill used to propel ships through air and space. Combined with the still shifting ballast in the ship's hull, thaumatics was what made travel between worlds possible. People who were strong enough used it to propel ships. People like Quill. People like Gabbi, who weren't quite that strong, could still move smaller things at a fair decent clip. Things like pots, pans, and the entire cutlery drawer embedded in Nel's wall.

All the smaller ammunition in the galley had already been expended, cutlery was scattered around the room, here and there, driven into the wall, the tables, even the floor. One of the long table benches floated in front of Quill, studded with sharp, pointy projectiles. While Quill didn't possess the thaumatic nuance to manage dozens of items like Gabbi, he could heft significantly larger and heavier objects, hence his responsibility for launching and landing the ship planet-side and keeping it moving in the void.

The pots circling Gabbi picked up speed, a dizzying spiral of cooking implements that began to peel off one by one and fly towards Quill. The navigator threw the bench in the way, pots ricocheting off the hardwood furniture.

"Stand fast!" Nel bellowed at the top of her lungs. Her order startled the two combatants so sufficiently that Gabbi lost her concentration; pots, pans and the odd surviving spoon dropped out of the air. Quill kept his defences up, peering cautiously out around his improvised shield. Across the galley, a bald and wrinkly head popped up from behind the range, framed by two oversized ears. Jack, Korrigan Jack, Gabbi's burly kitchen assistant.

"Skipper," Gabbi started to say. There was a crash as Quill released his grip on the bench and it fell to the floorboards. The noise it made was thunderous, but hardly enough to shake the whole ship. Nel's gaze focused on it, feeling sick inside.

It wasn't Gabbi and Quill that had been making the ship rock.

“You two . . .” Nel left the threat unfinished, unwilling to waste any more time on them. She turned away from the aerial battlefield that was the galley and began to sprint the length of the ship, heading for the bridge, passing confused crew members on the way. She didn't stop to ask any of them what was going on; she needed to see for herself.

Nel found the bridge just as confused as the rest of the ship, but at least the captain was there. Horatio Phelps turned at the arrival of his first officer. His dishwater grey hair was a mess and he was still in his nightclothes, the overlong shirt flapping around his knees. He had been roused as surely as Nel herself and looked none the wiser for it. His baggy and sleep-ridden eyes seized on Nel with a sudden urgency she found deflating. Horatio obviously had no idea what was going on either.

“What's going on, Nel?” he called out, confirming her suspicions.

Nel shook her head, manhandling her captain aside to take over his vantage point. From the elevated bridge they could see the length of the ship. They could see for countless leagues in any direction, in fact, but being as they were in the deep void of space between planets there shouldn't have been anything to see at all. Unless they'd hit a freak solar storm. Some stray satellite maybe? No, such an impact would have been tossing the *Tantamount* like a bathtub toy or ripping a new hole in its hull. What then?

Debris. She could see it now. Flotsam. The mangled wreckage of what had once been another ship of the void. Like a fireside story, more details gradually emerged, becoming visible in the black misty miasma they sailed through. Shredded sails floated in the airless void, not stirred by so much as a flutter of breeze, broken spars splintered into jagged stakes, a mast broken in two but with some of its rigging still attached. Bits and pieces of the ship's paraphernalia hung off the rigging, pulleys and locks, hawsers and nets, like some mad artist's inertialess sculpture of a spider web.

“Hells,” Nel whispered. The ship she was looking at wasn't just dead and adrift—it had been smashed, utterly smashed, almost down to the last boards and nail. For the crew who had manned her,

the ship might as well have been in one of the nine hells. The void was often considered one of them.

The *Tantamount* shuddered again as a large piece of debris nudged it before ricocheting off into the deep, spinning slowly.

“Why wasn't anyone on watch?” Horatio demanded indignantly. “Where was Quill?”

“The galley,” Nel said shortly, not caring to explain right now. She had just seen something else in the wreckage. The crew.

She could make out a dozen or so bodies, scattered amongst the timbers of what had once been their vessel. They hung limp and motionless, drifting with the rest of the debris. They made Nel think of puppets, marionettes with severed strings. Some bodies were snagged in the wastrels, others floated free, grotesquely drifting through the midnight skies that were the void.

“There could be survivors,” the captain said, not sounding as though he believed it himself.

“Not likely,” Nel said. “This could have happened days ago. Weeks . . . months even.”

It could have happened years ago. Nothing decayed in the void; it just drifted, frozen and cold until it encountered something else. Then, depending just what was encountered, the flotsam could burn up, crash, or get dragged into orbit. In some parts of the void, where the lanes were treacherous, there were whole leagues of wrecked ships. They were graveyards built up over centuries of collected disasters, held together as huge, floating mausoleums.

“Wreckage isn't dispersed enough,” Horatio said, sounding sure of himself now. “This isn't so old.”

“Still not likely to find anyone.” Nel sought to head off what she saw as a pointless exercise.

“We're looking,” Horatio said firmly. “Get to it.”

Nel grimaced. “Aye aye, Captain.”

She snapped out orders to the milling crew. Quill had surfaced from the galley. It was hard to read his scaly-faced moods but he didn't look particularly chastened to find the ship in such a state during his watch. Nel knew she would be having words with Quill later, about several things.

For now, she let him take the helm, bringing the ship to a stop clear of most of the debris. Quill was the navigator and an officer for good reason. It was his abilities that propelled the *Tantamount* through the void and you didn't keep that post without being good at it. It was why Nel and the captain tolerated the confrontational Kelpie. In the same way as he and Gabbi had hurled pots and pans at each other, he now put his abilities to better use steering the ship clear of any further damage.

Without people like Quill, it was impossible to break free of a planetary surface or to navigate the void. Even if a ship could be launched without navigators to guide them and adjust their course, they would continue on a straight lined course until something caused them to stop, like another planet. And it would be a sudden and fiery stop without a navigator.

Under Nel's orders the crew rushed to launch the tenders, or "bubbles" as most people referred to them. There was no breathable air in space, gases and solar currents aplenty, but nothing most humanoids could survive in. Space was just that, empty apart from the miasma, a misty black cloud found wherever ships sailed.

A ship carried its own atmosphere, its own gravity and air inside an envelope surrounding the ship, kept there by the same etheric ballast that kept the crew's feet planted to the deck. Bigger ships resulted in bigger envelopes, but when a situation required someone to leave the ship the normal procedure was to "bubble up" and float out from the ship in what was essentially an oversized fish bowl.

"Coming out, Skipper?" one of the crewmembers, a man named Cyrus, asked, holding the hatch to one of the bubbles open. The bubble was a glass structure, roughly spherical in shape, like its name suggested, with a flattened base so it could be stored more easily when not in use.

Nel grimaced, but nodded.

"Just the two of us, Skipper?" Cyrus asked her. Nel followed his sideways glance to the gangly figure at his side.

"Violet," Nel acknowledged the ship's cabin girl.

"Skipper," the teenager's voice sounding thin in that awkward adolescent stage of development where nothing was ever in sync.

“Do you need any help . . . ?” she left the question hanging hopefully. “Out there?”

Nel frowned. “You been out in a tender yet?”

“No, Skipper.” Violet shook a tangled head of fairy locks. “But Piper's been teaching me.”

“Maybe now's not the time . . . ,” Nel started to say. Cyrus coughed into his hand.

“Sorry, Skipper,” he apologised, catching her eye. “Got something in my throat.”

Nel looked at him for a moment longer, her crewman gave her a shrug back, a slight roll of his shoulders.

He's right, she thought, just like I told the captain. We're not going to find anyone alive out there.

“All right, Vi,” Nel agreed. “You're coming, but this isn't a game. You do what I tell you, when I tell you.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper,” Violet responded with an enthusiastic salute. The girl was beaming, tail practically wagging. Nel sighed at the sight. Damned misfits, the whole crew.

“Get in.” The skipper shook her head at Violet, pointing to the bubble. Then to Cyrus: “Go and find Gabbi, see if she needs any help. And tell Jack I'm going to be bringing him some patients.”

“Aye, Skipper.” Cyrus nodded as Violet clambered into the bubble. “As you say.”

“As I say,” Violet heard the skipper mutter as she climbed into the bubble herself. The flattened base gave them both something to stand on as they swung the hatch shut behind them. It made a squelching sound as it sealed in place. At a wave from Cyrus, the ship's crane then hoisted them up, just enough to clear the ship's railing before it swung them out into the void.

Cyrus winked at Violet before he gave the signal; she could feel herself grinning back. It would be her first real time out in a tender, a bubble. Cyrus dropped his arm and the crane released them.

Violet felt her stomach drop as they fell out of the *Tantamount's* envelope, the deck of the *Tantamount* disappearing from sight. In a

moment it was replaced by the utter emptiness of space as weightlessness caught them. It went on forever and ever, pure black void and the duller black mist broken by distant stars. The only sound was the faint hiss from the hose piping air into the bubble. That and a wire-wrapped cable were the only things linking Violet and the skipper to the ship. Away from the *Tantamount's* gravity-well the weightlessness of the void reasserted itself; both of them started to float freely within the bubble. Fortunately the controls inside were sturdy and robust, the turn-wheels and levers doubled as handholds during missions away from the ship, though they had to brace themselves between the controls and the bubble to operate both.

Violet worked the controls for the exterior valves that controlled their movement at the skipper's instructions. It was hard work. Without a sense of weight Violet had to brace herself against the interior of the bubble to turn a wheel or pull a lever. She concentrated hard, trying to remember everything Piper had told her about controlling the tender.

The valves she worked released tightly controlled bursts of air from the bubble that nudged them in the right direction. The skipper watched carefully as Violet worked. Air was precious and to be used sparingly in space. The bubble was a finicky and cumbersome contraption. Violet found it difficult to steer and now that they were out here amongst this mess of debris she thought it worryingly fragile. The walls were made from thick, toughened glass but they were still glass. Gradually though, Violet worked them through the field, moving in close enough to the crew of the shattered ship.

The crew. The dead, frozen bodies floated listlessly around them.

“What do you think happened here, Skipper?” Violet asked. Her voice sounded shaky even to her and the skipper glanced over. Violet kept her eyes away from the bodies, focusing on the remains of the other ship and the working of the tender instead.

“Something ploughed right through their ship,” the skipper said,

eyeing the bodies. One drifted in perfect slow motion past the bubble. There was a slight thump as it collided with the curved glass wall. Violet flinched, the involuntary motion causing her to drift back to the other side of the bubble. The impact of the body stuck the deceased sailor to the bubble for a moment, before their momentum shoved it off and sent the dead man spinning slowly in another direction. It was a macabre sight but Violet found herself focusing on the details. Not the cloudy, crystallised eyes or the curious hook of stiff fingers, but material details, the cut and colour of the uniforms all the dead wore. The cloth was a deep blue, almost black in colour, with white trim.

“Like an asteroid, Skipper?” Violet asked while their momentum took them deeper into the debris field. “Think someone was asleep at the helm?”

“Nothing like that around here,” the skipper told her. The woman's face darkened and Violet remembered the whispers and shouts of shipboard gossip. Even in the brief moments before they'd launched the tender she'd heard Quill's name mentioned. It was enough to make her regret her flippant comment. If the wreckage hadn't been as demolished as it was, with most of the ship broken into tiny fragmented pieces, the *Tantamount* would have been in serious trouble. She was already dreading the return trip to the ship, seeing first-hand how much damage had been done.

“See those cannons?” The skipper pointed to where the iron castings floated freely, anchored to a scrap of decking by a fraying rope. “High calibre, military issue.”

“You saying this was an Alliance ship?” Violet looked at the uniformed bodies again and immediately wished she hadn't. Her stomach wanted to climb back up from wherever it had dropped to.

“Air-corps,” the skipper confirmed. “You can't tell from the uniforms?”

“Never saw a lot of them back home, Skipper,” Violet mumbled, covering her mouth with her hand. “Seen them less since I've been with you.”

The skipper didn't press on the subject. Maybe she was regretting bringing Violet out here—she could hardly be blamed.

“Sorry, Skipper,” Violet managed to say. She gripped the wheel tightly with clammy hands.

“It's fine,” the skipper said, and sounded like she meant it.

When Violet felt she could safely look up again she found the skipper still studying their surroundings. The skipper used to be in the Alliance—that was more shipboard gossip but something Violet heard often enough to believe it was genuine. What was it like for her, seeing her former fellows out here like this? If the woman felt anything, she didn't give it away. Tough woman, the skipper. She'd been around—Violet could read that from the tattooed sleeve on one arm. A Kitsune girl like Violet from a backwater rock just didn't compare.

“Alliance ship, military protocols,” the skipper mused aloud. “They weren't going to get hit by a stray asteroid. Not even out here.”

“So what did happen?” Violet asked, because it felt like she was expected to.

“They were rammed.”

“Rammed?” Violet blinked, startled.

The skipper nodded grimly. “This was a ship that was maybe twenty-eight gun, lightweight, frigate class. Whatever attacked them was much bigger. Heavy, massive envelope ran straight through them. The change in pressure from the bigger ship's envelope would have ripped them apart. That's what happened.”

Violet studied their surroundings. “You asked Jack to get ready for patients.”

A shrug. “Wanted him to feel useful. There was a ruckus in the galley just before.”

“You don't think we're going to find any survivors, do you, Skipper?”

“Captain says we look. We're looking.”

“Aye, Skipper,” Violet said quietly.

The bubble drifted at its leisurely pace through the remains of the alliance ship. Every time they came to a body they would inspect it, moving around stray bits of timber and canvas, checking the obvious places a survivor might be. All they found

were more cold bodies.

“Something odd about these bodies, Skipper,” Violet said eventually.

The skipper turned back to face her, eyebrows raised quizzically. There was precious little light out here amongst the mist and debris. Much of the skipper's face was shadowed, giving the woman a foreboding look. That look fit with what Violet had been feeling since they got out here. Something was wrong.

“They look dead, Skipper, a long time dead.”

“How so?” the skipper pushed for her to explain.

“Seen bodies before, Skipper,” Violet shivered at the memories. “They . . . usually they all look the same out here. Frozen. Cold. These,” Violet turned her head to follow another corpse, “they look like they were left in the sun to dry. Or maybe someone buried them for a week.”

Violet shuddered, rubbing at her wrist as she did so. There was a tattoo there, braided rope looped around the wrist and up into the palm, protection against being lost overboard, so she would always have something to hold fast. Most sailors had tattoos—the rope was Violet's first and only. Piper had taken her out to get it the first time she'd made planetfall with the *Tantamount*.

“You think it was a corpse ship, Skipper? Maybe taking their dead back from some battle out in the Lanes?”

The idea had been sitting at the back of her mind for some time now. Too many bodies out here, too far gone. It wasn't normal.

“No,” the skipper said quietly, “that's not what the Alliance does with its dead.”

“You'd be one to know, Skipper. But then what . . . ?” Violet gestured. She didn't finish her question.

“Draugr,” the skipper said. “They're Draugr. Air-corps run with them these days,”

“Oh.” It was a long time before Violet tried to make conversation again.

She'd heard of Draugr before. Most everyone had. They were supposed to be common around the Alliance Lanes, but not out in the backwaters. Labourers, servants, slaves, Violet wasn't quite sure.

She didn't even know if they were even alive or some sort of animation, just that they were becoming more and more common in the High Lanes. She hadn't expected to see something like that out in the Free Lanes.

The thoughts washed away when she looked ahead of them. Part of the hull, more or less intact. The reinforced section around the keel of the ship; where heavier cargo would have been stored. It might even have maintained something of an envelope.

“Skipper,” Violet called, pointing.

“All right,” the skipper said. “Take us over. Nice and easy.”

“Only speed we've got, Skipper,” Violet said, adjusting the angle of their approach. The bubble drifted leisurely towards the broken hull, which yawned dark even against the black. But not so dark Violet couldn't see it.

“There's someone in there.” Violet's voice rose to a high pitch. She twisted around to face the skipper with wide eyes. “They look like they could still be alive.”

The skipper's face creased into her habitual frown, hand straying to her side but grasping at air. Often the skipper carried a wand there, especially when they were ashore, less often aboard.

“Hells.”

“Skipper?”

“Nice and easy,” the skipper repeated through clenched teeth.

With white-knuckled hands Violet manoeuvred the bubble right to the edge of the hull wreckage until the empty space between them started to twist and fray. Violet eyed the distorted air warily, for that disruption meant there was air of some sort between them. There was an envelope present and it was reacting to the pressure of the air inside the bubble.

“Skipper,” Violet called out, pointing.

“Keep us out here,” the skipper cautioned her. “That's a fractured envelope, a different atmosphere from us. We won't take any chances here.”

Violet shivered. This close and she could just about see inside the darkened recess. A figure huddled up as far inside the hull as

it was possible. No uniform that she could see, the man wore drab colours that seemed to blend into his environment. The head shifted, appearing to lift to regard them. There was no other sign the survivor was aware of them.

“Signal the ship,” the skipper said. “Tell them we've found someone.”

Violet reached out and grabbed the signaller with one hand. She stared at it, struggling.

“Skipper . . .,” she said after a moment, her voice drying up.

The skipper took her attention away from the survivor for a moment.

“What do I send them?” Violet asked quietly.

“You don't know?” the skipper asked sternly.

Violet bit down on her bottom lip, shook her head.

“Two white flashes, one red,” she was told shortly. “Survivors found. Send it 'til you get an answer.”

Violet felt her face burning as she went to operate the signaller. A triangular fixture with three different faces of coloured glass, the faces could be flashed in coded sequences to relay messages. Violet took a long look at the survivor while she worked. The man was becoming more animated now, like a machine shaking off cobwebs and dust and starting up after a long downtime.

The survivor didn't try to speak, not that he would have been able to make himself heard across the envelopes anyway. He appeared to be waiting, gauging the skipper and Violet.

“Violet?” the skipper called, “what does the ship say?”

Violet jerked her head back. She'd missed the ship's answering signal, had to wait for it to repeat. “Two green flashes, one white, Skipper.”

“And that means what, Violet?”

“Come back to the ship,” she said quickly.

“Come back to the ship with cargo.” The skipper glanced over her shoulder reprovingly.

Violet flushed. “I knew that, Skipper.”

“Then say so. All right, Captain says we bring him in, we bring him in. It's one more than I thought we'd find.”

The keel of the wrecked ship would have been filled with ether, Violet thought. The amber coloured rock that all ships of the void used as ballast. Ether was what provided both gravity and envelopes in space, keeping the miasma out and the breathable air in. Enough of it seemed to have survived to keep an envelope, and the survivor, alive.

“Get ready to open the hatch, Violet. Stand back.”

“You're not going to mesh the envelopes?” Violet asked, referring to the process of merging two different atmospheres. Strictly speaking the bubble didn't have an envelope as it lacked the induced gravity to hold it in, but it still had its own air, so long as the hatch remained shut. A hatch the skipper had just said she intended to open.

“We can't mesh. The bubble won't fit in there.”

“It might!” Violet protested.

“And if we get stuck in their gravity?” The skipper shook her head. “No, we're doing this the hard way.”

Violet was incredulous at the plan so Nel ignored the girl. If she stopped to think about it she would realise how stupid it was. Taking a moment to clip a safety cord to a carabineer on her belt, she took a firm grip on the valve release wheel that held the hatch shut. Nel twisted the wheel slowly, counter-clockwise, and grit her teeth as the hiss of leaking atmosphere grew louder. They only had a few minutes before the hatch would have to be shut again, minutes before the air inside the bubble became too thin to breathe as it was vented into space.

Nel took a firm grip on hatch, bracing her feet against the interior wall in the weightless bubble and pulled. The hiss became a rush as the atmosphere was sucked out of the bubble. Unlike a ship like the *Tantamount*, the bubble didn't have the gravity to keep the air where it was meant to be and now it was making good its escape from the glass confines.

With a clear run to the other envelope now, Nel braced herself for what she knew would be bitter, freezing cold. When her

fingers and toes wrapped around the edge of the hatch opening, ready to pull herself through, she looked at her bare skin and swore. In the rush since she'd woken up in her hammock, she hadn't realized she was wearing little more than her nightshirt and breeches. No gloves or boots, no coat, very little at all to protect herself from the void. All back in her cabin, along with her sidearm. She could already feel the icy touch in the square of the hatch.

“Skipper?” Violet asked again. “You sure about this?”

That quiet voice of reason. Irritating. No, Nel wasn't sure about this at all.

“It's fine.” Nel clenched her jaw, gauging the distance to the other envelope. Not more than a few feet really. She could do this. Just a few feet.

She braced herself, crouching down in the flow of air as it rushed out of the bubble. Her legs uncoiled beneath her as she launched herself across the gap.

The cold hit her like a slap, a vicious blow the size of a breaking wave, washing over every inch of her skin. It lasted only a few seconds and then she was inside the dead ship's envelope, which felt like a furnace by comparison. Gravity reasserted its presence, some hangover from the original ship and she hit the deck hard on her knees. Nel's whole body was shivering; sweat had formed on her skin and turned to an icy hoarfrost, a second bodily layer her shivering shook off like an animal shedding its skin. She managed to get her feet up and under, rising shakily, not looking forward to the return trip she'd have to make in a moment.

“Can you move at all?” she asked of the survivor, who hadn't made a move towards her. Up close she got her first good look at him.

Probably early thirties, square jawed like so many other Alliance corpsmen Nel had seen aboard ships of the line. Close cropped practical haircut, barely a finger's width of black follicles remained and the beard on his face appeared to be only a couple of days old. Had he been here that long? She could find out later. The survivor was gaunt and tired but otherwise healthy, though she didn't like the way he studied her with those dark eyes. It felt like she was being

judged.

“Yes,” he said in a voice hoarse from thirst and disuse.

“Good,” Nel said, unclipping her safety cord and pulling two lengths of rope through her carabineer. “Loop this round your waist and tie it off. Is there anyone else with you?”

“No.” The survivor followed her instructions, finishing by clicking the sprung gate over the cord. He pulled on it once or twice, testing the lock before inclining his head at Nel. She frowned back at him, hand on her carabineer. The knot he'd tied was a good one, just not one a sailor would have chosen. She expected more conversation, if not outright questions. Her survivor was taking this all a bit too calmly for her liking.

She turned, shuffling the carabineer round to the other side of her belt so as not to be caught up in the loose rope. Violet gave her a wave and slowly cranked the hand winch Nel's safety rope was attached to until it was taut. Nel looked back at her passenger.

“We're going to jump, same way I came in, and Violet is going to reel us in at the same time. It's going to be cold so brace yourself and don't even think about missing the hatch. I won't be coming back out to get you.”

The survivor ducked his head. “I understand.”

“Good.” Nel scowled. “You got a name?”

“Sharpe. Castor Sharpe.”

“Hold on to your breeches, Castor Sharpe. On the count of three then, one . . . two . . . three!”

Nel took another leap out into the void, experiencing that flash of vertigo as gravity vanished and sub-zero temperatures took over. She realised she should have waited longer between exposures, too much haste, but that realisation came a second too late. Her vision was tinged with red now. In all likelihood she'd done some damage by not letting her body recover. She clutched at her lifeline with frost-tinged fingers, trusting in Violet to get her back inside the bubble. She was dimly aware of something large looming up ahead of her and could assume it was the bubble. A current hit her, pushing her back and all but

killing her momentum; the air gushing out of the bubble. Then the line went taut again as the winch caught up and took over. Hands were pulling her inside and she felt the flush of warmth on her limbs. Not as fierce as the last time, suggesting that the bubble's atmosphere was still leaking out faster than it could be pumped in.

Struggling to see through the red haze that was her vision, Nel pushed herself towards where she guessed the hatch was.

"I've got it, Skipper," Violet called over the roar of air being sucked out.

"The hells you do." Nel could see her tangled up with the survivor and the rope they'd both been pulled in on. She gasped as her own frozen hands touched the cold metal wheel and stuck but she managed to brace herself and pull the hatch towards her, fighting against the outgoing flow of air. For a moment she wasn't sure she was going to be able to finish the job, then someone else grabbed the wheel and between them they forced it close. The wheel locked solidly into place. Exhausted, Nel just held onto it, not quite leaning—that was impossible floating inside the bubble—but she took a moment to collect herself. Carefully she pried her fingers off the metal, leaving skin behind.

She pushed herself around, expecting to see Violet, but it was Castor Sharpe instead. Just past him she saw Violet, who winced at her expression.

"Thank you," Nel said to Sharpe. She put a hand to her face; it came away with the faintest smear of red. She must have burst a blood vessel out there. That explained the red haziness then.

"Take us back, Violet," she ordered, still looking at the blood. "Think you can manage that?"

"Aye, Skipper." Violet quickly busied herself with the signaller, telling the *Tantamount* to reel the bubble back in, much as Nel and Sharpe had themselves been. At least Violet remembered the signal for that.

"Good," Nel said. Using the wheel to push against, she turned herself around to face Sharpe. He was shaky after their ordeal, not as bad as she imagined she herself looked, but he might have had trouble standing in actual gravity.

“That was impressive how quickly you recovered from the exposure,” Sharpe said, his voice still sounding raw and disused.

“You managed all right yourself,” Nel replied. She'd recovered because the hatch needed to be shut, simple as that. Sharpe had moved a little too quickly for her liking, though maybe it had just been the adrenaline. He looked ragged now.

“Once my surgeon looks you over you can tell your story to the captain,” Nel told Sharpe. “No sense in you telling it twice, let's do it once and do it right.”

Sharpe's head pivoted on his thick neck to regard Violet, who was busy with the signaller and didn't notice. With her back to them her bushy foxtail was plainly visible. As always it moved with a mind of its own, snapping back and forth.

“Kitsune,” Sharpe commented.

Violet's head jerked round, her skin flushed. “What about it?” she demanded.

“Nothing.” Sharpe shrugged. “Tails are supposed to be good luck, that's all.”

Violet drew her tail back behind her protectively. “What about my tail?”

“Turned out to be my lucky day, that's all I'm saying,” Sharpe told her. “I don't mean anything by it, little princess.”

“Princess.” Nel shook her head. “Watch your name-calling. You'll make the girl's head puff up to match that tail.”

“Skipper!” Violet protested.

“Skipper,” Sharpe repeated. “But you say you aren't the captain?”

“First officer to you,” Nel corrected. “Or Nel. The crew call me Skipper but Horatio Phelps is the *Tantamount's* captain.”

Sharpe nodded slowly. “I see.”

Nel scowled, wondering if he was humouring her. She chewed on that as the bubble made its slow journey back to the ship. Sharpe didn't offer any more conversation and she was happy to leave it at that. A small crowd waited for them at the *Tantamount's* railing, including Jack and the captain. Getting a bubble back onto a ship involved reeling it back into a cradle. It

was a finicky process that had to be done properly if the bubble wasn't to come crashing down on deck when it re-entered the ship's envelope and gravity. After what seemed an eternity, Cyrus and the crew working the crane wrestled the bubble into place and swung it back onto the ship.

Nel felt weight returning as suddenly as it had left, a not altogether pleasant sensation that made her feel like she'd been overindulging in Gabbi's cooking. When the hatch opened she was the first through it, though that too was a drawn out process as they had to wait for the pressure inside the bubble to be adjusted to match the *Tantamount's*.

"Found one after all, did you?" Horatio stood before her on the deck. He'd managed to find time to dress himself she noticed, was clad in his threadbare best coat and boots sorely in need of polishing. A battered captain's hat topped the ensemble. Not exactly dressed to receive guests but somehow she doubted Sharpe would care.

Behind her Nel could hear Sharpe and Violet exiting the bubble, feet hitting the tar stained deck. She leaned in close to whisper to Horatio.

"I don't like this. Is he really the only one we found?"

"You were the one who didn't expect to find anyone alive, Nel," the captain reminded her.

"That's what I don't like about it. You have to be strong to survive what happened out there. As far as I'm concerned that makes him dangerous."

"I understand what you're saying, Nel. We'll talk to him, find out." Horatio cocked an eyebrow at her. "Do you want to get dressed or should we get started now?"

Nel glanced round at the crew. She wasn't exactly undressed and they'd all seen her in less and she them. Being roused during an emergency didn't leave time for propriety and anyone who dithered to take the time wouldn't last long on her ship. But her aching body was crying out for gloves and boots and other fleece-lined clothes. She decided she could spare the time to get changed.

"Jack can give him the once over."

Horatio nodded. "We'll meet in the chart room then."

"I'll be there," Nel said.

She retreated to her cabin, hobbling a little and realising just how frostbitten her feet were. She could barely feel heels or toes as she walked the short distance. It was with relief that she shut the door behind her and sank into the lone chair in the room. Away from the eyes of crew.

She didn't allow herself more than a few minutes rest though. Her body ached and felt slow and ponderous, but her mind was racing along. An Alliance ship, smashed to pieces, one survivor. It felt like a bad tavern tale, the sort that ended in tragedy or at least with a cruel joke. She wanted no part of it. Not on her ship.

With that thought overriding all other concerns she stood and grabbed clothes from corners of her cabin. For working on the ship during her watch she preferred fingerless gloves and calf high boots. Linen breeches replaced the ones she was wearing and a sleeveless leather jerkin completed the outfit. Her eyes fixed on one last item as she laced up the jerkin: her holster slung over a hook in the wall. A wall still studded with kitchen utensils, some embedded an inch or more deep, but what hung from the hook was more dangerous.

It was simple and effective, though at first glance it appeared innocuous. A wand, her wand, not much more than a bronze hued rod in appearance, engraved, but not as intricately as some, the only exotic part the silver patterned basket-hilt above the grip. It didn't look dangerous, not being sharp or even heavy enough to bludgeon with, but the wand was thaumatically charged to a near lethal level. Nel didn't often want for her sidearm aboard the ship with only the crew she knew so well, but with a shipwrecked survivor aboard, then yes, she felt the need. She hitched the holster round her waist on the way to the chart room.

"If this were a tavern brawl, you ain't coming drinking with me ever."

Nel heard Jack's voice as she entered the room. It was hard not to hear Jack's voice. Like the rest of him it was large, crude,

and simple. It was useful having crew members who could pull double duty, but as Jack's double duties combined the roles of Gabbi's butchery assistant with that of ship's surgeon his approach to the latter was blunt and direct.

"No," Horatio insisted, "this wasn't a tavern brawl, Jack. The man survived a shipwreck. Be gentle with him."

It was quite the sight, the grey haired and knobbly kneed stick of a captain getting right up in the face of Korrigan Jack, interposing himself between the butcher-turned-surgeon and his latest patient. It reminded Nel that there was at least one world where Korrigan Jack always stayed aboard ship, a place where he'd done hard time. For a Korrigan, Jack was short but broad. Each of Jack's ears was fully half the size of his flattened face, which made him seem even wider. Most of his hair was tied back into three scraggly braids, one behind each flapping ear and a third atop his head. That and his walnut coloured skin made him look wizened like an old oak tree, all in all not someone whose appearance inspired trust.

Sharpe for his part regarded both Jack and the captain somewhat warily. The man had taken a seat atop the chart table, which had been cleared of its normally heaped up contents to serve as a makeshift examination table. He'd been stripped of his shirt and his chest was marred by blue and grey mottling. Broken ribs, most likely. Nel agreed with Jack. Sharpe could have just come through a rather vicious tavern brawl.

"I've been in a shipwreck," Jack snorted. "Piper has too, and he got the rings to prove it. Didn't neither of us get banged up like this one."

"It's nothing, Captain," Sharpe said in an attempt to alleviate the tension, running his hands down his ribs gingerly. "A few stiff drinks in front of a warm fire and I'll be fine. Your first officer got worse than I did."

"Foolish woman," Horatio said. "Should have taken her time, no need to go getting exposed like that. No need at all."

"I heard that." Nel strode into the scene, trying to ignore the pain in her feet that accompanied each step. "Just wrap his ribs, Jack. Captain's orders."

Jack shook his head doubtfully. “Soft, Skipper,” he said. “Soft folks don't make good crew.”

“Not our problem if he is, Jack, 'cause this man's not crew, so don't be judging him like he is. Just wrap his ribs up good 'til we can drop him off at the next port.”

Jack considered this before nodding in agreement. He turned to Sharpe and held up his scalpel suggestively. “I'll go get some bandages. We'll get you wrapped up then. You wait.” He made it sound like a threat.

“Sure,” Sharpe agreed, leaning back on the table. “How about something to drink while you're at it? All this talk about taverns has got me thirsty.”

That got a grin from Jack. “Yeah, I could do that. Brandy should do it. Captain's got some brandy.”

“I do?” Horatio winced.

“Yeah, you do.”

“Well, I . . .,” Horatio mumbled.

“It's medicinal,” Jack growled.

“Yes, but it's very strong medicine, Jack,” the captain stressed.

“Yeah?” Jack said. He laughed at Sharpe and nodded. “Yeah, you're right. He's a bit soft, like I said. Aye, Captain, don't worry. I'll be testing it before I give him any.”

“That wasn't quite what I —”

“Be right back,” Jack rumbled, lumbering towards the door to collect his brandy and bandages.

“Hurry back, Jack,” Horatio called after him. “And check on the rest of the crew, make sure there aren't any more injuries.”

“Crew's fine,” Jack hollered back. “They ain't soft. Except that damned Kelpie.”

“Go check on the crew, Jack.” Nel pushed him out the door. “What was that about injuries, Captain?”

“We may have a couple of bumps and bruises,” Horatio explained. “Some of that debris knocked a few holes in the ship. Ripped a few sails, that sort of thing.”

“That sort of thing?” Nel shook her head. She'd forgotten to take a look at the ship as they came in on the bubble, not that

she'd been able to see much with her bloodshot vision. "How bad is it? And what does Quill have to say about all this?"

"Yes, well, with things being as they are I haven't gotten around to talking to him yet," Horatio admitted.

"I found him and Gabbi trying to tear a few holes in the ship themselves," Nel told him.

"He's still on the bridge," the captain said. "We can talk to him later."

"Later," Nel agreed, turning to their unexpected guest.

Sharpe returned their regard unfazed. "Your ship's doctor is rather . . . direct."

"He knows what he's doing," Horatio defended his crew quickly. *More out of habit, Nel thought, than any real desire to defend Jack.*

"Most of the time," Nel couldn't help muttering.

Jack knew anatomy extensively from his work in the galley, so as far as fixing broken bones and patching up cuts and tears to the *Tantamount's* crew he was competent. It was his bedside manner that needed work. Korrigan Jack didn't have a lot of respect for anyone who wasn't tougher than he was. And if you got injured you weren't as tough as he was.

Nel noticed Sharpe give her the once over, noticed that his eyes lingered on the wand holstered at her waist. He didn't show any reaction to it, but he definitely knew she was armed now. She took the time to have a closer look at him.

With sailors it was usually easy to read them—they had their life stories written proudly on their own bodies. Hoops through the ears for years in the void, tattoos for ports and planets visited. Nel had some of her own, though she'd kept them confined to just a sleeve on one arm. But she knew how to match crooked dice to a sailor who had spent time at Vice or a manta-ray for someone who had traversed beyond the periphery and out into the Deep Lanes. But Sharpe didn't have any markings, not ink nor jewellery. Not so much as a good luck charm to keep him from being lost overboard. That was odd. Even the Alliance had their own brand of markings.

"Thank you for the rescue, Captain Phelps," Sharpe said. "You were timely."

“Yes, well, glad we could help, my boy.” The captain straightened his clothing as he spoke, beaming. “We were hoping you could tell us what happened out there. You were attacked, obviously.”

“Who was it?” Nel asked directly.

Sharpe's gaze shifted to her. “I'm afraid I can't help you with that. I was below deck when we were attacked. Got buried under the water casks and never got a good look at them.”

“That's an Alliance ship out there.” Nel watched him carefully. “A warship at that, one that's had something big and solid driven right through it. You were rammed, Sharpe.”

“Seems the way of it,” Sharpe agreed.

“And you don't know who did it?” Nel said.

He shrugged. “I'm not Alliance. I was just a passenger.”

“What was the name of your ship?” Nel asked.

“The *Falchions Rise*.”

“And how many souls aboard her?” Horatio inquired.

Sharpe sighed. “Over a hundred, Captain.”

Over a hundred. The number hung in the air with an ugly sense of reality. The *Tantamount* ran with less than twenty, Alliance ships ran heavy it was true, but the number still sounded high. Nel had counted maybe two dozen bodies during her expedition. That left at least four score unaccounted for. Floating out there in the void.

“A tragedy,” Horatio said uncomfortably. He motioned for Nel to continue the conversation.

“Where were you bound? What port?” she asked.

“Marching, on Thatch,” Sharpe told her.

The port he'd named was on a distant planet and not one aligned with the Alliance. Lawless was too strong a word, independent might be closer. It wasn't the sort of place an Alliance vessel would go without a good reason.

Nel was about to ask what sort of person could get passage aboard an Alliance warship when they were interrupted by a piping, high pitched voice.

“Captain!”

The thin voice belonged to Violet. The girl's hair was still a tangle of fairy locks and half undone braids, like she'd just climbed out of her hammock.

“Captain, oh, Skipper!” Violet stared as she realised that Nel was present too. She didn't pay Sharpe so much as a second look, probably still ignoring him for that quip about her tail.

“Piper sent me to find you, he needs to see one of you. Says it's urgent!”

“Urgent, is it?” Horatio repeated. “Well, we'd best see about that then.”

“I'll go,” Nel offered. “I want to see what's been going on while I was out in that damned bubble.”

“As you say, Nel,” Horatio agreed. “I'd like a few more words with our guest in any case.”

Nel hesitated. There was something about Sharpe she didn't like, but on consideration it wasn't likely he would do anything while aboard the *Tantamount*.

“Take me to Piper,” she said.

CHAPTER 2

Sharpe had given Nel the impression of being dangerous, but if impressions were what to go by then Piper had dangerous written all over him. That writing took the literal form of extensive, intricate tattoos that ran from the backs of his hands to the balls of his feet, even making forays up one side of his face. Tattoos marking every port he'd ever sailed into; rays, dragons, cuttlefish, and other more obscure creatures Nel didn't even know the names for. On one shoulder he had the constellation surrounding his home planet, a map home if he ever needed it. Hoops ran up the top length of one ear, one for every five years a sailor. The opposite ear held a black pearl, evidence, as Jack said, that Piper had once survived a shipwreck, and a silver stud to pay for his burial, should he not survive a second one.

Stripped down to not much more than shorts, there was plenty of bare skin to display Piper's artwork. The sweaty sheen on his arms and shaved head suggested he'd been working hard at something. Nel and Violet found him involved in an animated discussion with his constant companion, Bandit, in the deepest recesses of the ship. Piper was doing most of the talking.

"Didn't I tell you to get rid of that thing?" Nel interrupted the one sided debate.

Piper turned to her, his heavy features drawing down into a sulk. "No," he claimed.

“No? You know damn well I did, Piper. Why is it still on board?”

Her problem with Bandit was simple. She detested rodents. And the foot-high, furry mongrel was definitely a rodent. The animal, called a loompa, looked like a cross between a monkey and a raccoon, with a monkey's tail and ambidextrous limbs. The raccoon-like slitted mask of fur over his eyes was what Bandit got his name from. Uninspired, given the creative artwork covering his owner.

“No, Bandit stays,” Piper told her firmly. “If Bandit goes, Piper goes. And right now we have to fix the ship so we can't go.”

Nel groaned. This was all Horatio's fault; the man was forever picking up strays. The scamp at her side that looked up to her with calf eyes and the deranged engineer in front of her were only two of the many that made up the misfit crew.

“Vi,” she said. “Go keep an eye on the captain for me. If you see anything suspicious from our guest you come get me straight away. Got it?”

“Aye aye, Skipper.” The cabin girl fired off another over-exaggerated salute and turned, disappearing with a flick of the bushy fox-tail she flashed every time she turned around. The tail made Nel shake her head.

Misfits, all of them.

“Something amiss, Skipper?” Piper asked.

“You been teaching our girl signalling?” Nel said pointedly.

“Yes,” Piper said slowly.

“Teach her better.”

Piper exchanged a long look with his pet but said nothing.

Nel leaned wearily against the curved hull. “What's wrong with my ship, Piper?”

“She is full of holes, Skipper.”

“How?” Nel said. “Where?”

Piper gestured around the hold. “Bits hit us. Big bits, Bandit says. They woke him up. Bandit tried to plug the holes but the holes are big and Bandit is so small.”

Bandit scampered down from the rafters and onto Piper's shoulders, chattering constantly. The loompa held a mallet in its dark, wiry hand and Nel wouldn't have put it past the thing to have

banged out the holes itself.

“You're saying the hull is breached?” Nel concluded. “How badly?”

“Badly,” Piper pointed at a pile of crates. Nel stared. What at first had looked like haphazard storage she now realised was, in fact, covering a gaping hole in the side of the ship.

“There are more,” Piper said. “Bandit can crawl through most of them, all the way to the outside. We should watch where we step.”

“Can she still fly?” Nel asked, pushing one of the crates aside to get a better look at the damage. It was bad—she could see straight through the breach to the outside, the swirling emptiness of dust and misty miasma. Bandit wasn't the only one who could have fit through the hole; Violet could, and with a bit of squeezing Nel herself probably could have too. Not good, not good at all.

“There is more,” Piper said.

Nel braced herself. “Show me.”

Piper took her deeper into the hold, near the prow where the planks of the ship curved in. Driven through those curves was a massive log. Piper couldn't have put his arms around it if he'd tried. It appeared to be part of a mast, with rigging and hawsers still attached. Probably it was the other half of the mast she'd seen when out in the bubble.

“Hells,” Nel said anyway. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Somewhere out there is a ship without a mast,” Piper confirmed sagely. “Here there is a mast without a ship and we have one more mast than the ship needs. Too many masts is not a good thing, Bandit thinks.”

“Can we fly with that thing sticking out of us? Will it just do more damage?”

Piper hesitated. “Fly yes, but Bandit says we should be stopping soon. Stop soon, fix ship. Sooner is better.”

“I asked you, not that overgrown swamp rat,” Nel snapped.

“You will hurt Bandit's feelings,” Piper said sternly. “Bandit knows this ship, every nook and cranny. The ship is hurt. Fix her

soon, or she will not be flying. Bandit knows.”

“Fine,” Nel waved a hand wearily. “We need to make some repairs. Can we do that here? Or while we sail?”

Piper glanced questioningly at the loompa. Nel made a sound of disgust. Their ship was impaled. She trusted Piper's knowledge on the matter, in spite of the loompa obsession, but she didn't really need to hear it. Her ship was hurt and hurt bad. So was he really going to ask the damned rodent's opinion on that?

It turned out he was.

“No,” Piper said firmly. “We cannot. We can patch and sew, perhaps, but fix? No, we cannot fix. The ship must be set down, big repairs. This will take a while.”

“And cost a fortune,” Nel sighed, running a hand through her hair, tugging a red strand in front of her eyes. It was getting long again, almost down to her shoulders. One more thing to attend to.

“How far can we get with the ship like this?” she asked. “*Your* opinion, Piper. If that swamp rat says anything else I'm going to hang him over the side as bait.”

Bandit squawked in alarm and took off into the rafters. Nel watched him go, surprised but satisfied at the same time.

“Is a good thing Bandit likes you,” Piper said crossly. “Anyone else would get bitten.”

“Piper, how long can the damned ship fly?”

“A week, maybe more, maybe less. But not much. The ship needs fixing.”

“A week, fine,” Nel said. “We'll set down. Has to be somewhere nearby we can go. Do what you can down here, Piper, grab whoever you need. Get Jack to help you with the heavy stuff, at least.”

She looked up the loompa still cowering in the rafters. “And when we get to wherever we're going, we're getting rid of some excess ballast, you understand?”

Piper glanced up. “Bandit hopes you are not talking about him.”

“Bandit can hope all he likes. Just fix the ship, Piper.”

“We will do what we can, Skipper.”

“Someone want to explain how in the hells this happened?” Nel folded her arms in disgust.

Quill and Gabbi stood ill at ease in front of the tribunal of two. Nel and Horatio had sequestered them on the bridge, away from the prying eyes of the rest of the crew. Violet had taken Sharpe to find somewhere to hang a spare hammock, with orders from Nel to make sure it wasn't too private. She still couldn't put a finger on the source of her unease but with a ship full of holes she wouldn't lose sleep over caution.

Now her feelings were leaning towards angry. She wanted an explanation from Quill as to why he hadn't been on the bridge and another from both him and Gabbi as to why they'd been firing cutlery into her room.

“I've just been down to the hold,” Nel said. “Piper showed me what's left of the mast of that ship out there. The *Tantamount's* been skewered like a harvest festival pig. How the hells did that happen?”

Quill and Gabbi were chastised into silence for perhaps a heartbeat before both of them burst out talking. Talking quickly escalated into shouting, then degenerated into abusive name-calling as the two stopped trying to explain themselves and turned on each other.

“. . . psychotic lizard-freak!”

“Incompetent scullery wench!”

“. . . of all the . . . ! You ungrateful snake-skinned bigot!”

“Grateful?! You tried . . .”

“. . . half a mind to . . .”

“. . . poison me! Repulsive gluttonous meat bag . . .”

“I'll turn you into a meat bag!”

Sparks were on the verge of flying again, thaumatic ones. The very air was alive and crackling, blue arcs of free-flowing energy writhing between them and coiling around clenched fists. Quill's tail lashed, Gabbi stamped her foot, and the deck creaked. Nel stepped in at that point.

“Enough, both of you!” she yelled. “One more move out of either of you and I'll have you scraping fungus off the underside

of the hull.”

Nel glared at both of them until they quieted down, though both still simmered angrily.

“One at a time, if you please,” Horatio suggested. “Mister Quill, why weren't you at your post tonight?”

“I was until she poisoned me!” Quill pointed an accusing finger at Gabbi.

“I never!” Gabbi retorted. “Don't be blaming me if your slimy stomach is giving you problems.”

“Gabbi, please.” Horatio held up a hand. “You'll get your chance. Quill, go on.”

The Kelpie navigator might have smirked; it was hard to read his cold blooded features. “I took my evening meal before I started my watch. Two bells later I was face down in the head. It was her cooking; it couldn't have been anything else.”

“It was the same slop as you eat every night, Loveland,” Gabbi retorted, emphasising the first name he detested so much. “Damned Kelpies and your bland cuisine. It was raw meat, minced! There's no way to screw it up.”

“Then you put something in it.” Quill glared down at the diminutive cook.

“Get in my face and say that!” Gabbi glared back up at him.

“You see?” Quill appealed to his captain. “When I went to confront her about it she attacked me.”

“He started it,” Gabbi countered.

“Either of you starts anything more and I'll be the one to finish it,” Nel warned them. “You could have damaged the ship, to say nothing of the dereliction of duty.”

“Easy, Nel,” Horatio said with a pained expression. “This isn't an Alliance ship, we don't flog our crew.”

“Maybe we should start,” she suggested darkly.

“Humans,” Quill muttered.

“Damned Kelpie,” Gabbi matched him tone for tone.

“All right, that really is quite enough, all of you,” the captain said. “Gabbi, do a check of our stores, make sure we haven't taken on anything bad and that nothing's spoiled since we left port. It sounds

like we'll be making an unscheduled stopover soon anyway.”

“Where?” Quill asked quickly.

“Excuse me?” Horatio blinked.

“Where are we stopping over?” Quill repeated his question. “I'm still the navigator. Where am I navigating to?”

Nel spread out a star chart over the map table. Originally they'd been on a cargo run, a simple and legitimate expedition for an independent ship like theirs. They were still several weeks from their intended destination. With luck they'd be able to make up the time later but now they needed a stopover. Somewhere close, accessible, and, if Nel was being honest with herself, someplace that wouldn't ask too many questions.

The choices were limited.

Quill came over and gave the charts a critical looking over. Knowing the charts as well as he did, he didn't have to contemplate long before coming to a conclusion.

“Cauldron,” he pronounced. “It's the only place anywhere near that might have what we need.”

Nel pursed her lips. She agreed but had been searching hard for an alternative. The problem being there wasn't one.

Horatio came up, squinting at the map unhappily.

“What about Settler's Landing?” he suggested.

“Too much of a backwater,” Nel said heavily.

“Gateway.” Horatio pointed to a spot on the map, back the way they'd come.

“An Alliance port,” Quill reminded him. “The last one before we hit the High Lanes and tolled space.”

Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Within the High Lanes, Alliance patrols provided security but, between the tolls and the competition that safety engendered, it was hard for a ship like the *Tantamount* to scrounge out a living.

The Alliance, being the loose collection of disparate parties that it was, had come about more or less by an accident of mutual interest. It was badly managed and over bureaucratized, with different groups often ending up competing against one another. The worst, as far as Nel was concerned, were the trading

companies, some of which bordered on being nations unto themselves.

“Tamil?” She could hear the wistfulness in Horatio's voice.

“Too small, Captain,” Nel said. “We took a lot of damage out there, sir. Rope, sails, timber, maybe stores. We need some place with all of that and we need it cheap. We'll be lucky to break even on this run now.”

Horatio grimaced at the mention of money. Nel's suspicions started again.

“It'll have to be Cauldron.” She rolled up the chart when the captain didn't add anything else, ending the conversation. “Figure two or three days at a safe speed?”

“About that, yes.” Quill took the proffered chart from her.

“Well, get to it, navigator,” she said. “And when I say safe I mean safe. We have a damned mast sticking out the wrong side of the ship.”

Gabbi and Quill left to attend to their duties. When they were alone, Nel said to Horatio, “Captain, tell me we don't have debts waiting for us on Cauldron.”

“A rigged game,” Horatio assured her all too quickly. “It'll never stand up.”

“It will on Cauldron.” Nel folded her arms. “You're going to tell me you weren't cheating yourself?”

“Nel,” the captain scowled. “You're fussing.”

It's my job, Nel thought. “Captain . . .”

“Don't worry about it, Nel,” her captain assured her. “It's a small debt, trifling really. Likely we won't even run into the creditors in any case.”

“Let's hope so, sir,” Nel said neutrally. “About our passenger, now.”

“What about him?”

“I think he should get off at Cauldron.”

Horatio frowned. “Do you?”

“Yes,” Nel said firmly. “There's something not right about him.”

“Not right how?”

“He's too calm for one,” Nel stated. “No one who's been through

what he has should be that relaxed. It's like he was just waiting for us to come along and rescue him.”

“Seemed a reasonable sort to me, Nel.”

“Did he now?” Nel asked suspiciously.

“Indeed,” Horatio nodded. “We had a chat, him and I, after you left.”

“Really, Captain.” Nel bit down on her lower lip. “About what?”

“All sorts, Nel, all sorts. I rather like him actually. In fact, I think you're just letting your prejudices get in the way.”

“My prejudices?” Nel exclaimed.

“Because he was on an Alliance ship,” Horatio said. “You can take the girl out of the service but—”

“Captain,” Nel interrupted.

“Well, service left its mark on you, you can't deny that. In any case, Sharpe told us he wasn't part of the Alliance. Didn't you ever carry non-service personnel?”

“None I'd want on this ship,” Nel said pointedly.

“Hardly a reason to abandon him on Cauldron though. Terrible place, Cauldron, awful. Can't believe I'm going there myself, ourselves, I mean all of us. Together.”

“What else are we supposed to do with him then?” Nel asked. “He was on his way to Thatch, that's weeks out of our way. You want to take him all the way to the drop off on Vice with the rest of our cargo?”

“There's plenty of places we could let him off along the way, Nel.”

“Cauldron is the first such place, sir.”

“We'll talk about it,” Horatio said, which meant that they wouldn't. “We have a couple of days before we arrive, in any case.”

Nel sighed. The conversation was taking on an all too familiar pattern. Horatio was a soft touch for strays, always had been. If she wasn't careful, or pushed this too much, she'd end up with another misfit crew member on her roster. The best she could say about Sharpe so far was that he was human and that didn't mean

much.

“I hope you do, sir,” she said. “Think about it, that is. And try and remember that creditor's name while you're at it.”

“You know I hate to think about those sorts of things, Nel,” the captain dismissed her concerns.

“I know, sir. That's why you have me.”

The first thing Nel did after she left the captain was go back below deck to check on their cargo. She'd been too concerned about the state of the ship itself to pay it any mind when she'd been down before. The captain, and by extension the crew, was already going to be out of pocket fixing the ship. If they forfeited on this run because of damaged goods, they might find themselves patching the ship only to hand it over to their creditors.

Sharpe was standing by one of the breaches in the hull, deep in the belly of the *Tantamount* where the heavier cargo was stored during flight. That cargo came down from above, hoisted via cranes into the hold. During flight the gap was covered by a wooden mesh, a criss-crossed lattice of timber that let very little light in. Light above deck was provided by glowstones, a gemlike substance that only lit up in the midst of the void, surrounded by all that nothing. They had to be close to that open airless void to glow, to the miasma, so they were less effective inside cabins and below decks. The glowstones put out a silvery hue, like white light in that it provided both visibility and a degree of colour, but left everything tinged with shade, looking faded.

Sharpe, on the other hand, was carrying one of the ship's oil lamps, the flickering of which cast both him and the hold in inconsistent, twitching shadows. He had his back to Nel, but turned at her approach.

“What are you doing down here?” Nel asked him, keeping her eyes averted from the oil lamp. Down here in the dark it was overly bright, almost painful to the eyes.

Sharpe gestured to the jagged hole behind him. “Heard you took some damage,” he said. “Wanted to see for myself.”

“That so? Look like something you can fix then?”

Sharpe frowned. “Not really my speciality, Skipper.”

“Then why bother looking?”

“Because if the ship I’m on is full of holes, I want to know how bad it is.”

“My ship, my problem,” Nel said. “But since we’ve come to it, what is your speciality?”

Sharpe shrugged, then turned at the sound of something skittering along wood. A quick-fire scrapping and scratching sign and then a fist-sized shadow shot between two crates, a larger clutch of darkness in hot pursuit.

“The hells was that?” Sharpe lifted the lantern higher.

“Bandit.” Nel made a face.

Sharpe rocked back on his heels, swaying. “Part of your crew?”

“Not if ever I catch him,” Nel muttered.

“Looked like he was trying to do the catching. Every ship needs a rat-catcher. Didn’t look much like a cat though,” Sharpe observed.

“Loompa.”

“That’s different.” Sharpe mused. “Didn’t know loompa were carnivorous. You sure he eats what he catches?”

“—don’t care if it walks off the plank after them. I want him off my ship.”

The skipper’s voice carried to Violet as she descended the stairs into the hold, cradling a steaming bowl of soup between her hands. She hadn’t bothered with a light; the hold was easy enough to navigate though she knew some of the crew had trouble. She followed the sound of the skipper’s voice, pausing when a small bodied form ran up to her out of the shadows.

“Don’t be letting the skipper see you, Bandit,” Violet whispered. “She’ll break out that plank like she’s been threatening.”

The loompa peered up at her with big eyes. A garbled sound emerged from his throat, muffled by the limp form of his latest

catch. He scurried off into the depths of the hold again, presumably to devour his prize. Violet was just glad she'd never had to clean up whatever he didn't finish eating.

Holding the soup out in front of her, Violet made her way towards the sound of voices. Rounding a stack of crates, she found herself staring down a bright, angry red glare. She squeezed her eyes down to the barest slits, trying to hold still and not spill the soup.

"Skipper?" Violet called out uncertainly. "That you?"

"What is it, Vi?" The skipper's voice came from behind the glare.

"Nothing, Skipper." Violet felt her tail going into a slow, nervous spin behind her. "Wasn't even looking for you. Gabbi thought Mister Sharpe might like something to eat. Thought he was down here with you."

"It's just Sharpe," she heard the man they'd rescued say. The light, a lantern, dimmed. She could make out Sharpe and the skipper, though she had blotches in her vision. "No mister. You say mister I'm gonna start looking around for my old man and none of us wants that fellow here. So just Sharpe, or Castor."

"I got some soup here, Mister . . . Sharpe, Castor." Violet held out the bowl.

"Thank you." Sharpe took the bowl in his free hand, hanging the lantern up on a nearby hook. He gave the soup a sniff.

"Don't mean to be rude, miss," he said apologetically, "but I did hear something about your cook poisoning someone just before I came on board."

The skipper snorted, reminding Violet of the accusations Quill had been throwing about.

"That was just Quill," Violet said, giving her tail a savage whip. "He was just venting. Gabbi never poisoned nobody. I've been helping her out in the galley."

"You seem to be everywhere on this ship," Sharpe observed. "Should be running it someday."

"Skipper runs the ship, Mister Sharpe," Violet said.

"And you do the running. I see," Sharpe nodded. He looked down at the bowl of soup. "This might be easier if I had a spoon."

"Sorry." Violet grinned at him. "Skipper's got all the spoons still."

Haven't had time to go dig them out yet.”

“Dig them out?” Sharpe repeated. “Dig them out of what?” He cocked an eyebrow at the skipper in confusion.

The skipper ignored him. “Maybe you should get to that,” she suggested to Violet. “The digging.”

Violet's eyesight was coming back, and for the first time she got a good look at the damage to the *Tantamount*. “The ship sure took a hammering, Skipper.” She scampered up to one of the breaches and knelt down beside it. The hole was big enough to fit her head and shoulders through. She could see through to the edge of the *Tantamount's* envelope. This close she could see something she'd never noticed before, how the miasma broke and roiled like surf on a beach before it reached the wooden hull.

“All that black mist outside, how come it doesn't come through?” she asked, looking back at the skipper. “We got more holes in us than Gabbi's galley even and the miasma's just floating out there.”

“The ether keeps it out,” Sharpe said, blowing on his soup.

“How?” Violet asked him.

Sharpe glanced at the skipper. “You mind?” he asked. “She's your crew; you don't mind me educating her some?”

The skipper raised her eyebrows. “Not at all.” She leaned against a post and folded her arms. “Seems she could do with some educating.”

“Skipper!” Violet protested.

“You should know this already, Violet.”

Sharpe spoke up before she could answer that rebuke. “You know how ships like this fly, right? Pack the hull and the keel full of ether and get a navigator to push the thing out into space. Going through the atmosphere is like taking a breath before you go swimming, the ship drags some of the air out with it.”

“Yeah.” Violet fidgeted impatiently. “I know all that. What's it got to do with keeping the mist out?”

“That black mist, that miasma, is like ether. Or ether is like a solid form of mist, they repel each other like a couple of magnets. You get the opposing magnets and they push each other apart,

same with mist and ether, the mist is trying to get in but the ether keeps it out.”

“It's a balancing act,” the skipper added. “Too much ether in the hold and the ship won't fly, it pushes all the miasma away. You sink. Too little and you don't have an envelope, so you can't trap any air.”

“Exactly,” Sharpe nodded. “The pressure of the mist trying to get in is what keeps your feet stuck to the floor. In fact,” he added conspiratorially, “since there's no other gravity out here, up and down is all relative to where you put the ether in your ship. That's why it goes in the keel and the bottom of the hull.”

“So?” Violet glanced down. “What does that mean?”

“It means if you went out through that hole,” Sharpe pointed, “and climbed down underneath the ship, your feet would stick to the hull of the ship.”

“Really?” Violet took half a step towards the breach. “You mean it? I'd be upside down then?”

“Sort of, well no, only from our point of view, from yours you'd still be right ways up.” Sharpe gestured vaguely with one hand, then looked at the still steaming bowl of soup. “It's like this,” he said, pointing at the bowl. Holding the bowl one handed he swung it back and over his head, upside down, before quickly bringing his arm back down and holding the soup out on the flat of his hand in front of him.

“It's like that,” he said. “The force of me swinging it keeps it in the bowl even when it's upside down. Same with the ether and flying this ship. If you climbed through that hole then to me and the skipper you'd be upside down but to you it would seem like normal. They call it void walking and . . .”

And if it works for a bowl of soup . . .

“Don't!” the skipper snapped, when Violet put a hand to the edge of the breach. The skipper glared at both of them. “That's enough planar theory for one day. Go get those spoons, Vi, I don't want to find any in my cabin when I turn in tonight.”

“Aye, Skipper,” Violet sighed, disappointed, but she moved quickly. She gave Sharpe a grin as she went.

Void walking, have to remember that for when the skipper's not

around. Maybe talk to Piper . . .

“Sweet girl,” was Sharpe's observation, taking another cautious sip from the bowl. “You know, this soup's not that bad, actually. My compliments to your cook. I'm almost willing to forget all those nasty rumours I heard about her.”

“You can compliment her all you like,” Nel replied. “I won't stop you and neither will she. But unless you want to be face deep in that soup you like so much that's the last time you put any ideas about void walking in my cabin girl's head.”

“Educating, Skipper.” Sharpe smiled. “And I did ask first. Maybe I made my first friend aboard this ship.”

“Violet's a good kid,” Nel said. “She doesn't need someone like you . . .”

“Someone like me?” Sharpe interrupted, grinning.

“Watch yourself,” Nel said. “And get yourself above deck. I don't like having oil lamps down here. Fire hazard.”

“Aye, Skipper,” Sharpe mockingly echoed Violet's words. “As you say.”

“Gabbi,” Violet called. “Where do you want these?”

“What?” Gabbi turned, waving a hand to see through the cloud of steam that was filling the galley. The cook eventually spotted Violet with her armful of cutlery.

“Is that from Nel's cabin?” Gabbi flushed at the sight of half a serving set in Violet's arms. “Put it in the tub. I'll wash it down before anyone eats with it.”

“Skipper's wall looks like a dartboard,” Violet said. She'd had to chip at the timbers to get the utensils free, bending more than a few and picking up splinters in the process.

“Lost my temper,” Gabbi muttered, turning back to her pots. “Quill . . . damned Kelpie.”

She gestured and a box skidded across the floor, stopping at her feet. The way Gabbi and Quill made things move like that

tugged at Violet.

“How do you do that?” she asked wistfully.

“Thaumatics,” Gabbi said.

“Yeah, but how?”

“Just do.” Gabbi asked, “How do you move that tail of yours, then?”

“My tail?” Violet twitched her tail, grabbing a self-conscious handful of bushy fur. “I dunno, I just do. It's a tail, what else?”

“See, you can't explain that?” Gabbi shrugged. “Make your head hurt just thinking about it. Same for thaumatics. Some folks have 'em, some don't.”

That didn't seem like enough of an explanation. “Mister Sharpe and the skipper were explaining ether to me before,” she said. “It's gotta be something like that.”

“Mister Sharpe?” Gabbi grinned at her. “He that one you brought aboard then? Not bad looking, that one.”

“Bandit and I think there might be too much steam in your eyes, cook,” Piper rumbled, appearing at the doorway with armfuls of sailcloth. Bandit was perched on his shoulders carrying a hammer and mouthful of nails.

“You just focus on fixing that wall, Piper.” Gabbi pointed at the holes in the wall separating the galley from the skipper's cabin. What was left of it, anyway. “Skipper's mad enough without having holes in her cabin.”

Piper opened his mouth to say something then thought better of it. He grinned at Violet and handed her one corner of the cut down sail he was carrying.

“This will have to do for now,” he said. “The skipper will manage. The skipper also tells me we need to work on our signalling, little one. Something about your sojourn to rescue our new friend.”

Violet flushed. “I . . . might have forgotten a few.”

“We will work on them,” Piper assured her. “These things cannot be rushed.”

“Piper, explain thaumatics to me,” Violet changed the subject as they stretched the sailcloth over the wall, covering the holes Gabbi and Quill's fight had left.

“Thaumatics?” Piper frowned, taking the hammer and starting to nail the sailcloth into the wall. “Ah, wizardry. Alas, little one, that one I cannot explain.”

“Why?”

“It's not wizardry, Piper,” Gabbi said.

“I cannot explain because I am not a wizard like our friends Gabbi and Quill.” Gabbi snorted at Quill's name but Piper didn't seem to notice. “How would you explain sound to a deaf man, sight to the blind? No, I do not think it is for us to know, little one. Leave it to the wizards.”

“Piper, it's not wizardry,” Gabbi repeated. “You'll confuse the girl.”

“Then explain it to me,” Violet said, exasperated. “Why is that so hard?”

“Later,” Gabbi said, shaking an empty box critically. “Right now I need more salted meat for the slush fund.”

The slush fund. That was one of Violet's least favourite duties. Boiling salted meat until it was a sickly grey colour produced an excess of fat and grease. Gabbi collected that grease and sold it when the *Tantamount* made port. The slush fund, as the crew called it.

“Go find Jack for me, Violet,” Gabbi said. “I don't know where he's been storing the meat lately.”

“Are we done here, Piper?” Violet asked.

Piper stepped back from the wall, studying their work critically. The sail covered the holes into the skipper's quarters but it wouldn't do much to stop noise coming through. *Still*, Violet thought, *quieter than slinging a hammock with the rest of the crew below decks.*

“It appears so.” On his shoulder, Bandit chirped. Piper turned his head towards his pet.

“Bandit wishes to go with you.” He looked thoughtful. “Very well, but hurry back, the both of you. We will have lessons later.”

Violet held out an arm and the loompa jumped, transferring to her. He ran up her arm and settled on her shoulder, clinging to her hair.

“Don't pull,” she warned him, feeling his small hands becoming tangled. Bandit squawked a reply. Violet laughed at his small, screwed up face. She didn't believe Bandit talked in quite the way Piper made out but she could read his moods well enough.

“Where's Jack, Bandit?” she said to him once they made their way down the ship. The loompa didn't jump off her shoulder and lead her to the sailor, as Violet had secretly hoped he would, but tightened his claws on her shoulder. Violet saw why.

At the other end of the ship, atop the bridge, Quill had fixed his gaze on them. Violet shuddered as the Kelpie's cold regard swept over them. It was clear the ship's navigator was still fuming.

The ship started to bank at that point, tilting to one side as Quill pushed the sails to make a change in their course. Violet heard a snapping sound and out of the corner of her eye caught sight of a water barrel starting to lean. It passed the tipping point and crashed to the deck, rolling straight for her.

Violet heard a yelp, unsure if it was from her or Bandit and jumped, catching hold of the railing leading to the forecastle. She swung her legs up just in time—the barrel hit the side banister and ruptured, water flooding over the deck and Violet.

“The hells was that, Quill?” Violet yelled one of the skipper's favourite expressions at the navigator, who appeared unconcerned. She was soaked, the light downy fur on her arms and legs was sodden, to say nothing of the tail which soaked up the water in sponge-like quantities. Violet had to resist the urge to shake and ring it out.

Quill shrugged, barely deigning to look at her. “The water barrel was unsecured.”

“Yeah?” Violet said. “It just happened to almost crush me? You just happened to have to turn the ship just as I was in the way?”

“I wouldn't waste the barrel,” Quill dismissed her accusation. He turned his attention away from her. “Make sure that is cleaned up.”

Violet bristled at the order, knowing she'd actually have to do it. Quill outranked her, hells, everybody on the ship outranked her. And she still had to find Jack!

A chirp from above caught her attention. Bandit was up in the

rigging—she hadn't even noticed he was gone. *Jumped ship at the first sign of danger, the little rat.*

“Get down from there,” she called.

Bandit ignored her and darted higher up the ratlines. Violet tracked him and saw him frolic amongst the sailors in the rigging. Mostly they ignored the critter as they trimmed sails and pulled lines. He settled on the shoulder of one sailor at the extreme end of the yard. Jack.

“Oh, hells,” Violet whispered. She thought to call out but knew he wouldn't hear her. She'd have to climb up.

Gingerly she set bare feet to cordage. Ratlines, thin cords strung between the shrouds formed ladders up into the sails. Violet used her legs to propel herself up into those sails. And the higher up she climbed the more the mast swayed, every slight adjustment Quill made to their course amplified. When she reached the spar where the *Tantamount's* sailors were working, Violet paused, hugging the mast to steady herself. She felt the first touch of nausea and she'd yet to step out onto the footrope. Glancing down she could see Quill staring up at her.

I'm just imagining that smile, Violet thought as the ship twitched again.

“All right there, lass?”

“Fine, Cyrus,” Violet told the sailor closest to her as she hugged the mast.

“What do you need?” Cyrus grinned. “Come up for a spell in the nest?”

Violet shuddered at the idea. The crow's nest was the worst place to be on the ship. Even seasoned crew got motion sickness whilst up there. Most saw it as a form of punishment.

“Need to talk to Jack,” she said.

Cyrus jerked his head. “He's out on the horse.”

“I can see,” Violet said unhappily.

Cyrus chuckled. “Off you go then, lass.”

The spar ran out from the side of the mast, extending over the edge of the ship. A footrope ran the length of the spar so the crew had something to stand on. Near the far end where it was

attached it became too steep to find purchase, so a second and shorter rope, the horse, was hung. Two footropes provided an unstable purchase, so it was the most experienced sailors who found themselves out on the far end. Sailors like Jack, who Violet needed to get to.

She edged round Cyrus first, which meant leaning out behind him and swinging round to the other side. Not ideal.

Cyrus leaned in towards the spar to help her. The second sailor was not so helpful, annoyed at having his work interrupted. Violet almost missed her footing and might have got into trouble. Jack's gnarled hand launched out and closed on her upper arm, hauling her back in.

"Not so lucky up here," Jack rumbled at her.

"What?"

"Saw that barrel miss you down there."

"It didn't miss me, I jumped."

"Yeah, lucky."

"What's luck got to do with it?"

"Kitsune tails. Lucky," Jack stated.

"My tail ain't lucky, Korrigan Jack," Violet snapped.

"You got it wet," Jack said critically. "Maybe it's no good wet."

"Stop looking at my tail!"

"Don't look right wet," Jack grunted. "Why's the Kelpie looking at us all angry?"

"Because he's a Kelpie," Violet muttered, glaring down at Quill. The navigator's head jerked away, determinedly trying to act busy. "What is his problem?"

"Weak stomach," Jack chuckled. "Now what do you want, girl?"

Violet remembered why she'd come up in the first place. "Gabbi needs to know where you put the salted meat. She can't find anything the way you pack the hold."

"Couldn't wait for me to be done with the sails? Why didn't you just signal me from down below?"

Violet started to say something, before realising Jack was right. She could have signalled him from the deck. Except she couldn't remember how. She turned away from Jack instead, starting the

shuffle back towards the ratlines.

With Jack and Bandit trailing her she made the journey back to the main deck. The wood was wet underfoot, causing Jack to stop and stare at his feet.

“That tail of yours ain't the only thing that got wet.”

Violet shrugged. “Quill said it weren't tied off proper.”

“Course it weren't. Look at all this. Find a mop and bucket.”

“Don't tell me what to do, Jack.” Violet was annoyed at the way he was talking to her. First her tail and now with the orders. She'd been sent to get him to do his job, not to be fobbed off herself.

“Why not?” Jack said. “You got better stuff to do? You're getting mouthy girl, but we all still get to tell you what to do. So get to mopping.”

He left her there, seething. Violet stomped the deck for a moment before relenting, as if she had a choice. She found a mop and began to push the puddles of water around the deck with it. She squeezed the handle of the mop as she worked, grinding her hands, then winced suddenly as she caught some of the splinters she'd got from digging out cutlery in the skipper's cabin. She'd forgotten about those.

“Having fun there?”

Violet had been so engrossed in her sulk she hadn't heard Sharpe come up. He was in annoyingly cheerful spirits, though he was moving somewhat gingerly and holding one hand to his injured ribs.

“Does this look like fun?” Violet planted the mop on the deck and leaned on it, glad for the excuse to avoid the job.

“I was a cabin boy once,” Sharpe recalled, sweeping a gaze along the length of the ship. “*Litany of Gabrielle*, that was my first ship. I rubbed my knuckles raw scrubbing her deck and my feet down to nubs running orders from one end to the other.”

Violet fidgeted with her own hands, the palms rough and callused from hard labour.

“Been here a while then?” Sharpe commented. “Long enough to thicken your skin.”

“Years,” Violet said, starting to work at the splinters.

“Tell that one to the marines.” Sharpe winked. “Either you mean Kitsune years or you're the worst cabin girl ever.”

“Feels like years,” Violet muttered.

“On the *Falchions* they had Draugr do stuff like that.” Sharpe pointed at the still present puddle of water. “Not always a good thing when you're out here in the Free Lanes and might end up needing to drink that same water.”

Violet recalled the frozen creatures out in the ship wreckage. “What are Draugr?” she said. That and thaumatics had been tagging at her mind for explanations of late. Violet figured Sharpe was more likely to answer than the crew. He owed her and the skipper for his rescue. “Skipper said the Alliance runs with them on their ships.”

“Skipper used to be Alliance, didn't she?” Sharpe said.

Violet shrugged. The last thing she needed right now was for the skipper to come along and catch Violet talking about her.

“It's all right,” Sharpe said, “I can figure things out for myself. What was I saying, then? Draugr? No easy answer there, little princess.”

“That's what everyone says.” Violet made a face. “About everything.”

Sharpe chuckled. “But I'm not everyone. Didn't say I minded if things weren't easy. Here, look.” He knelt down on the edge of the water spill and started drawing patterns with his finger.

“This is where we are.” He sketched a wide circle near the middle of the pool. “Way out in the Free Lanes, sparsely populated, unregulated, a big free for all with lots of opportunity for people who are smart and capable and trouble for those who aren't. Here,” he pointed to the centre, “we have the High Lanes.”

Sharpe made a number of patterns, zigzagging his finger back and forth only for the water to quickly flood back in. “Dense, lots of people, lots of rules and laws. It's all Alliance territory. There are trade routes all over the place, industry and more. It takes a lot of labour, a lot of manpower, to make a machine like that. The Alliance is made up of nations, planets, guilds, and companies. A lot of those . . . members use Draugr as labour. They don't sleep, don't complain,

and don't ask for pay. Half the High Lane trade routes are built off the backs of Draugr labour. To some people they're the perfect workers."

"To some people," Violet repeated.

Sharpe wagged his finger at her. "Yes, some people. Don't make the same mistake most do. Don't look at a group, especially a big group like the Alliance, and assume they're all working together. Most . . . they're like this ship."

"What about this ship?" Violet said quickly.

"Well, there's you," Sharpe pointed. "Everybody always telling you what to do. And," he said before she could interrupt, "your cook and your navigator, always at each other's throats. Why doesn't your captain do something about it?" Sharpe waved towards the hold, covered by latticework. "Your friend Jack there has had enough whippings to be married to the gunner's daughter. He's got the scars that prove it, but I don't think he got them on this ship."

"Captain doesn't like flogging," Violet told him. "Says it don't prove anything."

"And is the captain the one in charge?" Sharpe folded his arms across his chest. "Because it looks like Nel is running this ship. Why does she put up with some of this crew?"

The thing of it was, he wasn't wrong. Violet hadn't been on a lot of ships, only the *Tantamount*, to be honest. But from the moment the captain brought her aboard it had been clear that Nel was the one who ran the ship, even if she deferred to the captain. But if it were up to the skipper, Violet could imagine a lot of the crew getting the boot the next time they made port. It was the captain that had decided Violet could stay aboard in the first place.

"Why don't you ask them?" Violet told Sharpe. It wasn't her job to explain to him why the *Tantamount* worked the way it did.

Sharpe thought about it. He grinned suddenly. "Maybe I will. Thanks, princess." He turned to go.

"Hey!" Violet called after him. Sharpe turned.

"You never explained what Draugr are," she reminded him.

Sharpe grinned at her and winked. "That's right, I didn't."

Violet stared at his departing back, then gave a small scream of frustration and pitched the mop after him.

"I hate you!" she yelled. Her only answer was a laugh drifting across the deck. So much for gratitude.

Sharpe liked to talk. That much had been obvious to Nel from the moment he'd regained his voice. His first lesson to Violet wasn't the last. Over the next few days Nel would often come across the two of them, Sharpe telling ever more outlandish tales, Violet torn between fascination and frustration. And if he wasn't with her he was with the captain, playing endless rounds of cards. Conveniently, that kept him from helping out in any other manner, but it seemed to please Horatio, so Nel didn't object. Much.

What Nel hadn't figured on was how much the rest of her crew liked to listen to Sharpe as well. Boredom was a factor on long voyages, an odd, blissful boredom that crews on shore leave started to long for. But they never remembered that longing during the boredom—they craved novelty and entertainment only to quickly tire of it in turn. For now, Sharpe was that novelty.

Nel had been looking for Jack to ask about the results of his inventory. She'd found Sharpe holding court on the main deck, Jack being one of the few not present. The crew had been asking about the Draugr, Cyrus in particular, who'd had to man the forecandle and push some of them away from the ship while Nel had been amidst the wreckage. He had the shakes every time he talked about one getting caught on his boat hook and almost ending up aboard.

"This one time," Sharpe leaned forward from his perch on a water barrel outside the galley, "we were out on the Lanes, been at sail for a few days, three bells after the midnight watch. There I was asleep in my hammock, dead to the world, when someone starts to climb in with me."

He grinned round at the crew. "Well, you all know what that's like, your hammock is the only thing on a ship that's yours, your own little haven and you don't let nobody in it. Unless it's cold."

The crew laughed.

“As it happens it was a cold night and I was feeling a bit lonely so I didn't object at first. I roll over and start snuggling up the way you do and I'm relieved to find out my new friend is a lady, if I can use the term.”

More laughter.

Sharpe grinned, getting into his own story. “At this point in my dreamy state I'm thinking to myself, Castor, there's some mighty fine women on this ship and we all love a woman in uniform, don't we, lads? Yeah, that's what I thought. So I start to get things warmed up and plant a kiss on the old girl.”

He leaned back, shaking his head. “Her breath, let me tell you . . . well, no, don't let me. It was awful, but us beggars can't be choosers. Then I'm starting to wake up a bit, I realise maybe it's not just her breath, I'm thinking her skin's a bit rough and I start thinking this isn't as good as I thought it would be and I'm trying to figure out who's in my hammock.”

Nel snorted, shaking her head. She'd heard enough tavern tales to recognise this one. Enough of the crew were wide eyed and slack jawed though. Sharpe had them.

“So I open my eyes and there she is, in all her glory. We called her Gammy on account of her having no teeth. One of the ship's Draugr and she must have been feeling lonesome as even those lot do. And it was then that I realised something.”

“What?” Violet demanded when Sharpe didn't say anything else. “What?”

Sharpe blinked at her, as if it were obvious. “That was when I realised that it wasn't even my hammock.”

The crew roared with laughter, except for Violet. She looked annoyed at the punch line, then indignant as Sharpe tousled her already tangled hair.

“Back to work, all of you,” Nel called out, allowing the crew a moment to have their joke. They jumped when they heard her, leaving with a mix of grins and backslapping. Gabbi ushered Violet away, the girl's frown deepening. Gabbi was shaking her head in answer to whatever questions had been raised by the

indignant, young Kitsune.

“Skipper,” Sharpe greeted her from his perch. He held two steaming mugs in his hands. “Coffee?”

Nel took the proffered mug, a quick sniff confirmed the contents. She grinned at Sharpe. “So who's hammock was it?”

“It was my mate Stoker's,” Sharpe said, shaking his head. “I figured he might have been mad about me sleeping in his hammock so I never told him. He came back and found Gammy snoring away, happy as you please.”

He raised the mug, drinking deep from the piping contents. Nel raised hers too, but didn't sip, watching Sharpe. His expression changed, becoming uncertain, then pained. She watched him consider his options, the discomfort becoming more evident. Finally he swallowed, reluctantly.

“That,” he coughed into his hand, “was different.”

Nel smirked. “Too hot?”

“That's not like any coffee I've ever had before,” Sharpe said diplomatically.

“Got it from Jack, didn't you?”

Sharpe made a face.

“Next time ask Gabbi,” Nel advised. “Jack sometimes . . . experiments.”

She walked over to the edge of the ship, flinging the contents of her own untouched mug over the side. The hot liquid flash froze into a storm of dark snow the moment it hit the edge of the envelope.

“What was that?” Sharpe followed her example. “Or would I rather not know?”

“Probably the latter.”

“Could have been worse, I suppose.”

“Probably could.”

Sharpe grimaced. Nel was content to let him suffer.

“Your navigator, the Kelpie,” he said.

“What about him?”

“Watches me a lot.”

“Makes a change,” Nel muttered. “You have a problem with Quill?”

“Not Quill as such, no.”

“Kelpies in general then?”

Sharpe hesitated. “No, least, not on this ship. Was just saying, feels like he's watching me.”

“Then stop distracting my crew,” she told him. “They've got work to do.”

“Aye, Skipper,” Sharpe told her, all smiles now. “Whatever you say.”

“And make yourself useful.”

“How?” Sharpe grinned. “I already admitted to getting lost on the way to my own hammock. How do you think I can be of service, Skipper?”

“Take these back to the galley,” Nel tossed her mug in his direction. His hand jumped out and caught it. Nel frowned at that—the man was fast.

“Such a waste of my talents,” he sighed. “If you had another mug, I could juggle. But you don't, so I can't. To the galley then.”

A moment after Sharpe was gone Nel realised that much as he liked to talk Sharpe said very little about who he was or where he was from. Even what his talents were, as he put it. She wanted a word with Horatio.

The captain's cabin was the largest private accommodation on the *Tantamount*, the great cabin as such things were called, spanning the width of the stern of the *Tantamount*, with large windows covering the back wall, providing a vista out into the void. The cabin covered the same area as the galley and the two cabins above it, one of which was Nel's, the other Quill's. Unlike their cabins, Horatio's was as spacious as the layout of the ship allowed, divided into two sections: the chartroom and Horatio's private quarters. And unlike Nel's cabin both of those rooms had actual doors. Both Nel and Quill were on call as first officer and navigator respectively, at all times, and their cabins reflected that. Personal accommodation yes, but directly underneath the bridge and open to the deck.

The captain was counting coins. Stacks of them balanced atop ledgers and receipts, a precarious construction of towers that threatened to topple over at any second. What concerned Nel was the small denomination of most of the currency.

She grabbed a second chair by the neck, slamming it down backwards on the other side of the small counting table. Coins shuddered, then fell like gleaming dominoes, a cascade of money that spread out over the table. She straddled the chair, resting her arms over the back as her captain looked at the mess she'd made of his collection.

"I was counting those," he said plaintively.

"They don't need counting," Nel said. "There's not enough of them to need counting."

Horatio sighed, pushing loose coins towards the pile. "There's never enough, Nel. Join me in a drink?"

Nel nodded and retrieved the iced brandy from Horatio's liquor cabinet.

"What happened to the advance for this run?" she said, pouring two tumblers of golden liquor over ice.

"This is the advance."

Nel froze, the brandy halfway to her lips. "You're joking."

Horatio shook his head sadly. "This is my last bottle of brandy too. Sheridan, the good stuff."

Nel took a sip from her glass. Horatio was right, it was the good stuff. Burning all the way down and spreading out from there.

"That's what happens when you pay off debts, Nel," the captain said disapprovingly. "You run out of money."

"We'd have more money if you'd stop getting us into debt," Nel countered.

"I'll get us out when we reach Cauldron," the captain predicted. "I know some places, easy money. Never fails."

"I've heard that before."

"This time will be different," he promised.

"I've heard that before as well." Nel drained her glass, dropping it down on the table. "Captain, I wanted a word about . . ."

"Hear something?" Horatio lifted his head, and then a slow grin

spread over his face.

“Rays,” he pronounced.

The two rose from the table, Horatio still carrying his drink. A loud crooning came from outside the cabin, from outside the ship in fact. Both had heard the sound before and knew it well. Following the song they found more crew above deck, looking out to the side of the ship. At the rays.

A whole school of them. The void going variant of their sea dwelling cousins, only much bigger. Most of them measured ten feet in body with that much again in tail. Some were bigger; the pack leader was almost as big as the *Tantamount*. Its white underbelly blocked out the expanse as it banked towards the ship, coming in for a closer look, one massive yellow eye studying the tiny crew scurrying about on the deck.

“Mister Quill,” Horatio called out. “Take us a few points to starboard.”

On the bridge above them Quill raised both hands, hands encompassed in blue as he used his power to turn the ship to starboard. The sails filled out, creaking as they adjusted to the sudden strain. Without wind in space the ship needed Quill to fill those sails and he needed those sails as something to push against, something to push and prod, simulating the currents on an actual sea to help the ship sail through a solar sea. The ship cut away from the rays, flying parallel to the pack. The leader banked away, taking the point position.

The crooning continued. Nel wondered what the rays heard outside of the envelope—sound wasn't supposed to exist outside of the area around a ship, though she had no idea how anyone would have gone about testing that. It sounded too philosophical for her—if a ray sings in space and there's no one to hear it, was it really singing? Nel would have just asked the ray, if rays could talk. All roundabout nonsense that didn't matter, the sort of thing scholars and sages used to justify their pursuits.

“Rays are like albatross,” Horatio commented. “Supposed to foreshadow good luck.”

“Superstition, Captain,” Nel chuckled. “Isn't that a bit late-

night-fireside?”

“Doesn't mean it's not true, Nel.”

“Doesn't make it true, either.”

Horatio swirled his brandy, casting admiring glances at the rays. One banked away from them, all but disappearing as it showed its topside, a skin as black as the void. Others drifted in and out of the miasma that followed all ships sailing the stars.

“They're beautiful, aren't they, Nel.” Horatio sighed happily. “Even you have to admit that.”

“I like their singing,” Nel admitted grudgingly. “Makes a change from the silence.”

“What do you think they're singing about then?”

Someone laughed. “That there's no good fishing around here.”

“You speak ray, then?” Nel put the question to Sharpe, standing at the lower deck below Horatio's cabin.

He coughed, covering his mouth. “Sorry, throat's still a bit raw, must have been something I drank. And course I do, Skipper,” Sharpe grinned up at them, hands in his pockets now. “Doesn't everyone?” He winked, turned, and started walking towards the prow of the ship. Nel scowled at the man's back.

“Nel?” Horatio asked. “Everything ok?”

“I don't like him,” Nel said, watching Sharpe move along the ship. He seemed sure footed enough, probably no stranger to sailing. There was something military in his background, of that she was sure. He was too fit, had come through the destruction of his ship too well. You wouldn't know what he'd been through to look at him. He claimed he wasn't Alliance, but had been on one of their ships. That didn't sit well with her.

“Any reason?” Horatio sighed.

“Not yet.”

Horatio struggled for something to say. Horatio was an optimist when it came to the people aboard the *Tantamount*. Nel considered herself a realist.

“Well, we'll see when we get to Cauldron.” He brightened. “At least we know I'm going to have a good run at the tables now.”

Nel turned. “We don't know anything like that.”

Horatio gestured expansively. "That's a lot of rays out there."

"Captain," Nel sighed in irritation.

"Oh, be positive, Nel. Agree with me for once. You saw the rays."

Nel looked hard at her captain. Sometimes she wondered.

"Let me have a chat with our guest, Nel. Man to man. I'll soon discover if he's got anything to hide."

"Man to man?" Nel eyed her captain sceptically.

"Aye, that's what I said, Nel. You'd be surprised at what a man will tell you after a few drinks and a few friendly hands of Freehold Poker."

"Fine, just don't lose the rest our advance, Captain."

"Rays, Nel. You saw the rays. And one day you'll come around to my way of thinking," Horatio predicted. "One day you'll know what it's like to be in charge of a ship like this."

"I like things just the way they are, Captain," Nel said.

Horatio grinned. "Me too, Nel." He waggled a finger at her. "But nothing lasts forever. Don't forget that."

His words reminded her of something. "Speaking of which, Captain, I need to go find Jack."

Jack was meant to have been doing a stock take of all the stores on the ship, like the captain had ordered, working out if anything had spoiled, in an attempt to get to the truth of the matter that had affected Quill. Nel wasn't optimistic about a resolution to the mystery but going through the motions was better than nothing.

Jack wasn't doing just nothing when she found him. He was eyeing up the rays, particularly a smallish one that had drifted close to the ship. Jack seemed to be weighing up whether it was within harpoon range. He held one ready in his hands. His big, burly hands with their scar tissue wrist bands. Scar tissue that came from manacles and fetters, a signature from time incarcerated. Everyone had a past and Nel didn't hold Jack's scars against him. Scars to Jack were like tattoos to Piper—they held hidden stories. Nel had never asked about most of those stories, they just reminded her that he was capable of violence.

“Don't even think about it, Jack,” Nel warned, stamping her boots as she walked to make sure he knew she was there. Jack turned his big head to regard her with small dark eyes.

Jack had things in common with Piper, as far as first impressions went. They were both big men, large and imposing, and both had strange ways of talking. Both were good sailors, earning their keep on the *Tantamount*. Jack had done hard time and Piper looked like he had. But that was where the similarities ended, Nel thought. Piper was . . . deranged, but his actions always followed a strange sort of logic. Most could be traced back to Bandit. Jack was just plain crazy, in a colder-than-Quill sort of way.

“Skipper,” he said in his coarse, gravelly voice.

“What are you doing with that harpoon, Jack?”

Jack looked at the harpoon; his big hands easily encircled the shaft even though it was nearly twice his height.

“We need fresh meat. Those rays look like they got enough on them.”

“There's also a lot of them out there, Jack.”

“So?”

“You kill one of them, the rest will attack,” Nel pointed out.

Jack's head bobbed as he counted the breadth of the pack. “I don't got enough space for them all, especially not that big one.”

Nel frowned. That hadn't been her point. “We'll be at Cauldron soon. You can pick up supplies there.”

“Won't be as fresh,” Jack argued.

“Crew's used to that.”

“Yeah, but we got fresh meat flying right alongside us. Waste not to take advantage of that.”

“Didn't Gabbi give you another job to do?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did you do it?”

“Course I did,” Jack growled.

“So?” Nel didn't budge. She wasn't about to let Jack intimidate her, not on her own ship. “Find anything wrong with the stores?”

“The meat ain't fresh. Rest of it tasted all right.”

“You shouldn't have to taste everything to check if it's gone bad, Jack.”

“That's how you know if it's gone bad.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “So what made Quill sick?”

“Kelpie's got a weak stomach.”

“He eats raw meat, Jack. That's rarer than what you like, and I've seen you at mess.”

“Kelpies,” Jack grunted dismissively. “You sure you don't want me to hook one of those rays? They're just floating there. Asking for it.”

“They're swimming, Jack.”

“In what?” Jack shook his head. “Fine. I got work to do.”

“Then get to it. Where's Gabbi?”

“Where a woman should be, in the galley.”

“You looking to be scraping the hull, Jack?”

Jack shrugged. “If it needs scraping get your cabin girl to do it.”

“Get off my deck, Jack.” Nel shook her head in disgust. She went searching for Gabbi next, doubting she could handle any more male company.

Shards of ice flew as Violet chipped away at the hull's frozen covering. She stepped back and eyed the bucket at her side speculatively. *That ought to be enough*, she thought. The metal pail was about two-thirds full, anymore and she'd just be digging out the dirty ice, not the clean hoarfrost she wanted.

Violet shivered, rubbing at her arms. It was cold in this part of the ship, deep in the hold. This close to the edge of the envelope ice would form, so it was where perishable stores were kept. And once every few days the captain would send Violet down to fetch ice.

Violet hefted the pail, carrying it awkwardly with two hands and started the climb out of the hold. There was more than one level to climb and her shoulders had started to ache by the time

she reached the main deck.

She could hear voices before she reached the captain's cabin, mostly laughter. Mostly the captain.

"Violet." Sharpe was downcast as he faced her. "Your captain is killing me."

"Experience, my boy," the captain chortled as Violet set the bucket of ice down near to him. "Years and years of experience. Thank you, Violet, that's just what we needed."

He started to fill his and Sharpe's glasses with handfuls of ice.

"I didn't realise your ship ran cold, Captain," Sharpe said as he accepted his glass.

"Perks of the trade, my boy," the captain beamed. "Can't make a proper brandy without ice."

"It's better than the coffee, I must say," Sharpe agreed, setting his glass aside as he considered his cards.

"Tried Jack's coffee, didn't you, Mister Sharpe?" Violet grinned.

"Just Sharpe, princess, I told you. And yes, gods help me, I did. Nel didn't even warn me, evil woman that she is."

"Aye, she's got a mean streak to her, no doubt." The captain nodded conspiratorially. "You don't want to get on her bad side, you'll never get off it. Holds grudges, that woman."

"I believe you." Sharpe took another card, scrutinising the captain over his hand. The captain returned a dead pan stare, ignoring his own cards. Sharpe sighed and leaned over towards Violet.

"Put me out of my misery, princess. What was in that coffee?"

Violet fought back a smile. "Toast," she admitted.

Sharpe blinked. "Toast?" he repeated.

"Burnt toast," Violet confirmed, watching the distaste grow on Sharpe's face with amusement. *Maybe the skipper isn't the only one with a mean streak.*

"A run," the captain announced loudly, laying down his cards. "Queen high."

"Queen?" Sharpe exclaimed. He stared at the cards on the table before throwing his own away. "I give up, Captain. Your whole crew's against me. I can't compete."

“Ah, well, more's the pity,” the captain said, looking over his winnings.

“Your captain's cleaned me out, princess,” Sharpe confided to Violet.

“I can see.” Violet grinned, eyeing her captain's newly acquired collection of matchsticks and buttons. “Barely a stitch to your name, Mister Sharpe.”

“Aye, he left me that dignity, barely,” Sharpe grumbled. “How did a sweet girl like you end up crewing for a crooked poker player like Captain Phelps?”

Violet shrugged. “Not much of a story there.”

“I recall it involved a tavern brawl,” the captain mused.

“All the best stories do,” Sharpe said.

“Nel had been drinking,” the captain said, his eyes becoming distant. “She didn't do that often but after Thyme got stabbed she started again.”

“Again?” Sharpe said, his eyes narrowing. “Who was Thyme?”

“He was . . . before me,” Violet told him. She looked unhappily at the captain. Sometimes . . . he got confused. This was the first time Violet had seen it happen without the skipper or someone else around.

“Captain,” she said, touching his shoulder.

“I sent Quill to go find Nel, can't sail the ship without a skipper,” the captain rambled, like he hadn't heard. “And we found Violet on the way. Found her on the way and . . .”

The captain looked at both of them, seeming to notice Violet's touch. “What was I saying? Something about a tavern brawl?”

Sharpe reached out and carefully gathered the cards from the table.

“Another hand, Captain?”

The galley was in better shape than the last time Nel had visited. Pots and pans were still flying around but not as vigorously as when Quill had been their target. Gabbi stood in the middle of the galley, directing her utensils like a pudgy

choirmaster. There was a queued up procession for the stove, brimming pots cycling over it as they were required. Gabbi's control wasn't quite fine enough to manage tasks like cutting and dicing ingredients but she could haul the heavier items in the kitchen around, cutting down on the number of assistants she needed. Mostly she just made do with Jack. He'd learnt to duck after the first day on the job. They dented less pots that way.

"Jack was looking to bring you a side of manta ray," Nel announced her presence dryly. "Freshly caught."

"Ray?" Gabbi's head came up, shaking. "I saw them before, pretty things, if you don't annoy them. Shooting them full of harpoons annoys them. Besides, those things are tough and dry. Taste terrible."

"You should try them battered and fried in oil," Nel suggested, though she was pleased Gabbi agreed with her.

"I'm trying to teach Jack more than butchery," Gabbi said. "But that boy is pure hunter-gatherer. If you can't skin it and fillet it, he doesn't want it."

"At least he's easily amused. Unlike some."

Gabbi cast Nel a cock-eyed glance. "Watch this," she said, taking a cracked walnut shell out of a box on the table. She tossed it into the air, catching it with her power and floating it out the door. Nel watched as Gabbi guided the nut case down the deck towards the back of the ship, towards the bridge. Quill stood there, feet splayed, and tail swaying. He seemed to be on edge.

With a flick of her wrist Gabbi sent the shell skittering across the deck right behind Quill, sliding off the back of the ship and out into space. Quill turned like someone had prodded him with a lightning rod, trying to spot where the sound came from. Nel could hear his snarl of frustration all the way from the galley.

"Been doing that long?" she asked her.

"Day or two," Gabbi admitted. "He's been jumpy lately. Still thinks I tried to poison him."

"Did you?"

"Skipper," Gabbi protested.

"Ok, ok."

“He'd be dead if I had, anyways.”

Nel raised an eyebrow.

Gabbi shrugged. “Just saying.”

“Ease off on him, Gabbi. The ship's in rough shape enough, don't need Quill twisting us apart because you scared the scales off him.”

Gabbi snickered at the idea.

“Gabbi,” Nel warned.

“Aye, Skipper, I hear you. No more tricks.”

CHAPTER 3

It was bells that woke her from a comfortable but dreamy sleep this time. Jack had tried to spear one of the giant rays and it had taken him for a ride, doing loops around the *Tantamount* while Jack clung to the harpoon. Gabbi threw giant walnuts to try and knock him free while the crew cheered and for some reason Sharpe stood on the bridge waving a flag to conduct the aerial display. And then, as so often happened in her dreams, clouds of ash and dust erupted to cover the scene, cloaking the *Tantamount* and all aboard her in choking billows. Nel woke to the sound of her crew shouting landfall amidst the pealing bells.

“Landfall,” she muttered, rolling out of her hammock and reaching for her boots. It was a gross exaggeration. She stood, trying to ignore the sheen of sweat that often accompanied her bad dreams. And the best way to do so was to join her crew on the deck, as Cauldron grew larger on the forward plane.

Cauldron was so named because it was settled in the bowl-shaped crater of a giant asteroid, one that could have made a case for being a small planetoid, but not a planet itself. The active, volcanic vents and flaming geysers were fuelled by underground gas chambers that provided heat and light to an otherwise desolate rock.

Old Smoky was what some of the locals called the biggest vent, a miniature volcano that rose in the centre of the crater. Much of the industry on Cauldron was powered by steam, rather than ether like

it would have been on a more developed world. Huge machines could be found around most of the vents, mills and wheels powered by the constant gush, with clusters of buildings around the contraptions, the only places on the rock it was warm enough to live. Cauldron was cold and generally miserable but survived because it happened to be roughly in the middle of two intersecting trade routes. Accessible but still off the high traffic lanes, a place where less than legitimate exchanges could happen and where not too many questions would be asked.

Having begun as a bare and airless rock, breathing came at a premium on Cauldron. Piers extended out from the rim of the crater to which ships could dock, or alternatively they could tie up to the floating moorings left adrift in space above Cauldron and lower bubbles down to the township. Either way would be met with eager toll collectors.

“Used to be they shipped air in the hard way,” Nel explained to Violet, leaning over the railing as Quill brought the ship to one of the piers. She would have preferred a mooring for the lesser expense and detachment it offered but repairs necessitated a proper berth. They needed scaffolding and skilled labour. They were going to have to bring materials onto the ship and there was no way they could do that with just bubbles and the ship's cranes. Not if they wanted to make their delivery within the next month. And they still had to get that damned mast out of the hull—it was already drawing attention. She could see people on the docks staring and pointing.

“How'd they do that?” Violet looked over the township with fascination. The girl always got fidgety whenever they made landfall. Nel put it down to youth; Violet had the attention span of any other teenager. She'd be over Cauldron soon enough once she got an idea of the place. Nel just had to keep her out of trouble 'til then.

“Brought it in by ship,” Nel explained. “All bottled up. Or sometimes they'd just siphon it straight out of the bigger ships once they'd put an envelope around this dust ball.”

“How'd they do that, Skipper? Put an envelope around a big

rock like this.”

“Same way we do it on the ship, fill the hull full of ballast.”

“You mean ether,” Violet said, trying to appear knowledgeable.

“Right,” Nel grinned, ruffling the girl's hair. “That thing that throws up a field around the ship. The more ballast, the bigger the field and envelope, and the more gravity there is. You can do the same for stations like this, just takes a lot more ballast.”

“Sounds expensive.”

“It was. It is. So they keep telling us. There's enough stunted shrubbery in this crater now to keep pumping out the air but the tolls are still here.”

“What are those?” Violet asked, pointing at a group of lumbering figures across the docks.

Nel squinted. “Golems. Steam powered.”

The golems were roughly man-shaped, boxy constructs made of wood and metal, gushing steam from various orifices. They had the same crudely painted symbol she could see all over Cauldron, a spider's web. She knew it for the sign of the group who controlled Cauldron. The Spider's Web, mercenaries, the strong arm employed by whichever shady trading company had set up the first trading posts on Cauldron, back before it had been called that.

Nel knew the Web for a big group, as far as mercenaries went, that used to have something of a reputation. Over time the mercs had taken over more and more of the day-to-day operations of running Cauldron until eventually they'd just cut out the middlemen altogether. They administered the tolls to anyone who stepped foot on the surface proper and made sure they got a piece of whatever else went on in their territory. The fees were high but not enough to drive people away. It was part of the price of doing business on Cauldron.

The golems Nel could see were mules; made to handle heavy lifting and transport at the docks—for a price of course. They'd probably started off as siege engines, war machines, and run on things other than steam. But mercenaries, being the most practical of people, could never justify anything that didn't bring in coin. Steam was cheaper than everything else on Cauldron and the golems

were free labour sitting idle. So they'd been put to work.

Smart, Nel conceded. Their presence everywhere reminded everyone who ran Cauldron.

“How do they work, those golem things?” Violet twisted round to ask.

“I don't know,” Nel said. The girl had endless questions, answer one and half a dozen more were blurted out. “Go ask Piper if you're so curious, maybe he'll tell you.”

On cue the lesson was interrupted by Piper's arrival. Bandit crouched on his shoulders, black clawed hands gripping the sides of Piper's bald head for balance. The loompa's own head turned excitedly left to right and then back again as it steered Piper towards Nel and Violet.

“Skipper.” Piper nodded, causing Bandit to squawk in alarm and almost lose his balance.

“Piper,” Nel said, “either kick that disgusting creature over the railings or tie it up somewhere out of sight. But for goodness sake don't cart it around like it's the one in charge.”

“I'll take him,” Violet declared, extending one arm to the loompa. Bandit chirped and transferred himself to the girl, scampering along her arm and taking a perch on her shoulder. He peered around with interest from his new vantage.

“Don't fall.” Piper appeared concerned for his pet. Bandit turned his head to regard him, then went back to Violet. He seemed crestfallen that his new transport was so much shorter, until he discovered the handholds Violet's tangled hair provided.

“He won't fall,” Violet assured Piper, giggling as Bandit played with her hair. “He likes me too.”

“The two of you are probably related.” A clicking on the coarse deck planking announced Quill's arrival. Like all Kelpies his legs bent backwards at the knee and ended in two hoof-like toes, so he rarely wore boots, going barefoot aboard the ship same as the rest of the crew. More of the crew were starting to appear now they were planetside.

“We're docked,” Quill told Nel, “and the vultures are gathering. Or should that be monkeys? Kin of yours, yes? Close

cousins perhaps.” He eyed the loompa meaningfully.

“You might want to stow the attitude, Quill,” Nel said. “You're part of the reason we're here.”

“I was poisoned,” Quill was quick to remind her. “We should find ourselves a new cook while we're here, one who cooks more than she eats.”

Bandit made a chattering sound, drawing suspicious looks from both Nel and Quill.

“What does that thing want?” the Kelpie hissed.

“Bandit should not use language like that,” Piper shook his finger. “Where did you learn such things? What? From the skipper?” He turned to Nel, poised to start lecturing. She wasn't in the mood.

“Don't even start, Piper,” she warned him off.

“I'm feeling peckish,” Quill muttered. “Perhaps a bite of monkey might go down well. What do you say, Skipper? Get rid of the fur and the thing might make good eating.”

Bandit bared sharp teeth in a high pitched growl, taking refuge behind Violet.

“You leave him alone,” the cabin girl snapped. “Just cause something got under your scales—”

“My scales?” Quill sounded surprised. “Insolent brat.”

“Touch them and I will hammer your tail into the anchor, wizard,” Piper warned Quill when the Kelpie took a step forward.

“That's navigator, oaf,” Quill snarled. “Navigator, not wizard!”

Piper snorted. “They are the same thing.”

“Gods below,” Nel exclaimed, “quiet, all of you. We've got a ship to fix. None of you are helping. Quill, I'm going ashore, you're in charge 'til I or the captain gets back. You two,” she pointed at Piper and Violet, “are coming with me.”

“Where is the captain?” Violet asked, looking around. She stood on her tiptoes to scan the ship which made Bandit imitate her atop her shoulders. “Shouldn't he be here?”

“The captain likes the games,” Piper told her. “The captain is not good at the games, but likes them all the same.”

“He was the first one ashore,” Nel said dryly. “Always is at a place like this. He'll be back when he runs out of money.”

“Shouldn't he be . . . ,” Violet hesitated.

“What?” Nel asked.

The girl hesitated. “I don't know, running stuff? Instead of letting you do all the work all the time?”

Quill laughed. Nel glared at him.

“The captain is the captain. Nel is the skipper,” Piper told Violet. “This is how things are. This is what works. Even the wizard knows this.”

“Navigator,” Quill repeated irritably.

“Horatio has his quirks, but he's a good captain,” Nel told the girl. “We've all had worse, believe me.”

Violet looked unconvinced but it wasn't Nel's job to change her mind. They had a long list of repairs that needed to be made and standing around wasn't getting them done.

“Where's our guest?” Nel asked, casting her eye up and down the crew starting to line the rail. Violet wasn't the only one with a short memory and attention span. Sailors had an odd fascination with terra firma; they were always glad to see it but grew restless soon after.

“Anyone seen Sharpe?” she asked those around her. She received shaken heads from all of them.

“Maybe he went ashore with the captain,” Violet suggested.

“Or without him,” Quill muttered.

“You don't think he left, do you?” Violet was crestfallen. She'd been spending time with him since they picked him up, Nel recalled.

Nel shrugged. “We can hope.”

“Skipper!” Violet protested.

“He was never going to stay, Violet,” Nel said. “He wasn't part of the crew.”

“And he was Alliance,” Quill said.

“No he wasn't,” Violet protested. “He said he wasn't.”

Quill snorted. “Doesn't matter what he said, he was on an Alliance ship.”

“What's wrong with Alliance, anyway?” Violet asked the navigator.

“They're Alliance.” Quill shrugged.

“So?”

Quill shook his head. “Idiot girl.” He looked at Nel. “Haven't you taught her anything yet?”

“Watch your tone, navigator,” Nel said.

“Children shouldn't be allowed on ships, bad luck.” He glared at Bandit. “Neither should rodents.”

Violet turned her back on Quill, flicking her tail upwards at him. Bandit kept facing the navigator and shook his tiny fist at the Kelpie, screeching.

“Disgusting creatures, both of them,” Quill said.

“Quill, go up to the bridge,” Nell ordered. “You're on watch, remember? Try and find out where Sharpe got to, though I can't say as I'll miss him if he has jumped.”

“Aye,” Quill muttered. “And I won't shed any tears if you choose to lose a few more crew members ashore.” He made the word crew sound like an insult.

Piper laughed.

“What?” Quill said suspiciously.

“Your joke,” Piper said. “It was funny.”

“What joke? There was no joke!”

“Kelpies cannot shed tears,” Piper said. “So you will be crying on the inside, yes?”

Quill spluttered indignantly.

“You try very hard to pretend. Bandit was getting worried.”

Quill stared. “This is not funny,” he hissed. He appealed to Nel. “This is not funny!”

Nel thought it was funny.

But she didn't let on.

Violet noticed how hard the skipper avoided looking at Quill whilst they were leaving the ship. Quill had retreated to the bridge and was being given a wide berth by the crew remaining on the ship. She'd already checked that all the water barrels were tightly lashed. Nel led Piper and Violet ashore and straight to the toll collectors

barring the way out of the docks.

“Chanel,” the man in charge of the check point leered. “Long time no see.”

“Oh, hells,” Violet heard the skipper mutter. “Just my luck.”

Violet tried not to stare. She hadn't been paying attention to where they were headed, eager to take in the sights and sounds of their latest port. She'd been hoping for a closer peek at those golems and how they worked. But she could count the number of times she'd heard anyone use Nel's full name on one hand and hadn't expected today to be one of those times. Personally she could never think of Nel as anything but the skipper. Anything else struck her as disrespectful, something someone like Quill might do.

“Brawn,” the skipper sighed, rocking back on her heels in front of the strapping man who blocked their path. *The skipper doesn't look happy*, Violet thought. The man who'd greeted her was big, almost as big as Piper, with pale eyes and dark hair slicked back with oil. His arms were bare and sporting a sailor's tattoos. Violet picked out the ones that mentioned naval service and trips to the Far Lanes. Most prominent was the web-like design Violet had been seeing since they got to Cauldron. It covered one shoulder and much of his upper arm.

“You looked better last time,” the skipper told him. “When I'd been drinking.”

“You were a mess,” Brawn replied, to the amusement of the others at the checkpoint.

The skipper scowled. “Didn't put you off.”

“Nothing puts me off.”

“Pity.”

“Isn't it just?”

Piper leaned in close to the skipper. “Bandit will bite him if you give the words,” he whispered loud enough for Violet to hear. On her shoulder Bandit tensed, shuffling around.

The skipper appeared to seriously consider it for a moment. But she shook her head.

“That your ship?” Brawn gestured towards the *Tantamount*

with his ledger.

“You know it is,” the skipper frowned.

Brawn scribbled a note on his ledger. “Where's Captain Phelps?”

“What's it to you?” the skipper countered.

“Like to say hi to the captains when they pass through,” Brawn grinned. “Touch bases, familiar faces, that sort of thing. Phelps hasn't been this way in a time.”

“Try the poker tables,” was all the skipper suggested.

Brawn chuckled. “Yeah, I'll do that. Man loves his games. He's already ashore then?”

A shrug. “Didn't say that.”

“Didn't have to. Now what's wrong with your ship?”

“Nothing's wrong with my ship.”

“It's got a tree sticking out of it. You let the cabin girl steer or something?”

“It's a mast,” Violet told him, annoyed. “We found a smashed up ship out there.”

“You found what?” Brawn sounded surprised.

“Shush, Violet,” the skipper said, shaking her head slightly. Violet bit down on her tongue at the chastisement.

Brawn eyed her speculatively. “New kid, Chanel? She got something to say?”

“Not to you she doesn't.”

“When you say a smashed ship?” Brawn inquired with a frown.

“I mean something hit them and pieces of them hit us,” the skipper told him simply.

“What, right after it happened? You picking fights out there?” Brawn's eyes narrowed. “People think they can hide out on Cauldron. Doesn't mean we like them doing it. Not if folks are likely to come to Cauldron looking for them. You ought to remember that.”

“We were late to what happened out there,” the skipper said. “Got caught in the aftermath, that's all.”

“Sloppy work, girl,” Brawn mocked her. “Your pilot asleep on the watch?”

The skipper flinched slightly at that comment, though Violet doubted anyone else would notice. Still aboard and Quill was still

causing the skipper grief.

“We done catching up, Brawn?” the skipper said. “Just tell me the toll so we can get this over with.”

“Well, now,” Brawn mused laconically. He gestured at the ship again. “There's a lot to consider. Landing fees, docking fees. Shore tax, that air you're sucking down ain't free, Chanel. You know that, right? Then there's the protection levy . . .”

“The what?” Violet could hear anger in the skipper's voice.

“Oh, yeah,” Brawn grinned. “Protection levy. You know what Cauldron's like, girl, all sorts of bad trouble just waiting to happen.”

The skipper's face darkened. It was clear even to Violet the man was trying to shake them down for coin, and not even being subtle about it. Whatever history the two had, Brawn was clearly enjoying his position of authority now.

“Real shame your captain ain't here, Chanel. He owes me for his last big win. All down to me that one was.” The man leered.

“I doubt that.”

Brawn chuckled. “And here was me thinking he sent you to settle his affairs for him. Now that'd be ironic. But you and me, we already had our fun. I've gone up in the world since the last time you were here.”

Bandit chose that moment to dig his claws into Violet's shoulder, causing her to cry out a little. She twisted, trying to make the loompa stop. He grabbed on with all four limbs and stared with wide, almost manic eyes at the toll collector. It was enough to draw his attention.

“Pretty young thing you got with you there, Chanel.” Brawn reached out and caressed Violet's hair with the back of his hand. Violet flinched away from that hand, feeling like something dirty had just touched her.

“Can't be too careful, why—”

He didn't get to finish as the skipper's knee came up sharply and connected with his groin. Brawn gave a sort of squeak and sunk to his knees in front of Violet. His men stared for a moment before reaching for weapons. Piper balled his fists expectantly,

but Nel ignored them, not bothering to reach for the wand at her side.

The skipper spoke quietly, but loud enough for all to hear her. "You don't touch my crew. Not a one of them. Not ever."

She crouched down beside Brawn, holding up a handful of dominions, trading currency. Coins that were taken anywhere and everywhere, usually at a favourable exchange rate.

"This is all you're getting," she told him. "You want more, go pick on someone who doesn't know you like I do."

She dropped the coins next to Brawn and gave him a shove. Brawn collapsed sideways, still clutching at his groin.

"Move," the skipper said, glaring at his men.

They moved out of her way, some giving dark looks but none seemed willing to incite more trouble.

"Skipper? What was —" Violet started to say.

"Keep walking." The skipper took a firm grip on the girl's elbow, dragging her along.

But Violet wasn't about to let it go. She rubbed at her face where the man had touched her. "Did you know that guy? Who was he?"

"Local muscle, appropriately named," the skipper muttered, not slowing.

"He called you Chanel," Violet exclaimed.

The skipper made a face, kept walking.

"Not even the captain calls you that," Violet said aloud.

"So don't start," the skipper warned her. The grip the skipper had on her arm tightened once reflexively.

"But . . ."

"He was a mistake, Vi." They stopped, the skipper speaking plainly. "He and I. He was a mistake I made. He was drunk, hells, so was I. Really drunk. It was a bad time. Sometimes . . . everyone makes mistakes, all right?"

Violet brushed hair away from her face, staring up at the skipper. For once the skipper didn't meet her eyes. She was . . . upset.

"You could have done better," Piper said.

"Nobody asked you," the skipper said angrily.

"You are setting a bad example for us all," Piper added. "Next

time Bandit will do the biting.”

“Piper,” the skipper growled.

“If you continue to make such poor choices in life, I will have Quill do the biting as well,” Piper threatened. “It would not be the first either, he will do it.”

The skipper glared at him. “Stow it, Piper.” But there was just the hint of a smile at the edge of her mouth. Violet felt a grin spreading over her face. Then the image of Quill attached by his teeth to Brawn popped into her head and she couldn't hold it back.

“Oh, shut up, the both of you.” The skipper turned her back on them. “Move.”

“Aye, Skipper, as you say,” Piper called, striding after her. Violet hastened to catch up.

The skipper took them all the way to the commissioning office, through the warehouse district and a shanty market. Like everywhere else on Cauldron, there was a web emblem above the door.

“These guys are everywhere,” Violet commented as the skipper studied the outside of the building. There was no one else around but the path was well beaten, indicating heavy traffic.

“Like cockroaches,” Piper agreed. “They need a good stomping.”

“Would you two behave while we're here,” the skipper muttered.

“You were the one who beat up that guy at the checkpoint,” Violet said.

For the reminder she earned herself a vicious glare. “You should have taken notes.”

“Who should have? What notes?” Violet complained.

Piper reached out and enfolded Violet in one burly, tattooed arm, ruffling her hair affectionately. She pulled her head away.

“What?” she complained, looking up at Piper. He smiled and she settled down into a sulk.

“Let the skipper do the talking,” he said. “This is one of those times.”

“Fine,” Violet muttered. *Shut up and listen. Be quiet and take notes. It's too hard to explain. Always the same.*

The skipper stared at the two of them. She didn't seem happy about what she saw. “Keep quiet,” she repeated before opening the door.

“Actually,” the skipper said before stepping into the office. “Just stay out here. And keep quiet.”

Violet sighed. *Always the same.*

The clerk at the desk inside the commissioning office barely looked up at Nel's entrance.

“Name?” he asked, not missing a beat as he ran a quill back and forth along a ream of parchment.

“Nel Vaughn —”

“Not yours,” the clerk interrupted. “Ship, company, office, faction. Something I might actually have heard of.”

“*Tantamount*,” Nel said shortly. “That's a ship, in case you're wondering.”

“*Tantamount, Tantamount*,” the man muttered, turning, and opened a filing cabinet behind him. The wooden drawer stuck and he tugged on it viciously. It came out with a swirl of dust. The clerk waved a hand to clear the air. “Equivalent, synonymous, as in equal to or near enough. That was *Tantamount* with a T?”

“Yes.”

The man plucked a file out of the drawer, swivelling back and laying it over his desk.

“What can I do for you?” the clerk asked, starting to page through the file.

“My ship needs repairs,” Nel said. “Hull breaches, decking, sails.”

“That will be expensive.”

“Surprise me.”

“Your ship has debt loaded against it,” the clerk pushed the file away. Nel scowled. That hadn't been the surprise she'd been hoping for. To be honest, it wasn't even much of a surprise.

She frowned. “You have that on file?”

“On the wall behind you, next to the door.”

Nel turned. Next to the door was a list of names. People, ships, organisations. All of them in bold red ink, meaning indebted. About halfway down the list was the captain's name.

“My ship's name isn't on that list,” she said, not willing to make the obvious mistake. There was a reason she hadn't used Horatio's name.

“Your captain's is,” the clerk said. He held up the file. “His name is in here, so is your ship's.”

Bloody Cauldron, Nel thought.

“You keep papers on every gambling debt?”

The clerk shrugged. “Only the ones owed to our members. You won't be able to commission materials or labour until the debt is settled.”

Who expected a smuggler's nest to keep detailed records? That was the thing about mercenaries though; they were meticulous about who owed them money. Nel winced when she saw the other name next to Horatio's. Brawn hadn't been kidding—the captain really did owe him money.

“How much is the debt?” Nel grimaced.

The clerk told her. She started swearing. Loudly.

“Skipper?” Piper stuck his head in the door, looking round the room carefully.

Nel took a breath. “It's fine, Piper,” she said. “Go wait outside.”

The clerk scribbled out a note, handed it to her. “The interest on the debt will be added to your docking fees. I suggest you settle it quickly.”

“I already paid my docking fee,” Nel objected.

“You'll pay this before you're allowed to leave.”

Nel took the paper reluctantly. She managed to resist the urge to crumple it until she was outside the office. She and Horatio were going to have words when she next laid eyes on him.

“Problems?” Piper asked when she emerged. He and Violet looked up from some discussion.

“We need to go somewhere else,” Nel said. “Some place

without a damned web over the door.”

Piper glanced up at the mercenary logo. “The captain is going to be needing a big win, yes?” he guessed. Piper had been with the captain almost as long as Nel had.

“The captain has done enough, Piper. Find me a salvage shop. Next to a bar, one that serves beer. Cheap beer. In fact, forget the salvage shop.”

Ebon stared at the cards on the table. It was a favourable hand. A very favourable hand in fact. The problem was that it wasn't his. The hand belonged to the man opposite him, a battered middle aged man sporting a just as battered captain's hat. The two of them were the only ones left in the game. In fact the other man, the captain, had been taking all the other players for whatever they were worth for the past few bells. A good run, the sort that made management suspicious. The captain was being watched closely, but as far as Ebon could tell he was playing it straight. The man was just lucky. It didn't make any sense. Nobody was that lucky. Not on Cauldron.

“Out.” Ebon threw down his cards in disgust. The captain chortled gleefully, raking in his winnings. Ebon retired to the bar, ordering a drink with a wave of his hand. It was embarrassing, getting fleeced by a visitor on his home grounds.

“Losing your touch, Ebon,” his server chuckled.

Ebon glared up at the man, recognising him. He'd just lost a considerable amount of coin and wasn't in the mood to be ribbed about it. “You tend bar now?” he muttered. “Thought you had better things to do. Last I saw you were running jobs for the Web.”

“The bar was empty and I couldn't miss a chance to chat with an old friend.” The bartender chuckled again. “Seems Captain Phelps took you for a ride, Ebon.”

Ebon snorted, reaching for his drink. “You said he was a lousy player. He's taken me and everyone else here for all we own.”

The bartender shrugged. “Guess he was due, but you were the one who wanted a ship. The *Tantamount* was bound for Vice before she had to stop here. She can run cold cargo and that's what you

need.”

“What I need is a way to get my money back,” Ebon growled.

“Suppose I staked you in the next round. And suppose I confide to you some of Captain Phelps’ tells.”

Ebon glared at the man. “Now you mention his tells?”

The bartender leaned down, grinning. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Ebon, this ship is perfect for your run. The crew as well.”

“You remember what’ll happen at the end of this run, right? Why this ship? What’d Captain Phelps ever do to you?”

“Ain’t Phelps so much as his first officer.”

Ebon stared, then chuckled, remembering the table talk. “Phelps’ first officer is a woman.”

“And a hard one at that,” the bartender muttered, running a hand through short hair. “So, are we doing this or not?”

Ebon took a long look at Captain Phelps. The man was busy ordering another drink and poring over his winnings. A fair amount of that coin had been Ebon’s until recently. The skinny, frail looking old human looked out of place amongst Cauldron’s motley inhabitants. *Don’t see too many like him out in the Free Lanes*, Ebon thought.

“All right,” he said, “tell me everything you know about Captain Phelps.”

“Who’s got my spendings?” Gabbi asked, looking round at her party. Jack didn’t answer, looking round at Cauldron’s milling populace. They’d come to the markets, a place where if it could be moved, it was for sale. That included anything and everyone, so it was not a place Gabbi would have come alone. That was why Jack and the other two crew heavies were with her.

Aldy and Orim were Free Lanes muscle, no other words for it. If it was a dangerous job or heavy lifting then they were the first in line. Like most sailors they got antsy staying in one place too long so were always volunteering, if volunteering would get the ship underway any quicker. Aldy didn’t have the sense to string

more than two sentences together, but he knew ships and sailing well enough. Given his ropes and a heading, he was happy. Everything a trader wanted in a sailor. Orim was a lousy hand at poker and dice which made him a favourite amongst the rest of the crew.

She wouldn't have trusted either with cold coin which was why Jack was holding onto the ship's slush fund. She had money for the provisions—that came from the ship's running costs, which was worked out between the officers. But the slush fund was gravy, so to speak, for all those extra luxuries that kept the crew happy and in line.

Jack had insisted on carrying it.

“This is hardly bulk.” The bearded Domovoi grocer she'd been buying from seemed bored by the lot. “Goods are in back, you can take 'em when you pay me up front. No discount.”

“You don't have much,” Gabbi said. “For once in my life I've money to spend and naught to spend it on.”

The shelves in this store and many others were thin. Not bare, but the bulk produce was mostly gone. The stuff that remained wasn't as good as Gabbi would have liked, the perishables looking older and wilted more than what she herself would have put on display.

“Just what you've seen.”

“And no liquor?”

“Not to be had here.”

And that wasn't going to sit well with the crew. Wasn't even going to be able to keep that from them neither, not once Aldy and Orim got back and started running their mouths. Only thing worse than sailors with liquor was sailors without it. Worse than crying babes they became.

“Jack, what's this then?” Aldy was asking her assistant. They were over at the meat racks. Jack didn't do greens; it was a wonder he had any teeth left at all. Meat was all her assistant desired out of the galley.

“Furred trout,” Jack responded after careful consideration.

“Looks like what we had for mess the other week,” Aldy

complained. "Where'd you go getting furred trout?"

"Didn't."

"So what was we eating the other week then?"

"Loompa."

"Loompa? Couldn't have been, saw Bandit when we left the ship, with Piper like always. Ain't no other loompas on the *Tantamount*, Jack."

"Looked like a loompa," Jack grunted, tugging at his topknot. "Only smaller."

"Smaller?" Aldy sounded disturbed.

"Yeah, smaller. Not as big."

"Jack," Gabbi called. "Found anything we need?"

Jack waved over at her. "They got furred trout, Gabbi."

"We don't need no trout, Jack. Furred nor otherwise."

"That's what they got."

"In some places that would be a delicacy," the grocer said.

"Ain't no delicacies on Cauldron," Jack told him.

"We'll take the dry goods," Gabbi said. "Meat and perishables can be shipped to the docks, right? Cold storage?"

"Aye," the grocer shrugged, "we can manage that well enough. Gonna be trail mix, though."

"Don't like trail mix," Jack grumbled.

"Can't do anything else," he was told. "We've been cleaned out as you can plainly see."

"Cleaned out?" Gabbi narrowed her eyes. "Why's everyone so short?"

The grocer leaned over his counter, smirking down at her. Gabbi resolved that if he made a joke about her height she'd brain the lout.

"Alliance group came through a few weeks ago, bought everything they could buy up, then took off again."

"Alliance? Here?" Gabbi thought to the blasted ship they'd been holed by. But that had been a single ship, not a group. They were well clear of the High Lanes, but Alliance ships wouldn't have left one of their own in such a state. "What's that lot doing out this way?"

“War, or like as such,” the grocer shrugged. “Not here, not even Alliance. Thatch is brewing, they say, bit of a hotspot. And there’s always Vice. Someone in the Alliance wants to play hero, I figure, sail around putting out fires.”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with Vice,” Gabbi asserted. “We was on a run to there, we would have heard if there was.”

“Must be Thatch then.” The grocer shrugged again.

Gabbi snorted. “Figures, bloody Alliance, always putting their end in.”

“Aye,” the grocer agreed. “Here, I’ll show you how they paid for their goods, seeing as you’ll be seeing them yourself shortly. Follow me.”

Curious, Gabbi followed the man, getting Jack to come with them as well. It was safer and he would have like as done it anyway. The grocer led them back into the meat locker, where hoarfrost covered the walls and cuts of meat hung on hooks along the room. It wasn’t empty. There were two men there, but they weren’t working. They just stood at one end against the wall, not so different from the other meat.

“Best workers I’ve ever had,” the grocer proclaimed. “Don’t eat, don’t slack, don’t complain, just do as they told until you tell ’em not too. Good lads, really.”

Gabbi couldn’t suppress a shudder at the grocer’s “good lads.” They were Draugr, grey skinned and unmoving, with that empty, dead look they all had.

“That’s how they paid you?” she asked quietly.

“Aye,” the man chuckled. “Didn’t have no trading coins, just that Alliance chit. Can you believe it? I was a bit sceptical myself, but they wouldn’t give me no choice. Thought I was getting shafted by the uniformed prats but these boys,” he nodded towards the Draugr, “worth their weight, they are. Work day in and day out, don’t have to feed ’em, don’t have to do nothing but tell ’em what to do.”

“That’s it?” Gabbi shivered. “They just do what they’re told?”

“Yeah, simple stuff. Can’t do the books, though I wish they could, least they’d be honest about it. Loading and carrying and fetching stuff, can’t beat them. Couple of times someone tried to make off

with one or the other, put 'em to work in their own business. But the Kelpie who handed them over fixed it so they just end up back here. Brilliant, ain't it?"

"Guess so," Gabbi agreed. She had to look away from the Draugr. She'd seen them before, but never so close. They were like anybody else, anybody who'd been dead a couple of days. Draugr were . . . hells nobody was quite sure what they were. She hadn't had a good answer when Violet asked her and she didn't have one now. Some said they were golems, flesh and blood or clay made to look like people, though supposedly their skin felt like carved hardwood to the touch. Gabbi couldn't bring herself to find out, even given the chance. Some people said they were what happened to Alliance sailors after they died, that they signed a contract to come back and keep serving. Witched up to keep on going, come hells or void water. Gabbi couldn't imagine anyone ever agreeing to something like that. Maybe that was why people like the skipper left the Alliance.

"These two'll bring your cold goods over," the grocer grinned. "Don't worry. Like I said, they're reliable."

Looking at the pair, Gabbi could only shudder.

"Let's go," Jack rumbled, putting one hand on her shoulder and steering her out. His hand felt warm in the chilled room and she clasped it, scars and all. Jack let her.

"Keep them coming," Nel said, staring at the counter top. She didn't look up as a pint of foaming beer was pushed under her nose, just dropped a handful of coins off to the side.

"Where's mine?" Violet complained. The girl leaned with her back against the bar, eyeing the other patrons unhappily. She held her tail in one hand, keeping it clear of the floorboards. Despite that the appendage was covered in dust and cobwebs.

"You get yours when you can pay for it yourself," Nel said.

"When do I get paid then?" Violet asked indignantly.

"When you start pulling your weight."

That sent Violet into another sulk.

“Hate Cauldron,” Nel muttered. “Hate it. Sooner we're out of here the better. Bloody Cauldron.”

“Hey.”

Someone pushed their way to the bar, shoving Violet out of the way, drawing an indignant squawk out of her. Nel did her best to ignore the newcomer. Vodyanoy, she noted out of the corner of her eye. This one was like a walrus crossed with a skin. The flat, whiskered face and bulging eyes were out of place on Cauldron. Normally they stuck to wet planets. Smoke filled holes like Cauldron dried them out.

“You're Horatio Phelps' first mate. Nel Vaughn, if I'm not mistaken,” the Vodyanoy said, showing an impressive grasp of the trader's tongue. Not easy with that mouth.

Nel took a deep drink. She hadn't heard anything that warranted her attention yet.

“I'm Ebon Masaius.” He held out a hand. Nel ignored it.

“Do I know you?” she conceded the words grudgingly.

Ebon withdrew the unshaken hand, whiskers twitching with annoyance. “No, but I know your captain.”

Nel shrugged. “Good for you.”

“Former master of the *Tantamount*.”

Nel's hand automatically went to her side, but she stopped herself, fingers just curling under the guard of her weapon.

“Why former?” she asked, pushing her beer away. Eyes narrowing she took a closer look at the Vodyanoy; there was no sign of a spider's web tattoo or sigil. Nor had the *Tantamount*'s debt been anywhere near enough to have it seized, even with the interest.

What was this Ebon on about then? Did Horatio have other debts she didn't know about? Stupid question, of course he did. Most of the time Nel was happier not knowing.

Ebon smiled, a broad smile that nearly split his face in half. Nel figured this wasn't going to be one of those times. “Because he lost it to me.”

Nel turned away from the Vodyanoy. “You're full of it.”

“Recognise this?” Ebon held up something. Nel glanced at the deed of property. It was familiar all right, official looking with the

Tantamount's name embossed large in the header. A deed of title that appeared for all the world to be genuine. Nel knew for a fact that Horatio always carried those papers on his person.

Violet gasped. "Hells, Skipper."

"Watch your mouth," Nel warned her. To the man with the deed, "How'd you get that?"

"Won it, fair and legal." Ebon turned the deed over in his hands, admiring it.

"I doubt that," Nel retorted. "Horatio's never played fair in his life. He wouldn't put up the ship if he thought he could lose."

That grin again. "He didn't have much of a choice."

"You threatened my captain then?" Nel asked quietly.

"He was on a good run," Ebon told her, redirecting the question. "A very good run. And then it went bad and he was in deep. The ship was his last card."

"Am I supposed to care about any of this?" Nel went back to her beer. Next time she told Piper to find a bar that sold cheap beer she'd have to leave out the cheap part. That could have gone without saying on Cauldron. The stuff she was downing was more head than the swill it claimed to be, which was saying something.

And Ebon wasn't even letting her enjoy that much. "You're supposed to tell me where the *Tantamount* is berthed. Phelps ran out on us last time before we could collect."

"Sounds like your problem is with my captain." Nel shrugged. "Go bother him. You're not even the first person who's been asking about him."

"You're here. He's not."

"I'm drinking, you're distracting me. Get lost."

Ebon leaned back. "Not the best attitude for someone in your position."

"I said I'm drinking," Nel growled. "Go away."

"Nothing in this charter that says I have to let the current crew stay. You should be nicer."

"The hells I should."

"Fine." Ebon folded up the deed and put it away carefully. "I'll find Phelps without you then. And then I'll find your ship."

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

Ebon smiled, scaly lips pressed into a thin line, but left without another word.

Nel waited a minute, counting silently. She finished her drink as well. She could feel the watered down liquid sloshing in the pit of her stomach, churned up into its own little swell. No smooth sailing tonight.

“Violet,” she said, just loud enough to be heard in the bar.

“What're we gonna do, Skipper?” Violet asked anxiously. The girl had heard every word of the exchange with Ebon and except for that one outburst had kept her quiet. She was learning. If they were lucky, all of the *Tantamount's* new majority shareholder's attention had been focused on Nel.

“In a minute we're going to walk out of here. Once we're out I'm going to go find Piper,” Nel explained.

She'd sent Piper off to the salvage yards by himself. Himself and Bandit. Piper had seemed happy enough with the arrangement and Nel hadn't been in the mood to do any more negotiating. As long as Piper kept names, both the ship and captain's, out of the equation he should have been fine.

“You want me to go find the captain, then?” Violet said eagerly.

“Captain can take care of himself,” Nel said. “No, you go back to the ship. At a run.”

“Is that a good idea?” Violet was doubtful. “If someone's looking for the *Tantamount* couldn't they follow me back to it?”

“Don't let them.”

“But—”

Nel cut her off. “Someone wants to find our ship, it's not going to be that hard for them. Cauldron's not that big. Plenty of people who could tell them, wouldn't even take that long to go through all the ships docked here right now. No, they're going to find us, can't help that.”

Violet looked dismayed. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Get back. Let Quill and the others know. Don't let anyone on board, no matter what. That happens we're proper sunk, understand, Vi?”

“Yes, Skipper.”

“Good girl.” Nel stood up. “Let's go.”

They made their way through the crowded and smoky tap room. Outside Violet glanced once at Nel for confirmation and then disappeared into the streets, vanishing like the street urchin she was. Nel scowled for a minute, remembering how difficult it was to find Violet when she didn't want to be found. The first few days Violet had been aboard the *Tantamount* Nel had chased her from one end to the other. Violet wasn't meant to have been aboard and both Nel and Quill had been trying to throw the girl over the side. Violet had good incentive to hide back then. Inevitably it had been the captain who had found her first, curled up inside of a barrel. After that, throwing her overboard had become less of an option, though Quill still suggested it occasionally.

Nel found Piper on his way out of a second-hand salvage shack. The front yard was littered with scrap metal and wood, bits and pieces of ships in various stages of being dismantled and recycled to be sold for profit. The leavings were of what might have once been proud and functional vessels, things with soul and purpose that had fallen on hard times and would never recover from them. The shack itself was a lean-to affair built from scrap but at least it didn't have a web on it. Of course the whole yard was falling apart. Maybe there had been a sign and it had fallen down. More likely it had been sold itself, maybe to a less legitimate business to lend it the veneer of officialdom. Or maybe the dusty cobwebs adorning corner nooks and crannies were meant to represent the mercenaries' logo. Spiders specially imported for just such a purpose. Stranger things happened.

Piper had what was probably a sheaf of promissory notes clutched in his hands and was passing them up to Bandit. The loompa examined one such paper carefully before screwing it up and stuffing it into Piper's pack with overstated deliberation.

“What are those?” Nel asked, bringing her ship's engineer to a stop.

“Consents,” Piper answered, passing one up to Bandit.

“Requests, requisitions. For the ship.”

He examined another he was holding. “This one is for nails.”

“Are they important?”

“Very,” Piper assured her. “Nails generally are.”

“Then stop giving them to the monkey,” Nel said through gritted teeth. Bandit stared at her, midway through crumpling another requisition. Perhaps the creature was finally starting to understand her dislike for it. Bandit still finished his filing but did it very slowly and carefully, almost reverently, carefully watching her to determine if there was going to be some sort of reaction.

“We have problems,” Nel said, trying not to glare at the loompa. “Start walking, we're going back to the ship.”

Piper fell into step with her. Though she wasn't short, Nel had to take three steps for every two of Piper's. As he walked, the big man folded the remaining papers in half and stuffed them into his pack. He swung it round in front of him to do so and his actions required a feat of acrobatics from Bandit to keep his seat. The loompa squawked his protest, but for once was ignored.

“What has the captain gone and done this time?” Piper asked with a familiar wariness.

“Apparently he bet the ship in a game,” Nel said.

“Betting the ship is not a problem. Losing the ship is.”

“Captain always loses, Piper.”

Piper nodded. “This is true.” He sighed hugely. “So we will be running, yes? Before the ship is getting her new legs even?”

“Haven't got to that part, Piper,” Nel admitted. “Right now I just want to get back to her before someone else does. I sent Violet back to warn Quill.”

“Ah.” Piper rumbled approvingly. Nel grinned in reply. For once the xenophobic Kelpie's prejudices were going to work in their favour. Quill barely tolerated his crewmates; neither of them had any doubts as to what the navigator would do to anyone trying to take possession of the *Tantamount* on his watch.

All the same they hurried back to the ship, Piper's tree trunk legs chewing up the distance and Nel hustling to keep pace. She was slightly out of breath by the time they reached the docks and saw the

first signs of trouble.

There was a crowd. Crowds were bad—people would congregate to watch festivals, performances, and circuses, but they were drawn in much more quickly by the spontaneity of bad things. Crashes, executions, brawls. Crowds loved a spectacle. A ship given over in a gambling debt and its repossession being contested by the original crew qualified as a spectacle. Given that they were on Cauldron, Nel half expected to see stands being erected and an admission fee being charged.

“Hells,” Nel muttered as they started to push their way through the crowd. She let Piper go first. His bulk made it easier going and anyone who protested usually thought better of it. Especially once they got a good look at the tattooed man with the loompa riding his shoulders. Big tattooed men were scary, but not that unusual. Sailors liked tattoos and plenty of ships made up their crew's numbers with ex-cons and less-than-savouries. It was the eccentric ones people were wary of. People missing body parts—eyes, a leg, hands—folk who talked to themselves and held conversations with people no one else could see. Or one's with strange fashion sense; like a man Nel had once met who wore skin-tight smocks over his head like a mask, or others who used souvenir body parts as accessories.

Mascots, which most people assumed Bandit was, were not uncommon aboard ships and plenty of crews were possessive and protective of their mascots. Again, Nel knew more than one ship that had been burned to the gunnels after incidents involving another ship's mascot. Most people looking at the loompa cautiously made that association.

In Piper's case they were probably right. He was both possessive and protective, and the fact that Nel and a majority of her crew would have happily pitched the loompa overboard in mid-voyage wasn't relevant today. Still, Bandit screamed and shook his tiny fist at anyone who still didn't get the hint. Nel was like an unseen shadow at their backs compared to that spectacle, too normal and unremarkable to register.

There was a commotion up ahead. Nel couldn't see over Piper

and the crowd, but Bandit's squawk of alarm made her try anyway. The sound of something smashing, a cloud of dust kicking up while people screamed in alarm.

"Piper?" Nel called out.

"Quill," he replied without preamble.

"Get us over there, Piper, now."

Piper gave a huge roar at the top of his lungs, scattering the people in front of him. They couldn't move fast enough to get out of the tattooed giant's way and Piper ploughed straight through the gap, Nel following in his wake. They reached the edge of the crowd, just shy of the pier leading to the *Tantamount*.

And found themselves behind an armed group. On Cauldron they could only be mercenaries. All were taking refuge behind a stack of crates, clouds of dust and splinters were still settling overhead. The group was a mixture of men, women, and non-human. It seemed to Nel that someone wasn't particular about who they recruited. She saw all shapes and sizes, a seven foot woman with tattoos covering one side of her face, a reedy looking man with glasses, a diminutive Korrigan that looked to be reamed in scars and more Vodyanoy. From that last Nel deduced the group answered to one Ebon Masaius.

Beyond them on the raised deck of the *Tantamount* stood Quill, the Kelpie's tail lashing violently behind him. That and the blue electricity arcing between his fingertips were bad signs. A shipping crate hovered ominously close above him. Ranged behind him along the ship's gunwales were the rest of the crew, brandishing boathooks and other makeshift weapons, all looking equally mean and evil.

Nel wasn't fooled though. Whatever show the crew might put on, they would be no match for a group of armed mercenaries. Self-preservation was holding them back right now, and a healthy respect for Quill's thaumaturgic abilities, but it wouldn't take them long to get over that and find a way to counter him. Thaumaturgy looked flashy but it was nothing new and couldn't stand up to an armed group by itself.

"I do not see the captain," Piper rumbled.

"Me neither," Nel admitted.

“It is up to you then, Skipper.”

“Yeah,” Nel muttered. “Hey!” she yelled, causing the group of mercs to turn and face her as she strode to close the distance. She picked Ebon Masaius out from the other Vodyanoy and made straight for him, hand on her sidearm.

Ebon's brows rose when he saw her bearing down on him, but to his credit he didn't flinch, motioning for his group to stay their arms as well.

“First officer Vaughn, I expected we'd be seeing you here. Looks like we arrived before you.”

“For all the good it did you.” Nel glared at him. “Ugly friends you've got here, Ebon.”

“Watch your mouth,” the giant woman told her, towering over her employer.

Nel craned her neck upwards. “Hells, Ebon, what are you feeding this woman? Whatever it is, stop. She's too damned big. Big don't make ugly any better.”

The woman nudged past Ebon, who looked pathetically small in contrast, before leaning down to shove her face in front of Nel's. “Are you stupid?”

“Just sober,” Nel said.

Ebon frowned. “I don't think—”

His reluctance was lost or came too late—the woman raised one meaty fist to pound Nel into the ground. Nel didn't hesitate with her sidearm. There was a flash of light as the wand discharged with a concussive shock and a yell from the woman. The ground shook again as the woman staggered and fell, clutching her foot.

“What?” Nel shrugged at Ebon, who was shaking his head. “I didn't hurt her . . . much. Piper, help the lady up.” She gestured.

Piper stooped to help up the woman, who swatted his hands aside angrily, making it back to her feet but clearly favouring the one Nel hadn't shot. Nel was amused to see she was marginally taller than Piper.

“If there's not going to be any more misunderstandings,” Nel asked, holding tight onto her wand. Nearby, one of Ebon's

minions spun a similar weapon lazily through his fingers, making a show of it. He caught her look and leered.

The discharge from a flick of Nel's wand scattered splinters and loose grit from the dock, blowing the wand clear out of the man's grasp. He grabbed for it, missed, and had to chase after the weapon.

Nel inclined her head towards Ebon. "Like I said."

"Idiot," Ebon muttered, neither flinching nor looking around. The man had nerve, Nel conceded. His lackey stumbled back into position, shamefaced.

"I was hoping to avoid this when I saw you in the bar," Ebon told her. "This could have proceeded much smoother than it has."

"You're trying to take my ship," Nel stated grimly. "Nothing is going to go smoothly about that."

"My ship," Ebon corrected her.

"Horatio Phelps' ship," she corrected Ebon. "I've only your word you won that docket from him. Any transfer of an independent vessel in a neutral port takes place on the vessel and requires the presence of the current and acting captain as well as the new owner."

Ebon's yellow eyes narrowed at her.

"Want to try me on that one?" she asked him. "Places like Cauldron take this sort of stuff seriously. Can't do business off the map if everyone is hijacking everyone else's ships all the time. Fact of the matter is I'm surprised we haven't got the taxman's goons breathing down our necks already. All I see so far are those misfit dropouts you've got working for you."

Nel smiled coolly at Ebon's consternation. "Until my captain turns up, that pretty piece of paper of yours is just that. So why don't we all just sit here nice and quiet like, 'til Horatio deigns to honour us with his presence. I'm going aboard my ship. Don't follow me."

She didn't wait for an answer, leaving Ebon and his goons to stew on the dock. She felt Piper at her back as she strode up the gangway to join the rest of their crew.

"What's going on?" Quill asked, barely concealed irritation in his voice. The rest of the crew crowded round, jeering and making obscene gestures towards the dock.

"I just bought us some time," Nel said, glancing back over her

shoulder. Ebon's group hadn't moved from the dock, he seemed to be addressing them. "They can't legally take possession of the ship until the captain gets back. Legally."

"What?" Gabbi exclaimed. "What do you mean, take the ship?"

"Nobody is taking the ship." Quill snapped his sharp teeth.

Nel swept her gaze over the crew. They shouldn't have been surprised at that bit of news. "Where's Violet?" she asked.

"She was with you," Jack rumbled. He had his butchery apron on—it was bloody and so were his hands up to the elbows. He held a savage looking meat cleaver in one hand and looked to be begging for an excuse to use it. Typical Jack.

"I sent her back to warn you."

"She's not here," Jack grunted.

"Then she didn't make it." Nel had to look around to place that voice. It was Sharpe, leaning innocuously in the shadow of the mast beside the rigging stowed against it. She was sure he'd left them. Had he been on the ship the whole time?

"I spotted the group out there," Sharpe went on to say. "They looked ready for trouble and we're the only ship docked out here."

Nel turned to Quill. "And you didn't bother to find out what they wanted?"

Quill shrugged.

"What do we do now, Skipper?" Gabbi piped up.

Nel considered their options. New owners on the dock; bitter, resentful crew aboard a ship not safe to fly. Two crew members missing including the captain, though it was Violet Nel was most worried about. A lot of things could happen to a girl in a place like Cauldron.

She glanced down at the docks. The spectators had dispersed and there was a clear reason why. The tax collectors had arrived with golems in tow. A group of steam gushing constructs led by a member of the Spider's Web. They spent a few minutes talking to Ebon's group before a spokesperson detached himself from the group and made his way up to the *Tantamount*. Quill's tail lashed

as the messenger approached.

He called out, "Which one of you is in charge?"

"I am," Nel told him, stepping up to the railing.

The messenger nodded. He didn't ask who she was—possibly he didn't care, more likely it just didn't matter who he delivered his message to. "I represent the Spider's Web, meaning the people who are in charge of this miserable rock. Let me explain to you that it's our miserable rock and you're making a mess of it. There will be no more . . . violence on the docks over your dispute."

"How about violence regarding other people's disputes?" Sharpe said coyly.

Quill laughed. Nobody else did. The messenger did not look amused.

The messenger pointed. "See those golems?" He didn't elaborate.

"Tell them to keep to their side of the dock," Nel said, pointing to Ebon's group.

"They have been told." The messenger frowned. "Ebon Masaius, a person known to us here on Cauldron, offers you the following arrangement. A meeting at one of his warehouses to finalise the arrangements for the transfer of this ship."

"Ain't gonna be no transfer," Jack growled.

"Final transfer requires the presence of the captain," Nel said.

"Ebon Masaius has . . . ," the messenger considered his next words, ". . . assured us your captain will be present at the meet."

Gabbi scowled. "Ebon Masaius can go jump off the bloody pier."

"He also says you can collect your captain once he has collected his ship." The messenger paused to let that sink in.

There was a rigid silence from the crew.

"You saying Ebon has our captain?" Jack took a step forward.

"Funny," Nel said. "I remember him saying Horatio skipped out before they could complete the transfer. Now we're supposed to believe he's waiting at the warehouse?"

"His words," the messenger said. "You can make what you like of it, as long as there are no more outbursts on our dock."

"One of my crew is missing," Nel said. "A girl."

"A fox-girl," Piper put in.

“She has a tail,” Gabbi added, talking over Piper. “A bushy one.”

Nel glared round at her crew. “Would all of you be quiet?” She turned back to the messenger. “Her name's Violet, my cabin girl. She's a Kitsune.”

“You can post a flyer at any office,” the Spider's Web messenger said. “For all the good it will do. People who go missing here tend to end up being put to work, doing one thing or another . . .”

“Skipper,” Gabbi whispered, alarmed.

“I know, Gabbi, I know,” Nel muttered. Dammit, what had happened to the girl? It wasn't even that far from the ship to the bar. Put to work. That could mean slavery or it could mean worse. Hells. For all she knew Cauldron used Kitsune tails for dusters.

She waved for someone to show the messenger off the ship, not bothering to see who it was.

“What's the plan, Skipper?” Gabbi asked, her round face anxious. “We need to get Violet and the captain back.”

“We should take off,” Quill snorted. “Take off and leave this place while we still have a ship to leave with.”

Gabbi whirled on the Kelpie. “You unfaithful, dried out little skink! Don't you even think that! We are not leaving Violet, or the captain.”

“Dead weight, both of them,” the Kelpie asserted.

“The only dead weight around here is going to be that fat tail of yours when I chop it off and serve it to you on a skewer!” Gabbi shook her finger at him.

“I would get more meat out of your squelching behind,” Quill retorted.

Gabbi's eyes bulged. “Squelching? Squelching!?”

“Stow it, the both of you,” Nel said sharply. She didn't issue any more warnings, turning her back on the crew to go stand by the railing. Looking out over Cauldron's bowl, into the heart of the steaming settlement. Somewhere out there were Violet and Horatio. And a whole bunch of other people.

Sharpe settled himself on the railing, his back to Cauldron and

facing the crew. He watched Quill and Gabbi's rant with interest. Nel's orders hadn't kept the peace for more than a few moments. The crew was tense. "Those two fight like an old married couple."

"If an old married couple could kill each other just by thinking about it, sure," Nel muttered.

"Maybe she really did try and poison him?" Sharpe suggested.

"Probably did." Right now Nel didn't care if Gabbi really had.

"This meet, you realise it's a trap," Sharpe said. "And an obvious one at that."

"Probably is."

Sharpe chuckled. "Audacious. I like that. Want me to go with you?"

"You?" Nel paused. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I owe you a rescue." He grinned. "And I'm not bad in a fight either."

"Jack thinks otherwise."

"What about what you think?"

"What's your angle, Sharpe?" Nel folded her arms. "You're not part of this crew, you could have cut and run the minute we made planetfall. Hells, I thought you had."

Sharpe glanced over his shoulder, back at Cauldron. "Not my kind of place, Skipper. Places I'd rather be, people I'd rather be with. Prefer it if I wasn't stuck here. That means sticking with you a bit longer."

"I've got problems, Sharpe. Don't need you being one of them."

"I'm hoping the captain feels differently about me," Sharpe said.

"Why should he?"

"Got to know him a bit during the trip here. Good man. Lousy card player though."

Nel raised an eyebrow. "That's why you want to help?"

"Let's be honest, Skipper," Sharpe said. "Even if you get your captain back, you still have to fix this tub and get your papers."

"Unless we just leave without them," Nel said.

Sharpe shook his head. "Without what? You already vetoed leaving without your captain and your cabin girl. If you leave with someone else holding papers on this ship you'll be declared rogue."

That puts you outside the law, not what you want. You can't trade, can't run cargo, and you'll be fair game for anyone and everyone. This ship and this crew aren't built for a life of piracy."

"Know something about that? Piracy?" Nel said pointedly.

"I know ruthless," Sharpe corrected her. "You've got some issues on this crew, that Kelpie navigator and your . . . doctor." Sharpe flexed his fingers, no doubt remembering Jack's no-frills treatment. "But you're not ruthless, not pirate ruthless. Don't think you're gonna cut and run over some bad gambling debt."

Nel stared at him. "Who are you Sharpe? Seems to me we never got around to that part."

He shrugged, rolling muscular shoulders like it just wasn't important. "Who are you, Skipper? We've all got a past, most of it don't make no difference to here and now. I'm here and it's now. You're in trouble, I'm offering to help. You want me or not?" He tried the grin again. *A flash of white teeth, a little charm, a whole lot of man-pretty*, Nel thought. Most people probably said yes to him.

"No."

Nel wasn't most people. She had to admit, she enjoyed the way his face dropped at her answer.

"Gabbi," she called loudly.

"Yeah, Skipper?" her cook answered.

"I'm heading back out," Nel said.

"You just got here," Gabbi objected. "What if those guys come back?"

"Throw stuff at them. Not forks, we need those. I'm going to find the captain."

"And Violet?"

Nel hesitated. "Her too. We ain't leaving anyone. We . . ."

The truth was she had no idea what had happened to the girl and didn't like to think about what could have. But she wasn't losing any of her crew. Not this time.

"Piper," she called, hitching the belt for her sidearm into a more comfortable position. "Here, now."

The big mate emerged from the crew to make his way to her

side. "Skipper?"

"Repairs. Details. Gimme," Nel ordered.

"Trolls."

Nel winced. "You hired Troll labour?"

Piper nodded. "Best there is, Skipper. Cheap too."

"There's a reason for that, Piper," Nel said. "They're smelly, disgruntled, they break stuff, what they don't break they eat—"

"You are a very hard woman to please, Skipper," Piper said disapprovingly. "Not as bad as Quill, but very hard."

"You should be used to that by now, Piper. Look, just get the ploughing ship fixed."

Piper looked at her disapprovingly. "Swearing, Skipper."

Nel ignored that. "I'm going to go get the captain."

"By yourself?"

"Yes."

"That is a bad idea."

"The hells it isn't."

Piper frowned. "I am confused. Do you agree it is a bad idea?"

Nel shrugged. "Most of the ideas that come out of this ship are bad, Piper. Mine are just a wee bit little less bad."

"You shouldn't go alone, Skipper. Bandit thinks it is a trap. You should have someone with you for when it gets to the violent part."

"I want everyone to stay here, make sure we don't get boarded or nothing while I'm gone. I don't want to come back and find my ship boarded, Piper, we clear? Don't let no boardings be happening whilst I'm gone."

"Aye, Skipper," Piper sighed.

Nel left her crew, stomping back onto the dock. It was now mostly empty. The crowd had dispersed when it became obvious there wasn't going to be any more fun. She did see the first of the Trolls to arrive, a five foot, greyish-blue skinned individual in a workman's harness and a loincloth. She stepped aside as it ambled up to the gangway.

She shook her head. "Captain's gonna love this."