

The Jewel of the Wild Sea

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CHAPTER 1

Harker awoke to the rattle of chains. The bitter taste of blood soured his mouth. Every muscle ached from sleeping in the awkward position of his arms manacled behind him. His head thundered from a bad headache. His tongue discovered one of his teeth was missing. He was lying on his side, his cheek against a cool stone floor. There was a musty, dank smell in the air.

Stubborn light pried his eyes open a crack. His spectacles were lying on the ground inches from his face. He nosed them about on the floor, trying to get them into a good position and open the arms. It took several minutes, but he eventually managed to get them on to his face.

Blurred vision came into focus and Harker took a moment to examine his surroundings. Cold grey flagstones stretched out before him ending in dark stone walls. He was in the corner of a huge room. In the far corner hung a rusting iron lantern which sputtered sending oily smoke curling to the ceiling and shadows dancing across the stone walls. With an effort, he managed to sit up. The far wall had a short flight of broad stone steps leading up to a pair of iron bound oaken doors with a barred window set in each. Around the edges of the great room were wine racks, stout barrels and wooden crates. A large trestle table was flanked by two benches. Off to the side stood a great iron cauldron, ancient and forgotten. Behind it, a wall of shelves was filled with dusty bottles and cobwebs.

A bent iron plate in the middle of the floor held something that looked like a thick slab of moldy bread. A fat rat nibbled at one corner of the loaf while eyeing him curiously.

To his left, a huge mirror sat leaning against the wall. It was cracked and stained and its heavy iron frame was bent. His reflection stared back at him pitifully from behind cracked spectacles. Curly black hair was caked with blood from several head wounds and his face was filthy. His beautiful four piece Kalimuran suit was torn and soiled and stained with blood. His chin was covered in stubble.

"He's awake", said a gruff voice from beyond the doors.

The heavy oak door creaked loudly in protest on aging hinges. Two armored guards came into the room, their heavy booted feet ringing out on the stone steps as they descended into the room. They wore mismatched bits of armor and curved blades hung on their belts. They both wore their hair in tangled dreadlocks and braids. The rat scampered

out of their way as they strode over to the prisoner. A swift kick caught Harker in the gut and the air exploded out of his lungs in a gush.

“Kick him again.”

Another swift kick, harder this time, impacted his rib cage. Harker coughed violently, choking on dust and blood. Both guards stood over him chuckling.

“Stop that at once!” boomed a heavy voice.

Both guards turn angrily at the interruption. Standing at the top of the stairs was a dwarf glaring at them. The short, rotund figure wore robes of dark green trimmed in white runes that covered his broad chest. His long grey beard fell down his chest in two thick braids. All about him, he was adorned with rings and jewels and bits of bone which were woven into beard and hair. A leather satchel was slung over one shoulder.

A second man appeared in the doorway beside the dwarf. He was a tall human wearing a dark blue tunic over mail. Silver hair framed an angular, clean shaven face. His dark eyes narrowed as he regarded Harker. Emblazoned on his tunic in white was a horn over a wave. Harker knew most of the guild sigils and felt he should have recognized this one. But at the moment, his head was aching and he couldn't think which guild it belonged to.

The green robed dwarf come down into the room and bustled over to Harker. “Help me get him to his feet”, he rumbled at the two guards “and get these damn manacles off him.”

The two guards looked questioningly to the tall man in blue who only scowled in at the fat dwarf.

“The prisoner is ours,” snapped the tall man. His voice was harsh, clipped, precise and it had a hint of an accent Harker couldn't place. “How we treat him is *our* concern.”

“It was the guild masters hired me, not you. And they expect results,” the dwarf replied, planting his fists on his hips. His speech was slow and thick and meaty as was the rest of him. “If this is going to succeed, you're going have to listen to me. This kind of mistreatment isn't necessary... and, in fact, will only make things more difficult. Why make an enemy out of someone who doesn't have to be? Now please... take these manacles off of him.”

The tall man hesitated a moment, seeming to weigh his options. At last, he gave a curt nod to the guards. They immediately bent to the task of unlocking shackles and removing chains.

The dwarf helped Harker up and over to one of the benches while the guards glowered at them. The dwarf set his satchel down on the table and began pulling out bandages and various jars. Harker rubbed his sore wrists. The dwarf smiled at him reassuringly and began dabbing at a wound on Harker's forehead with ointment and cloth.

Now that the dwarf was up close to him, Harker could see that this short rotund man was no dwarf at all. He had the beard and stature of the dwarven folk, but there was a strong greenish cast to his thick, leathery skin and a pair of cracked yellow tusks protruded from beneath his fat lower lip. He had a broad nose and his small eyes were deep set beneath a heavy ridge.

The strange dwarf turned his head slightly toward the guards. "Now... you three. Out! All of you and let me work."

The leader frowned once more and then turned and stalked away with the two guards in step behind him. The door slammed shut behind them.

"My apologies for the deplorable conditions and their mistreatment," said the green skinned dwarf as he continued to tend to Harker's cuts and bruises. "Warriors have their uses... but they can be rather blunt instruments at times. I'm delighted to finally meet you in person," he continued in that same slow plodding meaty voice. "You are Harker Kaedin, first officer on the sailing ship *Third Wind*." It was more a statement than a question.

Harker nodded slowly.

"You can call me Toth."

"Where-" croaked Harker and his question was immediately cut short by a fit of raspy coughing. The effort made him realize how dry his throat was.

"I have something that will help that," said Toth, reaching into his satchel. He pulled out a clay cup and a small flask and poured a thick brown steaming liquid into the cup.

"Drink this... it will make you feel better," said Toth, offering the cup.

Harker sniffed it cautiously and then took a swallow. The hot liquid had an unusual, though not unpleasant, flavor. It's strange warmth permeated him, quickly flowing all the way to his finger tips and toes. It seemed to push the pain out of him. His vision cleared, his headache vanished and a warm contentment, like the satisfaction of a large meal, settled over him. Harker quickly drained the cup.

"What is it?" Harker asked, handing the cup back to Toth.

"It's my own recipe," replied Toth, setting the cup aside. "Never really thought to give it a name." He picked up the cloth and began dabbing at Harker's wounds again.

"It's quite good. Do you always carry it around in your satchel piping hot?"

"It's always hot," said Toth with a smile. "That's just part of the magic."

"You're a wizard?" Harker looked closer at the strange charms and bones woven into Toth's hair and beard.

“Oh, I’m good with a fair number of spells and potions. But I also know a dozen wizards who would say I have no claim to such a title.” A hint of a smile tugged at Toth’s mouth.

“Where am I?”

“Where isn’t really important right now. This place is safe. What’s important is that we are here now. You and I together. You see, we have a job to do.”

Harker looked about the room. It was obvious he was in a cellar of some kind. “How long have I been here?”

“You were captured and brought here three days ago. I’m told you were slipping in and out of consciousness from that head wound. Your captors were more brutal with you than necessary. Had I been there, I would have prevented them from harming you. Unfortunately, I only arrived this morning.”

“But... why am I here? What is this job you’re talking about?”

Toth set down the rag and sighed slowly, seeming to consider his answer.

“There are few questions they won’t let me answer. And I’m fairly certain that we’re being watched right now.” Harker couldn’t help but glance about the empty cellar again.

“Don’t worry” said Toth, “we may get a chance to speak more openly later. And for now, perhaps I can put some of your fears to rest. Now that I’m here... you will not be harmed further. You have my word on that.”

Toth picked the rag back up. “Turn your head and let me get at that gash above your ear. Good. As for why you’re here... well, I need your help with something. Those who brought you here have hired me to find something. And I need your help to find it. It’s as simple as that. We shall search for it... together. My hope is that it will not take long. Once the item is located, you will be released. Unharméd.”

“Does my captain know I’m here?”

“Well, after three days, he certainly knows you’re missing. But...” Toth shook his head, “no, your captain and crew have no idea where you are and I doubt they would be able to find you in any case.”

“Don’t count on that,” said Harker. He then raised his voice, looking to the walls and ceiling. “Captain Callister knows every port in the southlands,” he called out defiantly, at whomever might be listening in. “He’s fought brawls in every tavern, outwitted Drakkellian swordtongues and sailed ‘round the world. I have no doubt that my crew is searching for me this very minute. And if there is one thing that I am *absolutely* certain of, it’s that Captain Callister Draabyn has everything under control!”

CHAPTER 2

“I have everything under control!” Callister screamed.

Callister Draabyn, captain of the Third Wind, held aloft a flaming torch and struggled against a forest of hands that clutched at his Kalimuran long coat and desperately strained to hold him back.

With another bellowing roar, he surged forward, dragging half his crew with him across the ship’s deck, as he inched toward the wick of the cannon.

“No captain!” cried one of his crew.

“Don’t do it captain!” cried another, straddling the cannon and trying to fend off the flaming torch.

Stuffed into the mouth of the enormous hullbreacher cannon was a bound and gagged man with an alarmed expression as he peered out from the muzzle. The cannon hung over the side of the Third Wind aimed directly at the harbor tax office below. The man in the cannon stared across ten feet of water at his “target” and the alarmed expressions of his fellow tax collectors.

A dozen crossbowmen, wearing the black and gold tunics of the city guard, were scattered across the dock and perched on nearby rooftops. They held their crossbows leveled at the struggling procession on the deck of the ship and glanced occasionally at their lieutenant on the dock, waiting for the order to fire.

Gathered around the scene were hundreds of curious onlookers. Fishermen in stained smocks, gaudily painted whores, dock workers, carousing mariners, steel eyed sellswords and dirty street urchins all watched the mounting tension between the ship and the pier. Several lords and their guards had arrived as well to see what all the commotion was about. There were several men in green cloaks bearing the white trident of House Tyrilun. A short fat lord and five guards were dressed in matching blue tunics with a yellow wine cup, the sigil of House Danysus. A trio of soldiers were resplendent in magnificent gold and red capes bearing the fiery phoenix sigil of House Fieranoth.

Aware of the growing audience and the many guilds present, the young Lieutenant Faybin ran a hand nervously through his thick blond hair. New to his rank, he felt completely at a loss. He had expected to deal with drunken brawls, but never in his wildest dreams had he imagined facing the notorious Callister Draabyn in a drunken rage with a loaded cannon. His eyes glanced up at the man. Callister Draabyn was the one of the more

well-known ship captains of the south seas. Long dark hair framed a lean face with a thick moustache and a narrowly trimmed goatee. He wore a Kalimuran long coat over the light shirt and pants typical of southern mariners. The lieutenant could see the man's famous tattoos peeking out at the wrists and neck. He had heard of those tattoos... some sort of enchanted protection that covered his whole body. If tavern rumors were to be believed, they were never the same from day to day.

The lieutenant returned his attention to the officials on the dock and the cheers from the growing crowd. Although his sword was out and his leather surcoat buttoned up, the lieutenant fought the urge to flee. It was all he could do to keep nodding as the tax official in front of him continued an angry tirade and gestured wildly towards the docked ship.

The tax official was Davros Bendri, a very tall man with shaved head and intense black eyes. He wore the black uniform with gold trim that marked his rank and position... that of the Drakkellian Tax Marshall. The lieutenant was intimidated by the marshal, but did his best not to show it.

"is clearly out of his mind," Marshall Bendri was saying, "and will not listen to reason. We've no motive to take his first officer. The Harbor Tax Office is all paid up with the City Guard and we demand action. Order your men to fire!"

The lieutenant shook his head helplessly. "I cannot fire on a civilian ship without just cause. They haven't... actually... hurt anyone yet."

"Just cause!?!", exploded the marshal. "What does he have to do before the City Guard will take action? Must he actually launch Mr. Arkus through our front window before you feel motivated to act?"

The young officer shrugged helplessly.

"Oy!" bellowed Callister. The lieutenant and the tax marshal both looked up to find the ship captain glaring down at them as he tried to shrug off his crew.

"Release mishter... mishter... oh, blast I've forgotten. Which one are we missin' again?" slurred Callister, swaying drunkenly toward his crew.

"Mr. Kaedin, sir" came a chorus of voices together, still holding on to his long coat.

"at's right!" Callister swung round to the cannon again. "Release mishtur Kaedin... at once!" bellowed Callister from the ship's edge, shaping his mouth carefully around the words.

Breaking away from the conversation with the lieutenant, the marshal strode to the edge of the dock.

"We don't have your first officer!" pleaded Marshal Bendri, wringing his hands and looking genuinely concerned.

The man in the cannon cleared his throat and summoned up a quavering voice. “Uh, Captain Draabyn... I have an excellent view of the tax office from here and I can assure you your first officer is not inside.”

Pushing his way through the crew on the deck of the Third Wind came a tall lanky man with blonde hair and a clean shaven face. He wore the blue and grey robes of a sea mage.

“Captain, I implore you to see reason.”

Callister’s turned and stared through bloodshot eyes at the man. Recognition slowly dawned and Callister’s face broke into a wide, maniacal grin. He threw off the grasping hands of the crew around him and clapped his hand on the blonde man’s shoulder.

“Forsssythe! Yur jus in time t’ help me attack Drakkel!” slurred Callister, swaying slightly. “We’ll start with these retched tax lords... I’m glad yur ‘ere... may have need of yur shpells!”

Forsythe shook his head. “Captain, I really think you should put the torch down so we can discuss this. Really, Captain,” he gestured to the cannon “this will never work.”

“Oh, it’ll work!” said a baritone voice. The crew parted as a man stepped forward. He wore mail over boiled leather and a battle scarred chest plate. He had a lean wolfish face with a short beard and a tangle of dark hair that fell to his shoulders. Two heavy blades hung from his weapons belt.

“Brakov!” said Callister with delight.

“I triple charged that cannon with powder,” said Brakov. “That tax collector will fly. Of that I am sure, Captain.”

“That’s not what I meant!” protested Forsythe. “Captain-”

“Enough! ‘s time we show these bastards what real power looksh like. They may have thur quills ‘n papers ‘n city regu... regu... rules... , but we have Big Bertha!” he said patting the hullbreacher cannon. “I’ll be damned if I let ‘em take one of our offisher. An’ I do t’same for eider one a’ yu.”

Callister turned back toward the tax office pier and started hurling curses at the throng below.

Forsythe pulled Brakov aside. “How can you *possibly* be in support of this madness?”

“Boredom, mostly,” said Brakov. Forsythe stared aghast at Brakov. It was impossible to tell when the man was joking.

“Send ‘im out at once,” Callister bellowed down at the tax marshal, “or I will return yur taxsh man to yu with all possible haste.”

"I swear to you, we are NOT holding your first officer captive."

"Yur 'olding him in lieu of my debt, ar'n' you? damn to depths tax...greedy jackals.. lot of you! 'ow much... my debt up to now, eh? Two thousand, init?"

"Actually," said the man in the cannon "you owe two thousand seven hundred forty three gold adjusted for this year's fees and-"

"Don't antagonize him, Farsil!" bellowed the tax marshal. "Are you mad?"

"Farshil?" asked Callister. "Farshil Arkush?" He said, lingering on the name. He leaned over to peer at the man in the cannon, looking him in the face. "Why I 'member you... li'l toad... tried to 'rrest me on dock's lasht year. I thought you had familurr face!"

"Ladesh and Gen'ilmen," bellowed Callister. "you wanna shee fat man fly?" Cheers erupted from the assembled crowd.

A new voice rang out above the commotion. "Captain Callister Draabyn, you are ordered to stand down."

All eyes turned to the newcomer. A handsome older man with a greying red hair and trimmed beard stood at the edge of the crowd with a stern expression. He was tall and lean and wore a black sable doublet trimmed in gold. A black cape was fastened to one shoulder by three gold coin buttons. He was flanked by a quartet of menacing looking city guards in Drakkellian banded plate. Whispers rippled through the assembled onlookers. It was Lord Straddoch, the Harbor Master himself.

Slowly walking toward the ship, Lord Straddoch swept an imperious gaze over the scene taking it all in. His expression was one of absolute authority with a measure of scorn. He seemed every bit the disappointed father catching his children with their hands in the cookie jar.

"Captain, you are currently in violation of seven harbor laws," he said in a slow, measured voice. "I understand you're very concerned over a missing crew man, but we cannot tolerate acts of vigilante violence, especially against the harbor tax office." His slow steady walk brought him to the edge of the pier. He stood directly between the cannon and the tax office. He locked eyes with Callister. "Stand down and release Mr. Arkus and I assure you that you will have my full attention to air whatever grievances you have."

Every face turned toward Callister.

"Yu'll search ze city?" asked Callister, still holding the torch over the cannon's wick.

"Yes" replied the Harbor Master.

"Yu'll lemme kill t' bastards wha' kidnap Harker?"

"I'll consider it," said the Harbor Master. His gaze never flickered.

Callister tossed the flaming torch overboard and it landed in the waters of the harbor with a hiss. The onlookers responded with a mix of audible sigh of reliefs and disappointed boos.

“Very well, come ‘board,” said Callister brightly. “Tackesh?”

“Cap’n?”

“Releash Arshul Farkish and...clean... up here.... clean... clean things..”

“Aye, cap’n.” Tackett began barking orders at the crew who scrambled to obey.

The Harbor Master, his four guards and Lieutenant Faybin stepped on to the deck of the *Third Wind* and followed Callister toward the stern of the ship. The Harbor Master stopped at the door to the captain’s cabin and turned to the guards.

“I will speak with the captain alone. Lieutenant, disperse this crowd and clean up out here.”

“Aye sir.” The lieutenant called orders down to his men on the dock while Tackett continued to bellow orders at the crew. Once orders had been given and the men were at work, the lieutenant, turned to Brakov and Forsythe. “Your captain is drunk!”

“More than drunk,” grinned Brakov. “We ran out of rum yesterday. He’s been drinking Blackfall all night.”

“Blackfall?! By god, I’m surprised he’s still standing. No wonder he’s raving.”

“Not for long. I have something that should help,” said Forsythe, holding up a small vial of pearl white liquid which shimmered in the sunlight.

“What’s that?” asked the lieutenant.

“Goes by many names, but here in the south, it’s known as Revel’s Bane,” said Forsythe with a smile. “I brewed this up last night. A few drops of this will clear the captain’s head. I’ll sneak it into his food.”

Not wanting the captain to have reason to reach for the Blackfall again, Brakov ordered two of the ship’s crew to head into the city to purchase several bottles of whiskey and ale. He gave them enough silver to buy what they needed and enough threats to make sure they didn’t waste the money at a seaport tavern.

The crew, soldiers and guards together went about setting things back to normal. The tax collectors took Farsil Arkus in and gave him hot onion soup to calm his frazzled nerves. They fetched him clean clothes to replace those that had been stained by oil and gunpowder. The crowds were dispersed and everyone was sent back to their respective ships and taverns. The crew of the *Third Wind* eyed the four city guards suspiciously for some time until Tackett invited them to play a game of raljath. Soon the deck was filled with the clatter of dice and the roar of laughter as the crew and guards played together.

It was more than an hour later that Callister Draabyn and Lord Straddoch emerged from the captain's cabin. The cards and dice were hastily put away and coins traded hands as bets were settled. Lord Straddoch shook Callister's hand and gave a brief nod. He then departed with his guards behind him.

As Callister stood at the rail and watched them leave, Brakov and Forsythe flanked him. The captain was pale and a sheen of sweat was on his brow.

"You and your damned healing potions," Callister growled at Forsythe. "You did this to me, didn't you?"

"Um, well, yes" Forsythe smiled weakly. "Sorry about the headache... it's a side effect."

"Did we get anything useful from the Harbor Master?" asked Brakov.

Callister sighed heavily. "Empty promises about searching the city and few other half-hearted gestures. It seems that finding our wayward first officer will be up to us."

"He could be anywhere and we have enough enemies. Who knows where he is or what they're doing to him. No doubt, they've taken him to get to you, captain. It might be House Landry. You still owe Lord Baest a king's ransom. Or it could be the Darrane Brothers. They'd peel his skin for revenge. They still haven't forgiven you for what you did to their dog."

"Dog?" asked Forsythe. "Do I even want to know?"

"No," they both answered in unison.

Callister shook his head. "You're right, Brakov. We have enemies a-plenty. It could be anyone... and they could be doing anything to Harker."

Forsythe shuddered. "What horrible manner of torture are they inflicting on our poor Harker right this very minute?"

CHAPTER 3

““W”ould you like another cup of tea, Mr. Harker?” asked Toth, holding a pot.

“Oh yes, please,” said Harker extending his cup. “And another one of those sweet cakes please.”

Toth and Harker sat at the table in the cellar. The table held a spread of dishes. Slabs of three grain bread smeared with apple butter, bowls of steaming beef stew, fried sunfish, honeyed sweet cakes and a half dozen other dishes that Harker didn’t recognize.

“So, as I was saying,” continued Toth, slurping noisily at a pint of ale, “I’ve worked for more than a dozen guilds in the Alliance. This is only my most recent job. I am not a member of the Sea Rakers, merely employed by them for a short time.”

“You’re a sellsword...” said Harker, considering it. “Only the sword you wield is your magic.”

“Sellsword. Mercenary. Call it what you like, I make no apologies about it. I owe fealty to no king and am bound by no oath. I am my own guild and work for whoever can pay me coin.”

“The very essence of the Drakkellian culture,” said Harker.

“Perhaps that’s why I prefer the southlands,” replied Toth. “In any case, I am not your enemy. We are, both of us, caught up in the schemes of the Rakers. We each have our part to play. I have found them to be a thoroughly disagreeable group and have no love for them. With luck, we will both be free of them soon.”

Harker popped the last sweet cake into his mouth. “I appreciate you getting food and sharing this meal with me. I was famished.”

“You’re most welcome. I must say that you are being quite a good sport about the whole nasty kidnapping business.”

“As you said, I’m a prisoner of the Rakers, not you. Besides it does me little good to refuse food. And as the grum say... ‘a full stomach merry makes’.”

“I agree with the grum. A wiser folk there never were.” said Toth with a smile. “I always find it easier to work on a full stomach. Alright Harker... now that we’ve eaten, it’s time we were about our business. It’s time for me to earn my gold and you to earn your freedom.”

Toth spread his arms to encompass the table and said “*Brix tali bar*” and brought his hands together with a clap. Instantly, the dishes, plates, cups and food began packing themselves up. Everything took flight and like a whirlwind, flew across the room and flew into his satchel. Toth then extended a hand toward his satchel, which was sitting across the room. “*Alum kar vyka*” he muttered quietly. The satchel opened up and something square floated out of it. It was a decorative wooden box which slowly glided through the air to Toth’s hand.

Toth, slowly, almost reverently, lifted the heavy wooden lid from the box. In the box was blue velvet cushion cradling a strange orb of metal. Toth lifted it out and set the box and lid on the aside. He held the strange orb between them and opened his fingers. The thing slid and fell, but then bobbed in place, floating gently a few inches above the table. Harker regarded the strange device with awe as it hovered before him. The thing was shaped like an egg and as large as Harker’s clenched fist. It was encased in a mesh of silver and gold. Circles, triangles, spirals and lines wove together into an intricate web that encased the device in a grid of ornate armor.

As Harker watched, the armor began to move. Bit by bit, the geometry of the armor began to shift, rotate, slide and fold. A seam appeared round the middle and the armor parted, folded up toward the top and bottom, like an eye opening. The parting armor revealed a faceted blue crystal within. Harker marveled at the metal and crystalline device between them. It was beautiful and intricately crafted and yet Harker had the sensation that it was regarding him as well. He stretched out a hand and then withdrew it, suddenly reluctant to touch the thing.

“What is that?” he said quietly.

“This is one of the Eyes of Ishkol. A rare item of arcane power. It is the first step of our journey. Now, Harker... gaze with me into the crystal and we may begin.” Toth slowly passed a hand over the device and began to mumble a few strange words. “*Hemkar benosk taval shuka...*”

A mote of light appeared in the center of the thing. A faint flicker at first, but it quickly grew stronger. Gradually swirls of light formed and began to churn about deep in the belly of the crystal. Harker realized he could hear it. A deep throbbing hum was emanating from the crystal orb and it was causing the plates to begin to vibrate.

“Is this thing... uh... perfectly... safe?”

“Gaze into the crystal, Harker. Concentrate on the light.” Toth said, not looking up. His eyes were locked on the crystal orb before him, his face illuminated by its glow in the dim room.

Harker swallowed his fear and gazed deep into the center of the device. The insides swirled with glowing clouds of blue against a backdrop of inky purple. Intricate strands of light flowed about the glowing clouds, chasing each other, merging, collapsing and spinning

apart in a rhythmic dance. The graceful patterns were beautiful and mesmerizing. The deep thrumming faded to a single faint crystalline tone. The insides of the crystal orb seemed huge, like a vast ocean of blackness in which the light danced. Harker felt dizzy as if he were standing on the edge of a great hole into which he could fall forever into a vast nothingness below him. He felt drawn to the dancing light below. He could almost swim in that yawning cosmic ocean. If he could just lean in a little further... just a little further...

Harker shook his head to clear it. He did not like this sensation of losing control. Harker glanced up at his companion. Toth was still seated across from him, gazing into the crystal intently.

“Good, Harker,” said Toth quietly. “You’re doing very good.”

Harker was about to return his attention to the crystal, when he noticed something over Toth’s shoulder. Very quietly, without any fuss, the walls were beginning to melt.

Harker’s eye snapped wide open at the sight.

“Toth! The walls!”

Toth made no answer. His eyes were locked in any unblinking stare on the crystal egg. His focus looked impenetrable.

Great globs of stone began falling from the ceiling and walls. Huge beams of wood began to appear where the stone had melted and flowed away like thick grey honey. It was then that Harker noticed the walls were beginning to close in.

“U-uh... Toth?” Harker asked, his voice quavering.

Harker’s attention was suddenly torn away from the moving walls as the table between them and the crystalline device began to melt as well. Horrified, Harker jumped out of his chair, only to see it melt away to nothingness as well. At the same time, objects began to rise from the melting stone. The liquefied stone began to take shape and assume texture. Harker started for the door, only to see the stairs melt away. All about him everything seemed to be moving, melting, shifting and reforming. Within mere moments, the chamber had completely reshaped itself. As quickly as it had begun, the strange metamorphosis stopped.

The stone cellar walls were gone as were the wine rack and barrels. The room was much smaller now with several bunk beds built into the walls. Several small footlockers lined the walls. There were now two doors leading out, a ladder leading up and stairs leading down.

Harker gazed about the room in a state of shock, his mind still reeling, trying to process what it had just witnessed. “Toth?” He turned back toward the wizard. Toth was standing and he was looking at Harker. His expression was a mix of pride and satisfaction.

“What-?” Harker shook his head, trying to distill his confusion down to a single question. “What just happened?”

“It worked” Toth said. “Terribly sorry about the melting walls and all that. Can’t be helped. A bit jarring, I know. It always is the first time.”

Harker suddenly realized the floor beneath his feet was swaying slightly. He had to shift his body weight a small amount. He did it almost without thinking for it was something he did every day. Comprehension suddenly dawned.

“We’re on a ship!” Harker exclaimed.

Toth nodded, smiling.

“No, wait...” Harker looked about the room. “I know this room. This is the portside crew’s quarters. Great Semorjon... we’re on the *Third Wind*!”

“Yes.”

“You’ve used a spell to bring me back to my ship?”

Toth gave a slight shrug. “Well, I-”

“I’ve got to let the Captain know I’m here!” interrupted Harker. He scrambled up the ladder and onto the deck of the *Third Wind*. The sky was full of stars overhead. A cool salty wind blew in his face. Harker realized they were at sea. There was no land in sight, only a calm, dark sea. Harker sprinted to the aft cabin and pounded on the door.

“Captain!”

Harker took a moment to straighten his jacket and smooth his hair. There was no response. Harker pounded on the door again. “Captain?”

Toth, climbing the ladder behind him, slowly heaved his bulk up onto the deck.

“Captain Draabyn?” called Harker louder.

“He can’t... hear you,” said Toth, panting from his exertion.

Harker tried the door and found it unlocked. He entered and stepped into the captain’s cabin. Everything seemed as it was when he had last been here. The familiar desk and chair, the huge yellowed parchment map of the southlands on the wall, the bookcase in the wall, the display cabinets, the crossed swords above the fireplace, the suit of black armor in the corner. The room, however, was unoccupied.

“Captain Draabyn?” called out Harker, a twinge of fear coloring his tone. Toth stepped into the captain’s cabin behind Harker and collapsed into the chair next to the fireplace. Toth waved his hand over the cold logs in the fireplace and a cozy fire suddenly crackled to life.

Harker ran out of the cabin and back onto the deck.

“Brakov? Forsythe? Tackett?”

There was no response. Just the gentle slap of the waves against the hull.

Harker stood at the railing and gazed out. The dark sea stretched out to the horizon in all directions. Above him, the occasional wisp of cloud floating in front of the stars. Distantly, he could hear the cry of a lonely gull.

Harker stalked back in to the captain’s cabin where Toth was waiting for him.

“Alright, Toth. What *exactly* is going on?”

“I didn’t want to burden you with too much. An empty mind is a clear mind. I thought it might distract you from what needed to be done. It seems to have worked because... here we are.”

“Where exactly is here?”

“We’re on the Third Wind. Or, more precisely, your memory of the Third Wind.”

“My... *What?*”

“The Eye of Ishkol which we gazed into together... a potent relic of arcane sorcery it is. I am actually quite fortunate to have obtained such a treasure. With it, and a great deal of diligent study mind you, I have manifested... *this*”, he gestured all around them. “Think of it as a tapestry woven from your memories. You have thousands of memories of this vessel. You have been a member of her crew for years. You have walked every plank, touched every beam, fought in every battle-“

Harker cocked his head with a skeptical look.

“Alright, you’ve *witnessed* every battle. But you must admit that you have shared in all its adventures. My point is that you *know* this vessel, my dear Harker... as well as any man alive. Perhaps even as well as her captain. And that makes you”, said Toth, pointing at Harker, “the perfect person for this.”

“You... you kidnapped me because I’m... familiar with the ship?”

“Well, not me personally. The Sea Rakers captured you... but yes. That’s why they took *you*. It’s very likely that Captain Draabyn himself knows the ship even better than you do... however, his tattoos would have prevented this spell from working at all. Furthermore, he would have fought like a lion.”

“Whereas, I was easier to capture.”

“You were an easy mark, I’m told.”

Harker pouted.

“Oh, don’t worry, we can’t all be warriors. Besides, there’s more to it than that. You also have a very disciplined mind. A well-ordered mind. ‘Tis much easier to sift through the

thoughts and memories of such a mind. From the stories I've heard of your captain, he's... well... a mite unpredictable."

"He is subject to whims," corrected Harker.

"Utterly unconstrained, some would say."

"Brilliantly unorthodox," countered Harker, folding his arms in front of him.

Toth smiled broadly, revealing those yellow fangs. "I like you, Harker. Well, regardless of how we may describe him, my point remains the same. You, my dear boy, were the better choice."

Harker looked about the familiar cabin in which he had had so many conversations and attended so many meetings. Everything looked absolutely real and absolutely as he remembered it. Harker walked over to the desk and ran his fingers along a few dents in the metal rim. The results of a few errant sword swings during some sparring with the captain last year.

Harker shook his head in disbelief. "I am humbled by your spell, truly. Your creation is... astounding."

"It is a credit to you, Harker - you and your disciplined ways. You created this, no less than I."

Harker straightened his jacket again. "Very well. I am at the mercy of the Rakers, it seems. Let's be on with this, shall we? You said you were searching for something. Am I to understand that you manufactured this..." Harker gestured about them, looking for the word, "this... copy... in order to search it?"

"Precisely."

"What exactly are we looking for?"

"A book."

Harker narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What book?"

"It would be small. Leather bound. Lacking in title or decoration, I would guess. But it likely has this symbol upon it."

Toth made a gesture and a few flames from the hearth were pulled out. The flames rolled and coiled as they floated up between the two men. Suspended in midair, the burning tendrils of flame shaped themselves into a glyph. It appears to be the letters H and S within a triangle and three strokes beneath them. After a moment, the flames unraveled and the glyph dissipated into a wisp of smoke.

"I don't recognize that symbol. I don't think I've ever seen that before."

“You may have seen it long ago, perhaps only a glimpse and forgotten it. If so, then it is buried in your memory. And if it is in your memory, then it is here, on this ship, with us. And even if we do not find the book itself, we may find clues to its location.”

“Do you know what part of the ship it’s hidden on? How long as it been here? Who hid the book?”

“Many questions. . . and now that we are alone, as it were, we can speak more freely.”

“You mean the Rakers cannot eavesdrop on us here.”

“Exactly. Now, if you’re half as knowledgeable as I’ve heard, you can tell me who the previous captain of the Third Wind was.”

“I can. It was a Captain Hanold Sayper, a former freebooter from the Isles .”

“That’s right. The book we are searching for is the captain’s log. . . or at least, one of Captain Sayper’s personal journals. The Sea Raker guild believes that he hid his journal aboard this ship years ago, and supposedly, it has lain hidden on the ship, undisturbed, for all these years. “

“How did the Sea Rakers come by this information?”

“A letter, written by Captain Sayper to one of his wives. I myself am privy to only parts of the story. For instance, I do not know how the Sea Rakers obtained the letter. But I have seen parts of the letter and it clearly states that the journal is hidden, and hidden well, on the Third Wind. Captain Sayper was the only one who knew its location.”

“Captain Sayper died years ago,” said Harker, “or so I’ve heard. If its location was secret, that secret died with him.” Harker took his cracked spectacles off to polish them, a habit when he was deep in thought. He stopped wiping them suddenly, wondering if the spectacles were even real here. After a moment’s hesitation, he shrugged and put them back on his face. “Why do the Sea Rakers want Sayper’s journal?”

“Honestly,” said Toth, “they would not tell me. Said it was not necessary for me to know. But they seem quite determined to find it. . . at any cost.”

“Do you believe the letter to be authentic? Do you think it’s possible that a book could have remained hidden and undiscovered on a ship for so many years?”

“I do.”

“Did the letter indicate where the journal is hidden?”

“It did not. In fact, in the letter, Captain Sayper boasted to his wife that the journal was so well hidden that a hundred men searching for a hundred years and searching to the ends of the ship could not find his journal. The letter did imply that he had left clues behind. That is precisely why the Rakers hired me. Quite simply, they are desperate. If the journal is as well hidden as the letter boasts, it might require the dismantling of the entire ship to find it. The Sea Rakers are a small guild. They do not have the strength to capture

the ship from Captain Draabyn by force nor do they have the political clout to impound the ship under false pretenses. And of course, a brute force approach, such as arson, is out of the question. Anything that might damage the ship could destroy the journal. No... they needed something more subtle. And that's where we come in. The Rakers hope that, between my magic and your knowledge of the ship and our specific knowledge of what we seek, that we might discover Sayper's clues and sniff out the resting place of this journal."

"And the symbol? Where did that come from?"

"It was Hanold Sayper's personal sigil."

Harker looked about the cabin and sighed. "I take it that I am a prisoner of the Sea Rakers until we find something."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. If we don't find anything, you won't be released for some time and I won't be paid at all. So, for both our sakes, let us hope that the clues are here."

Harker walked over to the bookcase. It was a huge and ornate thing, crafted from darkly stained wood, and built into the wall. Several hundred books filled its shelves. Surrounding them were sculpted carvings. Knights and dragons and maidens in distress peered back at him from the carvings.

"I have books in my quarters," said Harker, running his fingers along the intricate scrollwork, "and so does Forsythe, the ship's mage. But most of the books on the ship are right here, in the captain's bookcase. Still..."

"What's the matter?"

"I do not feel comfortable searching this room. This is the captain's private quarters. And he is my captain."

"Ah... loyalty to one's captain. I can understand that. Perhaps I should remind you that you are merely sifting through your memories, not actually searching his cabin."

"Yes, but... you said the book could be anywhere on the ship, right?"

"That's correct."

"Then as a favor to me, let us search other areas of the ship first. "

"We could. But I think that would merely waste time. I have a strong feeling that if the book is anywhere, it is here, in the captain's quarters."

"I can think of a few other places that we might search at least. Please... I would leave this room for last."

Toth looked at the bruises and cuts on the young man, the torn coat, the cracked spectacles.

"Very well," said Toth nodding. He clapped a hand on Harker's shoulder. "Let us search your other locations. We'll save this room for last."

CHAPTER 4

Callister, Brakov and Forsythe were sitting in the captain's cabin sharing a bottle of Mercian Stout. The setting sun poured in through the open window casting long shadows. Each was lost in his own thoughts. Brakov sat in the corner sharpening one of his blades absentmindedly. Forsythe paced nervously back and forth in front of the fireplace. Callister sat at his desk ignoring the notes that Harker had spread out on the desk, days ago, for him to review.

A knock at the door jolted all three out of their reveries.

"Enter" called out Callister.

Sakula, the *Third Wind's* helmsmen, leaned his reptilian head in through the door and gazed at the three men with black unblinking eyes. A forked tongue flickered from his long scaled snout.

"Turning over the watchesss, captain," he said in his usual slow speech. "Mr. Porter iss now topsside. All'ss quiet. No change in our spectatorss."

"Very well," nodded Callister. "Maintain the vigil. Have the watch wake me at the first sign of trouble."

"Aye, captain." He withdrew and quietly closed the door.

"Trouble?" asked Forsythe.

"Seems the ship is being watched. Three men, from a balcony across the way. They've been taking shifts. They've been watching the ship since we docked. I'm having our men keep a presence on deck and maintain a watchful eye on them... discreetly."

"Would you like me to..." Forsythe began and he wiggled his fingers in pantomime.

"No, no need for magic," replied Callister "I think spells would attract more attention than we want. For now, we'll just keep an eye on them."

Forsythe nodded.

"Out of curiosity," asked Callister, "what spell were you thinking of?"

"I'll tell you what he'd do..." said Brakov, gesturing with his blade, "he'd boil blood, shatter bone and burst eyes! Eh? That's our valiant sea mage. Spirit! Like a Vorrikan battle mage."

“How dreadful,” said Forsythe with a horrified look. “Is everyone in Vorrik as bloodthirsty as you?”

“I doubt anyone’s as bad as our Brakov,” said Callister.

“You should meet our women,” said Brakov.

“I won’t be bursting anyone’s eyeballs,” Forsythe said with a grimace. “I was rather thinking of simply summoning a fog bank to obscure their view of the ship.”

“Bah! Where’s the fun in -”

A knock at the door interrupted him and Tackett poked his bald head in, moustache bristling.

“Forgive the interruption, Cap’n, but you’re not gonna believe who just marched down the dock and asked permission to come aboard.”

“Who?” asked Forsythe.

“Samirra.”

“The swordtongue?” asked Brakov with a sneer.

“She’s standing on the dock right now and she’s not alone.”

“Wonderful,” said Callister. “What guild have we pissed off now?”

“If Harker were here, he could tell us,” said Forsythe.

Callister lead Brakov, Forsythe and Tackett out to the deck and to the ship’s railing. Standing below on the pier was a tall, thin woman with a hawkish face and short cropped black hair, peering out from the depths of a deep hood. Her features were sharp and lean with dark eyes. She wore a high collared surcoat of burgundy crushed velvet over a silken tunic and was girdled at the waist by a belt of silver and jewels. One eyebrow was arched as she gazed up at the Third Wind. Her expression was of haughty pride that spoke of both high birth and accomplishment.

Standing beside her was a tall man wearing a heavy iron helm from which emerged a grey beard and a tangle of long grey hair. His cloak was swept over one shoulder revealing silvered ring mail, leather and great sword strapped to his back. Behind them stood a trio of soldiers wearing visored helms and heavy grey cloaks over banded plate.

Callister strode down the gangplank and stopped in front of the woman. He folded his arms and glared at the group. He noticed that none of them were wearing any guild sigils and all of them were wearing hoods or helms to conceal their faces.

“Captain Draabyn”, she said with a slight bow. Her accent sounded Northern to Callister, possibly Normidian. “I bring greetings from House Aldrayun. I am-”

“Samirra. We’ve heard of you. Our cargo’s already been offloaded. We’re not buying or selling anything today. What’s a professional barterer doing here?”

"I am no longer a freelance barterer. I have taken a permanent position with House Aldrayun. Besides... we swordtongues do more than barter. We arbitrate guild disputes, negotiate business deals and much more. Today, we've come to speak to you.

"We?" Callister glanced at the tall armored man.

"Allow me to introduce Rendyll Harkune, Captain of the Guard at House Aldrayun." The tall man in ring mail gave a nod.

"As swordtongue to House Aldrayun," resumed Samirra. "I have been working on an ongoing negotiation... a negotiation which now involves you and your ship. We're here because we can help you get your missing first officer back."

"Harker?" Callister's eyes lit up. "Where is he?"

"House Aldrayun is willing to negotiate in exchange for certain--"

Callister grabbed her by her collar as he tore his sword out of its scabbard. "Where is Harker?" he yelled.

The four men around her reacted instantly, swords flying to their hands. Brakov and Tacket drew their blades as well. For a moment, almost everyone had a sword pointing at their throat.

"You're outnumbered, mariner!" growled Captain Harkune. "Drop your swords."

Callister leveled a death stare at the Captain. "If you four so much as twitch, she dies... then you die." The guards glanced at each other nervously.

"Captain, please" said Forsythe. "There's no need for bloodshed here."

Despite having a blade at her throat, Samirra maintained a level voice. "House Aldrayun is *not* holding Harker, but we can help you get him back."

"Talk!" barked Callister, not lowering his blade.

"I was sent to negotiate terms for an agreement," said Samirra. "It's simple. Our guild is assembling a team to play in an upcoming match of Kalgamorra. My guild wants you to lead the team. That's all. If you agree, we will give you all the information we have about where Harker is being held and who has him. We will even assist you in rescuing him."

"Why me?" growled Callister.

"We have reasons to believe that you would be a very valuable asset in this game. Reasons which I would be happy to elaborate on..."

"A Kalgamorra game?"

"Yes."

Callister lowered his blade and released the woman's collar. The guards visibly relaxed and lowered their swords, but kept them in hand.

"A dangerous game, Kalgamorra," said Brakov, putting away his blade. "People *die* in Kalgamorra."

"Yes," said Samirra, rubbing her neck, "but we think your captain could win the game for us. Please, Captain, allow me to tell you my full tale. Play for us and we will get your first officer back."

Callister moved aside and gestured toward the gangplank, but Samirra stayed put and folded her arms. "First thing's first, captain. If we tell you who has Harker and assist in his rescue, do you agree to lead our Kalgamorra team?"

Callister stared at the woman a moment, seeming to measure her resolve while he considered things. "Just one game?"

"Just one."

"Very well. I agree."

"Captain?" said Forsythe, "Are you sure? Kalgamorra is brutally-"

"Enough!" barked Callister. "If it gets us Harker back, then fine. I'll play their damn game."

He thrust a hand toward Samirra and she took it.

Callister pulled her close and looked her square in the eye. He wasn't smiling. "If I get Harker back alive and well, I play your game. If Harker dies, you get nothing."

"Agreed."

They shook.

"Tackett?" said Callister.

"Aye, cap'n?"

"Have Sawtooth bring food and drink to the officer's galley."

"Aye, cap'n."

A short while later, Samirra and Harkune were seated at a long table in the officer's galley aboard the Third Wind. Across from them sat Callister, Brakov, Forsythe and Tackett. A banquet of food was now laid out on the table before them. There were skewers of charred razorfish, grilled shrimp in honey and crab cakes in cream sauce. The door opened and a short, curly headed grum walked in carrying a platter loaded with steaming oysters and added it to the table.

"Thank you, Sawtooth" said Forsythe.

Sawtooth grinned, but said nothing. He gave a nod to Forsythe and left.

Soon the gallery was filled with the clink of cutlery and plates were passed around. “Now,” said Callister, pouring himself a goldsmoke brandy. “I have many questions, but the one I want to start off with is... why me? Why in the world do you want me to lead your team in a Kalgamorra game? I’ve seen several games of Kalgamorra and even sat in the front row, but I’ve never actually played a game before.”

“You’re a skilled warrior who has survived more adventures than I can count,” answered Samirra. “You fought in the Second Demon War. Your sword duel with Sirroth on the castle walls at the Siege of Myranor is almost legendary. You were personally present at the banishing of Draxorith. You led the Rukemian convoy to Aggradar. Tales of adventure are heaped upon your name. Is that not enough?”

“I get the feeling there’s something more specific.”

Samirra smiled and nodded. “You’re right. It’s about those tattoos of yours.”

“These tattoos offer some small measure of protection... from minor charms and incantations, but they are *not* always effective. It’s certainly not something I would trust my life with.”

“It depends on the spell used against you?”

“Yes.”

Samirra smiled knowingly. “Like most guilds, House Aldrayun has a wizard... a master of spellcraft who advises on magical matters. Ours is a young northern sorceress named Ildrasha. A lovely girl. Skilled in several arcane languages, including Yntharian glyph runes.”

Callister and Forsythe exchanged glances.

“Yes. Yntharian. Most wizards in this part of the world use Drethian for their magic. There are few wizards here who would recognize Yntharian glyphs. But our lovely Ildrasha is quite well versed.”

“So my tattoos are Yntharian. What of it?”

“Each team in a Kalgamorra match is allowed one wizard on the field. House Dragari’s team wizard is a man known to us. He is a rare wizard in that he uses the ancient language of Ranyku for his magic.”

“So?”

“Ah, I see,” said Forsythe. “Yntharian is based on Ranyku. If he’s using Ranyku for his magic, the tattoos would be the perfect counter.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow,” said Callister. “What does this mean?”

“In the game, you will be completely immune to any magic the other team’s wizard is using. None of his spells will affect you. We have never known Ildrasha to be wrong in these matters.”

“A tremendous tactical advantage”, said Brakov.

Callister nodded. “Immunity to the enemy’s magic. I’m liking this more and more. So tell me about the stakes. Why is this game so important?”

Samirra poked at her crab cake thoughtfully, considering her answer. “Are you familiar with the island of Borakar?”

“Yes, we had a run in there a couple years back. Transporting forty head of cattle. We stopped there to resupply, let the cattle graze a bit. Curiosity as well. We’ve all heard the tales...”

“Tales of great monsters,” prompted Samirra.

“They’re not just tales,” said Tackett solemnly. “We saw ‘em. Great huge reptilian beasts. Horns and scales and skin like armor. Big as houses.”

“We didn’t believe the tales,” said Callister “until they strode out from the forest and began feasting our the cattle. We managed to flee, but we lost most of the cargo.”

“Few ships visit Borakar... and as you say... the tales about Borakar are true. The island is infested by monstrous things. There are also some indigenous tribes living there. A primitive people who call themselves the Puwala. They do not like outsiders. But what has recently brought Borakar attention was the discovery of a valuable mineral there several years ago.”

“Spice crystals. Yes, we’ve heard of them. ”

“Just a common street drug,” said Tackett. “Grind the crystals down to powder, sell it on the street. Spice powder. We’ve seen people under its influence.”

“It’s a kind of harmless catatonic euphoria,” said Forsythe.

“Drooling mindless idiots,” replied Brakov.

Samirra shook her head. “Not so common and not so harmless. People under the influence of spice powder become aggressive, violent... and feel no pain. Spice powder has been the cause of several tavern brawls and more than a few murders.”

“Because of the side effects, the Council declared spice crystals illegal in the Alliance,” said Captain Harkune. It was the first time he had spoken and his deep baritone voice commanded attention. “That’s made them a profitable cargo for smugglers. Several guilds in Drakkell have attempted it. In particular, the Sea Rakers have been smuggling spice crystal into the Drakkellian Alliance for over a year now and are selling it in Hell’s Market.”

“The crystals are difficult to obtain,” said Samirra. “Between predators and tribes, it’s a dangerous island. Where other guilds have tried and failed, the Sea Rakers have been more successful. They’ve been making a nice profit from this smuggling for more than a year now. But recently, things have changed. The Council has decided to make spice crystals legal so that they can tax it.”

“Ha!” barked Brakov. “The nobles want their slice of the pie.”

“Indeed,” agreed Samirra. “The council is going to award an exclusive import contract for Borakan spice crystals to one guild house. Only one. As you can imagine, several guilds were initially interested. The potential profit is staggering. After much political maneuvering and cutthroat business deals, it has come down to two guild houses. House Aldrayun, whom I now represent, and House Dragari.”

“What can you tell us about both guilds?”

“House Aldrayun has two hundred swords at the ready,” answered Captain Harkune. “We’re a trade guild specializing in naval escorts and trade with the Pirate Isles. We have twelve ships in our private fleet. House Dragari has more than five hundred swords. It dabbles in a dozen different trades and crafts. They are larger and wealthier. They also have ties to the Drakkellian Guild of Sorcery.

“These two guilds have become entrenched in an intractable legal battle,” added Samira. “A stalemate which the court has recently broken. The presiding magistrate declared that the matter would be resolved by Kalgamorra.”

“They’re going to decide such an important matter with a game?” asked Forsythe.

“It’s the old way,” said Harkune. “For centuries, Kalgamorra has been used to settle guild disputes. The winner of this game gets the spice crystal contract.”

“A legal importer of spice crystal would also be contracting ships, guards, caravans...” said Samirra. “As you can see, the outcome of this game will affect dozens of guilds throughout the Alliance. The whole city will be watching this game with great interest.”

“When is this game?” asked Brakov.

“Five days,” said Harkune.

“How does any of this pertain to Mr. Kaedin?” asked Callister.

“The Sea Rakers are on the verge of losing their profits from spice crystal smuggling,” answered Samirra. “Regardless of which guild wins the contract, the Rakers would be facing a serious threat to their operations. They would have to compete with another guild... a stronger guild which would operate out in the open. They have become too dependent on the profits from their crystal smuggling.”

“Are you saying the Sea Rakers have captured Harker?” asked Brakov.

“That is correct.”

“How do you know this?”

“To survive and prosper in Drakkel, a guild must have friends in useful places.”

Tackett grunted. “Spies.”

Samirra gave a slight nod. “One of ours is among the ranks of the Sea Rakers.”

“Why would the Rakers take Harker?” asked Callister, shaking his head. “What possible value could he be to them?”

“The Rakers are searching for something. We don’t know what they seek, but they believe it to be hidden on board this ship. They have kidnapped Harker in order to interrogate him about its location.”

“Interrogate?” mumbled Brakov. “You mean torture.”

Forsythe let out a small gasp. “Poor Harker...”

“We don’t know what plans they have for your missing crew mate,” said Harkune.

“What could they possibly be searching for?” asked Tackett to no one in particular.

“Whatever it is, the Sea Rakers must believe it will let them keep smuggling the spice crystal. And since you took this ship to Borakar just two years ago, there could be a connection. Did the Third Wind take anything off of the island?” asked Samirra. “Was anything stolen from the tribes?”

Callister scowled off into space leaning on a clenched fist. He did not answer.

“No, nothing,” said Brakov, at last. “We took nothing off that island and had no encounter with the tribes. Our only encounter was with one of those wingless dragons.”

Several people began talking at once.

“Perhaps we could – “

“These smugglers are-

“Is it possible that-“

Callister slammed his fist down on the table. It startled everyone into sudden silence.

“Where are they keeping Harker?” Callister growled.

“Like most criminal organizations in Drakkel, they maintain a legitimate business... a public face as it were. The Sea Rakers are closely entwined with Burkar Imports, a shipping guild that specializes in importing and exports goods with the distant lands of Anquar and Padashan across the sea.

“The perfect cover for smugglers,” said Callister.

“Burkar Imports have three properties in the city. Their main headquarters is in the Copperton District. But what interests us is their warehouse. They’re keeping him at the Stour Hold.”

“What’s that?” asked Forsythe.

“It’s their main shipping hub. All cargo, both inbound and outbound, passes through that stronghold. It’s part fortress, part warehouse. Full of stock rooms, cellars and guards. It also houses a few guild officers.”

“Captain, that’s right here in Porthus District,” said Tackett. “At the harbor’s edge. The Stour Hold is but a bowshot from here.”

“He’s right,” said Samirra. “Less than three hundred yards from this ship. They’ve been holding your first officer right under your nose, Captain.”

“You’re sure about this information?” asked Callister.

“Absolutely. Our friend among the Rakers has seen your first officer with his own eyes.”

“How many men do the Sea Rakers have?” asked Callister. “What kind of resistance can we expect at the Stour Hold?”

“Because they’re a criminal group, they’re not officially listed in the Book of Guilds, but we estimate their number, including employees of Burkar Imports, at about two hundred. Perhaps one quarter of their guild would be at the Stour Hold.”

“And less than half of them would be fighting men,” said Brakov. He gave Callister a wolfish grin. “We can take them.”

Callister nodded. “We would have the element of surprise, and we have Forsythe’s magic. And I have the storm blades. But we’ll need more men.”

Callister turned to Samirra. “And I’ll not risk my own. Alright, if you want me to play your damn game, then give me twenty of your best warriors. I want them as soon as possible and I want them ready for battle. Have them meet us the Porthus Gate in two hours. ”

“Done,” said Samirra.

“I’ll lead them myself,” added Harkune.

“We’ll attack the Stour Hold tonight and get our man back.”

“I agree,” said Brakov. “Hit them hard and hit them fast.”

Callister nodded. “Brakov, Forsythe, you’re with me. And bring our blacksmith.”

“Aye. Big Choeg,” said Brakov with a wide grin. “Just the sight of him will put them to flight.”

“What of the crew, cap’n?” asked Tackett.

“I have another task for them.”

Callister rose to his feet. Everyone else rose to their feet as well.

“We will report back to House Aldrayun,” said Samirra “and make arrangements.”

“Good.” Callister turned to Tackett. “Tackett, you’re in charge while we’re gone.”

“Aye Cap’n.”

“I want you to conduct a search of the entire ship while we’re gone. Use the entire crew. Search every chamber.”

“What are we searching for?”

“We don’t know!” barked Callister. Tackett stiffened. Callister sighed and clapped his hand on Tackett’s huge shoulder. His voice softened. “Just look for anything out of the ordinary. Anything at all. Harker’s life may depend on it.”

Tackett nodded. “Don’t you worry, cap’n. We’ll check every nail and beam. I swear by Semorjon, if there’s something here to be found, we’ll find it.”

“I have faith in my crew,” said Callister, turning to Samirra. “but I doubt your tale. My men will search this ship from bow to stern, topsail to keel. But it is pointless. We have sailed this ship around the world. We know every inch of rope and canvas and I am telling you now, there is absolutely nothing here to find!”

CHAPTER 5

““I think I found something!” called out Harker excitedly.
“I’m on my way” called out Toth. Toth, was standing in the officers galley, checking for false panels in the cupboards. He slowly began trudging back toward the captain’s quarters, where Harker was now searching.

The two had been searching the Third Wind for hours. They had checked several areas that Harker considered likely candidates, but found nothing. During their search, Toth had asked many questions about the ship. Several times, Harker had asked Toth to show him again what Sayer’s sigil looked like. Eventually, they had split up, each following their own hunches. So far, neither had found anything.

Toth climbed back onto the deck and pushed into the captain’s quarters. Harker was kneeling on the floor examining a part of the bookcase.

“We already checked all the books in there.”

“It’s not the books I’m looking at,” replied Harker. “Come here and take a closer look at this...”

With a snort of exertion, Toth knelt down beside Harker and cast his gaze to where the young man was pointing. His fingers were lightly tracing the wood carvings of the deeply stained bookcase. The bookcase had five shelves and each had a pair of heavy wooden bookends that moved along in a track in the shelf. Harker was pointing at the base of one of bookends on the bottom shelf.

“This here,” Harker said. “On the bookend. It’s tiny, but... isn’t that the sigil? The symbol you conjured in the fire...”

“You have younger eyes than I. But yes, it does look similar. Hmmm, interesting.”

“So tiny... I never noticed these before.”

“You must have, else it wouldn’t be here. You may not think you’ve seen them before, but at some point, you saw them. You’ve probably gazed upon this bookcase a thousand times and each time you memorized the tiniest details without ever realizing it.” Toth looked closely at the heavy wooden bookend and felt the tiny signet with the tip of his finger. “Quite decorative, these bookends. Where did they come from?”

“Well, it’s all connected, you see? They run in these tracks. Part of the bookcase. Part of the original... ship...” Harker said, his voice trailing off. Harker quickly began running his fingers and eyes over the other bookends. “Look here. Here’s another one.” He pointed to the base of the left bookend on the middle shelf.

Toth ran his fingers along the carvings of the huge bookcase. Beneath each shelf was a series of carvings in bas relief. The carvings also flanked the sides of the bookcase and ran all the way to the top of the case.

“What do these carvings depict?”

“Many things... kingdoms of the world, famous battles... here is the great Sundering and the World Storm that followed. Here is the Battle of Anterian which started the Great War. Down here is the Siege of Tykron and up here is-“

“Wait... the Siege of Tykron...” said Toth and he sat down on the floor heavily gazing at the carving.

“What is it?”

“The Great Horde of Agurad laid siege to Tykron for a hundred days...one hundred days exactly.”

Harker’s quick mind made the leap in a flash. “Hanold’s letter.” he said excitedly. “Of course! He boasted that... what was it you said... someone searching for a hundred days...”

Toth closed his eyes and began reciting from memory... “One hundred men searching for one hundred days, searching to the ends of the ship, would never find my journal.”

“You think this is a clue?”

“An odd coincidence, at the very least, but I see no carving that depicts a hundred men.”

Harker scanned through the carvings, his finger lightly tracing along the shelves. He stopped half way through the middle shelf. “Here!” he said excitedly. “It’s a carving of the Rukemian Emperor. There’s the Imperial Standard. And standing behind him, two guards.”

Toth squinted at the carving where Harker pointed. “What of it?”

“The imperial house guard, the ones who protect the palace... they are one hundred of the finest warriors from across the empire. One hundred men exactly.”

Toth shook his head. “This cannot be coincidence.”

“I don’t think so,” said Harker excitedly. “Deliberate clues, I think.” He began poking and prodding at the two carvings, first one then the other. His fingers probed every indentation. He hoped he might stumble upon a catch or switch. But there was nothing.

Harker stood and began pacing back and forth in front of the great bookcase, polishing his spectacles, his mind racing. “A hundred men searching for a hundred days... what was the last part?”

“Searching to the ends of the ship would not find my journal.”

“The ends of the ship... the ends of the ship...” Harker stopped abruptly. “Ends...”

He knelt down suddenly in front of the bookcase.

“Bookends?” He carefully took a firm grasp of the heavy oaken bookend and began sliding it away from the row of books. It slid slowly, smoothly, running along its track.

Harker put his head close to the shelf and moved the bookend back and forth. “Listen, do you hear that?”

Toth leaned his head in, held his breath and listened. As he did so, the distant waves outside faded, the distant cry of the gull ceased. An unearthly silence descended. Harker began to move the bookend again and Toth could hear it. Ever so faintly, there was a very faint clicking sound, as if a tiny gear were being turned.

“It’s a puzzle lock of some kind” said Harker. “I think we need to align these two marked book ends with those two carvings.” Harker sat back on the floor and gazed at the bookcase before them. “Well... now you know where it is. This has to be it. The journal is hidden inside the book case. And now you know how to unlock.”

“I do believe you’re right,” said Toth.

Harker got up and sat at the desk. He suddenly felt exhausted, but happy. A quite contentment settled over him.

“We did it. Clues hidden in the letter... a clockwork mechanism hidden in the bookcase... that must be it. It has to be.

“I agree”, said Toth nodding.

“The book is there for the taking. The only thing left to do,” said Harker, “is take this information back to the Sea Rakers. But they will be in for quite a shock. They won’t be able to simply sneak aboard the Third Wind at night and fetch it. My crew is not so dim-witted. No... the only way this guild will ever acquire the book is to negotiate with Captain Draabyn. And I warn you,” Harker thrust a finger forward for emphasis “he negotiates with a blade.”

Toth struggled to his feet with a grunt of exertion and patted his round belly. “Such negotiations will not be necessary. You and I are going to claim the book.”

“Claim it? But how can we?” said Harker, shook his head, looking about. “You said that this whole place was a dream... woven from memories. I have no *memories* of opening

a puzzle lock, of finding a hidden book here, so how...how can it *be* here? How we can 'claim' a real book from a dream world?"

Toth smiled revealing those cracked yellow fangs. "It's time I reveal to you the crown jewel of my sorcery." Toth moved over to the center of the room and stood in front of Callister's desk facing Harker.

"It took months of work and patience to perfect the spell I'm about to show you. Many long nights did I spend shaping the magic to work with the Eye. Persistence prevails. I finally succeeded and the spell I have wrought is mighty indeed. Oh, I've used it before, in other circumstances. But here, tonight, on this ship, my spell will finally be matched with a quandary worth of its true potential." Toth looked over at Harker and smiled. "Thank you for this, Harker."

Toth then looked forward again and closed his eyes in concentration. He slowly raised both hands and began to mumble invocations in that strange twisting tongue again. *Ikvar bren tal roth candro barakas.*

Harker felt a strange sensation ripple through him as if it was a set of waves and he was the water. The space all around them convulsed like a living thing, twisting and tightening. Harker felt his nerves dancing with tension and he squeezed his eyes shut involuntarily.

The sensation quickly passed. Harker opened his eyes to find everything enveloped in a soft glow. The books, the walls, the desk, the chair. The very air seemed hazy with light. The door to the office suddenly opened and a shimmering, ghostly apparition walked in. Harker's voice caught in his throat and he took a fearful step back. Harker, however, quickly recognized the apparition. It was Captain Callister Draabyn.

"Captain?"

"He can't hear you" said Toth quietly.

Toth and Harker both watched as the ghostly captain walked to the fireplace and grabbed the two crossed blades above the hearth. He strapped their scabbards to his belt, then walked over to the suit of armor in the corner and began to don the heavy pieces of plate armor. His expression was one Harker had seen before... restrained anger... the calm before the storm. Harker could see other ghostly figures outside the door, bustling to and fro. The ship was active. They were heading into a fight.

"How is he-? What's going on?" asked Harker. "Is that... my captain?"

"We are still in the dream world, Harker... but we are peering through a veil into the true world. We are standing at the edge of the dream. Think of this as a reflection of the real world, if you like. Your captain is in his office, on board the real Third Wind, right at this very moment."

Once armored, the ghostly captain grabbed two other trinkets from the display cabinets around the room... a spyglass and an ornate metal sphere. He then turned and walked toward the door. Just as he was about to step through, he paused and turn back toward the office, as if he had heard something. His gaze swept the room and rested on the bookshelf behind Harker.

Harker took two steps toward his captain and reached out a hand.

"Don't touch him!" barked Toth.

Harker cast a quick glance at Toth. A look of terror gripped the dwarf's green skinned face.

Harker quickly withdrew his hand, suddenly afraid. He took a step back and turned to scowled at Toth. "Why not?"

Before Toth could respond, Draabyn turned and walked out, closing the door behind him. Toth visibly relaxed.

"You were scared," said Harker. "You were scared of what would have happened... Explain to me right now, Toth. Why couldn't I touch him?"

"It's those damn tattoos of his."

Comprehension suddenly filled Harker like a bolt. "Of course. The tattoos shield him from spells... are you saying it would have unraveled your spell?"

"Disruption is quite possible. You'd have sundered the Veil and ended up on the Third Wind."

"On the Third Wind? You mean on the real Third Wind? Are you telling me I could end this whole kidnapping business with a simple touch?" Harker immediately started from the door and grabbed the handle.

"No! Harker, listen to me! I know what you're thinking, but you cannot. You must not! It's a delicate balance of forces arrayed about us! You can't go blustering about. Yes, should you touch him, his tattoos might... *might* unravel my spell. If that happened, you and I both would be violently catapulted from this dream world and back into real and yes, most likely on to the deck of the Third Wind, but we would die in the process. Most horribly, I might add."

Harker hesitated, suddenly feeling very small and vulnerable. The cool metal of the door handle felt real enough in his hand. But was it? Was any of this? He stepped back from the door and looked about the cabin again. These were forces well outside his understanding. Harker waited and listened. He could hear the bustle of the crew on the deck above him and he wondered if some other phantasm might saunter in or whether a gaping void would open up beneath him and swallow him whole. With a shudder, he turned back to Toth.

“Very well. Now what?”

“Now...” said Toth, “we retrieve the journal. Help me move the bookends into position with the two carvings we found. And quickly... the Veil between dream and reality is parted, but I cannot maintain such a delicate balance for long. We must be quick.”

In order to move the bookends, Harker realized he was going to have to clear the shelves. He grabbed a heavy book on chart mapping, intent on tossing all the books to the floor. Toth joined him and soon the books were piled up around them on the floor.

Harker looked at the mess about them and then remembered the ghostly apparition of his captain taking the twin swords off the wall.

“We’re not actually making a mess in the captain’s cabin... are we?”

“You won’t like the answer, so don’t ask the question.”

Once they had the books cleared, Harker gently grasped one bookend and slowly began moving it toward the Siege of Tykron carving. It settled into position with a faint click. Toth then grasped the other and slowly slide it along its track. Harker kept his eyes on the carving of the Imperial House Guard. He held his breath as the bookend neared the carving.

As it settled into position, there was a hollow wooden thump that caused both of them to look up. Something had just moved at the top of the bookcase. Harker, being a full head taller than Toth, lifted himself up on tip toe and peered across the top of the bookcase. A thick layer of dust and cobwebs covered everything, but there was a clear disturbance. One of the wooden panels that made up to the top of the bookcase was at an odd angle, revealing a small gap at one edge. Grasping the edge, Harker lifted it. It swung open silently on a cleverly concealed hinge revealing a rectangular hole. Harker marveled at the mechanical precision.

“Hmph!” snorted Toth. “Made by a dwarf, I’d wager.”

Harker slowly put his hand into the hole and began feeling around. His fingers touched something soft. Grasping it, he gingerly lifted it out and brought it over to the desk. It was wrapped in soft leather. Harker set it on the desk and both men grabbed a chair. Harker unwrapped the thing while Toth looked on.

The book was not quite what Harker had expected. It was old. The brown leather cover was cracked and soiled. In faded gold lettering it bore six words - *The Jewel of the Wild Sea*. It bore no other sigil. One corner looked as if it had been chewed off by rats. Another was badly burned. The spine was cracked, but the stitching seemed sound and the rough cut pages were still bound in place.

“Hold the book close to you and keep a firm grip on it.”

Toth closed his eyes and raised his hands. He began to speak in that fluid language again... *Sakarab ordnac thor lat nerb ravki*. Harker was prepared for it this time. The strange rippling sensation passed through him. The book suddenly seemed alive in his hands as if some force were pulling on it. The rippling sensation engulfed him and circled him, pulling and tugging at the book. Harker wrapped his arms tightly about the book and hugged it to his chest. It felt as if the very air around him was straining against him, struggling to rip the book out of his arms. With a sudden release, the ripple passed and the sensation vanished. The book went limp in his arms. Harker opened his eyes and looked about the cabin. The ghostly glow was fading from the surroundings. The shimmer in the air faded and was gone. He could no longer hear the bustle of the crew - only the wind outside and the creak of ropes and canvas.

With a heavy sigh, Toth opened his eyes and smiled. "The veil between the real world and the dream world is now closed. The book is ours now. Let us take a closer look at our prize."

Harker nodded and set the book down on the captain's desk. Delicately, he opened the cover and began to slowly turning the crinkled yellow pages. Toth leaned over to get a closer look. Page after page was crowded with lines of a sure handed script. The ink was faded, but legible. The words crowded in around symbols, wrapped around diagrams and parted for bold renditions of large and strange looking glyphs. Several pages were filled with maps. Others showed simply lists. One page showed sketches of plants and animals. Another depicted a dark skinned native wearing an elaborate head dress. Yet another showed a dark stony crag looming over palm trees and a beach. Occasional words were written in the Southern tongue, but most of the handwriting was in a language unfamiliar to Harker.

Harker closed the book and sat staring at the cover.

"To think..." said Harker quietly. "All these years and this ship is still revealing secrets."

"As it should. A ship that's seen as much water as the *Third Wind*... well... she should have secrets." Toth sat backed and smiled broadly. "Congratulations, Harker. We did it. By the gods, we've done the impossible. We'll hand this over to the Rakers. You'll be released. And I'll be paid. Let us toast to our success and-"

Toth was cut off as the ship suddenly shook with a thunderous boom.

Both men sat up abruptly in the chairs. The ship shook again, this time more violently. The deck rolled beneath their feet.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," said Toth. He wrapped the journal in its leather swaddling and thrust it into his satchel. The ship shook again and they heard the splintering of wood. The

room pitched violently to the other side. Stacks of books toppled and slide across the floor. Harker and Toth both gripped the desk edges as the ship swung back and righted itself.

“Quickly, Harker, outside. Get to the deck.”

A moment later Harker and Toth burst through the door and out onto the ship’s deck. A fierce wind was whipping through the rigging and carrying stinging rain drops with it. Huge waves slammed into the side of the ship causing the deck to pitch violently.

Harker gazed up in shock at the night sky, his mind reeling as it tried to grasp what he was seeing.

“My god!”

The stars were falling from the sky. Dozens of them streaking from the sky and plummeting into the crashing waves. Harker followed the fiery plummet of the nearest. Like some monstrous crystalline jewel, the thing was alit from within by radiant flame. The giant crystal, as big as the ship, slammed into the sea off the starboard bow. The impact threw a curtain of water sweeping across the deck which knocked both men off their feet.

Harker, dazed and coughing, shook the salty spray from his eyes and turned to Toth.

“What’s happening?” yelled Harker, struggling to be heard above the roaring wind and crashing waves. Harker struggled to his feet and helped Toth stand up on the pitching deck.

“External perception crossing the Veil”, Toth yelled back. “Something’s happening in the Hold.”

“What?”

“No time to explain. We need to go!” yelled Toth. “Right now!” Toth fumbled with his satchel and pulled out the Eye of Ishkol. “It’s time to go home.” Toth sat down on the deck and set the Eye in front of him where it hovered above the deck. He motioned for Harker to sit across from him. Harker did so. Toth began chanting those slippery words of magic as he gazed into the stone. As Toth worked his magic, Harker looked up at the night sky as more of the fabulous star jewels plummeted down. A large one was hurtling directly toward them.

Ilba ton bree, chanted Toth. The Eye began to open up and the crystal within began to glow.

Harker kept his eyes locked on the falling star.

“Toth?”

Ashkara nix pulu, chanted Toth.

Harker’s eyes widened in alarm as the crystal star bore down on him, filling his field of vision.

Mar kali bon

“Toth!!”

A moment later the crystal star hit. It ripped through the bow of the ship obliterating the front half of the vessel in an explosion of splintered wood and salty spray. The ship bucked violently and Harker was shot into the air. The world spun dizzily as he flailed his arms, hoping to grab something, anything. A blinding flash of blue light was followed by a gut wrenching lurch in gravity and Harker found himself catapulted in a new direction by some unseen force. All sense of direction was gone and he could no longer see the ship. Starry sky and dark waves blurred together into a spinning vortex and he flew into a gaping starless void.

With a bone jarring impact, reality suddenly snapped back into focus. Harker’s heart thundered in his chest as his eyes quickly darted about. He was back in the cellar, still seated at the table. His clothes were completely dry. Toth was still seating across from him and, between the two men, the Eye of Ishkol hovered quietly above the center of the table, still glowing brightly.

Harker was about to launch a dozen questions at his companion when a clap of thunder shook the room. The table rattled on the stone floor. An explosion thundered distantly in some nearby part of the building followed by the sounds of shattering wood and glass. Heavy booted feet were running nearby and rapidly approached. Ringing blades mixed with bellowed commands and panicked cries.

Harker scrambled to his feet and knelt down beside the table, putting it between him and the double doors of the cellar. Toth grabbed the Eye and crouched down behind the table next to Harker. A moment later, the double doors burst open. A dozen men, swords flashing, retreated down the stairs and into the cellar as an equal number pressed the attack. Flaming torches and swinging lanterns suddenly flooded the dim room with light and threw a riot of shadows across the walls. The battling soldiers spread out across the cellar floor as they maneuvered to take advantage of the space.

“Harker,” whispered Toth urgently, his eyes never leaving the battle. “I think you should know that I have utterly exhausted my magic. I have no spells left to defend us.”

Harker had no words at the moment. He simply patted Toth on the shoulder reassuringly and returned his attention to the fray before them. It was a chaotic, confused swirl of fighting. Harker tried to make out who was fighting whom. He recognized one of the guards from earlier, the one who had kicked him. Fighting alongside him with several men, a few orcs and even a pair of saurian. The Sea Rakers, it seemed to Harker, were more pirates and misfits than guild. A motley crew they were, armed with wicked scimitars and mismatched armor and sporting jewels woven into their braids. Opposing them were soldiers wearing iron helms, heavy banded mail and wielding broadswords. They bore no

sigil or other mark that identified them as a guild, but Harker noticed they all wore matching armor of the finest quality and they each had on a dark grey cloak.

Harker suddenly saw a familiar face. Choeg, the Third Wind's blacksmith, stood head and shoulders above the crowd as he stepped through the double doors. He had the broad shoulders and massive muscles of his ogre lineage and a dozen old scars across his back spoke of a troubled life. He was wearing his warcoat and swinging a broad headed hammer, clearing large swaths with each swing. The hammerhead connected with a dreadlocked head and the man went down with the crunch of bone and a spray of blood. It seemed Choeg was fighting alongside those in the grey cloaks against Harker's captors. Choeg stepped over the body to engage another and as he moved aside Brakov leapt into the foray wielding a short, broad blade in each hand. Brakov's blades were a blur as he clashed with two opponents, a fat orc in patchwork leather and a tall bearded man in a cuirass of leather scale and swinging a battle notched great sword. Dodging the sweep of a scimitar, Brakov ripped one blade through the belly of the orc and spilt his intestines onto the floor. Brakov turned in time to parry a strike from the bearded man and staggered back under the force of the impact. The bearded one was fast and strong and had a greater reach, but Brakov matched him blow for blow. Their blades swung and met again and again in a ringing dance. Both men decorated the other with minor cuts. Jumping inside the reach of the great sword, Brakov struck with a rapid flurry of sword strokes, driving the bearded man back three steps. A crossbow bolt suddenly sank deep into Brakov's shoulder spinning him around. Taking advantage of his opponent's distraction, the bearded man swung his blade low and swept out Brakov's feet from beneath him. Brakov landed flat on his back with one blade pinned beneath him. Standing over Brakov, the man's thick beard split in a broad smile as he raised his sword up for the killing stroke.

A deafening thunderclap sounded as a bolt of blue lightning flew through the double doors and struck the bearded man in the chest, hurling him across the chamber. His body bowled over a wine rack, scattering bottles across the floor, and came to rest not ten feet from Harker. His broken sword clattered to the floor within arm's reach. The smell of burnt flesh filled Harker's nostrils. A gaping smoldering hole was all that remained of the man's chest.

Through the double doors strode Callister. He held before him a pair of matching blades. Wisps of lightning flickered along the length of the two blades and arced between them. Sear and Sunder, the storm blades of Trisark. Harker had seen these twin blades used before, but he had never been so close to the battle. Callister leapt into the action, sinking his blade into one man's gut while parrying a scimitar strike from another. Bring the twin blades up together again before him, he unleashed another blast of lightning which sent another victim hurtling across the room.

A flicker of movement to the side of the chamber drew Harker's attention. Crouching behind a stack of crates was the silver haired officer that had argued with Toth

before. He had just finished cocking a crossbow and raised it to a firing position. Harker quickly snatched up a wine bottle off the floor and hurled it at the officer with all his might. The bottle shattered on a shoulder pad and the officer flinched in surprise. The crossbow bolt flew high, arcing over the battle and embedding itself in the oak beams above. Angrily the officer turned to glare at Harker. Harker saw that the man was wounded - a deep gash in his side. All sense of his earlier composure was gone. His cold eyes held only bloodlust and madness, the eyes of a cornered animal.

The officer tore a short sword free from its scabbard and charged Harker. Harker looked about for a weapon and his eyes fell upon the charred body on the floor and the broken sword next to it. Harker picked up the sword just in time to clumsily parry the officer's first stroke. Even missing half its length, the great sword was heavy and felt unwieldy in Harker's hand. The officer swung again and again. Harker stumbled backward under the furious onslaught, his arm numb from the impacts. He heard Toth behind him, scrambling to get out of the way. Harker stumbled over a wine bottle and fell backwards to the floor. The officer leapt forward ready to skewer his opponent, but halted. His gaze fell on Toth, cowering behind a barrel and clutching his satchel protectively to his chest.

"You!" barked the man. His eyes lowered to the satchel. "The book."

Toth said nothing but gripped the satchel tighter.

"You have it, don't you!" screeched the man. "Give it to me now!"

"It seems the Raker guild has more pressing problems at the moment," replied Toth, nodding his head toward the raging battle. "I think I'll keep the book in lieu of my payment."

The man howled in anger and lunged forward grabbing the satchel with one hand. Toth and the officer struggled for the satchel, back and forth, until cloth and stitching suddenly ripped apart. Jars, boxes, plates, bottles, pots, pans, glass ware, books, scrolls and a hundred other trinkets suddenly burst forth and came crashing to the floor. Far more than could have possibly fit in the small satchel suddenly filled the floor between them. The officer fell to his hands and knees and started pawing frantically through the books.

Harker struggled to his feet, picked up his sword and swung with every bit of strength he had left. The flat of the blade smacked into the man's skull and he slumped forward, unconscious, into the pile.

Harker, utterly spent and panting heavily from the fight, stood staring down at his opponent. As his pounding heart began to subside, Harker slowly became aware that the sounds of fighting were gone and men were yelling at each other to drop their weapons. The clatter of steel roused him and he and Toth looked across the chamber to see the aftermath of the battle. Choeg, Callister, Brakov and Forsythe were standing with seven of the grey cloaked soldiers. Only three opponents, two dreadlocked humans and a bald orc,

were on their feet and they were now unarmed and surrounded. The grey cloaks quickly set to binding the hands of their three prisoners.

“Captain” Harker called out.

All eyes shifted to Harker.

“Mr. Kaedin. Well, I guess this was the right place after all,” said Callister, glancing at Brakov.

Harker stepped forward into the center of the chamber to join them. “Brakov, Forsythe, Choeg... I am so glad to see you.”

Forsythe clasped hands with Harker. “Harker, I am so relieved to see you alive. Are you injured? Are you alright? I have a potent healing salve if you have any-“

“Stop mothering him, wizard,” barked Brakov, “he’s fine.”

Toth slowly emerged from the shadows at the edge of the room and cautiously approached the group.

Brakov and Callister raised their blade as one and Toth stopped suddenly, finding two sword tips at his throat. Standing before the group of armed men, Toth suddenly seemed very short.

“Who’s this little fellow?” asked Callister.

Harker stepped forward. “A freelance wizard hired for his magic,” said Harker, stepping forward. “But he is not a member of the guild that captured me.”

Brakov sniffed. “Smells of orcish sorcery. The servant of my enemy is my enemy, as they say in Vorrik. Captain, even bound and gagged, he’s too dangerous to let live. Open his throat and be done with it. Before he casts a spell.”

“No!” Harker reached out and carefully pushed both sword tips away from Toth’s throat. “Captain, I vouch for this man. He is no threat to us and I would see no harm done to him.”

Toth nodded to Harker. “Thank you, my boy.”

Harker smiled. “You saved me from mistreatment and now I can do the same for you.”

Brakov sheathed his sword, but kept a wary eye on Toth.

“You’re our prisoner,” said Callister, “until I say otherwise. What’s your name?”

“Toth.”

“If my first officer vouches for you, it’s good enough for me. You’ll be treated fairly. I expect no trouble in return. At the first hint of a spell, though, I let that one,” Callister nodded toward Brakov, “take your hands off. Are we clear?”

Toth looked askance at Brakov who merely smiled at him. "I'll cast no spells without your leave, captain."

"You sure you want the trouble of a wizard captive, captain?"

Callister shrugged and sheathed his sword. "We'll hang on to him for a while. Could be useful as a hostage or bargaining chip. Bind his hands."

As Choeg and Brakov bound his wrists with strips of leather cord, Toth smiled weakly at Harker. "It seems our roles are now reversed."

The heavy tramp of boots caused all to turn. Harkune, leading several more grey cloaked soldiers, came down the stairs. Harkune wiped blood off his blade and sheathed it.

"Killing is thirsty work. Perhaps we should tap one of these barrels. Gregor, see if you can find some decent beer down here."

A sweaty looking stout man in a grey cloak saluted. "Aye sire."

"So is this the missing whelp?" asked Harkune with a nod toward Harker.

"This is Harker Kaedin, my first officer. Harker, this is Rendyll Harkune, Captain of the Guard at House Aldrayun. It was House Aldrayun that helped us find and rescue you."

Harkune surveyed the bodies on the ground. "We have nineteen prisoners – mostly common laborers, a few womenfolk and two stable boys, locked up in a cellar on the far end. With these three and him" Harkune gestured to Toth "that makes twenty three."

"The others you can do with as you see fit, but since my first officer has made a prisoner of this wizard, he's ours."

"Take him if you like, then. I've no interest in a wizard."

"It's a shame we didn't take an officer alive," said Brakov casting an eye over the bodies on the floor.

"Brakov, Captain... if it's an officer you want, we have one. Over here." Brakov followed Harker. They picked their way across the battle strewn floor and over to the trestle table. Behind the stack of barrels they saw the prone figure in blue.

"He's a Sea Raker, all right. A senior officer." Brakov nodded approvingly. "He'll do."

As Brakov slung the unconscious officer over a shoulder and rejoined the group, Callister turned on Toth.

"Alright, wizard, why did the Sea Rakers capture my first officer?"

"It's rather a long story."

“We’ve sacked the Stour Hold and it’ll be hours before anyone discovers this. Time we have. So let us take a moment and discuss what the Raker’s were up to. I have been told that the Rakers kidnapped my first officer to question him about something. They’re looking for a jewel?”

Harker and Toth exchanged glances.

“Uh, no actually.”

“We were looking for this.” Harker reached into Toth’s torn satchel and pulled the journal out. He carefully unwrapped it from its leather wrappings and handed it to Callister.

Peering over Callister’s shoulder, Harkune read the title aloud. “The Jewel of the Wild Sea... what is this?”

“To put it briefly... this is a journal penned by Hanold Sayer... the former captain of the Third Wind. He hid it aboard the ship. We, uh, retrieved it... with magic.”

“We?” asked Brakov skeptically.

“Um,” Harker suddenly felt many questioning eyes on him. “Toth and I.”

“All of this trouble was for a book?” asked Brakov shaking his head.

Harkune regarded the book with wonder. “If the Sea Rakers wanted this book that badly, it must have something in it worthwhile... perhaps something that would affect the spice crystal trade. If that’s so, it could be a useful tool in our bid against House Dragari.”

“Well,” said Callister, snapping the book shut suddenly. “Toth is my prisoner. So, I’ll be taking this.”

“You’d have not sacked the Stour Hold without our help. Lord Aldrayun will want this book.”

“Lucky for me, I don’t work for Lord Aldrayun. I promised to play a game for your guild and I accept whatever adventures that may come of that. I made no such promises about the loot along the way.”

“I’ll be taking that book for House Aldrayun... one way or another.”

“I think not. My prisoner, my book.”

Harkune drew his sword slowly, deliberately. Instantly, Brakov and Choeg come up behind Callister with their weapons ready.

“Aldrayun!” bellowed Harkune. As one, every grey cloaked soldier drew his sword and pointed it at Callister. Harker rolled his eyes.

“Gentlemen!” a voice cut through the noise. At the top of the stairs stood Samirra, flanked by four more grey cloaked soldiers. She slinked down the stairs slowly with a playful smile. Her eyes swept the men across the room.

“We are allies now so stop this petty posturing. There’s plenty of loot to be had here and we should not fight over the book.” She came to stand before Harkune and Callister. “It seems to me we should examine this book, together, as allies. Then perhaps we will be in a better position to decide what to do with it.”

“Do what you will,” said Callister, not taking his eyes off Harkune. “I’ve already decided.”

“I have no argument if you wish to claim it,” said Samirra softly. “As you said... your first officer, your prisoner... your book. But after we’ve had a chance to review it together, House Aldrayun will make a very generous offer if you’d be willing to sell it. Come, Captain, you don’t really need it and we really do. So... would you be willing to sell it for a profit?”

“If the price is right.”

“You see, Harkune, he can be reasonable. There’s no need for hostility. Now, why don’t you set the lads to cleaning up this mess.”

Harkune barked a few orders and the soldiers got to work. As the soldiers moved about the room, clearing bodies and searching the chamber, Samirra turned her attention to Toth.

“What shall we do with this one?”

“We...” said Callister, emphasizing the word, “are going to question this one and get to the bottom of why my officer was taken.”

“He’s not to be harmed,” said Harker.

“Of course, we won’t harm him,” Forsythe assured him.

“No more than necessary,” added Brakov. Forsythe scowled.

Callister reached out and grabbed hold of Toth’s collar and pulled him close til they were almost nose to nose. “You answer our questions, wizard, and no harm will come to you. Understand?”

“I understand.”

“We would like to be included in this discussion, captain,” said Samirra. “It would be useful to know what other guilds may be involved and what plots are in play. Why don’t you come back to House Aldrayun. Baths, hot food, feather beds – our accommodations would be much more comfortable than a ship.”

“Well, Harker. You’ve had the worst of it,” said Callister. “What do you say? Are you anxious to get back to the ship or shall we enjoy some hospitality while we look at this book of yours.”

“Well, I- I’m not-”

“I have three beautiful slave girls,” purred Samirra “who will bathe you and scrub you clean from head to toe.”

“A bath sounds nice,” said Harker, nodding.

“Wonderful!” Samirra turned to one of her soldiers. A short man, with curly red hair. “Jespin, run ahead and have the House make preparations for six guests.”

“Yes, m’Lady,” said the soldier and ran off.

“Let us finish up here and be off as well,” said Samirra.

CHAPTER 6

The morning sun was up and flooding in the windows of the great hall of House Aldrayun as Callister and Brakov hungrily devoured their meal. Each had a trencher of bread loaded with charred chicken meat and sweet onions and they washed it down with mugs of ale. They sat at an enormous oak table big enough to seat twelve. The room about them was an elaborately decorated dining hall on the upper floor of House Aldrayun. Servants came and went bringing more food and refilling their mugs.

Across from them sat Samirra in a white gown sipping a glass of wine and listening to the two men share tales of their exploits together.

Forsythe sat near one end of the table studying the Eye of Ishkol. He had gathered Toth's spilled possessions from the cellar floor and had even picked up the torn satchel. Brakov had teased him about that, but Forsythe had pointed out several valuable alchemical and magical items. As soon as he had found the Eye, he had become lost in studying it.

Choeg had asked to be excused. He felt uncomfortable surrounded by such luxury. He had asked permission to visit their smithy and lend a hand there. Callister had agreed thinking that a full blooded ogre might make the nobles and officers of the house uncomfortable.

As he ate, Callister cast a curious eye about the hall. House Aldrayun was not the grandest guild in the Alliance, nor the wealthiest. It was, none the less, impressive. Immense sandstone curtain walls and four high towers had greeted his eyes when they arrived earlier this morning. Callister had counted no less than thirty burgundy clad soldiers arrayed about the battlements and courtyard when they had been led to this hall. It seemed House Aldrayun was a formidable house and, to Callister it seemed, a worthy ally. Even now, the ringing of swords sounded out in the practice yard outside the window.

On the wall was a large tapestry bearing the sigil of House Aldrayun... three white stars on a field of burgundy. Now that the battle was ended and the need of discretion was past, the guards had donned their normal tunics and Callister suddenly found the Aldrayun sigil everywhere – tapestries, tunics, fluttering flags and even engraved on the copper flagon next to him.

“Well Captain,” said Samirra, rousing Callister from his thoughts, “this day has turned out well for you. You’ve obtained a book of lore which House Aldrayun would very much like to buy from you.”

“We’ve got two prisoners who we can bargain with if the Rakers come after us,” said Brakov.

“And this enchanted jewel the wizard was carrying,” added Forsythe. “Which I’d like to keep, Captain.”

“Fools and trinkets, all of it,” scoffed Callister. “All that matters is Harker. Now that we’ve rescued him, we can get things on the ship back to normal.”

As if summoned by the mention of his name, the curtains at the far wall parted and in walked Harker Kaedin looking very different than he had two hours before. Fresh from his bath, his black curls were still damp and he was cleaned and perfumed. He now wore a long doublet of black velvet, matching hose and soft leather boots – all of which fit him quite well.

“How was your bath?” asked Callister smiling. Harker blushed and said nothing. Brakov chuckled.

“Was our healer able to ease your pains?” asked Samirra.

“Oh yes, I’m feeling much better. Thank you. You’ve been most kind.”

“Come, have some food,” ordered Callister, “and let us take a look at your book.” Callister pulled out the journal. Before he could unwrap it from its leathers, the tramp of heavy boots drew the attention of all.

The curtains parted again and in strode Captain Harkune. Behind him came a noble lord and lady, arm in arm, and behind them a quartet of armed guards and a pair of servants. The lady’s gown was of shimmering goldweave and radiant emeralds flashed at her pale throat which matched her bright green eyes. Her auburn hair was done up and pinned by a gold and emerald barrette. The lord was a somber looking, elderly man dressed in a high collared long coat over a silk shirt and a half skirt belted from the trousers as was the fashion that year among the nobles. He had pale blue eyes, an aquiline nose and a greying beard that was forked into two braids.

Everyone at the table stood hastily.

“Captain Callister Draabyn of the merchant ship *Third Wind*,” said Harkune formally. “May I introduce Lord Samrik Aldrayun of Guild House Aldrayun and his wife, Lady Merisa Aldrayun.”

“M’lord,” said Callister with a bow, “this is Harker Kaedin, my first officer, Korlo Brakov, my master-at-arms and Chaffa Forsythe, my ship’s mage.”

The lord and lady smiled politely and inclined their heads, before assuming the seats at the ends of the table. As everyone settled at the table, the four guards took up positions at the walls while servants rushed to fill wine glasses and plates.

“Captain,” said Lord Aldrayun in a raspy voice. “I am pleased that we were able to help you rescue your first officer and even more pleased that you have agreed to help us with our game. Tell me... have you ever played Kalgamorra before?”

Samirra cleared her throat. “My lord, pardon my interruption, but I believe we have a more pressing matter at hand.”

“Yes?”

“Harker here was kidnapped by the Sea Rakers for reasons that may relate to the spice crystal contract. House Dragari is not our only problem. The Rakers are up to something and we need to know what it is. We returned from the Stour Hold with two prisoners who may be able to shed some light on this matter.”

“I’d like to hear what they have to say as well,” added Callister. “Starting with the wizard.”

“Very well,” said Lord Aldrayun. “Captain Harkune, have the wizard brought in.”

Toth arrived, minutes later, surrounded by four guards. He was manacled and gagged.

“Are these chains really necessary?” asking Harker, jumping to his feet and walking to Toth. “Captain, can we please get these off him?”

“Absolutely.” Callister snapped his fingers at the Aldrayun soldiers impatiently. “You heard the man. Get those chains off him.” The soldiers glanced at Harkune who gave a nod. Once the gag and chains were off, Harker led Toth to the table, sat him down and began heaping food onto a plate for him. Toth rubbed his sore wrists.

“Again, my thanks, Harker.”

“Alright,” said Callister. “Enough foreplay. Let’s have the whole story, Harker. What exactly happened in the Stour Hold?”

Harker and Toth proceeded to tell his tale from his capture to waking up in the cellar to their adventures in the dream world of Toth’s magic. They took turns, back and forth, filling in details. The others listened intently.

“and that’s when the battle spilled into the cellar and... you found us.” When Harker had finished, there was a pensive silence as each considered what had been said.

“All this trouble,” Brakov growled “for a book.”

“Indeed,” said Samirra looking at Lord Aldrayun, “a kidnapping, a foreign wizard, a powerful spell. All to acquire this one book.”

Lord Aldrayun leaned forward. "Let us see this book."

Callister unwrapped the book from its leathers. The others stood and crowded around, all wanting to get a better look. The leather creaked as Callister opened the cover. One by one he turned the yellow pages. There were maps of every kind, charts, tables, symbols and glyphs, navigational notes, diagrams and dozens of sketches depicting plants, animals and natives. There were also hundreds of pages crowded with a strange flowing script.

"Judging by some of the maps, it clearly has something to do with Borakar, but most of this seems unintelligible," said Lord Aldrayun, "Does anyone recognize this language?"

"No," said Harker

"No," said Callister and Brakov.

"I do not," said Samirra.

"Nor I," said Harkune.

"Yes," said Forsythe. All eyes turned to him. "I recognize it. We ran into this perhaps six years ago, Captain, when we were visiting Seven Kegs Floating."

"Do tell."

"They were having a small celebration that week. Do you remember that old Myrian sea gypsy telling tales to the children?"

"Not a bit," replied Callister.

"Well, you were drunk with Bowden most of that week." said Brakov.

Callister shrugged. "What of the sea gypsy?"

"She had a number of scrolls with her – stories, spells, histories. They were written in a language that looked very similar to this. I recognize several of the letters and those accent marks seem familiar as well. I think this language might be Juema, the language of the sea gypsies. However," he said, his fingertip dancing across the page, "these letters here are orcish and these letters are definitely Drakkellin, but the words are gibberish. And I have no idea what this bit is over here."

"What does that mean?" asked Samirra.

Forsythe sat back and let out a heavy sigh. "I think Captain Sayper may have created his own cipher."

"The paranoid bastard," grumbled Brakov.

"I have no spell that will translate this, Captain," said Forsythe. "If this truly was a creation of Sayper and he alone understood it, then the code died with him."

“Not necessarily. He may have shared it with his officers,” said Callister. He and Brakov exchanged glances.

“What of the widowed wife who received the letter?” asked Harker. “Is it possible she might know this code? He sent the letters and clues to her... perhaps he meant for her to retrieve the book. Perhaps she can read this code.”

“Rather than speculate,” said Lord Aldrayun, “let us bring in the captured Raker officer and see what insights he might offer.”

A few moments later, four guards came in with the captured Sea Raker officer in chains. His blue and silver tunic was stained with blood and dirt. His hair was matted with dried blood and he had a gash on the side of his head where Harker had struck him with the sword. The officer noticed Toth sitting next to Harker with a plate full of food before him. A look of disgust swept over his face. “How is it he’s unbound and fed while I stand here in chains?”

“He’s our prisoner,” said Harker, smugly. “And how we treat him is our business.” The officer bristled at that. Toth smiled at Harker’s private joke.

“It is time for you to share what you know,” said Samirra. “I want you start by telling us all about the Sea Raker’s smuggling of the spice crystals. Tell us everything.”

“And how did the Sea Raker’s learn about this journal?” added Harkune.

“I am Commander Tagrin, second in command at the Stour Hold and a lord member of a Drakkellian guild.” He smiled a confident, defiant smile. “I have taken an oath not to betray my guild and I will not. I see no reason to answer your questions.”

“Really...” said Callister, amused.

“I do not care what you threaten me with. I will not speak.”

“Brakov” said Callister.

Brakov’s chair scraped on the floor as he stood. His face was stone, his eyes on the Raker officer. He walked over to Tagrin slowly and put one hand on his shoulder. Brakov leaned in close and began whispering in the man’s ear. The defiant smile slowly drained from Tagrin’s face. He looked aghast at Brakov who only folded his arms and stared back at him. Tagrin turned back to everyone at the table.

“So the Rakers have been smuggling spice crystals into the city for more than a year,” began Tagrin. Brakov grunted at him and returned to his seat.

“Turning a good profit too,” continued Tagrin. “We had problems with the natives and the wildlife. Lost men on every visit to the island. But we captured a few natives, learned some of their language and discovered some interest things... like why they hate outsiders so much. It seems they had trouble with a ship some twenty years ago. This ship caused all manner of trouble for them. There are several tribes on the island and the captain

managed to anger just about all of them. He killed a chieftain's son of one tribe, kidnapped three of the chieftain's wives from another tribe. The various tribes grew to hate him. But this captain also managed to stay alive and spent almost two years in and around Borakar. He explored the entire island, made detailed maps, learned the language of the natives and learned how to evade the more dangerous predators."

"Let me guess... the Dagger's Point captained by Hanold Sayper."

Tagrin nodded.

Callister held up the book. "And this journal?"

"When we learned the Dagger's Point had spent almost two years on Borakar, we made certain inquiries. Captain Sayper had several wives in different ports, but only one inherited his fortune upon his death... a well-bred lady in Freeport."

"And you paid her a visit, no doubt," prompted Harkune.

"We did. The Sea Rakers sent a few men to Freeport to see the woman. The ship itself went to the Sea Guild of Freeport, but Sayper's personal belongings went to his wife. The hope was that Sayper might have made a map of Borakar. Our men in Freeport ransacked her house. There was no map. However, there were letters that spoke of a journal contained everything he had learned on the island in his two years there. Every secret of Borakar is in that book. The last letter stated that the journal was hidden aboard the Dagger's Point. Our guild masters decided that they must possess it."

"And what of the wife?" asked Samirra.

"What?"

"Sayper's widow in Freeport. What happened to her?"

"She put a fight when they come to her house." Tagrin said, shrugging. "They killed her."

"You went after the Dagger's Point," said Brakov.

"We did."

Callister turned and addressed Lord and Lady Aldrayun. "The Freeport Sea Guild sold the Dagger's Point to a sea captain named Janok Parl. He renamed it the Third Wind, but shortly thereafter he lost the ship to me in a high stakes games of raljath."

"Once we knew that the Dagger's Point and the Third Wind were, in fact, the same ship, we had our target. There it was, floating in the harbor of Freeport. Our men in Freeport knew the journal was hidden on board somewhere, but they couldn't get at it. That's when our guild masters decided to bring in... help."

Tagrin stared at Toth who shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "It was at this point that they hired me," said Toth quietly. "Their guild wizard is an acquaintance. He

knew that I possessed magic which could help. They only told me that they wanted to be able to search a ship without boarding it and that they could provide someone who was intimately familiar with the ship.”

“The Sea Rakers,” said Tagrin “had planned on kidnapping Harker in Freeport during the Sea Festival. By the time Toth arrived in Freeport, you had already set sail. Indeed, it was in the middle of the Sea Festival that the Third Wind left harbor abruptly, leaving chaos in its wake. The Offering was in shambles after you left.”

Callister and Brakov lifted their mugs together in a toast, smiling. “Well done.”
“And you, sir.”

“It took several days, but our men eventually arranged transport on a ship. Fortunately for us, Toth was able to track you with his magic and was able to send word to us here in Drakkel. You stopped in Asylum and we might have caught up to you there... had you stayed.”

“Yes, well, we are a merchant ship. We picked up a job there. A cargo heading to Drakkel and they paid extra for a quick delivery.”

“Well, a fortunate coincidence for us as the Sea Rakers are strongest in Drakkel. Toth sent word ahead that you were heading to Drakkel. We have many men here. Preparations were made and when the Third Wind arrived in port, we were ready to strike. We kidnapped Harker as soon as he stepped off the ship alone. Toth and our men arrived in port three days later.”

“Well... that brings us full circle,” said Harkune.

“Captain Harkune” said Lord Aldrayun. “Have these two men taken back to their cells. Keep them separated. We’ll deal with them later.”

“Yes m’lord.”

Samirra waited for the soldiers to march the two prisoners out of the room before she spoke. “The Sea Rakers have not actually seen the contents of the journal. They don’t know that it’s written in code.”

“But their reasons for wanting the journal are valid,” stated Lord Aldrayun. “Maps, sketches, charts... all pertaining to Borakar. We have before us a vast treasure trove of lore on the island and its inhabitants.”

“Captain Draabyn, we are still very interested in the information in this book and we will pay handsomely to obtain it,” said Samirra. “But we need to find a way to decipher this code.”

“How much are we talking?”

Samirra looked to Lord Aldrayun and gave a slight nod. Lord Aldrayun folded his hands on his stomach. "I would be willing to pay one thousand gold for the means to read this book and all its contents."

"Three thousand" said Callister.

"Two thousand," replied Samirra, "and we get possession of the book." She looked to Lord Aldrayun who nodded.

"Done."

"You know someone who can translate this?" asked Samirra.

Callister exchanged glances with Brakov. "We have someone in mind."

CHAPTER 7

The Great Bazaar of Drakkel was the very heart of the city and drew thousands each day to buy, to sell, to haggle and to drink in life. Hundreds of tents, shacks and small makeshift booths were crowded along the walkways of the three great tiers of the central bazaar. The sounds of ten thousand people haggling, laughing and crying their wares were mixed with the snorts and bellows of animals, the clash of swords in practice matches, the sound of minstrels singing bawdy tales, the ring of blacksmith's hammers and the voices of criers announcing the latest news.

Squeezed between a butcher's tent and an old woman selling wicker baskets was a small cart cluttered with bottles, jars, bowls and pouches. A number of colorful potted plants were scattered about the cart. A large tapestry on a wooden pole stuck in the ground depicted a snake wrapped around a crystal flask flanked by a leaf and berry. Beneath the tapestry, a goblin in a stained apron sat on a tall chair chopping a bloated purple root on a wooden cutting board and happily chattering to himself. His tiny green fingers moved deftly as the root was skinned and sliced. From behind strands of long tangled hair, he occasionally glanced at the foot traffic passing by his cart.

A shadow fell across the cutting board.

"You wanna buy some blackroot?" said the goblin, still chopping. "Very fresh."

"Krummal."

The goblin looked up at the sound of his name. His tiny eyes narrowed suspiciously, then widened in recognition. Callister Draabyn towered over the little goblin, returning the gaze.

"Ah, crazy tattoo man." Krummal smiled revealing tiny crooked yellow fangs. "You wanna buy Sweetspice? Redleaf? Fireweed? Rothka? Krummal have all the finest."

"Depends," said Callister.

"No depends. You buy two pouches fireweed. No, three. One copper each. Good stuff. Fresh."

"I'll buy ten pouches," Callister said, "if you can tell me where Hosrik is."

The little goblin looked past Callister and saw three men and a fat, green skinned dwarf standing behind him. Towering above all of them was an ogre. He recognized Brakov, Forsythe, Harker and Choeg, but not the dwarf. He clucked at them curiously.

“We’ve been looking for him all morning,” said Callister, grabbing the goblin’s chin and bringing his attention back to him. “Hosrik’s not in his usual place in the Bazaar. He’s not in the side market squares. He’s not on Gambler’s Row. And he’s not here with you. So... where is he?”

The little goblin scratched an itch. “Why?”

“I need him.”

“Why?”

“I just need him.”

“Go away.”

“Choeg,” said Callister, gesturing for the big ogre to come forward, “pick up this cart and throw it across the street.”

Choeg bent down and lifted the cart. Bottles and jars rattled as the cart was hoisted seven feet in the air. The goblin let out a panicked yelp and began cursing up a storm in his native language. The others marveled at the ogre’s strength.

“Hold it for a second,” Callister told Choeg. Choeg held the cart.

“Are you going to play nice?”

“*Bakulish sata bon pootoo!*” yelled the little goblin. Toth chuckled.

“Did you catch that?” Callister asked Toth.

“Something about your mother and donkeys.”

“Alright, I talk with you,” yelled the goblin. “Put my cart down now! Then we talk!”

“Choeg. Down... gently.”

Choeg lowered the cart and set it back on the ground. The goblin immediately started sorting through the bottles and jars, putting them back in order and checking for damage. He continued to curse Callister in the goblin tongue.

Callister pulled out five silver coins and set them on the cutting board in a row between them. The goblin stopped fussing with his wares and stared wide eyed at the silver. “Now... these five here are enough to buy half your cart. Are you going to tell me where Hosrik is or shall I take my silver and go play with someone else?”

Krummal, eyes on the coins, licked his lips and reached out one skinny arm. In the blink of an eye, a blade flashed out and Callister brought the tip of his dagger down on the first coin. Krummal snatched back his hand. Brakov chuckled.

“Where is Hosrik?” asked Callister with slow deliberation. With the tip of his dagger, he slowly slid the silver coin toward Krummal.

Krummal gingerly took the coin. "Hosrik probably dead."

"What happened?" said Callister, pushing another coin forward with the dagger.

"Raljath. Cards and dice. Cards and dice. Always raljath." said Krummal, taking the second coin. He clucked with disdain and shook his head. "Big game. Big money. Big bet."

"Who was he playing against?"

Krummal looked about to make sure no one else was listening. "Grim Blade," he whispered.

"That doesn't sound good," said Harker.

"The Grim Blade of the Harrow Court?" Callister asked. Krummal nodded quickly with a fearful expression.

"What happened?" prompted Callister, sliding another coin forward.

"Hosrik cheat. Got caught," said Krummal, scooping up the third coin. "Bad dice. Funny dice. Not so funny for Hosrik."

Callister slide the fourth coin forward. "And?"

"They took him," said Krummal, wiping his greasy hands on his apron. "Down, down they go. To Hell's Market. To Harrow Court."

"When did this happen?" asked Callister, sliding the last coin forward.

"Yesterday."

"Thank you." Callister snatched up five pouches of various tobaccos and tossed one to each man. Callister started heading back along the edge of the bazaar, heading for an exit.

"We're not actually going down there, are we?" asked Harker.

"To Hell's Market?" replied Brakov. "Why not?"

"If that's where Hosrik is," said Callister, "then that's where we're going."

"You're sure this Hosrik can translate the book?" asked Forsythe. "I mean... is he worth the trouble?"

"Hosrik sailed with Sayper for near two decades. The last seven years as first officer. If anyone alive can read that book, I'm betting its Hosrik."

"Sir," said Harker, "I think you should know I've never actually set foot in Hell's Market."

"Don't worry, Harker," said Toth. "I visited there last year to fetch a rather rare herbal ingredient for a potion. It's not quite so bad as tavern gossip makes it."

Harker did not look convinced.

“Well then, this will be a treat for you Harker,” smiled Brakov. “Everyone should go to Hell at least once before they die.”

The six men made their way through the crowded market streets, moving from the great central bazaar to the smaller side markets and then finally into a dense maze of warehouses bordering the Market District. It was less crowded here, but Harker liked the look of these people less. Bloodshot eyes followed them suspiciously. Small groups of people stood in shadowy corners conducting trades out of sight of the main markets. Garbage and droppings littered the ground along with the occasional drunkard sleeping off his hangover. The stench of sour ale, sweat and urine hung in the musty air.

They went down a short flight of stairs, through a twisting back alley and stopped at a rusting iron door at the base of a broad stone wall.

Squatting beside the door was a legless beggar. He was filthy and his gaping smile revealed three rotten teeth and the stump of what had once been a tongue. He looked up at the men and shook a tin cup at them. Callister dropped a copper coin into the cup.

“This is the entrance to Hell’s Market?” asked Harker.

“One of several,” answered Brakov.

As they filed through the door, Forsythe paused and dropped three coppers into the man’s tin cup.

Inside the door, stairs led down to a broad winding hall. It took a few moments for Harker’s eyes to adjust to the dim light. Dozens of people were moving through the hall in both directions. Without hesitation, Callister merged in with the foot traffic and headed down the hall with the other five close behind. Harker could hear the murmur of many voices ahead. Several louder voices, hawking wares rose above the noise to be, in turn, drowned out by the sudden harsh clang of a bell.

The hall opened up and Harker found himself at the railing of a balcony overlooking an enormous tiered room. The geometry of the room was disconcerting. Walls, floors and ramps seemed to jam together in an architectural cacophony. Balconies jutted out from the tiers at many different levels and Harker could see other groups looking back at him across the void. Strung between the balconies were ropes and chains from which hung colorful banners and glowing lanterns. Harker could see that this great room was some sort of central hub and many hallways branched off from here leading to other chambers further on. He wondered how far back the maze went.

A tap on the shoulder ended his gawking and he found the others moving on. Harker hastened to join them. They headed stairs and ramps until they reached the bottom and headed out onto what appeared to be the main floor. Tents, stalls, booths, cages and

small buildings were crowded together haphazardly. Callister weaved his way through the chaos seeming to know his way.

Every imaginable race was here and Harker could not help but stare. There were the short statured sayune with their curly black hair and brightly colored clothes, armored orcs with bald heads and tusks, a pair of harothi saurians with striped reptilian scales and fierce war paint. As he gawked, an enormous grey skinned troll wearing a slave collar lumbered past. Harker saw a black furred mandalar wearing a decorative cloak over a leather jerkin. The two great horns sprouting from his bestial head were adorned with tiny bells that jingled with every heavy step. The mandalar snorted at Harker as he passed by and then began bellowing in a strange tongue at three dwarven traders. A pair of tall robed and hooded figures glided past with a soft tread. Their hands were bandaged, but Harker caught a glimpse of horribly diseased skin and warts within the depths of their hoods. He shuddered and moved on.

The main floor was a chaotic swirl of haggling and bravado with spectacles everywhere vying for the eye. Harker passed a booth selling a staggering variety of mismatched armor pieces, dented and scratched. He wondered if any of it was not stolen. Next to this was a weapon smith demonstrating the keen edge of a sword on a chained slave who was already bleeding from several deep cuts. Beyond this, a potion seller recounted the powers and blessings of the rare elixir that he held in his hand. Everywhere people were buying, selling, trading, haggling and arguing. To the sides of the main hall were unsavory types with dark aspects and roaming eyes. Down a shadowy side hall, Harker thought he heard screams of pain. He hastened to catch up with the others.

On the far side of the floor, they walked by some kind of tavern in which grim and battle scarred warriors were drinking flasks of blood. A big troll gnawed noisily on a fire charred piece of meat that looked suspiciously like a slender arm.

Beyond the tavern was a set of stairs leading up to a large balcony that held a commanding view of the entire room. Next to a massive door of iron and oak stood an ogre guard in heavy plate armor. He stood at attention, holding a ten foot iron spear.

"I need to see the Underking" declared Callister.

"Grubash taka ug mirren po" rumbled the guard in a deep voice.

"I don't care who he's entertaining. I'm Callister Draabyn. Perhaps you've heard of me. Now let me pass."

"Ax bar duwana tay" replied the ogre pointing back toward the great central chamber.

"The only place I'm going is through that door," said Callister, drawing both of his blades. "I can either go around you or I can go through you."

"Sarko bur tas!" bellowed the ogre.

“Kahuga dar zyot mugrak!” yelled Callister defiantly.

A shocked look of surprise swept the ogre’s face and then was quickly replaced by rage. The ogre roared and swung the spear. Callister ducked beneath the swing and leapt lightly back.

“What did you say to him?” said Harker, stepping back.

“I said his mother was a bloated whore.”

“Must you always do that?”

Brakov drew both his blades and advanced with Choeg close behind him. Forsythe and Toth retreated, talking urgently together.

Brakov crossed his blades and blocked a swing of the huge iron spear. The ogre bellowed in rage and took a step back toward the door as Callister, Brakov and Choeg began to surround him.

“You sure you want to kill their door man?” asked Brakov lunging low and swinging his blade. “Not the best way to start negotiations.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” answered Callister smiling. The ogre swung the iron spear around over his head and brought it crashing down, missing narrowly as Callister dodged to the side. In a flash, the spear was up, turned and parried a blow from Choeg. All four opponents circled each other warily.

The ogre bellowed again and raised the spear to chest height, parallel with the floor. It looked like he was about to bull rush Callister and push him off the edge of the balcony. Suddenly the ogre’s face went blank and the spear fell from nerveless fingers. The ogre stood up straight, arms dangling limply at his sides, his eyes gazing unseeing into the distance. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the ogre’s eyes suddenly focused on Callister.

“I think there’s been enough fighting,” said the ogre, “don’t you agree, Captain?”

The ogre looked back and forth between Callister and Brakov with an expectant smile. Callister and Brakov glanced at each other incredulously. They both warily lowered their blades. Choeg lowered his hammer.

“Captain,” said the ogre guard, smiling, “behind you.” He pointed.

Callister and Brakov turned. Standing halfway down the stairs were Forsythe and Toth, holding the Eye of Ishkol together. It was open and the gem within was glowing brightly blue.

“Raise your arms” said Forsythe. “Stand on one foot.”

The ogre guard raised his arms and stood on one foot.

“What deviltry is this?” muttered Brakov.

“No devils here” said Toth. “A simple trick for a simple mind.”

Callister sheathed both his blades, picked up the spear and handed it to the ogre guard, who took it. “Can you just have him open the door for us and stay out of our way?”

“Certainly Captain” said Toth. The ogre guard grasped the immense copper handle and hauled the door open. He then stood to the side and bowed deeply with an inviting sweep of his arm.

“That’ll do”, said Callister. “Let’s go.” He motioned for them to follow and he headed in. Harker, Brakov, Choeg followed.

“I’m interested in learning more about this device,” said Forsythe as the Eye of Ishkol closed up. ‘But perhaps you should hang on to it for now. We may have need of it. Better it be in hands that know how to use it.’ Forsythe handed the Eye to Toth. “Perhaps you will show me later.” Toth nodded.

Inside the door, a long ramp descended into an opulent chamber. The room was circular with massive stone columns supported a domed ceiling. Silk curtains and colorful tapestries adorned every wall and column. The room was dimly lit by lanterns and braziers and the edges of the room were lost in shadow. A sweet smoky perfumed haze hung in the air. A number of cushioned divans formed a central seating area. Directly across from the entrance ramp was a dais and throne. Several people of different races, dressed in fine clothes and jewels and other finery, reclined on the divans sipping from wine goblets and nibbling on morsels of food. Other people loitered at the edges of the room in small groups talking and eating. A musician sat on a cushion to one side strumming on a lyre. Servants in white came and went with platters of food. Standing in the shadows at the edge of the room stood a number of armed and armored orcish guards.

As they descended down into the chamber, Harker noted that the throne was occupied. Upon the throne sat a pale skinned creature with spindly limbs and great bloated belly. An ugly, misshapen head hung forward on a long, curved neck. He was dressed in gaudy silken robes and smoking an enormous ornate ivory pipe. He was surrounded by drinks and food and bowls of tobacco. Lying next to the throne was a hideous creature... it had the size and shape of a wolf, but it was completely skinless. Its corded muscles and black bones glistened wetly. A pair of leathery bat wings sprouted from its muscular black and an iron collar was about its neck. The hideous thing raised its head and sniffed curiously at the newcomers.

At the very center of the room, standing before the throne was a very fat man dressed in a long colorful longcoat, breeches and slippers. He wore an elaborate headdress and powdered makeup. His richly timbred voice rose and fell dramatically as he recited a poem to the creature on the throne.

With the heavy tramp of boots and the ring of metal, Callister and the rest came to a stop at the base of the ramp. The lords and ladies about the room stared at the newcomers

and began conversing excitedly amongst themselves in hushed tones. The colorfully dressed and powdered man before the throne turned to see what had drawn the attention of his audience. He wrinkled his nose at the six newcomers and looked askance at their dirty armor and dusty cloaks.

“Who comes unbidden to the Harrow Court and interrupts the business of the Underking?” asked the powdered man. His voice was gentle, but his eyes were not.

Callister stepped forward and spoke to the man on the throne. “Business, is it? Sounds like a pretty poetry reading.”

“One does not speak to the Underking. I am his chamberlain. I speak for him. And *you* are not welcome here,” said the chamberlain.

“And yet here I am,” said Callister with a wry smile. He spread his arms wide and gave a mocking bow.

The chamberlain drew himself up with all authority. “You stand before Lord Malgorun, the Underking, Master of Hell’s Market, Patriarch of Shadows and Ruler of All Beneath Drakkel. It would be wise to keep a respectful tongue or you shall have it removed. Now... my lord demands to know... who are you and why are you here?”

“I’m Callister Draabyn, captain of the Third Wind, and I’ll go soon enough. I’m looking for a man named Hosrik. I hear you might know where he is.”

“And why should we have him?” asked the chamberlain.

“I heard he was taken here by the one they call the Grim Blade.”

Several of the courtiers whispered to each other.

“And what if he did?” asked the chamberlain.

“Then I would have words with this Grim Blade and needn’t bother your master anymore.”

Without a word, two of the guards suddenly turned and left. They exited through a large door in the rear of the chamber.

“Grimblade shall attend us momentarily,” said the chamberlain with a practiced smile.

As they waited, the musician began to strum his lyre again and the lords and ladies of the Undercourt began to converse. Callister turned to his attention to the men behind him. He motioned for Forsythe and Toth to come close.

“If we need you to,” asked Callister quietly “can you two take that magic egg and ensorcell this Underking as you did the guard outside the door?”

“I do not think such wizardry would work here, Captain,” said Toth quietly. “Sitting on that throne there... that’s a sarthak. I’ve read of them, but never thought to

meet one. Magic is part of them as pumping blood is part of us, but all their magic is of the mind. They can bend a man's mind to servitude by sheer force of will. You see how he commands his servants with a thought... how he speaks through his chamberlain without a word? No, we'll not be able to sway his mind with magic, not even with the Eye of Ishkol, I fear. He has a strong mind and an iron grip on the minds of his servants and slaves. We'll have to find another way."

Harker glanced nervously at the figure on the throne. The sarthak lord puffed quietly on his pipe with an amused smile on his face. His eyes never left them. "If his mind magic is that strong" whispered Harker to the others "perhaps he can read minds as well."

"It's possible," replied Toth.

Brakov's brow furrowed. He was uncomfortable with magic and this smoky chamber practically stank of sorcery. "Are you suggesting that he's... you mean... right now?" Brakov gripped the handle of his sword for comfort.

"Can you use that egg thing to shield our minds from his sorcery?" asked Callister.

"I already am" said Toth with a smile, "from the moment we walked in here."

Callister grinned and glanced at Brakov. Brakov nodded approvingly. "I'm starting to like this little wizard."

A few moments later, the guards returned. Behind them came a hulking monstrosity of muscle and metal. He may have once been a man, but dark magic had clearly twisted him into something else. Metal plates were grafted to his body in a grotesquerie of living armor. A mouth full of yellow teeth was visible beneath a dented iron mask. Ragged scars decorated flesh here and there. Where his left hand should have been was only an ugly iron blade. Another blade swung from his belt.

The man marched in with one end of a chain clenched in his gauntleted right fist. The other end of the chain connected to the collar around the neck of an old man. The armored one dragged the old man forward with him.

Harker looked at the poor man being dragged forward by the collar. He was an old man with a grey beard. His arms were bound tightly behind him. His dirty clothes were ragged and stained with blood. He had several bruises and one eye was swollen shut.

"Captain Callister Draabyn of the Third Wind," said the chamberlain formerly "may I present Gremblad, Captain of the Underking's Guards, known to all as Grimblade."

Grimblade glared at Callister and the men behind him. Callister's eyes flitted to the old man in chains and back to Grimblade, returning the glare tenfold.

"What's dis now?" barked Grimblade in a harsh, ragged voice. "Some young pups from above... don't like my new dog. A lover boy of yours perhaps."

"I have no quarrel with you," said Callister quietly. "But I need him."

"He tried to cheat me at raljath," said Grimblade, "and for that I'm going to make him suffer." He gave the chain a vicious yank that brought Hosrik to his knees.

Forsythe took a step toward the old man, but Callister raised a hand to stay the young wizard.

"I'll buy his freedom," said Callister. "How much does he owe you?"

"Fifteen hundred gold lords," said Grimblade proudly. A soft gasp rippled through the court. The Underking leaned forward on his throne, seeming to enjoy watching this new drama unfold. The chamberlain stepped forward. "Do you have fifteen hundred gold with which to trade?" he asked.

"Not, uh, at the moment," Callister said, looking about the lords and ladies. Several of them averted their eyes. Callister turned back to the chamberlain and Grimblade. "We have healing potions. Several fine blades. Um..." Callister turned to his group. "What else do we have to trade?" Forsythe and Toth started rummaging through satchels.

"I'm not tradin' 'the ol' man," said Grimblade.

Brakov pulled one of his blades out. "I'll give him this, Captain. Pointy end first."

Grimblade dropped the chain and drew his sword. "Dance with me and it'll be the last thing you ever do."

"No, Brakov" said Callister. "Give me a minute to think."

"The Underking accepts your offer," announced the chamberlain.

"What offer?" asked Callister.

"The Underking wearies of poetry today and now bloodshed would amuse him. We shall decide this matter with a duel."

"No!" cried Grimblade. "He's my property by rights. I should not have to fight for what is already mine."

"Do you refuse to represent the Underking in combat?" asked the chamberlain smugly. Grimblade looked from the Underking to the guards standing around the room. He felt the eyes of the courtiers on him.

"I will fight" he mumbled. He handed the chain to a guard who led the old man off to the side of the room.

"Very well," said Callister, stepping forward. "I accept."

"Not you, Captain," said the chamberlain. He pointed to Brakov. "Your brash servant there. The one with blade and bravado unsheathed. We shall see him fight our Grimblade."

Callister glanced at Brakov. Brakov only shrugged.

“Let us have a game then,” cried the chamberlain and he clapped his hands together. “Grimblade’s slave is the prize. Whoever wins shall win possession of the man. And to make matters more interesting, let us have a match of board wrestling.”

“What?” said Callister.

“What was that?” asked Harker.

“Damn,” muttered Brakov.

“What’s board wrestling?” asked Toth.

“A delightful contest of martial skill that we learned of last year,” replied the chamberlain. “Supposedly from a distant realm.”

“Yes, we’re, uh... familiar with it,” said Callister.

The courtiers gathered their drinks and food and moved to the area between the pillars and the walls. Servants and guards came forward and moved the divans out of the way, positioning them in the gaps between the pillars. The center of the room was now an empty circle with nothing in it but a large rug.

The guards came forward with twine and round wooden poles and began to tie the two opponents to them. As the guards bound him, Brakov glared at Callister.

“This is your fault, you know,” grumbled Brakov.

“I know,” Callister replied.

“You just *had* to introduce Magrakian board wrestling to this city last time we were here, didn’t you?”

Callister shrugged. “How was I to know it would catch on?” he said with feigned innocence.

When the guards were finished, Brakov had a seven foot wooden pole placed over his shoulders with his arms strapped to the pole. He could not bend his elbows. The pole was four inches in diameter and the ends of it projected out past his fingers. Brakov realized it would be difficult to grasp anything should the need arise.

Grimblade was likewise bound, but Brakov noticed that the blade which served as a left hand projected out slightly beyond the end of his pole. Brakov made a mental note to be careful of that tip.

The courtiers, guards, servants and guests stood behind the divans and the safety of the stone pillars. The two opponents face each other across the rug. Callister and the others stood directly across from the throne and dais.

The chamberlain stepped forward into the center of the chamber, between the two combatants. “There are no rules in board wrestling,” said the chamberlain, addressing both

fighters. "No rules. So everything is fair game. You fight for the pleasure of the Underking so make it a good show. May the best man win." With that, he scampered back behind the safety of the pillars.

Grimblade and Brakov began slowly circling each other. Brakov watched his opponent's movement, the placement of his feet, his breathing. He was bigger than Brakov and looked strong, but how fast was he? Without warning Grimblade answered that question with a sudden charge. Brakov braced himself for the impact and their chests slammed together. Grimblade, having an advantage in size and weight, knocked Brakov back several feet. The guards around the room cheered for their captain.

Grimblade charged again, but Brakov was ready. He spun to the right and slammed the end of his board into Grimblade's ribs as he ran by. Wood crunched against metal as the pole struck an armored plate. Grimblade came to a stop, turned and laughed. Frustrated, Brakov fell back. He could see a dozen gaps between the plates where he could slip a blade, but nowhere he could drive this wooden pole for much effect.

They circled again, and a third time Grimblade charged. A moment before Grimblade was on him, Brakov threw himself backwards flat on to his back. At the same time, he tucked in both legs, knees against his chest and then kicked out with all his strength. His boots slammed into Grimblade's groin whose momentum doubled the impact. Grimblade folded, crumpled and fell backwards with a grunt of pain. Several of the lords and ladies cheered at the hit.

As Grimblade went down, Brakov rolled over backwards and scrambled to his feet. He quickly advanced on Grimblade who was prone on his back with his knees to his chest still groaning in pain. Their positions had reversed. Brakov moved to the right, turned and leapt up into the air over Grimblade. He brought the end of his wooden pole down with all of his weight behind it, driving the end into Grimblade's head. Wood struck the metal helm and splintered. Brakov hit the ground hard, but kept his feet under him. He staggered back panting and glanced over at his friends. Harker and Forsythe cheered.

"Good hit!" yelled Callister.

Like an armored phoenix, Grimblade rose to his feet with a roar of anger. His mask and helmet were badly dented and scratched, but still intact.

Grimblade and Brakov circled each other again, both panting and bruised. The courtiers were hooting and hollering with glee. The Underking continued to puff on his pipe, his eyes looked on the battle. Brakov kept his focus on his opponent while slowly moving closer to a stone pillar.

Grimblade shook his head like a bull and charged again, his guards cheering him on. He came roaring at full speed across the chamber. At the last second, Brakov turned and placed the end of his pole against the pillar. He lifted the other end up just in time to catch Grimblade squarely in the chest plate. The chest plate cracked with a loud snap as the pole

end splintered. A gasp went through the court as Grimblade staggered drunkenly back from the collision. Several shards of wood were impaled in his chest through a large crack in his armor. A trickle of blood dripped down the chest plate to the floor. Brakov advanced and spun, smashing the end of his pole into Grimblade's iron helm. The giant man went down with a ponderous crash. Brakov leaped up and stood on his chest.

"Do you yield?"

Brakov put a foot on the wooden splinters and pushed. Grimblade cried out.

"Do you yield?" bellowed Brakov, spittle flying from his mouth.

"I yield," gasped Grimblade, coughing blood up. "I yield."

The courtiers applauded, while the guards booed. Callister and the others were cheering. The Underking clapped with delight.

"Well done!" yelled Callister.

"Good tactics!" yelled Harker.

"Is he badly hurt?" asked Forsythe.

"I don't really care," said Callister walking into center of the room. Grimblade was knocked half senseless and seemed unable or unwilling to rise again. Callister stepped over him without sparing him a look and stopped before the throne. "Well?"

The chamberlain answered. "You may... take the slave."

The courtiers whispered quietly to each other as the guards undid the chain and collar about Hosrik's and led him forward. Without another word, Callister turned and lead his men back up the stairs and out of the Harrow Court leaving stunned silence behind him.

CHAPTER 8

No one talked as they made their way out of Hell's Market and back toward the upper city. Callister led the way, pushing through the crowds gruffly and never looking back. Brakov, Forsythe, Harker and Toth clustered around Hosrik protectively and Choeg brought up the rear. Callister didn't slow his pace until they came back out into the streets of the city markets. The sky had turned cloudy and the air was cooler than it had been when they went down.

Callister led them down the street and turned into a tavern which a large wooden sign named "The Cracked Mug Tavern." Ignoring the main dining room, he led them up and out on to a broad deck overlooking the street. It was spacious and provided a very good view of two streets crossing in a large plaza with a central fountain. A cool sea breeze stirred the banners hanging from the deck. They settled at a table in the corner away from the other patrons. A serving girl came over to them wiping her hands on her stained apron.

"Good afternoon, m'lords."

"Bring us bread, porridge, cheese and rashers of bacon for all of us," said Callister. "And last time I was here you had meat pie. Venison, I think it was."

"Still do. Finest in the city."

"Bring us out a whole pie," Callister said, rubbing his hands together. "And Mercian Stout to wash it down."

"Right away m'lord."

When the serving girl had left, Hosrik cast a suspicious eye at Callister. He seemed unsure what to expect.

"Hosrik" began Callister, noting the stare, "it's been a long time."

"Aye, more years'n I care to count." he said with a nod. Hosrik looked about at the faces of the men around the table. "Forgive a blunt question, Captain, but... am I your guest or your prisoner?"

"You're the man I just rescued from a slow and painful death."

"Of that I am sure."

Callister's face broke into a roguish grin. "Relax, old man. You're my guest and you'll have your freedom soon enough. But before you go wandering back to the gambling

dens, I want you to do something for me. You always were good with languages and you read as well as any. I have need of those skills.”

“You need something translated?”

“I do. And I suspect you may be the only man left who can read it,” Callister pulled out the journal and laid it on the table.

Hosrik stared at the old leather bound book and the worn title on the front. His look of confusion slowly blossomed into one of surprise. “Oh my... this brings back a few memories.” He reached out gingerly to touch it. “Now where did you get this?”

“You recognize it?” asked Callister, hopefully.

“Aye. I do. Captain Sayper’s journal on Borakar.”

Hosrik opened up the cover and began slowly paging through it.

“It’s written in code” said Forsythe. “A mix of several languages, but it makes no sense. Is this some cipher of his own making?”

“Aye. A cautious man he was always. Wouldn’t even trust me with the entire code. But I always understood it better than he knew.”

“So you can read this? You can translate this?”

“I can translate this for you.”

“I’m not the one you’re going to be translating it for. We’re working with one of the guilds. House Aldrayun. I’m sure we can arrange quarters for you there for a few days while you translate it. I want you to pen a copy in the Southern tongue for them. Will you do that for me?”

“Aye. For the man who just rescued me from said slow and painful death, I’d be happy to.”

“And I’d like you to make a second copy in the Southern tongue for me,” said Callister, noticing a scowl from Harker. “I think it would be good for us to have a copy in our library as well. House Aldrayun said they would pay to be able to read this. They never said we couldn’t have our own copy.”

“Seems your quite cozy with this House Aldrayun,” said Hosrik. “It’s never wise to entangle yourself in the affairs of guilds and politics. What’s all this about?”

Before Callister could answer, two barmaids came back with trays loaded with plates of food and pitchers of ale. Honeyed three grain loaves, wedges of smoked krell cheese, sizzling bacon and bowls of steaming porridge quickly filled the table. In front of Callister they set an enormous steaming venison and onion pie. Callister grabbed a knife and began carving the pie up into huge steaming wedges dripping with gravy and serving it to the others.

“Well,” began Callister, loading a slice onto Brakov’s plate, “it seems two guilds, House Aldrayun and House Dragari, are disputing over the right to import spice crystal from Borakar. And we got caught in the middle of it. There was a kidnapping, a daring rescue, a hidden treasure, a board wrestling match and a code that no one could read. So many adventures...” Callister paused to put a huge piece of venison pie on Choeg’s plate. Choeg smiled and fell on his pie with gusto.

“It all revolves around this book here which tells of Captain Sayper’s time on Borakar all those years ago. Seems he’s the reason the natives don’t like outsiders. We heard just bits and pieces, but it seems during his time there he murdered and raped and pillaged his way through the tribes. And *you* were there.” Callister fixed an accusing scowl on Hosrik. “You were his first officer at the time. So I’d like to know from you what happened. I’d like to hear the tales first hand.”

Hosrik was quiet and poked at an onion on his plate before answering. “I thought I was done with that accursed isle twenty years ago. But it seems our sins always come back to visit us. Captain... it’s a long tale, and grim. Not something I’ve ever spoken of.”

“I will have this tale out of you or, by Semorjon, I’ll give you back to the Underking. Now thrill us with your story, grim as it may be. We know Captain Sayper took the Dagger’s Point to Borakar and was there for near two years. The Dagger’s Point is now the Third Wind, *our* ship. So this makes it very much a matter that concerns us. Now... tell us what happened.”

Hosrik sighed heavily, seeming reluctant to begin. “Aye... Captain Sayper took the ship there. We spent months mapping out the island. Moored the ship in every harbor that island had, hunted game in every forest, took fish from the coast and rivers. We sent small groups of men in to explore the interior of the island. Lost men on several occasions to the great beasts of that island.”

“Great and terrible beasties,” said Brakov. “We’ve seen ‘em too.”

“Aye, but you’ve no idea... they come in all shapes and sizes. We lost a dozen men before we started to learn their ways and how to avoid them.” Hosrik stabbed at a wedge of cheese and chewed on it thoughtfully. “The Jewel of the Wild Sea. It’s an apt name for the book for that’s what the isle is. Never in all my days have I seen a land so beautiful.”

“Go on.”

“Well, after a few months of exploring and mapping, the Captain decided to make contact with the natives. The Puwala, they call themselves. Fifteen tribes living on Borakar and no one knew anything about them. We ran into them a few times. Traded with them. Fought with them. But eventually we picked up enough of the language that the Captain was able to befriend one of the chieftains. A great big toad of a man they called Poomta, Chieftain of the Izraki tribe. We even lived in the village of the Izraki for some time. Kuwata didn’t like that.”

“Kuwata?” Callister asked, glancing at Harker. Harker and Forsythe shrugged and shook their heads. The name was unfamiliar. “Who’s Kuwata?”

“A shaman of sorts. Not a member of any one tribe. He speaks to the gods for all the chieftains, all the tribes. Lives on the highest mountain and rules over a group of acolytes and worshippers. This Kuwata did not like Poomta cozying up with strange foreigners. Kuwata rarely came down from his mountain and when he did, he had nothing for Sayper but dire warnings and veiled threats. Full of bad blood and fiery rage, that one. Considered us unclean for worshiping false gods. And each time, after the threats, he would go back up to his mountain with the lesser shamans, back to worship at the feet of some idol.”

Hosrik poured himself more ale and took a sip. “Sayper and several of the men fought with Izraki against other tribes. You mentioned murder, rape and pillage. Aye, ‘tis all true. Sayper and several of the others did all that and more to the enemies of the Izraki. I’m ashamed to say I spilled blood myself on more than one occasion. Sayper learned much of the tribes and the island and every day he wrote in this very journal. We traded gifts with the Izraki tribe, ate their food, shared their women. We were like kings in paradise living in a dream. But it all came to an end soon enough.”

Hosrik’s voice had grown quiet and he stared now into his ale as if reluctant to go on. Everyone grew still hoping to coax more from the old mariner. A bit of venison dropped unheeded from Brakov’s fork as he listened.

Hosrik let out a deep sigh and resumed his tale quietly. “One night, we all got terribly drunk, Sayper more so than usual. And amidst the drunken bravado, it was decided that they needed to teach Kuwata a lesson. A group of them went up the mountain and snuck into the temple where the shamans lived. They found the idol of their tribal god and brought it back to the ship. Their deity is a god of blood and fire. I can’t pronounce the name, but I can describe the idol. It was gold and ivory and the belly was clay filled with blood. The shamans claim it to be the blood of their god.”

Hosrik felt the eyes of the table on him. Forsythe was giving him a disapproving look. “I was not involved in the theft of this idol,” said Hosrik defensively. “I assure you.”

“What happened next?” prompted Callister.

“In the light of sobriety the next day, I’m sure Sayper regretted his drunken misadventure. But he was a proud man, a stubborn man. When Poomta came and begged them to return to the idol, they only laughed. Sayper said he wanted Kuwata to come to the ship and ask for it back. Well, three days later, Kuwata did come... at the head of an army. Seems the shamans had spread word of the theft to the other tribes. They came pouring into the harbor, all of them. The shaman, the chieftains, the warriors from more than a dozen tribes. They normally fought each other, but Kuwata had united them in common purpose. There was no discussion, no debate. Only bloodshed. We were terribly

outnumbered and Sayper knew he'd made a terrible mistake. Realizing we couldn't possibly stand against the entire island, he tried to cast off and retreat. But the savages came in their long boats and dozens of them climbed on to the ship. Some even came leaping off of the cliffs into the rigging as we sailed by. A terrible battle played out on the deck of the ship while we tried to sail out of the harbor. I can still see them in my mind – the Boja with their painted faces, the Cayu and their bows, the Yami and their poison dipped spears. Even the shamans fought."

With fork and spoon, Hosrik mimed the battle. "At one point, Kuwata and Sayper squared off face to face, sword against staff. I've never seen such rage. The deck was slick with the blood of friend and foe alike. We were fortunate to have better weapons and armor. Steel against wood, iron against bone. But still, we lost many good men. Perhaps hoping to bring a swift end to it or perhaps drunk with rage, Sayper took the idol over his head and threw it down, smashing it on the deck of the ship. The clay belly of the idol shattered and the blood of their god poured out onto the deck, mixing with the blood of their dead. The shamans let out a great wailing at that and a kind of frenzy took them. Our sea mage fell to their spears and arrows. Our navigator, our boatswain. But for every one of us that fell, we took down five of them. With great effort, we managed to throw the last of them off the ship and into the sea water below. The wind filled our sails and we fled. The longboats gave chase, but the Dagger's Point was faster. They had no hope of catching up to us on the sea. And that was how we left the island."

Hosrik was staring off into space, his eyes on the past. "I can see it so clearly, as if it happened only yesterday. Kuwata stood in the bow of a longboat, screaming curses at us. It was the blood, you see. The blood in that idol was holy to them and here it was staining the deck of the ship along with the blood of a hundred of their dead. In Kuwata's eyes, the ship was carrying away the essence of their god and the blood of their martyrs. Kuwata shouted at us a vow... that he would not rest until he had burned the ship and crew in sacrifice to his god."

Hosrik suddenly came back to the present. He took a long drink of his ale. "Sayper put his rudder to Borakar and we vowed never to return. I imagine the other tribes wiped out the Izraki, punishment for befriending us. We lost more than half the crew that day and several more died from their wounds on the journey home. Only seven of us lived to reach the mainland. Sayper made us swear that we would never speak of our time there. And here I am breaking that oath. Well, I s'pose I've held on to that secret long enough."

The table was silent as everyone absorbed the tale, lost in their own thoughts. Brakov was the first to speak. "Vowed never to return. Hm. Until we took the ship there."

Hosrik's eyes widened. "You took the ship to Borakar?"

"We did. Two years ago. But we were only in harbor and on land for a day."

"Damned lucky you were then not to run afoul of the tribes," replied Hosrik.

“Are you saying the tribes still want the ship?” asked Callister. “*My* ship?”

Hosrik grunted. “Hard to say. T’was long ago, but the blood feuds of these tribes last for generations. I’d wager the shamans still want to burn your ship. However, the tribes are loathe to leave their island. If you steer clear of the island as we have, you’ve naught to fear.”

“I doubt they’d even recognize the ship now. When Captain Sayer sailed the ship, it had red sails, I heard” offered Harker.

“Not to mention the ship has been refitted since then,” added Brakov. “A wheel and rudder, Kalimuran cannons, a high aft castle, a new bowsprit. She may be the same ship, but she’s wearing a new dress.”

“All true,” answered Hosrik, swirling his ale in his mug thoughtfully. “But I wouldn’t trust to that. Kuwata had strange magic... spells and tricks and always seemed to know things he shouldn’t have. Trust me, somehow he would know the ship if he saw it again.”

“I find it disturbing to think there’s an island full of tribesmen and shamans that want to burn my ship,” said Callister. “That just doesn’t sit right with me.” He looked at Brakov. “We may just have to do something about that.”

“Aye, captain,” answered Brakov. “Mayhaps we kill all the shamans and they’d lose their taste for our ship. Cut off the serpent’s head as it were.”

“I know you gentlemen are fond of your bloodshed,” said Forsythe “and I certainly don’t want to stand in the way of your butchery... but might I point out that the ship has sailed for twenty years without so much as us even hearing about this tale. If we simply avoid Borakar, we’ll be fine.”

“True enough,” said Callister. “Well, it doesn’t matter. I care only for our good fortune in the here and now. We have Harker back, thank the gods. We haven’t lost a man. We’re in one of the greatest cities in the realm, reunited with an old friend. And we just made a small fortune running four bottles from Tyrrenkor to Drakkel. Four bottles! I think that’s the most we’ve ever been paid for such a small cargo.”

“Four bottles?” asked Hosrik. “Of what?”

“I don’t know. Some medicinal antidote cooked up by the Order of the Vile. I don’t trust those alchemists, but their coin is solid gold and that’s good enough for me. They paid us quite a sum to rush it here to Drakkel.”

“Thank the gods for the sick lord who needed this medicine,” said Brakov. “If not for his need, we might have tarried in Tyrrenkor and Harker would have taken there and lost to us.”

“A toast”, said Callister, raising his tankard, “to Lord Qualyn and a blessing on his rancid fever.”

Everyone raised their mugs and drank. Everyone except Hosrik, his mug held half way to his lips with a queer look on his face.

“What’s the matter Hosrik? Why aren’t you drinking?”

Hosrik set his mug down with a serious look. “Lord Qualyn, you say?”

“Yes.”

“And the Order of the Vile?”

“What of it?”

“Lord Qualyn is a friend and ally of House Dragari. And not many people know this, but the High Alchemist of the Order of the Vile is the older brother of Lord Dragari.”

“That’s too much of a coincidence,” grumbled Brakov.

“Are you suggesting that House Dragari arranged for that shipment?” asked Harker. “They *wanted* us here in Drakkel.”

“Coincidence is the harbinger of dark tidings,” quoted Toth. “An old dwarven expression, but often quite accurate.”

Hosrik shrugged. “Seems to me, well... yes, they wanted you here and quickly too.”

Harker and Callister exchanged glances. Callister glanced around the other patrons on the deck. A trio of drunken sailors were singing a bawdy song. A rough looking sellsword had a barmaid in his lap. A pair of grum were arguing over the last bit of ale. No one seemed to be paying any attention to them.

Callister turned back to the group and lowered his voice. “Does anyone else know the story you just told us? The story about the shaman wanting the ship? You said seven of you lived to reach the mainland.”

Hosrik scratched his beard in thought. “I’ve lost touch with most of them over the years. Samruk died in a prison cell in Duthelm, or so I heard. The Farushil Brothers headed north to Vorrik. Don’t know what became of them after that. Captain Sayper himself was knifed in a tavern brawl some three summers ago. Of the others, I have no idea. Could be anywhere.”

“Seven men sworn to secrecy,” muttered Brakov, looking at Callister, “but twenty years is a long time. Odds are that someone’s tongue wagged the truth. ‘Secrets don’t keep long in Drakkel’, as they say.”

“I have a bad feeling about this, Captain,” said Forsythe. “Remember those three men on the balcony... with their eyes on the ship? Someone was watching us. That much we know.”

“Let’s get back to the ship and prepare some defenses,” said Brakov. “I’ll post the crew in double watches around the clock.”

“And I’ll cast some defenses spells on the ship as well,” added Forsythe. “It would be best if we had some warning before someone tries to sneak on board the ship.”

“I agree,” replied Callister, “But we need to get Hosrik back so he can start translating.” Callister handed the journal to Harker. “Harker, escort Hosrik and the journal back to House Aldrayun. Choeg, you go with them for protection. Keep them safe. Harker will make introductions. I want Hosrik treated like an honored guest and every comfort made available to him. Remember, Hosrik, two copies. One for them, one for us.”

“Aye, Captain. I won’t let you down.”

Callister stood and the others rose to their feet as well. Callister and Hosrik shook hands. “You have my thanks. I assume it’s going to take you a few days to translate the book, so I’ll probably see you back at Aldrayun’s guild hall in the next day or two.”

“Fair winds, Captain. And thank you again for saving me from a *grim* fate.”

Outside the tavern, the group parted ways. Hosrik and Harker headed toward the guild district. Big Choeg walked behind them with his hammer slung casually over one shoulder and the last slice of venison pie in his hand.

Callister led Brakov, Toth and Forsythe south toward the harbor district. A thin fog hung in the air and shrouded the buildings. It gradually got thicker as they made their way through the streets. By the time they reached the gates to the harbor district, their clothing was damp and sticking to their skin.

As they made through way down the main harbor road, Callister could see the masts of many ships poking up from the fog like trees in the Mist Forest. It would feel good to have the deck of the Third Wind under his boots again. They’d been away for two days and even that short amount of time felt too long.

It was at that moment that Callister felt a subtle, but familiar sensation. Like the beginnings of an itch, it crept along his skin. He glanced down at his hands. Very faintly, his tattoos were beginning to shimmer and change.

“Forsythe.”

The others stopped and looked. Forsythe saw it right away and immediately understood his captain’s concern. There was magic about. Forsythe closed his eyes and raised one hand, palm out. He stood still for a few moments while the others waited.

“What is it?”

Forsythe said nothing. His brow furrowed in concentration. "This isn't right," he said at last. "Someone's gone to the trouble of masking their spell, but I can sense it. This is false."

"What?"

Forsythe's eyes widened. "This is wizard fog."

"What's-"

"Summoned by magic," blurted Forsythe quickly. "This fog, it's a spell!" He turned and ran toward the docks plunging into a thick bank of fog. The rest dashed after him. It seemed impossible, but the fog was getting even thicker. Callister couldn't see the others, but he could hear their pounding boots and labored breathing.

"Which dock is it again?" came Forsythe's voice from somewhere ahead.

"Pier fourteen," answered Callister.

"This way, dammit!" came Brakov's voice to the right. "Over here."

"Forsythe, where are you?"

"I can't see a damned thing!"

"Here it is!" called Forsythe. "Pier 14. Hold on a moment."

Axur fosh bry... Forsythe's voice rose powerful as he spoke the slippery words of magic. *Uxar pali boe duru tanar!*

With a sound like tinkling crystals, the fog suddenly burned bright and vanished as it condensed into a thousand thousand tiny snowy crystals which fell abruptly to the ground. After the choking fog, the air was suddenly shockingly clear.

Callister stared aghast at the pier before them. A lonely seagull, perched on the piling, blinked at them in the suddenly clear air and then took to flight.

Pier fourteen was utterly empty.

The Third Wind was gone.

CHAPTER 9

The quiet evening air was shattered as Callister's bellow of fury echoed off the harbor buildings. A hundred startled seagulls took to the air at once. Fish sellers, customers, sailors, dockhands and guards around the harbor district all stopped what they were doing and looked up in alarm.

"The ship is gone," barked Callister hoarsely.

"Now Captain..." said Forsythe in his most soothing voice.

"The ship is gone!" yelled Callister.

"Yes, but before you-"

"THE SHIP IS *GONE*!"

"Captain," said Toth. "Let's look at the situation calmly."

"I will *not* be calm," bellowed Callister, beginning to pace back and forth. His fingers curled into claws before him. "I'm going to tear down House Dragari brick by brick with my bare hands! I'm going to rip out the guild master's heart and eat it!"

"We don't know for certain that House Dragari is behind this," said Forsythe.

"First Harker goes missing, now the whole damned ship!" Callister bellowed. "What god have I offended?"

"Captain, over here!" Brakov's voice cut through the argument. Brakov was some thirty feet away kneeling down between a stack of crates and a row of pilings. The others rushed over to find him kneeling over a body.

"Oh dear," breathed Forsythe softly.

The body was prone on its back. Every inch of skin was charred black. The body had no hair or eyes or lips...all had been burned away. The face was contorted in a grimace of pain, the left hand was clenched in a tight fist, the right grasped a sword. Strangely, the clothing of the body was untouched. Soft cotton and leather were not even singed.

All four men stood around the body in stunned silence.

"Is that Hatcher?" asked Callister.

“Hard to tell,” said Brakov. “But judging by the shirt and the boots, yes, I think it is.”

“What did this?” asked Callister, looking at the two wizards.

“A skinfire spell,” said Toth. “I’m sure of it.”

“Skinfire...” murmured Forsythe. “A terrible way to die.”

“At least he got his sword out and he died fighting them,” said Brakov, nodding. “A good death.”

Toth knelt down beside and opened the man’s shirt. He laid a hand on the charred skin of Hatcher’s chest. “He’s still warm, Captain. This didn’t happen too long ago. Within the last few hours.”

“Captain, look here,” said Brakov. “There’s something clutched in his hand.” Brakov slowly uncurled the fingers of the left hand. One of the fingers broke off with a dry crunch. Forsythe winced.

Brakov stood and handed the small object to Callister. It was a silver button with the likeness of a leaf imprinted on it.

“It’s not from Hatcher’s doublet. And I don’t recognize it. If we’re lucky, he pulled that off of one of his attackers.”

Callister clutched the silver button in his hand and knelt down beside Hatcher. He placed a hand on Hatcher’s forehead.

“Praying?”

“Making Hatcher a promise.”

“Poor Hatcher,” muttered Brakov. “He always used to play the lyre at evening meal. Had a head full of songs and bawdy tales. I’m going to miss that.”

Forsythe recited a short prayer from Semorjon, the sea god. The last line of the prayer hung in the air. After a few moments, Callister’s eyes snapped open, he stood and sprinted off down the edge of the harbor.

Forsythe looked to Brakov who just shrugged. “I’ve no idea where’s he’s going, but let’s try to keep up. If it’s a fight, we don’t want to miss it. Come on!” With that Brakov ran after Callister.

“I’ll never keep up with those two,” said Toth, smiling weakly.

“That’s alright,” said Forsythe. “I’ll walk with you. We’ll catch up eventually.” The two wizards began walking in the direction the two warriors had raced.

At the mouth of the harbor, flanking the entrance were the Twin Beacons of Porthus – huge grey stone towers with fires lit at the top at night to guide incoming ships. Callister raced down the edge of the piers toward the harbor’s mouth. Callister leapt over fisherman fixing a net, ducked under a stack of poles being carried by two porters, and ran straight through a game of raljath being played by six mariners on the ground. Cards and dice scattered everywhere in his wake and the six men bellowed at him. Their yells turned to curses as Brakov bowled through them, knocking the biggest of them down and ran on his way.

Callister reached the end of the piers and ran out on the spit of land upon which stood the great West Beacon. Brakov was hard on his heels. Callister reached the bottom of West Beacon, threw open the door and tore up the curving stone steps on the interior.

The guard at the top spilled his soup and fell out of his chair as the raving Captain burst through the trap door.

“To your feet, dog!”

The guard scrambled to his feet as Brakov came pounding up the stairs and joined them.

Attached to a mount in the stone parapet was a large bronze spyglass. Callister moved over to it, spun it round til it was point out to sea and put his eye to the end.

“Oy, now” sputtered the guard, wiping soup over his tunic, “you’re not supposed to be up here.”

Callister ignored the question and continued to scan the horizon. He saw three sails out at sea, but neither was the Third Wind.

“Did you see the Third Wind sail out of the harbor?” Callister asked, his eye still held to the scope.

“The third what?”

Callister whirled and grabbed the man by the collar. “The Third Wind, man! A Mercian cog, stout of belly, with white sails and a triple decked aft castle. She sports hullbreacher cannons to either side and has a sword and cloud for a bowsprit.”

The guard scratched his head. “Uh-.”

“Did you see such a vessel sail out?”

Callister dropped the man’s collar and pulled out his dagger. He scratched a symbol on the stone parapet – three wavy lines, parallel to the horizon, stacked one above the other.

“She would have had this symbol on the main sails. Look at it. Did any ship with these markings sail out of the harbor?”

“Uh, no sir, I haven’t seen anything like that.”

Callister grabbed the man's collar again and put his dagger point to his throat. "You're sure? And you should know that this is the most important moment of your month!"

"I-I swear on my mother's grave, gentle lord, I've seen no such sail today. Not coming or going. Even with the fog below, I've marked every ship and every sail. There's been no such vessel leaving today nor yesterday nor the day before. I swear it by Semorjon."

Callister released him and sheathed his knife.

"I believe him," offered Brakov.

"As do I."

Brakov stepped over to the spyglass and turned it inland. He swept his gaze slowly along the entire harbor. The city of Drakkel boasted forty two piers in all and there were dozens of big ships in port today. He checked the markings on every sail. He looked at the ships being repaired in the dry docks. He watched the smaller vessels crisscrossing the harbor with passengers and small cargos. Nothing seemed amiss, but there was no sign of the Third Wind.

Brakov turned back to Callister. "If poor Hatcher died by some spell, then whoever did this has a wizard. Perhaps they sailed her out invisible like."

"Invisible?" pondered Callister. "An entire ship? I've never heard of such a spell and I imagine someone would have marked her wake."

"Aye."

"Perhaps Forsythe has some spell that might help," said Callister. "Let's go down and find him."

"Not necessary," came Forsythe's voice. A moment later, the young blonde man came tramping up the stairs and into view. Toth was right behind him, sweating and panting heavily from the long flight of steep stairs. "We're here. Toth and I have been discussing how we might find the ship. I do have a spell that will work and this is a very good location to try it. Being up here, with a view of the city, will actually help."

Toth collapsed heavily into one of the two chairs and pulled out a rag to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"You can find the ship?" Callister asked Forsythe excitedly.

"I have a spell which--"

Callister clapped his hands on either side of Forsythe's head and kissed him on the cheek. "Aha! I love my wizard!"

Forsythe blushed and pulled free. "Please captain, not-not in front of..." he nodded toward the city guardsman who was still dabbing at his stained tunic with a wet rag. The

guard, suddenly aware of the attention, looked up and met Brakov's glare. The guard raised his hands in mock surrender. "I saw nothing. Nothing..."

"Well, come on, let's do this," said Callister, excitedly. "Cast your spell, work your sorcery, do whatever it is you need to do."

"Quiet," said Forsythe. "I need quiet."

Callister and Brakov grabbed the guard and pulled him back to the edge of the tower. They all stood against the parapet trying to keep out of Forsythe's way. Forsythe stood on the other side, at the parapet, facing out to sea. He closed his eyes and raised both hands, palm out, toward the horizon.

Toth watched quietly, nodding slightly, in quiet approval. For several minutes they stood and waited. Forsythe moved his hands gently, first toward the south, then toward the west, slowly turning left and right.

He stopped. "I can feel it."

"Where?"

"It's close," murmured Forsythe, opening his eyes. He searched the blue horizon with his eyes.

"Where are they headed?" asked Callister.

"West, I'd wager," said Brakov "to Kalimura."

"No, south most likely," replied Callister, "to the Pirate Isles."

"Yes, I can definitely feel it. I- wait... something's... odd"

"What is it?"

Forsythe slowly turned until his outstretched palms were facing the southwest. He turned a bit more, facing west.

"Ha!" snorted Brakov. "West. Told you."

Forsythe turned more, facing northwest and then more, to the north.

"The north coast?"

Forsythe then swung around until he was facing northeast and facing the other four men. He took a step forward, his brow furrowed in concentration and strode over to the other side of the tower. Brakov and Callister moved out of his way as he reached the parapet. Forsythe stopped with both arms stretched out before him, facing toward the city.

"Straight ahead... about a league, perhaps two."

"The harbor isn't that big," said Brakov. "A league northeast...that's inside the city."

Forsythe closed his eyes again and tilted his head slightly in concentration. "I'm sure of it."

"It's in the *city*?" asked Callister, incredulously. "What are they doing? Sailing down Market Street?" Brakov chuckled.

"I can only tell you what the spell tells me. It's a league, perhaps two, and I-." Forsythe stopped abruptly, his face contorted in exertion. "Someone's blocking me." He began working his fingers, forming strange shapes and tracing unseen glyphs in the air. "Someone's pushing... me out... too strong... can't-" Forsythe suddenly cried out and was thrown back as if he had been violently pushed. He collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Callister and Brakov rushed over and helped him to his feet.

"Another wizard," said Forsythe, suddenly breathless. "And he's strong."

"Probably the same wizard who killed your man on the dock," said Toth. "The same one who summoned the fog."

Forsythe took a seat in one of the two chairs and rubbed his temples. He seemed exhausted. "I felt a powerful counter spell erected. I don't think... I don't think I'm going to be able to use that spell again. This other wizard has, well, erected defenses."

"Captain," said Toth. "Perhaps I may be able to help, I think-."

Brakov interrupted with a cough. "Perhaps we should take this elsewhere, Captain," said Brakov, nodding toward the guard.

"You're right," said Callister. He helped Forsythe to his feet. "You alright to walk?"

"I'll be fine. Just need to rest a bit."

"Come on, we're leaving." Callister descended the stairs with Forsythe and Toth behind him. Brakov walked over to the guard and stared him down.

"You saw nothing," Brakov growled.

"I saw nothing," repeated the guard.

"Good boy." With that, Brakov turned and followed the others down the stairs.

All four men gathered at the base of the tower.

"Ok, now what were you saying?" asked Callister.

Toth reached into his satchel and pulled out the Eye of Ishkol. "Forsythe's spell points us in the direction," said Toth, pointing toward the city. "All the guilds are in that direction. Let us assume it is House Dragari for the moment. I can use this," he said, holding up the Eye, "to read a man's mind. If we were to probe the mind of a Dragari officer, mayhaps we can learn something of the whereabouts of your ship."

"Why would you want to help us?" asked Callister, folding his arms. "You're still our prisoner, as it were. Why volunteer this?"

“Because young Harker stayed your blade and spared my life,” answered Toth. “I rather like that young man and would return the favor, if I can. I also see an opportunity for us to help each other.”

“How so?”

“I want my freedom and all my possessions back. When all this is over, I simply want to be on my way, with the Eye of Ishkol and everything else. And perhaps a bit of coin to see me through. I never was paid by the Sea Rakers, after all.”

“Very well, you have a deal. I get my ship, you get your freedom. Along with that damned eye thing and all your gear. And a fair cut of whatever loot we find or win.”

“Excellent.”

“One more thing, Captain... the Eye of Ishkol is powerful, but it is has limited range. If I’m going to probe the minds of those who dwell in House Dragari, we will need to be close.”

“How close?”

Toth shrugged. “To be honest, the closer the better.”

“I think we can arrange that.”

Callister turned to Brakov. “I want to see that Hatcher gets a proper burial.”

“Aye Captain”

With that, the four men started back along the harbor’s edge.

CHAPTER 10

The rain had been falling for an hour beneath a leaden grey sky and the ground of the courtyard behind the tavern had turned to a lake of mud. The smell of wet horse, damp manure and rotting straw fouled the air.

Toth sat on a bale of hay, the Eye of Ishkol open, glowing and hovering in front of him. Several of the horses in their stables whinnied nervously and pawed the ground, perhaps sensing the magic.

Callister sat silently in the shadows peering out across the yard at the rear of the tavern. The Red Trident was a large three story building of stone and timber. The muffled sounds of music and laughter could be heard from within. A flash of lightning lit up the yard and a peal of thunder drowned out the sounds of the tavern for a moment.

Forsythe sat beside him, cross legged and eyes closed. He had spoken little and appeared to be meditating.

Brakov was behind them, pacing back and forth while he listened to the rain drum on the roof above them and the snoring stable boy in the back.

"How long is he going to be a sleep?" asked Brakov, looking at the young lad curled up in the hay of an empty stall.

"It's a strong spell," said Forsythe without opening his eyes. "A few hours perhaps."

"Anything yet, Forsythe?" asked Callister. "Are you still being blocked by the other wizard?"

"I am," Forsythe replied, furrowing his brow slightly. "I don't know who he is, but he's powerful. And he's not tiring." Forsythe opened his eyes and shook his head. "Nothing. The ship is hidden from my sight. I cannot sense any member of the crew either, except for Harker and Choeg at House Aldrayun."

Callister nodded and returned his attention to the courtyard. He could hear his master-at-arms pacing the length of the barn. "What's wrong, old friend?" Callister asked at last. "You seem uncomfortable."

Brakov came over and sat down next to his captain. "I am. I prefer facing my enemies out in the open with a naked blade. Not sneaking about stables in the dark."

"Toth said he wanted to be close."

“Close, yes” Brakov gestured toward the tavern, “but the Red Trident Tavern? We’re right across the street from House Dragari.”

“The Red Trident is where all the Dragari men come to drink. Including their officers. Besides, this is the last place they’d think to look for us.”

“If we were any closer, we’d be-”

Brakov abruptly stopped talking as the back door of the tavern swung open with a bang. A man in breeches and a leather doublet came stumbling out. Cursing at the rain, he walked over to a stone ledge beneath a wooden awning. A series of holes was cut into the stone ledge. He dropped his breeches and sat over one hole to relieve himself.

Brakov and Callister watched silently from the shadows of the stable. When the man was done, he stumbled back into the tavern.

Callister turned around to look at Toth.

“Have you found one yet?”

Toth’s brow was furrowed in concentration, lit by the glow from the Eye in the dark of the stable.

“There are many people in there” murmured Toth quietly. “Many minds and most are drunk. I’m finding it difficult to sift through.”

“Not to worry, Captain,” said Forsythe. “There’s bound to be an officer in there. We just need to give Toth a little more time.”

Callister returned his attention to the tavern. The wind whirled about the courtyard lashing the stone walls with heavy rain. With weather like this, most would stay indoors. He doubted anyone would be coming out to the stables, but he did not want to tarry. They had already been here too long.

A moment later the back door banged open again and out strode a lean man with a head of black curls and a clean shaven face. Callister leaned forward and peered intently at the man. Even in the dim light, Callister could make out the horn and wave sigil of House Dragari on the man’s surcoat and the silvered pendant on his breast. It was an officer of House Dragari... a commander. Turning his back to them, the man unbuttoned his surcoat and began taking a piss against the wall.

Callister tapped Forsythe’s shoulder. “Take him.”

Forsythe stood and strode out into the rain drenched courtyard. Brakov walked out behind him, hand on his sword hilt, standing protectively near the wizard. Forsythe raised one hand toward the man, palm out and fingers splayed. The man turned about startled, still dribbling.

“Sleep.”

Instantly, the man's eyes rolled up into his head and he took one step forward, staggering. He swayed for an instant then collapsed into the mud face first. Brakov quickly moved up and took the man's weapons. He then hoisted him over one shoulder and carried him into the stable.

"You know, we're making a habit of capturing Dragari officers," said Brakov with a smile and dumped the man unceremoniously on the ground. "I like this spell of yours Forsythe. They don't wake when you toss 'em about. Ho now... look at this!"

Brakov knelt down and tugged at the lapel of the man's surcoat. Callister and Forsythe both looked. The lapel had five shiny silver buttons on it, each decorated with the imprint of a leaf. A sixth button was missing. Only torn threads remained.

Callister pulled out the button he had taken from Hatcher's charred hand. It was a perfect match.

"Well, there we are," said Brakov. "It *was* House Dragari on the docks. And here be the very bastard what burned our Hatcher."

Callister inspected the man's silver brooch. It was their house sigil, the horn and wave, adorned with sapphires. "This one's a full commander. But not a wizard, by the looks of him. I doubt he cast the spell. But I'll bet he gave the order." Callister stood, looking down at the unconscious man, clenching the button in his fist. "I'll bet he watched."

Brakov stood and delivered a swift kick to the unconscious man. "This is for Hatcher, ya bastard!" he growled.

"Enough," protested Forsythe. "That won't bring Hatcher back. Now what, captain?"

"Now," Callister said, standing, "we find a quiet place to have a chat with this fellow."

"Some place warm," said Forsythe.

"With ale" added Brakov.

"A bit of food would be nice," said Toth, standing up and joining them.

"I know just the place," replied Callister. "Brakov, bring him. Follow me."

Callister buttoned up his longcoat and stepped out into the rain. Brakov slung the officer over a shoulder and the three followed Callister close behind. They made their way down a side alley which opened up into a large cobblestone plaza. Callister paused at the mouth of the alley and checked to make sure the plaza was empty. Wind and rain whipped about the plaza, but it was utterly deserted. Callister led them across the slick cobblestones to the far side and then ascended a narrow curving flight of stone steps.

At the top of the stairs, Callister stopped in front of a black wooden door, knocked and waited. After a few moments, the door opened and a squat little grum in a greasy apron looked up at the four men. His eyes narrowed.

"You're not my delivery" said the grum, annoyed and gesturing with a bloody meat cleaver.

"No," replied Callister. "I need to see Murta. I'm a friend. Is she here?"

"She's busy." And with that the grum started to close the door.

Callister caught the door before it closed and held out a silver piece to the grum. "It's important."

The grum snatched the silver piece from Callister, inspected it and then shoved it in a pocket. "Stay here. I'll get her." He closed the door.

A minute later, the door opened again. Standing there was a huge and ugly woman, both tall and heavy. Green tinged skin, a prominent eye ridge and a pair of horns sprouting from her forehead showed clearly her ogrish heritage. Her face was decorated by a ragged scar, a crooked nose and a wart. She was dressed in a high collared burgundy dress covered by a leather doublet, great leather boots and a short cloak. Her lips slowly curled into a smile revealing yellow stained teeth.

"Captain Sir Draabyn," the woman said in a thick accent. "Being a while. Why you knocking back door?"

"Murta. I need a room and a little discretion."

Murta seemed to notice the limp body slumped over Brakov's shoulder for the first time. The smile vanished. "What being this now?"

"That? Oh nothing."

Murta scowled. "He wearing colors House Dragari."

"Is he?"

Her scowl deepened. "You trying bring Dragari here?"

"No... well, yes... let me-"

"Damn you, Draabyn." She planted her fists on her hips. "I having *one* rule. No Dragari in here mine tavern!"

"Well, actually-"

"He being dead?"

"Better... he's our prisoner."

Murta arched an eyebrow. "Prisoner?"

“Look Murta, I don’t have time to explain,” began Callister. “We’ve gotten mixed up in a guild war. There’s already been a lot of bloodshed and now matters are worse. House Dragari is probably looking for us. Right now. And you have something I need. *That* is why I’m knocking at the back kitchen door. So are you going to let us in or not?”

“Why should?”

“Because no one hates House Dragari more than you.”

“True.”

“Except for tonight. Murta, listen to me. House Dragari has the Third Wind. Somehow they took the whole damn ship. I don’t know how, but I’ll find out and I will get her back. I don’t care if I have to rip their guild house down brick by brick. You help me tonight and I promise you House Dragari suffers in the end. Financial ruin. Public disgrace. Humiliation.”

Murta pursed her lips as she considered it.

“I liking that. I liking that very much. What you needing?”

“Right now... we just need a room. The top floor suite. The big one facing the street.”

“Ha! My best room. Is that all you wanting?” she scoffed and folded her thick arms across her chest. “You wanting me to be warming your bed as well?”

“I want a little discretion too. I want no one in the main dining area seeing us carrying a Dragari officer up there.”

“And some food,” said Brakov.

“And some food” echoed Callister.

She regarded the ragged crew before her, standing in the rain. A seriousness clung to the group. A hard wariness in their eyes. Callister’s gaze bored through her.

“Alright then,” she said quietly, unfolding her arms. She gestured at the limp body. “What you doing him?”

“We’re going to interrogate him.”

Murta’s eyes lit up. “Interrogate good! I help. Get big knife.” She turned to go.

“No.”

Murta turned back and smiled weakly. “I watching?”

“No, Murta. Just the room.”

Murta pouted. “Very well.” She held out her hand. “Costing fifteen precious, all advance.”

“Fifteen gold? For one room? That’s outrageous... even for you.”

“Room and food being four precious. You still owing me eleven from last visit here mine tavern. You forgetting?”

Callister stepped closer and smiled disarmingly. “Murta... I thought we were friends.”

“We friends,” she said smiling and held out her hand. “And friends paying debts.”

Callister sighed, pulled out his coin pouch and started counting out coins into her eager palm. He reached twelve gold and three silver when the purse was empty.

“That’s all I’ve got,” he said. “Are you happy, woman, you’ve made a beggar of me.”

Murta inspected the coins and smiled broadly. “This enough. For now. Follow me. I taking you up backward way.”

With that she turned and gestured for them to follow. The party trudged down a short hall, past a large kitchen bursting with a hundred wonderful smells and up a flight of stairs. On the stairs they passed a serving girl with an empty tray. Her curious stare caught Murta’s disapproving look and the girl quickly averted her eyes as they passed.

At the top of the stairs and through a pair of doors, they came out into a large hallway. Murta led them to a set of double doors, pushed them open and led them in.

It was a huge room and lavishly decorated. An enormous four poster bed commanded one wall. Colorful rugs and tapestries adorned the floors and walls while richly stained tables and intricately carved dressers and wardrobes lined the walls. Doors hinted at closets and adjoining dressing rooms. There was even a large stone tub behind a decorative panel.

“Master suite,” said Murta with a sweep of her arm. “With tub and privy. This best finest room in whole tavern. Room yours for night. One night. You want second more and you handing over more precious.”

Callister stood in the center of the room, looking around and nodding. “Agreed.”

Brakov dropped the unconscious man in a decorative cushioned chair. Forsythe sat gingerly on the huge bed while Toth inspected the tub.

“What are you cooking tonight?” Callister asked.

“Old Tom roasting boar on spit”, said Murta with obvious pride. “We also having fried kebrin cakes in lemonsweet you like so much last time. And hearty chowder having mussels potatoes fried pork in cauldron.”

“Bring it all. And some ale to wash it down.”

“As you say, Captain Sir” Murta smiled, bowed and left.

“Why did you want this room?” Forsythe said, bouncing on the bed. “Not that I’m complaining, this room is very nice. But why not just take our captive back to House Aldrayun? We could have gotten rooms and food there as well.”

Callister strode over to the windows. “This is why”, he said, pulling the drapes open.

Forsythe and Toth looked out the window. The dark streets below were mostly deserted as wind and rain battered the city. Across the street and down the road, they could clearly see House Dragari’s guild hall. The great stone walls of the keep stood four stories high. Golden light peaked through shuttered windows. A pair of guards, wrapped in wet cloaks and looking miserable, flanked the main doors.

“I want to keep an eye on House Dragari tonight” said Callister softly. “Besides, both you wizards have told me that Eye contraption has a limited range. Well, if this officer doesn’t have the information I need, perhaps we can try probing House Dragari from here.”

Callister turned to regard the slumbering man in the chair. His face grew stern. “Bind him.”

Brakov pulled rope out and quickly had the man bound firmly to his chair.

“Wake him.”

Forsythe passed a hand over the sleeping man’s face. “Wake,” he said softly.

The man’s eyes fluttered open and he glanced about the room trying to remember where he was. When his gaze came to rest on Callister, recognition struck and his eyes narrowed dangerously. He tried to get to his feet, struggling against the ropes, but Brakov’s sword was out in a flash, the point of the blade at the man’s windpipe.

The man glared at his captors around him.

“You know who I am?” asked Callister.

“The pirate Draabyn,” replied the man with a sneer.

“Where is the Third Wind?”

“Do you have any idea who I am?” The man craned his neck around to encompass all of them. “I am a guild noble of House Dragari. A *knight commander*. You should address me as ‘my lord’.

“And as a guild noble, you’re no doubt well informed as to Dragari’s scheming. Where is my ship?”

“I will not be questioned by a baseborn commoner. Release me at once or I will have your head!”

“*Where is my ship?*”

“Go drown yourself, pirate.”

Brakov's fist lashed out. The man's head snapped to the side, a bloody tooth flew across the room. The man spat blood on the floor and glared at Brakov. Brakov raised a single finger in the man's face.

"That's one."

"Captain, please", said Forsythe, stepping forward. "This isn't necessary. Toth can easily get the truth without the need for bloodshed or intimidation."

Callister regarded the plump wizard sitting across the room. "Can you do it, Toth?"

Toth and the captive regarded each other. "Yes Captain." The captive smirked.

"Do it," said Callister.

Toth pushed a chair over to the captive and Forsythe and Brakov dragged a round table over and put it between the two chairs.

Toth sat down heavily across from the captive and began rummaging through his satchel. He pulled out the decorative wooden box, lifted the lid and withdrew the Eye of Ishkol. Setting the box aside, he released the egg shaped thing above the table and there it floated, it's intricate skin of metal mesh glinting in the light. Brakov, Callister and the captive all stared at it curiously.

The metal armor of the thing began shifting, unfolding and sliding as the Eye opened revealing the beautiful blue crystal within.

Toth passed a hand over the device and began to mumble. "*Hemkar benosk oopa brin...*"

The crystal filled with light seeming to drown out the warm glow of the candles in the room with its own cold blue rays.

"Look into the light, warrior", said Toth quietly.

The officer jerked his head away from the hovering object. "I shall do no such thing, sorcerer. Release me or all shall see you all flogged and given to the slavers"!

"Brakov, if you would..." Toth nodded toward the captive.

Brakov nodded. He grabbed the captive's head and forced his face back toward the light. With strong fingers, he pried the man's eyes open. The captive struggled feebly but Brakov's grip was like iron.

"Look into the light" murmured Toth.

Unable to turn away, the captive stared into the thing. Swirling strands of color danced deep in the jewel, in the eye, in the mind. His eyes widened and his muscles went slack. The light filled him.

“Good, warrior,” Toth said reassuringly. “That is good. Let the light in. Let go of your worries and fears. . . join me in the light. You and I together. We are alone in the light. We and the light are one.”

“-are one” murmured the warrior with him.

“We are the light” Toth and the captive spoke together.

“We are one” they said together.

Callister and Brakov exchanged glances. Forsythe smiled at them.

“Ask your questions,” murmured Toth and the captive together, “we will answer.”

Callister leaned in between the two men, his face illuminated by the hovering Eye. He was not sure to whom he was directing the questions.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Belarron.” They murmured together, their voices intertwining. “Commander Belarron.”

“House Dragari has a wizard. . . don’t they?” Forsythe prompted. “Someone new. . . someone powerful.”

“Yes,” they answered.

“Tell me about him.”

“His name is Malkarrus,” they murmured quietly. “Tale, pale, with hair like snow. He came from the Coalition. He wields an ancient sorcery. . . unusual, powerful. The other Dragari house wizards marvel at it.”

“Don’t worry, captain,” said Forsythe. “This is not unexpected. House Aldrayun said that this wizard ‘Malkarrus’ uses Ranyku for his magic. That’s precisely why your tattoos will be so effective against his spells. The fact that he uses this ancient sorcery plays into our favor.”

Callister nodded. “What happened to my ship?” he asked the two men seated at the table.

“I was ordered to take a unit of guards and escort Malkarrus to the docks,” they said together. “He was to take the Third Wind by sorcery. With a spell, he summoned fog so that our group could pass unseen to the dock.”

“Go on.”

“We arrived at the dock unseen and unexpected. Malkarrus began to intone a foul incantation. Two of the crew men on the ship leapt to the dock and battled us. Swords sang. . . arrows flew. . . but we had caught them unprepared. “

“What happened to the two that jumped to the dock?”

“One burst into flames and died screaming. The other was cut to pieces and his body cast into the harbor.”

Forsythe grimaced. Brakov clapped a meaty hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, we’ll pay them back for that.”

“Go on,” prompted Callister. “What happened next?”

“Malkarrus was able to complete his spell.”

“And?”

“If I hadn’t seen it myself,” Toth and the captive continued together “I’d have never believed it. Ice crawled up the hull, over the railing and spilled onto the deck. Ice everywhere. It froze the sails solid. The ropes, the men on the deck, everything frozen solid. The whole ship encased in gleaming ice. He then spoke strange words of power... and with each word, the ship shrank and shrank and shrank until it was no larger than a child’s toy, frozen in a block of ice bobbing in the water. It was fished from the harbor with a net and wrapped in a cloak. We carried it that way back to the guild hall.”

A stunned silence fell upon the room. Callister stared agape at the man. “Frozen? And shrunken?”

“Ha!” Brakov scoffed. “Barnacles! A fisher wife’s tale.”

“Maybe,” Callister shrugged. “But we’ve sailed around the world and I’ve seen more wonders than I can count. Alright then, what exactly are they planning on doing with my ship? Are they taking it back to Borakar?”

The captive squirmed uncomfortably for a moment as if resisting. The gemstone in the Eye flared brighter for a moment.

“Yes.” Toth and Belarron murmured together. “House Dragari... plans on taking the Third Wind to Borakar... and making a gift of it to Kuwata... the high shaman of all the Puwala tribes. Kuwata will have the ship and crew, alive and unharmed, to do with as he pleases.”

“Why would Malkarrus shrink the ship in this manner?” asked Forsythe.

“Aye, there’s the right of it,” agreed Brakov, nodding vigorously. “Why not just kill the crew and sail it out of the harbor. Just steal it. Why bother with spells and trickery?”

“Frozen and diminished in this way, House Dragari can take the Third Wind all the way to Borakar unseen and unhindered... no chance of pursuit... no trouble from the crew.”

Callister scratched at the stubble on his chin. “And in exchange for my ship, they’ll have secured an alliance with all the tribes. Damned to the depths with wizards and guilds and the lot of them.”

Brakov walked over to a divan and sat down heavily, staring at the floor. He slowly clenched his hands into fists. "Over our dead bodies!" he growled. "We've got to get the ship back before they can smuggle it out of the city."

"Where is the Third Wind now?" asked Callister. "Where is it *exactly*?"

"In the Guild Hall of House Dragari," murmured Toth and the captive. "On the second floor at the north end. There is a great hall where the leaders and officers meet in conference. The ship is there under heavy guard."

Toth's eyes slowly opened and blinked as if waking from a deep dream. He lifted his head and looked at Callister. "Captain, he's telling the truth. A remarkable tale, to be sure... but not a false one, I assure you."

Before Callister could answer, a loud knock at the door caused Forsythe to jump and Brakov to reach for his blade.

"Come in," called Callister.

One of the two double doors swung open and in came a creaky wooden cart laden with food. The cart seemed to be moving of its own accord until a short, curly headed grum stepped out from behind it.

"Compliments of Lady Murta for you, kind sirs" said the diminutive man with a bow and a flourish. With that, he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Dishes and bowls filled with food were quickly passed around. The four men sat around a large dining table and fell to their food hungrily. Everyone ate, except for Commander Belarron, still tied to the chair, who continued to stare senseless into the Eye.

For several minutes, everyone ate in silence, contemplating what they had learned. Between bites, Brakov muttered quietly, to no one in particular, describing in gruesome detail what he planned for everyone responsible. After some time, he quieted, drowning his anger in several tankards of ale.

At last, Toth pushed himself away from the table and patted his immense belly. "Now what?" he asked with raised eyebrows.

"We need to find out how many of our men were aboard the ship when it was captured," offered Brakov.

Callister shook his head and frowned. "When we left, I ordered Tackett to search our ship and to use the entire crew."

"I remember. But still... some of the boys might have been off at the gambling dens and whore houses. Maybe a few of them didn't get caught in this trap."

"It's possible," agreed Callister, "but House Dragari is a powerful guild. Even with the entire crew, we'd be hopelessly outnumbered."

“Then we sneak in... scale the walls at night and go in through a window,” said Brakov, standing excitedly. “With two wizards and our blades, we could do it. We kill only the guards we have to and make it out fast.”

“That sounds awfully risky,” replied Forsythe. “Remember, House Dragari has a guild wizard as well and who knows how many apprentices. And this Malkarrus has joined them as well.”

“Not to mention,” added Callister “they’re likely expecting us to try something like that.”

Toth cleared his throat. “Uh... Captain-“

“We can take ‘em, cap!” Brakov frothed and swayed slightly. “I’ll skewered them and Forsythe’ll fry ‘em with fire.”

“Captain?” repeated Toth.

“You can do fire, right?” whispered Brakov drunkenly at Forsythe “Great flaming balls of fire and lightning and not just that sissy sea stuff, right?”

“Captain Draabyn!” Toth said louder. “I think I may have a solution to your current dilemma.”

Brakov slumped back into his chair with a frown and reached for more ale.

“Let’s hear it,” said Callister.

“I can retrieve your ship with this.” Toth gestured to the Eye of Ishkol, still hovering quietly above the table. Their captive still gazed into its depths, spittle drooling from his lips.

“Bar... barn-” sputtered Brakov.

“Barnacles? Really?” asked Toth. “Gentlemen, let me remind you that I was able to steal a book from your ship without ever setting foot on it.”

Callister and Brakov exchanged glances. “True enough... so you were,” replied Callister. “And you accomplished such a feat with that little... contraption?”

“I did. All I require is someone with detailed knowledge of the location. Someone who has been there, spent time there... and I believe a Knight Commander” Toth nodded toward their captive, “would know the Dragari guild house quite well.”

Callister walked over to the window and looked down the street at House Dragari. “Do you think you can really do it?”

“I’ve done it once, Captain. It should work again. Once we have the ship in hand, Forsythe and I will work to unravel Malkarrus’ sorcery and release ship and crew from their icy prison.”

Callister turned back around and looked Toth in the eye. “Get me back my ship and crew and... and I shall owe you the rest of my days.”

“Nonsense, Captain. It is I who owe you and your first officer,” replied Toth. “Now, this spell will take some time, so let me be on with it.” The plump wizard resumed his seat across from their captive, took a deep breath and then began chanting in the slippery words of magic.

Ukar sebon nistra pov...

The Eye flared to life casting out scintillating rays of blue light about the room. Both men, wizard and captive, sat lost in the trance, their eyes locked on the glowing orb between them. Callister and Forsythe pulled up chairs to the round table and sat across from each other. They watched intently as Toth droned on in the strange language and the beautiful shifting light of the Eye danced across the table. Eventually Toth’s droning ceased and the room was quiet, except for Brakov’s snoring at the dining table.

Callister could feel his tattoos react to the ripples of magic emanating from this new spell. The minutes stretched on and neither wizard nor captive had moved a muscle.

“How long will this take?” asked Callister quietly.

Forsythe shook his head. “I’ve no idea. This spell is beyond my art. I would imagine that if Toth is able to-“

Forsythe stopped abruptly. Thin tendrils of light had begun to emanate from the Eye, slowly curling up like moving living things. With a scrap of chairs, Callister and Forsythe both quickly backed away from the table. The tendrils were beautiful and delicate like threads of light. They swayed and rippled as they move. The threads began to intertwine, weaving together, back and forth. Very quickly they had formed a sphere above the table composed of nothing more than these gossamer threads of light. Within there seemed to be nothing – a void of absolute dark and cold that seemed to strain against the threads.

A flicker of light began pulsing somewhere deep in the inky blackness of the void. With the pulsing light came a deep thrumming sound - a vibration that set Callister’s teeth on edge. Tables and plates on the dining room table began to rattle.

Callister looked quickly to Forsythe who only shrugged helplessly.

Toth began chanting again, the same slippery words of magic. The void of darkness responded. The flickers of light within came quicker, the vibration deeper. Dishes and bowls on the far table began to skitter across the table. A porcelain bowl toppled and crashed, scattering shards of pottery across the floor. Brakov snored on, undisturbed.

Without opening his eyes, Toth lifted his hand and slowly reached toward the void. The threads of light surrounding it parted and he plunged his hand into the void. He pushed his arm in, up to the shoulder, as if groping blindly.

The void warped and shifted and the vibration grew louder and louder. The floor shook and more plates toppled and crashed. Callister looked down at his arms to see his tattoos writhing and shifting as waves of sorcery washed across the room.

Slowly and with great effort, Toth began to withdraw his hand. Steadily, inch by inch, he pulled his arm out. When his hand appeared, his fingers were rigid and gripped something. Then Callister saw it. A gleaming piece of ice locked in the wizard's hand. It slowly came into view. A long spear of jagged ice, steaming in the warm air, and within Callister could make out the bow of his ship. More ice emerged and more ship with it. It was a perfect likeness of his ship, but no larger than a child's toy. The bowsprit, the rigging, the sails, the hull... all locked in a sheath of jagged ice.

The void suddenly trembled and Callister saw another hand emerge from the inky void. Adorned with shining rings, its fingers were dug into the ice and locked with an iron grip upon the frozen stern of the ship. Toth furrowed his brow and chanted louder as he struggled against the other hand. Each had one hand on the ship and both were locked in a tug of war. Toth pulled the ship out further and Callister could see a burgundy sleeve trimmed in gold on the hand emerging from the void.

Callister stepped forward and reached for the ghostly hand, but Forsythe cried out. "Don't touch it," he yelled. "Your tattoos! You might undo Toth's spell!"

The vibration had become a roar of indistinguishable sound. Toth's chanting had grown steadily louder and he was now bellowing the words of his spell at the sphere. The candles sputtered and books fell from the bookcase. Somewhere beyond the roar and vibration and Toth's bellowing spell, they heard another voice... a deep voice echoing in the void, calling out its own words of power, uttering its own spell.

The inky orb of nothingness trembled again as another hand emerged. Wearing the same gold and burgundy sleeve, it emerged from the opposite side of the void and reached out toward their captive. Its fingers wrapped around his neck and locked upon his throat with an iron grip. The commander's eyes snapped open and a hoarse cry of anguish burst from his lips as the hand began to choke him.

"Forsythe!" yelled Callister. "Do something!"

Forsythe stepped forward and plunged both hands into the inky sphere. He began chanting words of his own spell. No sooner had he begun that fire erupted from the orb, racing up Forsythe's arms. As the sleeves of his robes burst into flame, Forsythe struggled to pull his hands out of the orb, but could not. The young wizard began to scream in pain. The threads of light about the orb began to come undone, lashing and writhing, burning the table top where they touched.

"That's it!" bellowed Callister. "Spells and wizards be damned!"

Callister stepped forward and plunged both hands into the inky orb. Instantly, the tattoos on his arms flared to life, writhing and shifting at the sudden and furious onslaught of magic. The void spasmed and convulsed as if it impaled and then exploded in a blinding flash of light. The blast hurled Callister across the room in a dizzying blur of light and shadow. He crashing through wood paneling and landed heavily in the stone tub. Shaking his head to clear it, he struggled to his feet and quickly took stock of the room.

Toth, Forsythe and the captive had apparently been catapulted as well and lay in the four corners of the large room. The splintered wreckage of the round table lay in the center of the room, several pieces on fire. Callister helped Toth to his feet and Forsythe limped over to join them.

The room was destroyed. Most of the furniture was broken and burning. Long jagged scorched marks scarred the walls and floor. Half charred books littered the room amidst shattered pottery and broken glass. The huge bed leaned awkwardly on a broken leg. The curtains were on fire.

Their captive, Commander Belarron, lay on the floor nearby. His sightless eyes stared at the ceiling above. His throat had been torn out.

“Captain?” said Forsythe. “Look there...”

Callister and Toth both looked to where Forsythe was pointing.

In a far side of the room, laying on the floor, was the miniature Third Wind encased in frosty ice.

A sudden snort from the dining room table drew their attention from the ship. With a cough, Brakov staggered to his feet and blinked bleary eyes at them. His gaze swept the wreckage of the room.

“What did I miss?”

CHAPTER 11

The clap of thunder rattled the windows and the wind howled beyond the walls. Within the Great Hall of House Aldrayun, the mood was no better. A fire roared in the hearth and servants had brought hot spiced wine and steaming bowls of onion broth to warm the rain soaked group. All of it went unnoticed by Callister. He sat at the edge of the great oak table, slumped in a chair, bleary eyes unblinking, staring at the thing at the far end of the table.

The ship... the Third Wind... a tiny thing no more than a child's toy... a mockery of a true ship. A sheath of ice encased it glittering like a coat of diamonds in the light of the fire. A cold blue mist drifted off the ice and slowly crept across the table.

Harker, Brakov and Forsythe stood in the corner, talking quietly, glancing occasionally with worried expressions at their captain. They had never seen him like this... powerless, a prisoner of circumstance.

After the destruction of the room at Murta's inn, they had fled through the window and across rooftops, with Murta shaking her fist and bellowing at them from the window. It had been a harrowing run, slipping and sliding across rain slick roof tiles in the black of night. Twice Forsythe had slipped and would have fallen to his death had it not been for the quick hands and steady feet of the others. Through dark alleys and deserted plazas, they ran all the way back to House Aldrayun. The whole time, Callister had clutched the Third Wind to his chest, the icy thing wrapped in a blanket. But he had not said a word. Not one word.

Once they had gotten back to the guild house and unwrapped the ship, they were able to study it in the light for the first time. Their horror had only multiplied. Beneath the ice was clearly visible the entire ship, every piece – boards and barrels, ropes and rigging – all in perfect miniature detail. But what chilled their hearts was the men. They had all seen them... the crew scattered across the deck. Each man had apparently been frozen in the midst of the battle. Sakula was in the rigging, Halleran was at the railing, his bow out and an arrow drawn. Tackett was waving his sword over his head and yelling. Even old Odek and Sawtooth were on deck wielding a broom and iron skillet. Familiar faces, all of them... tiny, frozen... trapped. Most of the men were locked in battle with the attackers: a motley assortment of thugs and sellswords. Apparently, House Dragari was not above sacrificing its own men.

Hovering over the miniature ship was Toth. Beside him sat Ildrasha, the house wizard of House Aldrayun. She was a short and slender woman with an unkempt tangle of brown hair. They were an odd pair. Toth's layers of heavy wool and shaggy beard made his immense belly seem even larger. Ildrasha, just a slip of a girl, seemed a child next to him.

The two of them had been poking and prodding the ship for several hours. On the table between them an assortment of tools, crystal flasks with strange elixirs and a bronze brazier of hot coals. Back and forth, the two argued over which counter spells would work. Toth would occasionally mumble a few arcane words of power, which would elicit a spark or a glow or nothing at all.

Brakov poured a glass of hot, mulled wine and set it in front of Callister.

"That's not a fit sight for a sober man," he said, easing into the chair next to Callister. "Either stop staring at it or drink up."

Harker and Forsythe sat down as well.

"Should they really be trying to do this in here?" asked Harker, gesturing toward the two wizards. He looked about the great hall. Although it was a spacious hall, Harker knew it was not as large as the Third Wind. "If they succeed in unraveling the spell here, won't the ship spring back to full size and crush us all?"

"We are merely studying the spell, Harker," called out Toth. "Not attempting to undo it. And our efforts have not been entirely in vain."

Toth had earlier fashioned a simple wooden stand for the tiny ship. With Ildrasha's help, he picked up both the ship and stand, carried them over to the four men and set it down before them. Harker regarded the ship. The icy sheath about the ship was unchanged. Their efforts had not so much as scratched it.

Forsythe leaned forward and peered at the ship. "What have you learned?"

"Can we smash the ice?" asked Brakov "One stroke of Choeg's hammer might free the ship."

Toth sat down wearily and rubbed his eyes. He looked exhausted. "This ice is stronger than steel. Hammers and ice picks will not crack it."

"What about fire?" suggested Harker. "Perhaps we should place it in the fire and try melting the ice."

"We tried wizards' fire to no avail. Even an hour in a roaring pyre would not cause this ice to shed a single drop," said Toth, shaking his head. "Blade, hammer, fire and spell. I'm afraid no craft we have will break this spell."

"Well, at least the ship is well protected, for the time being," offered Forsythe. "We need not fear for its safety."

“What about Callister’s tattoos?” asked Ildrasha. “Don’t those foil magic?”

“No, only spells directed against Callister,” replied Forsythe. “This is not a direct attack against him, so the tattoos will do nothing.”

“If this is not an attack against me,” said Callister, startling them all, “then what is?” It was the first words he had uttered in hours. He reached out and placed a hand on the icy ship in front of him. The tattoos across his arm rippled slightly and settled.

“Don’t worry, sir,” replied Forsythe. “We *will* get them out.” Forsythe turned to Toth and Ildrasha. “Surely, there must be a counter spell. What kind of a spell is this?”

“No spell that I know of.” said Ildrasha. “Likely some sorcery of his own design. Malkarrus is clearly a gifted wizard.”

“It is a complex binding spell of the highest caliber,” said Toth. “Cloaked in elemental trappings. It bears the aura of several arcane disciplines... evocation, conjuration... but woven into this spell are threads of necromancy, as well, feeding the spell, making it stronger. This is some kind of blood magic.”

Harker pulled out quill and paper and began scribbling furiously.

“Bah!” spat Brakov. “Speak plainly, if you can.”

Forsythe took the glass of wine sitting in front of Callister and slid it toward Brakov. “Allow me to explain,” in his most patient voice. “What they are saying is that this spell is very potent... so potent, in fact, that Malkarrus was forced to draw upon his own life essence to fashion it. And in so doing, the spell is bound to him.”

“Explain.” commanded Callister.

“I’m afraid there are only two ways to break this spell, Captain” began Ildrasha. “Either Malkarrus must choose to end this spell...

“Which he won’t do” finished Forsythe.

“Or?”

“You kill him,” said Toth flatly. “If Malkarrus dies, the spell is broken.”

“Yes!” Brakov slammed his fist down on the table. “Now we’re talking! Come on, Captain, let’s kill him! The only good wizard is a dead wizard!”

Forsythe, Toth and Ildrasha all cast sour looks at Brakov.

“Present company excluded,” said Harker, “of course.”

Callister gazed at the tiny ship before him and weighed all that had been said.

“Very well. Malkarrus dies.”

"Wait!" a clear voice cut through the air. The curtains at the side entrance parted and Samirra came in followed with Captain Harkune behind her.

"You must not kill Malkarrus" said Samirra in a firm tone.

"Killing is always better than not killing," muttered Brakov and tossed back the wine.

Samirra stepped aside and led in an elderly man. He was dressed in shimmering silver robes with a dark grey half cloak. Sparkling jewelry flashed on his fingers and throat. He was thickly built with caramel skin and a silver beard. He leaned heavily on a tall, carved obsidian staff as he walked. It was then that they noticed his left leg ended in an artificial foot of bronze.

The old man inclined his head in a slow bow and slowly hobbled into the room.

"It would be considered poor taste to assassinate the other team's wizard." His voice was a rich, baritone and well-honed from much use. "'Tis a dangerous game and people die, surely. But it's something of tradition that the wizard on each team not be harmed. It is an old tradition and harkens back to the earliest days of Kalgamorra."

He hobbled over to the great table and took a seat. Samirra and Harkune joined him at the table.

Callister regarded the man. "And who is our new advisor?"

Samirra inclined her head toward the old man. "Allow me to introduce Game Warden Haugrok of the Kalgamorrans Gaming Guild."

"Kalgamorra is overseen by seven game wardens," said Haugrok. "We seven are the wizards who control the game, the arena and all the arcane sorcery therein."

Brakov snorted. "Ha! Just what we need. Another wizard."

"I am a wizard," replied Haugrok. "But I am also a business man and my business is spectacle. On the playing field, we give the crowds something to marvel at and they give us thunderous adoration. It is because of this that Kalgamorra has become such an important part of this city's culture. The conventions of the game are woven into the very history of Drakkel. Kalgamorra is built upon tradition and it is that very tradition that frowns upon the outright murder of a playing wizard."

"We have a habit of breaking with tradition," said Callister.

"There is more to it, though," replied Haugrok with a sneer. "Malkarrus may have been away for many years, but he was born and raised here long ago. There are very few who know the truth... Malkarrus is the illegitimate son of Lord Poth Dimrani, the head of the Guild of Sorcery. Lord Dimrani wields a great deal of political clout in Drakkel. He cannot publicly acknowledge him, but bastard or not, Lord Dimrani is quite fond of

Malkarrus. Should his son be outright murdered on the Kalgamorra field, he would rain down his wrath upon the guilty party. I'm not saying that you cannot murder Malkarrus on the field. Merely that if you do, there will be terrible consequences."

"No, we can't allow that," agreed Samirra. "If it were seen as if House Aldrayun sanctioned you killing him, House Dragari might petition the game wardens to invalidate the game and award the prize to them."

"I am loathe to admit it," replied Haugrok, "but House Dragari has far too much influence in these matters. They have managed to bribe or intimidate many in the Kalgamorra Gaming Guild. Three of the wardens are on their payroll and I suspect the fourth is being courted. Should such a petition be made, House Aldrayun would lose."

"Alright then, damn you," barked Callister. "We won't kill him."

"Accidents do happen", said Harker quietly. "As I understand it, the game is fast-paced and chaotic. Deaths do occur. If he died as a natural result of something in the game..."

"Perhaps, but risky" replied Samirra.

"I should warn you that your theft of this", Haugrok said, gesturing to the icy ship on the table, "has stirred up House Dragari. They want this quite badly and you have taken it from them."

Brakov stirred. "How did-"

Haugrok cut him off with a raised hand. "When it comes to this game and the guilds involved, I know a great deal."

"We did not steal it," said Callister firmly. "This is *my* ship. We only took back that which was stolen from us."

Haugrok shrugged noncommittally. "As you say. In any case, the loss of this has sent House Dragari into a chaos. You have clearly pushed them to the point of desperation. It has been a remarkable morning so far. They are calling in old debts, new favors, bribing officials. The gambling houses are betting heavily on this game. The whole city, in fact, is stirring. I've not seen this much anticipation of a game in years. I have no doubt that House Dragari will do whatever they can to slant the game against you. So be prepared."

"Why are you telling us this?" asked Callister. "Why did you come here?"

"To right the balance of the game. I will do what I can to make it a fair game, but I wanted you to know what you were heading into. Once, long ago, Kalgamorra was the battlefield of judgment... the best and most fair way to settle an intractable dispute between two guilds. But in recent years, guild politics have muddied the waters. I do not like that House Dragari and the Guild of Sorcery have become so cozy. I want to see you beat them."

Haugrok reached out and gingerly stroked a fingertip along the icy sheath of the ship. “Why do they want this ship so badly?”

“That’s rather a long story,” replied Callister. “All that matters is that they want it and we have it. I’m pleased to hear that they are... desperate.”

“I should point out,” said Toth “that Malkarrus is using his magic to search for the ship even now.”

Samirra furrowed her brow. “Can he-”

“Do not fret, m’lady,” said Toth reassuringly. “We are well protected. I am maintaining a vigil... a cloak of sorcery that hides us from their searching. But it won’t hold for long. Eventually, he will break through my vigil and find the ship.”

“It does not matter”, replied Samirra with a sardonic smile. “They no doubt have confirmed that House Aldrayun and Callister are in league and that we now possess the ship.”

“Would they attack?” asked Harker.

“They would not dare,” replied Samirra. “Even House Dragari would not be so bold as to openly attack another guild within the city. And we are well protected here. However, it sounds as though Malkarrus will stop at nothing to get the ship back.”

“I know,” said Callister, with a grin. “Which is what I’m counting on.”

“Oh dear, I’ve seen that look before,” said Forsythe. “You’re bringing the ship with you into the game.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I do not think that is wise,” exclaimed Samirra.

“I will not let this ship out of my sight” replied Callister. “And that is final.”

“If they see you’ve brought the ship into the game-”

“Then they’ll come after me. The best chance to free my ship is to confront Malkarrus myself. He will be there, yes?

“Most certainly.” said Samirra. “House Dragari was boasting such many days ago. And since we now possess the ship, House Dragari needs to win the contract from the city more than ever. Malkarrus is their best wizard. They need him on the team to win.”

“Well, there will never be a better chance to face him, captain,” said Brakov. “Outside of the game, he’s protected by guild guards, corrupt politicians and who knows what else. But on the Kalgamorra field, it’ll be twelve men against twelve men and all manner of bloodshed and chaos.”

“Exactly.” Callister smiled broadly. “And chaos is what we do best.”

“If you all will excuse me,” Haugrok said, rising stiffly to his feet, “there is much to do before the game. I will see you on the field.” He began shuffling slowly toward the door, but turned back to look at Callister. “Have you ever played a Kalgamorra game before, Captain?”

Callister shook his head.

“Learn quickly.” And with that, Haugrok turned and left.

“The game is tomorrow, yes?” Callister asked.

Samirra nodded.

“Harker!”

Harker looked up from his writing. “Yes captain?”

Callister paused a moment, gazing at the icy ship in front of him. It was time to show this city what chaos really looked like.

“I need you to learn everything there is to know about this game. Rules, traditions, loopholes, history... everything. And I need you to brief me in the morning.”

Harker stood, grinning. “I’ll be in the library.”

CHAPTER 12

Wheels of oak and iron creaked loudly as the great wagon rumbled along the flagstones of the Long Walk. Its hard walls were covered by a canopied roof that enclosed it completely. So heavy was the wagon that it took six Korynian haulers to pull. The huge muscled horses strained at their leather harnesses as they hauled their burden forward.

The Long Walk was aptly named. The longest road in the city of Drakkel, it wound from the Plaza of Mallugar all the way to the Great Arena in the heart of the city. Despite a few puddles from the recent storm, it was arrayed in color and flanked by cheering crowds. Brightly colored flags, strung high across the street, fluttered in the summer breeze. The common folk always enjoyed any excuse to see the nobles flaunt their wealth and this was no exception. They lined the streets and cheered and yelled. Those favoring House Aldrayun tossed flowers while those on balconies above rained petals down on everyone. Young ladies called out to those in the wagon with proposals of every kind. Others jeered and threw eggs and tomatoes. The beautiful painted sides of the wagon were stained by both.

A veritable parade surrounded the wagon as it made its way through the city. Leading the procession was a brightly clad figure on stilts arrayed with feathers. Behind him came a small group of trumpeters, pipers and drummers playing a rousing marching song that had the crowds clapping in time. Flanking the wagon were a dozen armed guards in polished plate and brightly plumed helmets with brilliant burgundy cloaks bearing the sigil of House Aldrayun. Immediately following the great wagon came a motley troupe of jugglers, fools and minstrels playing for the crowd. A few food sellers brought up the rear pushing carts filled with meat filled pastries and flagons of ale. In the wake of the parade came a small army of street urchins search for crumbs of food and dropped coins. Several of them were picking up flower petals and stuffing them in bags. A bag of a hundred unsoiled petals would fetch them a copper from the seamstresses who used them to adorn the gowns of highborn ladies.

Inside the wagon, several conversations were happening at once. At the back of the wagon, Captain Harkune sat giving orders to six Aldrayun soldiers. They were a rough looking group. Scarred and grim, they had turned in their armor and blades for roughspun jerkins and woolen pants. Near the middle of the wagon sat Forsythe and Toth engrossed

in a magical discussion. At the front, sat Harker reading off passages from a book to Callister, Brakov and Samirra. Choeg sat next to Harker holding the heavy book for him.

Slung over one shoulder, Callister carried Toth's magical satchel. Inside was every magic item and weapon that his men had, including the Eye of Ishkol, the translated copy of the book and the ice clad Third Wind. Callister wanted to leave nothing behind at House Aldrayun. He cast a look through the rear window of the wagon, but up the road they had come. He had a feeling they weren't going back.

They had been up half the night going over the rules of the game, conventions, strategies and more, but Callister and Brakov could only surmise that the gaming guild was run by mad men and nothing in the game made sense. Here, on the road to the arena, Harker had insisted on going over it one more time.

"unless, of course" Harker was saying, with a chuckle, "any non-binding, partisan third tier convention is already in play AND Convention 201 is active, in which case all first and second tier conventions are voided. So, as you can see, it's a rather elaborate, yet elegant, interdependency. So, is any of that unclear?"

Brakov's glare was steady but for an eye twitch. Callister slapped Brakov on the shoulder and turned to Harker. "Let's start again, but this time maybe skip the higher level convention stuff. That's where you lose us."

"Well, uh" Harker closed the book in front of him and motioned for Choeg to put it away. He then began fumbling through papers. "I, uh -"

"Captain," cut in Samirra. "Allow me." She gave Brakov a reassuring pat on the knee. "Let us review just the basics of the game, which I think are quite straight forward. Two opposing teams each have their tower with three flags at the top. The game is divided up into rounds. Each round, you simply try to capture a single flag from the opposing team's tower and bring it to the top of your tower. The first team to gather all three of their enemy's flags wins the game."

"And a round is five minutes?"

"Correct," said Samirra. "Each team has a bunker... a covered stone chamber set in the ground at the edge of their end of the field. It sits about six feet down with a window at ground level looking out on the field. This bunker is your safe zone. The only safe zone. At the end of every round, each player is magically whisked back to his team's trench for a very brief rest interval."

"How brief?"

"Two minutes," replied Samirra. "It's a fast paced game."

"Very well, the basics we grasp," Callister said, glancing at Brakov who gave a curt nod in agreement. "It's the conventions that befuddle the mind."

Samirra spread her arms and shrugged helplessly. “In all honesty, captain, everyone has trouble with the conventions. There are too many and you’d have to be a Kalgamorrnan scholar to know them all. But the good news is, you don’t have to know anything about the conventions. Ignore them. Just be aware that conventions will come into play during the game and that each change the conditions of the game.”

“And each convention,” added Harker “comes into play only when a specific set of conditions are met.”

“For instance,” replied Samirra. “Convention I7 stats that if the sun is obscured by clouds, the visors on the manglers are closed, essentially rendering them blind.

“The Manglers...” said Brakov “those big metal ball things you mentioned.”

“Yes. Very good,” Samirra patted him on the knee affectionately. “You see? You will do well.”

Brakov smiled sheepishly.

“But why?” asked Callister “Why is this game so convoluted?”

“Spectacle, Captain,” replied Samirra and spread her arms. “This is a show. Nothing more. People come here to be entertained. And nothing entertains like the chaos of this game. Every game is different and they come to see something they have never seen before.”

“What makes this game truly unique,” added Harker “is that many of these conventions are triggered by events happening *outside* the arena... out in the city.”

“A good example is the market pig” said Samirra. “A greased pig is released into the Market District at the start of the game. If fans of either team catch the pig, then their favored team is granted weapons.”

Brakov grinned. “Now we’re talking!”

“Captain, you should know that House Aldrayun has not been idle.” said Samirra. “For days, we have been working on organizing several groups of supporters and allies. They in turn have been rallying the fans. There are dozens of conventions that the common folk can influence and bring into play.”

“I love it,” said Callister. “We’ve got half the city rising up to help us.”

“And House Dragari has the other half. The point is, Captain, that many hundreds of people out in the city will be fighting to bring various conventions into play. The game wardens who run the game have agents out in the city watching. As soon as the conditions for a particular convention are met, that convention will appear on the Board and it comes into play almost immediately.”

Callister leaned his head back against the wooden wall of the wagon and considered all he had heard. “What exactly does that mean for us... on the field?”

“It means you should be prepared for conditions to change rapidly. Weapons, armor, visibility, even the ground under your feet... everything can and will be changing at random times. This game is controlled by the seven Game Wardens... wizards, remember. Things will appear and disappear instantly as conventions come into play.”

Samirra leaned over and began pulling a rope in the corner. Slowly, the wagon’s canopy began to slide back, revealing a bright blue sky overhead. Just then a high stone wall loomed into view ahead.

“The Arena” muttered Brakov. Conversations ceased as they all gazed up at the high walls. Green lichen clung to ancient crumbling stones of the broad wall. It stood a hundred feet high. Brightly colored pennants fluttered from its towers. Each pennant bore the sigil of the gaming guild... three flags arrayed about a skull.

The wagon slowly turned and began moving along the wall. “We’re heading to the West Gate”, said Samirra. “House Dragari’s team will head to the East Gate. We enter from opposite ends of the Arena.”

“It’s much bigger than I thought,” murmured Harker. The wall curved gently as they made their way around the great oval shape arena. Harker recalled what he had read about it last night. It had stood for five centuries. Built from the stones of an old Traxxian fortress, it had endured wars and storms and worse. An army of slaves had labored for almost forty years to build the arena and the bones of those slaves were buried beneath the foundations, or so the story went. In a city of marvels, the Great Arena stood out.

With a lurch, the wagon shifted and began to turn. Harker slid open a window and peered out. They had reached one end of the colossal building. The West Gate House was a towering stone edifice built around a large pair of doors. Distantly, Harker could hear the cheering of crowds within the arena.

The wagon stopped before the gatehouse and the driver called out to the tower. Harker marveled at the doors. They were oak and iron, fifty feet tall and intricately decorated. A great battle between knight and beast was depicted in beaten copper upon the doors.

There was a series of metallic bangs and clicks and the enormous doors slowly yawned open with a squeal of rusty hinges and the clatter of chains. The wagon rumbled forward into the dark interior. Samirra pulled on the rope again and the wagon’s canopy slid shut. The wagon came to a sudden stop in the darkness and the rear doors of the wagon were thrown open.

“Everyone out”, barked Harkune.

Outside the wagon, they found themselves in a large, cool stony chamber. They were in the heart of the gate house. A pair of guards stood at attention in the corners of the room. Another massive pair of doors lay before them. Thin slices of sunlight pierced the

door between slats of wood, catching dust in the air. Harker could hear the crowd more clearly now seated in the arena just beyond those doors.

“What have we here?” came a voice. “The notorious sea captain and his misfit pirates.”

Coming down the stairs was a tall, thin man, completely bald, with unusually pale skin and black eyes. His black woolen doublet bore a high collar and the gaming guild sigil emblazoned across the breast. In his gloved hands, he held a rod which appeared to be fashioned from a solid piece of black crystal. His steps were slow and deliberate and he punctuated his words with his heavy steps that resounded on the heavy wooden planks.

Following close behind him was a short, fat goblin scribbling notes with quill and notebook.

“We do not find ourselves impressed by you, *captain*.” The title dripped with disdain. “We have heard of your exploits, your tales of adventure, but such follies pale next to the challenge before you. You find yourself now in the purview of the Gaming Guild. We do not tolerate rule-benders or law-breakers or those who think themselves above others.”

His measured steps brought him to a stop, standing directly in front of Callister and looking down upon the group. The squat little goblin scurried up behind him, the quill never stopping.

Samirra cleared her throat. “Callister, allow me to introduce Askof, one of the assistant game wardens.”

Askof’s eyebrow shot up. “*Chief* assistant game warden.” His eyes flickered over the group and came to rest on the cloth satchel slung over Callister’s shoulder and the small object within that weighed it down.

“What is this?”

Callister’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“It’s all right, captain”, assured Toth. “Show him.”

Callister slowly opened the satchel and pulled out the tiny ship encased in ice. Askof leaned down to study the strange artifact.

“We do not allow weapons to be brought in by either team.”

“It’s not a weapon”, growled Brakov, taking a threatening step forward.

The guards at the corners of the rooms put their hands on their weapons.

“Then what is it?” sneered Askof.

“It’s a...” Brakov began, but faltered, searching for the words.

“It’s a proxy,” said Callister. “From the Freeport Offering. A model of a ship.”

Askof looked askance at the icy thing. He then raised the black scepter and slowly waved it over the ice clad ship. The end of the scepter glowed brightly with an eerie purple light and sounded a dissonant array of tones.

Askof shook his head. "Some powerful sorcery clings to this thing. Weapon or not, I cannot allow you onto the battlefield with this. We have rules."

Brakov growled and advanced another step. Forsythe and Harker tried to hold him back.

"What about this?" asked Toth, stepping forward. Toth stuck a hand into the satchel and withdrew the Eye of Ishkol. Askof approached Toth and scowled down at the fat dwarf. Toth held up the Eye for inspection. It was open and glowing brightly. He handed it to Askof who inspected it closely.

"And what is this?"

"A mere bauble," replied Toth. "A pendant given to me by my father for luck. Surely you wouldn't deprive me of the only thing I have left of him, would you? A simple charm for luck. We do need luck out there."

Askof's scowl slowly faded. "You do need luck."

"And that ice cloaked ship is lucky as well," added Toth.

"Lucky" murmured Askof staring deep into the glowing crystal in his hand.

"You can't deprive the captain of his luck," said Toth slowly.

"Can't deprive..." Askof murmured.

"He is allowed to carry the ship with him," Toth and Askof said together. "And you may carry this bauble."

The little goblin looked back and forth nervously between the two, then scribbled in his notebook.

Toth took the Eye back from Askof.

"Time to go" they murmured together.

Askof turned and walked back up the stairs with a blank expression. The goblin glared at Toth and then quickly followed. Callister nodded his thanks to Toth.

Outside, the crowd suddenly erupted in cheers and a score of trumpets sounded. A booming baritone voice cut through the din.

"Welcome, one and all, to Kalgamorra... spectacle of the Southlands. We are moments away from the arrival of our first team."

Samirra moved over to the huge doors. "Over here quickly. We're about to be announced. Line up here."

“Announced?” grumbled Brakov.

Samirra laughed. “It’s all part of the game,” she said. “The gaming guild does love spectacle. Each team is unveiled. First the team, then the team leader. Callister, wait for your name to be called. Wave to the crowd,” she said to all of them and then gave Brakov a playful swat. “And try to smile.”

“It seems the first of our teams as ready to take the field!” boomed the voice. “Let us have a look at our brave combatants! I give you... House Aldrayun!”

The doors swung open wide and Harkune led the way as the group marched out onto the field. The crowd thundered applause.

“And leading House Aldrayun’s team, Captain Callister Draabyn of the Merchant Ship Third Wind!”

Callister strode out through the gates with the satchel slung over his shoulder. A deafening roar flooded the arena with a mix of cheers and boos. Callister strode over to Brakov and Harker.

“If this was Freeport, they’d all be cheering me”, said Callister.

“If this was Freeport, they’d be arresting you” replied Brakov.

“Well, this is Drakkell and no one wants to arrest me today.”

Brakov folded his arms. “Day’s not over yet.”

The field was bigger than Callister had expected. The seating area was six tiers tall and was packed with thousands of spectators forming an ocean of color and movement. The noise of the crowd was deafening.

Along one side of the field was a large stone tower looming over the field like a cliff face. Several balconies and viewing areas protruded from its face. Most likely, that was where the nobles and lords sat to enjoy the game, Callister thought. At the very top of the structure was a larger covered balcony where seven men sat on thrones.

“The Game Wardens”, said Samirra, noticing Callister’s gaze. “The wizards who control everything on the field.” Callister’s eyes took in the entire tower and then came to rest on something peculiar at the base of the tower.

At the base of the great tower was a large raised stage area. On the stage were various men and women who seemed to be officials for the game. Several wore the black doublets that marked them as assistant game wardens. Others wore colorful robes.

Clustered to one side of the stage was a group of twelve drummers sitting at enormous drums. They were wearing identical white tunics and each of them wore their long hair pulled back into ponytails. Standing next to them was very large man in red and

black robes with one hand resting on a horn of tremendous size. A pair of grum were polishing the horn as the man conversed with one of the drummers.

Connected to this stage was a raised pulpit that protruded out over the edge of the field. Standing in the pulpit was a man dressed in garish robes of orange and yellow. Even from a distance, the glint of his jewelry could be seen. In one hand, he held a silver scepter which had a carved mask mounted at the end. He seemed to be speaking through the mask. It was this man who had introduced them and his voice, magically amplified by the scepter, rose above the din of the roaring crowds.

“Who is that colorful fellow?” said Forsythe, nodding toward the man in the pulpit.

“The Herald of the Game”, answered Samirra, “He is the voice of Kalgamorra. He introduces the teams, calls out conventions as they come into play and introduces each round. In many respects, the Herald is as much a part of the game as the players.”

Samirra pointed out their flag tower... a tall, square stone tower with a wooden ramp spiraling around it up to the top. The top of the tower had a stone parapet around its edge. At the center of the top, was a large central stone with three flags set in it. As the three fluttered in the wind, Callister saw that they bore House Aldrayun’s sigil. The entire tower sat upon a small island of jumbled rocks.

At the far end of the field stood an identical tower with its own three flags in Dragari colors. Between the two towers stood a broad, featureless field of grass.

A pair of stone arches arced high overhead connecting the tiered bleachers on either side. The stone arches crisscrossed at the center. Hanging from below the intersection of the arches was a large iron cage suspended by several chains. The cage hung directly over the center of the field, some forty feet up.

Forsythe pointed up at the cage. “The penalty cage?”

“Correct”, replied Harker. “If you break a rule, the Herald will call a violation and the Game Wardens can put you up there and you stay until someone else on your team violates a rule.”

“I don’t like heights,” said Forsythe, but then shrugged. “But at least it’d be safe up there, I suppose... far from the bloodshed on the field.”

“Not exactly safe,” replied Harker. “The cage is lined with weapons. If you end up there with a member of the other team... well, let’s just say that opposing players in the cage are encouraged to... continue the battle.”

“And that?” asked Callister. The others looked to where he was pointing. At the base of the large stage, beside the raised pulpit, was an enormous wooden wheel with at least twenty spokes. At the end of each spoke was a large square panel bearing a sigil of some

sort. Standing on the stage area, just behind the wheel was an enormous brass gong and a large masked ogre with a matching brass hammer.

“They call it the Wheel of Challenges which Harker mentioned earlier. At the beginning of each round, the wheel is spun with three chimes of the gong and when it comes to rest, whatever sigil ends at the top determines the battlefield. There are also some conventions that cause the wheel to be spun during a round. The point is, the battle field can change right under your feet at almost any moment.”

“Change how?” asked Brakov.

“The field might be rocky or sandy or snowy or

“Crashing waves,” finished Harkune. “Or pits and spikes. Could be anything really. They’re always coming up with new ones.”

Callister and Brakov exchanged glances. “That’s fine”, said Callister. “No matter what lies underfoot, the other team has to deal with it too.”

“And you see that large wooden wall behind the stage?” asked Samirra. Callister saw that the lower third of the great tower had a wooden face on with what looked like hundreds of shuttered windows crowded together. “That’s the Tally Board. During the game, whatever conventions are in play are listed there in large numbers for the crowd to see.”

The cheering crowds filled the tiers of the stone bleachers that encircled the elliptical field. The structure, however, was not complete. Across the field, near the far end, there was a tremendous gap in the wall. A v-shaped gap, some forty feet across, split the encircling wall through all three tiers from the top all the way down to the field.

“What is that?” asked Forsythe, nodding toward the gap.

“That”, replied Harkune, swelling with pride, “is the Breach.”

“The shortest game in the history of Kalgamorra” said Samirra, “was House Okran vs House Peller in ‘62. That game lasted only thirty nine seconds. Both teams were killed along with all four manglers, the Herald and all the spectators that were unlucky enough to be sitting there.”

The others looked at the crumbling gap in the stone circle. It was clearly old. Scorched rock and cracked stone hinted at fire long ago. Lichen and plants had taken hold in the cracks and crevices between exposed stones. Through the gap, the city and harbor could be seen beyond. The spectators today sat in the seats around it but gave the Breach a respectful distance.

“The Gaming Guild left it there, unrepaired, as a reminder,” finished Samirra.

“What caused that?” asked Forsythe. “What happened during the game?”

Samirra and Harkune exchanged glances. “It’s bad luck to discuss it... especially before a game.”

Before Forsythe could press the matter, their attention was drawn to a rapidly approaching sound. Coming across the field was two odd mechanical contraptions that greatly resembled rolling metal spheres. The eight foot spheres came on with the sounds of clanking metal and wheezing bellows. Blades, spikes, armor plating and various other mechanical protrusions decorated the hull of the things. A pair of mechanical pincers and a front mounted crossbow gave the thing a vaguely crab like appearance. A small metal pipe at the top of each sphere belched puffs of black smoke in time with the bellows. Forsythe and Harker both took a step back as they approached, but the things slowed and came to a clattering stop in front of the group.

A hatch at the top of the nearest sphere open with a bang and a small figure popped his head out amidst a cloud of oily smoke. He was a small dwarf wearing thick goggles. His clothing, skin and beard were soot stained and greasy. His dirty face split into a wide grin and he threw open his arms.

“Well met crazy men!” the dwarf cried. “My name Ukar” he said thumping himself on his chest. He then pointed to the other sphere. Another dwarf poked his head out of it. “My brother, Poj. We best manglers! We fight for you today. Good day for fight, eh?”

Callister nodded, grinning. “Good day for a fight. Yes.”

“We hear stories you! We big fans you! Third Wind! Great ship! We be honored! We be good manglers for you! Best! We crush enemy for you! We kill! Much blood! Good, eh?”

“I’m liking these two”, said Brakov.

“Me too” agreed Callister.

“Much blood!” yelled Ukar and cackled joyfully.

“Much blood!” yelled Brakov throwing a fist into the air.

Ukar cackled again and then disappeared back into his machine. With a rumble, the bellows fired up and the two spheres rolled off out onto the field leaving a trail of smoke behind them.

“They’re on our side, right?” asked Forsythe.

“They most certainly are” said a gravelly voice. They turned to find a wizened old man with an eye patch and stump where his left hand should be. He wore a leather apron stained with dried blood stains.

“Don’t get cocky though”, the old man said. His scarred face crinkled up into a smile. “The other team has a pair of manglers as well and theirs will be coming after you. They don’t call them *manglers* for nothing.” The old man walked up to Forsythe and

peered at him with his one good eye. “Blades, spikes, fire, all manner of weapons, in fact. You gotta be hard as iron to go head to head with a mangler.”

Forsythe looked like he was about to faint.

“Don’t worry, most of the time, they just try to roll over you.”

“Callister”, said Samirra. “This is our pit boss... Kreedle.”

Callister regarded the squat little man. He had an enormous nose and a fringe of snow white hair clinging to his skull. A jagged scar cut down his face and crept underneath the eyepatch. A variety of odd tools hung from his belt.

His good eye looked the group up and down.

“So you’re the mariners, eh?”

“Kreedle,” said Samirra, stepping forward. “Allow me to introduce-”

Kreedle cut her off with an upheld hand. “Stop right there. No names. Kreedle’s First Rule. Don’t need names. You boys are stepping into the gaping maw of Hell. You won’t live long enough for names to matter. Follow me. All of you.”

He led them over to the end of the field between their tower and the tiered arena wall. There was a low stone bunker set in the earth. A ramp of earth on one side led down into the center of it. The group followed Kreedle down into a dim room, illuminated only by a long narrow window that peered out on to the field at ground level.

Kreedle stopped in the center, turned and raised his arms, encompassing the entire chamber.

“Alright then. Look around you. This is our pit bunker. At the end of each round, it doesn’t matter where you in the field, you’ll be whisked back here in the blink of an eye. Magic. Don’t know how it works. Don’t care. But you’ll arrive here in a flash. The game moves fast and they don’t want to wait on wounded players who can’t limp or crawl their way back here.”

“Crawl?” asked Forsythe.

Kreedle ignore him. “This is home base. This is safety. Your precious few minutes here will be the only reprieve you have. Point is, it’s my job to keep you alive. We’ve got some splints, bandages and medicinal herbs here in the bunker. We need to make ‘em count.”

Kreedle walked over to the corner and grabbed a bucket.

“Alright, line up.”

Harker stepped up next to Callister. The rest milled about and got into position.

Kreedle stepped up to Callister, pulled out a brush dripping with white paint and drew a large number one on the front of his tunic. He then went down the line, numbering each man with a number. He then stepped back to admire his work.

“There! That’s much better, isn’t it number 4?”

Brakov nudged Forsythe, who looked down at his chest.

“Uh, much.”

“Best way to play this game is to pair up. Divide them team into six pair. You stay with your partner no matter what. I don’t care how you pair up, just pair up.

Callister stepped out of line. “All right, Harkune, take your five men and make three pairs. Four of your men should stay and guard our flag tower. The rest of us will be on offense. Choeg, stay with Forsythe and keep him safe.

“I’ll stay with Toth”, said Harker. “We’ve been a good team.”

“And Brakov with me” finished Callister.

Kreedle clapped his hands together. “Very good. Now... every round starts with the third strike of the gong and ends with the third strike of the gong. During a round, I advise you to keep moving. Let me say that again. Keep moving! Mobility is more important than armor. In this game, armor only slows you down. There are numerous terrible dangers-”

A blast of horns from out in the arena drowned out Kreedle. Kreedle looked out the window. “The other team. Quickly, back onto the field.” Kreedle ran up the dirt ramp and the others followed.

“Wait,” said Forsythe, running after the group, “What was that you were saying about terrible dangers?”

The twelve men hustled after Kreedle and back out. The blazing noonday sun was blinding after the dim shadows of the pit bunker. Blinking back tears from the sun, Harker could see that on the ramparts, great braziers were now belching forth colored smoke and sending columns of slowly churning emerald and sapphire and ruby smoke into the sky. Through some unseen magic, the columns of smoke were not dissipating, but rather snaking together and forming a colorful braid those rose high into the sky. It was an announcement to the city that a great game of Kalgamorra was about to begin. Callister and the rest followed Kreedle to the base of their flag tower where Samirra was waiting for them.

Across the field, a pair of immense oaken doors in the far wall began to open. As they swung wide, a dozen young men ran out. Each wore tights and tunics of blue and white, the colors of House Dragari, and carried a long trumpet that glinted silver in the

sunlight. They arranged themselves in two long rows and began to play fanfare for the arrival of their house.

From the darkness of the tunnel emerged a pair of massive reptilian creatures walking on four powerful legs. They were more than twice the size of a horse and their scales were painted blue and white. Each saurian head sat atop a long, curved neck and was crowned by a spiny crest. Swaying side to side, they strode into the arena, hauling a massive eight wheeled wagon, even larger than House Aldrayun's wagon. It was painted in the same blue and white motif as the beasts. The two reptiles snapped at the air with their long jaws and let loose with tremendous roars. The audience quieted, momentarily stunned by the spectacle, and then exploded in cheers.

"Just like House Dragari," muttered Samirra, shaking her head. "Always so flashy."

The trumpeters continued to blast away. As they watched, one of the huge reptiles snapped up the closest trumpeter in its jaws and proceeded to devour him to the sounds of screams and snapping bones. The thunderous cheers redoubled at this. The music staggered and faltered as the other trumpeters broke ranks and fled.

The wagon slowly circled around the far flag tower and came to rest in front of it. The rear doors opened, a set of stairs swung down and, one by one, the team members of House Dragari stepped out onto the field.

A trio of ogres stepped down from the wagon and were met with thunderous applause. The extra-large tunics they wore strained against their broad shoulders and massive chests. They struck heroic poses for the audience. One of them pointed toward Callister and his men and mimed something which elicited laughter from the crowd.

Behind them came a half dozen men that all looked similar. Their heads were shaved bald and their scalps and faces were painted white. Their tunics were torn and tattered. Spiked iron collars were around their necks. The twitched and pawed at the ground with their boots like agitated animals, hooting and hollering.

Brakov spat. "And they call *us* pirates!"

Next came two tall lean mean dressed in blue tunics wearing white masks. Behind them came a man in a black surcoat with a high collar. He had a thick mane of golden hair that trailed down his back.

The group formed a line and posed for the applauding crowd. Two manglers came up and flanked the group. One of the manglers blasted some kind of horn and black smoke sputtered out. The crowd cheered again.

"That's him," said Samirra. "The one in the middle. The blonde man all in black. That's Malkarrus. The one who ensorcelled your ship."

As if summoned by her introduction, Malkarrus began striding purposefully across the field toward them. Without hesitation, Callister marched out to meet him. Brakov

started to follow, but Callister gestured behind him and Brakov stopped. As the two lone men approached midfield, they slowed. Malkarrus stopped and clasped his hands behind his back. He looked Callister up and down with a look of distaste.

“The Pirate King himself. And what’s this? His skin adorned in the mysteries of the Great Ranyku? It is an offense to their greatness. Perhaps after the game, I’ll have my men skin your corpse and decorate my bed chamber with it.”

Callister opened up the satchel and pulled out the Third Wind. Malkarrus’s eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly regained his composure.

“Either this spell will be undone,” said Callister, holding the ship before him, “or I will kill you.”

“How dare you!” sputtered Malkarrus. “I am a magister of the Drakkellian Guild of Sorcery! I could burn you to ash where you stand. For all your blustering, you are nothing. A mere sea wretch.”

“Undone... or dead” replied Callister, pointing at the ice ship and Malkarrus in turn.

Malkarrus took a threatening step forward, his fists clenched. “Look into my eye, ! Do you see panic? Do you see *fear*?”

Callister’s fist struck like a lightning bolt and Malkarrus went sprawling face first into the dirt. “I see dirt in your eye.” With that, Callister turned and walked back to rejoin his team.

“Was that really necessary?” asked Samirra.

Callister glanced back at the enemy. Two of the ogres were helping Malkarrus up and brushing him off.

“Yes.”

Samirra turned away to hide her smile.

An assistant game warden came walking out toward Callister and his team mates. He was bearded and plump, but had a friendly face. He was carrying a bundle of brightly colored cloth.

“Greetings players!” said the short one. “I’m assistant game warden Aldzi. Just a few last minute things to check before the game begins.”

“Very well,” said Callister.

“You are the team leader?”

Callister nodded.

“Please put this on,” said Aldzi. He handed him a bright red tunic. “This signifies to the Game Wardens and the crowd that you are the team leader. It makes you easier to see during the game. Now, who is your designated team wizard?”

Forsythe came forward and sheepishly raised his hand. “Um, that would be me.”

Aldzi nodded and handed him a bright yellow tunic. “Put this on. This designates you as team wizard. By the rules of the game, you are the only member of your team allowed to use magic. You may use any spell, but you must confine your spells to the playing field and those on it. The arena, the audience and the game wardens are all off limits. Any spell which leaves the playing area will be a violation. Any damage to the arena or injuries to onlookers is a violation.”

“Understood.”

“Good luck to you all.” Aldzi turned and headed back to the main stage.

“Captain” said Samirra. “I must leave you now. The game is about to begin. I want to express my gratitude for leading the team. But I’ll be watching from the stands with many others from House Aldrayun. Good luck!”

As she left, Callister turned back to Kreedle and the others.

“What now?”

“Start every round, here, at the base of our flag tower,” replied Kreedle. “I’ll be in the pit bunker watching.”

“Any last minute advice?” asked Harker.

Kreedle’s gaze swept the entire team. “Keep moving! Never stop to ask why. Stopping to ponder or complain will only get you killed. And no matter what happens, remember, there’s always a way through. A path through the obstacles, a hole in the wall, something. There’s always a way. Good luck to you all! I’ll see you in the bunker at the end of the round.” With that, Kreedle turned and walked away. The twelve men turned to face the field.

“Alright men,” yelled Callister. “Pair up.” Brakov moved over to Callister. Choeg stood protectively next to Forsythe. Harker and Toth shook hands and wished each other luck.

“Look at that,” said Callister. Across the field, Malkarrus was wearing a tunic that was half red/half yellow, over his black surcoat. “He must be both team leader and team wizard.”

Brakov spat. “Arrogant son of a bitch.”

After a few minutes, the chattering of the crowd was broken by a tremendous horn blast, which elicited cheers. The Herald moved up to the pulpit with his scepter and placed

the mask end over his face. His voice boomed out of the mask, filling every corner of the arena.

“As it was in the beginning,” he began slowly “so it is now and ever shall be. And today, the story plays out again... two titans of Drakkel, House Aldrayun and House Dragari, locked in a furious struggle over the only thing that matters... profit! Both determined, both intractable... the only way to resolve it... battle and blood, fire and fury... unveiled for you today on a field of glory! One game, three flags, winner takes all, and let that be the end of it.”

The Herald repeated the last line, but this time a hundred thousand voices joined him... *One game, three flags, winner takes all, and let that be the end of it.*

The Herald pointed to Malkarrus. His magically amplified voice boomed over the cheering crowd.

“House Dragari... are you ready?”

The team on the far side of the field roared and pumped their fists in the air. Malkarrus, arms crossed and glaring, merely nodded.

“House Aldrayun... are you ready?”

Callister nodded while his team hooted and hollered.

“Then let the Wheel spin and the Game begin!” The crowd redoubled their cheering. The Herald pulled a large lever at the side of the pulpit. The wheel roared to life, clicking loudly as it spun around. The sigils flared and faded as each reached the top of the wheel. All eyes were on it as the spinning slowed. The masked ogre struck the gong and the sound hung in the air.

“Remember,” said Callister to those around him. “Keep moving and stay with your partner.”

Click, click, click. The wheel slowly. The gong sounded a second time.

“And no matter what comes out of that wheel”

Click, click, click

“We deal with it.”

Click.

The gong chimed a third time. The wheel stopped. The sigil on top flared to brilliant life. Instantly, the field before them changed into a hellish landscape. Sharp spires of jagged stone lanced up from a field of jumbled black rocks. Gaping chasms belched fire and smoke while lava flowed through fissures and cracks.

“Oh dear” whimpered Forsythe.

CHAPTER 13

A collective gasp escaped from players and crowd together. The landscape looked charred and devastated. Where there had been a broad grassy field was now a jumble of blackened boulders, sharp jagged spires of rock. Flame spouts and bubbling lava lit cracks and crevices. Tendrils of oily black smoke rose here and there. They could no longer see the other team or the far end of the field... just the enemy flag tower rising above the rocky terrain.

“Move!” yelled Callister. He and Brakov charged straight forward and disappeared into the rocky maze. The crowd cheered as they leapt into action. As both teams charged into the field, the drums began to play a thunderous, pulse pounding beat.

Harkune and Number Eight ran forward and headed right while the other four Aldrayun soldiers stayed at the base of the flag tower to guard it.

Forsythe watched as Harker and Toth ran into the maze and disappeared.

“Let’s follow those two” he said to Choeg, trying to sound braver than he felt. He took off at a jog and felt comforted to hear Choeg’s heavy footfalls right behind him. They ran into a maze of boulders and Forsythe immediately lost what he thought was a path. “Damn!” Seeing it split, he choose left, thinking Harker might go opposite Harkune.

There was an alarmed cry of surprise somewhere up ahead, but Forsythe wasn’t sure who it was. Choeg shrugged and pointed at a gap between two tall rocks.

“Looks good to me. Lead the way!”

Choeg charged forward and Forsythe followed, but immediately the ground began to buck and shake violently. He stumbled and fell to his hands as the shaking increased. He looked up just in time to see a fissure split the ground under Choeg’s legs. A roaring column of fire exploded upwards catapulting Choeg up and out of sight.

“Choeg!”

Forsythe got back to his feet, but another geyser of flame exploded to his side sending him hurtling back to the ground. Geysers erupted all around him spewing steam and ash into the air. Judging by the sounds of distant yells and the reaction from the crowd, this was happening all over the field. He rolled over choking, leapt to his feet and quickly started running. He glanced skyward but had completely lost track of his companion. Fighting back tears, Forsythe abandoned all caution and bolted forward, with no clue which direction he was facing.

Elsewhere, Harker was weaving between large black boulders with Toth right behind him. The shaking ground was making every step difficult. A sudden lurch sent Harker sprawling face first into the ground. He rolled over in time to see a fissure rip open the ground between him and Toth. Before either man could say a word, a number of rocky spires erupted out of the fissure like a line of spears. Lava bubbled out around the spires and Harker scrambled to get away as it splattered all around him. Regaining his feet, Harker backed up. The spires were thirty feet tall wreathed in fire and lava.

Harker couldn't see Toth. He called out to him, but his voice was lost amongst the roar of fire, the cheering crowd and the shaking ground. "Toth?" he yelled once more. There was no response.

A shift in the sound around him made Harker pause. The slow grind of rock on rock set his teeth rattling. Then, out of the fissures there suddenly came a thick red mist. It had a foul acrid stench that burned his nostrils and stung the eyes. Choking, gagging and half blind, Harker staggered away. He found what looked like a broad path and run forward. All he could see were his feet pounding on charred ground and red gas. He wasn't even trying to navigate and was only vaguely sure that he was heading toward the enemy's flag tower. The path was flanked by rock on either side. He had no choice but to continue on.

"Anyone?" Harker called out as he ran. There was no reply. Only the slap of his shoes and his labored breathing. He could distantly hear the crowd yelling and screaming. The rocky chasm he was running down ended and he suddenly burst out onto a field of level ground strewn with rocks. The far side was obscured by the red mist.

Without warning, a mangler came clattering out of the mist to his left and rushed toward him. It bristled with mechanical protrusions and a pair of menacing pincers. Harker caught a glimpse of a Dragari flag on top as he leapt to the side. He landed hard, rolled and got to his feet. The mangler stopped and rotated, kicking up stones and dirt and it turned. It charged again. Harker turned and fled across the field. He could hear the mangler right behind him, bouncing over small rocks and banging into large ones.

Looming ahead were a number of tall rocky spires like a forest of limbless trees. He looked for the narrowest gap he could find and leapt through. Harker landed in his feet and turned just in time to see the mangler rush the gap, but the gap was too narrow for it. The mangler hit the rocky spires hard. Its front armor crumpled under the impact with a loud metallic bang. A spray of rock and dust came down like rain. The crowd cheered and Harker caught himself smiling.

The smile quickly faded as a dull roaring noise rose behind him. He turned quickly and his jaw dropped. Come quickly through the rocky spires was a whirling vortex of flame. It was more than fifty feet tall, wavering with a sinewy grace as it lit up the red mist around

it in a halo of eerie orange light. Sand, rubble and rocks were whirling about inside the body of the vortex. Harker leapt to the side as the vortex swept past him. It engulfed the mangler that was still reeling from its impact. The mangler was swept up in the fiery maelstrom. Spinning around and around as it rose up, Harker could hear the panicked yelling of the driver. Within seconds, both vanished into the red fog leaving a stunned Harker standing in its wake.

Harker looked around. For the moment, he seemed to be alone and out of danger. He turned to see a towering shape through the red fog. The Dragari flag tower.

“Keep moving, Harker,” he muttered to himself. With that, he ran on.

Callister and Brakov watched as a whirling fiery tornado cut across their path and vanished into the red mist.

“Was that a mangler that just flew by?”

“Not one of ours”, replied Callister. “This way!”

The two men charged forward again, weaving through spires, leaping chasms and over boulders. They could clearly see the Dragari flag tower ahead, not more than a stone’s throw.

Both men skidded to a halt as a broad fissure shot up a curtain of flame in their path. The fissure rapidly opened up into a gaping pool of bubbling lava and steam. As they watched, a large mass arose from the pool, moving as if alive. It was a jumble of rocks and crusted lava a dozen feet tall. Streams of bright yellow lava trickled down out of cracks. It glowed from a hellish heat within. A pair of rocky pseudopods emerged from the sides and quickly shaped themselves in a pair of arms with massive hands. Another protrusion shaped itself into a hideous head. Glowing eyes and a gaping maw opened. The thing, now fully formed, roared at them in fury.

Callister and Brakov looked for a way around. The path split around the fissure, but they would be well within reach of those monstrous arms. As they exchanged looks, the creature dipped one hand into the lava pool and flung a flaming mass of lava toward the two men.

“Orders cap’n?” asked Brakov as he dodged.

“Split up!” answered Callister. “You go left. I’ll go right. Meet up on the other side. And watch out for those hands.”

The creature’s gaze followed Brakov as he tried to pass. The massive stony fingers curled in and a hammer-like fist came crashing down, narrowly missing Brakov. The fist opened and grasped at him. Both men dodged and scrambled, but were forced to back up to where they had started.

"It's faster than it looks" said Brakov. "I wish I had a sword."

"I wish I had a cannon!" replied Callister.

"Damn! Look there." Callister looked to where Brakov was pointing. Beyond the volcanic creature, three Dragari warriors were scrambling along a rocky ledge. They were heading to the Aldrayun end of the field and moving rapidly.

The creature roared and hurled another glob of flaming lava.

"We have to find a way around this thing", said Brakov

"Or we go through it!" Callister said. He gave a primal roar as he charged.

Harker's head snapped up at the sound of a roar. "Captain?" he called out. He had been running and now altered his direction toward the sound. He felt like he was covering ground. He leapt over a large rock, evaded a shower of sparks and covered his face as he ran through another geyser of red mist. As he raced round a large black boulder he ran into someone in someone wearing a bright yellow tunic and the two went down in a tangle of limbs.

"Harker!" exclaimed Forsythe. "Thank Semorjon. I lost Choeg and I've been running around here trying to find someone. I ran into some kind of fire serpent. It chased me all over the field. I had to use an ice storm spell to stop it."

"Slow down", said Harker. "What happened to Choeg?"

"I don't know. Some kind of fiery geyser. Catapulted him into the air," Forsythe shrugged helplessly. "I looked for him but I couldn't-, I- I think he might be dead."

Harker stood up, not quite sure what to say. "I got separated from Toth as well." He reached his hand down and helped Forsythe to his feet. "So you're my new partner. We can't stay here. We have to keep moving. Follow me and stay close'.

"I can do that."

They ran on through several geysers of steam, ash and red mist. Up ahead, through the fire and smoke, Harker caught a glimpse of Callister's red team leader tunic in the distance. He and Brakov seemed to be wrestling some kind of rock golem. Brakov was on its back and Callister was swinging his satchel like a weapon.

The view was suddenly blocked as three Dragari men dropped down on the path in front of them. They were armed with large stones.

"Forsythe" said Harker, "do you have a spell?"

"Maybe." Forsythe put his hands out in front of him and closed his eyes.

Suddenly there was a horn blast of two notes, followed by a chime of the gong that echoed across the field.

“Hold on a second,” said Harker to Forsythe. The three Dragari men kept coming and ignored the second gong stroke. They were only ten paces away.

Harker grabbed Forsythe’s arm. “Brace yourself.”

The third gong stroke sounded and instantly the surroundings changed. Snow replaced lava, ice covered rock and smoke and steam turned to snow. In the blink of an eye, Harker found himself knee deep in snow as a blizzard of wind and snow come down from the sky. Everyone was momentarily blinded by the whiteness.

“This is more like it!” exclaimed Forsythe with a smile. “As a sea mage, I’m a bit out of my element with all that fire and lava and ash, but this...” He made a few gestures in the air and spoke a few cryptic words.

A circular wall of ice rose up around the three Dragari men. One of the tried to leap out, but was too slow and fell back in. The curtain of ice curved in on itself toward the top and quickly formed a large, solid dome of ice over the three. Their silhouettes could be seen within, pounding on the ice. As Harker watched, the ice walls thickened and thickened until he could no longer see their silhouettes at all.

Forsythe walked over to the icy dome and leaned against it with a broad smile.

“Well done Forsythe!” said Harker, yelling over the wind.

“Yes, I’m much better with water.”

“How long will that last?”

“Probably only until the terrain changes again” Forsythe replied.

“Good enough. Let’s go!”

As the third gong stroke sounded, the volcanic creature bucked and sent Brakov hurling to the ground. Brakov was surprised to find himself landing in soft snow. He leapt to his feet and he and Callister watched as ice quickly flowed over everything and the snow deepened. The creature bellowed in fury at the wintry storm. The glow inside the creature rapidly diminished. It’s movements grew slow and stiff. Within seconds, the creature froze in a rictus of fury. It’s gaping maw began to fill with snow.

“Move!” yelled Callister and he took off at a sprint, ducking beneath the huge arms of the thing and continuing toward the enemy flag tower.

“Why did the-” began Brakov, as he changed after Callister.

“Don’t ask why!” yelled Callister.

The path came out from between two huge snow drifts and opened up into a broad snowy field with the Dragari flag tower straight ahead. At the base of the tower was Malkarrus with the two tall men in white masks.

Malkarrus wasted no time. He raised his hands and began casting a spell while the two white masked men ran forward. Brakov and Callister immediately started to move apart, forcing the two men to separate and the wizard to choose a target. Callister was not surprised when Malkarrus turned toward him.

Before the white mask reach Callister, Malkarrus hurled a spell. A bright sphere launched from his fingertips and flew toward Callister, trailing blue sparks behind it. Callister braced himself as it slammed into his chest, but the impact felt like nothing more than a blast of air. The sphere exploded into lightning and sparks which cascaded all over his body. The tattoos on his skin writhed beneath the onslaught, interlocking into new geometric configurations. The energy dissipated into globules of glowing energy. Where each glob of energy fell, it hit the snow and sizzled, burning a hole through the snow.

Malkarrus cursed, but Callister had no time to gloat. The white mask struck out with a flurry of fist strikes and tried to knock Callister off his feet with a sweep of his leg. Brakov was engaged with his own opponent. Clearly these two were no common thugs. They moved with the speed and precision of martial training. Brakov changed his stance and style to match his opponent and the two traded blows and kicks with dizzying speed.

Callister dodged and ducked a few more attacks from his own opponent. He felt another magical attack from Malkarrus rippled harmlessly across his body as his tattoos reconfigured themselves again.

The crowd cheered suddenly and the words “convention forty seven” were carried on several voices.

“What’s convention 47?” asked Brakov as he ducked under his opponent’s swing.

“You’re asking me?!” barked Callister, irritably.

There was a flash of golden light and Brakov suddenly found himself holding a sword. Callister was suddenly holding a small cannon the size of his arm and a flaming torch.

“Yes!” roared Brakov triumphantly.

Callister’s opponent charged. Thinking fast, Callister dropped the butt end of the heavy cannon to the snow and braced it with his foot while he held the muzzle up. He touched the torch to the powder as he aimed at the charging man. A deafening boom sounded and the masked man was blown backward with a gaping hole in his chest. He landed in a bloody heap at the foot of an astonished Malkarrus.

Callister’s ears were ringing. He could no longer hear the wind. He glanced over at Brakov who was pulling his sword out of his opponent’s body. Brakov said something, but Callister couldn’t hear it. He pointed at Malkarrus and yelled “Get him!.” Brakov, with sword in hand, and Callister wielding the flaming torch charged Malkarrus together.

Malkarrus quickly looked from one to the other and began to cast a spell. Just as the two of them got within striking range, Malkarrus vanished in a burst of blue light.

Brakov said something.

“Can’t hear you!” yelled Callister, pointing to his ears. “Cannon deaf.” He pointed to the flag tower before them. “Let’s go!”

Callister charged forward and Brakov followed. The ground in front of Callister suddenly exploded in a spray of white snow as something rose up in front of him. Callister felt sharp, spiny things grasp his shoulders and sides trying to get a grip. A sudden impact from behind sent Callister sprawling forward and the thing lost its grip. Callister rolled over and got to his feet to find Brakov wrestling with what looked like a giant centipede. The creature’s body was bluish and transparent. Its spiny legs wrapped around Brakov. Brakov already had his sword through the thing’s head and was repeatedly punching it on the side of the head. He yelled something to Callister and pointed to the tower.

Callister nodded. Armed with a sword, Brakov could handle the thing. Callister turned and bolted for the tower. As his feet pounded up the wooden ramp that circled the stone tower, Callister heard the gong sound. The round was almost over. As he came around the fourth corner he found a Dragari man there braced and waiting for him. Callister jammed the flaming torch into the man’s face and pushed him hard. The man went flailing off the ramp and fell twenty feet into the snowy field below. The second stroke of the gong sounded. Callister sprinted up the ramp, trying his best not to slip on the snow. He reached the top platform and lunged for the three flags. He grabbed the first one and yanked it out of its iron bracket just as the gong stroke a third time. He lifted the flag high and roared in triumph. The crowd erupted in response.

A sudden flash of light enveloped him and Callister was no longer standing at the top of the tower.

CHAPTER 14

After the glare of the white snow and the bright light, the bunker suddenly seemed very dark to Callister's eyes, even with the flaming torch in his hand. Kreedle was standing on a bench peering out at the field through of the bunker window. The rest of Callister's team began materializing rapidly, in random places all over the bunker.

Forsythe, Harker and Toth all materialized in rapid succession, in different parts of the room.

A second later, Harkune and Number Eight materialized. Both men were struggling to subdue an octopus like creature and neither seemed to have noticed that they were in the bunker.

"Die, you blasted thing, die!" Harkune yelled as he stabbed at the thing with an icicle. The creature flailed whip-like tentacles and died screeching and spurting blue blood.

Brakov appeared with the ice centipede's head clutched triumphantly in one hand and a broad sword in the other. He was smiling from ear to ear.

A pair of Harkune's men, Nine and Twelve, materialized. Nine was on fire and Twelve was attempting to put the flames out. Harkune and Toth, closest to them, leapt in and helped.

Choeg appeared lying prone, burned and bloody, but conscious and wincing in pain.

"Choeg! You're alive!" Forsythe rushed over to him and began tending to his wounds.

Finally, the last two appeared. Ten appeared on his knees, cradling Eleven. Eleven was bloody with gapping puncture holes in his torso. His left leg was missing below the knee.

Toth and Harkune both hurried over and knelt down.

"What happened?" asked Harkune.

"One of their manglers got him, sir", said Ten.

Toth felt the man's neck for a pulse, but then looked over at Callister and shook his head.

"And Choeg?" asked Callister.

"Not good" said Forsythe. "He's badly burned... broken leg. I could heal his injuries and get him back in the game, but it would take every bit of magic I've got."

“Use your magic to ease his pain, but no more. Choeg’s done enough. He stays here in the bunker where it’s safe. Save as much magic as you can for the fight.”

Forsythe nodded and laid his hands on Choeg’s leg.

Kreedle stepped down from the window bench and walked to the center of the bunker.

“You boys took a beating”, he said slowly, turning to face them all. “But eleven of you are still alive. And believe me, in Kalgamorra, that’s a good first round.”

He turned toward Callister with a smile and clapped him on the shoulder. “And we got one of their flags! Well done, Captain!” Kreedle took the flag from him. “I’ll make sure this gets to the top of our tower.” With that, Kreedle disappeared up the ramp and out of the bunker.

“Sorry about your man, Harkune” said Brakov.

“Aye.” Harkune nodded, resting his hand on the dead man’s forehead. “His name was Drazin and he was a good lad. We’ll drink to him tonight!”

A sudden horn blast sounded. Harker peered out the bunker window.

“According to the Board” he said, “convention 87 just came into effect.”

“And that means what?” asked Brakov, exasperated.

“Healing”, said Harker. “The other team just got healing.”

“Wonderful!” Brakov spat. “So the bugger I ran through with the sword might be on his feet again?”

“He might be, but not the one I hit with the cannon,” said Callister. “He’s surely dead.”

“I took one also” said Harkune, “that could not have lived.”

“Then we’re down two and so are they,” replied Brakov. “Ten against ten.”

A moment later Kreedle returned without the flag.

“Round two begins soon. If you have any questions for me, bark ‘em out now.”

“The Board just got updated again”, said Harker. “Convention 119? I don’t remember that one.”

“119, eh?” Kreedle said, scratching his beard thoughtfully, “means there’ll be a prize on the field. Placed near center field and undoubtedly hard to get to. Whichever team lays hands on it first gets to keep it and use it for the rest of the game. Can’t tell you what it is. Changes every game. But it’s always useful.”

“A weapon?” asked Brakov.

Kreedle shrugged. “Could be anything.”

“Alright, let’s talk weapons and strategy”, said Callister. He looked around the room. All of them had a weapon of some kind. “Weapons front and center. Let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

Brakov had a broadsword, Harkune’s men had a variety of long blades, Toth had a dwarven battle axe, Choeg had a massive ogrish war hammer and Forsythe had a silvered dagger. Harker had a tall wooden quarterstaff.

“Seems we each got a weapon suited to us,” said Brakov.

Callister smirked. “And if I’d known someone was listening, I’d have asked for something other than a cannon. Speaking of which, are the wardens listening all the time. Are they listening to us now?”

“No,” said Kreedle. “Out on the field, they see and hear a great deal. But not in here. Here, you can speak freely to plan out strategy and so forth.”

“What’s that you have there, Harker?” asked Forsythe. Harker handed over the weapon for Forsythe’s inspection. It was a straight wooden pole as tall as Harker, topped by a fist sized crystal that was glowing faintly. It had three feathers tied in twine to the neck and a variety of sigils burned in a long line running the length of the shaft. Half way down the length of it was a metal band around the shaft.

“A wizarding staff?” asked Toth.

“Seems to be infused with some sorcery,” replied Forsythe, “but I’ve not seen it’s like before.”

“I’ve seen that kind of staff before,” said Brakov, taking it from Forsythe. “This is a Normidian stun stick. They use them up north to hunt torgats. Teams of twenty men. But rarely do twenty men come back from a hunt. Right ornery bastard the torgat is.” He handed it back to Harker.

Harker took the staff back from Forsythe. “I think I’d rather have a Normidian ‘kill’ stick.”

“Oh, don’t judge too harshly,” answered Brakov. “That there stick packs quite a wallop.”

“How does it work?” asked Forsythe.

“Just aim the crystal at your opponent, give that metal band a twist and boom! It’ll let loose a blast of light and clap of thunder. It’s made to stun a torgat at close range. Probably kill a normal man. But be warned, it’s only got one shot. So make it count.”

“One shot?”

“Regardless of when you use the magic, you can still swing it like a quarterstaff. And that crystal is razor sharp. Good for stabbing.”

Callister stepped forward. "Alright men, we're changing tactics. Harker, Forsythe, the field is too dangerous for your two. I want you up at the top of our tower. Defend the flags. You'll be our last line of defense. Forsythe, you've got your spells. Harker, use that stun stick."

He turned to Harker's men. "Ten, Twelve... I want you at the base of our tower. Don't let anyone up the ramp."

"Aye sir" they said in unison.

"Toth, Harkune, Brakov, Eight, Nine – you're with me. We're offense. We're going after another flag and we'll do as much damage to the other team as we can while we're out there."

Callister moved over and knelt down next to Choeg. "Kreedle, take care of the big guy." Callister then put a hand on the massive weapon lying next to the ogre. The long handle was wrapped in leather and the weighty iron head was spiked. "I'm going to borrow this for the next round if it's alright with you." Choeg gave a weak smile and nodded.

The horn blared again – two short blasts. "That's it! You're out of time!" barked Kreedle. "Everyone outside. Move!"

The ten men regrouped at the base of the tower. The field had reverted to the flat featureless grassy field that it had been at the start of the game. On the far end of the field, ten men stood. Each team had a single mangler at their side. The wrecked hulks of the other two manglers were out in the field. One appeared to have been ripped apart. The ground around it was littered with mechanical debris. The other was on fire, smoking and lifeless.

The crowd was applauding, talking, laughing and whistling all at once, but a hush rapidly descended as the gaudily dressed Herald walked out to the pulpit. He raised his the scepter to his face and spoke.

"House Aldrayun leads, four flags to two. Our teams are still matched. Ten men and two manglers on either side. As my predecessor was fond of saying:

*'This game is far from over and fate's a fickle thing
Nothing's more uncertain than what second round can bring.
So place your bets, refill your drinks, let not your spirits waver.
The second round begins, let's see which House the gods will favor.'* "

With that, he pulled the lever and the big masked ogre struck the great brass gong. The sound hung in the air for a moment. All eyes were on the wheel as it spun in a blur and a whirl of clicks. The ogre struck a second time as the wheel slowed. Click, click, click. Sigils flashed briefly, now slow enough to see each in turn. The wheel slowed further... click, click, click. A third gong strike sounded as the wheel stopped.

The sigil flared brightly and the field changed. The entire arena was thrown into shadow by grey clouds overhead. The ground formed into rolling slopes. Sickly, leafless trees crawled their way out of the dirt to stand erect in tortured poses. Hundreds of gravestones pushed through the dirt. Within moments, a full graveyard stretched from one flag tower to the other. In the center of the field was a small lopsided hill with a cliff on one side. A twisted, decrepit tree was perched precariously on a rocky overhang over the cliff. A brightly glowing object was hanging from one of the branches.

The crowd roared in approval and the drums began playing again.

“Move!” yelled Callister and he charged forward with the others behind him. Harker and Forsythe charged up the spiral ramp of their flag tower.

“A graveyard,” panted Forsythe breathlessly, “last thing... I expected...”

They reached the top of the flag tower and peered over the edge. They had a good view of the field. Ten and Twelve stood at the base of the tower with their swords out. Callister and the rest were weaving their way through gravestones at a full run. Each team’s mangler was skirting the outside, looking for a path. The gravestones were chaotically arranged and there didn’t seem to be any place for the manglers to gain entrance.

Callister’s group was approaching the hill in the center of the field. As they made their way around the left side, they could see that a large cave was in the side of the cliff at the base of the hill. A dark shape moved within the cave and suddenly came out into the light.

It was an ugly, deformed giant thing more than three times the height of a man. Though it walked on two legs, it was much more beast than man. One arm was larger than the other, giving the creature a lopsided appearance. A third smaller arm jutted out from the center of its chest. A great single eye dominated its hideous face. Four yellow tusks protruded from slaving jaws. It lumbered slower out of the cave, saw Callister’s group and roared as it charged. The crowd went wild.

Callister turned to the group and looked at Harkune. “Split up! You go north, we’ll go south.” Harkune gave a quick nod and ran off heading on a wide arc around the north side of the hill. His two men followed after him. Callister, Brakov and Toth started for the south side of the hill.

The monstrous creature, almost within grasping range, hesitated as all the men scattered, splitting around it. It gave a roar of frustration and then began lumbering after Harkune’s trio. Despite its awkward gait, the creature covered much ground with every stride.

Eight was having a hard time keeping up with the other two men. The creature closed the distance and lunged out with a grasping hand. Eight leapt to the side, rolled and came up on his feet. Harkune and Nine reached the arena’s wall. Eight tried to join them, but the creature positioned himself between Eight and the other two, seemingly focused on Eight. Having no choice, he began backing up, heading along the wall, back toward House

Aldrayun's flag tower. The crowd tried to help, throwing food and rocks to distract the creature. Eggs and pebbles pelted the horny hide, but the creature's gaze never wavered. Its single eye starred unblinking at Eight as the two maneuvered.

Eight glanced behind him and saw one of the sickly, leafless trees near the wall. Its huge trunk twisted out of the soil at an angle and its gnarled limbs branched out over the wall and within reach of the crowd.

Without warning, the creature charged forward in a bull's rush. Eight sprinted for the tree, ran up the trunk and raced into the twisting branches. The creature slammed into the tree shaking it from trunk to twig. It tried to reach Eight, but there were too many branches in the way. The beast then took hold of the two largest branches and began to shake the tree in fury. Eight held on tight as the entire tree bucked and swayed, left and right. Finally, he gathered up his courage and threw himself from the branch. He landed awkwardly on the top of the wall and scrambled to his feet. The creature, realizing its prey had left the safety of the branches, moved around the tree toward the wall. The creature's long arm lashed out, surprising Eight. He leapt again, just barely dodging the enormous hand and came to his feet further along the wall top.

The crowd's wild cheers turned to panicked screams as the enormous hand closed around a hapless onlooker in the first row. A shower of food, rocks and shoes pelted the creature. Those in the first row stabbed at the beast with blades and sticks, but to no effect. The hand dragged the unfortunate wretch to the gaping maw and the creature bit the man's upper half off. The creature gnawed on the twitching body casually, forgetting its prey for the moment.

The Aldrayun mangler came rolling up along the edge of the field toward the beast. The big crossbow on the mangler's front fired and the bolt stuck in its side. The beast gave the mangler a swift kick, sending it rolling away.

Seeing an opportunity, Eight ran back. He passed the creature, passed the tree and began running toward the Dragari end of the field. The smooth flat surface of the wall top was wide enough that he could run at full speed. Onlookers in the crowd, many of who were leaning along the wall top, backed up to give him room to pass. Eight saw Harkune and Nine ahead. Within a few seconds, he'd be close enough to jump down and rejoin them.

"Penalty!" came a thunderous voice. It was the Herald, gesturing wildly from the pulpit with the mask scepter in front of his face. "The Game Wardens have declared a Penalty!"

A murmur rippled through the crowd, punctuated by a few boos.

"Out of bounds!" yelled the Herald, pointing at Eight. "Off the field and out of bounds!" He conferred briefly with one of the assistant game wardens and then lifted the mask scepter again. "The Judges have decided... to the Cage!"

“To the Cage!” chanted a few hundred voices in the crowd. “To the Cage! To the Cage!”

Eight was suddenly lifted up into the air by some unseen force. He flew up toward the huge cage of iron bars hanging above the field. The cage door opened, he was tossed in and the door slammed shut with a clang. Eight gazed down at the game field through the crisscross of iron bars in the cage floor.

“Did you see that?” said Forsythe, incredulously.

“I was wondering how they got us up to the cage,” remarked Harker.

“No, not the cage!” sputtered Forsythe. “That poor innocent onlooker. The creature... devoured him.”

“That’s why so many people in the front row carry weapons.”

“But-”

“Look there,” said Harker, pointing. “Cap’n’s reached the hill.”

“Damn! Did you see that?” asked Callister, as they ran. “Right up to the cage he went.”

“I saw,” said Brakov. “Now it’s ten to nine.”

Callister slowed and stopped as they came to the foot of the hill. Brakov and Toth stopped with him. A worn dirt path skirted the base of the hill, weaving between dozens of gravestones. A second path went up the hillside. At the top of the hill, they could clearly see the tree at the top, perched at the edge of the cliff. It was ancient, gnarled and twisted. Its naked branches looked like claws. Hanging from a branch, over the edge of the cliff was the brightly glowing object that they had seen from the distance. Now that there were so close to it, Callister could clearly see that the object hung from the branch by a chain. Whatever the object was, it was small, glowing and contained by some sort of iron bracket around it.

“Captain” said Toth, panting heavily. “I must speak with you.”

“What is it?”

“That thing,” pointing Toth at the object in the tree, “cannot fall into the other team’s hands. It’s an arkulyte.” Toth was met with two blank expressions. “An arkulyte... a wizarding stone, sometimes called a power crystal.”

“That’s great,” said Callister. He glanced at Brakov. “So... south path?” Brakov nodded.

“Wait,” said Toth. “An arkulyte is a powerful crystal. It contains pure essence... pure magic.”

“We don’t need magic,” said Brakov, swing his blade. “We’re doing quite well with cold steel.”

“Yes, quite... but my point is, that I can sense the crystal’s power and so will Malkarrus. If he acquires the crystal, it will greatly intensify his spells and-” Toth stopped abruptly, as if sensing something. A moment later, something lashed out from the ground and struck Brakov’s leg.

“Kael!” cursed Brakov in surprise. A skeletal hand was sticking out of the dirt and had clamped around his ankle. Brakov swung his sword down, severing the arm. He grabbed the bony thing, yanked it off of his ankle and threw it in disgust. It landed with a crunch in the distance and it was only then that all three men became aware of sounds all around them. As they watched, skeletons began clawing their way out of the dirt. From every grave, a skeleton arose. Dirt cascaded off of them. Most of them had rusted iron helmets, notched axes, broken swords and dented shields. Bits of moldering flesh, rotted cloth and tattered leather clung to the bones here and there. Worms wriggled between broken teeth. Within each empty eye socket was a flicker of fiery light.

Another stood up directly in front of them, shaking dirt from its bones. Its left arm ended at the elbow where Brakov had struck. It wore a chain and steel helmet and held a battle axe in its remaining hand. The thing looked at the three men, opened its mouth and let out a dry, raspy death rattle. It moved toward them and raised its axe. Four more were coming up right behind it.

“Run or fight,” asked Toth.

Callister swung his great hammer, catching the one armed skeleton in the chest and sending it careening into the other four.

“You need to ask?” laughed Brakov.

Harker and Forsythe stayed at disbelief at the scene unfolding below them. All around the field, skeleton warriors were ripping their way out of their graves. They could see Callister, Brakov and Toth surrounded by more than a dozen skeletons and fighting bravely.

Harker grabbed Forsythe by the shoulder. “Those skeletons are likely going to overpower our two men down there. We can’t let them or the Dragari soldiers up the ramp. Do you have any spell that might prevent them coming up? Can you block the ramp?”

Forsythe’s eyes lit up. “I can blow a gap in it with a hull breach spell!”

“No, no, no” said Harker. “We can’t intentionally damage the tower. Against the rules. They might put *you* in the cage if you did that.”

Forsythe thought for a moment. “I have it.” He rummaged around in his robes for a moment and withdrew a small silver cup. He set it on the edge of the tower parapet, closed

his eyes and began gesturing over the cup. His fingers worked deftly, tracing unseen glyphs in the air over the cup as he whispered arcane words of power. After a few moments, he opened his eyes, grabbed the cup and stepped over to the top of the wooden ramp. He then tipped the cup and out flowed a golden liquid. It splashed all over the wooden ramp, soaked in and began flowing down the ramp.

Harker wrinkled up his nose at the stench. "Smells fishy... what is that foul stuff?"

"Hornwhale oil", said Forsythe with a smile. "Very slippery stuff. This'll make the ramp unclimbable."

"Does it have to be hornwhale oil?"

Forsythe shrugged. "I am a sea mage, you know."

Gallons and gallons of the oil poured forth from the tiny silver cup. Harker leaned over the edge of the parapet and looked down. He could see the oil splashing and rolling down the entire ramp. It dripped down the walls of the tower as well.

"There!" said Forsythe, putting the cup away. "Dragari thugs and skeleton horrors both... I'd like to see any of them try to get up our ramp now."

The two Aldrayun soldiers at the base of the tower were sword fighting with four skeletons. They had their backs to the ramp, but they were outnumbered. Before long a few skeletons made it around the two soldiers and started up the ramp. After a few feet, their boots slipped and slid and the lot of them came tumbling and clattering down to land in a tangled heap at the ramp's bottom. The things climbed to their feet and glared up at the men.

"Seems to be working," said Harker with a smile. "Well done."

"We may have a problem," said Forsythe. Harker moved over to Forsythe and peered down. His smile quickly faded as the four skeletons approached the wall on the opposite side from the Aldrayun soldiers and began climbing up the side of the tower. They carefully dug their bony fingers into the cracks between stones and began working their way up, stone by stone. Others followed. Soon more than a dozen skeletons were crawling up the tower side like macabre insects.

The wooden ramp was supported by wooden scaffolding that pierced the stone wall of the tower with support beams at regularly spaced intervals. A gap of more than a foot existed between the wooden ramp and the tower wall. Harker hoped that the gap would be too small for the skeletons to get through. His hopes were dashed as the first skeleton reached the gap and easily fit through. It had a rusting sword clenched between its teeth and its flickering pupils seemed fixed on Harker.

"Damn!"

A horn sounded from the great central tower and the crowd erupted in cheers.

“Now what?” barked Harker irritably.

Forsythe tapped Harker’s shoulder and pointed up toward the clouds. From the great churning grey cloud that hung over the arena, a dark shape moved. And another. Suddenly a trio of winged forms darted down out of the clouds and into the light. Horned heads, leathern wings and serpentine tails caused a gasp to ripple through the crowd.

“Dragons?!?” said Harker.

“No, too small,” replied Forsythe. “I think those are fire drakes.”

The three drakes circled each other in a great spiral and then broke apart, separating. They were graceful and fast. One of them sped directly toward Harker and Forsythe, passing their flag tower in a streak of red and black. It circled and came back to the tower, slower this time. As it glided overhead, it peered down at the two men and shrieked. It then dove toward the tower and spewed out a stream of fire as it passed. Both men ducked behind the parapet as flames splashed the tower top.

“Is that oil flammable?” asked Harker.

“Extremely!”

A moment later there was a roaring whoosh. Harker peered over to see fire racing down the ramp. The fire spread to the scaffolding and even sections of the tower walls ignited. Within seconds, the entire tower was ablaze. The crowd exploded in frantic cheers while the Herald cleared his throat.

“Do we have a violation? No?” said the Herald. There was a brief flurry of activity on the main stage and then the Herald said “The Wardens declare... no fault.”

Through sheets of flame, Harker could see skeletons crawling up the side of the tower. All of them were on fire. None of them had stopped their ascent.

“Well, at least we know those skeletons aren’t coming for the flags” said Forsythe cheerfully.

“No, they’re just coming to kill us.”

The first skeleton reached the parapet. Bones and armor both were ablaze. The fire, ash and scorched marks only made the thing more horrific. It took the sword from its mouth and stepped down onto the tower roof with the two men. Harker lunged forward with the staff, trying to stab the thing in the face with the crystal tip. The skeleton jerked left with surprising agility and Harker missed. As the fiery horror advanced, a second skeleton reached the top and peered over the parapet.

“Protect the flags!” yelled Harker and lunged forward again.

At the center of the field, on the south end of the hill, Callister, Brakov and Toth were embroiled in battle. Splintered bones and crushed skulls littered the field around them. All three were armed with large, heavy weapons that were working well against the undead marauders.

Callister glanced over and saw that the Dragari mangler had managed to weave its way in between gravestones and stopped a mere thirty yards away. Skeletal warriors had surrounded it and one was on top. Their ancient rusting blades rang against its armored hull. They weren't damaging it, but they were preventing it from coming closer.

"I think you should know", said Brakov as he swung and sent another skeleton to the ground "that our flag tower is on fire."

"Can't leave those two alone for a minute." Callister swung and sent a skull flying into the distance.

A sudden shriek caused all three men to look up just as a large winged creature bore down on them. It raked the ground with a stream of fire as it passed. All three leapt clear of the flames.

"Fire drake," said Toth, getting back to his feet. "A southern red-banded firedrake, if I'm not mistaken."

"Well, that explains the tower," said Callister.

"Make that two fire drakes."

A second firedrake swept by leaving another trail of fire on the ground, crisscrossing with the first.

Malkarrus appeared around the side of the hill followed by his remaining masked bodyguard and one of the big ogres. They were on another trail and half way up the hill. For a moment, Malkarrus and Callister locked eyes. Malkarrus smiled and started up the hill with his men behind him.

"We must stop him, captain" implored Toth. "If he acquires the crystal-"

"Yes, yes, very bad things. I thought all you wizards said I'd be immune to his magic."

"You are," replied Toth. He ducked a skeleton's sword swing and brought his hammer down on its skull. "But with that crystal in hand... I don't know. He may be able to overpower your tattoos. I do not think it wise to risk it."

Callister thrust his hand into the satchel and dug around. A moment later, he withdrew the Eye of Ishkol. "What about this? Use this against him."

"I can't," said Toth. "He's too far away. Range is critical. The Eye *must* be near its target."

Callister thrust the Eye back into the satchel and then looked back and forth between the two paths. One winding path meandered through the graveyard to the Dragari flag tower. Dozens of skeletal warriors were scattered around the field, but they were spread out. The other path wound up to the top of the hill, to the big tree and the prize. Malkarrus and his two men were half way to the top already. Skeletons were crawling all over the hill and more were coming from all directions. They seemed to be drawn to the hill.

“Fine!” he said finally. “If we need to be closer, let’s get closer. Brakov! Up the hill!”

Callister began swinging his war hammer in wide arcs, catching two skeletons mid rib cage and send them flying. The other two followed, their weapons swinging wide and cutting a path through their bony opponents. The trio began slowly working their way up the hill.

The top of the Aldrayun flag tower was thick with black smoke from the burning oil and wood. Harker and Forsythe were surrounded as skeletons climbed over the parapet again and again. Harker was swing his quarter staff wildly. Fortunately, it was the perfect weapon for this melee. Long, light weight and with excellent reach. He found that with a good swing he could send a skeletal warrior flying from the tower top and had already sent more than a dozen falling to the ground below.

Unfortunately, the fall wasn’t enough to destroy them. He was beginning to recognize specific skeletons by their weapons and armor. More than one of them had climbed up a second time.

Forsythe was beside him, blasting individual skeletons off the tower with various spells. At first, he had hurled spheres of water, then short blasts of wind. Now he was wielding a trident he had summoned.

One of the firedrakes came roaring through the smoke and snapped its long jaws at Harker, narrowly missing. The smoke swirled in eddies as the drake flew by and vanished into the smoke again.

“Can you... do anything... about this... smoke?” asked Harker, choking the words out between coughs. “I can’t see anything.”

“How about rain? That’ll douse the fire... and clear the smoke.”

“Do it!”

Forsythe raised both hands to the dark grey cloud above. “*Voco excieo pluvia tempestas!*” Immediately, sheets of rain began sweeping the tower. The fire below was quickly quenched and steam from the hot stones began to mix with the smoke. After a few moments, the smoke began to clear.

“Much better” yelled Harker, as he swung at another skeleton.

There was a tremendous roar from below. Both men exchanged worried looks and leaned over the edge of the parapet.

“Now what?!!?”

The sides of the tower were black with soot and there was little of the wooden ramp and scaffolding left. A dozen skeletons still clung to the tower sides, trying to find a grip on the rain slick stones. But what drew the eye was considerably larger. At the base of the tower, they could see the monstrous beast from the hill cave. In the chaos and confusion, Harker had forgotten about the beast. Here it was now, looking up at them.

Harker looked for the two men down below. One Aldrayun soldier was already dead, with a half dozen skeletons hacking at his body. The other was thirty yards away, surrounded by the undead, but still fighting.

The huge beast began scaling the tower like some monstrous ape climbing a tree. The creature’s powerful hands and thick blunt fingers were gaining purchase by using the charred struts of the scaffolding as handholds. The two men watched as it kicked a skeleton off of the side of the tower and sent it flying to the graveyard below. Further up, it came upon another skeleton, grabbed it around the chest and squeezed, crushing it to splintered pieces. The creature then looked up, directly at Harker and Forsythe, roared and quickened its ascent.

“Do you have any spells left?” Harker asked.

“A few”, replied Forsythe “but nothing that will stop *that* thing.”

Harker quickly looked around the tower top for something. Skulls, bones, shreds of armor and broken weapons littered the floor. The tower roof was slick with rain and puddles. Four flags jutted out from their metal sconces in the central stone. The ramp had been their only way down.

The creature came over the side of the parapet. Enormous head, lopsided shoulders and one arm bigger than the other. It reached out with its larger arm toward Forsythe. Forsythe stabbed the hand with his trident and the creature recoiled and grunted in pain. Again and again, Forsythe stabbed at the hand keeping it at bay.

The creature withdrew his arm and swung one leg over the parapet. Harker hoisted the staff like a javelin, wondering if he could hit the creature’s single eye. Suddenly, Brakov’s words came thundering back to Harker. He shifted his grip on the staff and aimed it at the creature’s chest.

“Get down!” yelled Harker.

Forsythe dropped to the ground and Harker twisted the staff’s metal sleeve. The crystal tip lit up and a shaft of brilliant blue-white light shot out of the crystal. Blindingly bright, the beam struck the beast full in the chest and catapulted him backwards into empty air. The creature spun wildly, end over end, roaring all the way down. Harker and Forsythe

rushed to the edge. The beast was far below, on the ground and twitching, but otherwise not moving.

“Did you see that?” asked Toth, excitedly. The light from the top of their flag tower, which had lit up all the clouds around it, was fading.

“I think that was the Normidian stun stick” said Brakov.

“No doubt!” said Callister, without sparing a look. He brought the massive war hammer down on a skeleton and crushed it to a pile of bones with one stroke. He glanced up at the hill top. Malkarrus was at the great tree, leaning out over the cliff edge and had his hands on the iron bracket already. No doubt, he’d have the crystal in hand any moment. The ogre and the masked man were keeping the skeleton warriors off of him. They were wielding swords and wearing armor that they had picked up from fallen undead soldiers.

Brakov dropped another of the skeletal warriors and looked around. The hill was swarming with the undead. It was a flurry of swords and skulls and bony arms and rusting helmets. The dry raspy rattling moans of the skeletons was unnerving.

“I hate the walking dead!” he yelled to no one in particular and swung again, cleaving a skull from bony shoulders. “Stay dead!” he yelled at the corpse as it collapsed.

A sudden peal of thunder boomed all around them and a lightning bolt streaked down from the hill top. It struck three skeletons that were all fighting the ogre. The three skeletons were blasted apart. Nothing but bone fragments and dust remained. One of their skulls rolled down the hill toward Callister.

Malkarrus was striding down the hill triumphantly, a maniacal grin upon his face. He held the glowing crystal in one hand. With his other, he was flinging lightning bolts one after another. He formed a fist and leveled it at a particular large skeleton that was advancing on him and his two men. A bright beam of lightning shot out straight and disintegrated the thing. He then opened his fist, fingers spread. Five lightning bolts lanced out from his five fingers, taking out an equal number of skeletons.

He continued down the hill, his two men falling in pace behind him. Again and again, tendrils of lightning arced out blowing skeleton warriors to pieces. Malkarrus was making directly for Callister and, within moments, had swept the hillside clear of skeletal warriors. Now none stood between him and Callister.

“You two,” said Callister “get behind me.”

“He seems more interested in defeating you than winning the game” said Toth, as he made his way behind Callister.

Malkarrus stopped a mere twenty paces from Callister. He held his free hand down for a moment. Lightning continued to arc between his fingers and the ground. Sparks dripped from his fingertips. He glared at Callister.

“Now you end, pirate! Allow me to show you true power.”

Malkarrus held the crystal aloft and the glow within grew even brighter. Miniature lightning bolts began to swirl around his arm and torso, increasing in number and speed. A buzzing drone could be heard as the intensity of the spell swelled moment by moment. The ground began to shake and the droning increased. Malkarrus eyes began to glow white and the mane of hair around his head stood on end like a halo of gold. Callister’s tattoos twitched in response to the energy all around him.

Malkarrus raised his free hand, clenched into a fist and thrust it toward Callister. All of the tendrils of lightning and energy swirling around him responded, racing down his arm and joining together into a vortex of energy that stabbed out in a unified beam. The energy blast hit Callister in the chest. The tattoos reacted instantly, shifting, adjusting and interlocking to form complex geometric patterns. Sparks and bolts careened from the impact, dripping to the ground. But the tattoos held and Callister stood his ground. The bolt dissipated.

A gong in the distance sounded.

Malkarrus shook his head in utter disbelief. “Impossible!”

Callister smirked and shrugged.

The gong sounded again. Malkarrus threw his head back and roared in frustration.

The gong sounded a third time and there was a flash of light as all the players were whisked back to their bunkers.

CHAPTER 15

With a series of flashes, the team appeared in the bunker. Everyone was battered, beaten and bloody. Everyone had seen battle. Ten was dead, hacked and stabbed a dozen times over. The undead warriors had shown no mercy. Kreedle began passing bandages and healing herbs out.

“Where’s Grattik?” asked Harkune, looking around the chamber.

“Who?”

“Number Eight!” he bellowed.

“Still in the cage,” replied Kreedle. “Once you’re in the cage, you stay there until one of your team mates violates a rule and gets sent up. Only one person from each team in the cage at a time.”

Callister looked at Harker and Forsythe who were standing in the corner.

“What the hell happened over here? Looked like the whole damn tower was on fire?”

“It was,” replied Forsythe. “It’s rather a long story.”

“Is the ramp gone?”

“Yes.”

“No, actually” replied Kreedle. “The field returns to its original state at the beginning of every round. That includes the towers, ramps, everything.”

Brakov spat. “Magic...”

“Harkune, next round you and your men guard the base of our tower,” said Callister. “The rest of us will be on offense. We’re going after Malkarrus.”

“Harker, Forsythe, see what you can do for their injuries,” said Callister, nodding toward Harkune. The two nodded and set down working on Harkune and his two remaining men, Nine and Twelve.

“We’re down four men,” said Brakov. “I think we’re going to need Choeg out there with us.”

Callister nodded. “Forsythe, use whatever magic you need to get Choeg back on his feet. We need him.”

“Save your magic for the game, Forsythe” said Toth. “Allow me to help Choeg. I may be forbidden from casting spells, but I believe there may be something in the satchel that can help.” Toth stepped over to Callister, reached into the satchel and pulled out a small clay flask. He then stepped over to Choeg and let him drink deeply from the flask.

Toth smiled at the questioning looks and gave a shrug. “My own recipe.”

A moment later Choeg was standing on his feet, feeling much better.

“Better?” asked Callister. Choeg nodded.

“Here,” said Callister, handing Choeg the massive war hammer he had taken earlier. “You’ll need this.”

While the others were busy tending to the wounded, Callister pulled Toth and Brakov off to one side and kept his voice low. He fished the Eye of Ishkol out of the satchel and held it up. “If I can get this close enough to Malkarrus, can you magic your way into his head? Use *this* to force him to release the spell on my ship?

“Yes, but you’d have to be close,” answered Toth. “He’d have to look directly into the Eye.”

“I’ll be close,” said Callister with a smile.

“I knew you lot were going to be trouble,” said Kreedle coming up to the trio, “the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“What do you mean?” asked Toth.

“All this business of using that thing to force him to undo a spell.” Kreedle shook his head. “That’s mind magic. Charm spells and such... not allowed. And I’m fare certain whatever that egg looking thing is... if you’re planning on magicking him to undo some spell... that’d be worth sending you to the cage, I think.

“Oh, I have no doubt I’m going to spend some time in the cage before this game is over. Besides, it’s the fool who doesn’t cheat when the game is rigged.”

“So why the worried look,” asked Brakov.

“I’m going after Malkarrus with this. He knows now, beyond any doubt, that he can’t affect me with his magic.”

“Which means he might go after us,” said Brakov.

“Exactly. So I’ll just have to keep him focused on me. If I get close enough to him, I’m going to jam this in his face. When I do, Toth, you use your magic and try to get him to undo the spell. If it works, the ship is free. If it doesn’t, I’ll kill him. Either way, the ship is free. After that, I don’t care what happens. If the Game Wardens want their precious game to continue, they’ll have to deal with a ship lying on the field.”

“If they have magic that can us move us from one end of the field to the other in a flash,” said Brakov, “maybe they can move the ship to the harbor. It’s not that far away.”

The horn blared again – two short blasts. “Alright everyone!” barked Kreedle. “Time for Round 3. Everyone out to the field!”

The team regrouped at the base of the tower. This time, there were only eight. The field had, once again, reverted to the flat grassy field. Their flag tower had been repaired. The wooden ramp and scaffolding circled the tower up to the top, as if they had never been touched by fire.

On the far end of the field, eight men stood and a single mangler. The lifeless remains of the other three dotted the field.

The murmur of the crowd quieted down as the Herald took his position at the pulpit suspended over the edge of the field. He paused on the tiny platform with one hand on the lever and his gaze swept the crowd. He raised the scepter to his face and spoke.

“The score remains unchanged this round, two flags to four. Three manglers down, one left. And the teams are still tied, eight men against eight.”

With that, he pulled the lever and the big masked ogre struck the great brass gong. The wheel burst into motion, a blur of spinning and a rush of metallic clicks. The ogre struck a second time as the wheel slowed. Click, click, click. The magic sigils flashed one to another, as it slowed. The third stroke of the gong sounded as the wheel came to a halt.

The sigil flared brightly and the field changed. The flat grass field was replaced with bright orange sand dunes from edge to edge. The entire arena lit up from the reflected light and took on an orange hue. Small dust devils swept the dunes, here and there. But beyond that, nothing broke the featureless sand dunes between the two towers.

“Figures” muttered Forsythe.

The drums started up a riotous beat and the crowd chanted in time.

“Harkune, guard the tower! The rest of your with me. We’re going after Malkarrus. Let’s finish this once and for all!” With a roar, he charged forward out across the sand. Brakov, Harker, Forsythe, Toth and Choeg charged after him.

Running in the sand was difficult, but soon the five men were almost halfway to the center field. Malkarrus and his men had divided into two groups of four each. One group was skirting the north wall. The group with Malkarrus was heading straight down the center, directly toward Callister and his men.

When the two groups were a mere fifty feet apart, a deafening groaning sound shook the dunes and a massive shape rose up from beneath the sand. An enormous round head and cylindrical body breached the surface. Sand cascaded off the creature as it rose. It was some kind of snake or worm. The bulk of it was easily eight feet in diameter with a body

that extended more than fifty feet. It bristled with hairs and fins. Multiple eyes blinked open and regarded the men. Its jaws opened and it let out a roar.

Before anyone could react, a second worm breached the surface directly underneath Malkarrus' team. The four men went flying. A third worm breached close to Callister, spraying the five men with sand. A fourth worm breached the sand like a shark cutting through water. It was heading toward the other Dragari team near the north wall.

Chaos erupted as the four worms rose and dove. One of the men in Malkarrus' team died screaming as a worm crashed down on him with its jaws open wide.

Callister charged directly toward Malkarrus hoping to take advantage of the confusion. He dodged left and then right, evading the coils of one of the huge worms. Before he could reach Malkarrus, one of the worms breached right between the two men. Callister was thrown back amidst a wave of sand. He came up, spitting and coughing, but unharmed. One hand darted to the satchel to make sure it was still with him.

Directly ahead of him, the worm was towering over Malkarrus, its massive head craned down toward the wizard, jaws open and preparing to strike. Malkarrus had the power crystal in one hand held before him defensively. His other hand was held out and swaying left to right as he intoned words of magic. The worm, tense and eager, suddenly relaxed and let out a guttural sigh. The great head began to sway left to right in time with the wizard's hand.

Malkarrus pointed to Callister and the worm's head turned.

"Kill!" the wizard said.

Instantly, the worm reared up and the head shot forward, directly toward Callister. The mariner lunged out of the way as the head impacted the dune sending sand showering out in all directions. Callister rolled to his feet only to leap out of the worm's strike again. Again and again the beast coiled and shot forward, missing the mariner each time by a split second. The two danced around each other, but the worm was driving its target back, with each assault. Callister turned and ran, hoping to lead the worm off and circle back for the wizard. The worm gave chase. As he ran, Callister looked for the others. He saw men running, worms breaching and curtains of sand being thrown up. But didn't see any of his team. He veered toward the main stage with the Herald, the pulpit and the great wheel. A chorus of boos followed as some saw what Malkarrus was doing.

He heard Malkarrus laughing behind him and spared a look over his shoulder. Malkarrus was chasing after the worm, laughing and yelling, as the worm chased Callister. The three of them were now far from center field and getting close to the main stage.

A sudden impact from behind sent Callister pitching face first into the sand. Something tugged at the satchel and Callister bolted upright. He was nose to nose with the enormous

sand worm. It had managed to bite down on satchel's strap and was pulling. Callister suddenly found himself in a tug of war with the great beast with the satchel between them.

"No you don't," yelled Callister. "Bad worm!" he said throwing a handful of sand at its face. His protests went unnoticed. The sand worm raised itself up. The head rose rapidly into the air and Callister clung stubbornly to the bag. In an instant, he found himself dangling twenty feet off the ground. The worm began to shake satchel left and right, trying to throw the man loose.

"My bag!" yelled Callister. The crowd roared in approval with some cheering on Callister and others cheering on the worm.

With a roar, the sand worm jerked its head to the side. Callister and the satchel both went flying. The world spun as he flipped head over heels. With a crash, Callister landed in the midst of an astonished crowd. Laughter and cheers turned to panicked cries. The worm coiled back and attacked. The thing lunged into the crowd, biting and goring. It swept its head left and right, knocking dozens of people over and turning wood benches to splinters. The worm was trying to get a grip on Callister's legs. He kicked the beast's snout and then rolled away. Panic rippled through the crowd as the sand worm struck again, sending people and benches flying.

In the confusion, the satchel was knocked from his shoulder. Instinctively, he lashed out with a hand and his fingertips grabbed the bottom of the bag. People screamed and flailed trying to get away from the worm. A leg kicked at the satchel, the flap opened and out slide the ice covered ship. Callister watched in horror as the chunk of ice, bright and glittering in the sunlight, went bouncing down the stone steps toward the worm. A roar of frustration escaped his lips.

"Take it!" screamed Malkarrus, from the field. "Bring it to me!" The sand worm's head darted down and jaws closed around the glittering jewel. It turned and plowed through the sand toward the wizard. The worm dropped the icy jewel into his outstretched hands.

"Very bad worm!" yelled Callister, getting back to his feet and putting the satchel back over his shoulder. All around him, people were helping the injured up. People were clearing the damaged section of seating. Callister and Malkarrus glared at each other. The wizard, standing in the sandy field below, held the ship aloft and cackled with glee. "House Dragari thanks you for your ship, captain." With that, he turned and began to run back toward the Dragari flag tower.

"Violation!" came a booming voice. Malkarrus stopped and turned. The Herald stood at the pulpit with an accusatory finger stabbing toward him. "A most clear and heinous violation! *Your* charm spell... *your* violation! Destruction of the arena! Injury to spectators! A most disturbing disregard for the boundaries of the field!"

The Herald turned and looked up toward the Game Wardens at the top of the main tower. "Do we have a consensus?" All eyes turned up to the Game Wardens. Several of

them were out of the seats, gesturing and talking. It was clear that an argument was taking place.

Callister ran down toward the main stage and out toward the pulpit. He grabbed the scepter from the Herald and held the mask shaped tip up to his face.

“To the Cage!” he yelled while pointing at Malkarrus, the mask magnifying his voice a hundredfold.

The crowd was quick to pick up the chant. “To the Cage! To the Cage! To the Cage!”

The Game Wardens stopped their argument and looked out upon the crowd who were clearly now united in one desire.

Suddenly, one of the Game Wardens leaned out on the railing of their balcony and threw back his hood. It was Haugrok, the Game Warden who had visited House Aldrayun the night before. He locked eyes with Callister and smiled.

“To the CAGE!” he roared.

The crowd went wild with applause.

Malkarrus bellowed in protest. “No! I am a magister of the Drakkellian Guild of Sorcery! I will not stand to be bullied by unwashed masses of ignorant-” A sudden force lifted him into the air. He clutched the icy ship to his chest protectively.

“No!” he protested. “You cannot-”

His voice faltered as he flew up to the cage. The side door opened and he was thrown in. The cage door slammed shut behind him.

Callister, still holding the Herald’s scepter, turned around to all the crowd. “Rules are rules!” he yelled and the crowd repeated it back to him. “I was also out of bounds” he said pointing to the broken benches. “I was also in violation!” A mix of yells and boos sounded. “No, it’s true. I should also go to the cage! Send me to the cage as well! To the cage! To the cage! To the cage!” The chant was picked up by many in the crowd. Callister handed the scepter back to the Herald.

Callister locked eyes with Haugrok and nodded. Haugrok nodded back.

Callister felt it in his stomach first. A curious sensation, being lifted by an unseen force. He held the satchel tight. Although the cage was only forty feet up, the view was spectacular. As he approached the cage, the side door opened and team member Eight was pulled out. The two passed each other in midair. Callister landed in the cage on his feet and the door behind him slammed shut.

Callister and Malkarrus stood at opposite ends of the cage, facing each other.

“Alone at last,” growled Callister. “You have something that belongs to me.”

“You are never getting this ship. This belongs to House Dragari.”

“I told you at the start of the game... either you undo the spell or I kill you. Nothing has changed.”

Without a word, Malkarrus dropped the ice ship to the metal floor, pulled out the power crystal and unleashed a beam of golden light at Callister. The tattoos reacted instantly, scattering the beam harmlessly.

“Fine,” said Callister, “we do it the hard way.”

Callister looked down through the metal grate floor and found Brakov on the field below.

“Brakov!”

The two locked eyes.

Callister pointed to the Wheel and yelled “Water!”

Brakov nodded in understanding.

Brakov, Forsythe, Harker and Choeg had regrouped and taken on one of the worms together. Choeg was in the process of finishing it off with his war hammer. The ogre brought the heavy weapon down on the worm’s skull with a crack. The creature lay, bleeding and wheezing.

Callister’s call had brought Brakov’s attention to the cage above. The cage lit up from within with the flashes of spells being fired, but it seemed the captain was unharmed.

“Harker, Choeg, Forsythe, Toth – with me! We need to get that Wheel spinning.”

Brakov led the five of them running across the sand. Just before they reached the main stage and the pulpit, one of the sand worms breached in front of them. The five of them charged forward, weapons swinging.

Up in the cage, Callister marched across the length of the cage. Malkarrus fired another spell, a blast of greenish mist, which again dissipated. A third spell of blue sparks fizzled as Callister slapped the crystal out of the wizard’s hands, grabbed the wizard’s throat and lifted him off his feet.

“No more magic out of you!”

The wizard struggled against Callister’s iron grip, but was no match for the mariner’s strength.

Callister thrust one hand into the satchel and dug around. A moment later, he withdrew the crystal.

“Toth!” he yelled.

Toth looked up from the battle and saw that Callister had the Eye out. Toth moved back from the battle, closed his eyes and began to mumble the words of incantation.

In Callister's hands, the Eye slowly opened.

"Look into *my* eye, wizard!" growled Callister and tightened his grip around the wizard's throat. Callister held the Eye directly in front of Malkarrus' own eyes. The wizard struggled feebly.

Within the wizard's mind, a struggle between two wills was fought. Toth grappled with Malkarrus in the shadowy realm of magic between dimensions. "*You will yield*" Toth's voice echoed within their shared mind space. "*You will undo this spell*." Callister tattoos rippled, sensing the magical battle being waged within. After a few moments, Malkarrus' entire body went slack and his eyes widened.

Slowly, faintly, Malkarrus began to speak while down below Toth echoed the words in time. "*Caetro indarrum maeshara...*" The Eye of Ishkol was now floating on its own. The deep glow within was now illuminating the interior of the cage brightly. Callister released the wizard and took a step back.

"*glaciem dissoludar exsero*-" the wizard continued in a deep, almost unworldly, voice.

The ice covered ship began to vibrate loudly. A clear crystalline tone sounded loudly as the bars of the cage floor started to vibrate. As the brightness from the Eye grew, the tone grew louder. A series of other tones began and they merged into a harmonic drone. Soon, the entire cage was shaking.

Down below, the four men and the sand worm danced around each other. The worm was bleeding from a dozen wounds. Brakov perked up at the sound of mechanical bellows. He turned in time to see the last remaining mangler approaching. It was dented and damaged and having trouble with the sand. But it was moving and it was heading directly toward Toth. The thing bristled with weapons. The oversized crossbow in the front was moving, searching for a target. Its two mechanical pincers were opening and closing as if flexing.

"Toth!" yelled Brakov. The fat little wizard did not respond. His head was thrown back, his eyes were closed and he was mouthing unheard words.

Brakov bolted forward putting himself between the mangler and Toth. Brakov swung his sword down on the visor of the viewport and slammed it shut. A voice from inside cursed him and his mother. Brakov then jumped on top of the mangler and began swinging wildly. He brought his sword down on the visor again, denting it badly. He began hacking at pipes and wires, vents and panels. The voice inside unleashed a torrent of curses as the

mangler spun around haphazardly. The twin pincers groped toward the top trying to grasp the attacker.

Brakov glanced up at the cage overhead. The whole cage was swinging and shaking. The light within the cage was so bright now that the iron bars were throwing long streaked shadows across the sand dunes.

“Choeg!” bellowed Brakov. The ogre turned from the fight. Brakov pointed to the huge wheel set in the front of the main stage. “Spin the wheel!”

Choeg nodded. He swung one last time at the sand worm as he ran past it and reached the wheel. The ogre reached the top of the wheel and pulled with all his might. The huge wheel spun, mechanical gears and wheels within clicking madly. Above the wheel, glowing sigils filled the air, one after another, in a rapid succession.

Up above, the harmony of crystalline tones continued, growing louder. Finally the sound of ice breaking echoed throughout the arena like a whip. All eyes shot up to the cage at the sound. A series of cracks sounded in rapid succession. With a brilliant flash, the ice exploded, sending shattered fragment in all directions. Malkarrus let out a roar of pain and surprise as the spell was broken.

A collective gasp escaped from a hundred thousand onlookers. Like a rain of diamonds, the icy crystalline shards fell to the sand below.

Callister snatched the floating Eye and jumped back as the Third Wind began to grow at an alarming rate. Iron groaned and bars bent as the ship quickly filled the cage. Malkarrus screamed in terror and Callister threw himself on top of the ship.

Brakov, still standing on top of the mangler, swung his sword down at the oversized crossbow and severed the cables and brackets that held it in place. The massive weapon fell to the sand below. He leapt off the mangler, grabbed the crossbow and ran toward the wheel, hearing the snapping of iron bars above. He was out of time. He dropped to one knee, raised the crossbow and took aim. At that moment, a sand worm breached, raising up above Choeg and getting ready to strike. The Wheel was between the two of them.

The iron of the cage gave a tortured scream as it buckled and broke. The expanding ship exploded out of the cage in a shower of iron rods and twisted steel. The crowd gasped as the ship fell. Brakov fired. The bolt flew between Choeg and the worm and impaled the Wheel near the edge. The sigil at the top was the wavy line with the double crest. The sigil flared to life.

Instantly, the sand dunes turned to waves. The Third Wind hit the water, keel first, throwing out curtains of spray. Everyone on the field, man and worm alike, dropped through the surface of the water and was submerged.

A momentary stunned silence was shattered as the crowd exploded in wild cheers.

“Violation!” called the Herald. “This must be some sort of violation! Wardens?”

On board the ship, Callister jumped to his feet and shoved the Eye into the satchel. All around him were crew members and a half dozen Sea Raker thugs. All of them had weapons drawn, but none were fighting. They gazed about their environment in a daze, confused.

“Third Wind crew, snap to!” barked Callister. “Throw these dogs off my ship!” As if to demonstrate, Callister grabbed one of the thugs and hurled him overboard and into the water below.

“Sakula, take the wheel! You there, cast ropes and nets over side. We’ve got men in the water. Get them on board! Move! Move! Move!” All around him, his men snapped out of it. Some grabbed the thugs and threw them overboard. Others began casting lines and nets out, draping the sides of the ship.

“Harker, Forsythe, Choeg, Toth – swim for the ship!” he barked. “Tackett – loose the sheets and make ready to sail!”

“Aye sir” answered Tackett.

The crowd continued to cheer while the crew of the Third Wind scrambled to make the ship ready. Harker, Forsythe, Toth, Choeg and Brakov climbed up the netting and came aboard.

Harker stopped one of the crew from skewering Toth. “This one’s a friend!”

“Forsythe and Toth” barked Callister, “Join me at the bow.”

The three men moved to the front of the ship and conferred. Callister pointed toward the Breach.

“Well, can you do it?”

Toth looked at Forsythe. “I think so, but we’re going to have to work together.”

Forsythe and Toth began to chant words of magic together. Their hands worked quickly, tracing sigils in the air. A wind began to blow steadily through the arena. The sails billowed out and the ship began to move across the water. Callister looked back at the central tower. Several of the game wardens were up out of the chairs, gesturing wildly and arguing. Down below, on the main stage, the Herald and Samirra were arguing and

gesturing toward the ship. Two assistant game wardens were in the water by the Wheel, struggling to remove the crossbow bolt that had it pinned. Several sand worms were floating in the water, apparently drowned.

“Draabyn!” yelled a voice. Callister looked toward the sound. Harkune and two of his men were half way up the stairs of the Dragari flag tower. Several of the Dragari men were in the water below.

“What are you doing?” bellowed Harkune.

“We are leaving!” yelled back Callister with a smile. “I have my ship and we’ve had enough of this game.”

“You can’t leave! What about the game? What about the city contract?”

“Four flags to two, I think that should count as a win!” yelled Harker.

The Third Wind cut through the crashing waves and headed straight for the Breach. At the bow, Forsythe and Toth had their eyes closed. Their hands worked gestures in the air and they murmured words in unison.

At the Breach, the ship crashed through a wooden retaining wall and the waters surged out into the street. Panicked screams were heard as people on the street fled. The Third Wind dropped down to the street level outside the huge arena. The waters however, did not flood through the side streets and alleys. Instead, the water flowed and surged, staying directly underneath the ship. The ship rode down the main street trailing a river of water behind it. Toth and Forsythe continued chanting.

Amazed onlookers on balconies stopped and gawked as the ship sailed by.

Harker stepped over to Callister. “I’d like to point out, Captain, that once again, we are fleeing a city under duress and leaving chaos in our wake.”

“Your point?”

“I don’t think that we will be welcome back in Drakkel anytime soon.”

“Let Drakkel rot!” said Callister. “They kidnapped my first officer! They stole my ship! Corrupt guilds and tax officials and wizards plotting and conspiring at every turn!”

“He’s right, Harker” chimed in Brakov. “We don’t need this damned city.”

The ship reached the end of the broad street, crashed through a wooden fence and spilled into the marina. The ship took a stomach dropping lurch downward as it dropped fifteen feet into the harbor. Millions of gallons of water followed it.

Forsythe and Toth relaxed and opened their eyes. They turned to look back at their handiwork. The entire street from the arena’s breach to the harbor had been swept clear.

Irate shop owners shook their hands and brooms at the vessel. Forsythe and Toth joined the others.

“Well done, my wizards!” exclaimed Callister. “And as promised, this is yours.” He handed the Eye of Ishkol back to Toth.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“I can’t help but feel bad for Samirra and Harkune and the rest of House Aldrayun,” said Forsythe. “We’re leaving them in a bind. What if the Game Wardens count the game as a forfeit because of our departure? What if they award the contract to House Dragari?”

“We were winning,” protested Brakov. “Four flags to two. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Besides,” added Callister “we gave House Aldrayun a copy of the Jewel of the Wild Sea. Maybe that book will give them the edge they need.”

The Third Wind sailed out of the harbor, out between the Twin Beacons of Porthus and out toward open sea.

“I hate to be the sour voice of reason”, said Harker.

“And yet you so often are” replied Brakov.

Harker ignored the quip. “Captain, you do realize that even though we freed the ship and escaped the city, there’s still an island of natives out there that want this ship. There’s still a Puwala shaman on Borakar who has sworn an oath to burn this ship in sacrifice to his god. For all we now, they or House Dragari might come after us again.”

“You know, you’re absolutely right.” Callister strode to the railing and looked to the horizon.

“Helmsman, set sail for Borakar!”