

The Offering

Part I – Sea Festival

Hadon Porter hung awkwardly, fifteen feet above the dock. Suspended by creaking ropes and a leather harness, he was within reach of the Third Wind - the ship that he had spent seven years nursing through sea storms, naval battles, hull worms and worse. The carpenter peered intently at a hole in the side of the hull. The wooden planks around the hole were rotted beneath slimy tendrils of orange fungus which glistened wetly in the bright sunlight.

“It’s definitely spreadin’ cap’n! Once one plank has it, the lot of ‘em goes”.

He grabbed one of the weakened planks with his gloved hands and gave a yank. The heavy piece of wood fell and crashed to the dock below at the feet of three men, scattering shards of wood and bits of fungus all over. Harker Kaedin jumped back a little and quickly inspected his finely tailored four piece suit to make sure none of the foul bits had stained him. The clean cut young man felt that, as first officer of the Third Wind, it was important to maintain a pristine and orderly appearance.

Craydon, a scrawny old man with a head of unruly grey hair and a leather apron, nudged the plank with the toe of his boot. Tiny orange tendrils groped at the tip of his boot, as if trying to gain a grip.

“Do you wish me to incorporate this infestation in to your proxy?” Craydon asked the two men next to him. “I pride myself in always making sure that the model is an exact replica of the ship it represents. Down to the tiniest detail.”

Callister Draabyn, captain of the Third Wind, knelt down to inspect the fungus. His wavy brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He was careful not to let the cuffs of his longcoat

touch the brightly colored stuff. Several tattooed glyphs could be seen on his cheek and neck and hand. The tattooed markings on his hand shimmered slightly as he touched the fungus. Some tiny bit of magic still clung to the orange tendrils.

“No need to include this,” replied Callister. “We’ll have it fixed soon enough.”

“What exactly is it?” asked Craydon.

Kaedin pulled out a bit of white cloth and cleaned a glob of fungus off of his wire rim glasses. “We ran into trouble in Coalition waters last week. A goblin corsair with a shaman aboard. Goblin spells are nasty, foul-”

“-and nothing to worry about.” Callister interrupted, standing up. “Don’t worry Craydon... you just keep working on the model as planned. We’ll take care of this fungus. Right Mr. Porter?” Callister called up to the flying fat man, “you can fix this?”

“No problem, Cap’n.” Porter called down. “It’s only seventeen boards. We’re just going to replace them all.”

“How long?”

“Forty four”

“Forty four what?” asked Craydon.

“Ales,” answered Kaedin. “Mr. Porter always gives his repair estimates in the number of ales he’ll drink during a job.”

“About two days, then?” Callister asked.

“Aye sir” Porter grunted, prying loose another board with an iron bar. “Two days.”

Callister steered Craydon away from the ship and they started walking slowly down the dock toward the aft of the ship. Kaedin followed closely behind.

“So how is our proxy coming?” asked Callister.

“Very well sir,” replied Craydon with a huge smile. “You will not be disappointed.”

“And I assume - “

“It *will* be done on time sir. That I promise you. The Offering is in five days. I will have your proxy completed in three.”

“Excellent! And I appreciate your expediency. We are cutting it a bit close this year, but I have every confidence in-“

“Oh Captain!!” A sing-song voice pierced the morning air. “Oh Captain Cally! Yoo-hoo!” the voice sang out.

Callister froze mid-step. Kaedin hurried forward.

“Is it?” began Callister.

“Yes, it’s her,” replied Kaedin, glancing back toward the head of the dock.

“Do I have time to -“

“I don’t think so, sir”

“Is she?”

“Yes”

“with the?”

“Yes”

“Has she?”

“Oh most definitely, sir”

“Damn!” Callister steeled himself and then slowly turned to face his newest challenge.

Coming up the dock toward them was a small entourage. Leading the way was an immensely fat woman in a garish dress of yellow and green. A tall white wig crowned her head. A few wisps of grey red hair underneath had worked their way out and now floated in the breeze. Her chubby face and lips were covered in various powders and creams that gave her too much color. She glittered in the sun with jewelry – from the emerald necklace to the garnet ear rings to the diamond brooch. In her chubby hands, she held an elaborately decorated gem studded rod which she twirled about with great delight.

Beside her walked a young woman who might have been a younger version of the first. The younger woman’s striking beauty was not marred by any powders or creams and she wore only a simple sapphire necklace. Her slender figure was graced by a white dress trimmed in blue and her thick blonde hair was braided in the Rukemian style.

Behind them both came a grum, a squat little man only four feet tall with a mop of curly brown hair. He was dressed in a formal waist coat of bright yellow and green that matched the fat women’s dress. Slung haphazardly about his neck and shoulders were an assortment of bags, satchels and purses. Protruding from these was a miscellany of odds and ends - a spyglass, a folded fan, an umbrella and a jewelry box. In his hands, the grum carried a satin pillow upon which was perched the smallest dog Callister had ever seen.

Bringing up the rear was a tall man with broad shoulders and a neatly trimmed beard. He wore light leather armor and a broad sword was slung casually over his shoulder. He had the stern gaze and calm countenance of a bodyguard. He gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod toward Callister.

“Oh Cally!” cried the fat woman. “I heard you were in port. You are a naughty boy for not sending word.” She shook a fat finger in Callister’s face in mock reproach.

“My apologies Lady Keldryn,” began Callister, slipping into a silky voice of reassurance. “We’ve only just arrived in port yesterday morning.”

Craydon cleared his throat. Callister took the hint. “My Lady, I would like to introduce Craydon Tamik, a proxy craftsmen and, in my opinion, the finest in the city. I’ve commissioned Craydon to build the Third Wind’s proxy this year.”

Craydon gave a slight bow. “My pleasure”

“Lady Keldryn is-“ began Callister.

“Lady Keldryn needs no introduction,” interrupted Craydon. “Wife of Lord Keldryn, the Harbor Master of Freeport. A well known art collector and political power in her own right. My Lady, it is a privilege to finally meet you formally.”

Lady Keldryn blushed and giggled at the attention as she extended a hand to be kissed.

“Now Cally,” she said, resting a hand on Callister’s arm, “I would like to introduce my niece, Jemma. She is the daughter of Duke Habrifor and she is visiting from Aridorn. She’s here for the Sea Festival. It’s her first time. When I heard you were in port, I just had to bring her down to meet my gallant captain and his magnificent ship.”

The young woman offered her hand and Callister took it with a slight bow.

“Callister Draabyn, sea captain, swashbuckler and hero of the Empire, I hear” said Jemma.

“A pleasure, Miss Jemma.”

She turned his hand over in hers. “And I’ve heard of these tattoos. Fascinating. They give you magical protection, don’t they? A ward against evil?”

“Defensive only, yes. They provide some modest protection from spell and charm.”

“They have saved my Cally’s life on more than one occasion. And they move!” squealed Lady Keldryn with delight. She grabbed Callister’s chin and turned his head left and right to examine the tattoos on his face. “Each day, the pattern is slightly different. I like the arrangement today, Cally, Very handsome.”

“You’ve come at the best time of year,” said Callister to Jemma, trying to steer the conversation away from his tattoos. “This festival is Freeport’s grandest tradition. No finer festival exists in all the southlands. The food, the dances, the costumes - “

“And the celebrities,” Jemma said. “If half the stories my aunt have told me about you are true, then I stand before no less than Freeport’s prodigal son.”

“Well I-“

“Oh, they are all true, my dear,” Lady Keldryn insisted. “Why, it was my handsome Callister that dueled Sirreth atop the castle walls at the Siege of Myranor. It was Callister who led the Imperial fleet to Aggradar two years ago and brought back trinkets for me. And it was this very ship” she said, gesturing to the Third Wind in front of them with a sweep of her arms “that won the Midland Cup last year.”

Callister glanced at Craydon and rolled his eyes. Jemma noticed and stifled a giggle.

“And don’t tell your uncle,” she continued, “but Captain Callister fancies me. One day he and I are going to run away together, isn’t that right, Cally?” She batted her eyelids fiercely.

“We’re ready for her, Cap’n!” yelled a voice from up on the ship deck. Callister and the others down on the deck looked up to see three crew members at the ship’s railing looking down.

“Lady Keldryn’s welcome aboard anytime!” said the second.

“Plenty of room for her!” said the third.

Lady Keldryn squealed with delight and clapped her hands.

Callister turned away from the two women to glare death up at his crew.

“Mr. Kaedin,” Callister growled through clenched teeth.

“Yes sir?”

“Institute Ship Law 15.”

“Right away sir,” said Kaedin and then called out “Ship Law 15!” to the ship.

“Ship Law 15” echoed several voices up above. “Ship Law 15!” There was an immediate commotion on the ship deck above. A moment later, all three men were hurled overboard and into the waters of the harbor.

Lady Keldryn looked down at the water with concern as all three men surfaced, sputtering and cursing. “Are they-”

“They’re fine,” said Callister, without sparing them a look. “My dear Lady,” he resumed his gentler voice. “As eager as some of my crew are for their next adventure, we have so much to do. The Festival is already underway and we are behind schedule as it is. We have cargo to unload, our proxy to finish and countless preparations to make for the Offering. The ship is in need of repair and I, alas, am overwhelmed with social obligations. I’m bailing water at the moment, I’m afraid”.

“You do lead such an adventurous life,” she said, nodding with genuine concern. “Perhaps after the festival.”

“Perhaps. Besides, you wouldn’t want to sail on a ship that hasn’t been offered to the sea.”

“What is this business of offering the ships to the sea?” asked Jemma. “I’ve heard this mentioned three times now this week. It’s some sort of ceremony, isn’t it? Mr. Craydon?”

“It is,” said Craydon with a smile. “The Offering is one of Freeport’s oldest traditions and is one of the highlights of the festival each year. Each ship captain commissions the construction of a proxy... it’s a miniature model of his ship. An exact replica. Traditionally made out of kef brittle.”

“Kef brittle?”

“A local flowering shrub. Good lightweight wood. Two centuries ago, the proxies were rather crude things made of simple bundles of kef brittle twigs. But over the years, the ship models have become much more elaborate. Indeed, these days, captains compete to see who has the most beautiful and most accurate proxy.”

“And this year” said Callister with a wink, “we hope to best them all thanks to Craydon here”.

“And what do you do with these proxies?” asked Jemma.

“Ah, well,” replied Craydon, “a candle is put inside each proxy along with a scroll that bears the name of the ship it represents. At dusk on the last day of the festival, there is a great gathering in the central harbor. The candles are lit and all the proxies are put in the water. A priest of Semorjon summons a current and all the proxies, candles ablaze, head out of the harbor in a long flotilla of flickering light and out to sea. This whole ceremony is called the Offering.”

“It sounds beautiful.”

“The candles are special. They burn fierce and fast, even in the wind, and have a tall flame that can be seen for quite some distance. When the candle burns down, it ignites the kef brittle, which is very flammable, and the proxy burns to ash on the water and sinks. In this way, the ship is ‘offered’ to the sea.”

“You destroy those beautiful models? After all that work?”

“Those who make their living from the sea are a superstitious lot. Common seafolk have enough superstitions, spooks and charms to fill a book. It’s widely believed by folk that the sea hungers for ships. By offering the proxy, the sea’s hunger for that particular ship is satiated.”

“I see. And in so doing, the ship avoids storms.”

“And reefs and pirates and horn whales and all manner of ill fate. One hopes,” said Cradyon, with a chuckle. “However, the sea has a poor memory. So a new offering must be made each year.”

“So much trouble for a simple superstition.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Sailors are deadly serious about misfortunes and ill tidings dealt out by vengeful sea spirits. Why, most sailors won’t set foot on a ship that hasn’t been offered to the sea. There are even some businesses that won’t trust cargo to such a ship. So, most captains make sure that their ship’s proxy participates in the Offering. It’s just good business sense.”

“Not to mention a matter of reputation and pride,” said Callister. “It’s more than just a blessing by a priest... ships gain a certain respect and credibility with the act of the Offering. I’m proud to say the Third Wind is well regarded in this honor.”

“Aye, your foul reputation comes from what you do when you’re on land,” said Craydon with a smile.

“Well, it sounds like quite a spectacle,” said Jemma. “I will be sure not to miss the Offering. A thousand candles on the water... a river of light... it sounds absolutely magical. I won’t miss it.”

“We will both be there,” said Lady Keldryn “as always, I’ll be standing next to my husband as he officiates the Offering.” She then leaned in close to Callister and whispered “but my heart belongs to the Third Wind and her captain.”

Lady Keldryn looked Craydon in the eye with a stern look. “Make my Cally a fine proxy, Mr. Craydon”.

“I will, my lady”.

“Fair Winds, gentlemen. Come along now, Jemma. We need to buy new dresses for the Festival.” And with that, she turned and headed back up the dock.

“It was nice to meet you all” said Jemma as she turned to follow. The guard and the grum servant followed after.

“I should take my leave as well,” said Craydon. “There’s much to do.” Craydon shook hands with Callister and Kaedin and headed up the dock.

“How did I do?” asked Callister, watching the entourage depart.

“I thought you handled her quite well this time,” replied Kaedin. “You’re right about her, by the way. Her flirtations are becoming... less subtle”.

“*I thought that fat bitch would never leave,*” said a strange voice behind them. Callister whirled about drawing his twin scimitars to face the voice.

Standing on the dock, that moments ago had been empty, was a figure wrapped in a heavy black cloak and a deep hood. A pair of taloned claws drew the hood back. It was a saurian. The scales of his green reptilian skin glinted in the sun. His large black glossy eyes blinked and regarded them quietly. Under the cloak, the saurian wore leather armor and several blades were strapped in a harness across his chest.

“Kuufa”, said Callister, slowly lowering his blades.

“Draabyn” the stranger said. His voice was a soft nasally whine and he spoke with an odd accent. Callister hated that voice. It grated on his nerves.

“I thought I told you I’d hang you if you ever set foot on my ship again”. He sheathed both swords.

Kuufa looked down at the planks of the dock beneath his clawed feet.

“Thus far, I have not violated your terms” said Kuufa with an unconcerned toothy smile. “Besides, petty threats are of no concern when I have exciting news. There’s always news in such a busy city as Freeport. So many people, all working, planning... plotting. I heard you were back in town and your arrival always seems to stir up the city. I heard you’ve just come from Tyrrenkor” his gaze dropped to the shattered, fungus covered plank laying on the dock, “and that you narrowly avoided trouble there”.

Callister folded his arms. “You hear a lot”.

“Seems no matter where you go” wheezed Kuufa, “trouble finds you. The best way to avoid trouble is to know that it’s coming. Information is a valuable commodity, my dear captain. More precious than gold or jewels. And I have news worth hearing”.

Callister drew one of his swords again.

Alarm flickered in Kuufa’s glassy eyes. “It is worth a moment of your time, I assure you. It is never wise to dismiss an opportunity to increase one’s knowledge.”

“How much?” asked Callister with a cocked eyebrow.

“Fifty gold drokmire and three kegs of Blackfall”.

“Ha! Ten gold drok, and I won’t *drown* you in a keg of Blackfall”.

Kuufa pouted slightly. “You always were a gifted negotiator. Worthy of a Drakkellian sword tongue... twenty drok and I promise you won’t be disappointed”.

Callister considered it a moment and then sheathed his sword. “Fine. Twenty drok it is. Come aboard. I don’t want too many eyes to see me talking to the likes of you.”

“I’m flattered”.

Part II – A Valuable Commodity

A short while later, Callister and Kuufa were on board the Third Wind, seated at a large oak table in the captain's cabin. Sunlight spilled in through the open windows and the sounds of gull cries and distant festival music floated across the harbor water. Kuufa had never been in this cabin before. A huge and yellowed parchment bearing a map of the southern Ithrian coastline hung on one wall. Shelves and cabinets around the room were crammed with hundreds of curious objects – a mechanical hand in a display cabinet, a glowing orb floating above a wooden base, a brass bracket holding a shard of blue crystal, a set of five spyglasses, a lumpy rock of translucent red in an open wooden box and dozens of other curious things. Kuufa let his gaze slowly roam over it all. Plunder from distant lands. It was true that this man had sailed to the corners of the world.

Sitting on the table between them was a bottle of Goldsmoke Brandy and two shot glasses.

“So what's this news,” Callister asked as he offered Kuufa one of the shots. Kuufa took the proffered glass and tossed back the drink.

“You know a man named Captain Tamarroff, I think” said Kuffa.

“Tamarroff?” Callister scanned his memory. “Yes, I know him. Captain of the Sea Hammer. Big talker, sore loser, can't hold his liquor”.

“That's the one”.

“What of him?”

“He's planning on sinking your ship”, Kuffa said, gesturing with both claws to encompass the whole cabin.

“What?”

Kuufa smiled. “Or to be more accurate, he is planning on *preventing* it from sinking.”

“Mr. Kaedin!” bellowed Callister. Instantly, Kaedin ran up and assumed a position next to Callister. Kuufa looked about but could not tell where this young man had just come from.

“Yes sir?”

“Captain Tamarroff... what do we know about him?”

Harker pulled out a small leather clad book and flipped through the pages.

“Captain Jeven Daedrik Tamarroff,” began Harker. “Human, male, age 39, a Mercian slave trader of noble birth,” Harker paused, lingering on the last two words as he exchanged glances with Callister before continuing, “captains the Sea Hammer, three masted square rigger,

commercial transport, 1400 ton displacement, 26 crew, no outstanding warrants. And sir, I feel that I would be remiss if”

“That’ll do.”

“But I really should mention-“

“Harker, have a seat.”

“Yes sir.” Kaedin took a seat on a small stool in the corner. He pulled out quill and paper and seemed to be readying himself to record every word uttered.

Callister turned back to Kuufa.

“What do you mean he’s planning on *preventing* my ship from sinking? Not that I’m opposed to the idea.”

Kuufa gave another toothy smile. “I thought that would get your attention. The Sea Hammer arrived in Freeport two weeks ago. Since then, Tamarroff and his officers have been drinking and bragging all over town. He has been saying many not nice things about you and your ship. They are saying that the Third Wind is cursed and will not complete the Offering. Two days ago, he was at the Bloated Cog, telling every sailor within earshot that the Third Wind has offended Semorjon and would be cursed before all of Freeport.”

Callister dismissed Kuffa’s tale with a wave of his hand. “Barnacles! He’s a blowhard. I don’t care what he’s saying. The Third Wind *will* be in the Offering. Why should I care if he’s spewing sour rum all over town. And for that matter, if this gossip is in every tavern, I would have heard it anyway. Why should I part with twenty gold for news on every loose tongue in Freeport?”

“Because I’m not here to tell you what the tavern gossip is,” replied Kuufa, leaning in closer to Callister. “I’m here to tell you that you should take this threat seriously.” Kuufa punctuated his words by tapping one talon on the table.

“Why?”

Kuufa leaned back again and smiled that toothy smile of his. “Tamarroff’s last stop before arriving here was at the guild academy of Morcrest on Temolok’s Isle. There, he met in secret with a wizard named Paldaris and paid him eight thousand drok. The Sea Hammer stayed in port for a full month. An unusually long stay for such a small town. At the end of the month, Paldaris met with Tamarroff and the next day the Sea Hammer set sail. I do not know what the money was for... but someone I know in the region, someone I trust, assures me that Tamarroff did not leave port empty handed. He carries back with him potent sorcery crafted by Paldaris. What magic he holds, I cannot say, but I believe his tavern boasts are not idle. One way or another, I believe he means to foil your offering.”

“How do you know all this?”

“You have your talents, I have mine.”

Callister regarded Kuufa and considered the tale. "Eight thousand, eh?"

Kuufa nodded slowly, allowing the weight of his story to sink in. Callister said nothing, seeming to contemplate the drink in front of him.

"One more thing..." said Kuufa. "There is a wager underway at the Ale Drowned Mariner that you might find interesting. I recommend you visit that place. Soon."

"I will." Callister counted out twenty gold coins into a small purse and handed it to Kuufa.

"A pleasure to do business with you" he said with a slight bow. With that, he stood and left, leaving Callister and Kaedin to think on his words. After a few minutes, Callister broke the silence.

"What was that you were trying to tell me earlier, Harker?"

"I was going to remind you of why Captain Tamarroff might be plotting against you."

"No need. I know why he's angry. I just didn't want to repeat the story in front of Kuufa. Kuufa might already know some of it, but no need to fill in the gaps. Round up the officers. I want to have a meeting tonight."

"Yes sir."

Four hours later, as night was falling, Kaedin returned with all the officers in tow and soon all were seated around the captain's table. The sounds of the festival could be heard drifting across the water. Callister pulled out six glasses and a bottle of Davidson's Best whiskey. A few glances were exchanged. Davidson's Best only came out when the captain had something serious on his mind.

Callister poured himself a drink and handed the bottle to Kaedin to his left. It was clear he was going to wait until everyone was served before he began.

Kaedin poured and handed the bottle to Harris, the second officer and ship's master at arms. With his dark banded leather armor, scarred face and military cropped beard, Harris was a grim and daunting presence that could stop most bar fights with a glare. Harris poured and passed the bottle to Forsythe.

Forsythe, the ship's mage and healer, was a lean and lanky man with blonde hair dressed in brown and tan robes. He took the bottle from Harris but poured only a sip. Like all corvenians, Forsythe had a natural gift for simple magic but didn't particularly like strong drink. He handed the bottle on.

Darian, the ship's navigator and purser, took the bottle. Being the youngest officer and newest addition to the crew, Darian was still getting used to these little ship board traditions. Although he had attended several officer's meeting before, this was the first time he had seen the

Davidson's Best come out and he could feel a certain tension in the air. He poured and passed the bottle on.

Tackett was last to pour. He was a big, barrel chested man with a shaven head and a walrus mustache. He was the boatswain of the ship – the liaison between the officers and the rest of the crew. Although not an officer himself, Tackett was treated by Callister as an equal and had the respect of both officers and crew. He poured himself a drink and passed the bottle back to Callister with a nod.

Callister took a drink and set the glass down. "Kuffa visited this morning and let me know that Tamarroff is spreading rumor and gossip that the Third Wind is cursed. That something terrible is going to happen at the Offering. His words may not be idle. Seems he paid a large sum of gold to a wizard up north. Possibly to fashion something to use against us at the Offering. I don't know for certain if he's planning something... but I don't trust the bastard and he is the vengeful sort."

"Sir, seeing as how I've only been with the crew six months," said Darian, "I feel there's quite a bit of history I'm not privy too. Why, exactly, is Tamarroff, uh... sore with you?"

"Ha! Sore doesn't begin to describe it," said Tackett. He leaned forward and stabbed a pudgy finger at the table in emphasis. "Tamarroff's furious. Cap'n's right... he's the vengeful kind. It's the kind of hurt anger that festers and simmers and just gets worse with time."

"And he's had a year to plan", said Harris grimly.

"A year? Exactly a year?" asked Darian.

"Before we go any further, we should fill in our young navigator about prior events," said Callister, looking at Tackett.

Tackett nodded. "A year ago, at last year's Sea Festival," he began, "the cap'n and Tamarroff were playing cards with several others in one of the seedier establishments in Freeport. The cap'n got 'em all drunk on Blackfall and when Tamarroff passed out, the cap'n ended up betting and losing Tamarroff's proxy to a rival... a huge half orc named Pojka.

"Isn't Blackfall illegal?" asked Darian timidly.

"Very" replied Forsythe with a sour face.

"This Pojka," continued Tackett, "ended up burning the proxy in effigy on the very morning of the Offering."

"Oh my."

"To make matters worse, he did it in front of a crowded market. In his defense, it wasn't his idea. He was... dared into it."

All eyes turned to Callister

Callister shrugged. "I was very drunk."

"Why didn't Tamarroff just have another proxy made?" asked Darian. "Even a crude and hastily assembled thing could have been put in the Offering."

"Yes," said Harker, "he might have been able to do that except—"

"Pojka decided that owning the proxy gave him ownership of the Sea Hammer itself. Again, an idea that was suggested to him," said Harris, looking right at Callister.

"Hold on now," said Callister, "that idea came from Sancho. Fat bastard's very persuasive when he's drinking you under the table."

"By the time Tamarroff woke up, his ship had been hijacked by a band of drunken orcs and was half way to the Coalition."

"It was a bad day for Tamarroff," added Harker. "He and his crew retrieved the Sea Hammer two days later, but they had missed the Offering."

"His ship was fine," Callister broke in, "It was his pride that was scarred. He's had a string of bad luck since then and he blames me for it."

"Do you think Tamarroff is plotting to do something against our proxy before the Offering?" asked Darian. "Perhaps he means to steal it and burn it, just as his was."

"I don't think so," replied Callister. "I think he wants to up the ante. It'll be something public and humiliating. He doesn't just want to destroy our proxy. I think he wants to ruin our reputation."

"Aye, knowin' him..." said Tackett, "he won't stop until he's convinced the whole kingdom that the Third Wind is cursed".

"It would be prudent to protect Craydon and our proxy... just in case" said Harris.

"Agreed," said Callister. "Mr. Darian, I want you to take three of the crew, well-armed, and go fetch Craydon. Have him bring the proxy and all of this tools and materials here. He can finish the proxy on board the Third Wind.

"Aye Cap'n." replied Darian. "You haven't mentioned them yet, but I assume that your tattoos won't help protect the proxy."

"That's right. These tattoos do a fair job of protecting me from harmful spells, but they only protect me. If Tamarroff's planning on going after our proxy with magic, these tattoos will do nothing to help. Mr. Forsythe, do you think you might be able to learn anything about this sorcery he's brought back with him?"

"I have a few trusted allies in the Freeport wizard's guild. Perhaps someone has heard something. Let me see what I can find out."

“Take a couple of crew members with you. I don’t want anyone traveling alone. Mr. Kaedin, Mr. Harris - you’re with me. Tomorrow evening, we’re going to visit the Ale Drowned Mariner and find out what this wager is that Kuufa mentioned. Mr. Tackett, I want you to come too. Bring a couple of crew members. We may run into trouble. Choeg would be a good choice. He’s good in a fight. And Porter as well. We’ll leave enough to defend the ship. Let’s all plan on meeting at the Ale Drowned Mariner tomorrow evening.”

With that, everyone finished their drinks and headed out. When they had gone, Callister gazed out the window looking at the lights of the festival on the far side of the harbor, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

Part III – Ales and Wagers

The Ale Drowned Mariner was one of the largest and rowdiest taverns in all of Freeport. Built around a huge central fighting pit, the enormous building was dominated by a single vast chamber which most people referred to as the “Ale Pit”. This central arena chamber was three stories high and boasted numerous platforms, balconies and terraces allowing dozens of groups to sit and drink with a splendid view of the fighting pit below. Branching off from this central chamber were halls leading to sleeping rooms, private dens, kitchen pantries and the back offices.

Of course most patrons never saw those back rooms. Most simply wanted to drown their sorrows in ale and watch whatever spectacle was happening in the pit. Everyone wanted a good view of the pit because there was always something to watch... something to gamble on. Every night, warriors would brawl and swordsmen would duel to entertain the tavern crowds. Vormathir, the owner and proprietor of the establishment, was a showman who knew how to please bloodthirsty mobs. On occasion, the pit would even host a monster fight. But regardless of what strode into the pit, there was always a bloody spectacle to rile up the frenzied crowd.

Tonight was no exception. Down below, a barbarian from the northern wastes of Borrell, who had been a crowd favorite of late, was fighting three drunken sailors. The barbarian’s snow white hair was matted with blood and grime, but he was holding his own as the three sailors staggered about, circling him with weapons raised. The muscled giant managed to grab one of them by the leg and hurled him bodily out of the pit where he crashed noisily into a barmaid who fell beneath the bloodied form with a shriek. The crowd cheered.

Amidst this cacophony, Callister strode in through the main doors followed by Kaedin, Harris and Tackett. Following close behind Tackett was Porter, the ship’s carpenter and Choeg, the ship’s blacksmith. Both had been chosen for their size. Porter was an obese man who could outdrink anyone in the bar. Choeg was a full blooded ogre, more than seven feet tall and three hundred pounds of muscle. Strapped to his back was an enormous two handed sword. Callister was confident that the mere sight of those two would keep most rowdy bar patrons in check. Callister and his motley entourage settled at one of the larger tables near the edge of the pit opposite the door. Once all had settled into his seat, Callister glanced around the tavern. As expected, various groups were sizing them up. Callister let his gaze come to rest over at the main bar where three bartenders were pouring drinks. His crew followed his gaze.

Above the bar was an enormous board of slate on which chalk markings held a dizzying array of letters and numbers. A sweaty man on a ladder with a piece of chalk and a sheaf of papers was erasing and updating numbers. This was the heart of the Ale Drowned Mariner... the betting

board. On it more than a dozen wagers were spelled out with odds, amounts, prizes, the names of betting parties and other notes. Most of it was written in a code that was gibberish to newcomers, but Callister and his crew could decode the board at a glance.

Choeg peered at the board, but had no gift for numbers. His brow furrowed in concentration as he struggled to understand the first bet.

“There,” said Kaedin. “Fifth column, half way down. ‘...*three clouds hither*’. A rather obvious reference to the Third Wind. They’re not trying very hard to hide it.”

“Look at the betters. Degari Shipyards. Port Authority. Harbor Office, the Brotherhood and a dozen others I don’t recognize. Looks like most of the important factions in the city have a stake in that bet. Some of those names are fake. I bet most factions are in, but not everyone wants the city to know which way they’re betting.”

“Look at the odds! Forty to one against!”

“Is that a lot?” asked Choeg, his deep voice rumbling.

“Aye,” replied Tacket, “someone’s betting the lot of us will drop dead before we even get our proxy in the water.”

“Or worse,” said Harris.

“Seems Kuufa was right,” murmured Kaedin. “Nearly half the port is betting against us. Uh, sir... do you really think it’s wise for us to be here... stirring the pot, as it were?”

Callister smiled. “It’s what I do best.”

Callister and his men ordered food and drink and talked among themselves. Barmaids were soon filling the table with bowls of thick greasy chowder, loaves of hot bread and tankards of fairwind rum. Halfway through the meal, Forsythe arrived with Hatcher and Clarke, a gunner and helmsmen from the Third Wind.

“Forsythe! Grab a seat and some food and tell me what you found out,” ordered Callister.

“I spoke with a friend of mine at the wizard’s guild” said Forsythe as he filled his bowl. “He’s quite good with divination charms. Together we paid a visit to the Sea Hammer. Discreetly,” he added, seeing Callister’s raised eyebrow. “Don’t worry, we weren’t noticed. He was able to sense something on board, but we couldn’t get anything precise. Tamaroff definitely has something enchanted, but whatever it is, it’s protected from divination... and protected well.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Tackett. “That Tamaroff is a paranoid bastard”.

“What we need,” said Callister, “is a counter spell”.

“Sir,” said Forsythe, “I’m good with torn canvas, splintered wood, sour stomach, broken bone... but what Tamarroff has in his hold is powerful... well beyond my skill.”

“I understand, Mr. Forsythe. No disrespect, but we’ll need something more potent than your Corvenian charms,” Callister clapped a hand on Forsythe’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I have something else in mind.”

“Sir,” interrupted Kaedin and gestured to the front of the tavern, “coming in the main door”.

Across the huge fighting pit, a crowd of men were coming into the tavern. They all wore matching tunics bearing a sigil - a black hammer on a field of green. Leading them was a tall man with a lean, angular face and a long brown beard. He had thick shoulder length curly black hair which he wore loose. A chainmail shirt was visible beneath a heavy cloth tunic bearing the same hammer sigil. Slung over his shoulders was a black cloak and on his hip, a long sword. He strode between two tables at the pit’s edge and walked up to lean against the railing directly across the pit from Callister. His eyes glittered in the torchlight as he regarded Callister for a moment. His lips curled back into a manic smile.

“Callister Draabyn!” he called out.

Callister folded his arms. “Tamarroff.”

Behind Tamarroff his officers and crew, twenty at least, began taking seats around the two tables. Barmaids were already racing to bring them food and drink and dodging slaps on their rears.

“It seems the festival has lured home most of Freeport’s finest,” said Tamarroff, calling across the pit and speaking up to be heard over the background tavern noise.

“Present company excluded,” replied Callister.

Tamarroff’s smile twitched for a moment, but then stumbled into a practiced laugh.

“Are you enjoying the fight tonight?” asked Tamarroff with a wide smile as he gestured to the fighting pit between them. The borrellian below faced only one sailor now and both were bloody.

“Is someone fighting?” asked Callister with mock innocence, as if only now noticing the gaping pit. “Hadn’t noticed. No, I was more enjoying the betting board.”

“As always.”

“I rather like that odds heavy longshot in the fifth column. Now that’s a wager I can get behind. You wouldn’t be betting on that one, would you?”

“My wagers are private and of no concern to you.” Tamarroff said, his smile fading. He then sank down into a chair and reached for a tankard of ale.

Callister raised one hand and flagged down a pretty young red headed barmaid. Tamarroff watched as Callister said something to the barmaid and handed her a pouch. She nodded and scurried back to the betting board where the pouch and message were quickly relayed up to the board master on the ladder.

Callister and Tamarroff’s eyes met. Callister smiled. Tamarroff scowled.

The board master updated the notes on the Third Wind bet, placing a 200 gold wager under Callister’s name in favor of the Third Wind. To Tamarroff’s surprise, he then wrote down a new wager.

Fate of Third Wind shared by Sea Hammer, Last day of Festival, 50 gold drok, Draabyn

A number of tables began murmuring at the new bet. Tamarroff stood up suddenly, upsetting his chair.

“What outrage is this?” he sputtered. Tamarroff then called for a barmaid with raised hand.

“What are you doing?” asked Kaedin.

“Stirring the pot,” said Callister, never taking his eyes off Tamarroff.

The same barmaid that had taken Callister’s bet ran over to his Tamarroff. Tamarroff, gesturing wildly toward Callister, was clearly unleashing his anger upon the poor girl and hounding her with a flurry of questions. She shook her head and pointed to Callister. With a sudden backhand, Tamarroff sent the girl sprawling to the floor. He then whirled back toward Callister and grabbed the railing with both hands as if to keep from flying across the fighting pit in a rage.

“How dare you-” Tamarroff sputtered, unable to finish the thought. “The Third Wind is nothing more than a river scow with a peasant captain! It is noble blood that runs through my veins. You and your ship will never be my equal.”

“True!” called out Callister. “Our ships are not equal. My river scow is crewed by free men”. Callister winked and raised his tankard. His officers around him cheered.

Tamarroff sputtered incoherently. “I have seen *whale carcasses* more seaworthy than the Third Wind!” exploded Tamarroff. Several sailors at adjacent tables turned to regard the exchange.

“At least the Third Wind was not taken by drunken orcs!” Callister called back.

“And the Sea Hammer has not offended Semorjon!” bellowed Tamarroff.

Several tables had now quieted down to watch the exchange. Two of the tavern enforcers hovered near by with hands near weapons.

“Semorjon loves the Third Wind and the sea shall accept our offering.” Callister said, standing up.

Tamarroff looked about and saw the dozens of sailors were watching the exchange.

“The Third Wind labors under a hex... as do you!” screamed Tamarroff. “You have offended the gods with your disrespect. You have pandered to foreign powers. You have meddled with the supernatural. We all know this to be true. You have defiled holy ground with your very presence. If you violate the sanctity of the Offering, you, your crew and your ship will be punished before all of Freeport.”

The crew behind Tamarroff cheered loudly at this proclamation.

“Barnacles!” bellowed Tackett.

Callister vaulted forward and leapt up onto the railing that circled the pit. The two fighters below paused in their bludgeoning to watch.

“Do you hear this?” Callister shouted, addressing the entire tavern. “Do you hear this!?” The music slowly died as the musicians paused uncertainly at this sudden change of events. The crowd murmured excitedly.

“I am Callister Draabyn! Captain of the Third Wind! This is Freeport! Our home port! Why do we warrant such a cold welcome from so many? I think there are those,” he said glaring at Tamarroff, “who are jealous of our exploits.”

A wave of murmuring rippled through the crowd punctuated by a cheer here and a boo there.

“Is it our fault,” continued Callister, walking along the railing of the pit, “that we of the Third Wind have claimed more than our fair share of adventure and glory?”

“No!” shouted several tables, amidst a scattering of cheers and boos.

“Is it our fault,” yelled Callister “that we have sailed the seas, plundered and pillaged and gotten away with it?”

“No!” shouted several voices. In the back, someone yelled “Here’s to the Third Wind!”

“That’s right,” cried Callister. “We should not be punished for merely being good at what we do. Whatever happened to that old saying that all mariners in Freeport are brothers? Jealousy is never a flattering garment!”

“I hold no jealousy in my heart,” yelled Tamarroff. “Only pity. Woe betide anyone who sets foot on the Third Wind.”

“I will not stand by idly,” responded Callister, “while anyone besmirches the good name of the Third Wind or her valiant crew!”

“Or her captain!” cried Harris, raising his tankard.

“Hazzah!” cried the officers and crew standing behind Callister.

The tavern erupted in cheers and boos and jeers and thrown food as tables argued back and forth.

“So what are you going to do?” yelled a voice from the crowd.

Callister raised his arms to address the assembled crowd.

“To my brothers of Freeport,” Callister bellowed for all to hear. “Bet against us if you like, but I tell you now that the Third Wind will be a part of the Offering... along with every other ship.”

A roar of voices erupted all at once. Cheering, booing, yelling, cursing. Pounding tankards and stomping feet thundered throughout the hall. A rhythmic chant of “Draabyn! Draabyn! Draabyn!” was soon taken up around the tavern. Callister, still standing on the railing of the pit, spread his arms wide and let the cheers rain down on him as he locked eyes with Tamarroff. Tamarroff clenched his fists in fury as the two captains glared at each other across the pit. In that moment, every voice was raised and absolute anarchy reigned at the Ale Drowned Mariner.

“So what ARE we going to do?” yelled Kaedin, straining to be heard above the din.

Callister stepped down from the railing and spoke loudly to be heard over the thundering crowd. “We’re going to fight magic with magic.”

And with that, Callister and his officers marched out of the tavern, with a hundred sailors chanting in their wake.

Part IV – Gorrosha

The rain was falling heavy the next evening as four cloaked figures made their way down a winding narrow road. Drawing back his hood, Harris looked back at Callister as if to make sure their fearless leader was still sure about their mission. Callister, second in line, prodded him forward. Behind Callister came Kaedin wiping rain drops from his spectacles. And last in line was Forsythe clutching his cloak about him tightly.

“This is not a good part of town to be in,” said Harris.

“This is Freeport, Mr. Harris, and we are mariners,” replied Callister. “The trick is to simply be more dangerous yourself than the part of the town you’re in”.

The narrow street angled down sharply, squeezing between tall buildings that leaned in precariously. As they descended, Kaedin had the impression they were at the bottom of a ravine. Strange looking shops and dark shuttered windows surrounded them. Several of the signs were written in orcish, ogrish and languages he didn’t recognize. Garbage and excrement fouled the sides of the road. Rats scampered away as the four men approached.

“I never knew this was down here,” said Kaedin.

The narrow road came to a dead end at a tall narrow building. Their boots were ankle deep in mud and filth as the rain water rushed passed them and vanished down a sewer drain. They stood before a large door of darkly stained oak with an old corroded brass knocker. Several strange symbols were etched upon the oaken planks.

“The home of Gorrosha”, said Forsythe.

“Are the stories about this Gorrosha true?” asked Kaedin. “I’ve heard that she’s an exiled witch... banished from an orcish tribe.”

“That’s one tale,” said Harris. “I’ve heard many... tavern rumors say she consorts with evil spirits and sees the future. One drunken sod even told me that she robs graveyards and eats the dead.”

“Unlikely,” replied Forsythe. “But colorful. Despite her dark reputation, there are those at the guild who say she is quite powerful.”

“You sure about this, Captain?” asked Harris. “You know we could always go to Jenog’s tower. He’s well-known and well-liked around the city. And a fair bit more respectable.”

“Jenog is good with charms and potions. But he doesn’t have the kind of magic we need.” With that, Callister stepped up to the door and pounded the knocker. Kaedin pulled out one of his many journals and jotted something down as the group passed a few uncomfortable minutes. Distantly they heard a shuffling from within followed by the sounds of a heavy bolt being drawn back. The door creaked open on rusty hinges revealing only darkness beyond. The small group exchanged a few glances before shuffling into the dimly lit interior.

They found themselves in a very cluttered chamber. Tall bookcases stuffed with crumbling scrolls and tomes were visible behind towering stacks of more books. Piles of junk reached almost to the ceiling. Boxes, crates, barrels and bags were scattered everywhere. Strange creatures in wire cages peered back at the newcomers. A table at the far end held a number of bottles and bowls. A glowing blue liquid bubbled quietly in a jar at the bottom of a strange maze of wires and tubes. As they wrinkled their nose at the musty smell, a towering pile of books and junk slowly began to topple over and spilled into another pile. Kaedin began tidying up the mess.

Forsythe noticed that Callister’s tattoos were starting to shift about, as if adapting to the strange energies emanating from all corners of the room.

On the back wall was an arched doorway covered by a pair of dark curtains. Through the curtains came a figure – a wizened and ancient looking hag shuffling toward them with the help of a cane. Yellow eyes peered out from a wrinkled mask of grayish green skin. A pair of horns protruded from a tangle of grey hair. Harker couldn’t tell what manner of creature she was. As she approached, Callister’s tattoos shimmered slightly.

“Gorrosha” said Callister.

“Draabyn” croaked the creature. Even her voice sounded ancient.

“I need your help,” began Callister. “It seems a rival of mine, Captain-“

“I know why you are here,” croaked the old hag, waving away his words with a hand. “Gorrosha knows all” she said and began to rummage through a pile of junk. “You seek way to foil Tamarroff plot.”

“Exactly. Do you know what he’s planning?”

“Gorrosha knows all”. She picked up a strange looking package wrapped in paper, sniffed it and then tossed it aside.

“Would you be willing to tell us?”

She turned to regard Callister. Her yellow eyes held his for a moment.

“No.”

She then turned back to her rummaging. “Gorroscha likes her fun,” she chuckled.

Harris moved his hand down to his sword hilt and looked to Callister for permission to strike. Callister shook his head urgently and gestured with one hand for Harris to stand down.

“Well... in that case... we were hoping that you might have something to help us...” continued Callister. “Something to counter the magic he has.”

Gorroscha seemed to ignore him as she searched through the piles.

“We can pay.” Callister held out his hand and Kaedin handed over a heavy blue cloth sack. Callister shook the bag and the jingle of coins could be heard. “Two hundred,” said Callister.

Gorroscha paused to regard the sack, apparently uninterested.

“I can double that amount, if that would help.”

She took the bag from him, sniffed it and then tossed it aside. It landed with a crash behind a pile of garbage. “Bah! Money. No use to Gorroscha.”

Kaedin hurried over and started picking up the coins.

“Is there any trade you might consider?” asked Callister.

“Perhaps... one thing.”

Callister waited expectantly. Gorroscha went back to her searching. Callister had forgotten how aggravating the old hag could be.

“And what would that one thing be?” he asked, trying to not let the exasperation creep into his voice.

Gorroscha stopped her rummaging and closed her eyes, concentrating. “Third Wind. Captain’s cabin. Starboard wall. Display cabinet. Middle shelf. Wooden box. Red rock inside.”

“How do you? – never mind. The rock? You want the rock?”

“Chrylomar” she said almost reverently. “Stone of the shapeshifters. Very rare. Very valuable. Bring me red crystal stone. I give you help you seek.”

Callister considered the trade. He wasn’t sure what help she was offering. But he had long ago learned to trust his instincts.

“Mr. Harris, go and fetch that red crystal from my cabin. Make it fast.”

Harris nodded and quickly left.

Gorroscha looked at the remaining three men. “I go fetch what you seek. Very good help. Return soon. You all stay here. Touch nothing. Do nothing... no cleaning.” She said, aiming that last comment directly at Kaedin. She then slowly hobbled back through the curtains and into a back room.

Callister, Kaedin and Forsythe waited patiently. They could hear her rummaging around in some back room. The crash of a cage. The yowl of a cat being kicked. Objects being tossed about.

“She seems... not right... in the head.” said Kaedin.

“Mad as a summer squall...or so I’ve heard,” said Forsythe.

Callister shrugged, unconcerned. “She’s like that.”

Some time later, Gorroscha came shuffling back through the curtain with a large flat box in her hands.

“Your friend comes,” Gorroscha said, setting the box down on a table.

The door opened and Harris entered, panting heavily and drenched in rain. He handed the heavy crystal to Callister who immediately handed it over to Gorroscha.

She clucked and chuckled as she held the treasure aloft. It was a brilliant burgundy translucent crystal, about the size of a fist. She turned it over in her hands and marveled at its beauty in the candle light.

“So... we like the stone?” asked Callister, hopefully.

“Yes, yes, yes” Gorroscha said. “Very good stone. Good for many potions. Much magic. Gorroscha like.”

“Excellent. Now... let’s talk about Tamarroff.”

“Yes,” she clapped her hands together and cackled. “Gorroscha help. Gorroscha help.” She then held up a bony finger before her face and looked Callister in the eye. “Tamarroff plots. Will use your little ship against you.”

“Our little ship? You mean our proxy? What’s he planning?”

“Faerie glamor. Glow and thunder. Poddling mush magic, mush mosh kara breen oj chaka,” she chattered away, veering off into the orcish language. She patted the flat box with one wrinkled hand. “This... this the help you need, Gorroscha think. Bind one spell with another.”

She undid a latch on the flat box in front of her and opened the lid. Instantly, Callister’s tattoos twisted and writhed on his skin at the sudden release of magic. As the tattoos slowly settled

into a new pattern, Callister looked in the box. Inside was a cushion of velvet gently cradling two objects. The first appeared to be a long slender bone. Numerous magic symbols were etched upon it. Next to it was a corked bottle filled with white powder. Gorrosha picked up the bottle and handed it to Callister. He shook it gently.

“Bone of troll,” she said. “Ground down to powder. Mixed with song and shadow and sorrow’s kiss.”

“Great.”

“You know not what evil Tamarroff brings. It not matter. Make your little ship and his... one. One pinch each. Fate bound then. Two small ships, one path. Magic follow too.”

Harris let out an exasperated sigh. “What in the Sapphire Main does that mean?”

Gorrosha clucked and shooed Harris out of her way. “What your captain say in tavern. The wager. Very good fun.” Gorrosha turned to look at Callister. “Bind his ship to yours. He cannot attack his own.”

“Ah, yes. I see,” said Forsythe. “Captain, I think she’s saying that we can bind the two proxies with this... bone powder. If we put a pinch of this powder on Tamarroff’s proxy and a pinch on ours, they will be... bound... connected. Whatever happens to one proxy happens to the other. Including spells and hexes and so forth.”

“Yes, yes” she said, patting Forsythe on the cheek. “Good boy. Smart boy.”

“You’re saying anything he does to our proxy would affect his proxy instead?”

“No sir. If I understand correctly, it would affect *both* proxies. But you’d have him. He wouldn’t dare attack our proxy without affecting his proxy in the same manner.”

Gorrosha nodded as she stroked Forsythe’s cheek. Forsythe smiled weakly, trying not to cringe.

Callister regarded the powder filled bottle in his hands. “I like it! It has a certain poetic irony. We’ll bind his hands with his own damn treachery. If the Third Wind is cursed, so be it. The Sea Hammer goes down as well. Oh, I like this. I like this very much!”

“A question, captain,” said Kaedin. “How exactly are we going to put a pinch of this powder on Tamarroff’s proxy? He’s going to have that thing surrounded with guards. We won’t be able to get near it.”

“There is a way,” said Gorrosha, looking at each of them in turn. “Think. What is common of all the little ships?”

“The kef brittle?” asked Harris.

“No! No... not all.” Gorrosha muttered to herself, shaking her head.

“She’s right,” agreed Kaedin. “Not all proxies use kef brittle. Some proxies are made from kirrip wood, others are portrus. And the Royal Fleet uses-”

“Harker.”

“Shutting up, sir.”

“Think,” Gorrosha said, tapping her forehead with a bony finger. “What do all have?”

“The candles!” said Forsythe suddenly. “Every proxy has a candle! Identical candles. Made from the same wax. The same batch.”

“Good! Good!” Gorrosha cooed and took Forsythe’s hand. “You Gorrosha’s favorite. Here. Have treat.” She took one of his hands and, in his palm, she placed a large glistening black beetle. She then patted his knee and turned back to Callister. Forsythe and the beetle looked at each other, both uncertain what to do.

“Will that work, Gorrosha?” asked Callister. “If we put a pinch of this powder on his candle, will it have the same effect?”

“Yes, powder... strong magic,” mumbled Gorrosha. “Powder on candle. Magic will work.”

“Not to breach the idea, sir,” said Harris “but we can’t go sprinkling powder on a candle as the candles are being passed out on the beach. Not right under the nose of the Harbor Master. Too many people. And Tamarroff will be watching us. We’d never get away with it.”

“You’re right,” replied Callister. “Which is why we’re not going to do it on the beach. We’ll put it on his candle ahead of time. All the candles are made at the Harbor Master’s keep a day or two before. We can get to the candles there.”

“How are we going to get into the Harbor Master’s keep?” asked Harris. “That place is a fortress.”

“How do we get in? Into the home of Lord and Lady Keldryn? Lady Keldryn who’s madly in love with me?”

“Ah,” said Harris, sheepishly.

“Yes, I think she can be persuaded to help us.”

“One more thing,” said Gorrosha. She reached into the flat box and withdrew the other item, the bone, and handed it to Callister. “When you are ready, break this. This will make the binding. This make powder work. Until you break, no magic. Wait until you are ready. You will know the time.”

“I understand”, he said. “And thank you.”

He turned to his officers. “Gentlemen, we have a plan. Let’s get to it.”

“Sir, the Harbor Master and his assistants will be handing out hundreds of candles,” said Kaedin. “If we infiltrate the keep tomorrow night, how are we going to know which candle is Tamarroff’s?”

Gorrosha chuckled to herself quietly. She already knew his answer.

“Easy,” said Callister. “We’re going put the powder on every candle.”

Part V – The Harbor Master’s Keep

For five days, the Sea Festival had filled Freeport with feasting, laughing, dancing, singing and all manner of drunken debauchery. Brightly lit tents, cooking contests, boisterous dances and raucous crowds filled the docks, walkways and parks that circled the enormous harbor. As with most things in Freeport, the festival activities were all held within sight of the water.

Amidst the revelry, no one noticed a tiny fishing boat, out on the vast dark water of the harbor, slowly gliding through the waves. The small boat was very low to the water and entirely covered in a black oilskin tarp making it blend very well into the darkness of night. No oars protruded from underneath the tarp. Nor was there any sail. Despite any obvious means of locomotion, the craft drifted steadily forward, against the current.

One corner of the tarp lifted slightly and a long spyglass slowly extended out from the underneath. Peering through the spyglass, Callister slowly rotated the outer cylinder. Inside the spyglass was the click-click-click of tiny gears and the sudden clunk of a small magical lens locking into place. Through the eyepiece he could now see out across the waves as if it were a bright day. He could see their destination ahead... a stout keep of rough hewn stone perched atop a narrow craggy island of rock at the center of the harbor. Thick green ivy crawled up its outer bulwark which was stained and scarred by decades of stormy seas. Towering over the keep was a single central tower, at the top of which could be seen a bright steady light.

Callister twisted the spyglass again. With a few more clicks, a different lens locked into place. The view through the spyglass changed and hazy blue mist slowly coalesced into distinct shapes and patterns. He now saw a ghostly outline of the stone keep but only where mosses and lichens and ivy clung to the walls. He saw tiny dots scamper amidst the bushes and seagulls perched on the gables. He saw larger human shaped glowing forms, walking on different levels of the keep. He counted the larger forms trying to get an estimate on the number of guards. It looked like there were at least a dozen people in the keep. His view was suddenly jostled as an elbow bumped his arm.

“Dammit, you’re sitting on my foot again, get off.” cried Harris.

“Sorry,” said Kaedin.

“Quiet down back there and let Forsythe concentrate on the boat.”

In the back of the boat, Forsythe sat with folded legs and hands clasped before him. His eyes were closed in concentration.

“More to the starboard, Forsythe” said Callister, looking at a small beach nestled amid the rocks ahead.

Forsythe turned his clasped hands slightly to the right and the boat banked gently to the right an equal amount. A few moments later the boat slide up onto the sandy bank of the island

and stopped between two bushes. Callister, Kaedin, Harris and Forsythe stepped out of the boat and pulled it further into the bushes to conceal it.

The four men quietly made their way up an overgrown path which wound up the steep slope toward the base of the stone bulwark. High above, Callister could make out a sentry patrolling atop the wall above.

At the base of the stone foundations of the keep, tucked between the edge of the bulwark and the side of the hill was an old iron door. It was well concealed because of its position and the surrounding bushes. No one from the mainland could see it. The door was badly corroded and looked ancient. Callister wondered when the last time this door had been opened.

“I wish we had some oil to lubricate those hinges,” Callister mused.

A small green bottle was thrust in front of his face. The word “oil” was scrawled on a tiny label.

“Not bad, Mr. Kaedin,” said Callister, taking the bottle.

“A first officer’s job is to anticipate his captain’s needs. And your needs are, dare I say, frequent and varied.”

Callister poured a bit of oil on each of the hinges in turn and rubbed the oil in, letting rust flake off freely.

Kaedin cleared his throat. “Sir, I have grave concerns about this course of action. Infecting every candle with this magic powder... well, don’t you think that’s going a bit too far? Tamarroff won’t know what we’ve done until it’s too late and then...well, are we really prepared for what could follow?”

“You’re missing the point, Kaedin. I plan on visiting Tamarroff and informing him of our counter spell.”

“You’re going to tell him?!”

“This is game of deception. By affecting all the candles, by involving every ship... we are, in essence, calling his bluff. He thinks he’s holding all the cards. But I will make it clear to him that the consequences of this game will be so far reaching, so heinous... that he has no choice but to fold.”

“And do you think you can convince him of that?” asked Forsythe.

“I’ve played him at cards before.”

Forsythe and Harris nodded, but Kaedin’s worried expression did not soften. The four men stood quietly listening to the sounds of the night, each lost in their own thoughts.

“So now what?” asked Harris, always the first to bristle at inaction.

Callister looked up at the great keep. “Wait for it.”

A few minutes passed and then suddenly a bell tolled high above them. It was coming from a top the great central tower of the keep.

After the seventh stroke of the bell, the iron door clanked and then swung open with a slight squeak. The squeak was easily drowned out by the loud ringing of the bell which stroked an eighth and ninth time. Out came Lady Keldryn wearing a grey dress and a black shawl. All of her jewelry consisted of black pearls. She held a small iron lantern in her hand. Callister had never seen her in such drab colored clothing. Her face, however, was as colorful as ever. She waited until the final stroke of the bell faded away before she spoke.

“Cally!” she squealed and then stopped suddenly, realizing she was speaking too loud in the sudden silence.

“Ten bells, right on time” she whispered. “Oh, this is so exciting! I’m so happy to be sharing an adventure with you. When you came to me this morning and told me that you needed me... you NEEDED me... oh, my heart sang. I can’t tell you how much it meant to me. I wanted to show you that I am up to this because sometimes I think you don’t believe I’m ready for adventure. But I am. Remember the time I stowed away upon your ship? Oh, that was so dreadfully fun! Perhaps after tonight we can discuss our next grand adventure. Have you ever been to Vogue? Oh, they have the most wonderful fashion sense there. And dare I say, quite a problem with art forgeries! Oh, the scandals!”

“My lady.”

“I’ve often thought I might do well in Vogue. Although I’m not sure if they have a port...”

“My Lady!”

“They do have a river though. Delightful by moonlight. Can your ship navigate a river?”

“LADY KELDRYN!” Callister growled, as he grabbed her head in both hands. “Perhaps we should save this for another time”.

“Yes, of course, how silly of me. I’m getting ahead of myself. I remember once I was returning from the Port Ball and this dreadfully funny-”

“My Lady!”

“Oh dear, there I go again. I’m afraid I do get over excited at times.”

“Tonight, we require speed and stealth. There will be time for celebration later. Now... can you lead us to where they are making the candles?”

“Yes, the main workshop on the lower level. They are working on the candles right now. Follow me.”

She turned and entered the keep holding her lantern out in front. The others followed. A set of broad stone steps curved down into the darkness. The stairs ended in a short stone tunnel through which they all had to crouch. This ended at an oak door which opened into a wine cellar.

As they made their way through the wine cellar, Harris tapped Callister on the shoulder and pointed to a barrel. Callister saw on the keg a subtle smugglers' mark.

"Blackfall. How interesting. Seems the Harbor Master enjoys the fruits of his confiscations. Mr. Kaedin, make a note of that."

Lady Keldryn led them into a larger corridor lit by flaming torches in sconces. There were three sets of large double doors.

"I've already sent the guard away on an errand and lured the workers away with food and rum... just as you instructed," said Lady Keldryn. "We should have at least a half an hour uninterrupted."

"Very good, m'lady," said Callister, giving her a pat on the arm. "You've done exceptionally well."

She opened the middle set of doors and they entered.

The workshop was quite large. A dozen cabinets of every shape and size lined the walls. In the center of the room were three large oak tables, a few chairs and an iron cauldron over a fire pit. The cauldron was a broad thing on three taloned feet. However, it was not very deep. Within the cauldron, a thick soup of blue goop was bubbling quietly. A number of bowls and bottles containing brightly colored powders and glittering crystals were on the table. About two dozen candles were hanging in long rows, their wicks tied to long iron rods suspended on racks over wax paper on the tables. The production of the Offering candles was well underway.

All five were startled when a squat little dwarf came walking out from behind one of the tables. He stopped suddenly, seeming equally surprised. He was dressed in a grimy leather apron and squinted at the group through a pair of thick goggles. He had a wiry grey beard that was partially burnt off.

Without looking behind him, Callister raised a hand and gestured to Harris to cease, whose blade was already half out of its sheath.

"Ubo!" barked Lady Keldryn in a surprisingly stern tone. Judging by the way the dwarf cringed, it must have been his name. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be eating with the others."

"Uh, uh, I came back to give some food to my little ones, m'lady," said Ubo. "I.. I didn't mean no harm."

Callister and the others could see that on the floor behind the dwarf there was a saucer of milk and a plate with bread, milk and cheese. Three big rats and a fat little kitten were happily feasting on the dwarf's offerings.

Lady Keldryn advanced on the dwarf threateningly. Her immense bulk towered over the scrawny little dwarf, who seemed to shrivel. Slowly, she put her arm around the trembling little man and gestured to the four men who were still standing at the entrance to the workshop.

“Do you see these four men?” she asked softly.

“Yes, m’lady,” said the dwarf in a shaky voice.

“No, you don’t.”

“No, I don’t, m’lady.”

“These four men aren’t here,” she purred.

“Yes, m’lady.”

“If you were to tell anyone that four men snuck into the keep this evening, I would be very angry with you.”

“Yes, m’lady”

“It would probably be unfair to ask you to keep this secret forever. Gossip is a sweet temptation. And believe me, I know what it is to give in to temptation”. She looked Callister up and down as she drew out the last word. “So, I’ll make you a deal, little Ubo.”

She pulled out a small pouch and put it in the trembling hands of the dwarf. “Here are five gold drokmire... now, if you can keep this secret until the end of the month, I will reward you with another ten. However, if you speak one word of this to anyone,” she grabbed his chin and turned his head toward her so that they were nose to nose, “I will make you cook and eat your ‘little ones’”.

“Y-y-y-yes, m’lady” stammered the dwarf.

She held his eyes for a moment longer and then released him.

“Very good,” she said in a sing song pleasant voice. “I think we understand each other. Now, take your gold and go. Come and see me at the end of the month for the other ten.”

“Yes m’lady,” he said, clutching the little purse. “Thank you, m’lady.” He took one final look at the five of them and then scampered out of the room.

“I like her,” said Harris. Lady Keldryn beamed at the compliment.

“Alright gentlemen. This here is only the first batch of candles and these will get dipped in the wax at least three more times. Additional batches of candles will follow. I suggest you simply put your powder into the cauldron of wax and stir it in. Every candle should get some powder then.”

“Sounds perfect. Mr. Forsythe, if you please.”

Forsythe stepped up to the cauldron and withdrew from his robes the bottle of fine white powder that they had received from Gorrosha. He grabbed the stirring spoon and slowly stirred in the powder, making sure it mixed well.

When he was done, they all looked at Callister, who was staring off in the distance intently, as if listening to something.

“What’s wrong sir,” asked Kaedin.

“Nothing,” he answered. “It’s just that usually, by this time, something would have gone terribly wrong.”

“Well, I suppose we’re bound to have a good day, every once in a while,” said Forsythe.

“Sir, we should make a discreet exit before someone finds our boat or other evidence of our presence,” said Harris.

“Agreed.”

They exited the same way they came in without mishap and soon stepped out of the iron door and into the cool night air under a star filled sky. At the water’s edge, Kaedin, Harris and Forsythe stepped back into the boat and waited on the captain. Before stepping into the boat himself, Callister turned to Lady Keldryn.

“Thank you, my lady. Sincerely. We could not have done this without you.”

Lady Keldryn said nothing. But as he turned to go, she grabbed his shoulders, spun him back toward her and kissed him fiercely on the lips. A stunned Callister stepped back.

“Good night, my sweet captain. Until our next adventure...” She turned and headed back up the path to the iron door.

Callister climbed into the boat with his three stunned officers. His face and lips were smeared with powdered makeup and bright red lip paste. Harris and Forsythe were trembling, desperately trying to hold in laughter.

Callister pulled out a rag and began wiping his face. “Mr. Kaedin...”

As the boat slide off the beach and headed out into the water, Kaedin pulled out a small leather bound book and a quill. “Ship Law #91” he mumbled as he scribbled quickly in the book. “... never to speak of... kiss... Got it!”

Part VI – The Sea Hammer

A fat seagull hungrily devoured a sunfish as it sat perched on the figurehead of the Sea Hammer. This particular figurehead was an impressive thing – a thundering titan god emerging from a crashing wave and holding a great golden hammer in one hand extending out toward the sea. The rest of the ship was equally impressive. She was a long sleek ship of black wood and gold trim. Six full stories tall and with a high aft cabin, she towered above the dock. Both sails and rigging were white as snow and her topsails and spires seemed to touch the clouds.

For below those topsails, four slaves scrubbed the deck planks while others applied pitch and tar to the hull. A carpenter worked on the scrollwork of the stair railing and a sailor sat in the corner repairing a fishing net.

Grigor, the first officer, a skinny man with a short pointed beard, stalked about the deck. He wore black leather armor which matched his dark hair and beard. Every now and then he barked at one of the slaves and lashed them across the back with a short three tailed whip.

He poured most of his attention on the oldest of the slaves, a sea gypsy. The old man was bleeding from a dozen lash marks and was now scrubbing his own blood from the deck.

“You’re bleeding on the deck, fool!” barked Grigor. “Clean it up!” His hand rose and the whip can down hard. The old man flinched so hard from the lash that he accidentally toppled the bucket of soapy water sitting next to him.

The first officer sputtered in fury. “Waste!” He lashed the slave again and then dropped to one knee so that he could grab the unfortunate wretch by the scruff of the neck.

“Do you think we provide this soap for your amusement?” he screeched. “Do you know how much this soap costs?”

The old sea gypsy mumbled apologies and cowered with one upheld hand.

“I would dock this from your pay if you had wages,” he said as he straightened to tower over the cowering slave. “I will have to take it from your flesh.”

The first officer reeled back to deliver a mighty blow, but the whip was suddenly jerked out of his hand. The startled first officer turned to find Callister Draabyn standing behind him, holding the whip. Callister smiled and casually tossed the whip overboard. It landed in the water far below with a splash.

“I’m sorry, did you still need that?” Callister asked.

The first officer glared at Callister. “How dare you!” he screeched.

“Please,” Callister said with smile, “I dare man, woman, beast and god on a daily basis.”

Flustered and speechless with angered, the first officer's eye twitched furiously as he struggled to find words. "You are not welcome here, Draabyn!" he finally blurted out.

"*Captain* Draabyn. And I've come here to speak to Tamarroff."

"*Captain* Tamarroff is conducting business and does not have the time to deal with peasant fishermen."

At that moment, the door to the aft cabin opened and out stepped Captain Tamarroff and a pudgy blonde man. Captain Tamarroff wore a white silk shirt and a fur trimmed coat. His black beard was braided down to his belt buckle. The second man wore the uniform of an Assistant Harbor Master.

Surprise flickered in Tamarroff's eyes when he saw Draabyn, but only for a moment. "Our business is done," Tamarroff said to the Assistant Harbor Master. "Leave us."

The pudgy port officer stared at Callister as he hurried away.

"Adding to the payroll, are we?" asked Callister.

"Callister Draabyn," said Tamarroff, ignoring the question. "What brings the poor peasant captain to this noble vessel."

"The Offering is tomorrow. And on that matter, we must speak."

Tamarroff gave a look to his first officer. Grigor immediately began clearing the deck. Within moments, Callister and Tamarroff stood on the deck alone.

"I know you're planning something," began Callister, leaning casually against the rail with arms folded. "You mean to unleash some terrible spell at the Offering."

"And why would I do such a thing?" asked Tamarroff.

"You would avenge yourself for last year's... unpleasantness. You will not profit from this course. I came to warn you."

"Warn me?" laughed Tamarroff with an incredulous smile. "Do you think I would heed such a warning?"

"I know you seek revenge by some foul sorcery. I know you hold magic purchased from far off Rukemia. It will gain you nothing. I have a counterspell, Tamarroff. Whatever harm you seek to inflict on my proxy will befall yours as well. It will, in fact, bewitch every proxy in the harbor."

"Tall tales from a practiced tongue," replied Tamarroff. "I see no reason to heed them."

"This is no idle threat," said Callister.

Tamarroff lifted a necklace out from under his shirt. Suspended on the golden chain was a magnificent golden pendant. It was fashioned of concentric rings and disks of gold in which were

worked faceted emeralds. Emerald light churned and mixed within the jewels. The effect was dizzying. Tamarroff stroked the necklace gently.

“Do I look like someone who would be dissuaded,” Tamarroff said as he caressed the fabulous necklace. “If I seek revenge, I am merciless.” He held the necklace up between them. “If I wield magic, it is potent!” He continued to caress the necklace as he lovingly gazed into its depths.

“No price is too high for righteous revenge,” murmured Tamarroff, gazing into the necklace. The glow from the necklace seemed to be growing stronger. Callister could feel his tattoos beginning to crawl.

Tamarroff, seeming to suddenly remember Draabyn, snapped out of his reverie. “And no counter spell or warding charm will save your proxy”. He shoved the necklace back under his shirt.

“So you admit it is the proxy-” began Callister.

“I admit nothing.” Tamarroff snorted.

“Listen to me, you pompous fool! The cards are dealt. If you unleash your magic against the Third Wind, every proxy in the harbor will be ensorcelled. Including yours!”

“You bluff too often, braggart. Now you listen to me. You have only one chance. Only one choice. Withdraw! Withdraw from the Offering... publicly. Do that and I promise you the Offering shall proceed unhindered. Do it not, and you will see how far I am willing to go.”

“I will not withdraw,” said Callister with an icy calm. “The Third Wind will participate.” Callister turned and began walking up the gang plank toward the dock.

“You would risk the Offering for your pride?” called Tamarroff after him.

Callister stopped. “No... you would.”

Without another word, Callister stalked off the ship.

Part VII – The Fate of One

The last day of the festival was a perfect day. The salty air rode a warm summer wind while the rhythmic slap of the waves against the wood piers was enough to lull an army to napping. Most of the officers and crew of the Third Wind spent their day drinking, gambling and feasting. The last minor repairs to the ship were completed and Craydon put a few finishing touches on the proxy. As the afternoon wore on, folk from all over started to make their way toward the harbor beach for the Offering.

The Offering was a special ceremony and, in many ways, was the unofficial conclusion to the week-long festival. It typically attracted crowds of several thousand people, almost a tenth of the entire city, to the great harbor beach. Almost everyone involved with the port and harbor came to see the spectacle.

The great huge beach was almost a hundred yards across and flanked on either side by a large pier. The piers offered the best view of the Offering and a few people were already staking out their favorite spots.

The beach and piers slowly began to fill with spectators. Families arrived with food in knapsacks to share with other families. Children flew kites in the warm wind, threw morsels to fat lazy seagulls and chased each other with kef brittle swords.

It wasn't long before the first ship crews began arriving with their proxies. At first, it was crews from some of the smaller ships and these arrived quietly carrying their proxy tucked under one arm. However, the larger and more famous ships of Freeport were more dramatic in their arrival. The first of these to arrive was the crew of the Green Dragon, the flagship of the Mercian navy. The officers and crew of that mighty ship marched in to the beat of a drummer, wearing matching tunics and green face paint. A standard bearer led the way followed by the captain and officers carrying their elaborate miniature ship and the crew came after that in three marching ranks. Their entrance drew cheers from the spectators. Their proxy was a thing of beauty – a detailed model of a four-masted ship with dark green sails and a dragon shaped figurehead.

Next to arrive was the crew of the Firebelly. The officers and crew of that ship looked particularly fearsome in red and black tunics trimmed in yellow. They were accompanied by a herald who recounted their exploits as they marched in carrying the proxy of their fat bellied three masted cog.

Soon after arrived the crews of the Clay Duck, the Eighth Sister, the Sea Bitch, the Last in Line and the Oaken Lilly. Each had equally colorful entrances.

The crew of the Third Wind arrived on the beach with a half dozen other crews, but without much extravagance. Callister had other things on his mind. Darian and Tackett carried their proxy onto the beach. Callister led Kaedin, Harris and Forsythe onto the east pier. Callister wanted a good view of the procession as the proxies headed out to sea.

A number of ships were floating in line, at the end of the piers. Spectators on the boats began pulling out food and drink and dangled their feet over the edge of their decks. Floating mere feet from the east pier was a fat bellied single masted craft. A rather scruffy looking overweight man dropped anchor and pulled out a bottle, waiting for the show to begin.

By the time Captain Tamarroff arrived with his crew, the beach was quite crowded. More than two hundred ships were represented and their crews were on the beach. Throngs of spectators were crowding about. A proxy contest was underway as judges roamed from group to group. Several local taverns had elaborate banquets spread out on tables.

Like Callister, Captain Tamarroff seemed uninterested in making a showy entrance. His crew also split into two groups. Several officers lead most of the crew to the beach where they set up their proxy on a small table on the beach sand. Tamarroff himself led his first officer and ship mage on to the west pier. Callister noticed that Tamarroff's crew had set themselves up particularly close to Darian and Tacket and both sides were keeping a wary eye on the other.

As was tradition, the Harbor Master did not arrive until the sun was setting. Lord Keldryn was an impressive physical specimen. Well over six feet tall with an equally impressive girth, he waddled onto the beach in an outfit of purest white trimmed in gold. His curly grey hair was covered by a matching cap. He walked with a tall hooked staff of silver and wood, inlaid with precious stones... the Harbor Staff, the symbol of his office.

His entourage included local nobles, naval officers, assistant harbor masters, Semorjon sea priests and a dozen armed guards. Walking beside him was the Lady Keldryn and Jemma, who were followed by a small army of servants, staff and slaves. This huge group poured on to the beach accompanied by the sound of trumpets and the cries of heralds.

Lady Keldryn searched the crowd until she caught Callister's eye and waved to him. She pointed him out to Jemma, who also waved. Callister, reluctantly and discreetly, waved back.

The Harbor Master and the eldest sea priest ascended a small platform on the beach. It was tradition for the Harbor Master to give a speech and each year, the speech was longer.

While the Harbor Master gave his speech, Callister took time to size up Tamarroff's crew. They were dressed in the same matching tunics they had worn at the Ale Drowned Mariner. Callister wondered if Tamarroff made them wear those throughout the whole festival.

Tamarroff had taken up a position at the very end of the west pier, directly opposite Callister who at the end of the east pier. His first officer and ship mage stood behind him. He seemed to be engrossed in the Harbor Master's speech, but his eyes darted over to Callister from time to time.

By the time the speech had ended, the sun was down and the light of the day was beginning to fade. The elder sea priest uttered a short prayer and gave a blessing upon the gathered crews and their proxies. After this, the crates of candles were opened. Every year the candles were a different color. This year, they were sky blue and, judging by the reaction of those closest, had a wonderful scent.

One by one the candles were handed out, lit and the proxies were placed in the water. Soon the water was filled with hundreds of models, bobbing in the waves, each with a candle burning bright. The models were so detailed that one could easily imagine that an entire armada had been shrunk by some evil spell.

The elder sea priest closed his eyes in concentration and began to quietly mouth the words to his spell. Instantly, the waves between the piers fell flat and the water became as still as glass. All the proxies began to turn their miniature bows toward the open sea. Slowly, they all began to advance in a long train of ships.

The crowd applauded as the ships began their journey. Every inch of the two long piers was filled with cheering and clapping spectators. Many people called out the names of the ships as they passed. Callister and his officers watched the Third Wind closely.

“So far, so good” said Harris. “Perhaps he hasn’t got the guts to go through with it.”

Across the way, Tamarroff said something which elicited a burst of laughter from those around him, but Callister could not hear what it was.

“No, I think he’s just warming up.”

Tamarroff climbed up one rung on the railing so that he was head and shoulders above those around him, but facing inwards toward the crowd. He gestured to the procession of miniature ships and again said something to those around him.

A murmuring rippled through the crowd on the pier and several people began to point. It quickly became clear what they were pointing at.

The Third Wind proxy, its tiny white sails fluttering, was suddenly passing several of the other miniature ships. Weaving in between ships, the Third Wind passed by the Dread Tyrant, the Branded and the Raptor. It skirted by the Ringing Blow and the Serpent’s Ire and finally passed the Firebelly. Several people began cheering it on. The solemn procession had suddenly become a race. The Third Wind was now right behind the Green Dragon, which led the procession. With a sudden surge, the Wind roared past the Dragon and headed out into the lead.

A very excited Tamarroff was now yelling something into the crowd.

“...you see... flies before the gods... judgment...” Callister only caught snatches.

The Third Wind, now leading the pack, was almost half way down the length of the piers. All eyes were now on the Third Wind and a few scattered people cheered it on. Tamarroff’s eyes were locked on the Third Wind with a manic look of glee. He continued to talk excitedly. His left hand clutched at the necklace under his tunic.

“What in the depths is Tamarroff up to?” asked Harris. “Puttin’ the Wind out in front?”

Before anyone could say another word, the Third Wind suddenly stopped dead in the water as surely as if it had hit a reef. A collective gasp escaped the crowd. The elder priest, standing on the beach with arms held wide, wrinkled his brow in frustration as he felt the sudden

resistance. The Green Dragon, the Firebelly and several other ships veered suddenly to go around the Third Wind.

The concerned murmuring of the crowd suddenly gave way to gasps and pointing fingers as the Third Wind slowly began to rise up off of the water. First a foot, then two, then three. Its small hull dripped water as the proxy floated a full four foot above the glassy water.

The flotilla of miniature ships continued unabated, some even gliding directly under the Third Wind's hull.

"What-" began Kaedin, but was immediately cut off. The Third Wind, floating six feet off the water now, was suddenly enveloped in a bright green glow. Gasps and shrieks filled the air from both piers. It was immediately apparent that this was no ordinary fire. Eerie ghostly flickering light radiated out from the hull and sails in every direction for several feet.

"What is happening?!" bellowed Lord Keldryn, clearly enraged. He seemed to be directing the question to the sea priests who were chattering among themselves. The entire crowd of spectators was talking excitedly. No one had ever seen something like this at the Offering. The words "Third Wind" and "Callister Draabyn" and "cursed" were being tossed about by the crowd with far too much enthusiasm.

"Do you see?" bellowed a triumphant Tamarroff. "The sea rejects the Third Wind! The very Offering is an offense!" Many people around Tamarroff were nodding their heads and murmuring agreement. A number of people clasped their hands and began praying to Semorjon.

"The Third Wind flies to the false heavens," cried a voice from the crowd. "It refuses to sink and be offered!"

"Tamarroff!" bellowed Callister. "This is no more a curse of the gods than the glassy sea before us. It is a simple spell used against this one ship."

The crowds on both piers quieted down to listen.

"Lord Keldryn," shouted a voice. It was the pudgy blonde assistant harbor master that Callister had seen on the Seahammer yesterday. He was on the east pier standing near Tamarroff. "I propose that in the interest of the safety of the harbor and all residents of Freeport, that we declare the Third Wind banished from this port."

"Barnacles!" swore Harris. "How many treacherous dogs does he have on his payroll?"

Callister swore under his breath. "Release the Third Wind from this spell!" he bellowed at Tamarroff.

"I have no such power," yelled Tamarroff. "This is what he has wrought by pandering to unworldly powers!" he said to the crowds around him.

"Lord Keldryn," said a voice. It was another assistant harbor master, on the east pier. "I concur with Assistant Master Beluwyn. We must banish the Third Wind from Freeport. If we do not, I fear we put the harbor, perhaps even the city, at risk!"

“I will kill them all,” fumed Harris.

A mad gleam was in Tamaroff’s eyes. The man seemed drunk with power. The Third Wind rose further up suddenly, now twelve feet off the water and blazing with ghostly green light.

All of the miniature ships slowed and stopped and the waves began to return. The sea priest, seeming to have lost any semblance of concentration, now seemed unsure of how to proceed. Two assistant harbor masters began arguing with the other sea priests.

Callister leapt up onto the railing at the edge of the pier and stabbed a finger toward Tamaroff. All eyes were on Callister.

“All mariners in Freeport are brothers!” roared Callister. “We are all brethren in the eyes of Semorjon.” Many people in the crowd murmured their agreement. A few sailors yelled enthusiastically. “Be it cutter or cog, hauler or fisher, long boat or tall ship, in this offering, we are as one! An attack on one of us is an assault on the whole damned fleet!” The crowd exploded in cheers.

“This man,” Callister thrust a finger at Tamaroff “means to do the Third Wind in with witchcraft. And I say Semorjon will hold us to our vows. If one ship flies beyond his grasp, so will all! I call upon you, Tamaroff, to release my ship!”

“Never!” screamed Tamaroff.

Callister looked to the Harbor Master. Lord Keldryn stood at the edge of the platform, gesturing to the captain of the guards who nodded and vanished into the crowd. A moment later, Callister could see a trio of city guards pushing through the crowds on the beach and heading toward his pier.

“It doesn’t look like we’re going to get justice today, cap’n” said Harris, solemnly.

With that, Callister reached into one of the pockets on his long coat and pulled out the troll bone that Gorrosha had given him. He held it aloft for all to see. The slender white bone almost seemed to glow in the cool evening air.

The bone suddenly flared brightly in Callister’s hands. A number of people cried out in alarm and fell back while others cheered.

Callister’s tattoos flared in response and began to shimmer, crawling upon his skin. Gasps erupted from the crowd around him as the markings slid completely from his face and neck, flowing toward his outstretched hand in a rippling wave.

“Tamaroff!” Callister yelled.

The crowd died down suddenly. Everyone waited to hear Tamaroff’s answer. No one moved. Nothing stirred but the bobbing proxies and the waves below.

Tamaroff stared as Callister’s glyphs continued to advance up his raised arm, towards the bone. His eyes widened with alarm.

The tattoos had all merged into a solid cluster upon his hand and forearm, locked into a dense and intricate pattern. The bone in his hand glowed so brightly, it was difficult to see. Both piers and the very water between them shook from some unseen power held in restraint.

“You wouldn’t!” said Tamarroff. “You would never!” he screamed.

“Wouldn’t I!” asked Callister and snapped the bone in two.

Instantly, the hellish green glow erupted from every single proxy in the harbor, as all two hundred of them vaulted into the air.

The crowd exploded into deafening chaos. Mothers shrieked in terror, children cried, sailors gasped in surprise, captains bellowed in fury and dockhands cheered.

Tamarroff, startled at this sudden change of events, looked up in horror at the hundreds of glowing proxies spiraling upwards from the water. He pulled out a glowing green necklace out from under his tunic and frantically banged it against the pier railing.

The sea below began to churn and roil in response. The proxies, still rising ever upward, began to dart about at random, cresting and falling like a swarm of fireflies fighting the wind.

Panic swept the crowd as the reality of what they were witnessing sunk in. Every single proxy had slipped the clutches of the sea. Every ship in Freeport was now forsaken.

“Save the ship!” bellowed one captain.

“Forty gold to whoever lay hands on my flying proxy!” yelled another captain.

A young officer ran past Callister and leapt into the water screaming “Not the Clay Duck! Save the Duck!”

Everywhere sailors were wading into the water from the beach or leaping off the piers in a desperate attempt to save their beloved proxies. One young navigator managed to grab ahold of the Blue Heron mid-leap and was now dangling from the proxy twenty feet in the air.

“Arrest that man,” bellowed the Harbormaster. Both Callister and Tamarroff quickly looked to see who he was referring to.

The Harbor Master was pointing at both piers. “Arrest them both!” he bellowed.

A number of city guards, pushing through the crowd, grabbed Tamarroff and his officers. One guard snatched up the glowing necklace.

“Cap’n” shouted Harris, pointing through the crowd. The trio of city guards on the east pier had almost reached them.

“Gentlemen,” said Callister, “time to go!”

“Yes sir!”

Callister, standing on the railing, leapt down onto the deck of the scruffy fat man's ship. He was immediately followed by his crew.

The scruffy fat man pulled out an axe and turned on Callister.

"You do realize that one of those proxies belonged to the Warthog!"

"My apologies, Sancho!" replied Callister with a shrug. "It was all or nothing."

Sancho, captain of the Warthog, smiled and wrapped Callister in a bear hug.

"It's good to see ya, lad!" He then turned and in one clean swing, brought the axe blade down on the anchor line. The rope snapped and the bow of the ship rocked free.

"Forsythe," yelled Callister, seeing two city guards preparing to jump. "Go! Go! Go!"

Forsythe, already seated in the back, brought his hands together in a clap. The Warthog surged forward as the guardsmen leapt. They missed the stern of the Warthog and plunged into the water. The Warthog sped out into the harbor leaving chaos and calamity in its wake.

"My debt to you is paid" yelled Sancho, above the roar of the wind.

"Agreed" said Callister.

"And I want a keg of Blackfall!"

"Done."

"And a new anchor!"

Callister clapped him on the shoulder. "Anything you want."

Three crossbow bolts suddenly whistled by. One of them sank into the wood main mast, inches from Kaedin, who ducked. A pair of long boats, with rowers and crossbowmen, were behind them in close pursuit.

Kaedin scowled.

"What's wrong?" asked Callister. "Forsythe is doing well".

"Just once, captain," said Kaedin, "I would like to leave a city without pursuit."

"So what are you planning on doing now?" asked Sancho, "You didn't just disrupt the ceremony... by the gods, you pissed all over tradition. You'll be lucky they don't put another warrant out for ya!"

"Not to worry. We'll give them a couple of days to chase us, but they'll soon realize that Tamarroff was behind it. I think that necklace they seized back there may be our saving grace."

"So where am I taking you?"

Callister pointed. The Third Wind was straight ahead and heading out for sea.

Kaedin pulled out a notebook and quill and began scribbling furiously across the page.

“What are you writing?” asked Callister.

“Don’t worry,” said Kaedin without looking up “As always, I’ll make you look good.”

“You’re going to say we lost today, aren’t you?”

“Well technically, sir, we did. Your goal was to get Tamarroff to fold and he most decidedly did not.”

“Yeah, stubborn”.

“In point of fact, we have lost in every conceivable way. The Third Wind was *not* offered to the sea. No ship in the harbor was offered.”

“What’s your point?”

“My *point* is we are, quite literally, leaving chaos and upheaval in our wake. I wish I could say it was our first time.”

“Harker,” said Callister, pulling out a silver flask “Relax. If all of us are cursed, then none of us are. All reputations intact.” He passed the flask around and each took a drink. As the Warthog pulled up alongside the Third Wind, ropes were thrown down along with welcoming cheers from the rest of the crew.

After a few goodbyes, Callister and his officers were soon back on the deck of their ship. They waved to Sancho as he sailed away with a keg of Blackfall at his feet.

“I’ll say this for ye, lads,” called out Sancho, “you do know how to have fun!”

As the Third Wind turned to towards the open sea, Callister and Kaedin stood at the aft railing, looking back to the harbor. Distant green lights were continuing to spiral gently upward, churning emerald light within the clouds as they rose. There was a brief flicker of green as the last of the lights vanished into the grey. A distant rumble of thunder sounded, echoed, faded... and all was quiet.