

STEVEN J
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THE DRAGONS
OF ASDANUND

THE SCHEMES OF RALTARN
& TOMAZ VOLUME II

Books by Steven J Pemberton

The Barefoot Healer (fantasy)

1. *Death & Magic*
2. *Plague & Poison*
3. *Dust & Water*
4. *Stone & Silence*

The Dragonrider Series (fantasy)

1. *The Accidental Dragonrider*
2. *The Reluctant Dragonrider*

The Schemes of Raltarn & Tomaz (fantasy)

1. *The Mirrors of Elangir*
2. *The Dragons of Asdanund*

Other Works

Escape Velocity (science fiction)

Racing the Storm and Other Stories (science fiction, forthcoming)

Simon and the Birthday Wish (for children)

Chapter 1

A DRIZZLY MIST had descended by the time we got close enough to *Glorious* to hail her. To nobody's surprise, the lookout's shouts produced no response. The warship hadn't moved since we spotted her an hour ago. She seemed to be listing. Had she struck a rock? I'd thought the sea was quite deep here.

"Raltarn!" My father, Rathkarn, called to me from the main deck, where he stood by my uncle, his brother Tomaz. I still hadn't got used to his being alive after a decade of believing he'd been killed in a burglary gone wrong. . . and I still hadn't quite forgiven Uncle for not telling me the truth about him. I descended from the forecandle, moving slowly so as not to slip on the wet planks.

Father gestured to Uncle and said, "Will you talk some sense into him?"

"I don't understand," I said.

"The Captain wants to send the boat over to the warship," said Father.

"I don't see how that's any concern of ours," I said. "Besides, if this mist settles, we're stuck here until the wind gets up enough to clear it."

"No good will come of this," Father replied. "There's nobody above deck. Half her sails are missing, and the rest are frittered. But she couldn't have been caught in a storm, because she was only half a day ahead of us. And she's not flying a distress flag, so whatever happened happened quickly."

"If there's something around here that's a danger to a warship," I said, "we ought to know about it."

"No," said Father, "we ought to get away from it."

"If the Captain wants to investigate," said Uncle, "we investigate."

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“You’re his employers,” said Father. “Tell him you’re in a hurry to get back to Asdanund.”

“We are,” I replied, “but the Captain of *Glorious* said we were obliged to help them under the Emergency Articles. He never rescinded that order, as far as I know.”

“He abandoned you!” Father exclaimed.

“We abandoned him, strictly speaking,” said Uncle. “And even without the Emergency Articles, what about the well-being of your fellow men?”

“I’ve never known you to show much concern for that,” Father muttered.

A splash from the other side of the ship told me our boat had been launched.

Father’s gaze shifted to the men climbing over the railing to descend to the boat. “Admit it—you’re hoping the Elangics who Buronoskol put on that ship went mad and killed everyone, so you can help yourself to the artefacts he gave them.”

Uncle snorted. “If that is what I want, what are you so worried about?”

Father’s gaze returned to *Glorious*. “That not all of them are dead.”

Chapter 2

IT WAS TOO COLD AND DAMP to wait for the boat to come back, and if anything bad happened while they were searching *Glorious*, I didn't want to witness it. I'd already seen more than my share of horrors on this voyage. I headed below decks to our cabin.

Zodratal lay on the bed, apparently asleep, but as soon as I closed the door, she jumped up and wrapped me in a bruising embrace and tried to kiss me on the mouth. I squirmed and turned my head, so the kiss landed on my cheek.

Releasing me, she stepped back and gazed at me with an exaggerated sad expression, like an actor trying to ensure he could be seen from the top of the theatre. "Raltarn," she said, her voice quavering.

I straightened my clothes and gave her the tiniest smile I could manage. "Good afternoon, Zodratal."

"Not to say me," she replied. Father had been teaching her Asdanundish, but hadn't got very far. The words were her best attempt at *don't say such things*. She and Father had married the day after our escape from Buronoskol's madness, which meant that, by law and by custom, she was now my mother. She was upset—or pretending to be upset—that I didn't care for the way Elangic women treated their sons, even the adult ones. She was also upset that I still called her by her name, rather than by her relationship to me.

Father obviously loved Zodratal dearly, and had done for quite some time. I, on the other hand, had spent less than half an hour in her company before learning she was to become part of my family. I hardly remembered my own mother, and hadn't thought I wanted—or needed—a replacement. The fact she couldn't be over a decade older than me didn't make it any easier to adjust to my new situation. Then again, I was stuck with her on board *Silver Dolphin* for a few months until we got home to Asdanund, so I should at least make an

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attempt to be civil to her.

I sighed. “Would you like to learn some more Asdanundish?”

Her eyes lit up, and she spread her arms. For a moment I feared another embrace, but she just said, “Learn Asdanund. Good, good.”

Good, good was something Buronoskol had said a lot. Maybe that was how the Elangics said *yes*. If so, how did they say *yes* to something they didn’t like?

“Right,” I began.

“Right,” she repeated.

I smiled and pointed to my head. “Head.”

“Head,” she said, mimicking the gesture.

“Arm,” I said, indicating one of mine.

“Arm,” she said, then, “Hand, fingers, chest, belly, back, leg, foot,” pointing to each in turn. “Hair, eye, nose, mouth, ear.”

“Yes, very good,” I said. Of course Father would’ve taught her those words. I tested her on a few, to make sure she hadn’t just memorised the order. My schoolmaster sometimes did that to catch us out. She got all of them right. I moved on to the names of objects in the cabin and found she knew all of those too.

“Learn Asdanund?” she said with a hopeful smile.

I managed to teach her the adjectives *big* and *small*, but couldn’t work out how to convey *bigger* and *smaller*. I tried colours, but we didn’t have enough objects of the same colour for me to be confident that she understood which property the words distinguished.

We moved on to numbers. She quickly grasped *one* to *ten*, but larger quantities eluded her. She could manage addition if the result was five or less. Subtraction seemed a mystery to her. It was only when I asked her to count in Elangic that I realised she hadn’t been taught the numbers beyond ten in her own language.

The cabin door opened, and Father entered. Zodratal squealed and threw her arms around him. I averted my eyes as they kissed noisily. Anyone would think they’d been apart for months, not hours.

Father spoke to Zodratal in Elangic. Her expression grew sombre. She answered him rapidly and at length. Twice she gestured to me, and Father paled both times she did this. What had I done—or not done?

Father turned to me. “The boat’s come back from *Glorious*. Her crew are all dead.”

“Mazor have mercy,” I whispered.

“Many of them have wounds from Elangic weapons.”

“So you were right that Buronoskol’s people went mad.”

“Not quite. Some of the crew were holding weapons.”

“There was a fight, then,” I said, “and they killed one another.”

“Perhaps.”

“What were they fighting over, I wonder? And what does this have to do with me?”

“There’s one survivor,” Father said. “One of Buronoskol’s people. The woman. She’s barricaded herself in the galley. She speaks little or no Asdanundish, so our Captain wants Zodratal to talk to her. Zodratal’s, ah, not keen on the idea. She asked why I’d risk leaving you half-orphaned for a second time.”

It took me a moment to work out what he meant. “What’s the danger?”

“The woman has an Elangic weapon, and she’s not shy about using it.”

“We could just leave her there,” I said.

He frowned. “I thought I’d brought you up better than that.”

“Blame Tomaz,” I muttered.

“The Navy will want to know what happened to *Glorious*, as will the crew’s families. We have to recover her log and her flags.”

“Neither of which are kept anywhere near the galley,” I said.

“And we need to take the weapons and other artefacts—to stop the Elangics from regaining them, even if they don’t change the course of the war.”

“You said they didn’t have any boats.”

“I never *saw* them using boats. Remember I was in a room with no windows for most of the time I was there.”

I shuddered. Being locked up in a place like that for ten years—it was a miracle he was still sane, never mind that he’d been able to fall in love with Zodratal.

“If it was up to me,” Father said, “I’d invite the woman to take off in one of the warship’s boats, then burn the whole sorry mess to the waterline, weapons, artefacts and all. But since it’s not up to me, I’ll just have to talk the Captain out of recklessly endangering the life of a passenger.” He murmured to Zodratal, and they left the cabin hand-in-hand.

I sat on the bed, tempted to lie down for a nap. Since Father and Zodratal came aboard, they’d had the cabin that Uncle and I

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had occupied on the voyage out. We now had to bunk with the crew, whose beds were much less comfortable than the ones in the cabin.

Someone knocked on the door. I opened it to see Suln, the ship's third mate. He had a sword at his belt, and my suspicions about his motives were reawakened. When *Glorious* had caught up with us on the voyage out, he'd hidden the Elangic artefacts that Uncle and I already possessed, to stop the Navy confiscating them. He'd convinced us to trust him by telling us he was an officer in the White Dragons, an organisation that was trying to force a peaceful end to the war by sabotaging the Asdanundish Army's operations. If he betrayed us, he'd said, we could simply tell the captain of *Glorious* who he really was. At the back of my mind had been the thought that to someone like him, *betray* was likely to mean *kill at the first opportunity*, but he'd given us a lot of practical assistance and good advice. He'd helped Uncle and me to rescue Father, when everyone else had wanted to get away from Elangir as quickly as possible. But now that everyone who posed an immediate threat to his freedom or his life was dead. . .

"The Captain wants to see you," Suln said.

Those weren't words I would've expected from a man who meant to murder me. "About what?"

"*Glorious*," he said, as though it was a stupid question. He stood aside to let me out of the room. I gestured to indicate he should go first. He shrugged, as if there would be plenty of other chances to kill me, then complied.

I followed Suln the short distance to the Captain's cabin at the stern. He tapped on the door, then opened it. Father, Zodratal and Captain Rymad sat at the table, while First Mate Gribekkh, Second Mate Ingryn and Uncle stood opposite them. I moved next to Uncle.

"Raltarn," said Rymad. "Thank you for joining us." He repeated what Father had told me about the situation on *Glorious*. "Since her crew are all dead and no other naval vessel is nearby, this is now a salvage operation. Our first objective is to disarm the Elangic woman and remove her from the ship—peacefully if possible, by force if necessary. Then we'll perform funerals for the crew and determine whether the ship is still seaworthy enough to sail to a friendly port. Though even if she is, I doubt we can spare enough men for her." Early in the voyage, we'd lost eight men in a terrible storm, and had yet to replace them. "If she's not able to make that journey, we'll

take anything useful or valuable that we've room for, and scuttle her to stop her falling into enemy hands."

Nobody questioned his implication that Elangir was an enemy now. Buronoskol had tried to sink us as we'd left his harbour. The fact he'd blown himself up in the process didn't mean his comrades wouldn't want to pick up where he left off.

"I agree with all of that, Captain," said Father. "It's in accordance with the law of the sea. But I don't see why Zodratal—my wife—has to go."

"She speaks the woman's language," said Rymad. "And the presence of a woman in our group might help to convince the Elangic that our intentions are friendly."

Father and Zodratal spoke in Elangic for a few moments. She glanced at Rymad and rolled her eyes.

"She doesn't know this woman, Sir," said Father. "But many people in Turakingat knew that Zodratal spent a lot of time visiting me in prison. So if the woman recognises her, she'll assume she's turned traitor."

"She has turned traitor," Suln remarked.

"I'd rather we didn't draw the woman's attention to that before we've disarmed her," Father replied.

"You're aware, of course," said Rymad, "that I could simply order someone to kill her."

"You could simply leave her there and sail on," said Uncle. "No one back home has to know what happened to the ship." He looked around us, inviting agreement.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," said Rymad, "if you expect every man on *Silver Dolphin* to lie for you." He held Uncle's gaze for a moment, then added, "We have to act soon. She could be using one of those mirrors to summon reinforcements."

"I'd say they have their hands full cleaning up the harbour," said Ingryn.

"We have to give her a chance to surrender," I said. "There's been too much killing on this voyage already."

"Easy for you to say," said Gribek, "when you're not the one facing down her weapon."

"We're getting away from the most important point," said Father. Rymad glared at him. "Which is?"

"There's no need to send Zodratal. I'll go instead. My Elangic is

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more than good enough to say, *Surrender or we'll kill you.*"

"If we want her to surrender, then you need to go anyway," Rymad replied, "to act as an interpreter."

"Exactly," said Father.

"We also need someone to wield the one Elangic weapon that we currently have," said Rymad.

"I'd better do that," said Suln. "Seeing as I'm the only person on board who's deliberately killed somebody with one of them."

That wasn't strictly true—I'd killed a hostile native on Krothror, though it hadn't been entirely deliberate, and in any case I had no desire to repeat the experience.

"Good," said Rymad. "That leaves Raltarn."

My heart skipped. "Me?"

He gazed at me. "Something went very wrong on that ship within a few days of leaving Turakingat. There are two obvious things that were different from her voyage out. One is that there were a couple of Elangics on board. The other is that she was carrying a large number of magical artefacts."

Uncle snorted. "You think all the cooking pots in the hold drove them mad?"

"Not really, but nobody has ever carried that many artefacts on a ship—or not an Asdanundish one, anyway. We don't know what the dangers are."

"And you think I can tell you?" I said.

"If not you, who else?" said Rymad. "You're the only magician we have. You can tell when an artefact is working. And didn't Buronoskol give you something that lets you see magic?"

"He did, but—"

"Good. Meet me on the main deck in half an hour."

Chapter 3

OUR BOAT CAME TO A HALT fifty yards from the grey bulk of *Glorious*. I shaded my eyes with a hand to cut the glare of the setting sun and stared at the ship.

“Anything yet?” said Suln.

Buronoskol had given me a pair of goggles that allowed the wearer to see magic, and I had them on now. They had a little slider on each side that gave control over precisely what they showed. I didn’t know everything the controls did, but before we’d left *Silver Dolphin*, I’d found a combination that allowed me to see a glow within the weapon that Suln now carried. We hoped that would let me see the weapons on board *Glorious* and give some warning of attack by the woman in the galley.

“If there’s anything there,” I replied, “either we’re too far away for me to see it, or the hull’s blocking it.”

“Resume rowing,” Suln said.

The mist clung to everything, and I felt colder than I had among the snow in Turakingat. I’d wanted to wear the thick coat that Buronoskol had given me, but Suln had overruled me, saying it was likely to get caught on obstacles in the ship’s confined spaces.

A minute or two later, the boat came alongside the dark towering hull of the warship. A rope ladder dangled before us, and my gaze followed it up to the deck. Near the top of the ladder, a darker stain had spread down the side of the ship.

“I still don’t see any magic,” I said.

“I’ll go first,” said Suln, “and check if the deck’s clear. Wait for my signal, then the rest of you come up, one at a time. Raltarn first, then Rathkarn with the lantern, then Zodratal. Oarsmen, keep the boat level with the ladder. If you don’t get my signal within a minute, or you hear me shout ‘flee,’ you head back to *Silver Dolphin*.”

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and don't mind if you break an oar. Once we're on the ship, Raltarn is my second-in-command."

I gulped. "What does that mean?"

"It means that if I become unable to give orders for any reason, you're in charge of getting everyone safely back to the boat, and the boat back to the ship."

"Sir," said Father, "I have much more experience of command than my son. I've served as a second mate, so I actually outrank you."

Suln smirked. "Sir, if you really believed that mattered, you would've mentioned it when Rymad put me in charge. Besides, Raltarn is the only other one of us who knows how to use this." He tapped the weapon in the sheath at his hip. "You can mind the lantern."

A lump formed in my throat. "I . . . I don't mind letting my father be the second-in-command," I said.

Father sighed. "No, Suln's right. The oarsmen know you better than they know me. And it's been a decade since I had to give an order. This isn't the time or the place to try to remember how it's done."

Suln checked the controls of the Elangic weapon and returned it to the sheath, then started up the ladder. I watched him, admiring how effortless he made it look. When I climbed this sort of contraption, I surely resembled a pigeon caught in a snare. All the same, he'd be an easy target if the woman had thought to venture out of the galley.

Suln paused at the top, scanning the deck, then climbed onto the ship. I heard his footsteps, slow and cautious. One of the oarsmen moved his lips silently—counting to when the time came to depart. Father put an arm around Zodratal, who seemed faintly green. Or perhaps that was just the glass in my goggles.

Now I heard nothing but the wind and the waves. Had Suln already gone out of earshot? Had the woman killed him before he could warn us? The weapons made no noise when discharged. How much time remained? I wanted to ask the oarsman, but feared making him lose count.

Suln peered over the railing. I almost screamed.

"I should warn you," he said, "it's even messier than I thought."

I checked that my goggles were secure, then stood on the bench. Once I was sure of my balance, I started climbing. The ladder coiled

underneath me, and I had to pause every second or third step to wait for it to stop swaying. At least that gave me time to warm my hands by sticking them one at a time under my arms. When my head drew level with the deck, a ghastly smell hit me. I lifted one hand to cover my mouth and nose, and almost lost my grip.

Eyes watering, I hauled myself onto the deck. The stain I'd seen from the boat continued up here. As I'd suspected, it was blood, almost black after being exposed to the air. I blinked away my tears and saw the source of the blood—a sailor lying on his side, gouged open from shoulder to hip, organs spilt over the planks. My guts squirmed, and my hand went to my mouth.

Suln gripped my shoulder and guided me forward. We'd gone five or six paces when my lunch came up, closely followed by my breakfast.

Behind me, Father whispered, "Dagoreth..."

I spat a few times to try to get rid of the taste.

Father came over to me. "Raltarn, are you all right?"

"I think so," I said, my voice shaking. "Just shocked."

He shuddered. "You've every right to be."

My gaze followed Suln as he moved around the deck, stepping over more bodies and assorted debris, peering through open doorways and hatches. I counted three more corpses on the deck, and thought there might be another under a large piece of sailcloth. One corpse had an Elangic weapon near his hand.

Zodratal poked her head above the deck and gave a loud gasp. Father hurried over to help her on board. She flung her arms around him, eyes shut tight, and spoke rapidly and breathlessly. Father rubbed her back and made shushing noises.

"Quiet," Suln growled.

Father let go of Zodratal and pointed to a set of wooden projections on the deck in front of the main mast. "Both boats are missing, so at least a few people got away."

"Or someone threw them overboard to stop anyone else escaping," Suln replied.

"Why would anyone do that?" Father asked.

Suln spread his arms to indicate the chaos around us. To me, he said, "What do your magic eyes tell you?"

I studied the weapon near the corpse's hand. "I see magic there, but fainter than in your weapon." I checked the forecabin and the

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poop deck, then the deck beneath my feet. “Nothing anywhere else. The hull must still be blocking it.”

“Right.” Suln pointed to a doorway in the starboard side of the forecabin. “The galley’s through there, down the stairs to the middle deck, then forward. I’ll go first, then Raltarn, then Zodratal, then Rathkarn. Raltarn, I need you to tell me if you see any magic, so stay to the left of me if you can, but keep behind me.”

Father lit the lantern, then shuttered it to shield it from the wind. I’d wanted to bring an Elangic one, but Suln had overruled me, saying he wasn’t convinced of their reliability. Besides, if we thought that having many magical devices in a small space might have contributed to the slaughter, it would be unwise to increase that number any more than necessary.

The doorway led to a short corridor, wide enough only for one person. Suln told us to stop just inside it, to give our eyes time to adjust to the dark. The smell of death was stronger here, crowding out the smell of my vomit. Ahead, metal creaked against metal, in time with the ship’s slow rolling.

“Raltarn, do you see anything through there?” Suln pointed to a door in the corridor’s left side.

“No.”

He tried the handle, then aiming his weapon at it, eased the door open. “Anything now?”

The room seemed to be a storage area, with things hanging from the walls, but it was too dark for me to tell any more.

“Nothing,” I said.

He closed the door, and we moved on to the top of the stairs. I stretched to see over his shoulder.

“There’s something down there,” I said. “Same size as a weapon, but a different shape.”

“Is it moving?”

“No.”

“You definitely can’t see magic through wood, then.”

“It would seem so.”

“That’s going to make things harder than I thought,” said Suln, “but we’ll just have to work with it.” He crouched for a moment, then straightened. “The galley is about ten feet past the bottom of the stairs. There’s a door, which the first boarding party said they closed behind them. As far as I can tell, it’s still closed, and I’m hoping that

means the woman is still behind it. If she is, she can probably hear our voices by now, so let's keep the noise down."

The stairs led to a space twice the width of the corridor. A banister on the open side of the staircase stopped halfway down. Its splintered end told me it had probably been damaged in the battle.

A couple of steps later, I trod in something sticky—blood, no doubt. My shoe made a ripping sound as I lifted it. I looked down and saw what the blood had come from—a body with most of its head missing. Behind me, Zodratal gave a muffled cough. Father whispered what I guessed were words of comfort.

"I said quiet," Suln hissed.

We were now close enough to the source of magic for the lantern to show it. It was a cylinder, about a foot wide and high, with three stubby projections on top of it, equally spaced. An upside-down cooking pot, I assumed.

The door leading to the galley was closed, as Suln had said. A trail of bloody handprints along the left wall led to it. The one on the door stretched down—perhaps the door had opened as the man leaned on it.

At the rear of the space, past the headless corpse, was another door, this one open. It was too dark for the lantern to show anything, but the goggles revealed multiple sources of magic. I whispered this to Suln.

"Any of them moving?" he asked.

"No," I said, after watching them for a moment.

"That's the crew's quarters. Lots of bodies there." He positioned us around the door to the galley—himself next to it, me behind him, Father and Zodratal opposite us, their backs to the hull. He told Father to pass the lantern to me and keep watch on the rear door, in case the woman had heard us coming and decided to sneak up on us from behind.

"I'm going to open the door just wide enough for us to get some idea of what's in there," said Suln. "Raltarn, you figure out where the magic is, then get back behind me."

I licked my lips and swallowed, tasting acid. "Understood." The lantern grew heavy in my hand, and I put my other hand beneath it.

"On three." Suln reached for the door handle. "One. Two. Three."

He pushed the door open six inches. At first I saw nothing. Then the goggles revealed a source of magic at about chest height, rapidly

brightening.

“Shut it!” I yelled, ducking behind him.

Even as he obeyed, a loud thump shook the timbers around us. As silence descended, the room seemed to get smaller. My chest tightened, and my legs shook. I slumped against the wall. Suln took the lantern as it slipped from my grasp.

“I should’ve realised she’d aim at the light,” Suln muttered. One of the planks of the door now bulged outwards.

Zodratal crossed the room and tried to embrace me. I was too weak to fight her off. Father said something in Elangic, and she retreated.

“I have an idea,” said Suln. “Can you manage a light spell?”

Chapter 4

I HALF-CLOSED MY EYES and cupped my hands in front of me. I paused. Oh Mazor, I hadn't forgotten the words, had I? Light was one of the simplest spells. When had I last needed to cast it? Having a device that could do it for me had made me lazy. I breathed in sharply and whispered what I prayed was the right incantation.

An egg-sized ball of light appeared between my palms, fluttering like a flag in a breeze.

"That'll do," said Suln. "Can you keep it up for five minutes?"

"I, ah, I think so."

"Good. The woman shot at the lantern because it was the only thing she could see. So your father is going to dangle it on the end of that pole while Zodratal tries to convince her to surrender. You and I will go round the other side of the ship to get to the forward end of the galley so we can sneak up on her if Zodratal doesn't convince her."

"Be careful," said Father. Zodratal seemed close to tears. Father whispered something to her, and she nodded.

Suln and I passed through the crew's quarters as quickly as we could, threading our way through and over bodies and other debris. My light was too feeble for me to see anything but dark grey shapes. My imagination filled in the gaps.

The weapons were mainly in the middle of the forward part of the room, and my light flickered as we drew near them. Even though nobody was using the weapons, they were still drawing in magic from the surroundings, competing with my spell. I prayed it would last until we reached the next room. It was a wonder it worked at all, this far from land. That had to be a consequence of Buronoskol fixing the machine beneath Turakingat—something he'd tricked me into helping him with. Had he known magic would become stronger, this far

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from the city? Was the disaster on board *Glorious* part of his horrific plan, continuing to bear fruit after his death? It was hard to see how this benefitted the Elangics, unless they merely wanted revenge for some real or imagined offence we'd given them. But Buronoskol was—had been—more ambitious than that.

“Raltarn?” Suln’s voice dragged me out of my thoughts. He stood a few paces into the next room, a mirror image of the one where Father and Zodratal waited. The staircase in this one was intact, and there were no headless corpses to avoid. Slivers of light poked through holes in the door at the top of the stairs. From the other room, Zodratal started speaking.

“Stay behind me and keep the light near the floor,” Suln said, shifting to the forward door.

“Now you tell me,” I muttered.

“And be *quiet*.”

“Moving the light needs another spell.” I whispered it, and the light obeyed, casting eerie shadows as it descended.

Suln drew his weapon. He then gripped the handle and eased the door open. The room looked to be a weapons locker. Swords lay across the floor next to an open cupboard. Two doors led from the room, the forward one slightly ajar, the one on the right closed.

I heard a thump, and Zodratal screamed. My light wavered. More thumps, then Father shouted—Elangic, it sounded like. Silence fell. Were they hurt? I should go back and help them.

Zodratal spoke again, her voice less confident than before. Another thump.

Suln pointed to the door on the right and whispered, “This leads to the galley. When I nod, I want you to cancel your light and open the door just wide enough for your goggles to spot the woman’s weapon. Then close the door again.”

“What if she’s right behind it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “She’s shooting at the others. I’ll cover you.”

I put my ear to the door, hearing nothing new. Suln nodded.

I grasped the handle and cancelled the light spell. The sudden darkness seemed to magnify the rocking of the ship, and my grip on the handle involuntarily tightened. This made it rattle, and I tensed, anticipating that the woman would start shooting at the sound. Nothing happened, so I turned the handle and eased the door open a few inches.

The goggles revealed nothing. I risked opening the door a bit wider. It bumped against something heavy.

From within the room came a gasp and the sound of someone moving. Magic flashed a moment before I pulled the door closed. There was a thump from the other side, felt more than heard.

Suln muttered what sounded like a swear word. "So she knows we're here now."

I stood, shaking. I wanted more than an inch of wood between her and me, but didn't feel able to move in the dark.

"Can't be helped," Suln replied.

"I think she's in the middle of the room. I didn't see the magic from her weapon until she shot at me."

"That probably means she's behind some cover. Which means my initial plan of kicking the door open and rushing her isn't going to work." He paused, and I heard him rubbing his chin. "I should've thought of this sooner. Go tell your father to take a weapon from one of the crew. The one we saw on deck should save you the bother of fossicking in the dark."

"He doesn't know how to use it," I said.

"He shouldn't need to. And even if he does, it's not difficult—point the end with the hole towards the enemy and press the button. You come back here and be ready with a light spell. When he's in position, he'll shout 'red tea,' and we'll kick both doors open at the same time. Between your light and Zodratal's lantern, she should see we've got her surrounded, and surrender without shooting any of us."

I was glad he couldn't see me shudder. "Red tea" was the code-word that Okhraam, the bo'sun, had used to signal a counterattack when the natives had surrounded us on Krothtror.

"What if she does shoot one of us?" I asked.

"Then we shoot her," he replied, as if it should've been obvious.

I cast a light spell and threaded my way back through the crew's quarters. Father and Zodratal waited in the room where we'd left them, out of sight of the galley door. I explained what Suln wanted Father to do, and how I thought it was likely to get someone killed.

Father tutted. "If you have any better ideas, my boy, I'm sure the third mate would be delighted to hear them. Anyway, you can come and show me how to unfasten one of these weapons from a corpse without losing a hand."

We climbed to the deck. Once our eyes had adjusted to the day-

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light, we crossed to the sailor who had a weapon.

“We need to get his jacket off,” I said. The part of the weapon that fitted in the user’s hand was attached to a thin, flexible cord that was in turn attached to a fat disk in the middle of his back, held in place with leather straps over his shoulders. The cold and my squeamishness made it slower work than I would’ve liked. I tried to avoid looking at him, even though his wounds were mild in comparison to some of the others.

“How are the negotiations progressing?” I asked.

“Well, she’s stopped shooting at us,” Father said, “but she’s not talking either.”

“Did she say anything at all?”

“Not much that I could follow. Babbling about being ready to sit at her ancestors’ hearth, mainly—you know they worship their ancestors, don’t you? Not as Gods, exactly, but—”

Below the deck, a woman screamed.

Chapter 5

FATHER STARED AT ME, HORRIFIED. “Zodratal,” he breathed. He jumped to his feet and ran down the stairs before I could stop him.

His footsteps came to a halt sooner than I expected. He uttered a few words in Elangic before a woman’s voice cut him off. A few moments’ silence followed. Then Father said, his voice shaking, “Raltarn, we’re coming up. Stay clear.”

Oh, Mazor... The Elangic woman must have come out of the galley while we were up here and taken Zodratal hostage. How could we have been so stupid? How could *I* have been so stupid?

Slow footsteps ascended the stairs—two, maybe three people. I hurried to finish the process of liberating the weapon from the dead sailor. My stomach fluttered at the stink of death that arose as I pushed and pulled the harness off him. It came loose just as Father appeared in the doorway. He saw what I was doing and shook his head.

I stood up and pointed the weapon at the doorway as Father stepped out of it.

“Raltarn, no,” he growled.

Behind him came Zodratal, her movements stiff, her eyes wide in fear. A pace behind Zodratal came the Elangic woman, her weapon pressed to the side of Zodratal’s neck. She glanced in my direction and said something, jabbing Zodratal with her weapon as if to emphasise the point.

“Drop your weapon,” Father told me.

“She must realise she won’t g-get off this sh-ship alive if she harms anyone.” My hand shook as I tried to keep my weapon aimed at her.

The woman shouted and waved her weapon in my direction, then stuck it back into Zodratal’s neck.

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“She doesn’t care about that any more,” Father said. “Just—please—put it down.”

I crouched, keeping my free hand held up, palm out, so the woman could see I wasn’t going to grab something else, then carefully placed the weapon on the deck. I could’ve just dropped it, but didn’t want to risk it shooting when it hit the planks.

The woman said something else and thrust her chin towards me.

“Step back,” Father said.

Fearful of tripping over a piece of debris or a corpse, but not daring to take my eyes off her, I took four slow paces backwards.

The woman spoke again, and Father translated. “Tell the sailors to come aboard. She’s taking the boat.”

“If she does that,” I said, “we’ll shoot her as soon as she’s clear of the ship.”

“She’s taking Zodratal with her,” Father added.

I said, “But then we have no guarantee—”

The woman shouted again and pointed the weapon in my direction. My cheek felt hot, and I heard wood splintering behind me.

“She said to shut up and tell the sailors to get off the boat,” said Father.

Heart hammering, I turned to the side of the ship, where the rope ladder waited. I was leaving my back exposed to the woman’s weapon, but there was no way I could walk that distance backwards.

I leaned over the railing, half-expecting to find the boat gone. But it was still there, the sailors faithfully keeping station with the occasional stroke of an oar.

“I, ah, we, ah, need you to come up on deck,” I said to them. “The Elangic woman is taking the boat.”

“Her and what army?” one of the sailors replied.

“She’s—taken Zodratal hostage.”

“She’s welcome to her,” the sailor muttered, and one of his comrades cuffed him.

Another of the sailors started the climb up the rope ladder, but before he was halfway, I heard a woman gasp. Expecting to be confronted by a scene of horror, I turned, only to see an arm reaching out of the doorway and holding an Elangic weapon against the back of the woman’s head.

Father spoke in Elangic, and the woman lifted her weapon from Zodratal’s neck and allowed the newcomer to take it. Zodratal relaxed

and then dashed into Father's embrace, almost knocking him over.

Suln came out of the doorway to stand in front of the woman. "You shouldn't be playing with these things, Lady," he said. "They're not toys. Someone could get hurt." He handed her weapon to me and told me to cover her while he patted her down for hidden daggers. She shuddered at his touch, but she slouched, and her eyelids drooped, as though she wanted to fall down and sleep on the deck. He found a disc of the magical blue metal, small enough to fit in a man's palm.

"I think that's a device to help open the door of a machine room," I said. "Not exactly a key, but—"

"Then you'd better look after it." He passed it to me, and I slid it into a pocket. He then asked Father to tell her to climb down to the boat. Zodratal followed, with a dirty look at me.

To the men in the boat, Suln said, "Four of you come up here and furl what's left of the sails, so she doesn't run off if the wind gets up." He told Father and me to strike the flags, then went back below decks in search of the ship's log.

Father untied the knots in the rope that held the flags to the mainmast, and together we reeled them down—first the Captain's personal flag, then the flag of the Asdanundish Navy. Both were about four feet long and two feet high. The flag of the Navy had three vertical stripes, blue, green and yellow. One story I'd heard said the colours represented three noble families that had united to form the kingdom, another that they stood for sea, land and the sun. I'd expected the fabric to be wet—with blood?—but both flags were dry, roughened and frayed by years of weather. Father folded them carefully and tucked them inside his jacket, then descended the ladder. I waited a few moments before following him.

Suln returned a few minutes later, a leather-bound book under his arm. Once everyone was settled, we set off back to *Silver Dolphin*.

Chapter 6

ALL THE WAY BACK to the ship, the Elangic woman held herself rigid, arms folded, feet lifted so that only her toes touched the bottom of the boat. If she noticed anyone looking at her, she turned her head away. She shied if anyone came near her.

Zodratal spoke to the woman a few times, but stopped after receiving no answers. The woman seemed older than I remembered, though perhaps that was just because I hadn't seen her in daylight until today. Her face and hands were bruised and scratched, her clothes torn and dirty. I glimpsed a thin gold necklace that I guessed would have been hidden by her dress had it been intact. A gold rectangle hung from it, about the size of my little fingernail. I hadn't seen any Elangic wearing jewellery until now, though with all the clothing they usually wore, how would I have known?

Suln sat in the stern of the boat, speaking only to give orders to keep the rowers on course. From the way his eyes narrowed whenever his gaze fell on Father or me, I knew he wanted to shout at us—or perhaps throw us overboard—but I guessed that lingering respect for his employer compelled him to remain silent.

Once we were back on board *Silver Dolphin*, Suln asked me for the weapon I'd taken from the dead sailor, and said he'd put it in the weapons locker, along with the one we already had.

"I expect Rymad will want to interview our new passenger," Suln said to no one in particular, "so feed her and make her presentable."

"We'll take care of that," Father said, indicating himself and Zodratal.

Suln nodded his approval. To me, he said, "With me."

I followed him to the poop deck, which was unoccupied—with the ship at anchor, there was no need for anyone to steer it.

Suln gazed at *Glorious*, now visible only as an interruption to the

strip of deep red on the western horizon. “All the way back, I was preparing to scream at you and your father for recklessly endangering your lives and Zodratal’s. But I was also thinking about what you should’ve done instead, and I couldn’t think of an answer where the Elangic wouldn’t have been able to take a hostage. I also couldn’t think of a way for you to rescue Zodratal without me.”

“Are you saying you should’ve come back to her and my father while I went looking for a second weapon?”

He turned to face me. “I suppose I am.”

I took a deep breath. “Then I accept your apology.”

There seemed to be nothing further to say. I stood, waiting for Suln to dismiss me, before remembering he didn’t have authority over me. I turned to leave.

“One more thing—” he said.

From somewhere below deck, voices were raised in argument. Suln listened for a moment, then ran. Recognising the voices as female, I hurried after him.

I followed Suln to the corridor outside the passenger cabin, where I found Father speaking in Elangic to the cabin’s closed door. From inside the cabin, Zodratal answered him, exasperated. Then our new passenger interrupted her angrily. He spoke again, pleading. This time there was no answer.

“What’s going on?” Suln asked him.

Startled, he turned to us. “She’s refusing to wash or change her clothes.”

“That can wait until you’ve fed her.”

Father pursed his lips. “She seems to think we’re going to execute her.”

Suln tutted. “It might come to that, if Rymad decides she killed anyone on *Glorious*. But first feed her.” He left to go back up on deck.

“I’ll fetch some food, shall I?” I said to Father.

He nodded, and I headed forward. As I passed through the crew’s quarters, Uncle called to me from his hammock, where he was getting ready to turn in for the night. I gave him a brief account of what had happened on *Glorious* and what we’d found there, glossing over how our carelessness had nearly added to the corpses on board.

“So what did you find in the way of Elangic devices?” he asked.

“Weapons, mostly,” I replied, “and most of those still in the hands

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of the crew.”

“No mirrors?”

“We rather had our hands full with not letting that woman kill us. The ship will still be there for you to loot tomorrow.” I left before I could be drawn into an argument with him.

In the galley, the cook gave me a bowl of porridge, a mug of water, and a couple of strips of salt pork. I asked him for something Elangic from the stores Buronoskol had given us, but he told me Rymad had ordered those to be saved so they could be sold on our return to Asdanund. I headed back to the cabin via the other side of the ship to avoid Uncle.

I found the door open. The Elangic woman sat in the chair, Father on the chest and Zodratal on the bed. I wondered whether to just leave the meal here and go, but thought I’d like to know more about our new passenger. I offered the bowl to her. She pushed it away.

“Do you know when she last ate?” I asked Father.

He said something in Elangic and received a curt answer. “She wants you to eat first, to prove it’s safe—do you know about that Elangic custom?”

“Yes, though I don’t see why she’s bothered about it if she thinks we’re going to kill her.”

“Customs are even more important when death is near.”

I sighed and took a spoonful of the porridge. I opened my mouth to prove I’d swallowed it.

She said something that Father translated as, “The meat and the water too.”

I bit the end off one of the strips. I chewed it for a while, making no discernible difference to its texture, before giving up and washing it down with some of the water. I passed the meal to the woman, who attacked it as though she hadn’t eaten for days. Perhaps she hadn’t.

I put the empty utensils on the chest next to Father and sat on the bed beside Zodratal. I wasn’t entirely happy about that, but it was the only place with enough room.

“So what have you got out of her so far?” I asked Father.

“I wasn’t aware we were supposed to be interrogating her. About all she’s told us is her name—Ergaryit.”

I gave the woman a friendly smile. “Hello, Ergaryit. I’m Raltarn.” I pointed to myself to indicate I was telling her my name. She looked at me as though wishing she still had a weapon in her hand.

“Where’s she going to sleep?” I asked Father.

“We don’t have a brig, and the only rooms with doors that can be locked are the officers’ cabins and this one.”

Ergaryit said something. Zodratal glanced at Father.

“She wants to know if we’re going to execute her,” said Father.

“That’s Rymad’s decision,” I said.

Ergaryit spoke again. Zodratal sniggered.

“She said if we’re not going to execute her, she wants to go back to Turakingat.”

“I don’t imagine we’d be welcome there now,” I replied. “Does she know Buronoskol’s dead?”

At the mention of Buronoskol’s name, Ergaryit turned to me and said something that sounded—and looked—like a threat.

“I don’t think she knows,” Father said. “Should we tell her?”

I shrugged. “We might as well. She’s going to find out sooner or later anyway. It might make her more inclined to trust us.”

Father rolled his eyes at that last sentence, but began speaking to her. He’d said only a few words when she lunged at him, screaming. Zodratal intercepted her, pinning her arms to her sides. Father scabbled to get away from them and knocked the bowl to the floor. Ergaryit struggled, but soon acquiesced. Zodratal hissed something that made her eyes widen. Father spoke sharply, and Zodratal glared at him. Zodratal half-led, half-dragged Ergaryit back to the chair and pushed her into it. I leaned against the door, afraid my legs would give way.

Father straightened his clothes. “Do you want me to continue? I got as far as ‘Buronoskol’s dead.’”

“As long as she promises to-to behave herself,” I said.

Having received this assurance, Father proceeded to explain how Buronoskol had tried to use one of Turakingat’s harbour weapons to sink *Silver Dolphin* in revenge for Father’s escape, and how it had exploded, killing him and a good number of his soldiers. I later discovered he had omitted Zodratal’s part in causing the explosion, not wanting to give Ergaryit any more reasons to hate his wife than she had already.

At first Ergaryit reacted angrily, shouting and interrupting Father. Probably she thought he was lying about Buronoskol’s death, or the manner of it. But then she calmed down, and then began to weep silently. I took half a pace towards her, instincts telling me to

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offer comfort, then recalled her threats and violence towards Father and Zodratal.

Ergaryit dried her eyes, then spoke, much quieter than before. Father said, “The day they left Turakingat, just after nightfall, some of the crew noticed a red glow on the northern horizon. Soon after that, they heard a faint rumble, like distant thunder. Nobody could work out what it was, but Angakhtal—that’s the other Elangic—thought a big device must have exploded, or the townspeople had tried to take too much magic from the machine under the tower.”

“If the machine had exploded,” I said, “that could’ve destroyed the entire city.”

Father nodded. Ergaryit spoke again. “She says we have to take her back, so she can help with rebuilding.”

I didn’t see what difference one person could make to the mess we’d left behind, but replied, “She surely understands we’re not welcome there.”

“I’m not certain she does. They have a custom—”

There was a knock at the door. I opened it to see one of the crew, a sword at his belt.

“Sir,” he said, “Captain requests the presence of you, Zodratal, Rathkarn and the prisoner in his cabin at your earliest convenience.”

Chapter 7

I KNEW ENOUGH OF SAILORS' WAYS to recognise that when the captain "requested" you to do something, it was really a politely-worded order. Father explained to Zodratal and Ergaryit where we were going.

Outside Rymad's cabin, another sailor with a sword stood guard. This man knocked on the door and opened it. We squeezed past him to find Suln and Uncle already waiting for us with Rymad. A thick book lay open on his desk in front of him—*Glorious's* log.

"Thank you for coming," Rymad said. To the crewman who'd accompanied us, he said, "Stay here and be ready to restrain the prisoner if she becomes violent or tries to escape." The man stood not quite out of arm's reach of Ergaryit, perhaps uncomfortable with the prospect of having to lay hands on a woman.

Rymad invited Father and Zodratal to sit. "We'll conduct funerals for *Glorious's* crew at first light tomorrow. Then we'll begin salvaging her." Everybody nodded their agreement with this. "I asked you to come here because I want to know what happened on that ship from the time she left Turakingat until we caught up to her."

"What does her log say, Sir?" Father asked.

Rymad harrumphed. "Even by Naval standards, Fareld was a man of few words." I'd heard that the logs of Navy ships contained much less information than those of civilian ones, supposedly to limit what an enemy could learn if they captured a vessel. Rymad flipped through the last few pages. They were divided into neat columns, mostly blank. "Left Turakingat, three days at sea. Dawn and dusk, ship's position, course, weather. Fourth day, crewman on a charge—doesn't even say what it was. The punishment was a week's short rations, so it can't have been very serious. The fifth day, two days ago, there's one word—*mutiny*. It must've happened during daylight, be-

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cause he's written the morning's status report but not the evening's."

"He must've intended to write more once it was over," said Father.

"If he had," said Suln, "he would've just written *put down*, along with how many men he'd had to execute."

"The only person who knows any more than that is standing in front of me," Rymad said. "Do you speak any Asdanundish, Lady?"

Ergaryit said something in Elangic. Father said, "I'll act as an interpreter, Sir. She wants to know if you mean to execute her."

"That depends on what she tells me," Rymad replied. "And on what we find on *Glorious* tomorrow."

Father translated this, and Ergaryit replied.

"She asked if we'll take her back to Turakingat," said Father.

Rymad gave a wry smile. "Not for a chest of gold."

"Or put her ashore."

"We've come five hundred miles," said Rymad. "It'd be more than that overland. A city girl wouldn't manage that on her own, especially in winter."

I recalled Father's assertion that they bred women tough down here, then thought that this *city girl* might have single-handedly killed every man on board *Glorious*.

"So, Lady," Rymad said to Ergaryit, "what happened on that ship after you left Turakingat?"

Father translated the question. Ergaryit didn't answer.

"Everyone on the ship was dead apart from you. Most or all of them had been killed by wounds from the weapons that your people gave us."

Ergaryit spoke softly, looking more at the floor than at Rymad. Father said, "She's not responsible for what the crew chose to do with Buronoskol's gifts. She didn't know there were so many weapons on board."

"Maybe not," said Rymad, "but you had a weapon in your hand when we found you. You shot at members of my crew. You took Zodratal and Rathkarn hostage and tried to fight your way off the ship."

Ergaryit said nothing.

"Why did you barricade yourself in the galley?"

No answer.

"Why is everyone else dead? Did you kill them?"

She gave the tiniest shake of her head.

“Both of the ship’s boats are missing. Where are they?”

No answer.

Rymad drummed his fingers on the log book, as if it might tell him what she wouldn’t. He stared at Ergaryit for a long moment. “You do realise, Lady, if you won’t answer my questions, I’ll have to assume the worst.”

Father hesitated before translating. When he did, Ergaryit stared at Rymad, and a tear trickled down her cheek. Then she collapsed, like a discarded piece of clothing. The crewman caught her just before she banged her head on the floor.

“She’s fainted, Sir,” he said, as though it was his fault.

“Well, revive her, then,” said Rymad, leaning over his desk to see her. The man gave him a helpless look, and Rymad added, “I don’t know—pat her cheeks or something.”

The man did this, plainly embarrassed at having to be so awkwardly intimate with a woman. For one drawn-out moment, I feared she was just pretending, and would attack him or take him hostage, but nothing happened.

Rymad slammed the log book shut. “It would be rash to make a decision before we’ve searched the rest of *Glorious*.” He was clearly having to restrain himself from shouting. To Suln and the crewman, he said, “Take her back to the passenger cabin. Make sure there’s nothing sharp in there, then lock her in. Rathkarn, Zodratal, I’m afraid that means you’re bunking with the crew tonight. Raltarn, be on the deck at dawn tomorrow with your goggles.”

I’d been afraid he’d give me an order like that.

Chapter 8

THE NEXT MORNING, Rymad, Suln and I took *Silver Dolphin's* boat over to *Glorious*. Seven of the eight rowers joined us on the ship. The eighth stayed with the boat to make sure it didn't drift off with the current. We brought a couple of the Elangic lanterns with us, plus some Asdanundish ones as backup.

Glorious had increased her list overnight, so our first job was to confirm whether she had any leaks. It didn't take long to find that one of the forward bilges on the port side contained more water than the same one on the starboard side. Suln pointed out shallow dents in the planks of the hull and the ceiling above.

"I'd say there was a fight with a couple of the Elangic weapons in here," he said, "and someone hit the hull below the waterline."

"Can she be saved?" I asked.

"Perhaps," he replied, "but I doubt Rymad will think it's worth the effort. We've got enough men to form skeleton crews for both ships, but if we run into bad weather—as seems likely given the season—a skeleton crew mightn't be able to cope."

"So both ships could be lost."

He nodded. "One ship with a full crew—or as close to a full crew as we've got—stands a much better chance of returning home. *Glorious* won't need much help from us to scuttle her."

"How long has she got?" I asked. "Or should I ask, how long have we got? Before it's not safe for us to be on board?"

"Hard to say. She might stay afloat another two or three days, if the weather holds, and if there aren't any more holes that are above the waterline at the moment. But I wouldn't want to come back after dusk today."

Our next job was to gather the bodies of the crew on the deck for a mass funeral. I showed the men how to make an Elangic weapon safe

before moving a corpse that had one strapped to it. After that, we worked in grim silence. Rymad had ordered us not to eat breakfast, which proved a mercy when the sights and smells overcame most of us.

Before long, all my muscles and joints were aching, some from the exertion of moving the bodies, the rest from bashing against corners and edges in the ship's narrow spaces. Sweat stuck my clothing to me, in spite of the cold. I breathed through my mouth whenever I remembered to. I had long ceased trying to avoid stepping in the bloodstains.

We took the Elangic weapons from those who had them, along with any personal effects. There weren't many of the latter—the Asdanundish Navy didn't encourage them.

One of the weapons was only half the length of the others, and the end was jagged, as if the rest had been torn off. I wondered if it had exploded, like the harbour weapon. My goggles showed no magic in it, and the right hand of a nearby corpse was mangled. Both of these facts seemed to support my theory. A couple of the other weapons showed distorted patterns in their magic, and I guessed they were faulty.

We brought a hundred and two corpses to the deck—a little over two thirds of the ship's complement.

“Is that everybody?” Rymad asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Suln replied.

“I suppose that explains where the boats went. I note there's only one officer here—the third mate, judging from his uniform. More telling, perhaps, the other Elangic isn't here.”

Rymad went through the funeral service with what would normally have been considered indecent haste. We slung the bodies over the side of the ship. It was horribly undignified, but I didn't see what else we could have done.

“How many weapons did we find?” Rymad asked Suln.

“Forty-two, Sir, plus the one Ergaryit had that we brought back yesterday.”

“That's seven less than Buronoskol gave them.”

“Whoever took the boats probably took the missing weapons too,” I said.

“Possibly,” said Rymad. “We'll take a quarter-hour rest, then go back to *Silver Dolphin* with the weapons. Gribekh will come back

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with a fresh team to search for any more Elangic devices and anything else that's salvageable."

I started for the ladder that led to the boat.

"Where do you think you're going?" Rymad asked me.

I blushed as I answered, "The boat. I don't want to delay the rest of you—you know how long it takes me to go up or down a rope ladder."

"You're staying here."

My mouth hung open. I snapped it shut when I realised a couple of sailors were staring at me.

"We don't know for sure that the missing weapons aren't still on board. We need you to find any hidden devices—and identify any that might be damaged, or dangerous to use."

"Start by searching the lowest parts of the ship," Suln said helpfully. "Those are the ones that'll flood first."

As I turned to leave, thinking I might as well start now, I heard a rattling behind me. "You might find these useful," Rymad said. He held up a bunch of keys, big black affairs that would have been handy for repelling boarders.

"Where did you get those?" I asked as he passed them to me. A leather tag on the ring had the number three burned into it, so I guessed, "The third mate?" I tucked the keys into a pocket and took one of the Elangic lanterns. "Mazor guard you," I muttered, and headed for the nearest door.

I took Suln's advice and started with the bilges. I should've given the goggles to someone else—anyone could use them, not just a magician. Though I'd never tested that assumption.

The sounds of *Silver Dolphin's* men moving around and talking faded as I went further into the ship, their place taken by creaking timbers and my own footsteps. Wherever I looked, I was confronted by evidence that the ship had been full of men until a few days ago—a discarded shoe, a half-eaten biscuit, a new carving on a wall. I wondered how many men had served on her since she'd launched. How many battles she'd fought in. Strange to think that within a couple of days, the planks I now stood on would be at the bottom of the ocean.

I thought of the crew's bravery and selflessness. They'd known the risks when they joined the Navy, but none of them could have expected to end their days here, murdered by a passenger or their

own comrades.

I reached the ladder that led to the bilges, and slipped my wrist through the lantern's handle to allow me to use both hands while I descended. The light bounced around, animating the shadows.

I walked along the gangway on top of the wall that ran down the middle of the ship, separating the port bilges from the starboard ones. I had to go slower than I would've liked. The gangway was narrow and uneven, without railings, and the beams across the ceiling were only an inch or two below the top of my head. I wasn't worried about falling into the water, as it was no more than a few feet deep, but in this weather, my clothes would take a long time to dry, and I might well catch a chill.

The goggles picked out a smudge of magic under the water, near the bow on the starboard side. I moved the lantern this way and that, trying to decide whether the device was worth sticking my hand into the cold smelly water. I couldn't see more than a few glints, so I rolled up my sleeve and crouched, then fished around for it.

My hand clasped something small and curved—an Elangic battlefield mirror, like the ones Father and I had used to plot his rescue, and like the one Buronoskol had given Rymad to let *Silver Dolphin* communicate with Turakingat. But Fareld had refused to take one when Buronoskol offered it. So where had this one come from? Why had it ended up here? And where was the other one of the pair?

The merchant's sensibilities that Uncle had tried to drum into me convinced me to pocket the mirror. Even without its twin, its materials and workmanship made it valuable as a mirror and a curio.

I walked all the way to the stern along the gangway, with the lantern tilted so that one of its slots faced down towards the water. That was another advantage this design had over an oil lantern or a candle. I saw no more signs of magic. A great many items had fallen into the bilges over the years, but of the few I could identify, none looked to be worth the bother of retrieving.

At the stern, I turned around to go to the ladder. Halfway there, I heard something bumping against the hull, and nearly fell over with surprise. It had to be the sailors climbing down the rope ladder to *Silver Dolphin's* boat. I picked up my pace, gripped by a sudden irrational fear that if they didn't see me on deck when they left, they'd forget to send the boat back here with its next crew.

As I neared the ladder, something squelched under my feet. Water

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from the leaking section of the bilges lapped over the gangway. It had already topped the wall that separated that section from the one forward of it.

Glorious had less time left afloat than Suln had thought.

Chapter 9

AS FAST AS I DARED, I climbed the ladder from the bilges to the deck above, then headed for the stairs. I feared losing my way in the unfamiliar surroundings, but soon emerged into daylight.

The boat was a third of the way back to *Silver Dolphin*. I shouted and waved until someone noticed me, then told them about the water overflowing the leaking bilge.

“You’re safe for a good few hours yet!” Rymad shouted back. “That whole deck could flood, and the ship would still float!”

I didn’t find that as reassuring as he probably hoped it was.

Rymad added, “Close the hatch that leads to the bilges and bolt it! The boat will come right back!”

I returned to the top of the ladder and fastened the hatch—a two-inch-thick piece of timber that fitted flush into its recess. The bolts were almost as long as the hatch was wide. It didn’t look watertight, though. It would only slow down the ship’s sinking, not prevent it.

My next job was to see which of the third mate’s keys opened any locked doors, cupboards or chests. There were six of them, none less than three inches long.

I started at the bow and worked my way aft. The keys admitted me to a pantry, a room full of rope and spare pulley blocks for the rigging, and a locker containing thick spears with a variety of heads—bolts for the ballistas. A couple of chests in the officers’ cabins had locks that were too small for any of the keys. We could probably take them back whole to *Silver Dolphin*. I didn’t find any more Elangic devices—though as I kept reminding myself, the goggles couldn’t see magic through wood.

The absence of other people meant I noticed every slight sound and every breath of wind. I lost count of the number of times I spun

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round, thinking someone was behind me. Everywhere were signs of the violence that had overtaken the ship—smashed crockery, broken furniture, spilt food, and of course, bloodstains. For some reason, the small ones were more distressing than the large ones. Perhaps it was because they meant the wounded man had survived for a while, and might have thought the ship's madness would pass. But it had made no difference in the end.

Something that struck me as significant was that all of the ship's lockers for personal weapons were open, none having had their doors forced, but the racks of swords, bows, spears and knives were all nearly full.

I found only one door I couldn't open. On the deck above the bilges was a box-like room, its planks dark with age, isolated from the rest of the deck by corridors on all sides. The door stood at one corner, facing astern, and had three locks. My keys opened one of them, but the other two wouldn't move. Evidently the room was like *Silver Dolphin's* weapons locker—the keys were distributed among the officers, so that nobody could open it by himself. Probably the keys for the other locks had gone overboard with the officers who'd been entrusted with them. Though they might be in the chests in the officers' cabins. I wondered how long would it take to break into those.

This room had to be where Fareld had stowed the artefacts he'd confiscated from us—the ones we'd taken from the two Elangics on Krothtror. He might've thrown them overboard, particularly after failing to find our mirror, but I didn't think he'd be that spiteful. Not when he could've used the threat of throwing them overboard to make us give up the mirror.

Having explored everywhere I could, I went back up on deck and shivered as I watched *Silver Dolphin's* boat on its journey back to *Glorious*.

Gribekkh, the first mate, climbed on board, along with seven of the crew. He ordered a couple of them to get the ship's crane working. I told him what I'd found, and he sent a couple more men to the pantry to see what could be salvaged from there.

He brought the rest of the men and me to the officers' cabins. He smiled when he saw the chest in the smaller cabin—the second mate's, he said. He crouched by it and drew a knife, which he used to trip the lock. As he rose, he opened the lid, revealing the remains

of an officer's career. He rummaged through it, not finding any keys.

"Nothing that looks especially valuable," he said, "though Ingryn might want the charts." He told two of the men to take it up on deck and, once the crane was available, lower it to the boat.

The chest in the first mate's cabin proved resistant to Gribekh's methods. He told the remaining crewman to tell the other two to put it in the boat.

"Now, let's see about this strongroom," he said.

He tried the door's handle, then tried all the keys in all the locks, evidently not wanting to take my word that we could open only one. He borrowed the lantern and held it up to each of the keyholes.

"They're beyond me," he said, "but Okhraam might be able to open them."

"The bo'sun?" I said.

The first mate grinned. "He has, ah, a very colourful past."

We went back on deck, where the men were using the crane to lower the second mate's chest into the boat. The first mate's chest and some barrels waited to join it. Gribekh told the men that Okhraam was to open the first mate's chest, then take the place of one of the men on the return journey. He was to bring any keys from the chest, along with his "special tools."

Having nothing else to do until Okhraam arrived, we went to check the level of water in the bilges. "How high was it when you closed the hatch?" he asked me.

"Starting to spill over the gangway."

He slid the bolts back and lifted the hatch. I shone the lantern into the bilges. "I can still see the gangway, so it probably hasn't risen much since then." He counted the rungs of the ladder, seven of them, saying we could use them to measure the water's progress. He closed and bolted the hatch, and we returned to the deck to await Okhraam.

Only six men went with the boat, as the things we were removing from *Glorious* took up too much room for a full set of rowers. When the boat returned to *Glorious*, Okhraam came up last. He made my ascents look as swift and elegant as a monkey's. One of his knees didn't bend as far as it should, and that leg kept getting tangled in the ropes. Each occurrence of this was accompanied by a blast of swearing that made me cover my ears. When he finally came aboard, sweating and panting, he swung a rucksack off his shoulders and

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hurled it to the deck, where it clattered.

He glowered at Gribekh. “You’d better have a damn good reason for dragging me over here.”

I expected Gribekh to reprimand him for these words, but he just raised an eyebrow, picked up an Elangic lantern and replied, “Follow me.”

I started after them. Okhraam glanced over his shoulder and told me, “Bring that.” Startled, I picked up his rucksack and trotted to catch up with them.

“Were there any keys in the chest?” Gribekh asked as we descended the stairs.

“Plenty of the useless tat that officers like to collect,” Okhraam replied. “No keys.”

When we reached the strongroom, Okhraam took one look at the door and said, “Dagoreth, man, do you mean to drown me?”

Gribekh clapped him on the shoulder and replied, “I know you can open it.”

“In a few weeks, *maybe*. I thought Suln said this tub wouldn’t live past nightfall.”

“He did.” Gribekh held up the key for the middle lock. “Does this help?”

Okhraam eyed the key as though it might turn into a scorpion. “Why didn’t you mention it sooner?”

“I didn’t want you thinking the job was easy.”

Okhraam gave a low growl and snatched the key. He tried it in the middle lock, which was the easiest to reach. He nodded and stuck out a hand in my direction.

“Tools, boy,” he said, when I hadn’t responded after a couple of moments.

How dare he talk to me like that? Bad enough that he was rude to a superior officer, but to his employer as well?

Gribekh, who was standing behind Okhraam, shook his head slightly. Deflated, I handed over the rucksack. Okhraam rummaged through it, then said, “One of you can hold that magic light, about there.” He pointed to a spot to his left.

Gribekh handed the lantern to me. “If you need me, I’ll be on the middle deck, supervising the salvage.” He left before I could think of a diplomatic reply.

I held the lantern at chest height while Okhraam poked and prod-

ded the top lock with one tool after another. Every so often he referred to the key for the middle lock and muttered something that I pretended not to hear.

When he paused to consider which of two tools to try next, I said, “Shall I find something to hang the lantern on?”

He grunted, not looking at me.

“My arms are getting tired,” I added.

“Never lifted anything heavier than a pen, I suppose?”

I lowered my arms, wanting to rub some of the aches out of them. “I’ve had just about enough of your insolence. I’m going to find something to hang the lantern on, and then I’m going up on deck.”

Okhraam threw the tools back in his rucksack. “Do you want this door open or not?”

“What sort of a question is that?”

“A door this strong, locks this difficult, you must reckon there’s something valuable behind it. Something you’d much rather didn’t end up at the bottom of the sea. My money’s on those trunks you took from the white rats on Krothtror. You remember—the ones that nearly got you and me killed.”

I swallowed carefully. “I haven’t found them, and this is the only locked door on the ship. So it seems reasonable to suppose they’re behind it.”

His lip curled. “‘Seems reasonable to suppose.’ All that schooling’s no use this far from home, boy.” He pulled a tool from the rucksack and jiggled it about in the top lock. “What I’m saying is, if those trunks are worth the risk of being killed, they’re worth a couple of sore arms.”

I scowled, but set aside the ungentlemanly retort that came to mind, and lifted the lantern back to my chest.

Chapter 10

AN HOUR LATER (or so it felt to my weary limbs), Gribekh returned, carrying our other lantern and accompanied by a crewman. “You’ve still not cracked it, then?” he asked Okhraam.

“What does it look like?” the bo’sun growled.

“I checked the bilges on my way here,” Gribekh continued. “The bottom two steps of the ladder are covered.”

“So the water’s about a foot and a half over the gangway?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“How much longer before we have to get off the ship?”

“I still agree with Suln—we’re safe until dusk.” To the crewman, Gribekh said, “You hold the lantern for a bit, while Raltarn and I find something to hang it from.”

Of course Okhraam didn’t object to the same suggestion from an officer that he’d refused from me. The crewman seemed nervous about holding the lantern, but I assured him it was safe, and showed him the mechanism for turning it off and on.

Once I judged we were out of Okhraam’s hearing, I told Gribekh, “If he’d put half as much effort into picking the locks as he has into swearing at them, he’d have had the door open by now.”

“You think he won’t finish before we have to abandon the ship?”

“I don’t know anything about picking locks, but he doesn’t seem to be making much progress.”

“He told me once, it’s often like that,” Gribekh said. “You try fifty ways to open it, and none of them work any better than any other, and then you try something slightly different from one of the fifty, and the lock’s open. But you could well be right. Those locks are Perakhandran—maybe not the very best they can make, but

certainly the best the Navy can afford for this class of ship. Possibly better than anything he's come across before."

"Could we break the door down? Or, I don't know, saw the locks out?"

"We could, but it wouldn't be any faster. The door and the frame are ironwood, at least four inches thick, judging from the key. I doubt we've got anything heavy enough to make a dent in them. And you notice the door's off to one side of the corridor? That's so you can't have a long run at it with a battering ram."

By now we'd emerged onto the deck, and I shivered in the damp breeze. I glanced at the sun, trying to guess how much of the day had gone. This far south, my instincts about it were all wrong, but I thought it was about as high as it ever got, meaning we were near to noon.

I looked down at the boat, almost ready to return to *Silver Dolphin* with another load, and thought of the other doors that had been forced open.

"Would an Elangic weapon do it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "You tell me."

"Some of the other doors seem to have been attacked with them."

"They're made of weaker and thinner wood than the strongroom," he replied.

"Somebody managed to make a hole in the hull with one. That's at least four inches thick."

He nodded, and said to a man who was about to climb down to the boat, "Bring one of the Elangic weapons back with you. Actually, make it two—one for Raltarn and one for me."

"Make it four," I said. "One in each hand." Would that work? I'd never seen anyone in Turakingat carrying two, but one on its own was enough for wounding or killing people.

I watched as the boat rowed over to *Silver Dolphin*, unloaded, took on the weapons, and came back. Everything seemed to take three times as long as I remembered. I almost convinced myself I could feel *Glorious* inching under the waves.

Once Gribekh and I had strapped on two weapons each, a crewman accompanied us to the lower deck with a lantern.

"For the last time," Okhraam growled when he saw me, "I'm not done yet. I'll come and find you when it's open."

Gribekh lifted a weapon. "Change of plan. Go and supervise the

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loading of the boat. We've got all the food and water we need, so concentrate on things we'll want for repairs if we hit a storm."

I didn't bother to point out it had actually been my decision to use the weapons. Okhraam would make less of a fuss if he thought it was Gribekh's idea.

The bo'sun gave me a dirty look as he picked up his tools, as though it was my fault the door had defeated him. He left with the man who'd come with us.

I studied the door, trying to determine the best plan of attack. The top lock and the wood around it had several scratches that hadn't been there before.

"I think," I said carefully, "that if we shoot out the parts of the frame next to the locks, then we can slide the bolts back."

Gribekh replied, "The bolt won't move unless you turn the key in the lock. It'd be quicker to shoot out the door around the lock, then slide the entire lock out. Or shoot at the lock itself."

"I don't really understand how these weapons work," I said. "The soldiers in Turakingat wore metal armour, which blocked some of the effect. So I guess it would be faster to shoot at the wood." I showed him how to control the weapons. We stood on opposite sides of the door, then we aimed the weapons at a point next to the top lock and pressed their buttons.

Nothing happened, but a loud whine came from all around.

"Stop," I said. We lowered the weapons. "I think there mightn't be enough magic here for all the weapons to work at the same time."

"How can you tell?" he asked.

I told him about the sound I sometimes heard when an Elangic device was working nearby, and how I thought it meant the device couldn't gather enough magic to perform its function properly. He seemed sceptical, since I was apparently the only person on *Silver Dolphin* who could hear this noise, but he agreed to try two weapons instead of four. For the same reason, we put the lantern as far away as we could, in the corner of the corridor on the other side of the hull.

We shot at the top lock again. I heard a whine, though not as loud as before. There was a sound like a dry straw snapping, and a short vertical line appeared on the door.

"Stop again," I said. The line had resulted from a thumb-sized piece of wood coming off the door, revealing the natural colour under

years of grime.

“Did you see where it went?” Gribekh asked. “We should close our eyes in case of splinters, but then we won’t be able to keep our aim true.”

I took the goggles out of a pocket. “These might help. They’ll show me the beams, so you can close your eyes and I can keep you on target.”

“What happened to the gloves that went with those?” he asked. As well as the goggles, Buronoskol had given me a pair of gloves that made the wearer’s magic much stronger than normal.

“I’m not sure they’d be any help here,” I replied. “And I wrecked one of them in the escape from Turakingat.”

When we started shooting again, I found Gribekh’s aim with his eyes closed was truer than mine with them open. The beams were much fainter than I’d expected, and were not steady streams of magic, but a series of pulses. The place we were shooting at grew brighter and dimmer at irregular intervals.

“They seem to be interfering with one another,” I said, half to myself.

“Like two oarsmen pulling out of rhythm on a boat?” Gribekh asked.

“Possibly,” I replied.

“So try it with just one weapon.”

I did. This time the patch on the door pulsed much brighter and more regularly. A faint hiss came from it, then a splintering crunch. Gribekh yelled. Startled, I stopped shooting. I smelt smoke as I turned to him.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

He touched his cheek, then looked at his fingers. “No, something clipped me, that’s all.” He studied the floor around his feet, then gestured to the door. “One willing man is worth two lazy ones. Or four, in this case.”

Where I’d been shooting, a piece of the door about the size of my palm had exploded outwards. The fragments, none bigger than my fingernail, were scattered over the floor. The hole was only about as deep as my hand was thick, which meant we still had a long way to go to get through the door. The exposed wood was warm to the touch.

I started shooting again, and was soon rewarded with another

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bang and more splinters. Smoke curled out of the hole. I repeated this process a few more times, deepening the hole to about an inch. The edge of the lock within the door became visible. I touched it, meaning to shake it to see if I'd loosened it, but scalded my fingers.

"This would be faster if I just held the button down until we were all the way through," I said, "but I don't want to start a fire."

"Do you think the weapons would still, ah, pull against one another if I shot at the bottom lock while you're shooting at the top one?" Gribek asked.

I shrugged. "Let's try it."

Both weapons produced strong regular patterns of magic on the door. Two bangs came in quick succession. Gribek grinned when he saw the hole he'd made.

After that, we kept shooting, waiting after each shot until the wood was no longer hot to touch. How hot did wood have to be before it caught fire? I didn't want to find out.

At last, I shot all the way through the door, making a hole big enough for my hand. Gribek made his way through the bottom part not long after. He grabbed the top lock and wiggled it.

"Still firm," he said. "We'll have to take out the wood along the bottom of the locks, and maybe the top as well."

As he returned to where he'd been standing, I asked him to bring up the lantern. "We might as well see whether there really is anything worth salvaging in there."

I took off my goggles and held the lantern up to the hole, moving it around to shine the narrow beam into different parts of the room. It revealed shelving, packed with large and small chests and crates. I put the goggles back on and looked again, but saw no magic.

"One of them is the same shape as those from Krothtror," I said, "but I can't be certain."

Gribek took his turn with the lantern and agreed with my assessment.

We resumed shooting, taking out the wood below our respective locks. Splinters carpeted the floor around our feet. Two rods, about four inches long, protruded from the bottom of the lock into the wood, holding it in place. By the time we'd exposed them, my right arm and shoulder ached from the effort of holding the weapon in the same position for so long, even though it weighed almost nothing.

Gribek shook the top lock again, finding it still wouldn't move.

“There must be more of these rods on the top.”

We were halfway through taking out the wood above the locks when a crewman approached. “Sir?” he said to Gribekh. “Okhraam would like a word.”

Chapter 11

G RIBEKH STARED AT THE CREWMAN for a moment. I expected him to tell the man to tell Okhraam to come down here, but then he said to me, “Carry on with the locks.”

They were gone much longer than I expected. By the time they returned, I’d exposed most of the upper rods on the top lock. It had become loose, though I still couldn’t free it.

“What was all that about?” I asked.

“The good news is we’ve moved everything outside the strongroom that’s worth salvaging to *Silver Dolphin*. The bad news is the water in the bilges is less than six inches from the hatch. There must be another hole in the hull that was above the waterline before.”

“How long before we have to leave?”

“An hour? Maybe an hour and a half?”

“Plenty of time to open the door,” I said.

“But maybe not enough to move everything out of the room. The other piece of bad news is that Rymad has moved *Silver Dolphin* further away so she doesn’t get caught in the whirlpool when *Glorious* goes under. And for the same reason, he’s ordered the boat to keep station halfway between the ships instead of next to us.”

That would obviously slow us down when we needed to move things to *Silver Dolphin*. “What are we waiting for, then?”

A few more shots from my weapon revealed the ends of the upper rods. At last the upper lock slid out, like a bad tooth. I almost dropped it—it was much heavier than it looked. Apart from the few scratches Okhraam had made on its face, it was a uniform black, more like a hole than anything solid. I pushed the door, wondering if we might shoulder-barge it open, but it barely moved. I looked through the hole where the lock had been. It was now apparent that all the chests we’d taken from Krothtror were there.

Eventually, we got the bottom lock out as well. Gribekh pushed the door, which opened slowly and silently. He stood and, with a slight bow, gestured for me to enter.

We fetched the lantern and went in. A musty odour hung in the air. Three sets of shelving, mostly occupied by chests and crates, ran all the way around the room. The chests from Krothtror were on the top shelf. Many of the others were labelled with random-looking series of letters and numbers.

“I’ll find some men,” Gribekh said. “You see if the third mate’s keys open any of these. We haven’t got time to force anything open.” He pointed to a large chest on the floor with *AQ4* stencilled on the front. “I do know that one’s rum, unless they’ve changed the code since I was in the Navy.”

“Code?”

“So that any man lugging stuff in or out who can read doesn’t know what’s worth stealing.” He left the lantern with me, and I heard him shuffling along the corridor, patting the wall to find the turning he wanted.

I tried the keys on the chests, finding only one that they opened. This contained bolts of dyed and undyed silk. What did a naval vessel want with that? Or was *Silver Dolphin* not the first ship they’d confiscated goods from on this voyage?

It wasn’t until Gribekh returned with three men that I realised we no longer had the magical discs that unlocked the Elangic chests. I’d have to hope they were in one of the chests we’d taken from the officers’ cabins. Failing that, an Elangic weapon would probably open them.

Gribekh and the men took two of the chests. When they’d gone, I tapped on some of the others and lifted them by their corners, trying to work out which were likely to have the most valuable contents. I hadn’t reached any conclusions by the time they returned, so I let Gribekh decide. Apart from the last Elangic chest, he picked three crates, each small enough for one man to carry.

I balanced a lantern on top of my crate and followed the men to the deck. *Silver Dolphin* looked a lot smaller than I remembered, even allowing for the greater distance.

Okhraam was supervising the loading of the boat. It was almost full, but he thought they’d find room for the things we’d just brought up. After some debate, he and Gribekh decided we had time for one

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more salvage trip, and then we'd have to leave *Glorious* to her fate.

I accompanied Gribekh and the three men who'd brought up the last lot of crates back to the middle deck. When the man at the front put his foot on the floor, I heard a squelch.

Chapter 12

THE WATER SPREAD FROM THE BOW. It inched along the floor in fits and starts, filling the dips and cracks in the planks. To the man at the front of the line, Gribekh said, “Take a lantern and go to the forward bilge hatch to see how deep the water is there.”

The rest of us waited on the stairs, as though fearing our feet would fall off if they got wet. The man returned, describing the area around the hatch as “awash,” which apparently meant the water was deep enough to cover his feet.

“Back up top, lads,” Gribekh said. He told Okhraam what we’d found and said that when the boat returned from *Silver Dolphin*, all of us would leave. More than a few of the men seemed relieved by that announcement.

“Can we bring anything else from the strongroom on the last trip?” I asked.

Gribekh frowned, and at first I thought he’d refuse. “If you can carry it down to the boat by yourself.”

“I thought the boat could take more cargo than that,” I said.

“Normally, yes, but we’ve got more than the usual number of men to go back.”

I took a lantern and hurried to the strongroom. The water was halfway along the corridor that led to it. Whatever I took would have to be small and light enough to carry in one hand or under one arm. I tried a few boxes, but the small ones seemed too heavy and the light ones seemed too big. The fear of picking something worthless nagged at me. One might think that anything kept in a room with three Perakhandran locks on the door must be valuable. But on a ship at sea, anything can be valuable if the nearest place to obtain more of it is a thousand miles away.

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With no knowledge of the contents of any of the boxes, perhaps my best option was just to pick one at random. I would never know what was in any of the others. Before I could move, the deck lurched, and I staggered sideways.

Water sloshed back and forth along the corridor, picking up some of the splinters from when Gribekh and I had shot the locks out. I gulped down a breath, resolving to take the first small box I set eyes on.

Some of the boxes had shifted, and through a new gap, I saw a flat box of pale yellow wood, tucked behind two other boxes. The colour made it stand out, and the fact it seemed to have been hidden tickled my curiosity. I slid it out, finding it quite heavy for its size. Painted on its top was a short line of Elangic writing. I flipped the clasp that held it shut. Inside was a book, its covers fastened to the box's lid and bottom. Why had Buronoskol given this to Fareld? *Glorious's* captain hadn't struck me as someone interested in learning, at least not for its own sake. If one measured value in terms of how hard it was to fetch another one of something, this book would be very valuable in Asdanund. That realisation made my decision for me.

One of my feet felt suddenly cold. Water swirled across the floor. Fearful of slipping, I returned to the stairs as quickly as I dared. Back on deck, I told Gribekh about the rising water and showed him what I'd chosen.

"They're unloading the boat now," he said.

I squinted in *Silver Dolphin's* direction, unable to see much detail at her new distance. The apparent lack of movement made the waiting more fretful. I kept checking the doors into the forecabin, expecting to see water gushing from them.

At last, the boat started towards us. When it came alongside, Gribekh told the rowers we were abandoning *Glorious*. We descended the rope ladder two at a time. Against my expectations, my foot caught only once. I clutched the book to my chest as we got underway back to *Silver Dolphin*.

Okhraam started a chant that the men took up. Judging from the words, it was meant to encourage them to row faster, though I wasn't convinced it made any difference.

When we reached *Silver Dolphin*, I turned to look at *Glorious* as I waited my turn to go aboard. Her stern was now visibly higher than her bow.

Once everyone was back on board and the boat safely stowed, Rymad summoned all of the crew and passengers to the deck to bid farewell to *Glorious*. From a small book, he read a prayer that I guessed had been intended for a scenario somewhat different from the present one. It spoke, for instance, of giving thanks for the survival of some of the ship's crew. But how often, I wondered, did a ship have all her men die and then sink within sight of a friendly vessel?

As soon as the prayer was finished, Rymad gave orders to get underway. Father, Uncle and I watched *Glorious* fade from view in the deepening twilight. I don't think we saw her actually sink. We heard some faint bangs and crunches from across the empty water.

"That's her rigging getting tangled up in itself," said Father.

"Can we go below deck now?" asked Uncle. "I'm freezing out here."

"Has Ergaryit said anything more about what happened?" I asked as we headed for the stairs.

"Not much," Father replied. "Zodratal's trying to gain her trust, but it's slow work. It doesn't help that Zodratal's from a lower social class than she is."

We squeezed past boxes and crates from *Glorious*—there wasn't room for all of them in the hold—and came to the galley, where we queued for the evening meal.

"Can you read Elangic?" I asked Father.

"A little. Why?"

I showed him the book and explained how I'd come by it. The pages were thin, almost transparent, and crackled when I turned them. One page had a line drawing with lots of arrows pointing to different parts of it. The tail of each arrow had some writing next to it. This was a diagram, then, but of what? A building? A vehicle? An ornament? With no idea of its size, it was impossible to guess.

Father leafed through the pages. "It seems to be a set of instructions, though I can't say what it's instructions for."

The cook handed us our meals, and I tucked the book under my arm while we walked to the table that ran along the middle of the crew quarters.

"How can you tell it's instructions?" Uncle asked as we started eating.

"A lot of the words have endings that you use specifically when you want someone to do something."

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“The imperative mood,” I said. “Brothric has it as well, I think.”

“Why do you need endings?” Uncle asked. “Isn’t it obvious when you want someone to do something?”

“In Asdanundish, it’s mostly the word order that conveys the meaning,” said Father. “‘Raltarn sees Tomaz’ means something different from ‘Tomaz sees Raltarn.’ The same words in a different order. But in Elangic, *Raltarn* and *Tomaz* have endings on them to tell you who’s doing the seeing and who’s being seen. So you can put the words in almost any order and it still means the same thing.”

“That sounds very confusing,” Uncle replied.

“Only if you’re not used to it,” Father said with a smirk. “Changing the word order changes the emphasis. Maybe it’s important that it was Raltarn who did the seeing, or that it was Tomaz who he saw, or that he *saw* Tomaz, rather than did anything else. It also allows a lot of flexibility with rhythm and rhyme in poetry.” He gave a sad smile. “Buronoskol used to complain that our language has only one way to say a certain thing.”

I opened the book again and turned to the diagram. “Do you have any idea what this might be?”

“If you don’t know, my boy, I’m sure I don’t.” Father squinted at the page for a minute, muttering and tracing parts of it with a finger. “Most of the labels are numbered, so I assume the picture is a procedure for operating... whatever this thing is.” He pointed to a thin rectangle that protruded from the main body of the diagram. “The only thing I’m sure of is that that one says ‘Pull firmly.’ So if it’s a lever, it must be at least the size of a man’s hand, meaning the whole thing would be at least twenty feet across.”

“So not something the Elangics would’ve taken on board *Glorious*,” I said. A pity Zodratal couldn’t read, I thought. Ergaryit probably could, though it would take some time to convince her to help us. “There’s a man in Symeera we could take this to.”

“Yindrath?” Uncle asked.

I nodded.

“Better if we ask him to teach your father to read the language properly,” said Uncle, “so we don’t have to worry about him gossiping to the city’s criminals about whatever’s in the book.”

“Is that likely?” said Father.

I explained how we’d taken the mirror that had started this whole adventure to Yindrath to have it valued, and how a well-equipped

burglar had tried to steal it shortly before we left Symeera. Father gave Uncle some telling looks as I was doing this, doubtless unimpressed with his choice of professional colleagues.

“And you think this Yindrath tried to steal the mirror?” said Father. “Or have it stolen, or however these things work?”

“We don’t know,” I replied. “But the only other people who knew about the mirror are Shanu and her parents.”

To Uncle, Father said, “Weren’t you telling me you thought she might not be the best match for Raltarn?”

I ground my teeth to stop myself from leaping to the defence of Shanu and her family—how they were one of the oldest and most respectable families in Symeera, and didn’t need to stoop to such depths. In my mind, I went over the conversation I’d had about the mirror with Shanu’s father, and realised I’d been wrong to suspect them.

“Actually,” I said, “none of them knew we already had a mirror in Symeera. I just told them we knew the whereabouts of an Elangic artefact, and it was a long way from Asdanund.”

“Well,” said Father, after an awkward silence, “there must be someone else in Symeera who can read Elangic.”

“Hundreds,” said Uncle. “We’re practically tripping over them in the streets.”

Father scowled at Uncle, then returned his attention to his dinner.

I leafed through the book, hoping to find a picture that someone might recognise. I came to a series of pages with repetitive sequences of characters in columns. At the top of each left-hand page was a row of five circles, some hollow, some filled in.

“Those are mostly numbers,” Father said, looking over my shoulder. “I couldn’t tell you what they mean, mind.”

“I think I already know,” I replied. “Buronoskol had a book like this. It gave codes to open the door of the machine room under Turakingat.”

“So it must be something to do with Ergaryit and Angakhtal’s mission to restart the machines elsewhere in the world.” He didn’t need to add, *and drown all the coastal cities*. “We should destroy it, or throw it overboard.”

“Why?” said Uncle. “You think Ergaryit’s coming to Asdanund with us?”

“We’ve got enough supplies to take us there non-stop,” said Fa-

ther. “Rymad won’t want to delay by putting one person ashore.”

“Those machines are spread throughout the Elangic Empire,” I said. “If she still means to carry out Buronoskol’s plan, she doesn’t have to be in Asdanund to do it. And because all the seas are connected, restarting a machine anywhere will make the waters rise everywhere.”

“So you’re saying we’d better have her where we can keep an eye on her,” said Uncle.

“Exactly,” I replied.

That evening, as I lay in bed waiting to fall asleep, I rolled over and felt something dig into me. From a pocket, I took the battlefield mirror that I’d recovered from the bilges on *Glorious*. The ruby on its edge gave off a faint glow, very bright in the dark surroundings. It must’ve pressed against my body or the bed when I was moving around. The fact that the glow was steady meant it had established a link with its twin. To confirm this, I brought the mirror up to my face and waved my hand in front of it. No reflection.

The range of this type of mirror was a few miles at most. So its twin had to be on *Silver Dolphin*. Fareld had said something about having a spy on board—that was how he already knew so much about us when *Glorious* caught up with us. The mirrors must’ve been how they communicated.

Why had the spy not thrown his mirror overboard when he found out what had happened to *Glorious*? Perhaps he simply hadn’t had a chance yet. Or perhaps he didn’t think anyone would find the twin, and wanted to keep his for the same reason I’d picked up this one—it was valuable in its own right.

I pressed the ruby to deactivate the mirror, and tucked the mirror under my pillow. If I could find its twin, that might let me unmask the spy. But what good would that do? *Glorious* was lost, Fareld was dead or missing, and the Navy’s mission was a failure. The spy could do nothing to help the Navy now, but if I exposed him, he might try to take revenge. On a ship full of Elangic weapons, that was unlikely to end well for me. Some doors were better left locked.

End of Free Sample

Thank you for reading. *The Dragons of Asdanund* is on sale now—visit www.pembers.net for details of where to buy a copy.