

# Chapter 1

Gavin Guile lay on his back on a narrow skimmer floating in the middle of the sea. It was a tiny craft with low sides. Lying on his back like this, he'd once almost believed he was one with the sea. Now the dome of the heavens above him was a lid, and he a crab in the cauldron, heat rising.

Two hours before noon, here on the southern rim of the Cerulean Sea, the waters should be a stunning deep blue-green. The sky above, cloudless, mist burned off, should be a peaceful, vibrant sapphire.

But he couldn't see it. Since he'd lost the Battle of Garriston four days ago, wherever there was blue, he saw gray. He couldn't even see that much unless he concentrated. Robbed of its blue, the sea looked like thin, gray-green broth.

His fleet was waiting. Hard to relax when thousands of people were waiting for you and only you, but he needed this measure of peace.

He looked to the heavens, arms spread, touching the waves with his fingertips.

Lucidonus, were you here? Were you even real? Did this happen to you, too?

Something hissed in the water, a sound like a boat cutting through the waves.

Gavin sat up on his skimmer. Then stood.

Fifty paces behind him, something disappeared under the waves, something big enough to cause its own swell. It could have been a whale.

Except whales usually surface to breathe. There was no spray hanging in the air, no whoosh of expelled breath. And from fifty paces, for

Gavin to have heard the hiss of a sea creature cutting through the water, it would have to be massive. His heart leapt to his throat.

He began sucking in light to draft his oar apparatus—and froze. Right beneath his tiny craft, something was moving through the water. It was like watching the landscape speed by when you're riding in a carriage, but Gavin wasn't moving. The rushing body was huge, many times the width of his craft, and it was undulating closer and closer to the surface, closer to his own little boat. A sea demon.

And it *glowed*. A peaceful, warm radiance like the sun itself on this cool morning.

Gavin had never heard of such a thing. Sea demons were monsters, the purest, craziest form of fury known to mankind. They burned red, boiled the seas, left fires floating in their wake. Not carnivores, so far as the old books guessed, but fiercely territorial—and any interloper that disrupted their seas was to be crushed. Interlopers like ships.

This light was different than that rage. A peaceful luminescence, the sea demon no vicious destroyer but a leviathan traversing the seas, leaving barely a ripple to note his passing. The colors shimmered through the waves, grew brighter as the undulation brought the body close.

Unthinking, Gavin knelt as the creature's back broke the surface of the water right underneath his boat. Before the boat slid away from the swell, he reached out and touched the sea demon's skin. He expected a creature that slid through the waves to be slimy, but the skin was surprisingly rough, muscular, warm.

For one precious moment, Gavin was not. There was no Gavin Guile, no Dazen Guile, no High Luxlord Prism, no scraping sniveling dignitaries devoid of dignity, no lies, no satraps to be bullied, no Spectrum councilors to manipulate, no lovers, no bastards, no power except the power before his eyes. He felt small, staring into incomprehensible vastness.

Cooled by the gentle morning breeze, warmed by the twin suns, one in the sky, one beneath the waves, Gavin was serene. It was the closest thing to a holy moment he had ever experienced.

And then he realized the sea demon was swimming toward his fleet.

## Chapter 2

The green hell was calling him to madness. The dead man was back in the reflective wall, luminous, grinning at Dazen, features squeezed skeleton-thin by the curving walls of the spherical green cell.

The key was to *not* draft. After sixteen years of drafting only blue, of altering mind and damaging body with that loathsome cerulean serenity, now having escaped the blue cell, Dazen wanted nothing more than to gorge on some other color. It was like he'd eaten breakfast gruel morning, noon, and night for six thousand days, and now someone was offering him a rasher of bacon.

He hadn't even liked bacon, back when he'd been free. Now it sounded lovely. He wondered if that was the fever, turning his thoughts to sludge and emotion.

Funny how he thought that: 'Back when he'd been free.' Not 'Back when he'd been Prism.'

He wasn't sure if it was because he was still telling himself that he was the Prism whether he was in royal robes or rancid rags, or if it simply didn't matter anymore.

Dazen tried to look away, but everything was green. To have his eyes open was to be dipping his feet in green. No, he was up to his neck in water and trying to get dry. There was no hope of dryness. He had to know that and accept it. The only question wasn't if he was going to get his hair wet, it was if he was going to drown.

Green was all wildness, freedom. That logical part of Dazen that had basked in blue's orderliness knew that sucking up pure wildness while locked up in this luxin cage would lead to madness. Within days he'd claw out his own throat. Pure wildness, here, would be death. He would finally accomplish his brother's objective for him.

He needed to be patient. He needed to think, and thinking was hard right now. He examined his body slowly, carefully. His hands and knees were lacerated from his crawl through the hellstone tunnel. The bumps and bruises from his fall through the trapdoor and into this cell he could ignore. They were painful, but inconsequential. Most worrisome was the inflamed, infected slash across his chest. It nauseated him just looking at it, oozing pus and promises of death.

Worst was the fever, corrupting his very blood, making him stupid, irrational, sapping his will.

But Dazen had escaped the blue prison, and that prison had changed him. His brother had crafted these prisons quickly, and probably put most of his efforts into that first, blue one. Every prison had a flaw.

The blue prison had made him the perfect man to find it. Death or freedom.

In his reflective green wall, the dead man said, “You taking bets?”

## Chapter 3

Gavin sucked in light to start making his rowing apparatus. Unthinking, he tried to draft blue. While brittle, blue’s stiff, slick, smooth structure made it ideal for parts that didn’t undergo sideways stresses. For a futile moment, Gavin tried to force it, again. He was a Prism made flesh; alone out of all drafters, he could split light within himself. The blue was there—he knew it was there, and maybe knowing it was there, even though he couldn’t see, might be enough.

For Orholam’s sake, if you could find your chamber pot in the middle of the night and, despite that you couldn’t see it, the damned thing was still there, why couldn’t this be the same?

Nothing. No rush of harmonious logic, no cool rationality, no stained blue skin, no drafting whatsoever. For the first time since he was a boy, he felt helpless. Like a natural man. Like a peasant.

Gavin screamed at his helplessness. It was too late for the oars anyway. That son of a bitch was swimming too fast.

He drafted the scoops and the reeds. Blue worked better to make the jets for a skimmer, but naturally flexible green could serve if he made it thick enough. The rough green luxin was heavier and created more drag against the water, so he was slower, but he didn’t have the time or attention to make it from yellow. Precious seconds passed while he prepared his skimmer.

4 Then the scoops were in hand and he began throwing luxin down

into the jets, blasting air and water out the back of his little craft and propelling himself forward. He leaned far forward, shoulders knotting with the effort; then, as he picked up speed, the effort eased. Soon his craft was hissing across the waves.

The fleet arose in the distance, the sails of the tallest ships first. But at Gavin's speed, it wasn't long before he could see all of them. There were hundreds of ships now: from sailing dinghies to galleasses to the square-rigged three-masted ship of the line with forty-eight guns that Gavin had taken from the Ruthgari governor to be his flagship. They'd left Garriston with over a hundred ships, but hundreds more that had gotten out earlier had joined them within days for protection from the pirates who lay thick in these waters. Last, he saw the great luxin barges, barely seaworthy. He himself had created those four great open boats to hold as many refugees as possible. If he hadn't, thousands of people would have died.

And now they would die regardless, if Gavin didn't turn the sea demon.

As he sped closer, he caught sight of the sea demon again, a hump cresting six feet out of the water. Its skin was still placidly luminous, and by some good fortune it wasn't actually cutting straight toward the fleet. Its path would take it perhaps a thousand paces in front of the lead ship.

Of course, the ships themselves were plowing slow furrows forward, closing that gap, but the sea demon was moving so quickly, Gavin dared to hope that it wouldn't matter. He had no idea how keen the sea demon's senses were, but if it kept going in the same direction, they might well make it.

Gavin couldn't take his hands away from the skimmer's jets without losing precious speed, and he didn't know how he would deliver a signal that said, "Don't Do Anything Stupid!" to the whole fleet at once even if he did. He followed directly behind the sea demon, closer now.

He'd been wrong; the sea demon was going to cut perhaps five hundred paces from the lead ship. A bad estimate, or was the creature turning toward the fleet?

Gavin could see lookouts in the crow's nests waving their hands violently to those on the decks below them. Doubtless shouting, though Gavin was too far away to hear them. He sped closer, saw men running on the decks.

The emergency was on the fleet far faster than any of them could

have expected. In the normal order of things, enemies might appear on the horizon and give chase. Storms could blow out of nowhere in half an hour—but this had happened in minutes, and some ships were only seeing the twin wonders now—a boat traveling faster across the waves than anyone had ever seen in their lives, and the huge dark shadow in front of it that could only be a sea demon.

Be smart, Orholam damn you all, be smart or be too terrified to do anything at all. Please!

Cannons took time to load and couldn't be left armed because the powder could go bad. Some idiot might shoot a musket at the passing form, but that should be too small a disturbance for the monster to notice.

The sea demon bulled through the waters four hundred paces in front of the fleet and kept going straight.

Gavin could hear the shouts from the ships now. The man in the crow's nest of Gavin's flagship was holding his hands to his head in disbelief, but no one did anything stupid.

Orholam, just one more minute. Just—

A signal mortar cracked the morning, and Gavin's hopes belly-flopped in the sea. He swore that all the shouting on every ship in the fleet stopped at once. And then began again a moment later, as the experienced sailors screamed in disbelief at the terrified idiot captain who'd probably just killed them all.

Gavin had eyes only for the sea demon. Its wake went straight, hissing bubbles and great undulations, another hundred paces. Another hundred. Maybe it hadn't heard.

Then his skimmer jetted right past the entire beast as the sea demon doubled back on itself faster than Gavin would have believed possible.

As it completed its turn, its tail broke the surface of the water. It moved too fast for Gavin to make out details. Only that it was burning red-hot, the color of iron angry from the forge, and when that span—surely thirty paces long—hit the water, the concussion made the signal mortar's report sound tinny and small.

Giant swells rolled out from the spot its tail had hit. From his dead stop, Gavin was barely able to turn his skimmer before the waves reached him. He dipped deep into the first wave and hurriedly threw green luxin forward, making the front of his craft wider and longer. He was shot upward by the next swell and flung into the air.

6 The skimmer's prow hit the next giant swell at too great of an angle

and went straight into it. Gavin was ripped off the skimmer and plunged into the waves.

The Cerulean Sea was a warm wet mouth. It took Gavin in whole, chomped his breath out of him, rolled him over with its tongue, disorienting him, made a play at swallowing him, and when he fought, finally let him go.

Gavin surfaced and quickly found the fleet. He didn't have time to draft an entire new skimmer, so he drafted smaller scoops around his arms, sucked in as much light as he could hold, threw his arms down to his sides, and pointed his head toward the sea demon. He threw luxin down and it threw him forward.

The pressure of the waves was incredible. It obliterated sight, blotted out sound, but Gavin didn't slow. With a body made so hard by years of working a skimmer that he could cross the sea in a day, and a will made implacable by years of being Prism and forcing the world to conform to his wishes, he *pushed*.

He felt himself slide into the sea demon's slipstream: the pressure suddenly eased and his speed doubled. Using his legs to aim, Gavin turned himself deeper into the water, then jetted toward the surface.

He shot into the air. Not a moment too soon.

He shouldn't have been able to see much of anything, gasping in air and light, water streaming off his entire body. But the tableau froze, and he saw *everything*. The sea demon's head was halfway out of the water, its cruciform mouth drawn shut so its knobby, spiky hammer-head could smash the flagship to kindling. Its body was at least twenty paces across, and only fifty paces now from the ship.

Men were standing on the port rail, matchlocks in hand. Black smoke billowed thick from a few. Others flared as the matches ignited powder in the pans in the instant before they fired. Commander Ironfist and Karris both stood, braced, fearless, glowing luxin forming missiles in their hands. In the gun decks, Gavin saw men tamping powder into the cannons for shots they would never get off in time.

The other ships in the fleet were crowding around like kids around a fistfight, men perched on gunwales, mouths agape, all too few even loading their muskets.

Dozens of men were turning from looking at the monster approaching to see what fresh horror this could be shooting into the air—and gaping, bewildered. A man in the crow's nest was pointing at him, shouting.

And Gavin hung in midair, disaster and mutilation only seconds away from his compatriots—and threw all he had at the sea demon.

A coruscating, twisting wall of multicolored light blew out of Gavin, streaking toward the creature.

Gavin didn't see what it did when it struck the sea demon, or even if he hit it at all.

There was an old Parian saying that Gavin had heard but never paid attention to: "When you hurl a mountain, the mountain hurls you back."

Time resumed, unpleasantly quickly. Gavin felt like he'd been walloped with a club bigger than his own body. He was launched backward, stars exploding in front of his eyes, clawing catlike, twisting, trying to turn—and splashing in the water with another jarring slap, twenty paces back.

Light is life. Years of war had taught Gavin never to leave yourself unarmed; vulnerability is a prelude to death. He found the surface and began drafting instantly. In the years he'd spent failing thousands of times while perfecting his skimmer, he'd also perfected methods of getting out of the water and creating a boat—not an easy task. Drafters were always terrified of falling in the water and not being able to get out again.

So within seconds Gavin was standing on the deck of a new skimmer, already drafting the scoops as he tried to assess what had happened.

The flagship was still floating, one railing knocked off, huge scrapes across the wood of the port side. So the sea demon must have turned, must have barely glanced off the boat. It had slapped its tail down again as it turned, though, because a few of the small sailing dinghies nearby had been swamped, and men were jumping into the water, other ships already heading toward them to pluck them from the sea's jaws.

And where the hell was the sea demon?

Men were screaming on the decks—not shouts of adulation, but alarm. They were pointing—

Oh *shit*.

Gavin began throwing luxin down the reeds as fast as possible. But the skimmer always started slow.

The giant steaming red-hot hammerhead surfaced not twenty paces away, coming fast. Gavin was accelerating and he caught the shockwave caused by such a massive, blunt shape pushing through the seas. The front of the head was a wall, a knobby, spiky wall.

But with the swell of the shockwave helping him, Gavin began to pull away.

And then the cruciform mouth opened, splitting that entire front hammerhead wide in four directions. As the sea demon began sucking water in rather than pushing it in front of it, the shockwave disappeared abruptly. And Gavin's skimmer lurched back into the mouth.

Fully into the mouth. The open mouth was easily two or three times as wide as Gavin was tall. Sea demons swallowed the seas entire. The body convulsed in rhythm, a circle that squeezed tighter and then opened wider, jetting water past gills and out the back almost the same way Gavin's skimmer did.

Gavin's arms were shaking, shoulders burning from the muscular effort of pushing his entire body, his entire boat across the seas. Harder. Dammit, harder!

The sea demon arched upward just as Gavin's skimmer shot out of its mouth. Its tetraform jaws snapped shut, and it launched itself into the air. He shut his eyes and screamed, pushing as hard as he could.

He shot a look over his shoulder and saw the impossible: the sea demon had breached. Completely. Its massive body crashed back down into the water like all seven towers of the Chromeria falling into the sea at once.

But Gavin was faster, up to full speed. Filling with the fierce freedom of flight and the luminous lightness of life, he laughed. Laughed.

The sea demon pursued him, furious, still burning red, moving even faster than before. But with the skimmer at full speed, Gavin was out of danger. He circled out to sea as the distant shapes of men cheered on the decks of every ship of the fleet, and the creature followed him.

Gavin led it for hours out to sea; then, circling wide in case it headed blindly in the last direction it had seen him go, he left it far behind.

As the sun set, exhausted and wrung out, he returned to his fleet. They'd lost two sailing dinghies, but not a single life. His people—for if they hadn't been his before, he owned them heart and soul now—greeted him like a god.

Gavin accepted their adulation with a wan smile, but the freedom had faded. He wished he, too, could rejoice. He wished he could get drunk and dance and bed the finest-looking girl he could find. He wished he could find Karris somewhere in the fleet and fight or fuck

or one and then the other. He wished he could tell the tale and hear it retold from a hundred lips and laugh at the death that had come so close to them all. Instead, as his people celebrated, he went belowdecks. Alone. Waved Corvan away. Shook his head at his wide-eyed son.

And finally, in his darkened cabin, alone, he wept. Not for what had been, but for what he knew he must become.

## Chapter 4

Karris hadn't joined the revelers celebrating surviving their brush with the sea demon. She woke before dawn and made her ablutions, and brushed out her hair to give herself time to think. It didn't help.

The secret was rubbing Karris like a burr under the cinch strap. She bound hair black as her mood back in a ponytail as usual. She'd spent the last five days putting pieces together: Gavin "falling ill" after the last battle of the war against his brother Dazen; Gavin breaking their betrothal; Gavin being astonished at learning about his bastard son Kip; Gavin being *different*.

Then she'd wasted time wondering how she'd been so dense. She—and everyone else—had attributed the changes to the trauma of war, the trauma of killing his own brother. His prismatic eyes had been proof, *proof* that Gavin was Gavin. Gavin was brilliant and quite the liar, but he shouldn't have been able to fool her. She knew him too well. More to the point, she knew *Dazen* too well.

That was finished. She made her way to the forecastle as she had every morning and began stretching. She went crazy if she didn't do some calisthenics every day. Her superior, Commander Ironfist, had thoughtfully brought her two sets of blacks to wear, and both tunic and pants were cotton infused with luxin—snug in spots, flexible everywhere, made for movement foremost and secondly to show off the Blackguards' hardened physiques. But though grunting and sweating were part and parcel of her life, that didn't mean she wanted to share it with every cretin on deck.

10      "May I?" Ironfist asked, coming onto the deck. The commander of

the Blackguard was a huge man. A good leader. Smart, tough, and intimidating as hell. When Karris nodded, he removed his headscarf and folded it neatly. It was a Parian religious custom, the men covering their heads in respect to Orholam. But there were exceptions, and like many Parians, Ironfist believed the injunction only applied once the sun had risen fully above the horizon.

Ironfist had once plaited his wiry black hair, but after the Battle of Garriston and the death of so many of his Blackguards, he'd shaved his head completely bald in mourning. Another Parian custom. The headscarf that had once covered his glory would now cover his grief.

Orholam. All the dead Blackguards, many of them killed at the same time by one exploding shell, a lucky shot that cared nothing for their elite skills in drafting and fighting. Her colleagues. Her friends. It was a yawning pit, devouring everything but her tears.

Coming to stand parallel to Karris, Ironfist brought his hands together, then separated them to a low-high guard. It was the beginning of the Marsh ka. A suitable beginning, when muscles weren't warm, and the ka didn't range far, so their moves could fit within the small confines of the forecastle. Sweep low, turn, back kick, round-house, land on the other foot, balance—not as easy a task as usual on the bobbing deck.

Ironfist led, and Karris was glad to let him do so. The sailors assigned to the third watch stole glances at them, but Karris and Ironfist weren't much visible in the predawn gray, and the gazes were unobtrusive. The motions were second nature. Karris focused on her body, the aches of sleeping on a wooden deck quickly worked out, the older aches more stubborn—the training injury that always made her hip ache, the stiffness in her left ankle from when she'd sprained it fighting a green wight with Gavin.

Not Gavin. Dazen. Orholam curse him.

Ironfist moved to Korick's ka, ramping up the intensity quickly, again, a good choice for this tight of a space. And soon Karris was focusing on getting just a little more length on her spinning round-house kick, getting full extension and height on the back kick. She wasn't nearly as tall as Ironfist, but he could flick his long limbs out into kicks and spear hands with unbelievable speed. She had to work hard to keep up with the pace he set.

The sun rose and they stopped only when it had almost cleared the

horizon. Apparently Ironfist had wanted some hard work, too. As she breathed and gasped, leaning over with her hands propped on her thighs, he mopped his brow, made the sign of the seven to the new-risen sun, breathed a short prayer, and put his ghotra on his shaven head.

“You want something,” he said.

He picked up another cloth and threw it to her. Of course he’d brought two. He was conscientious like that. It also told her that he’d not joined her morning calisthenics by accident. He’d come to talk.

Classic Ironfist. Comes to talk, and says five words in the course of an hour.

Still, he was right. So Karris said, “The Lord Prism is going to leave the fleet. He’ll either try to do so without your knowledge or he’ll at least try to get you to agree not to send any Blackguards with him. I want you to send me.”

“He told you this?”

“He didn’t have to tell me. He’s a coward; he always runs away.” Karris thought she’d worked out the rage in her calisthenics, but there it was, hot and crisp, ready to fling her skyward in an instant.

“Coward?” Ironfist leaned against the railing. He looked at it. “Hmm.” Not a pace from where they stood, the railing was broken. Had been broken by a rampaging sea demon.

A rampaging sea demon that Gavin had faced down.

She grunted. “That last part wasn’t supposed to come out.”

Ironfist wasn’t amused. “Come here. Eyes.”

He took her face in his big hands and stared at her eyes in the rising sunlight, measuring, intense. He said, “Karris, you’re the quickest drafter I have, but you’re also the quickest *to* draft. Uncontrollable rage? Saying things aloud you didn’t intend? Those are the hallmarks of a red or green who is *dying*. Half my Blackguard is dead, and if you keep on drafting like you have, you’ll break the halo in—”

“Hope I’m not interrupting,” a voice intruded. Gavin.

Ironfist was still holding Karris’s face in both hands, staring into her eyes. Standing on the deck in the soft warm light of dawn, they both realized at the same time what it probably looked like.

Commander Ironfist dropped his hands, cleared his throat. Karris thought it was the first time she’d ever seen him embarrassed. “Lord Prism,” Ironfist said. “Orholam’s eye grace you.”

12 “And a good morning to you, Commander. Karris. Commander,

I'd like to meet with you in an hour. Please summon Kip as well; I'll require him after our conversation. I believe he's on the first barge." Gavin's white tunic, accented with gold embroidery, was actually clean—on a ship, in the middle of fleeing from a battle, someone had laundered his clothes. He mattered that much to people. Things just magically worked out for Gavin without his even trying. It was infuriating. At least his face looked drawn. Gavin never slept well.

Ironfist looked like he wanted to say more, but he simply nodded and walked away.

Which left Karris alone with Gavin for the first time since she'd thrown a fit after learning he'd sired a bastard during their betrothal. She had jumped out of their boat then. It was the first time they'd even been face-to-face since she'd slapped his smiling face—in the middle of the Battle of Garriston, in full view of his entire army.

Maybe she *had* been drafting too much red and green. Anger and impulsivity shouldn't be a Blackguard's most prominent traits. Or a lady's. "Lord Prism," she said, determined to be civil.

He looked at her silently, that restless intelligence in his eyes weighing, always weighing. He looked at her almost mournfully, eyes touching her hair, her eyes, pausing at her lips, traveling quickly down her curves and back up to her eyes again, maybe flicking just for a moment to the sides of her eyes, where the wrinkles were starting.

He spoke softly: "Karris, you look better when you're a sweaty mess than most women look in their Sun Day best." Gavin was handsome, charming, and willful in all senses of the word, but something people often forgot was that he was smart, too.

He didn't want to talk. He was stalling. Getting her confused and defensive about something that had nothing to do with anything. Bastard! She was sweaty, sticky, stinky, how could he compliment her now?

How dare he be nice after she'd slapped him in the face?

How dare his stupid little gambit work despite that she knew what he was doing?

"Go to hell," she said, and walked away.

Nicely done, Karris. Professional, ladylike, civil. Bastard!