

Chapter 1

The two Blackguards approached the White's door, the younger rhythmically cracking the knuckles of his right fist nervously. The Greyling brothers stopped in front of the door, hesitated. *Pop, pop, pop. Pop, pop, pop.*

The elder brother, Gill, looked at his little brother, as if trying to emulate their commander's sledge-gaze. Gavin hated it when Gill did that, but he quit popping his knuckles.

"We gain nothing by waiting," Gill said. "Put that fist to use."

It was early morning. The White usually didn't emerge from her chambers for at least another two hours. With her declining health, the Blackguard were doing all they could to make the old woman's last months easy.

"How come it's always me who—" Gavin asked. At nineteen, Gill was two years older, but they were the same rank, and they'd been elevated to full Blackguard status at the same time.

"If you make her miss it because you're arguing with me..." Gill let the threat hang. "Fist," he said. It was an order.

Scowling, Gavin Greyling knocked on the door. After waiting the customary five seconds, he opened the door. The brothers stepped inside.

The White wasn't in her bed. She and her room slave were praying, prostrate on the floor despite their age, facing the rising sun through the open doors to the balcony. Cold wind blew in around the two old women.

"High Mistress," Gill said. "Your pardon. There's something you must see."

She looked at them, recognizing them immediately. Some of the

nobles and luxlords didn't treat the youngest of the full Blackguards seriously. It was a judgment that cut because it was partly deserved. Gavin knew that even a year ago, he wouldn't have been promoted to full Blackguard at seventeen. But the White never treated him like he was beneath anyone. He would gladly die for her, even if someone told him that she'd die the next day of old age.

She broke off her prayers, and they helped her into her wheeled chair, but when the old room slave waddled over to close the balcony doors on bad hips, Gill stopped her.

"She needs to look from the balcony, *caleen*," Gavin said.

Gavin wrapped the White in her blankets gently but efficiently. They'd learned exactly how much delicacy her pride would stand, and how much pain her body could. He pushed her out onto the balcony. She didn't complain that she could do it herself. She would have, not long ago.

"In the bay," Gill said.

Little Jasper Bay was resplendent below them. Today was the Feast of Light and Darkness, the equinox, and it was turning into one of those autumn days one hopes for: the air chilly, but the sky blindingly blue, the waters calm instead of their normal chop. The bay itself was conspicuously underpopulated. The fleet was still gone to fight the Color Prince at Ru and stop his advance. Gavin should have been there. Instead, he and three others had been sent back by skimmer on the eve of battle to report the fleet's disposition and plans.

Surely by now, the battle had taken place, and all that remained was to wait to hear whether they should rejoice in their victory or brace for a war that would tear the Seven Satrapies apart. Thus the White's prayers, Gavin supposed. Can you pray about the outcome of an event after the fact? Do they do anything then?

Do they do anything, ever?

The White waited silently, staring at the bay. Staring at nothing, Gavin was afraid. Had they interrupted her too late? But the White trusted them; she asked nothing, simply waited as the minutes stretched out.

And then, finally, a shape came around the bend of Big Jasper. At first, it was hard to get a sense of the size of the thing. It surfaced a hundred paces from the high walls ringing the entirety of Big Jasper, which were lined with people jostling one another to see. The sea demon was visible at first only by the wake it left, plowing waters to the left and the right.

As the sea demon came closer, it sped up. Its cruciform mouth,

half open, swallowing the seas with its ring-shaped maw and jetting them out through its gills along the whole of its body, now opened full. With each big gulping pulse, its mouth opening wide now, water splashed out to the sides and back in great fans every fifty or so paces, then as the massive muscles contracted, the water behind it hissed with churned air and water.

The sea demon was approaching the seawall that protected West Bay. One galley was making a run for a gap in the seawall, trying to get out. With how fast the sea demon moved, the captain couldn't have known it was precisely the wrong direction to go.

"The poor fool," Gill muttered.

"Depends on if this is a coincidence or an attack," the White said, eerily calm. "If it gets inside the seawall, they might be the only ones to escape."

The galley slaves lifted their oars out of the water as one, trying to make as little disturbance on the seas as possible. Sea demons were territorial, but not predators.

The sea demon passed the galley and kept going. Gavin Greyling expelled a relieved breath and heard the others do the same. But then the sea demon dove, disappearing in a sudden cloud of mist.

When it reappeared, it was red-hot. The waters were boiling around it. It veered out to sea.

There was nothing they could do. The sea demon went out to sea, then it doubled back, accelerating. It aimed directly at the prow of the galley, as if it wanted the head-to-head collision with this challenger.

Someone swore under their breath.

The sea demon rammed the galley with tremendous speed. Several sailors flew off the deck: some into the sea, one flying until he crunched against the sea demon's knobby, spiky head.

For an instant it looked like the ship would somehow hold together, and then the prow crumpled. Wood exploded in shards to every side. The masts snapped.

The entire galley—the half of it that was left—was pushed backward, ten paces, twenty, thirty, slapping huge fans of spray into the air. The sea demon's forward progress was only briefly slowed. Then the galley was pushed down into the waves as that great hammer-head rose even higher out of the water and kept pushing. Abruptly, the ship's fire-hardened wood hull shattered like a clay pot thrown against a wall.

The sea demon dove, and attached to that great spiky head by a hundred lines, the wreckage was dragged down with it.

A hundred paces away, a huge bubble of air surfaced as the last of the decks gave way underwater. But the ship never rose. Flotsam was all that remained, and not nearly as much of that as one would expect. The ship was simply gone. Perhaps half a dozen men out of a crew of hundreds were flailing in the waves. Most of them couldn't swim. Gavin Greyling had learned to swim as part of his Blackguard training, and that most sailors couldn't had always struck him as insanity.

"There," Gill said, pointing. "You can see the trail of bubbles."

The sea demon hadn't gotten trapped inside the seawall, thank Orholam. But what it seemed to be heading for was worse.

"High Mistress," a voice broke in behind them. It was Luxlord Carver Black, the man responsible for all the mundane details of running the Chromeria that didn't fall under the White's purview. He was a tall balding man in Ilytian hose and doublet, with olive skin. What remained of his long dark hair was streaked liberally with white. Gavin hadn't noticed him. A Blackguard, and he hadn't noticed. "Your pardon, I knocked but got no response. The beast has been circling the Jaspers, five times now. I've given orders for the guns on Cannon Island not to fire unless it attacked. They want to know if they should consider this an attack." The defense of Little Jasper was technically in his portfolio, but Luxlord Black was a cautious administrator, and he liked to avoid blame wherever possible.

What could a cannonball do against such a beast?

"Tell them to wait," she said.

"You heard her!" the Black bellowed, cupping a hand adorned with many rings to his mouth. There was a secretary on the roof, one floor above the White's balcony, holding a polished mirror a pace wide, leaning out over the edge to listen.

"Yes, High Lord!" The man hurried to flash the signal, and a younger woman replaced him at the edge, trying to listen without appearing to be listening to the wrong things.

The sea demon was now hugging the coast, swimming through waters so shallow its back was visible. It rammed through the portmaster's dock without even appearing to notice it. Then it reached the far northern tip of Big Jasper.

“Oh shit.” The thought was everyone’s, but the voice was the White’s. The White? Cursing? Gavin Greyling hadn’t thought she even knew curses.

The people on the Lily’s Stem had lost sight of the beast as it had come in close to Big Jasper, and the sea demon was bearing down on the bridge before any of them could react.

The bridge floated at exactly the height of the waves. Without supports, the yellow and blue luxin formed a lattice that looked green. It had withstood battering seas for hundreds of years, the chromaturgy required to make such a thing now beyond perhaps even Gavin Guile himself. More than once it had served as a wavebreak for ships trapped outside the seawalls during storms and had saved hundreds of lives. The sea demon’s first, incidental contact with the bridge rocked the entire structure. It threw hundreds of people off their feet.

The vast shape slid along the smooth luxin for ten, twenty paces, then slowed, seeming confused by the contact. Its confusion lasted only an instant, though, as fresh billows of steam rose around it. The sea demon’s head plunged into the waves and it sped out to sea, its vast tail slapping the water beside the Lily’s Stem and sending geysers over almost the whole length.

Then, out at sea, it turned back again.

“Tell Cannon Island to fire!” the White shouted.

Cannon Island sat in the bay on the opposite the Lily’s Stem. The likelihood of the gunners there making the shot was remote.

But a slim chance at distraction was better than none.

The first culverin fired immediately; the men must have been waiting for the order. The shot was at least a thousand paces, though. They missed by at least a hundred. The island’s other five guns facing the right way each spoke in turn, the sound of their fire lagging behind the bright flash of it, the roar reaching the tower at about the same time they saw the splash. Each missed. The closest splash was more than fifty paces off target. None deterred the sea demon.

The crews began reloading with the speed and efficiency that could be only imparted with relentless training. But they wouldn’t get off another volley in time. The sea demon was simply too fast.

The Lily’s Stem had become chaos. A team of horses had fallen, panicked, and turned sideways with their cart within the confines of the bridge itself, blocking all but a trickle of men and women from

getting out onto Big Jasper. People were climbing over and under the flailing, biting horses.

A stampede flowed out of the other side of the bridge, people falling, being trampled. Some few would make it in time.

“Carver,” the White said, her voice clipped. “Go now and organize care for the dead and wounded. You’re faster than I, and I need to see how this ends.”

Luxlord Black was out the door before she was done speaking.

Four hundred paces out. Three hundred.

The White reached a hand out, as if she could ward off the sea demon by will alone. She was whispering prayers urgently under her breath.

Two hundred paces. One hundred.

A second dark shape suddenly streaked under the bridge from the opposite side, and a colossal collision with the sea demon sent jets of water a hundred feet into the air. The sea demon was launched into the air, bent sideways. A black shape, massive itself but dwarfed by the sea demon, had hit it from below. Both crashed back into the water, not twenty paces from the Lily’s Stem.

The sea demon’s superior mass carried its body all the way into the bridge itself, shooting a wall of water at the tube and over it. The whole edifice was rocked by the force of the wave—but not shattered.

In a spray of water and expelled breath, flukes and a black tail surfaced. That tail smashed down on the sea demon’s body, and then the whale darted into Little Jasper Bay. Out, away from the bridge.

“A whale,” the White breathed. “Was that . . .”

“A sperm whale, High Mistress,” Gill said. He’d loved stories of the sea’s pugilists. “A black giant. At least thirty paces long, head like a battering ram. I’ve never heard of one that big.”

“There haven’t been sperm whales in the Cerulean Sea for—”

“Four hundred years. Since the Everdark Gates closed. Though some persisted for another hundred or— Your pardon,” Gill said.

She didn’t notice. They were all too engrossed. The sea demon was obviously stunned. Its red-hot body had turned blue and sunk beneath the waves, but even as the sea calmed from the aftershocks of the collision, they could see the red glow begin again. The waters hissed.

A swell of that big body underneath the waves, and it turned and began to move—chasing after the whale.

The White said, “That kind of whale is supposed to be quite aggress—”

Four hundred paces out from shore, another eruption of water as the two leviathans collided again.

Sperm whales had been the only natural enemies of sea demons in the Cerulean Sea. But the sea demons had killed them all, long ago. Supposedly.

They watched, and again the giants collided, this time farther out. They watched, in silence, while the rescue operations below worked to clear the Lily's Stem.

"I thought those whales were usually...blue?" the White asked Gill, not turning from the sea.

"Dark blue or gray. There are mentions of white ones, possibly mythical."

"This one looked black, did it not? Or is that my failing eyes?"

The brothers looked at each other.

"Black," Gill said.

"Definitely black," Gavin said.

"Bilhah," the White said, addressing her room slave by name for the first time that Gavin remembered. "What day is today?"

"'Tis the Feast of Light and Darkness, Mistress. The day when light and dark war over who will own the sky."

The White still didn't turn. Quietly, she said, "And on this equinox, when we know the light must die, when there is no victory possible, we're saved—not by a white whale, but by a black one."

The others nodded sagely, and Gavin felt like a significant moment was passing him by. He looked from one to another. "Well?" he asked. "What does it mean?"

Gill slapped the back of his head. "Well, that's the question, ain't it?"

Chapter 2

Gavin Guile's palms bled a warm, thick gray around the slick oar in his hands. He'd thought he had respectable calluses for a man who worked mainly with words, but nothing prepared you for ten hours a day on the oar.

“Strap!” Number Seven said, raising his voice for the foreman. “More bandages for *His Holiness*.”

That elicited a few pale grins, but the galley slaves didn’t slow. The big calfskin drums were thumping out a cetaceous pulse. It was a pace the experienced men could maintain all day, though with difficulty. Each bench held three men, and two could keep this pace for long enough to allow their oarmate to drink or eat or use the bucket.

Strap came over with a roll of cloth. She motioned for Gavin to present his hands. Strap was the burliest woman he had ever seen, and he’d known every female Blackguard for twenty years. He pulled his bloody claws off the oars. He couldn’t open or close his fingers, and it wasn’t even noon yet. They would row until dark; five more hours, this time of year. She unrolled the cloth. It seemed crusty.

Gavin supposed there were worse things to worry about than infection. But as she wrapped his hands with efficient motions, albeit without gentleness, he smelled something vibrant, resin overlaid with something like cloves, and heard the tiny shivering splintering of breaking superviolet luxin.

For a moment, the old Gavin was back, his mind reaching for how he could take advantage of their foolishness. It was difficult to draft directly from luxin breaking down, but difficult was nothing for Gavin Guile. He was the Prism; there was nothing he couldn’t—

There was nothing he *could* do. Not now. Now, he was blind to colors. He couldn’t draft anything. In the threadbare light of the slowly swinging lanterns, the world swam in shades of gray.

Strap finished tying the knots at the back of his hands and growled. Gavin took that as his sign and lifted weary arms back to the oar.

“F-f-fights infection,” said one of his oarmates, Number Eight, but some of the men called him Fukkelot. Gavin had no idea why. There was a loose community here with their own slang and inside jokes, and he wasn’t part of it. “Down here in the belly, infection’ll kill you quick as a kick.”

Superviolet luxin fighting infection? The Chromeria didn’t teach that, but that didn’t make it wrong. Or maybe it was simply a new discovery since the war and no one had told him. But his thoughts were drawn instead to his brother, Dazen, who had slashed his own chest open. How had Dazen not succumbed to infection down in the hell Gavin had made him?

Had the madness that had convinced Gavin he had to kill his imprisoned brother not been madness at all, but only a fever?

Too late now. He remembered again the blood and brains blowing out of Dazen's skull, painting the wall of his cell after Gavin had shot him.

Gavin put his bandaged hands back on the well-worn oar, the grip lacquered with sweat and blood and the oil of many hands.

"Back straight, Six," Number Eight said. "The lumbago'll kill ya if you do it all with your back." Now, that many words with no cursing was just a miracle.

Eight had somehow adopted Gavin. Gavin knew it wasn't pure charity that led the wiry Angari to help him. Gavin was the third man on their oar. The less work Gavin did, the more Seven and Eight would have to do to keep time, and Captain Gunner wasn't taking it easy on the speed. He wasn't keen on staying close to the site of the fall of Ru.

In another week, the Chromeria would have pirate hunters out: privateers given writs to hunt the slave takers who'd swept in upon the wrecks of the invasion fleet, saving men in order to press-gang them. They'd look to ransom those who had relatives with means, but many would doubtless head straight back to the great slave yards of Ilyta, where they could offload their human cargo with impunity. Others would seek out nearer slave markets, where unscrupulous officials would forge the documents saying these slaves were taken legally in far distant ports. Many a slave would lose his tongue so he couldn't tell the tale.

This is what I led my people to, Karris. Slavery and death.

Gavin had killed a god, and still lost the battle. When the bane had risen from the depths, it had smashed the Chromeria's fleet, their hopes thrown overboard like so much jetsam.

If I had been declared promachos, it wouldn't have happened.

The truth was, Gavin shouldn't have only killed his brother; he should have killed his father, too. Even up to the end, if he'd helped Kip stab Andross Guile instead of trying to separate them, Andross would be dead, and Gavin would be in his wife's arms right now.

"You ever think that you weren't hard enough?" Gavin asked Seven.

The man rowed three big sweeps before he finally answered. “You know what they call me?”

“Guess I heard someone call you Orholam? Because you’re seat number seven?” As six was the number of man, so was seven Orholam’s number.

“That ain’t why.”

Friendly sort. “Why then?”

“You don’t get answers to your questions because you don’t wait for ’em,” Orholam said.

“I’ve done my share of waiting, old man,” Gavin said.

Two more long sweeps, and Orholam said, “No. To all three. That’s three times no. Some men pay attention when things come in threes.”

Not me. Go to hell, Orholam. And the one you’re named after, too.

Gavin grimaced against the familiar agony of rowing and settled back into the tempo, sweep and stretch and brace against the footboard and pull. The *Bitter Cob* had a hundred and fifty rowers, eighty men in this deck and seventy above. Openings between decks allowed the sounds of drums and shouted orders to pass between the upper and lower galley decks.

But not only sound passed between the upper and lower decks. Gavin had thought his sense of smell was deadened after a few days, but there always seemed some new scent to assail him. The Angari fancied themselves a clean people, and maybe they were—Gavin hadn’t seen any signs of dysentery or sweating sickness among the galley slaves, and each night, buckets made the rounds of the slaves, the first full of soapy water for them to slop on themselves and the second full of clean seawater to rinse. Whatever slopped free, of course, dribbled down on the slaves in the lower hold and, dirtied further, into the bilge. The decks were always slippery, the hold hot and damp, the sweat constant, the portholes providing inadequate ventilation unless the wind was high, the dribbles of liquid from the deck above that dripped onto Gavin’s head and back suspiciously malodorous.

Footsteps pattered down the stairs, the light step of a veteran sailor. Fingers snapped near Gavin, but he didn’t even look over. He was a slave now; he needed to act the part or be beaten for his insolence. But he didn’t need to cower. On the other hand, he *did* still need to row, and that took all his strength.

10 Strap took Gavin’s hands off the oar, unlocked the manacles, whis-

tled to Number Two. Numbers One and Two were at the top of the fluid slave hierarchy, allowed to sit up front and rest, trusted to run errands without chains on, and only required to row when another slave got sick or fainted from exhaustion.

After Strap manacled his hands behind his back, Gavin looked at Captain Gunner, who was standing at the top of the stairs out of the hold. Gunner was Ilytian, with midnight black skin, a wild curly beard, a fine brocaded doublet worn open over his naked torso, loose sailor's pants. He had the handsome intensity of madmen and prophets. He talked to himself. He talked to the sea. He admitted no equal on heaven or earth—and in the firing of guns of any size, he was justified in that. Not long ago, Gunner had been jumping off a ship Gavin had lit on fire and poked full of holes. Gavin had spared Gunner's life on a whim.

The good you do is what kills you.

“Come on up, little Guile,” Captain Gunner said. “I'm running out of reasons to keep you alive.”

Chapter 3

Kip's palms bled vibrant crimson around the slick oar in his hands. His palms had blistered. The blisters had filled with colorless plasma. The tender skin beneath had torn. Blood had swirled into the plasma like red luxin. Chafed ceaselessly against the oar, the blisters broke, bled. He shifted his grip. New blisters formed, colorless. Filled with crimson. Burst.

He didn't see the color, though. Couldn't see anything. He could only imagine the colors waiting for him as soon as he shed the blindfold Zymun had put on him to keep him from drafting. Zymun, the polychrome who'd followed the Color Prince. Zymun, who'd tried to kill Kip in Rekton, and tried to assassinate Gavin at Garriston. Zymun, who held a pistol pointed at Kip's head even now. Zymun, his half brother.

Zymun, whom he would kill.

“What are you smiling about?” Zymun asked.

The rowboat bobbed and lurched on the waves as it had for the last two days. Without the use of his eyes, Kip couldn't thread his way through the chaos of the waves, rowing at the right time, pausing when appropriate. From time to time, he'd pull on one oar and feel it slip free of the water. He'd flounder until Zymun barked a direction. Two days they'd been doing this. Two agonizing days.

The blindfold was overkill the first day: Kip's eyes had swollen shut. During the battle he'd accidentally hit himself, and then Zymun had punched him in the face. He had a dozen small cuts on the left side of his face and down his left arm from when the merlon of the green bane had been hit by a cannonball and exploded into shrapnel. Andross Guile had stabbed him in the shoulder and gashed him along his ribs.

If it hadn't been for his Blackguard training for the last months and the fact he had a gun leveled at his head, Kip wouldn't have been able to move. As it was, the unfamiliar exercise reduced his muscles to quivering clumsiness. His back was agony. The fronts of his legs, kept constantly flexed as he tried to keep his balance in the bobbing boat, were murder. His arms and shoulders were somehow worse. And his hands! Dear Orholam, it was like he'd dipped them in misery. His burned left hand that had been slowly healing was now a claw. It hurt to tighten, it hurt to loosen, it hurt to leave it alone.

Kip was fat and frightened and finished.

“More to port,” Zymun said, bored. He didn't think enough of Kip to pursue why Kip had smiled. He was too canny to come close at a slight provocation, and the waves were too heavy today for him to risk putting himself off balance for a momentary pleasure.

He'd never offered to take a turn at the oars.

The only thing that kept Kip going was fear. It was exhausting to be afraid for two days straight, and it was starting to make Kip a bit furious.

But what can I do? I'm blind and reduced to such weakness I couldn't win a fight with a kitten, muscles sure to clamp or collapse at any move I make. Zymun has set the field. He has the cards: six colors and a gun.

But as soon as Kip saw it as a game of Nine Kings, his terror eased. He imagined analyzing the game with the patience of a blue.

Could Zymun be nearly as frightening an opponent as Andross Guile? No. But if you have a terrible hand you can still lose to a bad opponent.

Zymun could kill Kip at any moment, easily and without fear of justice or repercussions, because no one would ever know.

Yes, yes, we've established that, but so what?

Kip's best card was Zymun's laziness. Zymun knew they needed to row or they could fall prey to pirates and be enslaved. Zymun didn't want to row himself, so Kip was safe until he irritated Zymun enough to overcome his laziness, or until Zymun didn't need him any longer.

Zymun had great cards, but a great card that you never play is a worthless card.

Zymun had a ludicrously inflated opinion of himself—he'd already spoken at length about all the things he would do once he reached the Chromeria. Kip didn't appear in those stories, which told Kip all he needed to know about his own future. But Zymun's inflated opinion of himself meant he had a proportionally deflated opinion of others. Kip acted beaten, and Zymun believed it. Of course he was superior. Of course Kip would be devastated by that fact and realize that he was helpless.

"I really expected the sharks to get you at Garriston," Kip said, threading a grudging admiration through his tone.

Zymun wasn't an idiot, despite his arrogance. Once the sun went down, he lost his luxin advantage. Then he only had three cards: the pistol, Kip's injuries, and that his own muscles weren't devastated from a dozen hours of grueling labor. Anytime Kip had turned over last night in his sleep as he lay in the front of their little boat, under the bench, Zymun had woken instantly, the flintlock already cocked and pointed at him.

Kip's odds of getting accidentally shot if Zymun twitched in his sleep were depressingly high.

"Wasn't a pleasant swim," Zymun said. After a silence, he said, "I expected that waterfall to get you back at Rekton."

Peeved, Kip the Lip almost brought up their next meeting—in the rebel camp, when Zymun hadn't recognized him. But taunting a man with a dozen sure ways to kill you wasn't the height of good sense.

"Guess we've something else in common then," Kip said. "Hard to

kill.” He shouldn’t have bothered trying to draw them together with some illusory common bonds. Zymun was pure reptile. Kip thought the boy must try to hide it most of the time. With Kip, he didn’t. Another sign of how Kip’s time was limited.

“We’re the blood of Guile,” Zymun said. “But you’ll forever be a bastard. I’ll prove myself to grandfather, and be an heir. The heir.”

Kip rowed. “You’re sure?” he asked. “About Karris being your mother? I never heard so much as a whisper.” He hated being blindfolded, having to sift Zymun’s tones of voice rather than look for the momentary grimaces or twitches that might betray the truth.

“She was betrothed to the Prism when they conceived me. That makes me legitimate, to most people. When he broke their betrothal, she went and stayed with relations.”

“In *Tyrea*?” Kip asked. That was where he’d first seen Zymun, defying his master, throwing fireballs at Kip, and forcing Kip to jump off the waterfall.

“Blood Forest. Little town called Apple Grove. I went to *Tyrea* later. It was the only place to go to learn drafting that wasn’t the *Chromeria*.”

“Grandfather’s idea?” Kip asked. It sounded like Andross Guile. Have the boy educated, trained, and kept off the table. A perfect hidden card. While being honed into the perfect weapon, Zymun would also be kept from developing his own allies at the *Chromeria*. He would be perfect for Andross’s use against Gavin or the Spectrum, but he wouldn’t be a threat to Andross himself. The boy didn’t even realize how cynically Andross was using him.

Guess I’ve become a little cynical myself, to see it so clearly. Or maybe I’m only cynical where Andross Guile is concerned.

Regardless, Zymun didn’t answer. Or perhaps he answered by nodding.

In two days, Zymun had never asked about Karris. He seemed to think her position on the *Blackguard* made her acceptable to have as a mother, but not intrinsically powerful, and therefore not interesting. He saved his questions to arm himself for his meeting with Andross Guile. Kip wished he could be there to see that.

The next time Kip’s oar slipped off a wave, he coughed hard. He wheezed into his hand and pushed the blindfold up his nose fractionally. Coughing, even fake coughing, hurt like hell. He’d inhaled a lot

of seawater after he'd jumped into the Cerulean Sea to save Gavin Guile.

He'd once thought of himself as the turtle-bear, made with a special gift for absorbing punishment. He was really going to have to come up with some other special gift. This one was terrible.

He went back to rowing. Zymun had made him strip off his shirt, both so he could see if Kip tried to pack luxin, and to keep himself warm. With the cloud cover and the autumn wind, it was chilly for much of the morning and evening. Rowing and sweating, Kip didn't notice the lack so much.

At the end of each stroke, his head naturally tilting back, Kip took a tiny sip of blue under the blindfold. In the weak, gray, cloud-filtered light, the sea was soup, and his eyelashes and the blindfold blotted out most color, but he didn't need much. Couldn't take much at once, or Zymun might see it. With only a little at a time, Kip's skin was dark enough to camouflage the luxin as it traveled from his eyes, through his face hidden by the blindfold, down his back, and was packed beneath the skin of his legs and butt, out of sight. Zymun had checked his scalp and the skin hidden by the blindfold a few times, so an abundance of caution was in order.

Now, certain that Kip wouldn't draft, Zymun expected him to attack at night, when his own powers were weakest. But as a full-spectrum polychrome, Kip knew weakness wasn't measured in colors. There was no difference between Zymun having a dozen sure ways to kill him and only having one, if time was limited enough. In fact, if Zymun could be more easily surprised because he had a dozen ways to kill Kip than if he'd had only one, then those extra ways actually made him weaker.

Some people think that you play Nine Kings against the man, not the cards. It sounds clever, but it's rarely true.

By late afternoon, Kip had enough luxin. It took all of his concentration to row and push his pain aside and slowly thread the luxin up his back, up the back of his neck, up into his scalp. To draft luxin, it had to be connected to blood. Most drafters chose to tear open the skin at their wrists or under their fingernails. After a while, scar tissue formed; the body adjusted. But you didn't *have* to push the luxin through a spot where you'd done it before, and Kip didn't intend to. Every fraction of a second lost made death more likely.

The sips of blue made it all seem so logical. Kip's senses were acute, filtering out the wind and his own heaving breath. He divined that Zymun was seated facing him. Kip knew where the bench was, could tell that Zymun was seated in the middle of it from how the rowboat sat even in the water. He could hear Zymun shift from time to time, looking behind them or to shore.

The blue couldn't mute sounds, though, only sift them. The irregular wind obliterated much of the information Kip could have used. Nor did blue mute all his body's agony. Kip had husbanded his dwindling resources as carefully as possible, acting slightly more exhausted than he was so that he could grab a moment of rest between each oar stroke—balancing Zymun's laziness against his own life.

It had to be today. It had to be soon. He didn't have much strength left.

Kip hunched, grunted in pain, and released the oars, faking a leg cramp. The move was sudden enough it probably almost earned him a musket ball between the eyes. He massaged his leg with both hands, evaluating, testing, stretching not just his legs, but his hands and arms, too.

There was a sudden snort and a small cry.

Planting his legs wider than he had before, making them less helpful for rowing, but hopefully more helpful for a sudden leap, Kip settled back into his place, groped blindly for the oars. He pretended he hadn't noticed, but he died a little.

Zymun must have just dozed off. Kip had woken his enemy. With blue sharpening his senses, if Kip had waited even a few moments...

He hadn't. That was no use. Commander Ironfist had told them, 'Looking back doesn't help. Dwell on your mistakes when you're in safety. *Get to safety first.*'

"If you think I'm going to help you, you're insane," Zymun said.

Kip groaned from the pain of moving his arms. He didn't know if he would have the strength even to lurch across the boat. He groped around blindly, missing the oars that he'd released. He said, "Longer I fumble around for the oars, the longer I get to rest."

"Right hand. Up and forward. Up more. Use the chain, stupid."

The oar, held in its oar lock, bobbed and swayed with the action of the waves. It smacked Kip's fingernails. Kip grunted. He bent his wrist

to reach the manacle, and followed the chain to the oar. He hadn't forgotten about it. But it was better to look stupid.

It was better not to look like he was calculating exactly how long that chain was. Kip grabbed the oar. Then he repeated with his left hand, and he started rowing again.

"More to port," Zymun said, bored. "That's it."

There was only one way this could work. Kip had to knock Zymun into the water and not fall in himself. Once Zymun fell in the water, his pistol would be useless. He would only have time to throw one burst of something at Kip. Because all luxin had weight, that action—regardless of which color of luxin he chose to throw—would cause the reaction of pushing Zymun deep under the waves.

If Zymun missed with that first strike, Kip had a chance. He would have to row like mad. When he was able to see how far from shore they were, he could decide whether to risk going back and killing Zymun, or leaving him to his fate in the sea. After Zymun's impossible escape through shark-filled waters last time, Kip planned to kill him and be sure.

If Kip was too slow, though, he'd get shot. With no idea what direction to row, and as weak as he was, he would die. If he knocked them both into the water, he would die. Zymun was the better swimmer even when Kip was healthy.

There would be only one slim chance. Kip would be ready for it. His eyes, shielded from the light under the blindfold, were naturally wide, dilated. He tried to narrow them consciously, a trick any experienced drafter could do instantly. If he was dazzled by the light, he'd miss. If—

Zymun's weight shifted. "Orholam," he said.

The moment was on him so suddenly, Kip almost missed it.

"A galley," Zymun said. The blue luxin Kip was holding told him that Zymun's voice was muted by being turned to the side, looking. "I think it's pirates."

Now! Blue luxin tore through Kip's skin at his temples. With fingers of blue luxin, he flipped the blindfold off his head—and leapt.

Chapter 4

“I smell so much as a resiny fart, and I paints my deck chunky, little Guile. Red and gray and bony, you elucidate? I know luxinly smells,” Gunner said as he led him onto the deck of the *Bitter Cob*. “Or more like, I paint it all in brown and squashy, right, right?”

Gavin walked into the light with a lead heart.

“Right,” he said. Because he had feces for brains. Funny.

“Luxinly? Luxic? Luxinic?” Gunner asked. The man loved language the way a wife beater loves his wife.

“Luxiny, but I like your way better.”

“Bah.”

It was close to noon, choppy seas tossing the light galley more than he expected. These Angari ships were different. But what had been the most salient fact of his whole life—the light—struck him as insignificant. It was an overcast day, but with lots of light for a Prism. But this light kissed his skin like a lingering lover leaving. The hues of gray and white and black gave him despair where before the scintillant spectra had given him inconceivable power. He’d thought he’d adjusted to the loss of his colors, but it was one thing to face his loss in the darkness of a prison, another thing altogether to see that his prison was the whole world. And Gunner knew it. He had taken one look at Gavin’s eyes the night he’d captured him and he’d known.

So why is Gunner paranoid now?

Because he’s Gunner.

“On yer knobbsies,” Gunner said.

Gavin got on his knees, planting them wide on the deck so the rolling motion wouldn’t knock him down. He couldn’t tell if the stretching hurt good or hurt bad, but as long as he didn’t lose his head or any other limb more important to him, any break from the oars was a good thing.

Gunner looked at him. “What happened to Gavin Guile, levering the world on the fulcrum of his wantings?”

On one level, this was the clearest thing Gunner had said to him yet, but Gavin had told Gunner he wasn’t Gavin. It was probably one of the dumber things he’d done in the last year, though there were