

Cavalier Queen

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Chapter 1: Cavalier Queen

The Airship *Cavalier Queen*

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Chapter 1: Cavalier Queen

“The gas! Mark my words, if Dubhgall Kheegan ever sells the recipe for float-gas, it’ll be ‘cuz there’s a knife to his throat. That stuff is the only reason his guild still exists. Clear Skies have swept up everything else. They’ll own all the worlds in a few years...”

—*Overheard in the Gun and Drum, Crae Manaan, Eärrach.*

The Airship *Cavalier Queen*

Near Long Drop City, Alakbir Earthmote, the world-sphere of Sayf

09.06.03.06.03

From the air, Long Drop City looked like somewhere only the suicidally daring would live. It most closely resembled a stubborn fungus on the trunk of some fallen tree—a tumorous shelf of lightweight wooden platforms, cables, and hundreds of gas bladders latched precariously to the great five-mile cliffs where Alakbir's rolling plains abruptly dropped off into open sky and, far below, the turning of the other worlds.

In fact that alarming edifice was just the docking gantry. Long Drop was a guild city: *the* guild city, home of the Clear Skies Guild. Airships came and went like bees, each

laden with cargoes from all over the four Worlds.

Docking space was at a premium and Jerl Holten, captain and owner of the independent merchant *Cavalier Queen*, was acutely conscious of how little fuel his ship had left.

It had been a long run up from the lower worlds. Enough to leave them running on fumes, which was *usually* a sure way to get brought in quickly. And yet instead they had been loitering in a holding pattern around Long Drop for three hours now. He had raised flags to signal their situation, and so far the only reply the semaphore tower would give them had been *'keep holding.'*

With nothing better to do, he'd lit his pipe and sat down atop one of the stacked crates full of Haustian hides that littered the deck, thumped his boots up onto the railing, and watched. It was a rare day when the skies were so open and clear of haze: he could see all four of the worlds. A perfect opportunity to just stop and take in the view.

And what a view!

Cloud-garlanded earthmotes, the largest of them thousands of miles across, hung unsupported in the sky in all directions; above and below, fore and aft, port and starboard. They drifted gently along their course, always turning their upper face toward the sun, segregated by altitude into the four so-called "worlds:" Sayf, Eärrach, Haust and Talvi.

From his vantage, Jerl could see the bright silver thread of rivers glinting in the sunlight. He could pick out the coastlines of distant inland seas and watch storms flash and boil silently far, far away. With a good telescope and a steadier surface to rest it on than the *Queen's* rolling deck, he might even have seen cities and roads.

He would never fly over or visit even a fraction of them. The Worlds were just too big for any one man to explore in a lifetime, or even for any elf to have explored in several.

Lower down where the shadows of higher worlds could pass over, life was progressively colder and more dangerous but up here on the innermost, the sun's full heat was close at hand and never eclipsed. Sayf was where the waters first rained down in periodic monsoons, to flow, depending on the earthmote, past scrubby deserts and badlands, or through steaming jungle and across lush irrigated farmlands before plunging over the cliff edges to bring rain and weather to the lower worlds. Sayf was home to endless rippling acres of wheat and corn, fertile grazing grasslands, haunting deserts and sun-kissed beaches. Sayf was civilization, and it was, appropriately to its name, safe.

...Well, it was safe from the Worlds' worst nightmares anyway. And those were nightmarish enough to make mere overcrowding and gang wars seem like paradise to some.

He turned at the sound of feet joining him on the *Queen's* forecastle. His quartermaster, Sinikka, greeted him with a long-suffering nod as she took the steps two at a time. Jerl had been enjoying the warmth in his shirt-sleeves, but Sin was dripping sweat and miserable from the heat.

Being an ice elf, she hated their visits to Sayf.

"Derghan wants to know when we'll land," she growled. "And I'd bloody well like to know too, nay?"

By way of an answer, Jerl merely pointed the stem of his pipe toward the semaphore tower and shrugged. Sin made a disgusted noise and sat on a barrel of Cloudtreader Whisky. She didn't bother seeking shade; the shadows were nearly as hot as the full glare of the sun in any case, and elves simply didn't sunburn. Even if, as in her case, their skin was as perfectly, inhumanly flat white as snow.

"They're taking their piking time," she complained.

Twenty years had flown by since his father had first hired her on as quartermaster and occasional bodyguard. Other than a rakish scar or two and the truncation of one of her pointed ears, Sin looked much the same as she had on that day.

Meanwhile, at thirty-two years old Jerl was soon going to have to admit that he was now a grown man.

Looks were deceiving, though: Sin was an *old* soul. The Fey didn't die like mortals, but instead were granted the gift of reincarnation. Upon death, their spirit migrated to be conceived, born and to grow up again in a new body, and reclaim their memories of lives past when they came of age. Sin had experience dating back to the first day and the weaving of the Worlds.

All of which sounded like she really ought to be much wiser and more patient than was actually the case. Jerl resisted the urge to chuckle at her peevishness, and instead gave an amiable, patient shrug.

"Not much we can do about it," he said. "We might have enough fuel to make it to Overhang, but it'd be a close run. And if Long Drop have to send a tug out after us because they kept us waiting, they're the ones who pay for it anyway. We'll dock soon enough."

Sinikka snorted "There's no such thing as '*soon enough*' for me."

Jerl glanced back at the semaphore tower, then dumped out his pipe over the rail. "Well, you're in luck, they're calling us in," he said. He stood and shouted down to the wheelhouse. "Gebby! Green flag, bay twelve!"

He turned to Sinikka as the helmsman called 'aye aye!' "Better?"

"Ask me after I've had a cold bath and a colder beer, nay?" A small smile finally touched her face before she tapped her knuckles on his arm, and turned away to shout the crew into order. Jerl chuckled and returned to his spot on the prow, already planning his own shore leave.

He was overdue some time to relax.

Docking an airship was a busy and hazardous business, but Long Drop's longshoremen were experienced professionals. As soon as the *Cavalier Queen* came close enough under her own power, men wearing light wings of wood and canvas threw themselves from the top of the gantry. Trailing ropes, they glided across and dropped onto the top of the ship's gas envelope before swarming the rigging to attach guide cables, which pulled taut and drew the *Queen* safely into her cradle.

The steel bars of the docking lock were rammed into place, there was a groan of wood and steel as the extra lift of ship's gasbag altered the weight distribution of the whole gantry edifice, and then...comparative silence, broken only by the gantry's gentle creaking and the faint sounds of the *Queen's* engines cooling down.

Jerl's crew leapt into action preparing to offload cargo, only to be left standing around in mounting confusion as the cranes and gangplanks failed to swing across.

"...Ah. Jerl?"

Jerl knew and dreaded that 'Ah.' It belonged to his good friend and advisor in all matters magical, Amir at-Bezwi, the *Queen's* navigator. He was standing on the gangway, staring down at the jetty with a concerned expression.

Jerl joined him. Amir was the taller man, but Jerl was undeniably the more solid thanks to a life spent hauling on ropes, moving cargo and, when necessary, fighting for his life. Amir, on the other hand, was a mathematician, navigator, cartographer and mage, none of which were pursuits noted for their physical strenuousness. He was also a useful man to know simply for his apparently perfect memory for names and faces, and as a native Alakbiri his dark skin and embroidered jubba and kufi blended right into the crowd in Long Drop.

"Problem?" Jerl asked. He looked to where Amir was pointing.

At first, he didn't see much out of the ordinary, only dock-hands checking the cables and tying off...then he saw the harbourmaster, in conversation with three men in somber gray clothing. The spokesman for the trio was a tiny, slight man with equally tiny and slight spectacles, whose remaining hair was as white as Sinikka's. The other two were just hired muscle in well-tailored suits.

"You know him?"

"Mister Arthir Bellarn," Amir said, "and his 'colleagues', Mister Coven and Mister Sternal."

"Never heard of 'em."

"Bellarn, Coven and Sternal is a law firm owned by the Clear Skies Trading Guild," Amir said. "Officially."

Guildsmen. Jerl resisted the urge to spit over the side, and settled instead for scowling at them. "Go on..."

"Unofficially, Bellarn's job is to deliver very bad news, while Mister Coven and Mister Sternal make sure he doesn't get hurt in doing so. We may be in trouble of some kind."

Jerl considered this. "How much trouble?" he asked.

Amir's long, manicured fingers took a single thoughtful stroke of his beard "I should spread the word that the lads need to grab anything they can't bear to be parted from," he said.

Jerl frowned at him. "You think they'll impound the ship? We're not carrying contraband."

"I should still pass the word."

Long experience had taught Jerl that Amir's advice was usually worth following. In any case, something was clearly amiss here. He nodded. "Alright."

Amir nodded and bustled off to his cabin behind the wheelhouse to retrieve a few essentials, pausing only to alert a few crewmen. Very soon, the whole crew were sloping off below decks in ones and twos to grab their most precious personal effects. Jerl collected his coat, pistols and sword as well as a purse full of the Guild-backed steel and brass coinage from the ship's coffers.

He strode down the ramp with Sinikka and Amir in tow. Usually, he would have expected to meet the harbourmaster at the bottom, pay the usual docking fee and proceed to offload his goods. Instead there was Mister Bellarn smiling a faint, professional smile. Up close, Mister Coven and Mister Sternal were the classic nasty

double-act: where Sternal was simply a very large man who watched the disembarking crew with the steady and empty gaze of a born thug, Coven was leaner, smaller and radiated an intelligent, patient sadism.

“Captain Jerl Holten, I presume?” Bellarn said, extending a spotted old hand. “Mister Bellarn, of Bellarn, Coven and Sternal. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“And a pleasure to make yours, Mister Bellarn” Jerl said, slipping into the smooth businesslike patter he adopted when negotiating with merchants. They shook hands. “These are my quartermaster, Sinikka Nerissith, and Amir at-Bezwi my navigator. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Well, I do hate to be the bearer of bad news, Captain...” Bellarn handed him a letter. The seal had, sure enough, been imprinted with the circle and albatross sigil of the Clear Skies, the monster merchant guild that had already been a major player all across the worlds even before a sudden explosion in their fortunes over the last ten years. “But I am afraid I must inform you that your ship and all its cargo is hereby impounded pending a complete guild investigation.”

“I’m not a guild member.”

“No sir, but you *have* signed an independent trader’s contract with the Clear Skies guild granting you permission to make port here, and the search is provided for by the terms of that.”

Jerl glanced at Amir, who nodded.

“I see. And the reason for this investigation?” Jerl demanded as he cracked the wax seal.

“Routine random search,” Bellarn replied, a little too smoothly.

Jerl grunted skeptically and scanned the document. He barely got half-way down before a line stood out at him. “...Pending...investigation or payment of release fee of...five *hundred* platinum guilders?” He glared at Bellarn and pointedly ignored the way Mister Coven’s hand slipped a little closer to his belt. “This ship and all its cargo is worth less than a quarter of that!”

“Nevertheless, Captain, you will find that all is perfectly in order,” Bellarn replied, much too smoothly. “As you can see, the order bears the Sharif’s seal and the signature of the Clear Skies senior port officer. While the release fee is required by local law, I am afraid that it has been set at the maximum permitted amount and constitutes a formality in your case.”

“This is ridiculous, since when has Long Drop had a policy of conducting random searches?”

"I am instructed to tell you that the Guild is in total agreement with the Sharif's concerns regarding the movement of contraband substances through the ports of Long Drop, and has newly implemented this policy within the last twenty days, sir," Bellarn told him.

"Am I at least to be compensated for any damages, expenses or lost cargo?" Jerl asked.

"You would need to discuss that with a representative at the Guild's offices here in the city, sir," Bellarn told him. "My colleagues and I are here only to deliver this notice and ensure it is observed. Please order your crew to disembark immediately."

"And if we refuse?"

"You may remain aboard your ship and refuse to come ashore, captain, but I must warn you that you will not be permitted to refuel or set sail, and the usual port fees will continue to accrue."

The old man's polite smile never flickered, even in the face of Jerl's best hostile stare. Finally, Jerl spun about and marched between his friends and back up the plank.

"I don't believe this," Sinikka grumbled as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Bellarn's reputation is that he takes professional pride in never telling a direct lie..." Amir said.

"You don't have to tell a direct lie to conceal the truth," Jerl said. "Sin's right, something's awry."

Amir stroked his beard and issued a thoughtful "Hrrmm..."

"Not much for it in any case," Jerl added. "Sulking aboard ship won't help us. Sin, go tear Derghan away from the engines, would you? Seems we're going ashore without our cargo."

"At last, something fun to do." She betrayed an infinitesimal smile that was her equivalent of a toothy grin and headed astern toward the engine room. The mutual attraction between Sinikka and the *Queen's* burly storm-clan engineer was an open secret on board, not that either of them seemed in a hurry to go beyond flirting.

"Mind on the job, Sin," Jerl reminded her.

"Of course!"

Amir made an amused staccato 'hm!' and cast his eye over the ship. "Whatever could they be looking for?" he asked.

“Eh, I don’t even care at this point,” Jerl growled, and stepped aside as the helmsman Gebby and a few other of his most seasoned crew disembarked. “Go easy on the wenching, lads,” he cautioned them. “Remember what happened in Crae Seyfil.”

The *Queen’s* rigging chief, Marren, grinned at him. “Aye, but sure Villo’s fully recovered by now,” he joked, slapping the man in question heftily on the back. Villo went red while his twin brother Toren joined in the laughter.

“He’d better have, that apothecary wasn’t cheap,” Jerl commented, grinning at Villo’s discomfort. “Go on.”

The men disembarked, enjoying a little merciless teasing banter.

“You don’t care they’re just seizing and searching the *Queen*?” Amir asked.

Jerl sighed, scratched the slightly sunburnt back of his neck, shook his head and shrugged.

“Amir, old friend,” he said, “sometimes when you’re being fucked up the arse, the only thing to do is relax and bite the pillow. They’ll do their search, release her back to us as if they’re the ones doin’ us a favor, and that’ll be the end of it. Whatever they’re after, I guarantee it’s not aboard my ship.”

Once ashore, the crew scattered into the depths of Long Drop with assurances that they would check in regularly. Thanks to Amir’s forewarning every man among them had retrieved his coin purse, so Long Drop’s taverns and brothels would be wealthier places tonight.

Jerl had to make the call between lodgings that were appropriate for a merchant captain of his station, or those he could afford for any serious length of time. Prudence eventually won out over pride, and delivered them to a hotel called the “*Chart and Charter*,” where one single brass coin was enough to buy Jerl, Amir, Sinikka and Derghan their room and board for a night.

It was a fight to get to the bar after paying for their room, however. Clearly the Chart and Charter did much of its business in copious volumes of cheap alcohol, and catered without discrimination to wealthier ship-masters with a frugal streak, and to more down-market crew living the comparatively high life. The result was that Jerl found himself navigating a medley of half-heard conversations both intellectual and crude, and half-understood songs of varying lewdness and musicality before finally finding a table just being vacated by the fireplace, away from the worst of the noise.

There was no escaping it. No matter how carefully they read the impound document, it remained stubbornly legal.

Derghan was technically the first to give up, but only because Sinikka had never bothered to join in with poring over the letter. He'd nursed a single pint of the tavern's rich nut-brown ale throughout the conversation but when his patience finally gave out he emptied the leather tankard as if the rich substance within were water.

"Well, this explains the pikin' delay at least!" he said. "You don't just conjure up a Sharif's seal."

Derghan was a Haustian, son of the storm-dodging clans of Stórsteinn Earthmote. The stylized wind and lightning tattoos that sheathed his arms and ran all the way up his neck to his jaw had religious significance, Jerl knew, and each braid in his beard and hair commemorated a battle survived. He didn't know more than that: Derghan's past was the one subject on which he was perennially silent. He looked and behaved like an unsophisticated brute, but tending to the alcohol-fuelled brass engines that powered an airship was a job that required more brain than brawn: Derghan Vargursson had both in abundance.

"You do if you're the Clear Skies," Sinikka replied. "It just takes a few hours, nay?" She had brought her *Wychwethel* with her off the ship, and was now occupying herself by maintaining it. The Elfish weapon, a "howling-sword," was half handle and half blade, and named for the eerie shrill sound it was designed to produce as it spun and danced in the hands of a trained user. Sin was an expert.

"We were in the holding pattern for... what, three hours? A fast horse could get to Ajhazra and back in... hmm. About two and a half hours," Amir said.

"Less, if there's a fresh horse available," Sinikka pointed out.

"True."

"You think they just went and got one?" Jerl asked. "Surely you don't just buy—" he stopped. As a merchant he knew perfectly well that there was nothing in the four Worlds that didn't have a price. "Surely the Sharif's seal isn't *cheap*?" he corrected himself.

"So the question is, what do we have on board that's so valuable?" asked Derghan.

"Nothing," said Jerl, feeling like he was having to repeat himself. "Furs, whisky, iron, a couple dozen of those nice blankets the taranfey tribes make. That's what was on the manifest."

"You sure there's nothing *off* the manifest?" Derghan asked.

"On my ship? Pike off! *Nothing*. I know what's in my hold down to the nail, there's not so much as an unlisted rat turd."

“Personal effects?”

Sinikka shook her head. “Like what? What the lads don’t spend on booze and whores, they send home to their kin. Not a one of them could afford anything valuable enough to go to all this trouble,” she pointed out.

Derghan chuckled. “Aye, and if it’s the pox they want they didn’t need to lock down the *Queen* to find it...”

When this joke failed to earn him anything more than a patient stare from Amir, he cleared his throat. “...Is there no way this whole thing could just really be a random customs inspection?”

“The Clear Skies don’t give a rusty pike about contraband,” Jerl said. “No, this was targeted at us for some reason, or I’m a-” He shut up as a serving girl cleared their empty drinks off the table and replaced them, despite that none of them had ordered anything. As she set a new tankard down in front of him, she slipped a scrap of paper under it.

“Message from a friend, read it then burn it,” she whispered, then she was gone in a swish of skirts.

The wax didn’t bear any official seal---in fact it looked like it had been imprinted with the heads side of a steel penny. Amir inspected it and shared a frown with Jerl. “Yes, well. It seems you’re right,” he said.

“The Street Rats, now? What do they want with us?” Jerl asked

The Street Rats were the unofficial guild of the lost, orphaned and forgotten in Long Drop and elsewhere in the Worlds. To the rich and powerful, they were a thieving menace. To their members they were a force for balance in an uncaring universe, turning some of the languishing, unused wealth of the Worlds toward constructive ends. They were also the dominant force in a thriving market for secrets and information, and were (credibly, in Jerl’s opinion) rumored to cater to all the guilds in that regard.

“Piked if I know,” Amir replied. “What does it say?”

Jerl shrugged and broke the seal. The content of the letter itself was just a single terse line written by a blocky and unsophisticated hand.

OUTER WORLDS EXPORTS WAREHOUSE TOPSIDE, AT DARKFALL.

Heeding the barmaid’s instructions, after memorizing these brief instructions Jerl flicked the paper onto the fire and watched to make sure it burned completely away.

“R for Rats, eh?” he mused. “Well, then. You drunk yet, Derghan?”

“I’m offended you think two would be enough!” the engineer announced cheerfully, setting down his newly empty tankard.

Jerl had to chuckle at that. “Heh! Fair. But no more: we have a meeting to attend.”

Interlude: The Airship *Make Your Own Fortune*

The Unbroken Earthmote, the world-sphere of Talvi

09.05.13.19.04

Landing an airship in the wild was traditionally a delicate process involving carefully pumping the float-gas out of the envelope into pressurized steel canisters while using the engines to keep her steady. That was the steady and safety-conscious way of doing it, and far too slow a process for Nils Civorage, who had spent months devising a new technique for shaving time off that process.

The *Fortune* descended as far as she could before the wash of her own engines started blowing her back up again. As soon as she was low enough, harpoon guns were fired straight downward over the side, driving great metal spikes into the frozen ground. Men rappelled down from the ship, rushed to the harpoons and fed guide ropes through their sturdy iron rings.

Chanting work-shanties, they hauled on the ropes with all their strength, dragging the ship inch by backbreaking inch down against the lift of its own gas envelope, while the riggers worked just as hard to pump off the gas. Within a minute, the *Fortune*’s flat-bottomed hull was resting securely on the snow, and the work-songs fell silent, replaced only by heavy breathing, the distant shouts from the other ships, and the sound of the silent engines creaking as they cooled.

The same operation was repeated across the fleet, and went perfectly – they had rehearsed it far too often for mistakes.

Nils knew the inspirational value of pitching in, so he was one of the first down the rappelling lines himself, and one of the first to grab a rope. Now, he couldn’t resist a grin of triumph at the sensation of his boots crushing Talvian snow beneath him. Not quite one hour had elapsed since the Eclipse cleared and they began their descent: they were slightly ahead of schedule.

The work teams knew what was expected of them, and began the work of offloading the equipment and supplies even before the fifth ship had finished landing. Kegs of black powder, handcarts full of picks and shovels, the brightest and most long-lived magical lanterns that money could buy, bundle after bundle of prime lumber ready to shore up the mine shafts, drinking water, salt pork, hard tack, stockfish, rum, rice, cheese, chokeberries, live hens in cages, dried herbs and spices...

Provisioning the expedition had been expensive, but Nils had not been parsimonious in this. Well-fed men worked harder and for longer, and good food meant good morale. Down here, morale was life. The lavish victuals weren't an expense, but an investment he was more than certain would pay for itself several times over.

More and more barrels and boxes rolled off the ships, but far more was already here waiting for them. Already, some of the men were digging a fire pit for their forge. Others were uncovering the huge stockpiles of timber brought here over the preceding years, and a team was walking the perimeter digging post holes for the lanterns, steaming in the cold air as they worked.

Nils' pulse raced and a smile lit his face, dispelling all his tension. Things were going perfectly: In four days' time, when Eclipse returned, their camp would be complete and so brightly lit that no Shade could stand to approach it. It was to be the first permanent human-built outpost on Talvi, and it needed to be perfect if they were to survive the forty days until the sun's light again fell on this ground.

When it did, it would find either an empty, haunted failure, or triumphant men sitting on a pile of treasure. Nils had no doubts, though.

He was about to become the richest man in all the worlds.

“My lad near went outdoors in Eclipse last month. Said he wanted to try an' talk to the Shades. ‘Maybe they're lonely,’ says 'e. ‘Too pikin' right they're lonely!’ says I, after I'd belted half his arse off. ‘They're so lonely, they'll drag yer away and make yer one of them an' then ye'll be lonely too, forever an' ever.’ Scared the wits out o' him I did, an' I bloody well hope he stays scared. I'd not wish that fate on anyone...”

—*Overheard in the Broken Baron inn, Gideon's Reach, Oderlend barony, Garanhir earthmote, Eärrach.*

Topside, Long Drop City

Alakbir Earthmote, the World-Sphere of Sayf

09.06.03.06.03

“About four minutes, I reckon” Jerl said, one hand raised to his brow as he squinted upward.

Seeing the Roil itself was all but impossible: the great ring whose steady spin granted day and night to the Worlds fit the sun so tightly that a man would go blind trying to study it. But the line of the opposite terminator across the far earthmotes was nearly perfectly in line with the sun. Not long, now.

They were loitering under the awning of a shop where the heat wasn't quite so oppressive. Topside was cheap town, low-rent. Anyone with the money to afford it lived in Underside or Caverntown districts, in the mercifully cool air of the caves. The shop-owner was clearly keen to close for the night, but he had refrained from commenting thanks to the weapons they were openly carrying. Between Sin's Wychwethel, Jerl's pistols and Derghan's rifle, the four of them had enough weaponry for a small gang war.

Not that going armed was unusual in Long Drop. But still, people were giving them a wide berth. Even a Oneist proselytizer in the market square decided to move away rather than continue handing out pamphlets.

Darkfall took only an instant. The Roil's shadow swept across the city in a heartbeat, leaving only the reflected light of day from the far side of the Worlds to see by. It wasn't true darkness, but certainly much dimmer, and Sinikka sighed happily as the air chilled noticeably.

“Winter's tits, that's better,” Derghan agreed.

Jerl, who preferred higher, warmer climes, simply grunted “Mm,” and led the way. The warehouse was just up the street, and they ignored how the shopkeeper slammed his shutters and locked the door when they walked away.

A figure in a brown cloak banged three times on the door as they approached. There was the scrabble of a lock, the creak of large, heavy-duty and under-oiled hinges, and a man with an eyepatch ushered them inside. The interior was gloomy, lit by only a couple of fading magestone lanterns that left deep shadows among the semi-

neat mountain of barrels, crates, hogsheads, trunks, chests, sacks and piles of lumber that were the warehouse's current stock. Jerl suppressed a grimace: such a shoddy lighting job could get people worse than killed on the lower worlds.

Sayfians really were privileged.

Most of the lanterns were clustered around a cargo hoist that bored down into the cave below, presumably into a dockyard rented by Outer Worlds Exports, the second-wealthiest of the big four guilds. It was a yawning shaft in the middle of the floor, with arm-thick ropes and a block and tackle as big as a man's torso.

Two men were seated on a long, low crate at the top of the shaft, and stood as Jerl and the crew were shown in. One was an older man, his hair and beard equal parts black and gray, but his eyes had a fervent intensity that put Jerl on edge for some reason. The other was unmistakably a *pyrfey*, a sun elf with skin the dark red of a brick and wide eyes whose large amber irises left no room for white sclera to show.

"Prompt. I like that," the man with the salt-and-pepper beard said. When he shook Jerl's hand, his palms were as hard as any rope-hauler's. "I sing it ye're leathered of yer ship."

"Aye," Jerl said, matching his words and accent. Rat-cant was much too useful for him to have neglected to learn it in his career. "And I'll wage ye're a cully who notes he can lend light, 'fer scrap."

"No scrap. Light 'fer light. Might be ye're gnawin' fer *why* the Albies caged her, aye?"

Jerl nodded. "Might be."

Grey-hair nodded, and gestured to his colleague.

"A friend of a friend places your crew at Sky's End for this year's Winter bazaar," the elf said, not bothering with rat-cant.

"Aye, they'd be right," Jerl replied, cautiously. The Winter Bazaar was held once a year outside the gates of the Glacier Keep, the palace of Queen Talvi, and was easily the largest annual commercial event of the Worlds. Many airships had attended.

The elf nodded solemnly. "The Clear Skies are after something one of your crew acquired there," he said.

Jerl frowned. "My crew? You're sure?"

"Certain." The elf declined to elaborate, and Jerl guessed he'd not get a straight answer if he asked. "It would be a small wooden puzzle box, palm-sized, but *quite* difficult to open."

Amir cleared his throat and leaned forward to whisper in Jerl's ear. "Gebby," he murmured. Jerl nodded—he remembered seeing the helmsman turning it over and frowning at it in his off hours.

It seemed impossible that anybody's ears could be so sharp, but the middle-aged man seemed to take this in, then gave a strange look to the door guard, who nodded and let himself out. Jerl turned to watch the guard go.

"So what do you want from u-oof!"

He was still turning back when Amir tackled him violently and both men went sprawling to the warehouse floor. There was a pistol shot, which sent the percussive thump of gunpowder resonating around Jerl's chest.

Sinikka shrieked, and for a heart-stopping moment Jerl feared she had been hit, but then she was a white blur in the air as she leaped forward to parry the Sun Elf's killing sword-stroke. Her cry had been one of rage.

Jerl half-rose and took off at a crouching sprint, his boots scrabbling for purchase on the floor. Somehow, he managed to throw himself over a line of barrels as a rifle shot holed the floor by his toe. An instant later, Amir landed next to him.

There was no time for gratitude yet. Jerl tugged a pistol from its holster and peeked over the top of the barrels in search of a target.

The bearded man was down but not dead. Sin's *Wychwethel* had opened his belly and he was slumped against a wall, clutching the spreading red stain on his shirt. The Sun Elf struck out with a long fighting knife, seeking to go on the attack and get in close where Sin's long, whirling weapon was a liability, but she was too experienced a duellist for that, and the blade was swatted aside with a metallic clatter. She stepped, turned, flowed smoothly from parry to assault, and a *Wychwethel* on the offensive was a relentless wall of lethal steel that forced the opponent onto the back foot. He stumbled away from her, desperately deflecting first one stroke, then another. With each one his balance grew worse as he never quite had time to correct his footing before the next blow came raining down.

Movement in the shadows: a man with a rifle up on the second level of the warehouse, aiming and waiting for a clear shot on Sin. Jerl punched his own pistol towards the marksman and fired. The round went wide, but he saw his target curse and duck, aim spoiled.

Too late, he saw the *other* rifleman aiming at him, but the rifle shot that sounded didn't come from that quarter, but from Derghan, and the ambusher slumped dead over his weapon.

A third hidden marksman took his shot on Sinikka, and the snow elf's leg gave out underneath her as the bullet blew through her calf muscle. Her beleaguered foe turned a stumbling dodge into a desperate swipe that knocked the *Wychwethel* from her grasp and away into a corner. He regained his stance, drew his blade back to stab her, and Jerl blew the top of his head off.

He dodged into the flimsy protection of a stack of tall crates as the first rifleman he had missed earlier fired at him again. Derghan's second shot missed and blew the lid off an adjacent barrel of wine, but it forced the man's head down and gave Amir the chance to break cover, grab Sinikka by her shirt and drag her to safety.

The third rifleman's gun jammed. He swore and dropped down from the upper level, drawing a dagger. Jerl aimed and pulled the trigger, but only winged him, and the other man charged in, forcing Jerl's pistol aside.

They grappled. Jerl was strong, but his opponent was slightly taller and had the momentum, an advantage he used well, slowly forcing the point of his blade around toward Jerl's throat. In desperation, Jerl slammed his knee into the man's groin, then his forehead into his nose. His vision flashed and his thoughts fogged, but he retained enough presence of mind as his opponent staggered back to raise boot to chest and shove, hard. Flailing, the rifleman staggered back until the back of one of his leg hit a knee-high obstruction, he completely lost balance and toppled backwards into the lift shaft with a wail.

Derghan fired again, the first gunman fell out of his hiding spot, clutching a gut wound. He tried to stagger away, but made it all of three steps before a throwing knife sprouted from the side of his head. His lurch for cover turned into a dying sprawl.

In the sudden silence, Sinikka slid her second throwing knife back into its home in her left bracer, and hissed through her gritted teeth. She was sat with her back to a beam as Amir held his hand a finger's length above her injured leg and gripped a magestone tightly in the other. The air between hand and wound shimmered like the air over a candle flame, and Jerl could see her flesh knitting under the healing spell's influence.

"You all right?" Jerl asked her. She shook her head, but indicated her fallen *Wychwethel*. "Amir? Derghan?" he asked, darting to retrieve it.

"Aye," Derghan grunted. Amir merely glanced at him long enough to nod and then returned to focusing on his rejuvenancy. Jerl took stock of his own condition as he returned Sinikka's weapon. There was a cut on his forearm, probably from the man

he'd wrestled. But other than that, Sin was their only injury. They were five for none, somehow. Practically a miracle.

But he could hear shouts echoing up the cargo shaft, and that meant it was only a matter of minutes before somebody came to investigate.

While Amir and Derghan took Sin under her shoulders and helped her up, Jerl hastened to check the bodies. The man with the graying hair was dead from blood loss and shock, but he had a satchel, which at a glance appeared to contain papers and letters. Jerl unbuckled and stole it.

"Let's go."

They slipped away into the marketplace, and were well away by the time they heard a guardsman's bell sound distantly behind them. Jerl could only hope they'd got away clean enough. Something in his gut said they were in deep shit and a self-defense plea would sink them deeper rather than dig them out.

They found a secluded spot to set Sinikka down so that Amir could work on her leg. It took some minutes before she reported that her leg was strong enough to stand on, though Amir looked drained and gray. Magic was tiring, and healing a serious wound like rifle shot, doubly so. Amir was a decent enough mage, but merely getting Sinikka to the point of being able to limp had exhausted him—restoring her leg to full working order would take time they just didn't have.

"The fuck was all that about?" she asked, through a grimace.

"Gebby's in trouble," Amir said, echoing Jerl's thoughts. "They attacked us the moment they heard his name."

"Is a name enough to find him?" Derghan said.

"And the ship he's on," Sin rasped. She flexed her toes and uttered an agonized snarl, then twitched one of her knives from its sheath and reached down to cut away the bloody cloth of her pants, which she tossed into a nearby pile of trash. Sensible: wandering around with blood-soaked clothes would only attract attention. "In this town, that's more than enough."

"He went with Marren and the twins," Jerl said. "Anyone know which warehouse those four like best around here?"

"The Rose Curtain," Amir predicted.

"Yeah? That's the fancy place in Caverntown, right?"

"Comparatively fancy, yes," Amir agreed.

"We'd better get down there."

They paid the toll for the cable car, powered by the river that flowed through Long Drop before flowing off the edge to rain down on Eärrach and the worlds below. Sin settled gratefully into one of its seats and massaged her calf. The wound might be closed, but it was obviously going to take a lot more magic to put her completely right.

“Couldn't they just have bloody well bought it off him?” she complained as the brakes released and the device started to rumble down through a shaft cut into the bedrock. “Gebby would sell his own teeth for a brass!”

“Would have been simpler,” Derghan agreed. “Pike's sake, we left five men dead back there!”

“They broke a coin truce, too,” Amir added.

“Coin truce?” Derghan asked.

“When the Rats stamp a letter with a coin, they're promising no harm to the recipient for a period of time. A day for steel, a month for brass, and a year for silver.”

“So they broke their own rules?” Derghan asked.

“No. Those men weren't Rats,” Jerl said. “Real Rats would never break a coin truce.”
“Ever?”

Amir smiled grimly. “They call it the cheapest ticket out of town.” He indicated vaguely in the direction of the edge. “The Rats take their reputation seriously.”

Derghan shivered. “Eurgh. Summerlord's fat arse...”

From what Jerl knew, Derghan had grown up hundreds of miles inland and had never stood on an earthmote's edge until he'd left home. Life aboard an airship had only *mostly* cured his acrophobia. Not that his reaction was unreasonable. Someone thrown from Sayf would have a long time to ponder their fate before finally hitting something, and that was assuming they hit something at all: more probably they'd miss all the earthmotes altogether and fall past Talvi, into the endless freezing dark outside.

“So they got five men killed, and risk pikin' off the Rats for good measure,” Derghan summarized. “What in the worlds could Gebby have found that's worth that?”

The cable car emerged from the roof of a cavern into the perpetual off-white glow of Lowside, with its streets lit by cheap magic lanterns or, in the more affluent districts, by electric lighting powered by the fall of the river Anof. There was a rattle and a clonk as the slowed down into the raised platform of the lower terminus, and a uniformed boy opened the doors for thm.

“We need different lodgings, somewhere to lay low. And I’m in no condition to fight,” Sin said as she forced herself to stand. “I’ll go take care of that. You all catch up with Gebby and the lads.”

Jerl couldn’t disagree. He nodded grimly and handed her the satchel he had salvaged from the warehouse. “Read through this lot, see if you can find anything,” he said. “Where do we meet you?”

“The Cooper’s Coin,” she said. “The owner owes me a favor from a past life.”

“Right. Good luck, Sin.”

She slapped him on the shoulder by way of a reply and limped away. Jerl turned to Amir. “You okay, Amir?”

Amir wiped his brow and nodded. “Well enough...please don’t get shot.”

“Do my best,” Derghan assured him, drily.

The Rose Curtain was only a couple of streets away, at the edge of the rather affluent little collection of businesses clustered around the cable car’s bottom station.

They were just around the corner from the building when there was a burst of screaming and the sound of pistols being fired. Without hesitation they broke into a run, pushing past five girls who were fleeing the brothel in tears. Two of the Rose Curtain’s guards were dead in the street outside the door, and as they approached a prostitute burst through the door, clearly desperate to escape. A shot caught her from behind and she fell sprawling with a staring expression of silent surprise and dismay.

Derghan pulled up by the door, rifle raised to the vertical, then risked a peek around the door frame. He raised some fingers and mouthed the word “three!” then “not looking” as he pointed forked fingers at his own eyes and shook his head.

Jerl nodded, hefted his pistols, took a deep breath, and threw himself through the door.

Three targets. He raised his right hand, framed the butt of the weapon against his target’s turned back and fired. Blood exploded from the man’s chest and mouth as he fell. His friends were turning but Jerl’s second shot caught one of them in the throat. The third had barely half-turned when Derghan’s rifle spoke and took him in the face, just below the nose. Hurling lead blew out the back of his neck and he fell.

It all took less than a second. Quick, clean, smooth. Thank fuck.

“The girl?” Jerl asked.

Amir shook his head and closed the luckless whore’s eyes. “Dead.”

“Winter's tits!” Derghan swore.

No time for sympathy: Jerl gestured for him to follow. “Move.”

There were more shots and screams from upstairs. He and Derghan rushed to the foot of the stairs, glanced up it, then ascended with Jerl half-turned to cover the top. There was a shot, and both men flinched, but it hadn't been aimed at them. There were more shots—somebody was fighting back!

Abandoning stealth, Jerl took the last of the stairs at a run. Four men were at a doorway, firing in. One saw him coming and raised a shotgun, but Jerl had the drop on him and painted the wall with his brains, an instant before Derghan's rifle dopped a second man.

The two survivors flung themselves into cover, and it might have turned into a nasty shootout if Marren and the twins hadn't erupted from the door behind them.

Three brutal seconds later, it was over.

“Skipper? Pike me...” Marren gave Jerl a confused but grateful look, and jerked his head back toward the door. “Gebby's hit, sir.”

“Amir! Get up here!”

The navigator pounded up the stairs and pushed past him into the room; Jerl covered the stairs for a moment while Derghan reloaded, then followed.

Amir was kneeling over the *Queen's* fallen helmsman. Gebby was a shaven-headed Sayfi with a bad eye, who was whimpering in agony as he clutched the wound in his side. Jerl was no healer, but he could see that it was a bad hit – there was a lot of blood. After examining it for a second, Amir looked up. He didn't shake his head, but his grim expression said everything.

Gebby groaned and laid his head back. “I'm done, aren't I?” he asked. Blood frothed on his lips.

Jerl kneeled next to him. “I'm sorry, Geb. We should have got here sooner.”

“They... were after me? Why?”

“That box you picked up at the Bazaar. Whatever it is, they want it...”

“The...box? All... this for a pikin' puzzle box?” Gebby coughed wetly and tried to move. Amir tried to calm him. “It's in my...my bag...over there...”

Jerl glanced at it, but didn't go for it. Not yet. He took Gebby's hand instead, put a hand to the side of the dying man's head and looked him in the eye. “We'll get them back, mate. I promise.”

Gebby nodded, then he seemed to lose the strength to hold his head up and relaxed. “They could’ve just...paid me for it...” he complained, and was gone.

The girls who had been in the room where Gebby died vouched for them with the Watch, but it was still well more than an hour before they were finally free to go. As promised, they found Sinikka at the bar of the Cooper's Coin, sitting alone with three bar stools to herself despite how packed the place was, and chatting with a fellow elf who was presumably the owner.

Conversation faded briefly then picked up again in a pointed *not-our-business* sort of way as Jerl, Derghan, Amir, Marren, Toren and Villo walked in, still covered in blood that wasn't their own. The owner arched an eyebrow, asked a question of Sinikka, then shrugged, said her goodbyes, and vanished into the cellars.

Sin tried to rise to greet them, then grimaced and sat back down.

“Gebby?” she asked. Jerl just shook his head no. She deflated, hung her head, and murmured the brief Elfish farewell reserved for human deaths. “*Chal fa, mellwan...did you at least get the box?*”

Derghan held up Gebby's bag.

They left the bar, with Sinikka uncharacteristically accepting Derghan's shoulder to lean on. She had rented a suite of rooms at the back of the building, overlooking the scullery roof—a handy escape route.

There were papers scattered all over the bed, next to the satchel from the warehouse.

“There's not a lot to go on,” Sinikka said, gesturing dismissively to them as she sat. “The letters are written in code, but they're all addressed to ‘R.’ I'm thinking that's the guy I killed, same fella who sent us the message, nay?”

“That seems likely,” Amir agreed.

“There's also a ‘V,’ they seem to be the big boss.”

Amir nodded. “I'll have a look and see if I can break the code after I've brewed up something for that leg,” he said. Sin didn't object.

Derghan dumped Gebby's bag onto the bed. It didn't contain much – the dead man's coin purse, an assortment of souvenirs from all over the Nested Worlds, a small knife with an engraved antler handle, and a cheap portrait of a woman on a palm-sized tin rectangle. Jerl tried not to dwell on that—he knew Gebby sent most of his pay back to support a child he rarely got to see. Poor kid.

The puzzle box turned out to be a cube of varnished wood that fit easily into a man's hand, its edges and corners decorated with odd, angular knotwork. A brass triangle decorated the center of each face, so perfectly flush that Jerl could scarcely feel where wood ended and metal began. There were no visible hinges, only a hairline crack running around it just below one face.

Jerl could feel the warm tickle of magical power in his fingertips as he held it, and he had only briefly dabbled in magical study: Amir paused to stare wide-eyed and open-mouthed the second he laid eyes on it.

Merely grabbing the top and trying to open it failed. None of the brass triangles did anything when pressed upon or rubbed, and twisting the lid and pushing it in various directions accomplished nothing. They shook it and then argued over whether or not they had in fact heard something move inside. Jerl knocked on it, to which the box gave no response. Feeling foolish, he spun it, banged it hard against the solid oak of the bed, pressed his fingers to multiple points on its surface simultaneously, and even tried crushing it between his palms.

They gave up after Derghan produced a knife and tried to lever the crack open, only to nearly slice his thumb off when the blade skittered free. It didn't even mark the varnish.

"I guess we need the key," Derghan mumbled around his injured digit as he sucked on it.

"There's no keyhole," Jerl pointed out.

"Maybe it opens magically. You never heard of Hamlin's Vault?" Derghan replied.

"No?"

"Woulda thought you had, bein' from Garanhir. Baron Hamlin the fifth. Story goes he hired a mage to enchant the vault to his greatest treasure so it could only be opened by a descendant. Legend goes, to open it, an heir of the family had to shed blood on the lock."

"So, the key could be...anything?"

"It's a ridiculous fable," Amir said, returning with a rag soaked in something that produced a blueish mist. He pressed it to Sinikka's wounded leg and she hissed, but then the pinched expression of pain she had been wearing since the warehouse fight left her face.

"Wow," she said. Amir gave a satisfied nod and set about bandaging the compress securely to her leg.

“Why ridiculous?” Derghan asked.

“The third law of magic: *‘the relationship between the strength and duration of enchantment an object can retain, and how much that object has been shaped by mortal intention, is inverse,’*” Amir recited. “That’s why magestones and lantern stones are just random river pebbles. Something as complex as a vault door? You’d need to employ a hundred mages to spend their whole day doing nothing but pour magic into it.”

He paused, and looked at the box. “And by the Four, I’ve never felt a magical aura that powerful before, and I’ve seen the Grand Orrery at the Observatory.”

“Well how does the Grand Orrery get around that rule?” Jerl asked. The Orrery, being a scale model of the Worlds made from steel, cut gems, bronze and glass would certainly be impossible to strongly enchant for long.

“It doesn’t. It’s exactly as I said, lots of mages constantly charging it, all hours of the day,” Amir said. He grabbed one of the letters and sat down to read. “I’m beginning to see why people would go to such extreme lengths to have this thing. Such a refined object, able to hold such a potent enchantment for such a length of time? Impossible. Yet, here it is. There’s only one explanation for that.”

“Which is?”

“That it was made by the Crowns themselves. Or one of their Heralds.”

There was a moment of silence.

“So...it’s valuable, then?” Jerl ventured.

“Beyond priceless. Hmm...” Amir took up a pen and started to scribble in the margins of the letter he was reading.

Jerl exchanged glances with Sin and Derghan.

“That...would go some way to explaining why somebody would be willing to kill for it,” Sin observed.

“So, what do we do with it?”

“Sell it to the Observatory and become obscenely wealthy?” Derghan suggested.

“What about Gebby?” Sin asked.

“We can do more to avenge him with a giant stack of money than we can with a box we can’t open,” Derghan pointed out. “An’ besides. Sooner we get rid of it, the sooner it’s not our problem any more.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Jerl nodded.

Sinikka considered this. “Well...I can't argue with that logic,” she admitted. “But how do we get the box to the Observatory? It isn't on this earthmote, and our ship's impounded.”

“Well, if that sun elf wasn't lying about it being the Clear Skies who are after this thing, that makes them responsible for Gebby's death. Which means that their impounding the *Queen* won't be a problem,” Jerl said.

“Why not?”

Jerl was about to answer when Amir set down the letter he had been reading and cleared his throat “It...may go deeper than just them, actually,” he said, picking up and examining another letter. “But they are involved.”

“You broke the cipher already?”

“No, but they this one is signed ‘*BDLG.*’”

Derghan folded his arms. “Don't tell me. You know who that is.”

“Well...it's just a guess, but there was a Clear Skies ship called the *Lesser Glory* berthed at Sky's End for the Winter Bazaar. It's captained by Bree Dalsdottir, a... *vocal* Oneist. Strident, even. Bree Dalsdottir, Lesser Glory: BDLG.”

“...How in the pike do you remember all this stuff?”

Amir shrugged distractedly. “I have a good memory,” he said, then frowned and rubbed his upper lip. “Though I feel as though something's slipping my mind right now...”

“Something important?” asked Jerl.

“Something relevant, certainly...” Amir scowled at himself, then shook his head and resumed reading and taking notes. “It'll come to me. Let's see... ah!” He began to write on the back of one of the letters, constantly referring back to another.

Jerl let him work.

Sin cleared her throat. “Jerl?”

“Yeah?”

“*Why* doesn't it matter if the Clear Skies are behind Gebby's death?”

“Because that means we are in deep shit, and I don't intend to stick around in their piking capitol city waiting for it to get deeper,” Jerl said. “Fuck the impound: we're taking the *Queen* back.”

Interlude: Beacon Outpost

The Unbroken Earthmote, the world-sphere of Talvi

09.05.13.19.08

“And.... three... two... one...” Nils looked up, squinting as he tried to look at the sun. “You were a few seconds out.”

The navigator, Vanda, shrugged. “Even the best watches lose a few seconds a day,” he said, evenly. “Yours will be no excep—ah! There it goes.”

Over the course of about four seconds, the light levels plummeted as above them one of the great Haustian earthmotes continued in its path and blotted out the sun. Nils watched the sunlight race away over the snow and vanish in the distance.

The drop in temperature was no less sharp. Their breath had already been curling on the air, but within seconds the cold had gained an almost physical penetrative power that cut through fur and leather without effort.

The expectant, tense silence did not, thank goodness, dissolve into panicked shouting and screams of terror.

“Well, we're not dead,” Nils observed, drily. “So I think we can assume this bastion is secure.”

“I heard there's a thousand times more of 'em down here than you gets up above,” offered Jac Deragian, nervously. “The Winter Fey say they steps out of any shadow as big as a man or larger.”

“Well, we seem to have adequately prepared,” Nils said, looking around at their careful preparations. Every inch of the courtyard, every corner and cranny of the buildings, every possible place a Shade might hide in the blackness had been ruthlessly illuminated.

They would need to take similar care to eliminate the darkness in the mine. Native Eärrachans and Haustians were used to Eclipse and knew how to light a building to keep the Shades out, but they were taking absolutely no risks down here, where the darkness would be longer and deeper than anything experienced amid the higher Spheres.

They became aware of a noise. It wasn't a loud one at all. In fact, the hiss of a fitful zephyr sweeping loose ice crystals across the snow drowned it out entirely for a few seconds. But when the wind died again the susurrus returned, with an unnervingly familiar cadence and rhythm like quiet conspiratorial conversation, half-heard through a thin wall.

"...I've never heard of them *talking* before," Nils said. He advanced as close as he dared to the line that marked the point where a man would begin to cast a shadow if he stepped any further, and looked out into the darkness. It was so pitch-black out there that he couldn't even see the snow any more. But where were the Shades?

"I have," Deragian said, nervously. "My nan used to tell me the powerful ones, them what have turned a person, find their voice again. She said they talk all the time, but no matter how many they take, no living ear can make out the words."

"But it's coming from all around us," Nils said. He frowned out at the absent view, trying to make sense of what little he could see in the impenetrable gloom...

And then, like a candlestick emerging from an image of two faces, he *saw*. It wasn't that he couldn't see the snow because of the darkness—he couldn't see the snow because the Shades were shoulder-to-shoulder out there, an endless unbroken sea of black shadow-figures, all staring at him.

"Shit!" he exclaimed, and jerked back so violently that he slipped and fell, landing on the hard-packed frozen ground with a crash that knocked the air out of him.

"Mister Civorage!" Deragian and Vanda rushed over. "Are you hurt sir?" asked Vanda.

"Just..." Nils coughed, fought for breath, and finally recovered the ability to breath and speak. "Just my... pride."

He stood up, rubbing his bruised flank. "There's thousands of them out there... *tens* of thousands!"

The noise swelled a little as he said this, then died again. It was maddening. No matter how hard a listener strained to hear, there was always the sense that if you could *just* listen a little more attentively, you might finally make out what they were saying.

"They're keeping their distance, at least," Vanda said. "The lights are keeping them at bay."

"No reason not to get on with it, then," Nils said, bluffing over his rattled nerves.

"Come on, let's get down below. I want to be there for when the blasting starts."

None of them spoke aloud the other reason for wanting to get below – the whispering was already quite unnerving, soon to be intolerable. But worse still was the creeping sensation of being watched by ten thousand hollow, dead, hungry, and endlessly *patient* eyes.

Silently, they were dreading the forty days to come.

“The first law of magic is this: the energy required to perform magic cannot arise spontaneously, but must instead be drawn from a source. This is known as the Law of Channeling. An open flame or charged magestone are the most common sources, but a mage may draw from their own bodily reserves if need be. Care must be taken when doing this, as aggressive spellcasting can starve the body, resulting in injury or even death.”

—*The Initiate's Guide to Magecraft.*

The Cooper's Coin Inn, Lowtown

Long Drop City, the World-Sphere of Sayf

09.06.03.06.04

They posted a watch and slept lightly, with their weapons to hand. It proved to be an unnecessary gesture in the end—there were no Clear Skies men, no assassins, no hint that the foe had any idea where they were. By the time the light through the gaps in the cavern roof indicated the sun was out from behind the Roil again, Sinikka declared that her leg was stiff but satisfactory.

They had planned long into the night while Amir slowly unraveled the code of the intercepted letters, and although his work wasn't yet done, they had a much clearer picture of what was going on.

“R”, whoever they were, was clearly a figure of some authority in this conspiracy. There was no hint as to what the box contained, nor why “N” wanted it so badly, but

the – they might well have been able to learn much, had they captured him alive.

The whole affair was leaving a decidedly bad taste in his mouth, and the sooner they got rid of the wretched box and could return to the quiet merchant life, the better.

Though that might be easier said than done, if the Clear Skies held a grudge...

At least they had a plan without any steps in it that read *'make it up was we go.'* Jerl had made do with worse.

In this, as with so many other things, Amir's photographic memory was proving invaluable. He had a roll of blank paper and a pencil, and was busy sketching out the *Queen's* docking bay in detail.

"—and the top-gantry ladder is...here." He stepped back and frowned at the sketch. "I can't think of anything else that might be relevant."

Jerl nodded and stroked his jaw. He was overdue a shave, and stubble scratched at his fingertips. "Alright. Let's go tell the lads."

Marren and the twins had slipped out early in the morning to round up the crew, and they'd taken over the Cooper's Coin's game room for an impromptu "private function." As Jerl, Sin, Amir and Derghan entered, the buzz of conversation stopped and they all looked up expectantly. Jerl paused at the door to talk with Marren.

"You tell 'em?" he asked.

Marren shook his head. "Figured they should hear it from you."

"Right." There was a billiards table in the middle of the room and Jerl moved to its head end, gesturing for his men to gather round. He could feel their tension, they knew something was up.

No sugar-coating it, then.

"Gebby's murdered," he told them, bluntly. He let the shock ripple around the room, gave them a second to absorb the news and feel it, then continued. "Pikers who did it were Clear Skies guildsmen, and we're pretty sure it was on orders. They were after this."

He set the box down on the baize in front of him. "I don't know what it is, and I don't know why they want it. But no fucker kills one of our own and profits by it."

Nodding heads accompanied an angry murmur of agreement.

"If this were anywhere else we might be able to go to local authorities, but this is Long Drop. Even the bloody Sharif is in the Clear Skies' pocket. There's no day in court here, there's no justice. And whatever this thing is, the bastards would rather

kill anyone who knows it exists than buy it. So instead o' sit around and wait for them to hunt us down, we're takin' the ship back, and we're leaving. Tonight."

He laid Amir's map on the table, anchored its corner with the box, and looked around. "If anyone's not on board...door's there. No hard feelings, good luck to you. All I ask is, you say nothing to anyone."

Nobody moved. Jerl exhaled, nodded around the room at them, and then leaned forward.

"Alright. Here's the plan..."

By necessity, he had to send the lads out shopping. There were tools they needed, things they hadn't brought off the ship and would now need to get back onto it. The coin Jerl carried was *barely* enough to cover it all...but it was enough.

He just had to hope the Clear Skies' eyes weren't as omniscient as he feared. This was a delicate moment, and all he could do was wait while the lads slipped out in groups of three to retrieve weapons, rope, rigging harness, and more.

Derghan and Sin opted to clean and ready their weapons at the far end of the room. Jerl would have joined them, but there was a question nagging at him that they weren't equipped to answer.

"So...Amir."

Amir was still busy trying to decipher the letters from the warehouse, meaning he was at the heart of a circle of paper and plates, eating a large meat pie as he made notes in his journal. Serious mages were like that, always stuffing their faces and yet perpetually skinny. "Mm?"

"What would happen if we tried to magic the box open?"

Amir flinched. "Pike me sideways! Please don't!"

"That bad, huh?"

"I have no idea! All I know is, we're talking about something that breaks the known laws of magic which means it's probably a creation of the Crowns, and that makes it the most significant arcane discovery ever...and it's just a box." Amir closed his journal, neatly stacked the papers, and pushed them aside. "As in, it contains something. Something that the *Crowns themselves* thought warranted containing. If that thought doesn't terrify you into the utmost caution, then you haven't got your head around the magnitude of this!"

“So...I guess it’s a good thing we’re taking it to the Observatory, then.”

“Ah. Yes. I’ve been meaning to talk with you about that,” Amir said, carefully. “The more I think about it, the more I think we shouldn’t go to the Observatory.”

“Why not?”

“Well, one, they’d just try to open it, with who-knows-what consequences...but more importantly, this Clear Skies, Oneist, whoever-they-are conspiracy? I imagine we’d just be delivering the box into their hands if we did that. The Observatory is a large and eminently *permeable* academic institution.”

Jerl’s fingernails rasped through his whiskers as he mulled that thought over. “What do you propose we do instead?”

Amir took a nervous breath and leaned forward. “I think we should take it to Yngmir.”

“Pikin’ thrones!” Derghan exclaimed. He paused in cleaning his rifle and half-turned to face them. “You don’t just *take* something to a Herald!”

Amir looked between all three of his friends. “None of you can sense just how powerful this thing really is,” he said, more seriously than Jerl had ever seen him. “And it’s just the container for something else. Powerful people are after it, are willing to kill for it...whatever it contains, I don’t think it should be part of the mortal world. The Heralds might know what to do with it, and of all of them, Yngmir is one of the most personable and serious—therefore most likely to even listen to us—and of the few whose location I even know, he’s the closest.”

“How bad could it be if the bad guys do get their hands on it?” Derghan asked.

Amir swallowed. “In the worst case? It could be one of the Words,” he said. There were blank looks all around. “...*The* Words?” he insisted. “The Words of Creation?”

Sinikka scoffed. “They’re just a myth.”

“They’ve been theorized to exist since—”

“I was *there*, Amir. My first life was given to me on the day the Worlds were built! I remember watching the Crowns spin them out of clouds of dust, and they were silent throughout. The Words of Creation are a human legend, and your people have been getting it wrong this whole time.”

“The theory doesn’t claim the Words spoke the worlds into existence, Sin,” Amir retorted. “They spoke Space, Matter, Energy, Life and Time into being. It was only when they had those that the Crowns could assemble the worlds and then make the Fey and mortals.”

“Myth!” she insisted.

Amir sighed in frustration. “If you were made *of* the things the Words made, why would you expect to have heard them?” he asked. When she frowned and didn’t reply, he went on. “Anyway, when the Crowns had finished their work they supposedly forgot the Words by sealing them away and scattering them across the worlds. And here we have a box of immense magical power that we can’t seem to open. Maybe I am wrong and Sin’s right, but...even if so, I’m quite sure the only ones who could make this thing are the Crowns themselves. Meaning, its contents, whatever they may be, are not ours to meddle with.”

Jerl stroked his chin and stared off into the distance through the floor a few feet in front of his boots. “You’re serious about this?” he asked at last.

“Jerl, I swear by the Four, the Twelve and my late grandmother’s rice kheer—if we get down there and Yngmir laughs us out of his library, we can take this thing to the Observatory and sell it and use the funds to plan our revenge, and good riddance. But if I’m right, then the consequences of it falling into the wrong hands could be...I-I can’t...” he waved his hands helplessly and trailed off.

Jerl glanced at Sinikka, who shrugged and returned to sharpening her weapon. Derghan’s brow was so furrowed in thought that he didn’t even glance up.

It wasn’t even a decision, Jerl realized. Not really. He’d trusted and relied on Amir for far too long to ignore him now.

“Well...I did always want to see the Thundering Hall,” he said.

They split into two groups, Amir with Derghan and Jerl with Sinikka. The rest of the crew were ready, armed and had vengeance on their minds. Everyone knew the plan.

Finding their way out onto the roof of the docking shelf was the easy part. The high winds and constant creak and shift of the structure underfoot were all familiar to experienced airshipmen. Darkfall flashed over them as they crossed, and the darkest part of the night, when the least amount of light was reflecting back from the distant earthmotes, began.

Jerl and Sin had five of the crew’s best fighters with them, men who had proven their mettle fending off pirate boarding parties over the years, including the twins. Jerl gave them all a clap on the shoulder as they affixed their lines to the roof. He checked his watch. The signal wouldn’t be long in coming now.

The signal was when, in the bay below them, Derghan, Amir and the rest of the crew rounded the corner and marched purposefully towards the docking bay’s checkpoint.

The liveried Clear Skies guards on duty ordered them to halt, were ignored, and foolishly raised their weapons.

As the shooting started below, Jerl, Sinikka and the five chosen men swung down off the roofs.

Their judgment of momentum and rope length was perfect: the seven of them arced around on their ropes to land amidst the *Queen's* topside rigging. With the Clear Skies guards on board distracted by the fighting on the dock and taking aim to start shooting, they didn't notice the threat from above until the boarding party's boots had hit the deck planking. Three died in the first second.

Knife work in close quarters was bloody stuff, and Jerl's party had the advantage thanks to Sinikka. A thousand lifetimes of practice made her a flashing force of deadly nature, her *Wychwethel* screeching as she flowed into the melee and dealt death with a cold, troubling rictus. Jerl had always privately suspected she *enjoyed* bloodshed...

Jerl and his men were rather more methodical in their approach. With a pistol in one hand and his sabre in the other, Jerl busied himself with covering Sin's back. The five crewmen, armed with a mixed bag of machetes, daggers, a hand axe and a carpenter's hammer, went for the simple approach of descending upon one unfortunate man at a time and overwhelming him, quickly and ruthlessly.

Jerl's focus narrowed into a blur of violent action. *Shoot, slash, parry, kill.* One man, two men, three, and then the deck was clear. One of his chosen men, Tarruk, was down, and Villo was bundled behind cover clutching at a bullet wound where a rifleman had winged him.

"Ramps out! I've got the engine room!" Jerl ordered. He holstered his empty pistol, drew its twin, and moving to the top of the companionway. "Oi! Anyone down there?"

"Friendly!" One of his chosen men, Malik, emerged into the light. His axe was gory all the way down the shaft. "It's clear."

"Good work. Signal the capture, and get these poor pikers off my ship."

"Aye aye!"

Jerl knew a bit about his engines, of course. What kind of skipper would he have been if he didn't? He might not be able to make them sing like Derghan, but he could at least start them up. He opened the fuel valve and the ethanol flowed. A slow twenty, then he threw and held down the large switch marked "engine start."

There was a shudder, a cough, a splutter, then a roar and the entire ship began to creak and complain as the engines wound up to full power, pushing the *Queen* hard

against the docking clamp. Jerl quickly twisted the choke closed and set the throttle to “idle.” There was cheering from up on deck, and a second later Derghan joined him in the engine room.

“Nicely done!” He shouted over the hiss of fuel and buzz of the engines.

Jerl nodded and stepped aside to let him work his own brand of magic. “How’d we do?”

“Took ‘em down quick and hard. We lost Tarruk and Padrig, though. A few wounded.”

Jerl nodded, regretfully. He’d known coming into this that taking the *Queen* back might get some of his men killed, but that didn’t mean he liked hearing it. He just hoped they’d died for something worthy. “I better get back to the wheel,” he said.

“Aye. Marren and the boys’re about to pull the bolt.”

Jerl clapped him on the shoulder and sprinted up the stairs onto the deck, where the crew were coming aboard and rushing to their stations. Most were rolling stolen barrels of fuel aboard, enough to get them to the Thundering Hall.

As the last man stepped onto the deck, he kicked the gangplank away. The ropes had already been cast off, and Jerl could feel the *Queen* practically surging and straining, ready to fly again.

Down on the dock, Marren and four other men were donning the light canvas and bamboo wings that would allow them to glide across to the ship once it was away. As soon as the plank clattered loose, they grabbed the crank to pull the docking bolt across and heaved.

It didn’t take long – only seconds later the *Cavalier Queen* shivered and came free from the cradle. Jerl wasted no time – he hauled the signal lever into the “full astern” position and almost immediately the arrow to indicate Derghan’s confirmation moved with a bell chime. The engines went from idling to a full-throated howl, the blades became an invisible blur, and the *Queen* scraped along the cradle as they undocked much faster than was, strictly speaking, safe.

On the dock, Marren was pointing and shouting something. Jerl looked up and his heart sank: Unnoticed by any of the boarders, someone had embedded a grappling hook in the gasbag, its cable anchored in the solid rock at the back of the docking bay. There to stop them from doing precisely this.

It was already much too late to arrest the ship’s momentum. A horrible ripping, bursting sound as they cleared the docking cradle, and an eruption of blue-white gas, signaled the moment the hook tore into, through, and out of the bag and punctured one of its internal bladders.

There was a moment of sickly wallowing and then, robbed of its buoyancy, the *Cavalier Queen* dropped out of the sky.