

## Chapter One: *Maiden Voyage*

Worin's eyes struggled to focus on the moon. Against the black of night it was a blinding, brilliant white orb. His old eyes scrunched, and slowly its pits and craters began to take shape.

He shivered in the cold. A sturdy breeze whistled in his ears, that familiar wind sailors knew so well, called the *baethes voth*. But Worin was no sailor, and the unrelenting breeze chilled him to the bone.

He turned the collar of his coat upward to shield his face, but it was little help. His flimsy three-cornered hat provided almost no insulation. Worin could hear the hum of a great engine in the distance, steadily rumbling under the breeze.

The crisp air blew a clump of clouds in front of the moon, and in so doing revealed another bright orb. This one was a variegated marble of green, blue, and tan, with wisps and swirls of white.

Worin breathed its name unconsciously, "Aelmuligo..."

The House of the Gods.

Heaven.

The last time he'd seen it with his own eyes he was a much younger man. Twenty-two years younger. The time before that, he was just a boy, and couldn't possibly comprehend what it was.

*The gods are watching*, they said. But the gods never stayed long; in three days Aelmuligo would reach its nearest point, and afterward begin its long journey back into the distant reaches of the sky. It would shrink and shrink until it disappeared entirely.

Worin wondered at their untouchable world, and what it must be like there. It looked so beautiful from this distance.

*What kind of majesty must abound...?*

A lone lamp, creaking gently on an iron ring overhead, illuminated Worin's immediate surroundings. He stood on *Gilderam's* portside weather deck, a railed platform protruding from

the side of a canvas wall. The wall itself was just one side of a huge balloon.

An abrupt noise tripped his ears from overhead. It sounded like ripping fabric – like canvas.

Worin perked like a startled animal. The sound had come from above, but beyond the lamp he could see nothing.

He waited.

But there was not a sound, not a movement. Eventually he convinced himself it had been nothing, and Worin returned to the rail to look back out into the sky again.

He looked down into the void of open air beneath the flying ship. Far below, he could discern the gleaming streak of a wide river, the *Vulc Muri*. From a height of two *itthum*, it was a sleek mirror reflecting the moon and *Aelmuligo* as it snaked away into the night. The countryside all around it, normally verdant and sprawling, was a faintly rolling darkness now.

Worin heard another tearing sound.

This time it was much closer – and crystal clear.

He wheeled around and pressed his back against the rail. Squinting, he held his hand up to block out the lamp, but it didn't help. His eyes were burnt from the light of the celestial bodies, and he couldn't see anything in the darkness above.

"Come here!" he called to *Dathric*, who was on patrol further down the deck. He heard an indistinct reply, and threw back his coat to uncover the shiny, steel hilt of his cutlass.

Behind him the clouds uncovered the moon again, and it cast a new light across the ship. Now he could see all the way up the side of *Gilderam*, and the arc of its bubble. High above, he could see shadowy blobs of clouds drifting by.

But one of them drifted in the wrong direction.

"Hey! You there!" Worin shouted.

He began to draw his sword, but was not fast enough. The blob flew down from the wall like a black bolt of lightning. It was a man – that was all Worin could tell in the split second before a foot landed on his sword arm, pushing the blade back into its sheath, and the other foot found his throat and bent him backward over the rail.

Worin saw *Aelmuligo* and the moon one last time. Then he felt his spine snap over the handrail.

*Dathric* came running into the lamplight just in time to witness

the dark figure throwing Worin's dead body overboard.

"Worin! Wo-!"

Dathric fell silent as the shade turned around to face him. He was a short man in a long, dark coat. His clothes were tight, almost ill fitting, and he wore two swords on his belt. An old, battered tricorn dipped low over his eyes, and his coat collar was buckled over his mouth, concealing his face. A long, braided ponytail of hung over one shoulder.

Fear overtook Dathric, and he turned to flee. In a flash, the killer drew the shorter of his swords and threw it sideways down the deck after him. The spinning blade landed perfectly in his back, between the ribs, and sank deep into his chest.

"Might I offer you the most heartfelt congratulations," said Imperial Councilor Miro Thalius, lifting his drink. "This is truly a joyous occasion!"

In *Gilderam's* ballroom, women in bell-shaped gowns paraded arm-in-arm with sophisticated gentlemen and primly dressed military officers. Expensive silks, shiny badges, sculpted hair, polished boots, plastic smiles and waxed mustaches were everywhere. A six-piece orchestra played obliviously in one corner to underscore the static of politely chatting voices and rehearsed laughter, while a league of servants disseminated finger foods and champagne.

Shazahd Ranaloc blushed, turning her milky cheeks rosy in an instant. Her sharp, Elvish features blended exquisitely with her human complexion, creating a hybrid eyeful. She had light-gold hair, which was collected in an elegant tangle behind her head. Her large almond eyes were her mother's – green, enchanting, Elvish. But the strong line of her jaw came from her human father, Mentrat. Her ears rose into subtle points, the ultimate evidence of her biracial heritage.

"Thank you, Councilor," she said, and clinked her glass with his.

"That necklace..." said Nilan Thebthas. Nilan was a count, and a longtime friend of Shazahd's father. "Is that what I think it is?"

Shazahd nodded. "It's Divaran heartroot. Taken from the Sanctum of Shadow." She held it up for him.

From a gossamer mesh around her neck hung a clear slab of

resin, in which was suspended a tiny clipping of root. In the gaslight of the ballroom it glowed a luminescent green. Nilan leaned in close.

“If you look carefully, you can watch it pulse in time with the heart of the tree itself.”

“Marvelous...” said Nilan. “Breathtaking. I say, the Elves really know how to get engaged, don’t they? Who could say no to that...?”

“Actually, it was I who asked him.”

“Was it?” Councilor Thalius was clearly impressed. “A woman... propose marriage to a man? Ha! Only in Divar, I suppose....”

Shazahd said nothing to be polite.

“Well, I for one am wholly thrilled to be a part of this groundbreaking voyage,” said Nilan, “from New Gresad, the capital of Gresadia, all the way to the edge of Divar... but it’s a shame we won’t be able to be there on your wedding day,” Nilan said. “I’ve always wanted to visit the great forest.”

“Sadly the Elves are not very keen on visitors,” said Councilor Thalius. “Least of all humans.”

“Can you really blame them?” said Shazahd. “Gresadia has been trying to exterminate them for centuries.”

“Yes, we have had an... unfortunate history of diplomatic relations,” said the councilor. “But rest assured that those days are behind us.”

“Are they?” asked Nilan. “They say the Empress is pushing the council toward war over the Memdian Marches.”

“She cannot declare war without the *unanimous* consent of the council. You have my word, Nilan, that I will never condone such a hostile act. The Empress knows this. She can pray for war all she likes, but she won’t be getting one while I’m councilor.”

“May the gods bless you and keep you,” said Nilan.

“And what of your father, Mentrat?” Councilor Thalius asked Shazahd. “Will he be permitted to enter the Inner City?”

“Yes. The Elves are prepared to make exception for my father. Despite their... shall we say, unfortunate history of diplomatic relations.”

Councilor Thalius smirked. “That is reassuring. If they can find peace with him, then perhaps there is hope for all of humanity.”

“I think Mentrat is a changed man,” said Nilan. “He’s finally emerged from hiding in Zunir, working on this vessel in seclusion for – what has it been? – ten, fifteen years?”

“Eighteen,” said Shazahd softly.

“...Almost *two decades* without so much as a word to the outside world. To think! After all his contributions to aviation.... And now, *this*, his grand opus!” Nilan gestured to *Gilderam* all around them. “The fastest ship ever built!”

“Yes, it’s true,” said Shazahd. “The Ranaloc Shipyard and Machinery Works Company has had a rough go of it while he was away.”

“If it weren’t for you stepping up to run your father’s company,” said Councilor Thalius, “who knows what would’ve become of it!”

“You’re too generous, Councilor. I only began helping with the company in the past year, when construction began on this ship. Thanks to my father’s patents being ahead of their time, the company practically ran itself while he was away. But time has been catching up. This ship is going to put us back on the map.”

“A miraculous feat of engineering,” said Nilan. “Can her top speed really outrun a battleship?”

“Theoretically. But we haven’t pushed her yet.”

“And where’s the exhaust? It’s against the laws of physics to burn nexane without producing that awful, choking smoke.”

“My father’s design is clean-burning. It’s purely efficient.”

“Just where is your father, Shazahd?” asked Councilor Thalius. “Shouldn’t he be here celebrating?”

“I, for one,” said Nilan, “would like to congratulate him personally before we get dumped off in Potholos.”

“Well... he’s... he’s in his room. He doesn’t like crowds.”

“That poor soul,” said Councilor Thalius. “He used to be so gregarious. I remember back before your mother passed, Shazahd, the two of them would throw the most extravagant soirées. Ever since she.... Well, he’s never been the same, has he?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Shazahd. “I was only a child then.”

Across the ballroom, four dark-suited men stood grimly silent, watching Shazahd’s conversation with the councilor and Nilan. One of them wore a heavy, bulging satchel. Another, wearing a thick mustache, produced a pocket watch and checked the time.

“We need to get moving,” he said. “Where are they?”

“There,” said the one with the satchel. “They’re coming.”

Wading through the guests came two more men, one rather tall and the other fairly short. Aside from their minor differences, the six of them could've been brothers. They were similarly built, had the same dark hair, were dressed uniformly in dark suits, and all shared a moody and reserved countenance.

The tall man said, "All is prepared. They're in position behind us." His eyes scanned the crowd of guests as he spoke.

"But where's that other guy?" asked the short one. "With the ponytail?"

"He won't be joining us," said the man with the mustache.

"Good. I don't trust him."

"Then why'd we bring him?" asked the man with the satchel as he adjusted the strap over his shoulder. The weight was becoming uncomfortable.

"He's here for something else."

"Like what?"

"What does it matter? We've got a job to do. We'll see to the engine room, you two clean up the deck, and you two head for the bridge."

"Right."

"Now move."

The six broke into pairs and scattered.

Chief Steward Pawl, a squirrelish man in a brown-striped frockcoat, bumped into two of them on his way into the ballroom.

"Oh – ooh! Excuse me!" he said.

"Watch it, little man," he heard as they exited into the corridor.

Pawl's eyes raced around the ballroom until they found Shazahd. He took off for her, swimming through the crowd.

"Tell me, Shazahd," asked Nilan, "just how well armed is this ship? I would guess it'd be quite the prize for any of your competitors. Or – gods forbid – pirates! Think what the Raven Queen would give to plunder *this* ship!"

"Come now, Nilan," said Councilor Thalius. "It's bad luck to speak of pirates on a maiden voyage."

"Not at all," said Shazahd. "We've taken great expense to ensure the safety of this voyage. Besides our escort ship, *Gilderam* herself has four long-range deckguns to dissuade any would-be attackers.

Plus, our security arrangements onboard have been seen to by Commander Owein Maeriod, a veteran of the Imperial Army. He operates a private security organization out of New Gresad and came highly recommended.”

Councilor Thalius had an odd expression. “Maeriod, you say...?”

“Yes. Owein Maeriod. Do you know him?”

“In a manner of speaking....”

“You look troubled, Councilor,” said Nilan. “Is everything all right?”

“My dear,” Councilor Thalius said to Shazahd, “just what have you heard about Owein Maeriod?”

“They say he’s never lost a soul he was charged with protecting.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“What it is, Councilor?” Shazahd asked.

“Well,” he began, “I suppose it’s.... Did you happen to hear how he left the military?”

“Mistress Ranaloc!” It was Pawl. He was a nervous wreck, brusquely and ungracefully elbowing his way through the guests.

Shazahd sighed. “If you will excuse me, gentlemen.” They bowed politely as she left to meet her assistant.

“Shazahd!” he said breathlessly.

“What is it, Pawl?”

“There is a slight... problem.” He kept his voice low.

“Problem?” Shazahd did not cloak her voice at all. “What is it?” A few heads turned.

“Well, um,” Pawl wiped the glistening sweat from his furrowed forehead. “Two guards have gone missing, Mistress,” he whispered.

“How long?”

“We’ve only just found out. They were patrolling the main deck, but they failed to report in and now no one can find them.” He waited for Shazahd to react, but she was icy cool. “I tried to summon your father, but he won’t come out of his chamber. I would’ve gotten here sooner, but it took me forever to find the ballroom, and —”

“Bring me to Maeriod,” she said.

One of the pairs of dark-suited men – the one with the satchel and the one with the mustache – walked with a quickened gait down a narrow wooden corridor. The commotion of the ballroom behind

them was a ghostly echo, and the warm hum of a roaring engine grew louder as they went.

“Where the *mlec* is this thing?” the one with the satchel cursed. “We’ve just walked in a circle, I swear it!”

“We’re going the right way. Listen.”

“To what? All I can hear is –”

“There.”

Rounding a corner, the pair encountered a double door guarded by two uniformed men, members of Owein Maeriod’s security team. As they neared it, they saw the door was marked “Engine Room, Crew Only.”

“Sorry, sirs,” said the guard on the right. “This is a private area. You should turn back. There will be no further tours tonight.”

Without reply the two men in dark suits pulled knives from their jackets and rushed the guards. Their left hands muffled the guards’ mouths and slammed their heads into the wall, as their right hands drove the daggers under their sternums and into soft hearts. Their movements were synchronized – rehearsed – and the unprepared victims were dead in seconds. Their bodies were promptly looted for weapons.

The dead guards had been armed with break-action pistols. The killers slung them around their shoulders and filled their pockets with shells before trespassing into the engine room.

Inside they encountered a multistoried mechanical room the dimensions of a small theatre. The walls and ceilings were coils of copper and silver pipes, and the floors were steel grates. Gangways encircled and crisscrossed the room to provide access to various stopcocks and control levers. Huge, twin turbines occupied the floor, around which a handful of engineers were working.

One crewman, a wiper, was cleaning a greasy pipe near the ceiling when the dark suited men arrived. He was surprised to see them enter, and stepped down from his ladder to approach them.

“I’m sorry, chaps,” he said, wiping his soiled hands with a filthy rag. “But this area is off limits to guests. You’ll have to –”

The man with the satchel punched the wiper across the face so hard he fell backward off the catwalk. Screaming, he fell three stories before smacking fatally on a pipe below, crunching the tube and breaking his back.

This caught everyone’s attention on the floor. The man with the



mustache leapt down the stairs a flight at a time, cocking back the hammer of his stolen pistol along the way.

“Hey! You! What do you think you’re doing?!” cried the Third Engineer, who had been left in charge of the engine room.

The other mechanics pooled behind him near the turbines as the man with the mustache jumped to the ground, skipping the last flight of stairs. He stood up slowly, and faced them in ominous silence.

“Just who in the –!”

And he shot the Third Engineer in the chest.

A burst of fire and smoke exploded from the pistol. The sound was excruciating inside the reflective engine room. The thumb-sized bullet tore through the engineer’s torso and continued past into the machinist behind him, killing them both.

There was a scream, and then sheer panic.

An oiler, a big man, ran at the mustachioed killer in desperation, but was quickly cut down by a few expert slashes with the knife. The Fourth Engineer went for the speaking tubes, but was stopped short by a second shot, fired from the stairs by the man with the satchel.

A junior engineer sprinted for the nearest door, and the man with the mustache took off after him. He jumped on him from behind and sliced his throat, spilling dark blood everywhere.

As the man with the satchel made his way down the stairs he reloaded, and blasted a cadet running for cover. When the bullet tore through the boy’s shoulder it nearly took his whole arm off.

In a matter of seconds, every crewman in the engine room was dead or dying.

The man with the satchel brought it to the turbines and set it on the floor. Casually, he unlatched it and began to unload its contents.

“Take us down seven *entilum*,” ordered Captain Adan Brel. “We’ll want to avoid those clouds.” Stern-jawed and wind-weathered, Brel sat upright and rigid in the captain’s chair. He was a career sailor, a bluejack – practically born in the air – and wore his crisp uniform like a second skin.

“Down seven *entilum*,” responded Hurn at the helm. “Aye aye.”

*Gilderam’s* bridge was not large. Helmsmen Hurn and Cort were at the controls in the front, facing a wall-sized window. Behind them

was the elevated captain's chair, flanked on both sides by steps leading up to a raised back portion. Directly behind the captain was the massive steering wheel manned by Ethlezus, the Pilot, and the binnacle. On either side of that, against the walls, were two table offices for Intha, the Navigator, and Mec, the Communications Officer. A single door in the back led to the hall outside.

Hurn pulled a large lever on the center console all the way down, then readjusted it to the new altitude. A flat buzz rang from overhead. A moment later, a second fainter buzz echoed in reply. Then, steadily, the ship began to descend. The vast, fluffy mass of silver clouds ahead, brightly illuminated by both the moon and Aelmuligo, started to rise out of their way.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" said Captain Brelt to the bridge crew. He was staring at the neighbor planet. "The gods are keeping a close eye on us tonight. This is a good omen. How long till arrival in Potholos, Intha?"

"At present speed we should be there just after sunrise, Captain."

"Good. Maintain this altitude. Mec, you have the helm. I'll be right back."

"Aye aye."

Captain Brelt came to the door and unlocked it. "Remember," he said to Mec, "don't open this door unless you hear this knock." He knocked four times.

"Aye aye," said Mec, rising to lock the door behind the captain. He resumed his seat at the communications table as a muffled, tinny voice chirped from one of the speaking tubes in front of him.

*"Gondola to bridge, gondola to bridge,"* it said.

Mec pulled the tube out of the wall by its mouthpiece, conveyed by a leather hose.

"This is the bridge. Go ahead."

*"The Vulc Muri, current bearing, eighty-two degrees."*

"Thank you, Ensign," he said, and returned the tube to the wall. "Did you catch that?"

"Vulc Muri, eighty-two degrees," said Intha. Then he began scribbling on the maps before him. Eighty-two degrees, according to his reckoned trajectory, meant that they would need to adjust six degrees port to stay on course. But first he'd have to compensate for crosswind so that their heading would remain –

*Knock, knock*

Intha looked up from his calculations. Mec turned around with a raised eyebrow.

“What, is he back already?” said Intha.

“And did he forget what he just said?” Mec wondered aloud as he rose to unlock the door. Two men in dark suits – one tall, the other short – were waiting on the other side, knives ready in their hands.

“What in the name –!” and Mec was mightily stabbed in the stomach by the taller one. He groaned as he was pushed aside, collapsing onto his communications table. Blood splattered all over his papers.

Next was Ethlezes, who tried to grab the tall man’s knife hand, but was overpowered by the superior strength of his attacker. He cried out as the blade plunged hilt-deep into his side, piercing vital organs.

Intha was barely able to rise out of his chair before he was kicked in the gut by the short man. The blow sent him flying down the stairs, and his head smacked hard on the edge of the console below, knocking him unconscious.

The two helmsmen, terrified, were on their feet as the dark-suited men stalked toward them. The shorter man lunged down the stairs with his knife, but Cort was ready for it. He took him by the arm and swung him around, smashing him backward into the ship’s controls. He then tried to wrench the knife out of his hand, using his body to pin the killer against the console. As he struggled, the short man calmly lifted his knee to his chest and, with his other hand, freed a tiny dagger from an ankle sheath. Cort screamed as the little blade rammed again and again into his back, mincing his kidneys.

“*Threithumé!*” hissed Hurn before he ran boldly at the tall man, and tackled him into the stairs. The hijacker let out a pained cry as he hit the sharp edges of the steps, and his knife fell out of reach. Hurn sat up and delivered a sturdy punch across his face. He reeled back for another but the tall man managed to put his foot to Hurn’s chest and kicked him off.

The shorter man was there to catch Hurn and, holding him by the hair, slashed his throat open with an easy swipe.

He did likewise to Intha’s body, just to be sure, while his accomplice secured the door.

Pawl led Shazahd outside onto the foredeck. The wooden balcony was fairly well lit between the hanging gas lamps, the moon, and Aelmuligo. Shazahd's bust was illuminated by the soft, green light of her necklace.

A deckgun stood in the center, poised like a great bird about to launch itself into flight – gleaming and menacing. It was a sleek, double-barreled cannon atop a rotating base. There was a seat between the barrels for the gunner, and behind hung a closet-sized case for ammunition. Beside the deckgun huddled the security team.

“Master Maeriod,” Shazahd said on approach. “Just what’s going on here?”

The group parted to reveal a tall, muscly, louche man. His hair was brown and wispy, and a few days’ stubble darkened his face. He looked serious, unfriendly, and stressfully occupied.

“Lady Ranaloc,” he said unenthusiastically.

“I’m not a lady.”

“Mistress, then. Whatever.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Just what’s going on here?”

“We’re handling it.”

“Handling what, exactly?”

“Two of my men are unaccounted for. That’s all we know so far. Just to be safe, it’d be a good idea to gather all your guests together in the ballroom and keep them there for the time being. Gor’m, Fulo,” he said to two of his men, “go with *Mistress* Ranaloc and look after them.”

“You got it,” said Fulo, a thin man with keen eyes and long hair.

“My pleasure,” said Gor’m, a massive beast of a person, with a voice so low Shazahd felt it more than she heard it.

“The rest of us,” Owein said to his men, “will be conducting a thorough search of the ship. We’ll start at the center and work our way outward. Lock up everything as you go. Leave no exits.”

Shazahd remained deathly still, staring at Owein.

“You’d better get this under control,” she warned, “and *fast*.” She turned to leave. Pawl and Gor’m followed, but Owein snagged Fulo.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “Make sure our kind hostess doesn’t wander off, would you?”

Fulo winked, and followed the others into the ship.

“All right,” Owein said. “Aroda, Shaesh, go to the bridge and have Captain Breld notify our escort. Ulrath, Dez, head to the engine room and lock it up tight. Maiath, Thebulin, seal all outside hatches, starting with the main deck. The rest of you, come with me.”

Owein and his men marched into the ship. Maiath produced a large ring of keys and locked the door behind them.

“I’ll take the starboard hatches,” said Maiath to Thebulin. “You go around portside. We’ll meet up at the stern.” Thebulin nodded and they split up.

*Gilderam* had eight hatches on her main deck, which was a wooden walkway encircling the whole ship. There was one at the fore end, one aft, and three spaced along each side. At its narrowest, the deck was about half an *entil* wide, but it fattened out at its cardinal points. The fore was roughly three *entilum* at its zenith, the aft about two, and either side just one. Altogether, the ship was almost twenty-nine *entilum* long.

Thebulin cinched his coat up tight and crossed his arms for warmth, walking with a quickened gait to the next hatch. The *baethes voth* bit at his ears and nose.

He locked the first door as fast as he could and continued around the ship. As the deck began to widen out along the port side, Thebulin eyed the deckgun mounted there. He was about to lock the door behind it when he stopped abruptly, taken aback by what he saw. He whipped out his pistol, but didn’t move. For a moment he was perfectly still, staring at the back of the gun.

The ammunition case was unlatched, and its lid hung open slightly.

Then he heard footsteps coming from his left, astern.

“Maiath!” he called out. “Come here! This deckgun looks like it’s been unloaded!”

Thebulin came to the gun and opened the ammunition case. It was completely empty. It should’ve been stacked with shells. Thebulin saw the form approaching from the aft.

“Look at this, Maiath,” he said to the oncoming figure. “Someone’s unloaded the gun. Why would Maeriod order that? Unless....”

When the approaching man entered the light of a nearby lamp, Thebulin could see that it was not Maiath. It was a stranger in a dark suit.

Thebulin swung his pistol toward him.

“Hey, how did you get out here? No one’s allowed on deck. You’ll have to go back to the ballroom.”

“I’m sorry,” said the man, walking up to Thebulin, “but I know what happened to the ammunition.”

“You... what?”

“You see,” he said, stopping in front of him, “I’ve thrown it overboard.”

Before Thebulin could say another word, the man drove a knife into his neck. He stabbed him several more times under the jaw until Thebulin’s body slumped lifelessly to the deck.

After procuring his gun, the man in the suit dragged Thebulin’s corpse to the rail and hefted it over. He watched it disappear soundlessly into airy darkness below, then made his way back to the stern.

At the rear of the ship, two gigantic, ducted propellers roared underneath the deck, pushing *Gilderam* along at cruising speed. Leaning on another disarmed deckgun, another dark-suited saboteur waited for him.

“Did you take care of him?” he asked over the din of the propellers.

“Of course.”

“I’ve discarded the last of the ammunition. Signal the ships.”

Thebulin’s killer dug in his pockets for a particular bullet and loaded it into the pistol. He aimed the gun skyward and fired. It launched a bright red flare, which streaked across the sky in a blinding arc that faded away as fast as it had come.

Just before it winked out, at the tail end of its descent, the flare briefly illuminated the ghostly prows of two ships following close behind.