

It was night. The sea brought thick mist and cool salty air with its tide, whispering in its endless, lulling rhythm. The Foranjin crew ignored this tranquility, being too busy loading up to bother with such esoteric niceties.

Pito Seawolf rapped harsh orders to the struggling crewmen, kicking or belting those who didn't move fast enough. The cargo for their upcoming run was small in comparison to the size of the ship and its storage capacity. Pito was having increasing difficulty securing larger, more lucrative consignments because of his ship's dubious reliability factor, but he worked cheaply and carried anything, be it textiles, food, drugs or slaves. The less legitimate cargo kept them solvent despite their questionable reputation. Someone always needed to get something somewhere without anyone else knowing what, when, or why.

Finally, they completed preparations. The crew pulled in the loading ramps, hauled in the anchor and headed out to sea. Pito himself manned the helm, a silver flask dangling between the first and second fingers of his right hand as he guided the navigation wheel. He drew from this flask regularly.

It was something of a rarity for him to be piloting the ship himself. Usually, he spent his time getting drunk and playing in his cabin with a companion of the feminine and inexpensive persuasion. He had a tight schedule for this run, however, and didn't trust his mates to get across the Canal fast enough.

He stood inside the barren walls of the navigation shack, just forward of the upper deck's center. Actually, it wasn't completely barren. His two mates had been waging a war of words on the inner wall during their shifts at the wheel. The first line read, "Bite me, Luco!" The second line, in a shakier hand said, "I don't like shrimp." The third, "Then you must have a hard time

looking between your legs.” Followed by, “Hey, Renn, why don’t YOU bite ME!”

He chuckled huskily at the juvenile scribbling. Other than the authors, only Pito could read and write. Literacy was not common among trade-ship sailors, and in any case not something he looked for in crewmen other than his mates, to whom he delegated tasks that required such knowledge. Ignorance was far more malleable.

An hour out from Lantri, his face twisted to a snarl as the ship glided into an even fog bank that further narrowed the already questionable visibility. He heard several of the crew’s voices rise in alarm.

“Shut up, you weak-kneed scum!” he shouted over his shoulder through the open door behind him. “It’s nothing but bloody fog! Anyone I catch crying about it gets thrown to the sharks! Settle down!”

The chastisement had the desired effect, and the crew fell silent. The ship sailed on, completely enshrouded. After all attempts to steer out of it proved futile, even Pito got uneasy.

“Thickest fog I ever seen,” he mumbled in disbelief.

The agitation of the crew became as dense as the fog, swirling and broiling with fear that overflowed into panic as they continued on.

They saw something out there, glowing in the mist.

Pito spun the wheel starboard, then port, but could not avoid it any more than he’d been able to steer clear of the fog. The phosphorescence moved with the ship in eerie synchronicity, then closed rapidly. Pito took a long swallow from his flask and shoved it into a pocket. Then, he drew his sword and stomped out on deck. Several of the crew joined him, watching, waiting.

The glimmer continued its advance, halting just beyond the ship’s bow. As the crew gathered at the rail, the fog dispersed and the glow substantiated. When this final unveiling

occurred, several sailors gasped or cried out in superstitious terror.

Standing imperiously on the surface of the dark sea, smoldering with spectral incandescence, was their former captain.

Several lanterns beamed down to further illuminate him. The improved visibility revealed more details of the figure, drawing further cries of terror from the jittery crew.

The Oshiran was in an advanced stage of decay. His flesh – what little he had left – hung wetly from his yellow bones, and tatters of clothing clung to his skeletal frame. Only the face looked relatively untouched by rot, frozen in a mask of solemnity. The figure pointed at them and rose high into the night air, which sent the Foranjin crew into hysterics of the highest order. They started to scatter, jabbering madly amongst themselves. Pito's voice roared above the clamor, “Every bloody one of you stay right where you are! Anyone who leaves this deck dies!”

The din of the crew lowered to a dull murmur as they heeded him, having seen similar threats carried out with their own eyes on other occasions. They fell to frightened silence as the apparition spoke.

“Many months ago, you ungrateful curs threw me and a young elf to the sharks. Now, I will take two of you in trade.”

Whatever composure the crew had left evaporated into a shouting match between those who had been on board at the time of the former captain's murder and those who came after. Not even Seawolf's bellowing could quell the furor. Weapons and tempers sparked like tinder, and within moments, a full-scale brawl had erupted. The night rang with the clash of weapons and the cries of men.

Above them, the specter grinned in satisfaction, eyes bright and gleaming as he watched. All was going as planned.

Several minutes passed as the battle continued and the veteran faction of the crew was forced to the edge of the deck. The newer recruits didn't want to take chances, and intended to dump all of those potentially responsible for the revenant's appearance, including their current captain, into the sea, just to be sure the spirit was appeased.

A momentary lull in the action occurred as the phantom forsook his position beyond the ship's prow and levitated to the navigation shack. A cold wind chilled the crew as he passed above and dropped to the roof with a soft thump. They momentarily forgot their battle as they waited to see what the ghost would do next, and the combatants chattered nervously amongst themselves in speculation.

Pito still lived, a feat he accomplished primarily by shoving his men in front of him to avoid the heat of the fight. He had taken a few cuts, but several men had died for their captain, willingly or not. His mind worked furiously as he watched the glimmering specter with the rest of the seamen. Something bothered him about this supernatural visitation. An acute sense of suspicion swept over him and he hopped up onto the ship's rail, grabbing a mast-line for balance. He pointed and howled at the glowing figure atop the tiny navigation shack.

“Spirit!”

The rest of the combatants, startled by his shouts, fell to stunned silence as they looked to the ghost.

“I got a question for you, ‘Cap’n,’” Pito offered, once he had everyone's attention. “Get me the answer and I'll jump into the sea and follow you straight to Hell.”

The crew thought him mad, and several openly voiced this opinion, but Pito disregarded them, remaining focused on the specter. He crossed his arms across his chest, the mast line hooked beneath his arm, and waited, resolute in his conviction.

“How is it that a ghost makes noise when it lands on something?” Seawolf asked his predecessor. “To my mind, spirits don’t weigh a bloody pound. Why do you suppose this one does, mates?”

Their supernatural reverence began to dissipate as quickly as it had come. They shouted up at the specter, demanding an answer to the simple question.

For several long seconds, the rotting phantom said nothing. Then, it cursed in frustration. Its voice altered, as did its manner.

“Would somebody tell me what kind of a world we live in where a miserable lowlife like Pito Seawolf can catch me up like this?”

The crew had no response.

“Well, the charade’s over,” the visitor snapped in disgust. “I’m not your old captain, but I am the elf you threw to the sharks. And I’m not going overboard this time, let me tell you.”

The image of the rotting corpse melted to reveal an elven warrior with long red swords at his sides.

“And I am very much alive.”

Vallayek was hoping they’d be intimidated or at least impressed, but this was not the case, a fact dramatically illustrated by Pito pointing vehemently at him and shouting, “Kill him! Kill that pointy-eared, bloody bastard!”

The crew rushed forward, several clambering up the sides of the shack as the rest grabbed hold, rocking it back and forth to oust Vall from his roost. He stamped, kicked and slashed at the hands that appeared at the roof’s edge, but judging by the degree of sway and the moaning and cracking of the wood, it would soon topple.

Within a couple of minutes, he would be down on deck, fighting for his life. Spells could

not save him now. He had magically exhausted himself floating all the way out here, generating the fog, and maintaining the illusion of the captain. This last had been especially difficult due to his lack of expertise in Shadowing. It would be a while before he'd be able to generate further magical effects, far too long to prevent physical confrontation with the crew.

In the perfect world of his dreams, Vallayek got to sit back and watch them all kill each other. That way, he didn't have to take responsibility for doing it himself, securing his revenge without getting his hands dirty, which was the whole point of the elaborate charade. Very neat. Very clean. Very unrealistic.

With a wicked crash, the navigation shack collapsed. Vallayek leaped from its apex as it went down, soaring over the heads of the attacking pirates and landing nimbly on the deck. He drew his swords, tracing defense patterns in anticipation of their attacks. Their ranks suddenly parted, revealing the leering Pito Seawolf.

“I’d like to thank you, mate. Job’s not worth doing if you can’t do it right. Now we get to feed you to the sharks in a proper manner. Tell ol’ Cap’n Suja I sent my regards when you see him in Hell, would you?”

Vall opened his mouth to retort, but his words caught in his throat as he felt a tingling up his spine. The hair at the base of his neck rose, and the air around him thickened with a strange, fluidic density. Not just humidity, but a sense of being underwater, fathoms down, where the pressure could kill you. The cold, heavy weight bore down on him. His ears muted from the change in pressure.

Behind captain and crew, Vallayek saw a sinuous, tentacle of seawater arch over the ship’s rail, halting several feet above them. The teardrop tip altered shape, forming the face of Captain Suja. The Oshiran grinned a terrible smile and laughed a garbled, underwater chuckle. The

brigands whirled to face the sound and gaped in awe as the tentacle drew back like a giant whiplash and snapped forward at incredible velocity, slamming Pito to the deck. The fluidic appendage poured down his throat, flooding him with brine. Seawolf pounded the deck spasmodically for a few moments, then became still. As the tentacle receded, water drained weakly from his bloated, waterlogged body, face frozen in wide-eyed horror.

Vall's hopes of the anomaly simply disappearing, vengeance slaked, quickly fled as more of the tenebrous limbs rose from the depths all around the ship. The crew screamed in terror, running for cover or jumping overboard, more willing to take their chances with the shade-sharks than face the vengeful water spirit. The tentacles began whipping at the deck like the arms of a mad octopus, snatching sailors with unerring accuracy, plucking them from the deck or dragging them from below, then pulling them overboard into the sea. The crew of the Foranjin were being systematically exterminated.

“No!” Vall cried into the rising winds and vicious, thrashing tentacles. “Don’t do this! It’s not going to change anything!”

One of the limbs halted before him, the tip shifting back to the face of the Oshiran mariner.

“No one on this ship will ever commit evil against another,” he gurgled in his tight, clipped accent. “You came for vengeance. You Called me here to give it to you.”

“Called you? I did not! I barely studied Calling!”

“Consciously or not, I was summoned.”

The face vanished and as the tentacle veered off in search of more prey, Vall realized the ship was slowly turning as though drawn by tremendous air and water currents. He ran to the rail and peered overboard.

The Foranjin angled inexorably toward the center of a vast whirlpool twisting down into

the depths of the sea. The Oshiran had already all but eliminated the crew and now it meant to have the ship as well. Even at the height of his magical stamina, the elf doubted he'd be able to influence such raw power. He thought about the rage and fury that must have driven Captain Suja to such an incredible display of destruction and trembled in fear.

Then, more pragmatically, like a sudden slap in the face, Vall realized the ship had no lifeboats. Even if the spirit spared him, he'd have no way of getting back to shore. He saw Pito's small-minded, paranoid philosophy laid out in his mind like a hand of cards. Such crafts could be used to escape with stolen cargo or out of fear of retribution for wrongdoing. The fact that not having them would doom his crew in case of an emergency was a risk he was willing to take. However, this risk would not apply to him, Vallayek knew. A guy like Pito always kept an extra knife in his boot, high card in his sleeve, or bottle of rum in his cabin.

Complementing this thought, a hidden panel in the upper deck burst open with a spout of water revealing a small, one-person boat with a double-paddled oar strapped to the side.

Had Suja presented him with this escape route, or did some fluke of the pressure pumping through the ship from below pop it open by coincidence? Vall didn't know and didn't care. He had to get out of here.

The Foranjin, in its final stages of orbit around the maelstrom, listed heavily to starboard as Vall ran forward and pulled the tiny boat from its cache. It had a tie line on the front that ended in a leather bracelet that he snapped around his wrist. Even if he got separated from the craft as he jumped ship, he could pull it back to him and continue his escape... assuming of course, it didn't rip his arm out of its socket.

He then ran toward the back of the ship, as far from the whirlpool as possible, and launched himself overboard, the tiny lifeboat held before him to absorb some of the impact when he hit the

water.

Instead of crashing into the sea as he expected, Vallayek felt himself gliding through the air as though a giant, unseen hand carried him, then skimmed across the surface of the water, finally coming to a stop far beyond the reach of the slowly spiraling deathtrap. Had it been an unconscious and desperate spell on his part? Or had the spirit of Captain Suja somehow interceded on his behalf? He'd never know for sure.

The elf could only watch as the Foranjin was devoured. Even as the masts snapped and the frame buckled under the titanic pressure of the watery vortex, the manic tentacles punched through the hull and deck. The elf heard the final cries of the crew, faint and forlorn in the distance as he struggled to board his small boat, blinking in stunned shock at the havoc he had inadvertently caused.

On a pragmatic level, he knew their deaths were no great loss, that they probably deserved it. However, the implications of what had happened, the loss of magical control that allowed the Oshiran mariner to manifest in such a violent manner, profoundly humbled and unnerved him. No lesson or warning Entedemian ever taught him so vividly illustrated the dangerous unpredictability of magic.