

To Anna and Thomas, and to all my family and friends

PROLOGUE

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A THREE-MASTED square-rigger with iridescent green sails that shone by day or night, the *Flying Mantis* was a fast and lucky ship. She sailed the Border Sea of the House, which meant she could also sail any ocean, sea, lake, river, or other navigable stretch of liquid on any of the millions of worlds of the Secondary Realms.

On this voyage, the *Flying Mantis* was cleaving through the deep blue waters of the Border Sea, heading for Port Wednesday. Her holds were stuffed with goods bought beyond the House and illnesses salvaged from the Border Sea's grasping waters. There were valuables under her hatches: tea and wine and coffee and spices, treats for the Denizens of the House. But her strongroom held the real treasure: coughs and sniffles and ugly rashes and strange stuttering diseases, all fixed into pills, snuff, or whalebone charms.

With such rich cargo, the crew was nervous and the lookouts red-eyed and anxious. The Border Sea was no longer safe, not since the unfortunate transformation of Lady Wednesday several thousand years before and the

consequent flooding of the Sea's old shore. Wednesday's Noon and Dusk had been missing ever since, along with many of Wednesday's other servants, who used to police the Border Sea.

Now the waters swarmed with unlicensed salvagers and traders, some who would happily turn to a bit of casual piracy. To make matters worse, there were full-time pirates around as well. Human ones, who had somehow gotten through the Line of Storms and into the Border Sea from some earthly ocean.

These pirates were still mortal (unlike the Denizens) but they had managed to learn some House sorcery and were foolish enough to dabble in the use of Nothing. This made them dangerous, and if they had the numbers, their human ferocity and reckless use of Nothing-fueled magic would usually defeat their more cautious Denizen foes.

The *Flying Mantis* had lookouts in the fighting tops of each of its three masts, one in the forepeak, and several on the quarterdeck. It was their task to watch for pirates, strange weather, and the worst of all things — the emergence of Drowned Wednesday, as Lady Wednesday was now known.

Most of the ships that now sailed the Border Sea had incompetent lookouts and inferior crews. After the Deluge, when the Border Sea swept over nine-tenths of Wednesday's shore-based wharves, warehouses, counting rooms, and offices, more than a thousand of the higher rooms had been rapidly converted into ships. All these

ships were crewed by former stevedores, clerks, rackers, counters, tally-hands, sweepers, and managers. Though they'd had several thousand years of practice, these Denizens were still poor sailors.

But not the crew of the *Flying Mantis*. She was one of Wednesday's original forty-nine ships, commissioned and built to the Architect's design. Her crew members were nautical Denizens, themselves made expressly to sail the Border Sea and beyond. Her Captain was none other than Heraclius Swell, 15,287th in precedence within the House.

So when the mizzen-top lookout shouted, 'Something big... err... not that big... closing off the port bow... underwater!' both Captain and crew reacted as well-trained professionals of long experience.

'All hands!' roared the mate who had the watch. 'Beat to quarters!'

His cry was taken up by the lookouts and the sailors on deck, followed only seconds later by the sharp rattle of a drum as the ship's boy abandoned his boot polish and the Captain's boots to take up his sticks.

Denizens burst out from belowdecks. Some leapt to the rigging to climb aloft, ready to work the sails. Some stood by the armoury to receive their crossbows and cutlasses. Others raced to load and run out the guns, though the *Flying Mantis* only had eight working cannons of its usual complement of sixteen. Guns and gunpowder that worked in the House were very hard to come by, and

always contained dangerous specks of Nothing. Since the toppling of Grim Tuesday fourteen months before, powder was in very short supply. Some said it was no longer being made, and some said it was being stockpiled for war by the mysterious Lord Arthur, who now ruled both the Lower House and the Far Reaches.

Captain Swell climbed onto the quarterdeck as the cannons rumbled out on the main deck, their red wooden wheels squealing in complaint. He was a very tall Denizen, even in stockinged feet, who always wore the full dress coat of an admiral from a small country on a small world in a remote corner of the Secondary Realms. It was turquoise blue, nipped in very tightly at the waist, and had enormous quantities of gold braid on the shoulders and cuffs. Consequently Captain Swell shone even more brightly than the green sails of his ship.

‘What occurs, Mister Pannikin?’ Swell asked his First Mate, a Denizen as tall as he was, but considerably less handsome. At some time Pannikin had lost all his hair and one ear to a Nothing-laced explosion, and his bare skull was ridged with scars. He sometimes wore a purple woollen cap, but the crew claimed that made him look even worse.

‘Mysterious submersible approaching the port bow,’ reported Pannikin, handing his spyglass to the Captain. ‘About forty feet long by my reckoning, and coursing very fast. Maybe fifty knots.’

‘I see,’ said the Captain, who had clapped the telescope to his eye. ‘I think it must be... yes. Milady has

sent us a messenger. Stand the men down, Mister Pannikin, and prepare a side-party to welcome our illustrious visitor. Oh, and tell Albert to bring me my boots.’

Mister Pannikin roared orders as Captain Swell refocused his telescope on the shape in the water. Through the powerful lens, he could clearly see a dull golden cigar-shape surging under the water towards the ship. For a second it was unclear what propelled it so quickly. Then its huge yellow-gold wings suddenly exploded ahead and pushed back, sending the creature rocketing forward, the water behind it exploding into froth.

‘She’ll broach any moment,’ muttered one of the crewmen to his mate at the wheel behind the Captain. ‘Mark my words.’

He was right. The creature’s wings broke the surface and gathered air instead of water. With a great flexing leap and a swirl of sea, the monster catapulted itself up higher than the *Flying Mantis*’s maintop. Shedding water like rain, it circled the ship, slowly descending towards the quarterdeck.

At first it looked like a golden, winged shark, all sleek motion and a fearsome, toothy maw. But as it circled, it shrank. Its cigar-shaped body bulged and changed, and the golden sheen ebbed away before other advancing colours. It became roughly human-shaped, though still with golden wings.

Then, as its wings stopped flapping and it stepped the final foot down to the deck, it assumed the shape of a very

beautiful woman, though even the ship's boy knew she was really a Denizen of high rank. She wore a riding habit of peach velvet with ruby buttons, and sharkskin riding boots complete with gilt spurs. Her straw-coloured hair was restrained by a hairnet of silver wire, and she tapped her thigh nervously with a riding crop made from the elongated tail of an albino alligator.

'Captain Swell.'

'Wednesday's Dawn,' replied the Captain, bending his head as he pushed one stockinged foot forward. Albert, arriving a little too late, slid along the deck and hastily tried to put the proffered foot into the boot he held.

'Not now!' hissed Pannikin, dragging the lad back by the scruff of his neck.

The Captain and Wednesday's Dawn ignored the boy and the First Mate. They turned together to the rail and looked out at the ocean, continuing to talk while hardly looking at each other.

'I trust you have had a profitable voyage to date, Captain?'

'Well enough, Miss Dawn. May I enquire as to the happy chance that has led you to grace my vessel with your presence?'

'You may indeed, Captain. I am here upon the express command of our mistress, bearing an urgent dispatch, which I am pleased to deliver.'

Dawn reached into her sleeve, which was tight enough to hold no possibility of storage, and pulled out a large

thick envelope of buff paper, sealed with a knob of blue sealing wax half an inch thick.

Captain Swell took the envelope slowly, broke the seal with deliberation, and unfolded it to read the letter written on the inside. The crew was quiet as he read, the only sounds the slap of the sea against the hull, the creak of the timbers, the momentary flap of a sail, and the faint whistle of the wind in the rigging.

Everyone knew what the letter must be. Orders from Drowned Wednesday. That meant trouble, particularly as they had been spared direct orders from Wednesday for several thousand years. They were almost certainly no longer going home to Port Wednesday and the few days' liberty they usually received while their precious cargo was sold.

Captain Swell finished the letter, shook the envelope, and picked up the two additional documents that fell out of it like doves from a conjurer's hat.

'We are instructed to sail to a landlocked part of the Secondary Realms,' the Captain said to Wednesday's Dawn, the hint of a question in his voice.

'Our mistress will ensure the Sea extends there for the time it takes for your passenger to embark,' replied Dawn.

'We must cross the Line of Storms both ways,' added the Captain. 'With a mortal passenger.'

'You must,' agreed Dawn. She tapped one of the documents with her riding crop. 'That is a Permission that will allow a mortal to pass the Line.'

'This mortal is to be treated as a personal guest of milady?'

'He is.'

'This passenger's name will be required for my manifest.'

'Unnecessary,' Dawn snapped. She looked the Captain directly in the eyes. 'He is a confidential guest. You have a description, a location, and specific sailing instructions drawn up personally by me. I suggest you get on with it. Unless of course you wish to challenge these orders? I could arrange an audience with Lady Wednesday if you choose.'

The crew members all held their breath. If the Captain chose to see Drowned Wednesday, they'd all have to go as well, and not one of them was ready for that fate.

Captain Swell hesitated for a moment. Then he slowly saluted.

'As ever, I am at Milady Wednesday's command. Good day, Miss Dawn.'

'Good day to you, Captain.' Dawn's wings stirred at her back, sending a sudden breeze around the quarterdeck. 'Good luck.'

'We'll need it,' whispered the helmsman to his mate as Dawn stepped up to the rail and launched herself in a long arcing dive that ended several hundred yards away in the sea, as she transformed back into a golden winged shark.

'Mister Pannikin!' roared the Captain, though the First Mate was only a few feet away. 'Stand by to make sail!'

He glanced down at the complex sailing instructions that Dawn had given him, noting the known landmarks of the Border Sea they must sight and the auguries and incantations required to sail the ship to the required place and time in the Secondary Realms. As was the case with all of Drowned Wednesday's regular merchant marine, the Captain was himself a Sorcerer-Navigator, as were his officers.

'Mmm ... Bethesda Hospital ... room 206 ... two minutes past the hour of seven in the evening. On Wednesday, of course,' muttered the Captain, reading aloud to himself. 'House time, as per line four, corresponds with the date and year in local reckoning in the boxed corner, and where... odd name for a town... never heard of that country... what will these mortals think of next... and the world...'

He flipped the parchment over.

'Hmmp. I might have known!'

The Captain looked up and across at his running, climbing, swinging, rolling, swaying, sail-unfurling, and rope-hauling crew. They all stopped as one and looked at him.

'We sail to Earth!' shouted Captain Swell.