

Edan said, softly yet passionately. "But as long as I am Captain of the *Morning Star*, I can't. It would appear that I was garnering favor for my position. For now, things must remain as they are."

Rose was heartbroken but understood what he said. She had seen the constant power grabbing and positioning within the hierarchy of Avalon. This would not bode well amongst the people of Emmyr, vying for position under the Gil-Gamesh. "I understand," she muttered, disappointed and heartbroken.

Before he could say anything to comfort her, Edan heard the sail fluttering above him, as if it loosened from its rigging. He looked up and noticed the wind slack off, causing the sail to whip about. There were only two things that could cause this: A change in wind patterns or something "stealing" the wind from his sails. Since these under currents were constant, it can only mean one thing.

Edan jumped to his feet and quickly looked aft. The moon was barely visible through the cloud layer above. He pulled out a telescope from his belt case to scan the horizon, looking for who or what may be following them.

He spied two ships, quietly following closely behind them, at the peak of the prevailing air currents. They were poised in the right position to attack, but they were just sitting back as if waiting for something. Edan didn't recognize the configuration of these ships either. They could be Brood or pirates, anyone out to hurt the Gil-Gamesh.

"Rose, go below and ask your father to come up here immediately," Edan insisted. "Mister Solomon, let's beat to quarters, but do it quietly. Don't raise the alarm so as to cause suspicion. Understood?"

The sailor nodded his head. "Aye-aye Captain!" The first officer headed below to get the crew up and ready for a fight.

"Edan, what is it?"

"Rose please, this is not the time for questions. Go get your father for me ... Now!"

Edan rushed over to the helm, leaving Rose still shaken, until she came to her senses and ran below. "Ten degrees down for a five count then level out Mister Foster," he ordered the helmsman. "That should get the wind back in our sails."

"Aye Captain, ten degrees down."

The ship dipped down slightly until the wind filled the sails again before leveling out. As the crew quietly moved into battle stations, Lord MoonDrake and Hunter made their way to the bridge.

“What is it Edan?”

Edan handed him his telescope and pointed to the sky above. “There sir—two points off the stern, just below the cloud line—two ships following us. They’re in perfect attack position but they seem to be holding back.”

Bryan spied the airships, flying with minimal sail so as to maintain a stealthy position and not overtake the *Morning Star*. “Why didn’t the lookouts spot them?”

“That close to the cloud line, and with no moonlight, it’s hard to see. I only discovered them when they stole the wind from our sails,” Edan explained. “I don’t recognize their configuration milord. It appears to be another mish-mash.”

Bryan examined the ships closely. He noticed different colored wood planking, put together like a jigsaw puzzle. He then looked forward and saw something to confirm Edan’s suspicion.

“They’re definitely a mish-mash, from Idlehorn no doubt.”

“What makes you say that father?” Hunter questioned.

Bryan handed him the telescope. “Look on the bow, near the standard. The name *Flame of the West*, written in Elfish, has been crossed out and replaced with *Hell Sworn*, written in goblin.” Hunter also observed that the bow ornament, an Elfish woman holding a torch, had been carved out to represent a skeleton holding a head instead.

“They’re getting more creative, I’ll give you that,” Hunter remarked.

“At least now I can tell Lord Baldrid what happened to one of his missing ships,” the Gil-Gamesh confided as he took another look at the two airships. Their quiet disturbed him. He’d never seen goblins or pirates act this way before. They were usually more aggressive, especially when they have the advantage.

“No sign of a crew on board. It’s as if they’re running on their own, like ghost ships.”

“Perhaps they are just spying on us,” Edan interjected.

“Maybe ... I don’t know,” Bryan surmised. “But I don’t like them hovering behind us like that. It’s unnerving”

Edan waited for the Gil-Gamesh to work things out and decide on their next move. "Captain, how close are we to the New Dover cliffs?" Bryan asked.

"We're nearly there sir ..." Edan exclaimed, walking over to his charts to verify their position. "... It's less than a mile to Lancelot's Bridge. What do you have in mind?"

"Let's see whether their just spying or if they have other inclinations. Can you pilot us through a cliff run?"

Edan beamed with confidence, but inside he was unsure. The Gil-Gamesh knew how much he loved "running" the currents, especially those down the ravines and valleys across Avalon. "Yes sir, I think I can."

"Think? Or are you sure Captain O'Brian?"

Edan gathered his senses. "I know I can milord."

"Then make it so Captain."

Edan saluted and walked over to the helm. "Mister Solomon, tell the crew to prepare for a fast run," he ordered. "Secure the guns and be quick about it!

"Mister Thompson, I want men in the riggings, ready to go to full sail on my command!"

Both men responded immediately by barking out orders and getting the crew into step. "I have the helm," Edan bellowed, taking the ship's wheel in hand.

The crew scrambled into the rigging above and lashed down the massive cannons below in preparation for the run. With all the activity around them, Hunter raised his concern about his father's decision.

"Father, I'm not sure this is a good idea ..." he cautioned. "We really don't know what their intentions are. I think this is an unnecessary risk."

"The only risk we have is losing our lunch Hunter," Bryan joked. "I'm not about to let two Brood airships overtake us. They've been after me incessantly since I brought down the *Marauder*. We could be out gunned and outmanned at a moment's notice but this should even the odds, if they dare to follow us."

"Now, go below and make sure your mother and your sisters are safe and secure for the run," he ordered. Hunter saw no point in arguing with his father and headed down below deck. Bryan moved up to the

rail at the helm and braced himself. First Officer Solomon Graves and Sailing Master Killian Thompson hurried to the bridge, saluting both the Captain and the Gil-Gamesh before reporting.

“All stations secure milord,” Solomon huffed, out of breath.

“The riggings are manned and ready, awaiting your orders Captain,” Killian added.

“Alright then, make your run Edan,” Bryan ordered.

Edan bowed his head, closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

*“Though my sails be torn and ragged and my mast be turned about; though the night wind chills me to my soul. Though spray stings my eye and the stars no sight provide, give me just enough Lord ‘til morning light to hold.”*

Edan’s recitation of a sailor’s prayer stirred all around him to bow their heads, perform the sign of the cross and say a quick prayer themselves.

“Amen,” avowed the Gil-Gamesh.

Edan pushed the wheel forward and began his downward trek toward the white cliffs of New Dover. Like their namesake in the outside world, the cliffs chalky white slopes have long been a symbol of peace on Avalon. Unlike their namesake, the cliffs didn’t follow the coast, but rather followed inland along the Folkesmore River through a ravine that separated Avalon deep into the island.

The only way across the ravine was Lancelot’s Bridge, a natural rock formation bridging the gap at the coastline. Legend has it that this was the bridge where King Arthur met Sir Lancelot and recruited him into the Knights of the Round Table.

For pilots, the bridge created a natural wind tunnel, focusing the airflow down the ravine. Only the best pilots could maneuver through these wicked currents. Fortunately for the crew of the *Morning Star*, Edan had been running through these ravines since the day he learned how to pilot an airship. With subtle maneuvering, Edan brought the ship down toward Lancelot’s Bridge. He counted to himself to time his run perfectly.

“Stand-by!” he shouted to the crew to be ready to jump into action.

The Gil-Gamesh looked back ... One of the two airships broke off and began to follow the *Morning Star* down. He recognized it

immediately as the *Devil's Incisor* ... A Brood Frigate, built for speed and precision for cutting down slower vessels. The Brood were large goblins bred for strength, cunning and savagery. They scurried about the deck, like spiders on a web, as the ship matched course and speed with the *Morning Star*.

However, Edan's ready for them as he counted down to make his move. "Set the top sail and rig the jib! Be quick about it!" he commanded. Sailing Master Thompson relayed the order with added inflection to spur the crew into action. The sails were set just as the *Morning Star* reached Lancelot's Bridge. With the added sheets, the ship lunged into the ravine, increasing its speed.

Just as quickly as the *Morning Star* entered the pass, the *Devil's Incisor* swooped in, but they were not ready for the increased speed. The ship swerved upward, cutting off its crew's nest on the underside of Lancelot's Bridge.

The Brood quickly corrected its course and lined up behind the *Morning Star*, closing the distance between itself and the Gil-Gamesh's flagship.

"What's our speed Mister Solomon?" Edan asked, not even looking back at their pursuer.

First Officer Graves looked over at the anemometer, spinning wildly on the bridge railing. He counted the number of times the red cup spun around within a minute to give him an approximate of the ship's speed.

"Twenty knots Captain and still climbing!"

Edan steered the airship through the ravine, maneuvering through the twists and turns, taking every precaution to avoid the cliff walls. He joggled the helm left and right with short, subtle turns of the ship's wheel to make all the necessary adjustments and course corrections to fly through the chasm.

"Furl the jib and standby to reef the topsail Mister Thompson!" Edan ordered. "We're coming up to Queen's Fork!"

The Sailing Master was confused by the Captain's order. "Sir, they're gaining. If we furl the jib, they'll be on top of us."

"Don't delay Mister Thompson, do it now!"

Killian looked to the Gil-Gamesh for help, but Bryan trusted Edan's

instincts when it came to flying his airship. “You heard him Killian! Furl the jib!”

Killian acknowledged with slight hesitation and relayed the order. “Furl the jib, standby to reef the topsail!”

The Gil-Gamesh understood the Sailing Master’s hesitation and hoped his confidence in Captain O’Brian was well founded. “What’s your plan Edan?” he inquired.

“As we slow down, they’ll gain speed, thinking they’re about to overtake us. They’ll be going too fast to make the turn at Queen’s Fork,” he crooned. “It’ll be like leading lambs to the slaughter.”

Bryan had never seen this side of his young Captain ... Intense and downright cutthroat. He realized Edan was finally coming into his own as Captain of the *Morning Star*.

Edan looked straight ahead and saw his destination. Queen’s Fork was where the Folkesmore River split into the Mersey and the Severn Rivers. The winds died down at the split, forcing pilots to fly out of the ravine and back into the air above Avalon. Lucky for Edan, his ship was blocking the fork from the *Devil’s Incisor*.

“Reef the topsails!” Edan commanded. Sailing Master Thompson reluctantly relayed the order as he kept one eye aft on the approaching vessel. The *Devil’s Incisor* crept up, so close you could hear the howls of the Brood as the closed in.

Edan watched the fork ahead to time his turn precisely while the Gil-Gamesh kept an eye on the Brood. “Edan?!” he groaned with a growing concern at the approaching ship.

A bead of sweat dripped down Edan’s brow. Hundreds of calculations ran through his mind as he eyed the approaching landmarks. “Speed Mister Solomon?” he barked.

“14 knots and dropping fast Captain!”

“Everyone hold fast!” Edan shouted as he spun the ship’s wheel sharply port while pulling back. The *Morning Star* turned and lifted above the ravine while the *Devil’s Incisor* exploded on impact with the rock wall. The ship flattened like a pancake against the rock face as Brood goblins fell into the water below.

“Mister Thompson, send a message to New Cornish, ask them to

send a search party to the wreckage site and search for survivors, though I doubt they'll find any."

"Aye Gil-Gamesh!" he saluted, but before he went off to his duties, he walked over to Captain O'Brian.

"That was a brilliant maneuver Captain, well done sir," Killian congratulated, holding out his hand to the Captain.

Edan took it as a sign of respect from his Sailing Master, someone who Edan had been desperately trying to win over. "Thank you Killian."

The Gil-Gamesh walked over and patted Edan on the back to add his congratulations. "Well done Captain, well done! Now, get us back on course for Emmyr, if you please."

Edan grinned from ear-to-ear, one of the few times he'd done so. "Yes milord ... Mister Foster, take the helm if you please," Edan ordered as he returned to his duties. "Set course south southwest until we reach the optimal current to turn back north to Emmyr."

"Aye Captain," Mister Foster shouted, taking over the helm. "I have the helm sir."

"Mister Solomon, secure the men from battle stations, resume the watch."

"Aye Captain," Mister Solomon replied, but before he gave the order, he shouted, "Three cheers for Captain O'Brian!"

"HUZZAH! HUZZAH! HUZZAH!" all the men shouted in unison. Edan saluted his crew for their cheer. This was the first time they all came together to acknowledge him. He was happy to have finally proved himself to them and earned his place as their Captain.



Deep within the caves of Idlehorn Mountain, King Mnenock watched in disbelief at the destruction of the *Devil's Incisor*. From the depths of his scrying pool, he gawked as the burning wreckage fell effortlessly to the river below.

It was one of his best crews and they were out maneuvered by an untested Captain; a boy, according to all reports. He cringed as he

watched the tragedy unfold in front of him. He hoped he would have a present for Lady Heather, but instead he had nothing but total failure.

“Mnenock!” shrielled a voice, echoing off the cavern walls. Mnenock recognized it as that of Lady Heather. “What the Hell do you think you’re doing?”

Lady Heather strutted toward the Goblin King, gripping the Orb of Veles tightly against her breast. She was recognizably furious with her minion.

“This was a unique opportunity to capture the female Outlander,” he explained. “We had them in our grasp with two of my best ships ... I don’t know what went wrong.”

“What went wrong? What went wrong? You ... That’s what went wrong you idiot!” she shrieked, her tone changed to something deeper, more hostile; it changed to that of the sorceress Morgana le Fay. Her face contorted as her fury raged on. “If I wanted the Gil-Gamesh’s daughter captured this way, I would have had you send a dozen ships after her.”

Her anger was unrelenting as her frustration with the Goblin King increased tenfold. She grabbed Mnenock by the throat, lifting him into the air with unearthly strength, choking the life out of him. “This must be done precisely as I planned or it will all be for naught ... Do you understand me!”

His goblin attendants rushed to aid their King but with a wave of the Orb of Veles, Heather sent them flying into the stalactites above, piercing them through-and-through.

“Please milady, I am sorry, it won’t happen again,” Mnenock gurgled as he pleaded for his life, gasping for air. Lady Heather’s tone changed back to her own as she released Mnenock.

“Do not attempt to veer from our appointed course Goblin King,” she stated calmly. “Our goal is nothing short of the total destruction of the Gil-Gamesh and all of Avalon with him. The Dark Tides cannot rise unless we do things precisely as planned.”

Heather turned and walked away. Mnenock crawled over to a rock and propped himself up. “*That woman’s wrath will be the death of us all,*” he pondered. If they were to succeed, he must be patient and let things happen as planned. “*Fate cannot be circumvented ...*”