

The development of Sewyn Warren was progressing far faster than Sabrilla had anticipated. At the same time, it wasn't moving fast enough. Kanishkath had her guards, her three devoted Shields, as well as a new little beastie that was particularly attached to Kalpanath. Five dragons that called Sewyn Warren home. Five dragons who were devoted to her and would follow her lead. It was leagues ahead of where any of the other princelets were at regarding the development of their warrens. Yet it wasn't enough. Even with Coonie out in the Nexus waiting for her own bond to find her, Sabrilla knew that her current course was not sustainable. Not without a sizable increase in candidates.

At least she had her labs for now. And the Barokians to run them. While Shy busied himself with his own projects and architectural developments on the surface, Sabrilla had the Barokians provide exact specifications for their needs below ground. Working with a cadre of dwarves come over from Lanutha, the Barokians had three working labs within a month of breaking ground. Two months in, and they had enough equipment and computers to begin work on Sabrilla's first big project.

The labs were impressive structures in their own right. Three massive caves carved out from the interior of the plateau, each one built to a scale that made Pernese Weyrs look cramped. Each one supported by dozens of artfully carved columns of stone at regular intervals within the open, domed interior. They had seemed massive beyond any reasonable space requirement when Sabrilla first saw them. Now, filled with beeping machines and computers and screens along every wall and hung from every column, she understood the necessity of all that space. Especially since her project, her precious first experiment, took up the entire back wall of one such lab.

Wires crossed and wove around each other in an intricate webwork across the stony surface. Lights rose and faded in the semblance of a heartbeat's rhythm along the cables, carrying their blue or red or violet luminescence from one end of the lab to the other. Towering, unadorned sleeves of steel collected the cables together on each end, then split into branching pathways that led to various computers. Vines that became branches that became trees that became a vast sea of squat, square processors. It was a beautiful, chaotic mess, and it was everything Sabrilla hoped it would be. All that lacked were the ornaments the network of cables were meant to process. The glowing cables along the wall, the beating heart of her project, wove around round, empty sockets where, someday soon, her greatest treasure would live.

"It's beautiful, isn't it," Sabrilla commented, not really expecting an answer from her companion.

The sharply dressed woman beside her made a noise in the back of her throat. Some faint sound of acknowledgement without any opinion one way or another.

"What, exactly, does it do," the woman asked.

"Right now? Nothing. But once my delivery gets here, it will be able to analyse, extract, and activate the latent energy found in some very special crystals."

"And you need these crystals because..." The woman arched a brow. It was clear from her posture and pointed questions that she wasn't enjoying this game of twenty questions as much as Sabrilla.

"For Shy's gift, of course," Sabrilla replied. She turned away then and stepped toward a different section of the lab, confident that the woman would follow.

Against an adjacent wall, connected to the branching paths of steel-encased wires, lay a series of large, rectangular computer banks and three steel circles raised up from the floor. Atop the circles sat a trio of glass cylinders, each containing a humanoid figure built of steel.

Automatons, the Barokians had named them. In Barok, these creations of steel limbs and clockwork organs were everywhere. They operated as servants, attendants, street sweepers, and so much more. They were the busy little beetles that kept Barok clean while greater minds puzzled out the mysteries of life. Some were made to be elegant, delicate works of art. Others bore all the aesthetic appeal of trash compactors. Sabrilla had opted for the prettier design.

She could have had regular automatons flown over in a couple of days. She'd even received offers from some of the top universities. While she was more than willing to accept their base materials, Sabrilla was intent on creating her own version of the indispensable aides.

"Automagi," Sabrilla announced as she swept a hand out to draw Ari's attention to the three slumbering creations. "The Barokians have their automatons, but I will be incorporating magic into my design. And this one," she paused, stepping up to the central cylinder to draw Ari's attention to an automagi designed with delicate, feminine features and a flared dress, "will be Shy's."

"Interesting," Ari said, her voice lacking any hint of the emotion she spoke of. "When will it be ready?"

"Soon. Very soon," Sabrilla repeated. She looked back to the automagi asleep in her glass cylinder. Translucent fluid kept the machine suspended while wires wove in and out of her figure; a puppet hung by her strings. Long, impossibly slender strings of silver wafted around the automagi's face. The strands were made to resemble hair, but Sabrilla had designed this one with special intent. In times of danger, the automagi could launch her strands at enemies with unerring accuracy.

Theoretically. She hadn't tested any of their features yet. That was for Shy to do.

"Caretaker," came the sharp, high-pitched cry from the lab's entrance.

Sabrilla cringed inwardly, though she betrayed no outward sign of her sudden displeasure. No one ever came to her with good news using that tone of voice. She'd heard it often enough that she'd learned the cadences of different types of bad news. When something broke but did not immediately threaten harm to anyone nearby, the messenger gave their report with a soured note to their voice, as if they could convey the collective irritation of everyone whose jobs had been interrupted by the breakage. When something broke in more spectacular fashion, typically involving explosions or fire, the messenger spoke with such hurried, high-pitched words that Sabrilla could scarcely discern them from the screaming alarms blaring through the complex. This particular messenger arrived with the soprano notes that she knew to mean something disastrous had happened, but stalled at the sight of Ari. That meant this was not a thing for the aide to hear. Interpersonal trouble then.

"Excuse me a moment," Sabrilla trilled cheerfully to Ari.

The aide raised a single, knife-edged eyebrow, then turned back to her clipboard to jot down some notes.

Sabrilla waited a beat to ensure the geneticist's eyes and ears was thoroughly engrossed in her notes before striding quickly over to the messenger. She liked Shy. She welcomed him into her home. She trusted him as much as one might trust a "tamed" tiger.

Before she could even demand a report from the man, words began to spill out from his lips like a hissing waterfall.

"The ship, Caretaker! The ship with the... you know..." he nodded his head toward the far wall. At a quick nod from Sabrilla, he continued. "It's been taken by pirates."

Sabrilla experienced several emotions at once in reaction. At first, shock numbed her system. The ship in question was her father's mercantile flagship, the *Prins Detlaff*. It was an absolute behemoth of a creation, well equipped to defend itself from potential raiders. That it had been taken was, quite frankly, a marvel. Secondly she experienced indignation that a pirate had the gall to attack a flagship of the Coranaet family. She had a fondness for pirates thanks to her dear friend, Jaliath, but it was apparent in that moment that the feeling wasn't mutual. Last of all, fear stole away any heat the indignation had offered. What lay in the crates of that ship could not fall into the wrong hands.

There were few rules on Tris'Hath that Sabrilla and the Red Mage of the Warren saw eye to eye on. Sabrilla agreed with the ruling that the princelets ought to work together and they should all do everything in their power to make that happen. She disagreed with Mystic's methods; banning offworld trade, banning technological trade, banning this, banning that, banning sneezing, she was sure, if it in some way offended one of the princes. Those rules were relaxing now, but some remained steadfast. Most pointedly, anything to do with the bowers of the Ancients and the ruins of ancient battlefields. All princelets carried some rules regarding the treatment of such sites. Mostly to the tune of "don't touch." However it was Mystic who decreed that any attempts to enter the bowers, remove relics from those old sites, or otherwise in any way interact with the past was to be met with severe punishment and potential banishment. She had her reasons, which Sabrilla respected, but she could not agree.

The past was to be studied and picked apart until it held no more secrets. It was a tool to learn from so they could better themselves. It shouldn't be buried under rubble and forgotten.

So when Sabrilla heard rumours of an old battle site uncovered on Sudland soil, she couldn't resist. She sent her people to investigate. When they began to uncover ancient bones, massive on a scale that had no modern-day measure, she became excited. When they unearthed the first known, fully preserved hydra skeleton, complete with crowns and jewels, she near fainted with delight.

When her people reported back that the skeleton was not just that of a hydra, but a chaos hydra, as confirmed by the five crowned heads and the presence of a black diamond, Sabrilla had to lock herself in her room for three days to sort herself out.

On the one hand, this was the find of a millenia. Researchers and sages from across the world would salivate at the thought of being allowed to work on such a perfect specimen. On the other hand, a chaos hydra, even in death, inspired such an instinctive level of terror that Sabrilla felt her heart leap into her throat each time she thought of it.

She didn't know if the crown gems contained any latent magical energy. Everything she had built came from theories and speculation. Several times along the way, she thought to tear the whole project down and have the site buried under ten tons of dirt.

Curiosity was a ravenous beast, and it got its hooks deep into her mind. At last, after days of deliberation, she ordered her people to excavate the skeleton and remove the gems. They sent her back a very polite and well worded letter that amounted to "not on your life."

So she sent the automatons instead. A few dozen of them brought over from Barok, specially programmed by her, then shipped off to the site.

The first gem to be removed and packed up for a return trip to Sewyn Warren was the treasured black diamond itself. That, along with a few of the smaller gems, waited in crates, labelled as trade goods, on a ship that now rested in pirate hands.

"How long ago," Sabrilla asked in a small voice.

"A few hours at best."

Hours. The pirates had hours on her. Thankfully, she knew their routes from eavesdropping on her grandfather's council a few times. She also knew that a ship like the *Prins Detlaff* stood as much of a chance of blending in among other ships as a dragon did in a flock of sheep. Whoever had taken it would need to either offload the vessel or give it a makeover real quick, and there was only one place among Sudland's coastal islands that could even think to offer such services.

"Have Ari sent up to the Vella Crean complex," she instructed the messenger. "Politely. Give her a little tour. Whatever you do, do not let her know that I've left the area."

The messenger paled, but nodded his head in quick agreement.

Sabrilla debated finding someone better suited to the task for a moment. The messenger looked to be fresh into the horrors of puberty, zits and scraggly chin hairs and all. She doubted he had the mental fortitude to calm himself enough so as not to raise Ari's suspicion. She also couldn't think of anyone better off the top of her head, since she'd sent Coonie off a few weeks back to stand at a clutch.

Dammit, dragon eggs needed to hatch faster.

Stuffing her reservations deep down, Sabrilla marched out of the lab and down the hall. She kept herself from breaking into a run, but only just. With her focus set on the elevator at the end of the hall, she pushed out a mental prod at her bond.

::*What happened?*:: Kanishkath's response was immediate and alert. Not surprising since Sabrilla practically thrummed with anxious energy.

::*We're going on a trip.*::

::*A trip?*::

::*To Balgazi.*::

Kanishkath's alarm abruptly turned suspicious.

::*The pirate city. We're going on a trip to the pirate city.*::

::*They took something from me and I need to get it back.*::

::*What happened to just being a politician?*::

Sabrilla slammed the palm of her hand onto the call button for the elevator. The light above the door gleamed yellow as the metal box made its way to her floor. Sabrilla bounced on the balls of her feet while she waited, wishing she hadn't built the labs so deep within Sewyn Warren.

::*Sometimes politicians need to get their hands dirty.*:: she replied to her now skeptical bond.

::*By taking bribes, not diving face first at pirate ships.*::

::*Believe me, this is not my preferred course of action, but I need to get those crates back before they open them up, or a few irate pirates will be the least of our concern.*::

The door dinged, the light turned green, and Sabrilla squeezed past the door before it had even finished opening. She pecked at the “close door” key like a starving chicken until the panel slid shut again. The ride up to the surface involved soft music, a gentle sensation of movement, and Sabrilla willing the cables and gears of the device to aim her like a damned cannon and blast her out over the mountain range.

::Four gods, are you kidding me? They took the crates?:: Concern coloured Kanishkath’s words. Very few knew of Sabrilla’s secret excavation work. Kan was, for obvious reasons, one of those few. Though she hadn’t agreed with Sabrilla’s plan at first, the gold queen could not deny the wealth of knowledge they stood to gain through the experiments. That was if they weren’t discovered and summarily executed first.

::They took the whole gods-damned ship.::

::Well that makes this difficult.::

Sabrilla rolled her eyes.

::Yes, because it was just a stroll in the park before.::

::You know what I mean. Are you sure they’ll be there? At Balgazi?::

::No, but I’ve no doubt that’s where they’re headed. We start from there and trace our way back along the coast. With luck, we’ll run into them.::

A pause, and then Kan spoke with a thread of fear darkening the gold of her mental voice.

::And without luck?::

::We pack our bags and find a nice, quiet asteroid somewhere far, far away, where we can watch the brilliant light show that will be the Red Mage nuking the whole of the Nexus from a safe distance.::

::I don’t think there’s an asteroid far enough away for that.::

The elevator dinged, the door slid open, and Sabrilla sped walked her way into the glaring sunlight of Sewyn Warren’s landing field. Kanishkath waited for her a few feet away, wings half spread and legs coiled in a crouch, ready to go.

::Then we had best find that ship,:: Sabrilla said.

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Pirate Queen Emdi Wezakha. No. Pirate Empress Emdi Wezakha. That was a much better title. And given she was about to become the most renowned pirate the world over, she deserved a fitting title.

Captain Emdi Wezakha (soon to be Empress) stood at the gold-gilded helm of the second ship in her new armada. Her own ship, the *Squall Eater*, drifted ahead of them, ivory sails snapping in the wind, black flag raised high. A matching black flag snapped atop the main mast, while the red and green flag of Sudland lay, neatly folded, atop a table in her new Captain’s quarters. She was a pirate, not a heathen.

“What should we call her,” Emdi mused to the man who stood stiffly at attention beside her. She leaned across the helm, arms draped to either side of one of the gleaming gold handles. Warmth drifted up from the wood, even through the long sleeves of her coat. The whole ship felt alive beneath her.

"She has a name already. It's bad luck to change a ship's name," her first mate, a half-orc by the name of Aftan said.

"It'll be worse luck if we go traipsing about with *Prins Detlaff* plastered to our asses," Emdi quipped back. "Besides, she'll be a new ship soon, all gussied up and given a new paint job."

Emdi unlooped her arms from around the helm and stepped back. She raised her hands and formed the bottom half of a square with her thumbs, fingers upraised. She aimed the frame at the three massive masts with their double sails each.

"I'm thinking black sails and a blue hull. What do you think?"

"Might as well call her the bruised ego then," Aftan muttered.

Emdi sent a glower at her first mate, but the man had his back to her, hands clasped over the buttons at the top of his twin tail coats. The wind picked at the short curls riding down the center of his head, but could do nothing to mess up the fringe of black stubble along the sides. He did not have the height of his more brutal kin, but he certainly had their frame. Aftan filled out the coat the way potatoes filled a cloth sack. Though the coat had been custom fitted to his frame, it still strained at the seams to accommodate his wide arms, and the mid-section pinched a little too tight. If he wasn't such a damned good first mate, she might've entertained the idea of having a deeper connection with him. Though she feared his tendency to be as engaging as a wet blanket extended to the bedroom as well.

"I think I'll call her *The Maelstrom*," she said. "Oh, wait, no. *The Royal Maelstrom*. Now that's got a ring to it, eh?"

"As you say, Captain," Aftan replied automatically. His eyes never left the other ship bobbing on the waves ahead of them. "You certain it was a good idea to leave the *Squall Eater* with Raskin?"

Emdi stepped forward and reclaimed the helm. Her hands fit neatly around the handles at two and ten o'clock, as if it had been designed for her.

"Kid needs a chance to prove himself. Besides, his head blows up too big, Yarpin will pop it for him."

Planning the attack on the *Prins Detlaff* had been no easy feat. Weeks of coordination, memorization, and strategization went into the attack. Emdi had wanted Aftan on the *Squall Eater* at first, but her first mate balked at the thought of leaving her side. She intended to take *Prins Detlaff* from within, after all, and he wanted to be sure of her safety. While Emdi knew her crew to be a strong, loyal lot, they were pirates, one and all. Some of them had dreams of flying their own flags one day. Raskin, her second mate, was one such man. Thankfully she knew Yarpin, her quartermaster, to be the sort of fellow who had her back until his dying day. She'd done him a service years ago, and he'd sworn a life debt as repayment. Not a thing to be taken lightly.

"You put a lot of faith in him," Aftan rumbled.

"I put a lot of faith in all of my crew. Comes with the territory of being Captain," she retorted.

"Sometimes I think you trust too openly. It's gotten you into trouble before."

"And out of it," she countered. "What's this all about, Aftan? You've always got a stick up your ass, but today it seems to be wedged a little deeper."

The boulder-shaped man drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Things almost went to pot this morning. Had they waited one minute longer, we would’ve been dead for certain. I think maybe your faith in Raskin is misplaced.”

“Ah, but they didn’t go to pot, did they? We got the ship. Crew’s got a nice, comfy relocation to the brig. Everything’s coming up Emdi.”

Despite her chipper words, Emdi understood her first mate’s concern. There had been a moment during the execution of the plan where she thought that Raskin might’ve betrayed her. That he’d taken her ship and run with half her loyal crew turned to his side. It was a terrifying thought, but the moment the cannon blast split the air, she banished all hints of doubt and rallied her small band to finish the job.

Six crew members. After hours of debate and planning, she’d settled on taking exactly six people with her aboard the *Prins Detlaff* prior to its departure from harbour. They’ll all signed on as new kitchen crew after the last group came down with a bad case of food poisoning a day before the ship was to leave port. Six people to feed a crew of forty, and then fight that same number three days into its journey.

It had been a simple plan to start with. Sneak on, disguised as new crew members, and get in good with the Captain by cooking up a storm. Aftan, though he lacked social skills, bore no equal when it came to the frying pan. Even her own cook complained that he couldn’t measure up to the first mate.

Three days into their voyage, Emdi slipped a little concoction into that evening’s porridge, and halfway through the night, chaos engulfed the *Prins Detlaff*. There simply were not enough privies for everyone to vacate their suddenly furious bowels. In the midst of the groans and shouts and disturbingly loud rumbles of bodily functions, Emdi led her team of six in a calculated assault to cut off small sections of the crew, disable them (which had already been mostly accomplished by the drugs), and then corral and capture the Captain.

The last part was supposed to come with some assistance from the *Squall Eater*. Raskin was supposed to bring her ship up alongside the *Prins Detlaff* and straff her bow with a few cannon shots. Enough to send the message that Emdi was not alone and it was in everyone’s best interests to cooperate.

Six people against forty, even if they were incontinent and sweating enough to turn the crew quarters into a swimming pool, were not good odds. Though they managed to cordon off half the crew before anyone knew what was happening, the Captain of the *Prins Detlaff* rallied the few who could still stand and formed ranks on the top deck.

Emdi knew her people were strong fighters. She knew they could hold their own in a fight. Yet each one would have to take three sailors a piece, and though the ones below posed less of a threat, they were still alive. If things dragged on too long, sooner or later they would join the fray.

Raskin took his time. Raskin knew just how long to wait to begin sewing the seeds of doubt. Emdi was not an idiot. Though the sight of her *Squall Eater* sliding up alongside the much larger ship like a wraith in the night opened a well spring of relief inside her, she knew that the delay was no accident.

Light bloomed from the *Squall Eater*’s starboard cannon ports. Three shots in quick succession. Two soared harmlessly over the heads of the *Prins Detlaff*’s captain and his crew. The third clipped the railing along the bow. Wood exploded in a dramatic spray across the deck and into the air. Those nearest the impact dropped to the ground, then immediately began

rolling about and groaning as if mortally wounded. The reality was the sudden movement had not done their upset stomachs any favours.

Under the watchful eye of Emdi's crew, the *Detlaff's* captain surrendered his weapon and put his hands on his head. The rest of his crew followed, and soon all were sharing a comfortable bunk in the belly of the ship. They were worth more to Emdi alive than dead, after all. Corpses never garnered much of a ransom.

Yes, Emdi understood exactly where Aftan's concerns came from. The problem was how to deal with them. If she confronted Raskin, he'd play the victim and whisper poison into the ears of her crew until they mutinied. If she let it slide, undoubtedly Raskin would try again.

Emdi pondered what to do with her rebellious second mate as she gazed lovingly across the deck of the *Prins Detlaff*, soon to be the *Royal Maelstrom*. She hoped the carpenters of Balgazi were as talented as they claimed to be. The faster she got this ship turned around, the better.

A commotion on the deck of her new ship caught her attention. Emdi tracked the noise down to a small knot of people gathered at the base of the main mast. One of them waved a telescope wildly over his head, shouting and pointing off the port side.

"What's he on about," Emdi muttered under her breath.

"Spotted something, I think," Aftan said. Then he raised his voice, booming out across the roar of wind and crash of waves. "What have you got, barrelman?"

The man cupped his hands around his mouth, the telescope tucked under one arm. Even from this distance, Emdi could see the whites of his eyes.

"DRAGON," he roared.

Emdi stared at the man a moment, then up at Aftan.

No, that was impossible. No one could've gotten a message back about their caper this quickly. Not this far out from port. Hathians never flew this far from the mainland either. They were masters of the air, but water gave them pause. Even so, when Emdi went for the telescope hooked onto her belt at the same time as Aftan went for his, she expected to see a sleek, serpentine body on the other side of the looking glass. She did not expect to raise the telescope and zero in on a living embodiment of fiery wrath headed her way.

The dragon gleamed bright as a newly polished statue and moved with the fluid grace of a ray through water, her multi-tined wings undulating in perfect rhythm. A hint of sapphire sparked and danced in the morning light each time the dragon raised her wings, and something white glinted from between her shoulder blades. Emdi squinted down the telescope, then lowered it.

"You had the crew checked for mages, right," she asked Aftan, already knowing the answer.

"Of course. I did it myself. Standard protocol," he barked. His tone was not defensive, but the half-orc didn't have far to reach to make his voice intimidating.

"Well something was missed. That's a hells-sent dragon rider bearing down on us."

"What?" Aftan raised his telescope again.

Emdi watched his face as he focused in on the dragon. It went from stern and unreadable to lined with confusion, and finally fear. When he pulled the spy glass away from his face for a second time, she saw the same look in his eyes as had been in the barrelman's.

"Rally the crew and signal the *Squall Eater*. We're in for a fight."

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::I think I see it,:: Kanishkath said as she sailed along the salty coastal air currents.

They hadn't been in the air long, perhaps an hour, but a quick tour of the Balgazi port told Sabrilla that the ship hadn't made it there yet. It was too distinctive to miss, and she thanked every god she could name that she'd attended the launching ceremony several years back. She knew exactly what to look for.

The coastal region along the mountainous edge of Sudland's territory was a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Waves pounded the rocky shoreline, caves drank in the salty water then spit it out again, and the only living things for miles were sea birds, scrub brush, and the few daring mountain goats who braved this side of the cliffs. Even boats were few and far between. There existed a single, narrow current that passed far enough from the shore to avoid unexpected rocky outcroppings, but not so far as to risk getting lost in the waves should a storm come up. Following this current back from Balgazi, Kanishkath scanned the waters below with her sharp eyes, while Sabrilla relied on the readouts of her suit.

Sabrilla hadn't had time to grab all of her gear before they took off. She hadn't even bothered to saddle Kan. A fact which she regretted now, as riding bareback required so much more focus and muscle strength than she was used to. At least the holographic shielding of her Barokian flight suit cut down on the wind that blasted her face. Without the helmet though, she lacked the heads-up display, the added layer of protection, and the comms link back to Sewyn Warren.

Sabrilla scanned the read out scrolling across the right forearm of her suit. She could see the ship with her eyes, but from this distance, she couldn't make out details. Her suit, however, picked up the size of the ship, number of masts, origins, type of wood, number of rooms, and concentration of heat signatures.

Her heart soared as the information scrolled past. This had to be it. This had to be the *Prins Detlaff*.

::Fits the bill so far, but I'm not holding my breath. Let's get closer,:: Sabrilla sent back.

Obligingly, Kanishkath folded her wings back along her sleek frame and slipped into a controlled dive.

Wind screamed past Sabrilla's ears. Though it was lessened by the holographic shield, it still stung her cheeks and whipped her long hair into knots. She squinted to see through it as the tiny speck bobbing on the vast blue waves below grew larger and larger.

::That's it! That has to be it,:: Sabrilla exclaimed as sunlight glinted off golden railings and along the blocky gold lettering along the side. She couldn't read it yet, but the structure looked right, and no other ship on this side of the continent looked quite so austentatious as one of her father's ships.

::What about the other ship?::

Sabrilla glanced in the direction to which Kanishkath's snout pointed and clocked another ship arching around to come back toward the *Prins Detlaff*.

::Don't know it, but I already don't like it. I'm going to the Prins Detlaff. Gods willing, they haven't looked at the cargo hold yet. Can you run interference on that other ship?::

::I can, but don't forget that your holo shield only really works against ballistic projectiles. If they come at you with a sword, which they have, you're essentially in your underwear.::

::I am very, acutely aware, Kan. Thank you.::

Kanishkath levelled out her flight and banked toward the second ship. Sabrilla used the momentum to slip from her bond's back and dive into a freefall.

For a singular moment, the rational part of Sabrilla's mind gibbered in nonsensical terror. What did she think she was doing jumping from a dragon's back?! She was small and squishy and not at all aerodynamic. Then she spread her wings and engaged the gliding sails that stretched from wrist down to ankle. Her freefall turned into an angled dive, and with the aid of her suit's guidance system, she steered toward the *Prins Detlaff*.

Someone on the ship below had noted their approach. Not difficult, Sabrilla reasoned, given they were literally falling from the sky toward them. People scrambled across the deck, rushing to the fore and aft guns, rushing below, rushing up to the helm area. There weren't a lot of people on the main deck, but the few Sabrilla could see looked as mean and disreputable as could be.

Someone reached the guns. The cannons of the *Prins Detlaff* were not designed to aim upward, but the small guns could be. A woman dressed in dark greens and blacks with hair the colour of rich, red wine cascading down her back flipped the gun up in Sabrilla's direction and lit the first shot. The small, mobile cannon barked loudly. Sabrilla pulled her arms in tight and dove beneath the blast, then spread her arms again to slow her landing.

Sabrilla hit the deck on an angle, turning her carefully controlled descent into a tumble that carried her halfway across the deck. When she came to a stop, she looked up to find an extremely startled young man standing over her.

The kid couldn't have been older than the messenger who first brought her word of the ship's capture. He had the same grade of patchy stubble across his jaw. Yet instead of the clean, crisp white uniforms that Sabrilla issued, he wore a ratty old shirt and a torn pair of black slacks.

"Hey," came a shout from further back on the ship.

Sabrilla turned to see the woman with the wine red hair leaning over the railing of the quarterdeck.

"What are you doing on my ship," the woman shouted at her.

"Your ship," Sabrilla shouted back. "I'll have you know this is my father's ship. I've come to retrieve it."

"Finders keepers," the woman taunted.

"Well I'm finding it back."

"You're none too familiar with the laws of piracy, are you?"

"I am very well acquainted with pirates. My best friend is a pirate, and he has no rules."

That wasn't quite accurate. Jaliath held himself personally accountable to many rules. Finders keepers was not one of them as far as she knew.

"I have rules," the woman replied. Then she raised a hand in the air and called the attention of the few crew members standing around the main deck. "Grab her. Throw her in with the others. We'll sort them out later."

Sabrilla switched her attention to the bean sprout of a boy standing over her. His eyes doubled in size and though he shook, he dove for her.

"No thank you," Sabrilla called out in a sing-song tone as she rolled out of his reach.

Another man came charging over while she gathered her feet beneath her. With a quick tap of holographic buttons arrayed over the arm of her suit, a blinding light blasted out from the wrist of her gauntlet. Sabrilla raised her arm, aimed her fist at the man's face, then turned her hand down so the light blasted him directly in the eyes.

The man howled, his charge turning into an aimless flailing as he raised one hand to cover his eyes and used the other to sweep uselessly at the air around him. Sabrilla ducked under the weaving appendage and launched herself toward the stairs leading to the deck below.

"The hell is wrong with you lot of gobshites? I said grab her!" The cry rang out above the crash of the waves and the roar of distant gunfire. Sabrilla spared a moment to worry about Kanishkath, but as soon as she spotted the six figures barrelling her way, she became deeply invested in her own well being.

Sabrilla dove for the stairs, not so much descending them as launching herself into the opening and hoping the ground wasn't too far below. She landed with a solid thud on the gun deck and heard the distinct thunder of boots headed her way. Without waiting for her entourage, Sabrilla juked around the side of the ladder and aimed for the next hole.

Thank all the gods in all the heavens that her father had the ship built to military specifications. He'd worried about pirates, as he always did, and thought the best solution was to take a galleon and turn it into a cargo vessel. While it came with its own defensive cannons, all of which butted up against the walls of the gun deck, the lower levels were all dedicated to storage. The *Prins Detlaff* looked fierce as any fighting ship, yet in a straight up battle, it didn't stand a chance.

All of which meant that Sabrilla had the interior of the ship memorized thanks to her childhood obsession with military vessels, and she had a fairly strong suspicion of where to find her precious cargo.

The third deck opened up into a wide galley that reeked of onions, garlic, and fish. A bald man sat at a long table, wooden spoon raised to his mouth as Sabrilla came crashing down to the ground. Shouts chased after her. The man looked up, clearly working through the meaning of this encounter.

Sabrilla didn't wait for him to finish puzzling out a solution. She rounded the stairs once more and charged down to the next level. A furious "hey" followed by the scraping of wood on wood told her the bald man had joined the chase.

::Are you trying to collect them all,:: Kan quipped in her mind.

::Not deliberately. I just have an attractive personality,:: Sabrilla sent back.

On the fourth level, Sabrilla encountered the first cargo hold. Her heart soared seconds before it lodged itself in the back of her throat. A fist flew toward her face. She fell back, slamming hard into the stairs, then kicked one foot upward.

The pointed heel of her boot impacted with something solid. A man's gruff growl turned into a high-pitched bleat of agony.

"So sorry, darling," Sabrilla whispered as she pushed herself up to her feet. The man collapsed next to her like a lump of unmolded clay, hands cupped around his family jewels and face flushing a crimson to rival the roses in her mother's garden. Sabrilla braced herself against the edge of the stairs and brought one foot back. "I'm also sorry for this," she said as she slammed the toe of her boot across his temple.

The man's whimpers of pain subsided as he lapsed into unconsciousness. Sabrilla reasoned that she'd done him a favour. He wasn't focused on his balls anymore.

More shouts from upstairs. The man from the crew deck crossed her field of vision as he came charging down the stairs. Without thinking, Sabrilla stuck out a hand to grab his ankle. He let out a single, startled cry before pitching head first down the rest of the stairs. She grimaced as he came to a stop with a sudden clap of noise that did not bode well for his skull.

Sabrilla hated fighting. She would have absolutely preferred to send someone else in to do this work for her. She really needed to find herself a proper bodyguard. Kan had four already. It really wasn't fair.

::I'm being proactive,:: came her bond's quippy interjection. *::Mine will take several years to mature anyway. You can just pick someone up off the street.::*

::Not just anyone,:: Sabrilla shot back as she turned to examine the rest of the deck level. *::Shy built loyalty into yours. I have to rely on my feminine intuition to find someone who won't stab me in the back.::*

::That and a hefty salary.::

::Which I can only do once I start producing export. Speaking of....:: Sabrilla trailed off as hope became a fluttering, living thing in her chest.

Before her lay a veritable mountain ridge of crates and boxes and bags. A heavy pieces of brown fabric draped across the far wall, promising more goodies beyond it. Many of the crates in the front room bore the royal seal, which told her that this must be where they kept the important shipments. Which meant that her crate should be somewhere here.

Sabrilla stepped among the boxes and began scanning them in rapid succession. The crest of Sewyn Warren looked similar to the Sudland crest, but with a significant difference. Where Sudland's crest bore a pair of rearing dodrians, hers displayed Kanishkath lifted up on her hindlegs, wings spread to the top corners of the crest, and head turned to the side. It was a little fanciful as far as crests went, but tasteful. Or so she thought. At least it wasn't the chaotic deluge that was the Traxan crest.

::Do you have a plan for getting out of there?:: Kan's mental threads thrummed with a tense energy. Sabrilla could feel her bond's fatigue growing from where she stood.

::I'll figure something out,:: she said as she moved from one stack to the next.

::Do it quickly. I'm almost irritated enough to harken back to my ancestors and turn this blasted ship into kindling.::

Sabrilla felt the urgency of her bond's words leak into her own limbs. She hadn't been at this long, a few seconds at best, but she could hear the thunder of booted feet above. Soon, her exit would be cut off.

Then she saw it. Just a quick shadow out of the corner of her eye, but one that she recognized. The crate was no larger than a bread bin, but clearly stamped with the Sewyn Warren crest on its wooden lid. Sabrilla lunged for it, greedily snatching it up and pulling it to her chest.

"Who's there?"

Sabrilla paused. Had the back wall just spoke? She turned to eye the drape of brown fabric.

"Who are you," she called back.

"I posed the question first. I demand an answer."

Oh, oh she knew that arrogance. Only one man in the royal Sudland navy dared speak with such authority when they hadn't a leg to stand on. She'd only met him once and she hadn't liked him then. That had been the *Prins Detlaff's* launch day.

Sabrilla marched over to the heavy drape of fabric. She shifted her crate to one arm, then took up a fistful of the cloth and yanked it aside.

A solid wall of iron bars blocked her path. Behind them, more than a dozen eyes peered at her blearily in the low light of the cargo hold. All of them wore dirtied white shirts and the green striped white pants of the navy. The man in front, though as stained and gaunt as the rest of them, stood straight backed and proud. His eyes glared out from the puffy, bruised skin of his lids and his lips turned up in a fearsome snarl. That was until he got a good look at Sabrilla. The fury fled from his eyes and his mouth dropped into a perfect O beneath his bushy mustache.

"Your Grace?"

"Captain Vestaufssan," she greeted him in return. "This is unexpected."

"Did..." he paused, heavy brows crashing together. "Did your father send you?"

"Not as much," though he'd likely have words for her when she got back. "Listen, I'd love to chat, but I'm a little busy."

Shouts from the stairwell. Sabrilla glanced back to see someone crouched on the top steps, heavy shadows behind him. She let go of the fabric.

"No wait! We can help."

Sabrilla grimaced. Maybe it was the sudden desperation in Captain Vestaufssan's voice. A desperation she'd never heard from the man before. She didn't think he had it in him to grovel. Or maybe it was her own desire not to be entirely heartless. Regardless of the reason, she knew she couldn't leave the crew locked down here.

One of the pirates reached the bottom steps. Three more followed at his heels, including the boy who had first attempted to grab her. Sabrilla whirled and fumbled her precious cargo under her other arm. She had to work quickly. They would be on her in seconds.

Bringing up the arm of her suit with the built in display, she tapped a few quick buttons, then directed the wrist cuff toward the heavy iron lock holding the door shut. Undoubtedly this section of the ship was designed to hold dangerous cargo, possibly animals. Hence the wall of iron bars. It held people just as well.

When Sabrilla flicked her wrist down as she had on the main deck, a light shot out from the cuff. This one was not designed to blind, as the last had been, but cut. It narrowed to a fine point and hissed as it hit the lock. She held it still for one second, two-

A pair of vice grips landed on her shoulders and hauled her off her feet. She felt the crate ripped away from her grasp, even as she tried to curl herself around it. A moment later, she hit the ground hard enough to empty her lungs of air.

As she lay wheezing and trying to remember how to breathe, a shadow loomed over her.

"Leave it, Rev," someone else said. A hand pressed against the shadow, pushing it back. "Captain wants her alive."

"I ain't going to kill her. Just tenderize her a little. You see what she did to Baddock?"

"I saw, mate, but we take her topside right away. Captain's orders."

"Captain can go piss on a dragon," the boulder-shaped shadow of Rev snarled.

Despite his protests, Sabrilla found herself raised up from the ground by a new pair of hands forged of iron. She spared one glance for her chest before it disappeared from sight,

carted back up the stairs by the young pirate with the peach fuzz on his chin. She could at least console herself with the fact that she wasn't far behind, marched back up to the main deck with her hands held tight behind her back.

Her shoulders ached. Her legs ached. Her chest burned. Nothing about this plan had... well... gone to plan. If she'd taken half a second more to consider what she was going to do when she got here, she probably wouldn't have ended up in this situation.

Then again, if she'd taken half a second longer, maybe someone would have opened her crate and discovered the illicit contents within. No matter her situation, she couldn't risk that.

Sabrilla sent a tentative feeler out to Kan as she ascended the stairs. Her bond was in a similar state to her in terms of pain. She'd taken a few hits and her wings burned from the excessive time being held aloft, but she hadn't given up her efforts to harry the other ship yet.

Sunlight slammed into Sabrilla's eyes like the judgemental glare of a lantern finding a drunkard on the street. She hadn't been below decks that long, and yet it stung her eyes to look upward. She had to blink several times before she adjusted to the brilliance. Enough time for her to be surrounded by her captors and presented before a tall figure in a long coat.

At this range, Sabrilla noted the woman's midnight skin and sculpted features. The points of her ears peeked out from the mass of red waves flowing down from the wide-brimmed captain's hat atop her head. She towered over Sabrilla, her high-heeled boots adding a few inches to her already lengthy build. The gold of the woman's eyes reminded Sabrilla of a cat, and when she smiled, Sewyn Warren's Caretaker got the distinct impression that she was the prey.

"You're a slippery one," the woman purred in a voice like melted chocolate. Her words were all drawn out vowels and soft consonants, as if she found the edges of the letter R too sharp for her mouth. She unfolded her arms from across her chest and held out her hands to receive the crate with Sewyn Warren's symbol emblazoned on the lid. "This is what you came here for, dragon rider? What's so special about it?"

Sabrilla felt her heart climb up into her throat and attempt to strangle her. She did her best to appear outwardly calm, but Kan got a live feed of the absolute pandemonium going on inside Sabrilla's head.

"Oh, alright. You found me out. That's my monthly shipment of sweets from the South. Terribly illegal, I know, but I just can't resist them."

The woman in the captain's hat frowned and shook the box.

The gems were packed in tight, thank the gods. They didn't rattle or thud about. Yet Sabrilla had no doubt that the pirate captain felt the weight of them dragging at her hands. Heavy things tended to fetch a good price.

"No, I don't think it is," she drawled. "I think you were sent to fetch something specific. Something important to your High Princess, maybe?"

Oh, well that was a useful surprise. This woman had no idea who Sabrilla was. Her elation didn't last long though, as the woman held out her hand and one of the beefy sailors standing around her slapped a crowbar into her waiting palm.

"You may have some fancy tech, dragon rider, but I've got the men, the fire power, and the ships. You were a fool to come alone."

Sabrilla's panic spiked. As did Kan's irritation.

::*That's it,*:: the dragoness snarled.

The groan of snapping wood drew focus away from the crate. The captain had the teeth of the prybar beneath the lid, but quickly dropped the tool and shoved the crate into the chest of a half-orc standing beside her. She pushed through the small knot of pirates to look out over the bow of the *Prins Detlaff*.

The other ship, now identifiable by the scrawling white lettering spelling out *Squall Eater* along its side, had drifted within firing range of the *Prins Detlaff*. Not a single person on board could spare a thought for cannon fire though, as they were fully engrossed in dealing with the massive gold dragon now sitting atop the quarterdeck.

Kan posed with her wings spread and her lips curled back in a snarl, a statue of furious vengeance if ever there was one. The ship's nose rose in the air, tilting the deck so that the sailors aboard slid and skidded their way down toward Kanishkath's claws. They screamed as they fell, and some even clawed desperately at the railings, aiming to go in any direction except toward the waiting beast. A roar thundered through the air and Kanishkath flicked her long, forked tongue across her lips.

If Sabrilla didn't have insight into the dragoness' sheer glee at the havoc she caused, she might've been worried as well. As it was, despite her less than comfortable position, she smiled at the woman in the captain's hat.

"Alone? No. Also, is that one of the ships you were talking about? Looks like you might be down one soon."

The woman with the wine-red hair whirled around, and the whites of her eyes were vibrant against her dark skin.

"It'll capsize the ship," she cried.

"Certainly looks that way," Sabrilla replied calmly. Inwardly, a flash of insight laced through her mind. This woman really cared for the men under her command. How refreshing.

The captain swung around to stare at her ship again. From this distance, the wind stole most of the cries of her crew, but every now and then, it rose in a howl of terror that stuck in the lofty white sails over their heads.

The atmosphere on the *Prins Detlaff* shifted. Pirates who had crowded close to Sabrilla moments ago, hemming her in, now shuffled their feet and glanced at each other with wary expressions. Even the hulking half-orc who held onto her crate in a single dinner-plate sized mitt looked unsettled. Sabrilla took the opportunity to flex her wrists and felt the hands holding her in place slacken slightly.

"It'll kill them all," the captain said.

"She," Sabrilla corrected. "Her name is Kanishkath, and that call is yours."

Not that Kan would ever actually kill anyone. On purpose.

"Alright!" The singular word cracked through the air. The captain held her hat between her hands, jamming it tight onto the waves of red flowing around her pointed ears, and though she had her back to Sabrilla, the strain in her voice spoke volumes of her mental state. "Alright! Call it off and I'll let you leave alive."

Sabrilla touched Kan's mind, felt the fatigue and aggravation of her bond as a wall across her awareness. She sent soothing thoughts toward the dragoness, urging her to stand down. Kanishkath's reluctance to take off again and overall crankiness meant that Sabrilla had to focus on the efforts a little longer than she intended, but eventually the gold dragoness swept her wings down in a single, powerful stroke and took herself back into the air.

The *Squall Eater* came crashing back down into the water, flinging supplies and men in all directions. Most of them landed on the ship. Those that didn't splashed into the waves below and began to flail about as if the salty water could melt them.

Kan swept low around the ship, her wings fully extended to cut through the misty spray as she eyed the sailors in the water. Her intentions were clear. To Sabrilla at least.

"Oh, sweetie, no. That's not how this is going to go. I'm taking you in," Sabrilla said to the captain. She glanced over her shoulder afterward and gave the man holding her, a burly fellow who looked like a very tall dwarf thanks to his excessive amount of hair, a searching look.

The man released her wrists as if she were made of fire and backed away. The captain, however, scoffed at her words.

"You, dragon rider? Playing at being the world police, are you?"

The words were bold, but the captain's demeanour looked to be wound as tight as a violin string. She kept shooting glances back at the *Squall Eater*, watching the men in the water flail and splash about like drowning insects. Some brave souls from the ship threw down life preservers, but those below were too occupied with keeping their eyes on the sky to reach for the floatation devices.

Kanishkath swept around for another pass, her claws skimming the tops of the waves.

Sabrilla rubbed at her wrists for a moment. The man hadn't been rough with her, but he had a grip like an angry crab. She stepped away from the small knot of pirates around her, pleased to see several of them back away when she moved. With a few long strides, she stood face to face with the captain. Then she put on a brilliant smile, took a step back, and bowed.

"Sabrilla Alyssa Coranaet of House Coronaet. Or as you would know them, the Sudland monarchy. I also happen to be Caretaker of the Sudland Warren. It's new. I'm not surprised you haven't heard of us. And you would be?"

"Captain Emdi Wezakha," the woman replied without hesitation. Then she paused, tilting her head to one side. "I am very impressed by your skills, Your Grace, but this is a game of numbers. Even if we left the ship to you, how would you get it home? You have no crew."

As if on cue, the tromping of feet announced the arrival of a new contingent. Captain Vestaufssan led the charge up the stairs, emerging into the sunlight as blind as a newborn kitten but no less stiff backed. Behind him came the original crew of the *Prins Detlaff*. Their skin shone beneath the unforgiving light, slick with sweat, and their normally pristine white clothing held a distinct yellowish tinge. Yet as they fanned out in front of the cargo hold steps, the pirates gave ground until all eight of them stood against the railing behind their captain.

Emdi did not move an inch, but fixed her golden eyes on Sabrilla with enough fury smouldering behind them to light the whole ship aflame.

"Seems you've got me at a bit of a disadvantage now," Captain Wezakha said.

Sabrilla continued to smile, planting her hands on her hips and striking a pose as if this had been her plan all along.

"Don't feel too bad. You brought ships to a dragon fight. It really couldn't have gone any other way."

Wordlessly, Captain Vestaufssan directed his men to surround the pirates. There were so many more of them that it took no time at all. The pirates surrendered without a fight, raising their hands high and cooperating as the sailors pushed them to their knees and brought out rope to bind them.

Only Emdi remained where she was, locked in a staring contest with Sabrilla.

"You think you're quite clever, don't you," Captain Wezakha purred.

Sabrilla wondered at the curious way her stomach did flips whenever she spoke.

"I know I am but that's besides the point."

"That point being that you alone will claim victory over the great Pirate Queen Emdi Wezakha, hmm? You alone will turn me in as a jewel in your family's crown? How much safer the waters will be with one less pirate to haunt them." Emdi paused and took a single step closer to Sabrilla. "You may have won today, main lander, but I am not finished yet."

"I would hope not. I'd like to offer you a job."

Emdi froze, her face locked in an expression of complete incomprehension. In fact, taking a quick glance around, Sabrilla noted that same expression on the faces of the *Prins Detlaff* crew. Captain Vestaufssan openly stared with his jaw practically unhinged.

"You stole the pride of my father's fleet right out from under his nose," Sabrilla continued. "That's not something to sneeze at. You have skills I could use and clearly a good head on your shoulders. I need more dragon riders."

"Are you insane," Emdi barked a moment later. "I belong on the water. Not in the air."

::Oh for the love of all the gods. You're not serious,:: the irate complaint vibrated across their connection.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sabrilla watched Kanishkath dip a claw into the waves and come out with a screaming, writhing creature caged between her talons. She dropped the man none too gently on the deck of the *Squall Eater* then went around again for another.

"Are you sure about that? You haven't even given it a try. I'll even let your crew go if you agree," Sabrilla pressed, ignoring the pointed looks and pointed thoughts directed her way.

"I don't need to drink piss to know I won't like it. I don't fly. Period," Captain Wezakha said.

"Oh, you'll be flying soon enough," said Captain Vestaufssan, recovered from his momentary shock. He shot a withering look at Sabrilla as he stepped forward. "From the end of a rope, no doubt. His Grace has no tolerance for pirates."

Sabrilla fixed the pirate captain with a helpless look and raised her shoulders in a shrug.

::You're really going to go through with this, aren't you,:: Kanishkath protested.

::She's willful, smart, loyal to her people. She's perfect.::

::She's a pirate.::

::So is Jaliath.::

::Jaliath doesn't take orders from you and doesn't live here. You can't compare the two.::

::Don't you think he'd be a little upset to know you're slandering his people so?::

What came back across their connection was not words so much as the very essence of disgust.

"Alright, fine. I'll go with you."

Sabrilla nearly missed the words while focusing on Kanishkath. She came back into focus, blinked at the abrupt turn around, and then grinned from ear to ear.

"That's not a choice-" Captain Vestaufssan began to say.

"Technically speaking," Sabrilla cut in, "it is. Sewyn Warren has been granted independent operation, so long as we don't break the laws and attend all the necessary council meetings. So, as Sewyn Warren's Caretaker, I am officially requisitioning this pirate."

"Your Grace-

"And I'm sending her crew back to her ship." Sabrilla paused and inclined her head slightly to Emdi. "As promised."

"Your Grace-

Captain Vestauffsan turned a very interesting shade of scarlet. It clashed horribly with his pale skin and sunken, bruised eyes. Sabrilla had half a mind to continue with the game to see how many different colours he could turn, but she thought he might have suffered enough already. She stepped forward, caught his hands up between both of hers, and shook them vigorously.

"And we'll be departing immediately. Thank you for carrying my report back to my father, Captain. I'll put in a good word for you later."

She left Captain Vestauffsan and his crew standing about with their jaws in their hands as she led Captain Emdi up to the quarter deck.

It didn't take long for Kanishkath to finish scooping up the floundering pirates and deposit them back on their ship. It took slightly longer for the *Squall Eater* to coast up alongside the *Prins Detlaff* and extend a gangplank.

The eight pirates who had launched a daring capture of the Sudlandese flagship shuffled down the board, back to their ship, minus their captain. Sabrilla made sure to reclaim her crate from the half-orc before he crossed. He paused once, halfway across the plank, and looked up at the quarterdeck where Captain Wezakha stood. Sabrilla wondered if he might come back and demand to go with them. But then Captain Wezakha turned away, and the half-orc continued back to his ship.

Under the watchful eye of Kanishkath, the two ships parted ways. Only when the pirates were well underway did Sabrilla give Kan the signal to swoop them up in her claws.

The golden queen complained for the few minutes it took her to *between* back to Sewyn Warren. Her wings hurt. Her arms hurt. That was not worth the effort.

Sabrilla bore it all in silence. She knew she'd be paying for this venture for weeks to come. She couldn't help but be in a good mood though. Not only had she retrieved her precious cargo, she'd picked up a new ally. Or hopeful ally. Really, she had no idea what to expect from this Emdi in the days to come, but undoubtedly it would prove interesting. At least there were no more surprises in store for the day.

The moment Kanishkath touched down on Sewyn Warren's landing field, she dropped her two passengers to the ground. A quartet of fledglings waited for her on the grassy flat surrounding the field. She moved toward them, a low rumble vibrating her throat.

Sabrilla picked herself up and dusted off her suit, then turned to offer a hand to Emdi. Her other arm remained firmly locked around the crate balanced on her hip.

The pirate queen hesitated a moment before taking the offered hand, allowing Sabrilla to pull her upright.

"I have now tried dragon flight," she announced. "I don't like it."

"Kanishkath's in a bit of a mood. Your people were shooting at her."

"She was trying to eat them," Emdi protested.

Sabrilla waved the accusation away as if it were an annoying insect.

"She was just pretending. At any rate, that wasn't a proper introduction. Once I call up the search riders, you'll see that it's really not that bad."

"Not that bad is not good," Emdi said.

Sabrilla rolled her eyes.

"Caretaker Sabrilla," interrupted a familiar, clipped voice.

Sabrila turned, and her good mood curdled in an instant.

Before her stood Ari and the messenger boy she'd tasked to see the aide back to her room. The boy cowered in Ari's shadow, shoulders hunched and hands wringing before his chest as if he could wash away his shame. Ari, however, stood with her arms wrapped around something other than her clipboard.

Against the dull gray of Ari's outfit, a bundle of flaming red fur wriggled and struggled and kicked at the air. The pup had to be the size of a small child and composed of ninety percent fur, but that didn't stop him from thrusting a tiny, pink tongue into the air to pant energetically.

"I'd like to talk to you about the definition of containment breach," Ari said.

Sabrilla sighed and resigned herself to a long evening of explanations and slobber. Tomorrow, she told herself, would be a normal day.