“Are ye sure about this, captain?” A sailor asked as the *Golden Gull* cut through the seas swiftly towards the north. From the engine just beneath the forecastle came a steady hum with a strange, almost ghostly melody, as if a tiny band were playing within the brass sarcophagus. A multitude of pipes came off of it, dropping into the deck towards the rear of the ship, as light flickered through many of the thin vents along the sides. Atop the brass cylinder stat a projector, aiming up at an angle, sending forth a beam of dazzling light towards a short mast rising from the forecastle. The mast, hoisting a number of apparati, caught the beam in a lense and transformed the luminescent light into a thousand strands of gossamer that formed countless feather like projections of light. They spread in the air above and before the Gull like wings, catching the aetherial currents and dragging the ship along behind. The tiny shards of light rustled almost like ruffled feathers, or maybe like the spirit of canvas itself.

Captain Alkyone, the prettybird privateer, stared forward, her jade green eyes intent on the horizon. She tugged her navy captain’s cap over her face. “There’s something wrong with Broken Pier, Tarboot. Three ships tie up, then no sign of their crew? Some shenanigans afoot and I mean to find out what, lest it takes me unaware and bugger me up the egghole.” The paragriff tapped the armrest of her chair impatiently with her small claws while her tiny vestigial wings beneath her shoulders kept working in worry.

“The commodore’s always been a friend to us,” the helmsman, Tarboot, noted, the scruffy human eyeing his captain with his remaining eye.

“Friend? She’s my bloody sister,” she said with a sigh. “Pier’s a port for every scallywag and buccaneer remaining on the cursed sea, but three crews? It’d be different if there was some reason. Missed tribute? A power grab? Someone bugger someone’s niece? Aye, I can accept that. But just disappearing? And sending me ‘invitations’ all year? Something’s wrong. I can feel it in my pinions.”

“Can’t argue it’s not queer, captain, but you want to put us at risk to find out?” Tarboot asked.

“Aye, a wee bit, but if we don’t know what’s happening, are we any safer at sea?” she asked in return.

“We can run on the open water. Gull’ll sail anywhere, anywhen. So long as we’re nae bottled in port.”

She patted him on the shoulder. “Trust me, swabby, and I’ll see you through.” It was hard to smile with a beak, but she managed as best she could from the side of her mouth.

“Aye captain,” Tarboots muttered. “We’ll be at the Pier inside an hour.”

The approach to Broken Pier was simple enough. From a gap in the steep coastal mountains and cliffs issued a river that blasted a channel through the mud and sand that accumulates at the shore. Once this had been a major port for the war effort, and on the starboard side of the Gull, Alkyone could still make out the white, rusting wrecks of the Confederacy fleet. Rusting substructure streaked the white

ceramic hulls as if the vessels were bleeding flesh. Gold gilt and screaming eagle decorations still caught the sun, though their defiance now appeared as cries of agony. A few magical glyphs flickered in the late afternoon sun, sending blue white sparks dancing on the broken hulls. The starboard moorings were completely inundated with silt, flooding with every high tide. Streaks of luminous blue and green fluids still dripped from corroded fuel tanks, dripping out as the engines mouldered. A haze of small biting flies obscured everything in sight.

Behind the doomed ships sat the naval facilities themselves. The drydocks, supply warehouses, and barracks all smashed as if a giant wave had swept through. The namesake of the settlement, the massive concrete quay that curled protectively around the swamped wrecks, sat in broken chunks: a testament to the folly of the Great War. How many thousands died when Feduian magic had brought the very seas ashore?

But while the starboard side lay in utter ruin, appealing only to the destitute and the desperate, the port side of the river still remained intact. Perhaps its smaller size had saved it from destruction. The sea wall curled protectively along the river's current, creating a shelter marked with red and green floats. A dozen or more fishing boats lay inside its sheltering arm, their masts bare. Why weren't they out to sea? The Pier was the lifeblood of half the ships on the cursed sea. Without its staples, even the Gull wouldn't last more than a year.

She disliked being this close to shore. The Gull's wings were closed, the forecastle mast retracted and the engine covered in an unassuming case. Behind it burbled a mix of steam of air, pushing it up against the current. It wasn't the most elegant means of propulsion, but she didn't want to signal to all of the cursed sea that she'd arrived just yet. The Gull's engine was valuable to more than just her.

"Captain," Tarboots, muttered, pointing off to the right. "We've got Adamant starboard."

She immediately scanned the ruins, and then spotted the small black hulled boat tied up to one of the warships. Black armored people scuttled like beetles over the hull as they sought who knew what magical technology that lay in the hulls.

"Wide berth?" he asked.

"And risk a raw rubbing with the sea bed? Nay." She stroked her beak thoughtfully. "Oy. Radio."

He plucked the headset from its stand and handed it over. She took off her captain's hat, hanging it on the armrest of her seat, and carefully put the headset on. "Ohoy hoy Adamant! Are you receiving me? This is Captain Alkyone of the *Golden Gull*! I gots a fancy calculator I picked up somewheres. Ye wants it?" A sneak was often more suspicious than a smile to their face.

Tarboots gave a small smile. "They're not going to answer, captain."

"Oy, so little faith?" she asked him with a grin, then cleared her throat. "Ahem, Adamant! I was mistaken. It's nae a calculator. It seems to be a device for a more vibratory nature!" She suddenly let out a yipe. "Oy, my cloaca! Ye sure ye don't want it?"

"You don't have a cloaca, captain," Tarboots said, covering his mouth with a hand.

"Shhh! They don't know that!" she said, still transmitting, then cleared her throat. "Adamant, I dare fear this contraption's so devistatin on me nethers that it must be some kind o terrible weapon from

the war. In the interest of protectin our misbegotten cursed world from tha horrors of the war, I beg ye to allow me to turn it over to ye!" She suddenly let out a yipe. "Oy! It's got itself a random settin!"

Tarboot hunched over in a coughing fit.

Then a woman's voice buzzed over the radio, "Ship, cease attempts at communication. If we think you have something worth our time, we'll take it ourselves." Which, hopefully, implied that they thought she didn't.

"Oy! Oy! Certainly! I simply respect yer mandate o protectin us from the folly o the war. But I was wonderin, have ye been keeping an eye on the settlement yonder?" No answer. "Come on, one lass to another. If you've been seein somethin amiss, surely ye'd say somethin." She worked her mouth. That much 'piratey' talk hurt her jaw!

Another pause, and then the woman repeated, "Ship, cease attempts at communication or we will open fire," she replied automatically, and then added. "Go away."

Alkyone's feathers twitched. "Aye, Adamant. Thank ye for the advice. Good scavenging," she said as she hung up the headset. "I owe her a vibrator."

"Some day, I'll understand how you work that out, Captain," Tarboots said. "What did you read from that?"

"There's something bad going on here, like we thought," she said as she peered at the Adamant boat. One of the black armored figures held a missile launcher, but they weren't pointing it at the Gull. "Tie up in the river, with the current."

"That's going to be rough oh her, captain," Tarboots noted. "We're going to be battered by the flow as it hits the stern."

"Aye, but if we have to run, I don't want to have to dodge out of a harbor. Get a rope on the Gull's tail and rig a weight. I don't even want to draw an anchor. I want us to cut and run," she said with a frown. "After all, Adamant's not the only one with guns."

The port side of the river pouring out of the crack in the mountains had fared far better than the starboard side. Smaller, it was defined by a pier that curved from the rock face in towards the river, creating a sheltered harbor. The concrete had long ago cracked into colossal blocks, giving the port its name: Broken Pier. The harbor was dominated by docks and smaller vessels; fishing trawlers, crab boats, and shrimpers. After all, even pirates had to eat. Most notable, however, were the larger ketches tied up against the river's flow. Piracy was something of a hobby for most. Cargo and passengers made up the bulk of even Alkyone's trade. But there were little modifications to the ship that suggested more nefarious possibilities.

The Golden Gull didn't tie up on the river side berth of the pier with these other ships, but remained out in the river, dropping a sacrificial anchor to help hold it against the current. That left her and two crew to row the skiff towards the mouth of the harbor against the current.

"Mind lending us a hand, Captain?" Tarboots asked as he hauled on the oars while she stood at the prow, effortlessly balancing against the rolling of the water.

"Not now, swabby. I got to make a good impression," she replied. "Tell you what. They start shootin and I'll be grabbin four oars to get our arses back to the gull, aye?"

"Aye captain. Here's hopin ye sprout two arms as well," Tarboots replied, pulling harder on the oars and guiding it around the end of the pier and into the harbor.

The side opposite the harborage was an immense concrete structure looming fifty feet above her, the top a massive overhand of reinforced engineering. She wondered if it had just gotten lucky and not hit by the feduian magic, or had and just shrugged it off. The structure had a half dozen immense doors slowly rusting away facing the pier. A net of floating docks made from whatever could stay above water stretched out like lace around the various tied up fishing vessels. A few crews poked around on deck, but Alkyone couldn't tell what precisely they were doing as they wandered about listlessly.

Atop the reinforced port, a large, square porthouse rose like a middle finger from the corner facing the sea. On the other corner, a large crane stood silently, ready to ferry heavy cargo from the waves up atop the massive concrete slab. Three doors, even larger than the ones leading into the slab structure, lead straight into the solid rock itself. Alkyone had spent years dreaming about what might lay inside. Water trickled out of holes along the water line.

A single door had been cut open ages ago, the edges stabbing inward like rusty teeth as they rowed through. Most of the equipment along the dock edge had been scavenged ages ago, but there was still some derelict equipment hanging from overhead. The lightning barely scraped away the dimness as their progress was observed by dozens of dull eyes just staring.

Plague? A coup? What had happened here? They reached an empty berth besides the landing and she hopped off. "Tarboots, with me. Swabby, take the boat out into the harbor. Keep a weather eye for my signal." The sailor nodded and backed the row boat back out of the chamber

"Leaving us stranded, captain?" Tarboots asked as the human climbed out and on to the concrete landing. A stair well lead up into the ceiling. From here, she could just barely make out the back of the reinforced bay, filled with garbage and cast offs that no one wanted.

"Till I talk with the commodore, I'm keeping light on my claws," she replied as she carefully picked her way up. At one of the landings she stopped and examined a dwarf that sat there, humming softly to herself. The melody had no real tune to it. It just seemed to wander up and down. The dwarf's glossy eyes kept sliding off to the side. "Oy. What's with you?"

The dwarf didn't even seem to acknowledge her words. The eyes just dropped down and to the side, the humming wandering as she sat there. Alkyone released her and regarded Tarboots. "What the daft hells is happening here?" He just arched a brow, as if surprised she was asking him. She turned and rapidly ascended the crumbling concrete stairs.

She poked her head out, peering into a kill pen built around the stairs. Four aluminum chain link fences surrounded the top of the stairs, topped with barbed wire. Four guard posts on stilt beams at each corner, each with a machine gun ready to rain death on invaders... but only a single guard slouched on the railing, leaning against the weapon as if it was all that kept him upright. The other three were completely abandoned. The gate leading out of the kill pen sat open with a single pirate slouched against it. Neither stirred as Alkyone and Tarboots emerged.

"Captain," Tarboots murmured.

"Aye, swabby. If things are like this, I hope Commodore Keyza's got some answers for us," she said as she stepped past. The air felt thick and heavy; a desolate humming filled the air as that wandering tune emerged from multiple mouths. She poked the man standing at the open gate. "Oy. Where's the Commodore?"

"Huh? Is it time?" the man muttered as Alkyone stared at him in horror. "No?" he said and then turned away. "Leave me alone." Immediately he resumed the humming.

"What the piss! A stranger just walked right into your base! What's yer job, yabbo?" She asked, giving him a shake. He stood like a lump, his eyes drifting down with every second. "Where's the Commodore? What about the Captains of the Blackjack? The Tempest? Where they be?"

"Commodore? Captains?" he blinked and then gestured away towards the town outside the pen. It'd been some cold blooded engineering some time ago that had put the town atop the pens. Still, the row homes hadn't been blasted apart in the Starfall. Though more than a few of the slate shingles were missing or replaced by wooden ones. The concrete road surface was strewn with bits of detrus that hadn't been cleared away. Pidgeon poop was was the most common paint adorning old wrought iron street lamps, and a flock of chickens pecked outside one home. People stood in doorways, on crates, or in chairs with a dull listlessness that made Alkyone shiver.

The gate behind her clacked shut, and the pirate gate guard then affixed it with a padlock. The moment the door was secure, the pirate returned to his slouch against the closed gate. Atop the tower, the man crewing the machine gun hadn't moved, but now his eyes were following Alkyone.

"Captain," Tarboots muttered.

"Aye," she said softly, and walked with him to the edge of the pens overlooking the harbor. Fortunately, the Golden Gull sat undisturbed in the flow. He reached into his coat, and withdrew a flashlight. She leaned in, and he blasted her in the face, her pupils shrinking to points before she gasped and rubbed her eyes. "Tarboots, ye arse! Ye blinded me!"

"Beggin pardons, Captain," he replied flattly and gave three quick flashes, followed by a longer flash. A minute later, a light flashed two longs and two shorts. "All clear so far, he muttered." She glanced down at the network of docks and boats tied up at the base of the pier. From forty feet, any jump was tricky, but interposed that fall with a hard wooden surface and she'd be lucky to walk away. Her eyes scanned the harbor and then she spotted the sailboat tied a little further out, blinking at the specks swarming in her vision.

"What are you thinking, captain?" Tarboots asked as he looked at the sailboat, the mast rising above the ledge of the pen. He immediately groaned, "Metronome, captain?".

“Metronome,” she murmured. “Can you snag it?”

“I reckon I can, provided no one minds me borrowin some rope. We could just climb down, though.” he muttered.

“I’m thinkin, when we go, we’re gonna be in a hurry.” She clapped his shoulder. “Get to it, Swabby.”

“Aye, captain,” Tarboots muttered as he shuffled off towards the boat. “Didn’t work in Sarn. No reason why it should work here,” he cursed under his breath, but she knew he’d support any fool choice she made. He was good like that.

She made her way towards the center of town. Many of the row houses were empty, looking abandoned. Broken Pier hadn’t been a metropolis, but it hadn’t been a ruin either. The occupants sat around as the others had. A few shops keeps slumped behind their counters, appearing as if they cared not a whit if she snatched what she liked for herself. Yet, oddly, it seemed as if no one had done so themselves. Pirates weren’t generally known for their propriety.

She passed by one of the hatches in the road. Normally closed, someone had pulled them open so that great round holes sat in the middle of intersections. Crowds gathered around these holes, but for what purpose she couldn’t understand. A humming eminated from each, a hollow noise from deep beneath their feet. Air trapped in the other pen docks, perhaps?

Hastening her step, she arrived in the town center. Normally, the hundred foot square plaza was the center of life in Broken Pier. Shops and bars open hawking stolen wares, grub, and inebriates of all kinds. Whatever music a fiddle, flute, and drum could manage. It wasn’t complicated. At the far north side rose the three story tall town hall, decorated in whatever nautical detrus seemed fitting.

But now the center of the plaza had been torn up, revealing a large metal hatch twenty feet across that had been concealed beneath the concrete. An impromptu crane and winch sat on the east side, next to a large reinforced metal cage. On the west side sat an elevated oil tank over a generator connected to an energy emitter that had once belonged in the lighthouse. Similar to the one on the Golden Gull, the fresnel lens had warped and chipped from decades of use past it’s life. What was it doing out of the lighthouse?

She moved around to the right, examining the winch, crane and cage. To her amazement, a griffon sat inside. The red and white striped beast eyed her coolly as she stared. “Hey,” it muttered as its claw scratched the steel. “You must be new here.”

“Bit yes and no,” she replied, looking at the sailors around the crane. They didn’t move much, sitting around laconically, but also they didn’t take their eyes off her. It made her crest itch. “Who are you?”

“Rampage,” it replied. “You must be the sister, right? These idiots have been talking about you showing up.”

“Have they? What’s going on here?” she asked as she scowled.

“Long story short? I’m the appetizer. You’re the main course,” she answered, and then suddenly her face turned stricken and she clutched the bars. “Oh, please! Please get me out of here! They’re feeding me to it. Every night! Over and over again! They’re going to do it again!” She suddenly slammed her head against the bars and slumped. Cruel, calm eyes stared at her. “Hey. Wanna know a secret? Come closer. I won’t bite.”

Alkyone took a step back, and the griffin cackled. “You’re going to wish I got to you first, pretty bird,” Rampage cackled.

“What’s going on here?” she asked one pirate, who just stared back at her. “Answer me!” she insisted, giving him a shake. He just continued to stare.

“Listen, civilian,” Rampage said from the cage. “There some serious stuff going down here. You get me out, I’ll report it to my squad, and we’ll take it out. Help me help you, and I’ll put in a good word for you.” The griffin clutched their head again and shivered. “Fuck. I’m losing it. I can’t take many more nights of this.”

“Are you barmy?” Alkyone asked. Was it just her or were her eyes a different color?

“Oh yeah. But I’m also serious. Get out of here. Better yet, get me out of here,” she said as she tried to rise in the small cage, but there was barely enough space for her.

Alkyone backed away from the crane, circling around the metal lid. It had a hinge on the south side, and from the bare metal scrapes, it had to have been recently opened and closed. Alkyone circled around to the other side. The elevated oil tank likely held several hundred liters of fuel, and had been set up to feed the generator via gravity. “Oy! Swabby! Why’d you take this out of the light house?” she demanded, gesturing to the emitter.

“It likes it,” the pirate muttered.

“What likes what?” Alkyone demanded.

“It like it,” the pirate repeated.

Enough was enough. She strode around to the north side and walked right up into the front door. No one moved, and yet everyone seemed to be watching her at once. “Keyza!” she shouted as she stormed into the common room just through the front doors. It served as everything from a flop house to a office to an impromptu bordello if times were slow. A number of couches and chairs lined the walls, the floor covered with even more filth than usual. Pirates were messy, but they tended to clean once the stink started.

“Alkyone?” said a voice from the far side. Behind an impressive desk rose a familiar form: her own. Keyza had the same height, the same feathers, even the same color eyes. Her green plumage, however, was just a touch more yellow. Her feather tips a little more sharp at the tips. “You came. Of course you came. It knew you’d come,” she said as she rose and walked around the desk with a warm smile. She wore her commodore’s clothes; a naval uniform from gods knew how long ago, but it was stained even more than usual. Without warning, her sister swept her up in a tight embrace. “Oh, I am so glad to see you, sister.”

Alyone relaxed a touch. “Keyza, what’s going on?” she said, trying to disengage herself from her sister’s embrace. She felt her sibling’s hand on her rear and gave a little jump. “Key! Buy me some rum first!” she yelped.

“You’re too serious, Alky. Too serious,” she said as she let her go. “I’m so glad you’re here though. We discovered something amazing. Something wonderful.”

“What? Keyza, what happened? Broken Pier is looking more broken than usual,” she asked as her sister walked to the desk. “What’s that griffon doing in a cage? You don’t do that, Keyza! For all we know that’s our grandma or something.”

“Relax, Alky. We picked the griffon up a month ago. Staggered out of Whitefield, if you can believe it. It’s a complete freak, and it’s crazy. Be careful.” She said as she reached behind the desk. “No, what we found was this!” and she pulled out a large glossy black case. Some of the fittings were rusted and the handle was missing, but she could make out the icon of a rose in silver, surrounded by a crescent moon, over a sword.

“What is that?” Alkyone asked, squinting her eyes at the rusty patina covering the cover. “Aetalis Devotar Aetalis Asitar?”

“Old Decorian. Eternally devoted or some crap.”

“So it’s from before the war?” Keyza gave a little nod with a smirk. Finally, Alkyone couldn’t help herself. She grinned. “What’s inside?”

Keyza picked up a small prybar, worked it into a gap in the seam, and cracked it open. The pop resounded in the room, and her sister opened it. Inside was black velvet padding which, to its credit, was still intact and soft. A pair of pistols met her eyes, glossy black revolvers with silver scrollwork of roses. They were as much art as weapon. A twelve inch blade protruded beneath the barrel. “Aethercharge pistols?” Alkyone breathed, reaching for one and cracking it open to look at the six capsules of concentrated energy. Keyza smacked her hand and then picked them both up before she passed Alkyone one.

“I get the better one,” Keyza said with a smirk. Alkyone rolled her eyes and took the pistol “It’s set to a sonic discharge, but you could get it tuned to something better.”

“Fire? Oooh, lightning! Nothing better than a lightning gun,” She said as she tucked it into her sash. “Now Key, about Pier-”

“Wait, wait, wait! That was just the foreplay,” she said as she pulled down the padding on the lid, reveiling a hidden compartment. “This is the sex,” she replied as she drew out a folder. “Ever hear of something called ‘Project Adamant?’ Or ‘Skyfall?’ Or ‘Chimera’? These were dirty secret projects during the war. I can barely understand any of them, but...” she extracted some papers. “This one is ‘Project Farsight’ and it’s at... Duh dun dunn... Savage River Naval Base.”

“Savage...” Alkyone murmured, then her eyes went wide. “Bloody hells, Keyza. That’s here!”

Keyza let out a chuckle. “Oh yes. Under here,” she said, stamping her foot.

“But no one’s able to get down there. It’s all sealed up and flooded... isn’t it?” Alkyone asked, carefully hooking the aethercharge pistol into her sash.

“That’s where this comes into it,” she said as she reached into the case and extracted a little black enameled box. Inside was a red rhomboid crystal. Inside it glowed numerous semi circular rings that seemed to be moving and shifting about inside the gem. In Spite of the padding, numerous cracks appeared in its structure. Carved on one side was ‘EC-1101.’”

“Shiny,” Alkyone murmured. “What is it? Some old arcane regulator?”

“I have no idea, but get it near one of the old war computers and watch,” She said as she carried it over to the corner. She banged on the box like monitor several times, and the screen finally flickered to life, asking for a password. Her claws typed the keys at random and the screen just flickered and the line cleared.

“I’m shocked it even works at all,” Alkyone laughed. “Pegasi tech, huh? But about the town-”

“Shhh! Shhh! Shhh! Watch,” she said as she moved the rhombus close.

The screen flickered as the semi circles inside the crystal began to tick and flick back and forth. Suddenly the screen blinked and came to a menu. “Savage River Naval Station. Security clearance, Divine.” Below it listed a number of options.

“Wicked,” she replied. “It’s got passwords in it. But Keyza, the town? Why is the Pier in such rotten shape?”

“You and the town! I thought you’d be more curious, Alky!” her twin laughed. She scrolled down to ‘Project Foresight’. “I don’t understand most of the junk, but it talked about something they did during the war with the Feduians. Using an arcane energy emitter like our lighthouse to make contact with something awesome.” Keyza said with a smirk. “Something that they stashed under the Pier.”

“What?” Alkyone asked, her pinions raised in apprehension, and a little excitement.

“Let me show you,” she said as she pushed something on the computer. Instantly the screen began to run some kind of code, opening and closing windows as the strange little spell gem flickered and flashed, the semi circles rotating too and fro inside the heart of the gem. ‘EC-1101 confirmed’ Then a klaxon sounded in the deep. The people in the room immediately stirred, wide happy childish grins appearing on every face as they quickly funneled out. However, a red box appeared on the screen reading ‘Warning, Aetheric emitter not found.’ Alkyone stared in shock as the crystal gave a little pop, a fresh crack appearing in the surface. Keyza immediately clacked the enamelled case closed.

“That’s what we needed the lighthouse emitter for,” her sibling said. Keyza took Alkyone’s hand, pulling her towards the door, the other holding that black case. “Come. You have to see it! It’s so beautiful.”

Alkyone let herself be led, feeling dread and excitement in equal measures inside her gut. Outside, she emerged into the plaza where the huge plate was being lifted slowly into the air by a hydraulic ram. The squealing of metal as the massive hole appeared made Alkyone’s tail twitch as

everyone pressed forward. She couldn't see into the hole, and wasn't sure she wanted to as the people gathered in jubilant glee.

"It hates the sun. We have to close it up. It takes a special kind of light to bring it out," Keyza explained. Alkyone watched as the emitter was placed on a pole and dangled out over the edge of the pit. The generator roared to life, and the emitter began to flash a sickly green, waxy light.

"Keyza, what the hell is going on?" Alkyone asked in alarm as the cage was swung out over the pit. The griffon screamed, swore, and wept in turn, clawing at the thick metal.

"It's hungry," she said placidly. "It just needs a nibble."

"What..." Alkyone started to ask, but watched in shock as something dark and wet rose into view. The tendril of flesh appeared gray, with veins of green light glowing along the surface. Here and there mouths gaped, lampret toothed, like the suckers on an octopus. They stretched up towards the cage, and the griffon fought, snapping and clawing at the tentacles that augured themselves through the holes. Wherever they bit, great bloody holes appeared.

{ALTERNATIVE}

The dodecahedron body was the color of rotten meat, an oily patina covering it. From its surface extended a half dozen pseudopods that extended outwards from the core. Gray cubical masses punctuating the limbs extended from the limbs, the geometric shapes blurred under the rubbery mass. The ends extended like fingers, each tipped with a lamprey like mouth.

"What is that? Keyza!" she said in horror. A pirate got used to many horrible things, but this?

"It's better with her. Before we needed our own people. The light was barely enough to get it to appear. It needs a stronger emitter to pull more of it out," her twin said as matter of factly as she watched with a blissful smile. "It's all worth it."

"Worth what?" Alkyone asked, but then got her answer.

It sang.

The countless tentacles that weren't trying to rip bites out of the griffon in the cage waved like undersea kelp, and from the countless unnatural voices came a song like a choir of angles. It rose as fell in no melody, but every note was glorious. She vaguely recognized the melody hummed by the people on the street. Instantly the horror dribbled out of her as the sea like mass swayed in its unearthy chorus. Peace. Tranquility. Joy. It was a song that promised all of these.

And Alkyone felt herself slipping away. Maybe it was the screams of the griffon fighting for her life, or the orgasmic look of bliss her sister wore, but she struggled for something... anything... that might end the beautiful song.

Her hand reached down to the pistol, held it up next to her head, and pulled the trigger.

Sonic weapons were always hit or miss. Hit, and your brain exploded like an egg. Miss, and you just had a migraine. Alkyone couldn't be sure if she'd pointed it at her head or not, but the cone of sonic energy knocked her right off her feet, sending her tumbling down the stairs and into the crowd. She laid there a moment, blood coming out her nostrils and ears before she blinked and gave herself a hard

shake. Okay... brain not exploded but it had one good effect: she couldn't hear a damned thing. The song was now this strange note, as if it were being played underwater.

Fuck this... thing. Whatever it had done to her sister, to her home, she was getting out of here now. Keyza's eyes were closed. She swayed, her mouth moving silently to the sound track of the tinitus in her ear. In her hand, loosely held, was the strange enamelled case with the crystal inside. Her sister work a look of childish glee as she swayed with the tentacles, her mouth moving. Was she singing along? Asking Alkyone how wonderful she thought this horror show was? It didn't matter.

She reached down and yanked the box from her sister's hand. Whether it had caused this, or was just the key, didn't matter. She had to get it away from her. Keyza's reactions were slow. She'd never had gotten from her if this thing wasn't compromising her reflexes. As she pulled it away with one hand, she brought up the other, pointed it at her sister's midriff, and pulled the trigger. Her sister's feathers and clothes flapped wildly as the shockwave knocked her firmly on her ass.

The crowd didn't even notice as Alkyone moved around the edge towards the crane, clambering up to get a shot over the crowd. The tentacles were darting through the gaps in the cage, coming away with gobbits of meat. The griffon might already be dead, but she couldn't just leave it. She examined the pistol and twisted a little ring just above the cylinder. I hope this works," she muttered, taking aim at the cage. The blast knocked it out of the grip of those wiggling tendrils, their plasm splashing across the rest of the mass as the cage spun wildly. She glanced over at where Keyza was rising and took aim again. Two more shots and the lock blew right off the door.

The griffon wasted no time knocking it open and flapping out into the air. Though it had more holes than Alkyone thought possible, it still managed to get aloft and away from the crowd. If it said anything, Alkyone couldn't hear it over the tintinitis she'd given herself. That left her with the question of what the heck was she going to do next. While she had the crystal, could they close the hatch? What about the emitter? She had to stop this madness now while she still could.

She looked across the pit at the generator, the emitter, and the elevated fuel tank. Pro, gravity fed meant no need for a pump. Con... Alkyone took aim at the drum and fired again and again. Each impact made it rock, and then the drum broke free, falling on the generator and splashing across the mass in the pit. A fwoosh later and the fuel ignited, spreading across the creature.

If it didn't like sunlight, it really didn't like fire, and while she couldn't hear it, she could 'feel' a sensation like claws on skin. The mob collapsed as well, screaming. Some, lit on fire, didn't even bother extinguishing themselves as they thrashed. "Time to go!" Alkyone yelled to herself, jumping from the crane and beating her wings furiously to land afoot, running away from the plaza and towards the edge of the pens.

The mobs gathered around the open holes were already recovering, along with Alkyone's hearing. It wasn't just the unearthly screaming... it was rage. Pure, unadulterated rage. She could imagine it coming right from Keyza's beak as she ran. It wasn't a minute before she had pursuers.

Good thing for her that she was an expert at running away. She darted down an alley and used every drum, crate, and obstacle she could as she raced to the edge. "Tarboots!" She screamed. "I hope you got that metronome ready!"

"Captain!" he shouted, waving from the edge. A jump down from here would mean a broken leg at best on the lacing of docks, but Tarboots had lassoed the end of a sailboat and had winched it down till

the tip of the mast touched the rail of the pen. “What’s going on?” She jammed the case into one of his deep pockets. “What’s that?”

“Trouble, Swabbie. My sister’s lost her damn mind,” Alkyone said as she grabbed the rope. She let out a shrill whistle and the rowboat started to paddle towards the sail boat rapidly. She eyed the bend in the mast. “Ready?”

“I bloody hate this. For the record,” he said as he also took a firm grip. Alkyone slashed at the rope tied to the rail with the gun’s blade. Mobs burst into view, the roar growing. Tarboot’s eyes widened. “I change my mind! I love it, Captain!”

The rope popped and gave way all at once, and despite herself she laughed as the pair of them swung over the sailboat, the momentum carrying them over the harbor. The sailboat leaned further and further over, but as it slowed as started to swing back, they released. Falling from a more manageable three stories still shook her hard, but there was no time for that. She swam with Tarboots, clambering into the rowboat. Some of the mob were trying to jump the forty feet down, crashing on to decks and docks. “Grab oar and row!” she yelled as she scrambled into position. The mob had guns, and they were starting to use them. The water around them popped and zingged as bullets from above slashed into the harbor.

They weren’t going to make it. She pulled against the oars as fast and hard and she could, but with all those guns...

Something plunged from the sky and landed on the rear of the boat. Alkyone snatched the pistol from her sash, pointing it at the face of the white and red griffon. “Don’t,” the beast snapped. “Hold on instead.”

Alkyone deferred to the half mythological beast and did so. It was always a mystery how griffons flew. It wasn’t so much that they flapped their wings as their wings just moved air... a lot of air... behind them. The rowboat surged along the harbor like a speedboat, throwing up a roostertail of water. In less than a minute they circled around the end of the pier and into the river proper. Though there were still shots, Alkyone risked a look back.

Maybe it was just fate, or twinsense, or something, but she spotted her sister’s white plumage near where they’d ridden the mast out over the harbor.

“Well, glad that’s over!” Tarboots said as the griffon powered them over to the Golden Gull.

“Think again, swabby. Look,” she said as she pointed at the harbor, where the mob was moving to every ship tied up. “Get aboard.” She said as she turned to the griffon.

“We’re even,” the griffon declared, then launched itself into the air, powering away into the night sky.

“Right,” Alkyone muttered, then clambered aboard. “Leave the launch,” she shouted to her crew. “Cut the line. Get the sails out. Move!”

In a thrice, the sacrificial anchor was sacrificed, the river current pushing them out to sea. Some of the tied up ships were taking potshots at the Gull, and Alkyone climbed to the wheel with Tarboots. She reached into his coat and pulled out the case, cracking it open. The little red rhombus glowed passively, declaring ‘EC-1101’ as the disks inside swirled and twitched.

“What is that, captain?” Tarboots asked as the emitter was uncased. The light splayed out, assembled themselves into glowing white feather like wings, and the Gull was swept away.

“Trouble, Swabbie,” Alkyone muttered. “And we’re neck deep in it.”