

## Chapter 1

He groaned, not recognizing his own voice. Bloodshot eyes opened reluctantly, cringing before the bright light of day. His vision wavered, submerged beneath fathoms of foggy, underwater haze. His belabored mind seesawed from one unconnected thought to the next. The images were disjointed, fleeting, insubstantial. A momentary panic arose within him- was he overboard? Were these the thoughts of a drowning man? A dying man? And then, this thought like the rest, vanished into the mists.

He heard something. Or did he? He tried to place the sound. Was it the scratch of a salty main sail being furled? Unfurled? The rasp of a boar-hair scrub brush upon the main deck? The incessant thrum in his head made it impossible to concentrate. There- was that a cough? Someone *was* near! Someone who could reach out a hand, save him, drag him from his death-!

He strove to call out, to wave his arms. Something kept him down, some omnipresent power that weighted his limbs like leaden chains. It kept him deep beneath the fog. He fought against it, the veins in his neck standing out like serpents, pulsing in time with his rapid heartbeat. Every sinew in his weary frame strove to break the invisible hold, to cast off the restraints. Tensions built within him. Surely all this pressure would force his head violently from his shoulders in another moment. He must call out, he must!

An ineffectual groan escaped him, nothing more.

Then it was over. He was bested- beat. Too weak to cry for help, too far beneath the waves to care, he gave up the struggle and let darkness reign.

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A vague shadow crossed his line of sight. He could see- not well enough for details, but it was vision after a fashion. Everything was white- bright, painful, indistinct. The dark blur caught his attention and then it was gone. He could not focus. He was too weak. Nor could he turn his head to follow the shadow's departure. There came to him a distant creak- that of a door. Or was it a main spar under heavy wind? Thoughts began to slide and collide again. The presence was back, that invisible weight, with its iron grip squeezing his brain like a sponge. Notions and motives ran together like bilge water. Could he be at sea? Where was the roar of the trade winds? The salty spray of the waves? The pitch and roll of the deck?

Where *was* he?

Nothing made sense. Everything from his world was missing. Had he passed on? Had he slipped into that great beyond? The prospect of mortality- his mortality- made his very lifeblood run cold.

Wherever he was, in the land of the living or the dead, the blessed or the damned, he was certain of one thing: he was alone.

Alone.

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The drums in his head woke him again. How long he lay unconscious he could not tell. Moments? Hours? Days? The glare of white in his blinded eyes began to take shape, to assume definite form and substance. He blinked, his vision clearing. The weight, the chains, the presence- all of it was gone. He was free. Free- free to experience all the pain of his broken frame.

He squinted, winced, scowled at his predicament. No supreme master hovered over him ready to judge, to condemn, to cast down; only a nondescript ceiling in a

nondescript room. White plaster stucco hovered aloft braced by ribs of bare wooden beams. Alabaster walls, also a blistering white, surrounded him close on all sides. The sight of familiar things, mundane as they may have been, soothed his troubled mind: a chair, a small table, a wash basin, a folded towel. These were not the trappings of the afterworld. Nor were they the tools of a celestial court. Divine radiance? Hardly. This was merely the glare of a bright afternoon sun.

The droning in his head lulled to a dull throb. He was master of his own again.

The air was full of song now- old, long-forgotten notes that called to him from a distant childhood. It rang unfamiliar in his embittered ear: delightful and cheerful, musical and whimsical. Song birds. Truly a far cry from the grating caw of gulls that he knew of old, wretched scavengers whose shrieks ate at the soul like the mocking, derisive laughter of a spiteful sibling. A breeze outside the open window stirred a warm, scented air. His mind's eye envisioned a giant oak verdant with shimmering, fluttering leaves- standing just out of sight like a protective grandfather.

Summer on the mainland.

Like a thunderclap, sudden and unexpected, his wits cleared and he was sitting upright in bed. The sea-faring spirit within him crushed away all fanciful thoughts of summer and sunshine and quietude. In an instant his buccaneer suspicions were roused to knife-edge sharpness. He knew he was in danger- not a day passed without some danger lurking in the wings. A fool let his guard drop an instant. A dead fool let it tarry a moment longer. He hadn't survived two decades on the open seas by daydreaming about birds and trees and sunshine. Surveying this empty room, however, he could not tell straightway where the danger lay. It was there, of that he was sure. There was no such thing as a safe port of call for Timion the Black. It was only a matter of time before

the hidden threat raised its scaly head. When it did, he would be ready- ready to crush it down before it had a chance to finish him first.

It was a small, neat room. The four walls surrounding him were bare, scrubbed clean. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in a room with plastered walls. He was accustomed to the coarse planks of lesser inns where the drafts blew freely and the shrill voices of whores echoed at all hours of the night. Though simple and bare, these walls were well-kept and bore only the slightest of cracks.

Sunlight slanted into the room through a single window that bore no sill. It was an oval molded into the plaster of the wall itself. Though small, the daylight it afforded illuminated every corner- too brightly for his tired eyes. Averting his gaze, he picked out the furnishings half noticed before: his bed, a side table with its basin, and a solitary chair. All were austere in the extreme, simple wood and reed with not so much as a touch of varnish upon their unfinished faces. The only decoration- if such a thing could be called so- hung modestly on an opposite wall: a religious symbol carved from commonplace wood. He stared at it stupidly, like a dog at the dinner table. The faith it represented was unfamiliar to him. This stirred his suspicions anew. How had he come here- a temple of all places? Timion the Black was not a name synonymous with piety. On a regular basis did he invoke the names of gods in vain, to curse the wretched luck of his life. Or the good fortune of others. The years were too numerous to count since he had last stepped into a house or worship. Sober at least. Questions plagued him: Why was he here? How had he arrived? And where exactly was 'here'?

A pungent smell roused him from this mystery. A scrub bucket and bristle brush sat on the floor. A damp patch on the flagstones showed where someone's work had

been interrupted. He nodded to himself. Someone *had* been here at one point. And not long ago, scrubbing away.

The musty water made him cough. He winced at unexpected pain in his side. A quick glance down and he saw his chest was swathed in linens- bloody linens. Touching his head, Timion found it similarly bandaged. His suspicions doubled. He had few friends who would tend his wounds so neatly- and they were not the type to frequent the temple districts! Yet here he was, bed-ridden in some devout haven, with his wounds tended and not a worry to care. Someone had taken great pains to comfort him in an hour of need. These clues failed to rouse feelings of good fortune- only suspicion. He rubbed his chin absently while pondering. The simple act revealed, much to his vexation, that his benefactors had even gone so far as to shave away his trademark beard. Any thought of gratitude lurking within his breast sank to the depths of the deepest sea. There would be hell to pay for this discourtesy! Timion the Black- beardless? Aye- devils to pay!

It was hot. Was it the heat of the day, or was he in the grip of a fever? He needed a drink, something to slake his thirst. He cast off the sheets. Stains of blood and sweat marked the under covers. Blood- so much blood. The sight made no impression upon his hardened soul. Not enough lost to finish him, still enough in his veins to keep him going. Last man standing was the only one to count!

His feet hit the damp floor and a wave of dizziness overwhelmed him. Timion stooped in a half crouch, teetering momentarily between standing up or dropping back to his sickbed. Deep breaths, he cautioned himself. Slow and deep...

Still enough in my veins to keep me going... going...

In this state of indecision they came upon him. No knock upon the door was made. No warning was given. The wooden portal creaked like the lid of a coffin. Bleary-eyed, fighting nausea, Timion looked up to see a young girl enter. He knew at once the child was a slave, or some similar caste. Her tunic was simple, short and threadbare. No extra material had been spared to cover her long legs, only so much as decency required. Her feet were bare, rough, dirty from going about without protection. That old maxim came to mind: 'Barefoot slaves never run far from home.' Nevertheless, the child did not look unhappy in her place.

Their eyes met: his narrowed and calculating, hers timid and curious. Instantly the slave child looked away. She shuffled to one side of the chamber, keeping her back pressed against the wall and eyes averted.

A second visitor entered more slowly, gracefully, pushing the door open to its full extent before braving the threshold. She was an older woman, much older than the slave. Threads of gray veined her chestnut mane. Small hair combs kept the style swept back from a broad, plain face. This woman's station was not so easily guessed. Her tunic was simple and lacking any decoration, yet it did not speak the life of a slave. The skirt beneath was full and fell clear to her ankles. Below the hem sturdy, modest sandals protected sturdy, modest feet. Like the room in which they stood she was sparse, somber, functional, scrubbed clean and bearing only a few cracks of age.

Timion shrugged to himself. What care had he for the woman's breeding or caste? Like all women, she wanted something from him. Something, when he had nothing to give. The surly buccaneer seated himself on the edge of the bed and regarded her boldly. She returned the stare coolly. There was no timidity, no fear. Shoulders

straight, hands clasped ceremoniously across her stomach, the woman allowed herself a moment of preparation, as when a warrior sizes a foe before the coming battle.

“Very well, Alyssia,” she proclaimed to the girl. “Gather your things and leave us. You may finish your chores here later.”

Muttering thanks, the child slave complied. Skitting forward, she fetched the scrub brush in one hand and then hoisted the bucket in a tiny bear hug. Eyes dutifully averted she slipped from the room on tiny, slapping feet. Her mistress closed the door for privacy.

“What place is this?” Timion rumbled, putting a hand to his head. His words were rough, though unintentionally so. It hurt even to speak! Perhaps death would have been more pleasant after all.

She did not answer. Instead she crossed the small chamber and sat upon the tired wicker chair. He noted absently how similar they were, woman and chair: nondescript, worn from use, yet still functional. The chair still had many years of service left. Could the same be said of her?

“This is the Mother Temple of DeMere.”

He flinched at her tone: crisp, steely, a verbal poniard. “I’ve heard of it,” he admitted, bracing his forehead in an upturned palm. He stared at the floor between his bare feet. “Vaguely... DeMere... DeMere... You turn girls into nuns... or something.”

“We mold young women,” she countered tersely. “The choice of higher calling, spiritual devotion, is up to the individual. The path of sacred service is, admittedly, not for everyone-” She stopped abruptly.

He looked up in anticipation.

“But I need not bore you with matters which do not concern you directly.”

“No?” He repressed a grin. She spoke with assumed authority and projected an air of unshakable self-confidence. He saw otherwise. The woman’s body language betrayed her. She sat with hands folded meticulously in her lap, feet planted solidly, ankles touching, knees pressed resolutely together. She had reservations about being alone with him- despite his near-death condition. Turning his head, Timion stared absently in the direction of the lone window. The angle was bad. He had to imagine sights to go with the sounds that floated in.

“Where am I?” he repeated. “Last I recall...” He tried to remember. So much was a blank- a blur. “We put in to Glammenport on the twenty-first...”

“This is the city of Glammenport. The day is the twenty-third.”

He made a throaty noise. Glammenport? With the sounds of birds and the scents of blossoms in the air? If this truly was Glammenport, then he was far from his normal haunts, far from the noise and filth of the waterfront districts where he was known in every back alley dive by face if not by reputation. His vision blurred momentarily and his head felt as big as a cauldron. It hurt to think. Through closed eyes he asked, “How is it I arrived here? I don’t recall...”

“The city guard. They carted you from somewhere in the northern wharf district.”

“The Watch? Devils and demons why? Did they take me for a corpse? Were they looking to plant me in the ground with a sprinkle of holy water? You’ve a graveyard out back?”

“No. Only gardens.”

Timion chuckled ironically. Hrump! Wouldn’t even make good fertilizer.

She continued: "The Mother Temple has an... equitable arrangement with the city watch. They often carry wounded men to our doors. We are healers."

"Is that so, then? I had no idea the Mother Temple was so noted for its... its..."

He groped for the word.

"Altruism?"

Timion frowned. Perhaps that was the word he wanted. But those thoughts were a long, long time ago. Another life. "Aye... altruism."

She inclined her shoulders slightly. "The Watch knows if someone of note- say someone from a noble house- is entangled in a... legal conundrum which could lead to a possible embarrassment... the Mother Temple is willing to handle the injured party in a discreet manner." She let her guest digest this for a space. To be sure her point was made, she prompted in a lower voice, "Families of wealth often contribute liberally to the Mother Temple for the careful handling of their wayward sons."

He nodded. "No doubt these same families generously reward the watchmen as well for showing such thoughtfulness- bringing their boys here rather than before the magistrate. Gold for silence. It simply will not do to have the good family name sullied by a lad's night of drinking and whoring."

She frowned at this sarcastic mood. "The impetuosity of youth often deludes a young man into believing he is a master of the sword. And to that end, women and drink are dangerous catalysts for baring steel."

He made a disgusted sound. "Even the holy temples are not above taking tainted gold."

"The Mother Temple is a humble house of the gods. It must do what it can to pay her costs. Our gardens cannot furnish all our needs. As for law and order, penance

for crime, reward for martyrdom, all these shall be dolled out in time by gods far more knowledgeable than you or I. Who are men to sit and judge their own? Only the gods possess the wisdom for such conclusions. The Mother Temple is a place of forgiveness. Of growth. We do not judge. We heal the body as well as the soul. Those who are brought to us invariably realize the error of their ways and leave with a healthier respect for their lives. Or at least their mortality. We have never administered twice to the same soul. We are satisfied with this. Dark shadows do not cloud the conscience of the Mother Temple.”

“Well, I’m no nobleman’s son,” he grumbled. “Nor am I a foppish dandy privy to the king’s invitation at court. Never have I worn silks, donned powdered wigs, or quaffed spiced wine from a golden cup. I’m an old seadog, a buccaneer, a sword for hire on the open waves. No servants bow and scrape to my every command, bathing me, dressing me, fixing sumpt’us meals and setting them before me at a grand table. Nay!” He ran a hand over his naked jaw. “And I do not care to have my face scraped clean without my consent! If I wish these things done- I do them myself! If I-”

A brash image pushed its way into his thoughts, elbowing aside his tirade. It came from nowhere and he feared the delirium was upon him again. His host was speaking, but her words were ineffectual, sounds without meaning. The scene in his mind took hold of him. There was carousing and drinking and more. There were red faces lit by flickering firelight. A low-ceilinged common room full of shouting and singing and stomping feet crashed in his ears. Ah, the *Blushing Wench*! It started to come back to him. He and his company had shacked up at the *Blushing Wench*, a score of sea-hardened mercenaries waiting for their ship to sail. They drank until after the Witching Hour. And then...? Then...? What had happened? He groped for the next

piece of his memory. It hovered just out of reach, hazy, wavering. He was trying to remember, trying too hard. It was slipping, slipping away. His head started to spin and sweat sprang out anew upon his brow. Suddenly a gap-toothed face was staring at him, laughing, taunting, jeering. Ike! That damnable bastard! It came back to him in a rush. He jumped from the bed in a rage.

“That worm-ridden cur double-crossed me! Lured me into an ambush! That thrice-cursed whoreson! When I get my hands on him-”

“I beg your apology!” his hostess interjected. Her explanation of why it had been necessary to shave him as he slept went to the wind. He had not heard a word.

Timion bristled. The woman braced her words upon an air of authority, or aristocracy- possibly both. Whatever court she called home, it was plain she was not one to tolerate a sailor’s mouth. Well, he wasn’t in the mood to be chastised by some milk-skinned spinster.

“You think my tongue coarse? Nay- hardly, woman. I can make a whore blush to the roots if I choose- wait!” Another disjointed thought had spilled into his mind. “The time? What is the-?”

On stiff-legged strides he staggered from the bed to the window. The gardens beyond sweltered beneath a summer day. Half a dozen girls in white tunics tended vegetables and flowers. Timion craned his neck in the tiny window to check the angle of the sun. The overhang of roof blocked his line of sight. “Devils, what is the hour?”

“Midday will be upon us momentarily,” she replied, unaffected by this apparent *non sequitur*. Such disorientation was common in her patients. “You are too weak to be on your feet. Please return to your bed. You have not yet healed fully, and overtax-”

“Noon! Noon of the twenty-third you say?” He turned from the window, face growing livid with rage. His fingers flexed, aching to have a grip on Ike’s scrawny neck. Would he find the flesh smooth, or scaled like the vile serpent he was? Treacherous beast! It was noon on the day of the twenty-third! The *Stark* had sailed at dawn with the tide. His men- gone. Gone- following that two-faced whoreson, Ike. Traitorous dogs, each and every last one of them. No doubt the *Stark* was well down the coast by now, halfway to Hargus. There’d be hell to pay- hell to pay!

And then the next instant the fire, the fury was gone. There was nothing he could do to change the facts of his situation. Timion limped back to bed. He felt old-impotent. He tried to ignore the extra pounds he had accumulated over the years, the aches and pains in his joints. He was not seventeen anymore. He felt more like seventy. A wound under his dressings burned like hot iron.

It was then he noticed he was naked save for his bandages. He glanced around the room for his belongings. “Where be my things? What have you done with them? I must go dockside and make some inquiries...”

If she was upset by his nakedness, his host made no outward sign. Her gaze remained fixed on him as before, not a touch of shame nor embarrassment staining her cheeks. “Your clothes have been scrubbed of their blood, vomit, vermin and wine.” The inflection she placed upon this last word voiced her disapproval of drink. Ferment from the vine was for ceremony only, not daily consumption. “Presently they are being mended by the Mother Temple’s seamstress. If it is humanly possible to repair them she will find a way. Until then, you have been supplied with a tunic.” A stray gesture indicated a neat bundle of white next to the water basin.

The garment unfolded in his grip like a lotus blossom, plain wool so well kept it felt to his rough hands like the purest of silk. Pliant fabric was alien to him. Life on the sea meant the same salt and sweat-encrusted breeks day in and day out. Proud, hard, he refused to enjoy the scented touch as he donned the top. Meant to be a loose-fitting affair for young women, the garment lacked the designs for a broad shouldered, reprobate buccaneer whose belly rivaled the kegs he favored. Timion grumbled in displeasure, struggling to pull the folds across his paunch. His thick fingers had a terrible time fastening the very ends of the sash. The hem had questionable success covering his manhood.

Near unto death, betrayed by his men, unemployed... and now reduced to wearing women's clothing! Aye, perhaps death would have been the easier route.

"Before you set your mind to departure," she began, getting to her feet, "there is one matter we must discuss. The Mother Temple has seen to your needs. We have not questioned-"

He stopped her with a raised hand. He knew into which port this verbal voyage was blowing. "Listen, sauce, I've told you I'm no nobleman with gold a plenty--"

She flared. "You may address me as Your Grace!"

"The four fiery doors of hell I will. Hear this- *woman!*- I'm no rich dandy who insulted the town drunk and settled the matter over drawn blades. And I'm many, many years past having my Paps bail me out! There'll be no generous rewards of silver or gold for your *discreet* tending of my wounds. Fair's fair, I'll admit. Patching me up and letting me sleep it off was more than I ever expected from anyone in this port. I won't deny I didn't need it. But I'm no treasure house. I've some coins in my pouch. I can

spare one or two coppers for your troubles. It won't be a prince's ransom, mind you, but it should cover the cost of new sheets-!"

Suddenly he was an old man. He didn't have the strength to argue. Weak, dizzy, he turned to go. Where? He had no idea. The weight, the chains, the presence was back. He needed to flee, escape in any direction available.

His world spun, someone gasped, and blackness engulfed him.