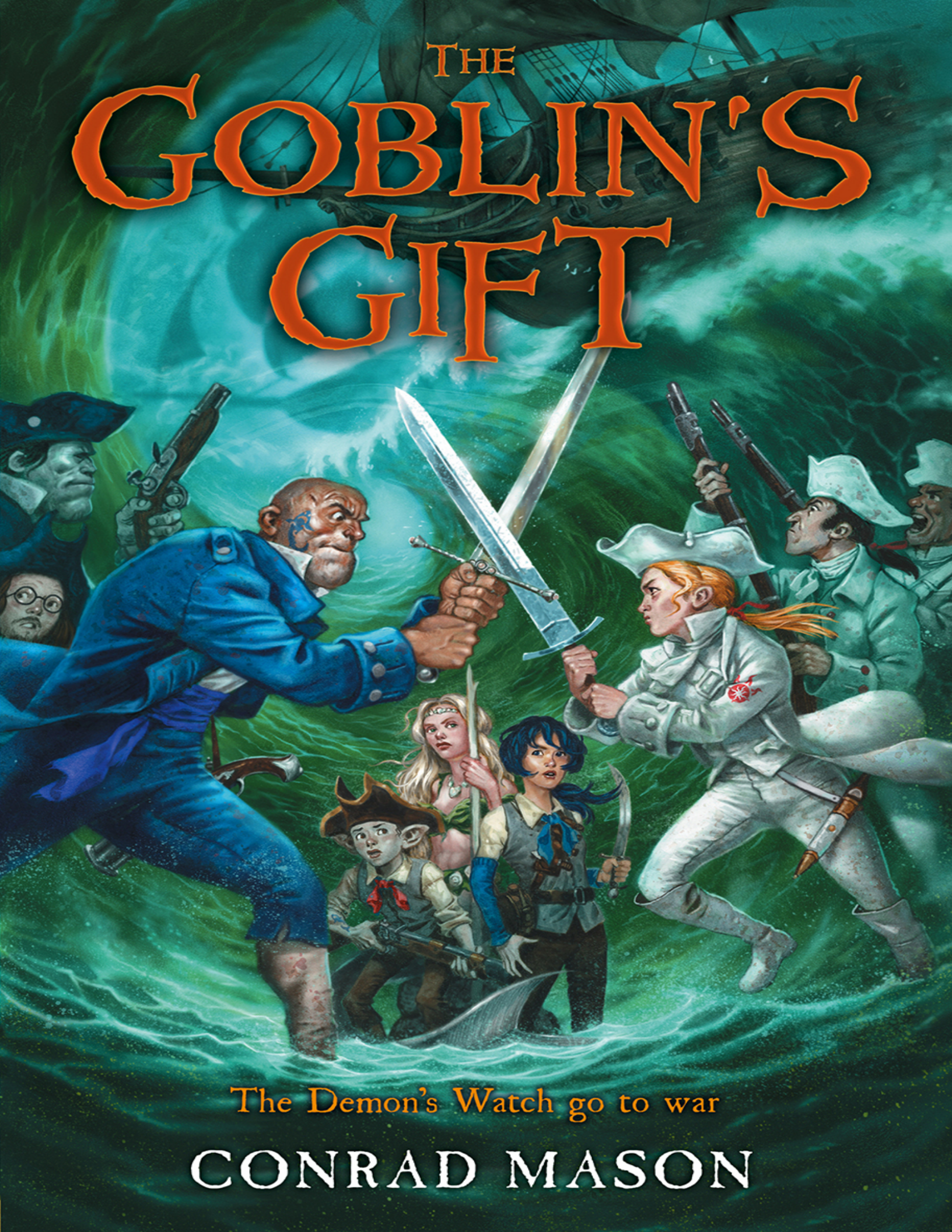


THE GOBLIN'S GIFT



The Demon's Watch go to war

CONRAD MASON

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Also by Conrad Mason

Title Page

Dedication

Maps

Prologue

PART ONE

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Interlude

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Interlude

PART TWO

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Interlude

PART THREE

Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two
Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Interlude
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six
Chapter Twenty-seven
Chapter Twenty-eight
Chapter Twenty-nine
Interlude

PART FOUR

Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-one
Chapter Thirty-two
Chapter Thirty-three

PART FIVE

Chapter Thirty-four

Chapter Thirty-five

Epilogue

Certain Remarks by Thalin

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Praise for *The Tales of Fayt*

Copyright

About the Book

Half-goblin boy Joseph Grubb is the newest member of the Demon's Watch. He and his fellow watchmen protect Port Fayt, where humans live in peace alongside trolls, elves and fairies. And now the town needs them more than ever, because the almighty League of the Light has sent an armada to wipe it off the map.

The Fayters' only hope is to persuade the magical merfolk to fight with them. But the merfolk won't go to war. Not unless their princess is returned to them from the clutches of the most dangerous nine-year-old in the Ebony Ocean.

It's up to Joseph and his friend Tabitha to rescue the mermaid princess ... But a secret from Joseph's past is about to change everything.

Also by Conrad Mason:

Tales of Fayt, Book I: The Demon's Watch

THE GOBLIN'S GIFT

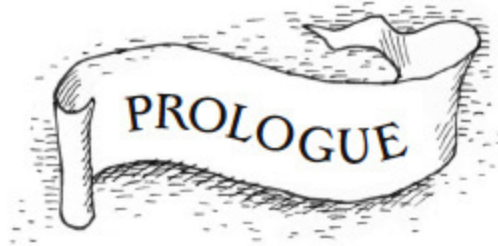
CONRAD MASON

RHCP DIGITAL

For Mark and Verity







IT'S NOT THE pain that he enjoys.

It's the fear.

He straightens his glasses with a thumb and forefinger and inspects the creature squirming on the desk before him. It is pinned to a wooden block, wings pierced with Azurmouth steel so that it cannot escape from the darkened cabin.

A female fairy. Daemonium volans. Demonspawn.

There is a grotesque fascination in the way it struggles, tries to lift its wings against the steel of the pins, begs, pleads with him to let it go. Almost unbearably disgusting.

'I'll tell you anything,' it cries. 'Please. I promise.'

'Anything? Truly, you'd tell me anything?'

He is rewarded with a flicker of hope in the creature's eyes.

'Yes, sir. I've lived in Port Fayt all my life, sir. I've seen some things, I can tell you. Just give me a chance.'

He leans over the desk, one hand resting on a green marble paperweight, examining the way the creature's wings protrude through holes cut into the fabric of its dirty dress. So foul. So unnatural.

'But what could you possibly know that might help me?'

'I've seen their fleet, sir. The Fayter fleet. I can tell you about their men and their guns. I can tell you all about

Governor Skelmerdale. I can tell you ... I can ...' Its voice peters out. The flicker of hope dies.

'Suppose you could. What difference would it make? Do you really suppose the Fayters stand a chance against us? No, my dear. I fear you are no use at all.'

'Kill me then. I'm not afraid.'

It has stopped struggling now and lies, tiny arms folded, glaring up at him. Its body glows faintly against the wooden block.

He raises his eyebrows. He had not expected this. Bravery, from such a despicable creature. He would not have thought it possible. And this bravery has driven away all trace of the fear. The fear that he so enjoys.

'I am impressed,' he admits. 'Most impressed.'

There is a knock at the door.

'Enter.'

Morning sunshine spills into the cabin as a white-jacketed marine ducks his head inside.

'Your honour, a vessel has been sighted to the west of our fleet. A wavecutter, flying no colours.'

The Duke of Garran considers for a moment, then nods.

'Very well. I will attend to it.'

He sweeps his hat from the desk, making the fairy flinch.

'Don't worry,' he tells it. 'You've shown me that you are brave. You're not afraid any more. That's good. Very good.'

Hope returns to the fairy's eyes. Delicious. And in one swift movement, the Duke of Garran lifts the marble paperweight and brings it down.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

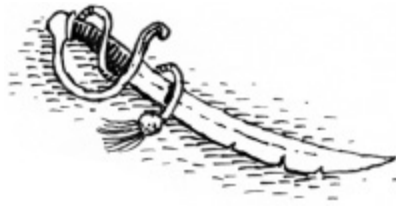
There is not even a scream.

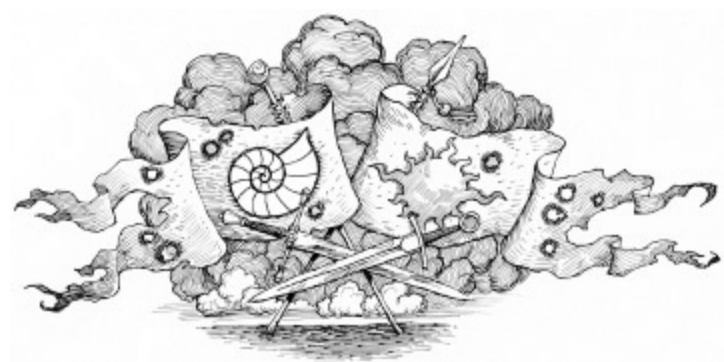
He turns back to the marine.

'Send someone in here,' he says, 'to clean my desk.'

PART ONE

Armada





Chapter One

JOSEPH GRUBB CLUNG to the ratlines, gripping the ropes so tightly they burned his hands.

‘What are you waiting for?’ came Tabitha’s voice from below.

He gritted his teeth and kept climbing, doing his best to block out everything except the regular motion: left foot, right hand; right foot, left hand. *Come on. You can do this.* Back in Fayt, he used to scramble up the stepladder in his uncle’s pantry every day. Two weeks ago he’d even clambered onto the rooftops of the Marlinspike Quarter to chase a cat. And now he was climbing to the crow’s nest of a wavecutter, swaying on a few bits of rope more than a hundred feet above the deck, so high that the people below looked like colourful beetles. So high that ... He swallowed.

Not helping.

He paused again, panting, brow prickling with sweat. On his raised right arm a fresh tattoo was scored into his greyish-pink mongrel skin. A swirling blue shark – the mark of a watchman. It was still almost impossible to believe that this was what he was. But the proof was right there, in front of his eyes. The Demon’s Watch. Protectors of Port Fayt. Scourge of all sea scum.

Scourge of Mrs Bootle’s pies, more like.

The thought made him smile, and he started to climb again.

The crow’s nest wasn’t far now. As he moved, a spyglass bumped around inside the right pocket of his breeches, balancing out the bouncing of the cutlass on his left hip.

Captain Newton had given it to him on the day he got his tattoo. The hand-guard was made of thick, solid brass, and the hilt had smooth oiled leather wrapped tightly around it. There was a small shark carved on the blade, and a word neatly lettered beneath it – GRUBB.

No doubt about it. His days as a tavern boy were well and truly over.

‘Hey, tavern boy,’ came a shout from below. Joseph chanced a look back over his shoulder. His stomach swam at the altitude, but on the deck he spotted the distant shape of Phineus Clagg – professional smuggler and captain of the *Sharkbane*. His hands were cupped around his mouth, and his long hair and dirty coat flapped in the breeze. ‘We ain’t got all day, yer know.’

Further down the ratlines, Tabitha’s blue-haired head turned to shout at him. ‘You want to climb up here? Oh wait, I forgot – you’re too fat.’

Joseph didn’t wait to hear the smuggler’s reply. He closed his eyes and kept going. *Left foot, right hand; right foot, left hand*. The higher he got, the more the breeze buffeted him, forcing him to grip the ropes tighter still. But he couldn’t stop now. If he did, Tabitha would never let him forget it.

He opened his eyes and at once they began to water in the wind. One last effort ... *Right foot, left hand* ... And finally he was there, hauling himself up through the gap and collapsing onto the platform of the crow’s nest. He lay there for a moment, gasping for breath, while Tabitha clambered up after him.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, slapping him on the back. ‘Don’t tell me you’re scared of heights!’ She was trying to sound casual but Joseph didn’t believe it for one second. She crouched on the platform, her eyes wide, her face tinged with green.

‘You have to admit, we *are* quite high up.’

Tabitha opened her mouth to argue, then flashed him a smile.

‘I s’pose you could say that.’

Joseph grinned back at her. Tabitha acted tough, but she was friendly too. Most of the time. She was always asking him about his old life working for his uncle at the Legless Mermaid, and about the time before, when his parents were alive. She didn’t talk about her own much, but for some reason she seemed to enjoy hearing Joseph tell stories about his home with the green front door. He enjoyed it too. It was good to have someone he could share the memories with.

Tabitha nodded out to sea. ‘What are you waiting for?’

He scrambled to his feet and grabbed hold of the rail at the front of the crow’s nest, trying to ignore the fact that on three other sides there was nothing but a sheer drop down to the deck. The view laid out before him did nothing to calm his churning stomach.

In the distance, Illon rose from the sparkling waters of the Ebony Ocean – the easternmost of the Middle Islands; a hazy green hump like the back of a sea serpent. Its largest bay was cluttered with vessels, anchored with their sails furled, white banners fluttering from every masthead. There were wavecutters and frigates on the fringes, and beyond, towards the heart of the fleet, lay the real battleships – galleons and men-of-war.

In the centre was a ship that could only belong to the Duke of Garran. It towered above the others like a wooden castle, its banner so vast that, even from this distance, Joseph could make out the Golden Sun embroidered on it. It was the biggest ship he had ever seen. But then, this was the biggest fleet he’d ever seen too.

He drew out the spyglass and held it to one eye. He could see movement on board some of the nearest vessels – League marines in their white battle-dress, bayonets gleaming. All humans, of course. It sent a shudder down his

spine. The League of the Light had come from the Old World for one purpose alone – to destroy Port Fayt and everyone who lived there. Elves, trolls, fairies ... and mongrels, naturally. Being half human wouldn't save Joseph when the other half of him was goblin.

Tabitha snatched the spyglass away from him.

'Let me have a look,' she said. 'We're supposed to be gathering information, not just gawping. That's the whole point of this expedition, remember? So we can get back to Fayt and figure out how to beat these dungheads.'

Joseph cast a sidelong glance at her as she sighted down the spyglass, blue hair tied back in a ponytail so the wind wouldn't blow it in her face. Like him she wore a watchman's coat, but with a bandolier of throwing knives slung over her shoulder. *Most* of the time she was friendly. But sometimes Joseph thought she liked those knives better than any real person. Tabitha was the first girl he'd ever met properly. Maybe they were just different from boys.

'No,' said Tabitha.

'Pardon?'

She was lowering the telescope, still staring out to sea. Her face had become greener, and her eyes even wider than before. 'No, no, no. Look!'

Joseph turned back to the League armada. It took him a few seconds to see it, but when he did his blood ran cold. The three closest vessels were moving away from the main fleet, heading towards the *Sharkbane*. They looked like frigates. Fighting ships. Fast ones.

'They've spotted us,' said Tabitha. She leaned over the side of the crow's nest and bawled at the top of her voice, 'Turn about! Three League frigates are closing on us!'

Joseph swallowed. 'Does this mean ... ?'

Tabitha sighed, louder than was necessary. 'Yes, it means we're climbing down again. You first. I don't want you throwing up on me.'

By the time they got down, Phineus Clagg was at the wheel. Joseph had to lean against the tilt of the deck as the *Sharkbane* came about, faster than he would have thought possible for a ship of her size. He and Tabitha hurried towards the stern, dodging smugglers tugging on ropes and shouting out instructions. Hal and the Bootle twins had already gathered around the wheel. All of the Demon's Watch were on board except Newt and Old Jon, who had both stayed behind in Port Fayt.

'Can we outrun them?' asked Hal, adjusting his glasses and peering across the water. He looked anxious. But then, he often did. Before he'd joined the Watch, Joseph had never imagined that a magician could be so ... jumpy.

'*Can we outrun them?*' Clagg mimicked. 'Course we can, spectacles. Ain't nothing to worry about. This is the *Sharkbane*. The fastest—'

'— ship in the Ebony Ocean,' chorused Frank and Paddy, the troll twins.

'We know,' said Paddy.

'You've mentioned it once or twice before,' added Frank.

Tabitha sprinted up the steps to the poop deck and inspected the League vessels with her spyglass.

'They're gaining on us,' she shouted. 'Those frigates are going faster than a greased fairy.'

'Ain't possible,' said Clagg. He took a long swig from his bottle of firewater and stuffed a fresh lump of tobacco into his mouth, his lazy left eye flicking nervously around the deck. The smuggler hadn't exactly jumped at the chance of helping out the watchmen, but a few ducats and a dangerous look from Newton had been enough to persuade him. He was probably starting to regret it now.

Joseph climbed the steps to join Tabitha. He almost gasped out loud when he saw the frigates. They were much closer than he'd expected, moving steadily, as if unaffected by the waves. In front of every vessel the air shimmered

like a mirage, but the ocean was as calm as a glass of water.

‘Magic,’ he murmured. ‘They’ve got magicians on board.’ Spell-casting was banned in Port Fayt – unless you had a warrant, like Hal did – but that made no difference to the League.

Hal appeared next to them. He took the spyglass from Tabitha and examined the enemy ships.

‘Ah,’ he said at last. ‘I fear you may be right. It’s elementary brinecraft, applied on a much larger scale than is usually attempted. They’re exerting willpower on the waves, reducing tidal movements that would ordinarily disrupt the passage of the vessel. Also I imagine they’re performing some sort of aeolian manipulation to increase the flow of wind to the sails. It’s rather extraordinary. I’ve not seen anything like it since—’

‘That’s fascinating,’ cut in Tabitha, ‘but maybe we should *do* something about it?’

Joseph leaned over the railing of the poop deck. ‘Can we go any faster, Mr Clagg?’

‘That’s *Captain* Clagg, matey,’ replied the smuggler. He was frowning at the ocean ahead, chewing on the tobacco, his hair and coat flung back by the breeze. ‘And no, not without a better wind.’

‘Thank Thalín we hired the fastest ship in the Ebony Ocean, eh?’ said Paddy, clapping an enormous green hand on the smuggler’s back. ‘Fastest except for those three frigates, anyway.’

‘They’re cheating! Stinking magic ... Ruins all the fun, if you ask me.’

‘Hal,’ said Tabitha. ‘If they’re speeding up their ships with magic, why can’t you do the same for the *Sharkbane*?’

Hal shook his head. ‘I’m flattered, but it’s out of the question. Spells that powerful require a team of trained magicians working together, focusing their minds as one. I couldn’t do it on my own.’

Frank drew his enormous cutlass and swung it in a practice stroke.

‘In that case,’ he said, ‘we’d best get ready for a fight.’



Chapter Two

THERE WAS NO need for a spyglass now. The frigates were so close that Joseph could make out cannons poking from the gun ports and groups of white-jacketed magicians standing at each prow, their hands spread out in front of them, smoothing the water ahead. Beyond he could see the movements of marines getting ready to board the *Sharkbane*. Real, battle-hardened soldiers. League soldiers. Soldiers who'd swept through the Old World, taking the Flatland Duchies in little more than a month and defeating the trolls of the Crying Mountains within a week. Soldiers who would kill anyone who wasn't human without a second thought. Butchers, some folk called them - because in battle, their white uniforms were stained with their enemies' blood.

Joseph pulled the cutlass from his belt, its weight reassuring him just a little. Frank and Paddy had been teaching him how to use it, and he tried to run through their lessons in his head to calm himself down. But the advice kept getting jumbled up. He decided to think about something else. There was nothing though - except those frigates bearing down on them. He pressed his fingers more tightly around the leather hilt.

He could make out the names of the enemy vessels now, painted on the prows. As he watched, the two flanking ships, the *Last Redemption* and the *Radiant*, peeled off from the *White Crusader* to port and starboard. Soon they'd come up alongside the *Sharkbane*. Joseph didn't know much about warfare, but he could see that there were

enough guns on board the League ships to smash the smuggler's wavecutter into matchwood.

There was a *CRACK!* from the nearest frigate and Joseph ducked, almost without thinking. Adrenaline coursed through his body.

'Heads down, everyone,' roared Frank or Paddy – in the confusion, it was difficult to tell which. More cracks sounded and musket balls whirred past.

'Snipers,' shouted Tabitha, as if it wasn't obvious by then. She flicked her wrist and sent a knife flashing through the air towards the enemy ship, before ducking down below the gunwale. There was a gleam in her eye and a second knife in her hand. Scared as he was, Joseph couldn't help but marvel at her excitement. Almost as if this was some kind of game, rather than a deadly skirmish they might very well not survive.

'To me!' shouted the other troll twin, and Joseph, Tabitha and Hal scurried to the edge of the poop deck and dropped down onto the upper deck.

Phineus Clagg was hunkered down behind the wheel, his podgy face pale. He had stopped chewing now.

'This is the *Sharkbane*,' he muttered to no one in particular. 'Fastest ship in the Ebony Ocean ...'

A few of the smugglers were returning fire with pistols, blunderbusses and crossbows. One caught a musket ball in the arm and whirled away, growling with pain. Joseph hurried onwards. The watchmen were gathering by the mainmast, while Clagg's crew milled around them.

'We've got to stop the butchers from boarding,' said Paddy.

'Soon as we let them onto our ship, it's over,' added Frank.

'So we'll split up, help the smugglers fight them off. Joseph and Tabs, we'll stay on the port side. Frank and Hal – you take the starboard.'

There were nods, and the watchmen dispersed, positioning themselves to repel boarders. Joseph hadn't known the troll twins for long, but even he could see that they didn't rate their chances. He lifted his cutlass and told himself he was ready for anything. He didn't believe it though. What good was a sword against musket balls and cannon fire? The thought made him feel faint. He staggered and grabbed the gunwale to steady himself.

The *Last Redemption* was edging up, closer and closer.

'Don't worry,' said a voice to his left. He turned to see Tabitha watching him, doing her best to smile. 'We'll get through this. Somehow we'll—'

The *Sharkbane* jolted, throwing them both off balance. There was a beating and a flapping from overhead, and Joseph looked up to see the ship's sails hanging loose from their yards, as if the wind had gone out of them.

A low, grinding noise rose up from below his feet, and the deck shuddered. Joseph gripped the gunwale tighter.

What in all the sea ... ?

'Hey, Cap'n Cuttlefish,' Frank shouted. 'What's happening?' But Phineus Clagg had gone as white as the sails above. His mouth hung open and his tobacco dropped onto the deck.

The grinding grew louder, and with a lurch of his stomach Joseph realized what was happening.

'Sinking!' he yelled. 'We're sinking!'

He leaned over the gunwale and saw the waves bubbling up to meet him.

Cannons flashed on the *Last Redemption*, and a rolling symphony of booms rang out as the cannonballs hurtled towards them.

'Down!' barked Tabitha.

Joseph had no time to duck. But the *Sharkbane* was lower in the water than it had been a few seconds ago, and the cannonballs just tore through the sails, shredding the canvas.

Clagg found his voice at last. 'Not sinking,' he shouted above the chaos. 'She's going down too fast for that. It's like ... like ...'

'Like we're being pulled under,' Frank finished for him.

Joseph felt a prickling at the back of his neck. He couldn't help thinking of the Maw, the monstrous sea demon he'd seen rise out of the ocean less than two weeks ago. It still haunted his dreams. And who knew what else lived beneath the waves?

'We got to do something,' Clagg was howling as his crew ran in every direction like headless cockatrices. 'Yer supposed to be the Demon's Watch, ain't yer? So do something. Sky's sake, this is my ship! My dear, lovely ship!'

'Get back!' shouted Paddy. 'Away from the gunwales.'

Joseph didn't need to be told twice. He joined the smugglers and watchmen scurrying towards the mainmast. Soon the whole crew was huddled together in the middle of the deck, weapons facing outwards, waiting for whatever was going to happen. Joseph found himself squeezed between Frank and Tabitha. She didn't look so calm any more.

Cannon fire exploded from the *Radiant*. Everyone ducked as the sails were torn up again and chunks of wood burst from the foremast.

They were practically at sea level now, and Joseph didn't know if it would be safer above the waves or below them. Not that he had any choice in the matter.

'Stick together,' said Frank sternly. 'No matter what.'

Seawater spilled over the gunwales, racing across the deck, surging through their shoes and up their legs. It was freezing cold. Joseph thrust his cutlass back into his belt and took a deep breath, sucking as much air into his lungs as he could. The deck juddered downwards, and suddenly they were all adrift. He gasped as water flooded his clothing, like icy fingers clamping onto his skin.

‘Look out!’ yelled Tabitha. Joseph floundered out of the way as the mainsail yard came down, smacking into the water and sending up a great gout of spray as it disappeared beneath the waves. Within seconds, the whole ship was gone.

Shouts and screams rent the air as the smugglers and watchmen trod water. Some struck out for the League ships, which towered above them on every side, vast and implacable. But what was the use? There would be no mercy for them there. Joseph had heard the stories. The Duke of Garran’s butchers would kill them all, if the sharks didn’t get them first.

‘Help!’ he shouted uselessly. ‘Help, please! Help—’

Someone grabbed hold of his ankles. *What in Thalín’s name ... ?* He tried to wriggle free, but the hands were strong and determined, tugging him downwards.

‘No! Wait! Let me—’

And then he was under.



Chapter Three

ONE MINUTE TABITHA was treading water, holding on tight to her knife. The next there were hands around her waist and she was being dragged down below the waves. She tried to stab at her attacker, but whoever it was dodged the blow. A hand closed around her wrist and the knife was twisted free. Tabitha struggled harder but it was no good. A second hand gripped her other wrist and her arms were pulled together behind her back.

As her eyes adjusted to the stinging salt water, she saw figures moving all around them. What in all the ocean was this? Some kind of trick by the League? She glanced down and saw a refracted form below her legs. A fish tail, absurdly oversized, with broad, powerful fins.

Tabitha gasped, swallowing a mouthful of seawater and almost choking in the process. There was only one kind of creature in the Ebony Ocean with the arms and hands of a human and the tail of a fish. *Merfolk*. She craned her neck round and caught a glimpse of a woman's face, long hair drifting out in the water, a necklace of shells ... And then the mermaid's tail flicked hard like a cracking whip, and they were suddenly moving.

The shapes around them blurred. Bubbles streamed past her face as they shot forward, faster than any land dweller could swim. The mermaid's arms wrapped around her, hugging her in close, and they took on another burst of speed.

Tabitha was feeling faint and sick from the seawater. Her chest and head felt as if they were going to explode, and

she found herself wondering which would go first. She had to breathe. If she didn't she was going to pass out. She thrashed feebly, trying to free herself from the mermaid's embrace, but it was hopeless. She didn't have the energy or the strength.

Suddenly they were heading upwards. The water became clearer and lighter, and then there was a thundering of spray all around them, and Tabitha realized they had breached the surface. For one incredible moment they were arcing through the air, the cold breeze biting into her wet, clinging clothes. She saw the waves stretching out on every side, saw gulls in the sky above, saw other doubled shapes moving fast below the surface behind them, each one surely a mermaid holding onto a person.

She almost forgot to breathe, and desperately gulped in air half a second before they hit the surface again with a crash; then there was a muffled quiet as they powered onwards.

They carried on like that, streaking below the surface. Tabitha was furious, but she couldn't break the firm grip of the mermaid. And even if she could somehow get free, what good would it do? She'd be alone, Thalin knew where, in the middle of the Ebony Ocean.

Every time her lungs began to burn with the need for more air, she struggled, and the mermaid, understanding, shot upwards and arced like a dolphin above the surface. Tabitha sucked in as much air as she possibly could, and then they were below again, swimming onwards.

Where are we going?

Tabitha had to admit that the merfolk had saved them from the League. She had to be grateful for that, didn't she? But she didn't feel very grateful. How long had they been swimming for? Hours, maybe. It definitely felt like hours. Above water, she tried to count the other mermaids. Occasionally she saw them breaching too, their captives