

Chapter 2

The soldiers gathered up along the deck while sailors busied themselves in the riggings far above. The three great ships of Stav'rol rode the waves with great gulping leaps. The men wore thick breastplates adorned with symbols of the Fist that matched the massive banners that waved from the tall central mast.

One of the ships passed by the enemy vessel the previous night and fired a few wild shots that resulted in no substantial hits. In the morning it had rendezvoused with its allies and now they were ready to attack and destroy the Cawlian vessel.

The three ships gathered in close proximity and the soldiers stood on the deck at attention awaiting orders while the sailors managed the sails in the riggings. Ahead in the distance the great Cawlian vessel plunged forward towards them. Still far out of range of the archers stationed high above the decks on the spars and even beyond range of the mages with their wands who waited in the bow.

"Today is a great day for Stav'rol!" shouted Admiral Anglus through the hollowed horn of a great antelope that he used to amplify his words. "Today we defeat the enemies of our nation. The Guide is watching you. Show your bravery and"

"Beware the missiles!" shouted a voice from the foredeck warning those aboard of an attack.

"What is this?" said Anglus turning his head sharply to look at the enemy ship still so far in the distance. It had changed its profile as three long arms now rose high in the bow where before there had been but the clean lines of the masthead. Even as he watched the wooden prongs began to retract back towards the ship, perhaps somehow cranked down by the sailors.

"Here they come!" shouted another voice and the admiral's eyes looked up to see half a dozen dark shapes plummeting towards them. Two of the shapes were long and narrow like a diving falcon while the other four were spherical. As the long shapes came into focus he noted they were spinning rapidly around their own axis and then one plunged into the ocean twenty-feet behind them while the other disappeared into the deck of the ship to his right.

A moment later the four spheres hit the ocean waves and burst for a moment into flames and then vanished beneath the water.

Aboard another vessel, the Fist of the North, stood Dietrich wearing his heavy armor and carrying a thick shield. Beside him stood a boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen who wore a light-leather jerkin emblazoned across the chest with an upraised fist. His eyes were wide as he watched the fiery missiles disappear beneath the waves.

"Steady there, boy," said Dietrich and put his hand on the lad's shoulder. "Is this your first battle?"

The boy nodded his head.

“You’ll be fine, there’s nothing wrong with being afraid, just don’t let it stop you from doing your duty, the Guide is watching.”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy his face relaxing into a smile.

“They’ve fired again!” shouted half-a-dozen voices at once as the strange arms rose sharply towards the sky with a motion so swift the eye could not follow it. Another six dark missiles rose high as the sailors aboard all three ships began to respond to commands.

“We need to separate!” shouted the captain of one vessel distinguished by heavy epaulettes on his shoulders and a tall hat shaped in a triangular fashion. “Hard a lee!” he shouted.

Long before the three ships could alter their course in any appreciable fashion the six missiles plunged down into the Fist of the North with shattering accuracy. One of the spinning shapes hit the base of the mainmast where the thickest section of deck held up the massive spire and went through it like a crossbow bolt through a duck. Two of the spheres exploded in the sails setting them instantly ablaze while a third smashed into the deck not ten feet from where Dietrich stood.

Through some strange twist of fate, perhaps the angle of the descending sphere and the pitch of the deck, fire spewed out at a slant that engulfed the young boy and left Dietrich unscathed. The boy shrieked and turned to Dietrich, his face already melting as the fire ate through his body and Dietrich tried to reach forward to help but the flames drove him back.

A moment later the deck of the ship, whose sails were shifting as the sailors attempted to swing her around, gave off a horrible shriek and splinters exploded from a crack that suddenly appeared. One of the splinters tore into Dietrich’s arm, two more bounced off his heavy armor, and a ringing in his ears indicated that his helmet deflected yet another shard.

A dozen men nearby went down in a bloody heaving clump as a dismembered arm flopped near one of the fallen. Dietrich tried to turn but the deck suddenly heaved beneath his feet and he slid to the starboard bulwark and only managed to grab it at the last second with his good arm.

He dangled for a moment and, gritting his teeth against the pain, managed to unstrap his heavy breastplate as he kicked his boots trying to get them off his feet. A moment later the ship heaved again and he felt himself plummeting through the air. It probably took him less than a second to hit the waves but as he fell he looked up and saw the great vessel tearing itself apart as dozens of sailors plunged from the riggings and into the sea.

Then he hit the water with a mind-numbing crash that knocked the wind out of his lungs. The next thing he knew, he was looking up from under the water and kicking furiously trying to reach the surface. He somehow got there with a frantic lash of his boots and sucked air into his lungs while continuing to kick wildly. It was to no avail as he felt the weight of his sword and clothes dragging him under. He pulled the sword from his side and let it slip from his hand as he went under yet again. A few furious kicks and he was at the surface gasping for air once again.

The next time under he managed to untie his boot enough to kick it free and a third dunking removed the other shoe and his helmet. The next time he rose to the surface he was able to stay up for a few seconds and spotted a piece of the ship, a spar of some kind, nearby. The thing was burning at one edge but that didn't stop Dietrich from grabbing it with an outstretched hand. The thing wasn't big enough to fully support him but kept him partially above water at the very least.

He used the respite to shed the dagger at his side, his heavy belt, and his shirt. Finally he held the far end of the spar under water to put out the flames and had a moment to look around. What was left of the Fist of the North was upended and drifting away.

He looked up and saw a second ship, he couldn't tell which one, completely ablaze with sailors leaping from the side shrieking in horror and pain. The third ship was moving away with all sails set. Then a wave rose up and tossed him up in the air and his mouth filled with the tangy taste of salt water. He coughed and spat for a moment clearing his mouth and head.

When he looked around again he spotted a dozen other survivors, like him, floating on pieces of flotsam cast off when the ship went under. Horrible burns marred several of them and one simply slipped off the spar onto which he held and disappeared under the water his mouth opening and closing as his eyes went wide.

As Dietrich watched these horrors he suddenly felt a shadow and he looked up at the bowsprit of a massive ship that was cutting through the water nearby. It took the form of a leaping cheetah and he could make out strange lettering on its surface. Then he spotted a figure standing just to the right of the masthead.

He was a man, tall with green skin and long hair tinged light blue like the sky on a clear day. Dietrich judged that the man stood at least forty feet above his own position and he stared at a point in the water not far from where Dietrich was floating.

Dietrich turned his gaze to see where the man was looking and noted a burning piece of lumber ten feet to his right and a trio of wounded men scabbling for a place on a broken barrel to his left. He and these other two groups were spaced enough to leave a small gap in the ocean clear of debris.

He looked back up just in time to see the man leap headfirst from the deck of the ship. He was naked as he dove, the sunlight silhouetted him against the great ship for a moment, and then he plunged perfectly into the gap with a surprisingly small splash.

Dietrich waited long seconds as the man disappeared beneath the waves and then, just as he had given up hope of seeing him emerge, the water broke twenty feet to his right and the giant emerged with a man under each arm. That it was a giant was clear as his face was square and massive and his arms impossibly large.

With a double kick of both his feet the giant propelled himself through the water at an impossible speed and was suddenly at a thick piece of lumber. The giant simply lifted the men from the water, draped them over the log, and then turned towards Dietrich. The soldier tried to wave him off but somehow he

couldn't lift his arms or say anything. A moment later he felt an impossibly powerful hand lift him from the spar and then they were swimming back to the large log. In a few seconds he felt himself lifted to join the others.

Then the giant was gone. He watched for a moment as the man swam off to help more of the drifting sailors and then he became aware that someone was shouting at him.

Just to his left was a small ship's boat aboard which two sailors, in sea-green jerkins that bore the symbol of an anchor, were lifting the other survivors aboard. Another two sailors were holding their arms out to him and shouting something he could not understand although he knew instantly what they wanted. He raised his arms and felt himself hauled into the ship where he was laid gently into the skippers.

Another man, this one dressed in priestly robes of some unknown god, was administering to the wounded men with both spells and vials of healing draughts. Dietrich looked up lazily, somehow everything was moving slowly with even the words uttered by the man dragging out into impossibly long syllables, and saw the man pouring a liquid onto his arm and then everything came into sharp clarity with the shrieking pain.

The man shouted a few words and Dietrich instantly felt relief from the burning. The priest smiled at him for a moment, nodded his head, and then began to work his magic and healing skills on more wounded men continually coming into the ship. Dietrich leaned back for a moment, perhaps longer, for time was not moving at its normal pace and a thump jarred him back to consciousness.

He realized their little boat had hit the side of the ship which must surely have launched it. Ropes snaked down from above and the sailors quickly tied them in strange little knots around brass hooks in the bow and stern. Then they were rising quickly as another little boat, apparently having disgorged its own boatload of survivors, was moving in the opposite direction.

The priest who had been tending the wounded moved to the bow of the skiff and paused for a dramatic moment as the two little boats approached each other. Then, just as the two reached an equal level, leapt from one to the other with a movement of both extreme power and grace. Then he was gone as they rose to the deck of the ship.

Seconds later they rose into the sunshine which blinded Dietrich for a moment. He felt the movement of the boat and then he watched as the sailors began to lift the wounded men from the boat and into waiting hands.

Soon enough it was his turn and he felt strong hands lift him into the air and a moment later he was on the deck staring up at masts that were clearly taller and stouter than those of the vessel from which he had been so rudely ejected.

Another of the priests bent over him and held his eyelid open for a moment, then nodded his head, and said something to a young acolyte at his side. He felt something cool on his lips and then he felt sleepy.

How long he was unconscious he did not know but it seemed only a few seconds later that a gentle hand shook him awake. When he opened his eyes he saw the disfigured face of some sort of goblin creature. The little beasts were the most degenerate of all the races in Stav'rol, suited for nothing more than digging in the mines and dying when they outlived their usefulness. This one was clearly far bigger than most of his species with bulging muscles but also uglier as it was missing part of its nose and a nasty scar ran along its left jaw ending in a hole where an ear must have once resided.

The thing smiled, more hideous than its natural appearance, and offered a sturdy metal cup to Dietrich's lips. The warrior nodded his head and a moment later felt the cool water passing down his throat. It was delicious beyond description, sweeter than a woman's kiss. After the goblin creature filled up the cup again and allowed him to drink his fill he tried to say thank you but his throat burned and he only managed to give forth a hacking cough.

The half-breed smiled again, even more awfully than the first time, and then took Dietrich by the arm and tried to pull him to his feet. He felt dizzy but allowed the mixed-race thing, he was clearly quite powerful, to haul him to his feet. Looking around he saw that there were dozens of survivors on the deck and crewmen tended to all of them, the most badly wounded remained on the ground while those less damaged were slowly getting to their feet.

The fellow who gave him water nudged him so that he faced in the other direction and he saw the giant, green skin now covered by a light jerkin but his long, straggly hair with that strange blue sheen still loose and free, standing on a raised platform near the bow of the ship.

One of the priests was talking to him and handed the giant a golden amulet. The giant took the amulet and put it over his head with a practiced motion and then turned to address those gathered on the deck.

"My name is Captain Cawl. This ship is the Prince of Corland. We are on a mission to destroyed Das'von where we hope to find and retrieve the Broken Throne. It is likely we will all die in this endeavor. We are all volunteers aboard this ship. We have no room for prisoners but a great need for crewmen. If you wish to stay you are welcome to join us. If you do not wish to stay; a flag of truce has been arranged with your allies. If you wish to return to that vessel please move to the ship's boat if you are able. If not, you will be carried."