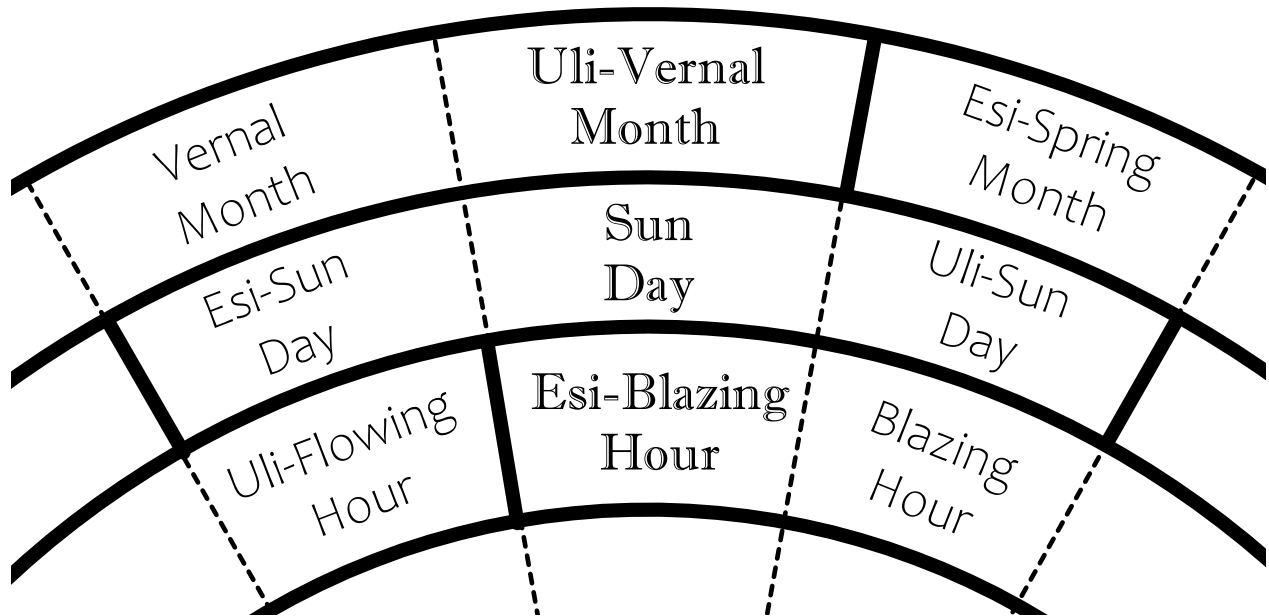


Chapter 5: At Sea with the Graken

YEAR 647



PRINCESS JAYLIN of House Ronar, daughter and Heir Apparent of Queen Marta of Loumaan and all Lands East of the River Sydon, did not feel like a Princess, just then. She was leaning over the side of her Sea Vessel, the *Longshot*, trying to keep last Evening's supper in her stomach.

With still an Hour before its highest point in the Sky, the Sun Day white Sun beat down on her, baking the inside of her skull. The throbbing inside her head was thrumming in phase with the rocking of her Ship.

Princess Jaylin *detested* the open Sea. She hated its instability, its openness, and its smell. The Almighty Father gave People legs to walk on Land or to ride a Curelom, and not gills or fins to survive in Leagues upon Leagues of salty nothingness.

Yet, as Princess, she had a duty to her People. Travelling by Ship, in defiance of the current Trade Embargo, was one of those duties. For almost three Months now, ever since the Sun started rising at the end of

the Winter Season, the Merchant Lords have been blocking all Sea traffic to the principal Ports of Loumaan.

Trade between the two Kingdoms of Loumaan and Yaarom was almost at a virtual standstill. The only access now was the Land route across the wide Sydon River, via Ferry, that separated the two Kingdoms far in the South.

Supposedly, the Merchant Lords were politically neutral and did not side for either Kingdom. This Year, however, since that gnashing King of Yaarom lowered the Port Tariffs in his own Kingdom to almost nothing, the Merchants had demanded similar deductions for the Ports in her mother's Kingdom. Ninety-by-nineties of her People who work at the Ports depended on those Tariffs to support their families and livelihoods.

In Yaarom, the People that made their living at the Ports were suffering. Word from her mother's Informants in the West told horrid tales of crime, hunger, and poverty already exploding. How do you deal with a rival, self-loving King that punishes his own People to make a profit? And his People do not even complain to their King for fear of further retributions.

As a result, a Sea voyage to the Yaaromite Capital City of Demanter to meet the Merchant Lords and the Great Immortal King himself was necessary to resolve this problem.

Princess Jaylin's mother, Queen Marta, had already sent other Emissaries and Ambassadors, but they found no common ground. The Merchants refused to work with them and would only discuss this situation, which to them was just a minor inconvenience, with only the King of Yaarom and the Queen of Loumaan, themselves.

Her mother, of course, refused to go, but she *did* offer her twenty-five Year old daughter Heir to go in her place.

To Princess Jaylin's dismay, they accepted—

And now, here she was, staring at the large Bulwhales that swam in the Ship's wake blowing vapour from their blowholes as they surfaced. Their whistling Bulcalls rising serendipitously to her ears.

Travelling by Ship *was* the quicker way to reach the Capital of Yaarom. The two Kingdoms were separated by a large Gulf of water, the Liorn Sea, which opened wide in the North to the Great Impassable Sea.

The Sydon, the largest River that fed the Liorn far in the South, was the natural Border between the two Kingdoms. Both Capitals sat near Northern Capes on opposite sides of the Liorn and were open to the Great Impassable Sea. The Yaaromite Capital, Demanter, was a good thirteen Leagues more North on their side of the Liorn Sea than her own Luomaani Capital of Egisia.

Travelling by Curelom and Carriage would mean a huge trek around the Liorn and across the Sydon, via the slow-moving Ferry. A journey of at least ten Days.

Travelling by Ship, however, would cut that time in half, in calm waters. Even with the Sea Vessels hugging the Coast as they went.

This was the Morning of the third Day of her trip, and they were well into Yaaromite Territory by now. They would be expected to arrive at Demanter by Tomorrow Night, with Heavens' Fortune.

Sailing directly across the Liorn Sea was too dangerous. Almost as dangerous as attempting to enter the Great Impassable Sea itself. Even the largest of the Merchant Vessels would not attempt it.

Very few of the bravest Sea Captains have survived the journey in the past. Those adventurous Captains would then always speak of huge sail- and mast-destroying High Storms, unpredictable rogue waves, thick blankets of fog, and, of course, the Beasts.

The Seas teemed with Animal life. The further out from Land, the Sea life grew larger and more vicious. Creatures much bigger than, and not as tame as, these Bulwhales existed out there.

Here, the Bulwhales followed the wakes of the Ships, enjoying the thrill of the flow and the churning of the Microbial Life that fed the Animals. Out there, in the deep Sea, the larger Animals would often attack a Boat or Ship, for who knows what reason.

Some Sea Monsters had sharp spikes at their fronts and would ram the outer hull, puncturing it. Most Ships carried Harpoon Weapons and other deterrents, but even the best of those often would not penetrate the Sea Monster's hides.

Those were just the underwater Creatures. During Migrations, the Airborne ones were worse—

The Graken.

In about nine Days, before the Vernal Equinox, when the Vernal Season turns to the Spring Season, the time of the Migration would arrive.

Somewhere, far to the South, where the white Sun always scorched the surface in Winter, never setting, the Graken would feel the shift of the colder temperatures and fly, en masse, to their Northern Home, where in the Spring, the Sun would begin its constant beating in the North, never setting. They would live there until the Weeks before the Autumnal Equinox, at which point they would all migrate back.

This bi-Annual pattern of Migration had existed for as long as History has been recorded. During the Migration, which could last for a few Days, although that varied, no one ventured outside. No Boat would be on the Seas.

The Graken would swoop down as they flew high overhead to attack and devour anything that moved. Their keen eyesight could even sense the heat signatures of anything hiding within weak Structures, Forests, or even under light camouflage.

The Graken primarily went for the Sea Creatures, like these Bulwhales, which needed to come up for Air occasionally. They also, however, feasted on Land Beasts, whether Curelom, Cumom, or Human. Thus, both Kingdoms enforced the Migration Tax.

The Endemic populations already had the solution to this bi-Annual dilemma: they cordoned off huge Valleys or Basins and set them up as great sacrificial Migration Pits all around the Land to place niners of nine-by-nines of the Land's Animals.

When the Migration occurred, the Graken would feast on these Animals, turning their attention away from places that were *hoped* to be left alone. Filling these Pits required all People to give up a part of their earnings, or their own Farm Animals, twice a Year for the Migration Tax.

The Graken varied in size, but most adults were massive and averaged about the size of the *Longshot*. Their vicious clawed feet could pick up a decent sized Bulwhale right from the Sea surface. They, like the larger Sea Creatures, had sharp beaked mouths that could penetrate most hides, roofs, or even the hulls of Ships. They had long, quick tails that cracked the wind when thrashed.

Thinking of all those stories, exaggerated or not, told by crazy Sea Captains, other Survivors, and old books, gave Princess Jaylin the shakes, so she rested her head on the backs of her hands as she leaned on the Ship's railing. If the Liorn Sea was that bad, she could not imagine what the Impassable Sea and beyond would be like.

No one returned from that Sea.

It was a wonder how the Founders even made it here on this Continent with their Founder Vessel from their own unknown World; albeit they crash landed here almost two Ages ago. Their Ship was now an empty shell on the Northern Yaaromite Coast. It sat there quite gutted and dismantled over the many Lifetimes since their Ancestors had settled here.

Princess Jaylin's Captain of the *Longshot* had told her they were safe near the Coast of the Liorn Sea at this time of Year. This being the middle of the Sun Week of the Uli-Vernal Month, the Sabbath, in fact. A Hall Meeting to take their Sacraments was planned for later in the Day.

The upcoming Vernal Migration would not start until sometime in the Wednes Week in just over eight Days. Still plenty of time to sail to Demanter and get her Ship to safety.

This was not the Princess' first trip to the Yaaromite Capital. Once, as a little girl, she had travelled there by Ship with her mother and father, also shortly before a Vernal Equinox. That was almost twenty Years ago now. Her mother was pregnant with Jaylin's baby brother at the time.

Princess Jaylin remembered that trip far too well and wished that she could forget it. Her father, King Razur, and her baby brother did not survive while in Demanter and Princess Jaylin returned Home with just her mother, Queen Marta.

This time, because of the high tension between the Merchant Lords and the two Kingdoms, the nature of this trip turned Jaylin's stomach much worse than the unstable buoyancy of the Ship.

Princess Jaylin had a biting feeling in her stomach, compounded by the nausea of travelling by Sea, that this whole Blockade was just a ruse for some higher purpose. A trap of some sort. An opportunity for the King to get his dirty hands on her Kingdom's royalty.

Or, even worse, the King's *son's* dirty hands on her. That thought almost *did* make her heave the digested contents of her stomach towards the whistling Bulwhales.

Yet, Jaylin knew she *had* to go to Demanter. Her People needed and depended on her. The food stores at Home were emptying fast and seeds needed to be planted with Tools that needed to be made with Metals that only came through trade. The Merchant Ships were even blocking a lot of fishing Vessels and Whalers. A negotiation had to be completed quickly. Even if it meant—

“Heir Princess, may I offer assistance?” said a voice behind her.

That was Commander Dillon's voice, the highest-ranking Officer of her personal Escort, a loyal and intelligent man. He and three niners of the Queen's Finest were accompanying her on this Sea voyage, as well as a plethora of Servants and other Crew.

Keeping her forehead down, Princess Jaylin could see his boots and also see the slippers of Dontelle and Birgit, her two personal Ladymaids, and best friends. Those two must have been concerned when their Princess had raced up here to the Deck still in her bedding attire.

Keeping a firm hold of the railing, Jaylin looked up and turned around to look at the trio. Commander Dillon adorned the full Uniform of the Queen's Finest: sharp red velvet vest adorned with the lapels that signified his rank. Jaylin's two Ladymaids wore their common blue and gray travel gowns. They were always up well before their Princess so they could be ready to assist her for whatever reason.

“Oh, Jaylin!” Birgit cried. “You look *awful!* Come, come! Let's get you back down to your Quarters!” Their long-term friendship superseded any need for her to use formal titles.

“No, Birgit,” Jaylin replied. “I'll be okay. I've never enjoyed being at Sea. My stomach will settle. Thanks for caring, though. Maybe a little breakfast will help.”

To prove her strength, Princess Jaylin let go of the railing and stood up straight, shoulders back. She was not concerned about her appearance in front of the Commander, even though her long, dark, windblown hair must have been such a sight. “You may go, Commander.”

The stink of the Sea Air turned her stomach some more, but Jaylin did feel a little hungry. The Commander saluted with a fist pumped to the side of his chest and turned to walk away towards the front of the Ship. Dontelle, with her even longer dark hair tied back, reached her hand out to take Jaylin by the hand.

“Breakfast? It’s nearly the Blazing Hour! Mid-Day meal is being prepared,” Dontelle said. “The Mess Hall is serving up those greasy, dry scones I know you absolutely *love!*”

Her sarcasm did not help the Princess’ appetite, but Jaylin managed a small smirk at her Ladymaid and allowed her to take her hand. On wobbly knees, her two friends lead their sickly Princess towards mid-Ship, where they could descend toward the Mess Hall.

The *Longshot* was one of the Luomaani Queen’s largest and sturdiest of Vessels. It had three large masts, with enough moorings and lines lying around to trip even the most balanced of feet.

Niners of People including the Queen’s Finest, Servants, and Crew, all scuttled about doing various duties that allowed her Ship to fly as fast as it could along the Coast. The currents and winds were very favourable along the East Coast of Yaarom when travelling Northward. The return trip would take longer sailing against these currents.

This Morning, the skies were clear, and the wind was strong with all the sails billowing on strong taut lines. A magnificent Ship, at least when looking at it from afar. Jaylin had other opinions while walking on the rocking Deck while at Sea.

As grand as the *Longshot* was, it was no match for the *Bottomless Ryker* that sailed in front of it, matching their speed. The *Bottomless Ryker* was King Tappanen’s Escort for their journey to Demanter and had arrived at Egisia two Weeks ago, passing through the Blockade without a hitch. The King had insisted that Princess Jaylin take the *Bottomless* for the voyage back to Demanter.

Again, her mother had refused and would not let her daughter go so easily. After lengthy arguments with the King’s Advisor that sailed with the *Bottomless Ryker*, her mother agreed to accompany the King’s Ship with one of her own Ships to the negotiations.

Besides, if things did not go as planned, then Princess Jaylin could leave the Arbitrations and go back Home on her own Ship.

The *Bottomless Ryker* was a Warship, large and sturdy. It had four masts and could outrun the *Longshot* if it needed to. It was an imposing sight to any enemy. Its volume was enormous and its back end, which was visible as they sailed behind it, stuck out of the water to such heights it was impossible to see its top Deck from here.

There must have been more Decks on that Ship than she could imagine; thus, giving the *Bottomless* its name.

Arm in arm, the three trotted on towards mid-Deck which was also bustling with activity. The huge double doors to the stairs to the lower Floors were wide open and People were scampering up and down. Many were carrying bits of bread or a piece of Fruit as they ascended. The monotone cacophony of a niner of conversations between the People they passed did not catch Jaylin's attention just then—

But something else did.

Her stomach lurched, and not from the undulating motions of the Sea.

“Hold on, you two,” she said, and stopped. “That's weird.”

“What is it?” Dontelle replied.

Jaylin wiggled out of her Ladymaids' arms and began sprinting towards the side of the Ship again, jumping over loose rope and other lines fastened to the floor.

Reaching the railing and leaning over, Princess Jaylin could hear Birgit exclaim from behind that Jaylin must be about to sick up again.

Jaylin was *not* going to sick up. Instead, she was looking towards the back of the Ship, towards the large wake that the *Longshot* was making as they stormed forward, following the *Bottomless*.

Jaylin was right. While walking to mid-Ship, she had noticed that the whistling of the Bulwhales was gone. Sure enough, the Sea Creatures were no longer cresting above the surface; none of them.

At that moment, Jaylin heard cries and screams from the front of the Ship. The shrieks rippled across the Deck towards the back of the Ship like a wave as People looked forwards and began yelling and pointing.

They were all pointing up.

With the white Sun high in the Sky, the black figure that flew towards the two Ships from the North was visible and growing larger. Large wings flapped as it flew with tremendous speed. Jaylin hung onto the railing as the Crew and others were scrambling around her.

Before Princess Jaylin could react, the thing closed its wings and nosedived towards the *Bottomless Ryker*, its tail now visible and snapping behind it.

A Graken. The Graken. Princess Jaylin could tell by the scar under its eye and the tear holes in its wings. At the last moment before it impacted with the Ship in front of theirs, the Graken arched its back and tail forward to extend its huge, clawed feet at the largest sail of the Ship.

It crashed into the mast, rocking the *Bottomless Ryker* with its impact, claws crunching and tearing at the canvas sails for stability. The top of the mast snapped off and plummeted with pieces of torn sail billowing down with it.

The Graken opened its pointedly sharp beak and screeched into the Air. She could just imagine the commotion onboard that other Ship. It was half the size of the huge *Bottomless Ryker*!

The Graken then snapped its huge black beak at the top of mast beside it. A poor fellow that was in a Birdpie's Nest there was swallowed up. The mast it bit into broke in two, ropes and sail now dangling from its closed maw.

The screams continued around her, and Princess Jaylin found that Birgit and Dontelle were at her side. Looking around, she also saw the Commander running at her barking orders, waving and pointing all around.

"Jaylin!" Birgit screamed. "We've got to get below! Come! Come!" She was pulling on one of the Princess' arms. Jaylin's other arm was still clinging to the side of the railing. Dontelle was trying to pry that one off.

The Graken spat out its mouthful and was now peering down at the Deck that Jaylin could not see from where she was. With its humongous body dragging more bits of sail, the Graken climbed down using hooks at the joints of its large wings.

The *Bottomless Ryker* appeared to get closer to their own Ship as it began losing speed and the *Longshot* began catching up.

Dontelle reefed Jaylin's arm off the railing and all three jerked back towards mid-Ship from the momentum of Birgit's pull.

What was that Monster doing here? They were helpless out here in the middle of the Sea! Niners of Staff and Crew were racing towards the double doors and jamming to get below Deck. About halfway there, Commander Dillon ran up to them.

"Take the Princess below! To the Cargo Hold!" Commander Dillon ordered the Ladymaids and then turned his attention. "You there! Spits! Retinack! Escort the Princess to the lowest Deck! Lackon! To the aft Harpoon Dock and hold your position! To arms, everyone!"

Jaylin did not want to go below. "No! No! NO! The Ship! It will sink! We'll be trapped! We'll drown down there! No!"

The girls pulled. Armsmen Spits and Retinack of the Queen's Finest joined them. Commander Dillon was off, pitching more orders about lowering the sails.

Birgit continued her pleading, "It's safer down *there* than up here! Let's go! Let's go!" They pulled Jaylin to join the throng of People heading down to the lower Levels. She could hear loud snapping noises from the other Ship as the Beast tore more of it apart. Faint screams from that Ship became mixed with the louder ones that Jaylin could hear all around her.

Jaylin was still terrified to go below. The thought of all that water surrounding her wracked her brain; but she went.

A throng of People massed together to head downwards. A few Soldiers were plodding their way up through the Crowd with Crossbows and other Weapons. Princess Jaylin and her Escorts continued down the criss-crossing stairs. They passed the main lower Decks where the Mess Hall, Armoury, and Recreational Rooms were. Long hallways stretched up and down the Ship at each Landing.

As they descended, the light grew fainter. There was a Generator on board that operated a few Electric Lights, but they only operated while the Ship was moving and rotating the large mechanical wheels that turned inside the Generator. Those lights were flickering open and closed as their Ship started decelerating. Oil lanterns lit most of the hallways further down.

Behind Princess Jaylin, and up above, there was a loud *thud* and *clang* as the large double doors that led to the top Deck slammed closed and were locked. The stairwell was then thrown into a deeper darkness that silenced the din outside.

The surrounding People, including Dontelle, let out a few squeals. They were now shut in! Jaylin was in a large buoyant, wooden bottle with its exits closed and a Graken tearing Ships apart outside. They all continued to descend as Princess Jaylin's eyes adjusted to the new ambient light of the lanterns.

The Migrations of the Graken always occurred before the Equinoxes. But this Graken was *NOT* migratory. This one had landed and stayed on their Continent. Jaylin knew this one personally.

Almost nineteen Years ago, when Princess Jaylin was only five-and-a-half Years old, this Monster attacked and killed her father and newborn baby brother right in front of her and her mother while they were last in Demanter.

This Graken, for some reason, could not or would not follow its fellows on their Migration pattern. Even though it could still fly at lower altitudes, it had stayed in their Lands. Whether by force because of unknown injuries or by choice, Princess Jaylin did not know.

Occasionally, when a Graken could not continue its Migration, the Beasts would die within Months because of the colder climates here. Somehow, this one acclimatized. After a few unsuccessful attempts to capture or kill it early on, it had left far away, into unexplored areas.

Since then, it has showed up only a few times; attacking random locations and then disappearing again. Once, in her memory, it attacked a floating Vessel like the one she was on.

The witnesses along the Coast said that there were no Survivors.

But this Graken hadn't been seen in Years! Why did it come now? Why did it come when Princess Jaylin was at her most vulnerable? While she was at Sea?

The two of the Queen's Finest that were with her were directing others to various locations on the lower Decks, giving them various tasks to shore up any windows or weak spots. Eventually, they came to the

doors that led to the Cargo Hold. Various Servants, with lanterns, entered first to light similar ones on the walls and the room slowly came into view.

The Cargo Hold was huge and spacious and filled with wares. In the centre of the room was a dumbwaiter system with rope, levers, and pulleys that could haul cargo up to the top Deck for loading and unloading.

After being granted permission from the King's Advisor to take their own Ship to the negotiations in Demanter, Jaylin's mother took advantage of the large Cargo Hold of the *Longshot* and filled it with trade goods to get it past the Trade Embargo.

The Captain of the Ship would see it unloaded in the Yaaromite Capital and traded for much needed resources back Home. The Cargo Hold was full of barrels upon barrels of sweet yellow grain that only grew in the fertile Fields of her Kingdom, a prize commodity outside of Luomaan. All this cargo was for the Yaaromite precious Metals that Loumaan lacked and that were needed for Toolmaking.

Besides the barrels, there were crates of other foodstuffs, rugs, tapestries, bolts of Kottoncloth, and other textiles. Jaylin feared for her life and the life of the Crew of the *Longshot*, but she also feared for the loss of all this commodity.

"Born alive! Look at all this stuff!" Birgit noted, eyes aghast and sweeping over the vast room. "I hope that *thing* gets fed up and leaves us alone!" She put a hand to her mouth, realizing the impact of what she had just said. "Oh my! I did not mean that literally!"

"Ladies!" the Finest called Spits said. "There are plenty of excellent Soldiers up there with better Weapons and Harpoon Guns. They will scare it away. Now, we will rest here and wait." He looked around, always watching for danger. A brave and handsome Finest of the Queen through and through, Jaylin noticed.

The Cargo Hold was also crowded with People coming in from above. Jaylin recognized that the two Kitcheners onboard were also with her in the Cargo Hold as well as other Servants and Crew.

Armsmen Spits and Retinack were the only members of the Queen's Finest down here and they stationed themselves by the main door entrance, which was now closed. Other doors at the opposite side of the room were also shut and some Crew members sat by it.

They waited and listened. A few muffled whimpers and whispers were all that could be heard. Even though the room slowly swayed back and forth, creaking softly, Jaylin did not feel sick anymore.

“I am *so* sorry that you saw that Graken again,” Birgit whispered to her. “Born alive, Jaylin! You look pale! Come, rest your head on my lap.”

Birgit adjusted herself and sat on some folded carpets that were stacked on top of some barrels. She patted the carpet beside her.

“Yes, thank-you Birgit,” Jaylin replied, taking her request. She went to lie down next to her, setting her head on her Ladymaid’s lap. “I am sorry I freaked out up there. I *hate* the Sea. I feel so trapped. Very un-Princess like. That Monster outside killed my family.”

Birgit stroked the mangled mess of Jaylin’s hair. Jaylin folded her knees up to her chest so that Dontelle could sit by her feet.

Birgit continued to whisper in a calm, steady tone, “I know about that. I am so sorry, Jaylin. I was too young at the time and living on the Farm in your Fields... You remember that Farm, Jaylin?”

Clever girl, trying to distract her from the disaster outside and those horrid memories from Years ago. “Of course, I remember, Birgit, you threw an egg at me! You were such a freckled little Squit! I chased you and pushed you into the creek!”

“And you came toppling after! But I sure got a scolding from my...”

The entire room lurched to the side with a low, wood crackling, *CRUNCH!*

Vertigo was lost as everything fell backwards. Everyone and everything not tied down was thrown towards one of the side walls.

Jaylin, laying horizontally, rolled over and over in the cacophony that ensued, bumping into everything and having other objects bump into her. She protected her head with her arms as more disorientating screams occurred. Princess Jaylin landed with a *whump* as something else, hard, landed on her foot. Pain shot up Jaylin’s leg and she howled out.

When the motion settled, the Princess lifted her head up with her arms and blew her hair out of her face. She hurt all over, especially her foot.

The opposite wall was now the ceiling! Objects, barrels, and People were still settling on this side of the room, which was now a highly slanted

floor. Some crates that were dangling higher up were still crashing and rolling down occasionally. Moans and shouts were everywhere.

Princess Jaylin's ears were ringing, and the room seemed to continue its spin. She tried to rise but looked at her leg and saw that it was pinned between two crates. A barrel, yellow grain now spilling out, was lying on top of it. Her foot was screaming underneath it.

"Birgit! Dontelle!" Jaylin shouted, looking around for them. Others were getting up and were moving objects around them. She could see Armsman Spits, standing and walking towards her over the loose objects that separated them.

He was nearly there when suddenly, Princess Jaylin lost her vertigo again and the entire room pitched a bit the other way, almost settling back into its original orientation.

The motion threw Spits and anyone else still standing back to the ground. The heavy barrel and crate rolled off her leg, and she felt a little relief around her ankle. Something else, however, thumped her back hard from behind her.

More screams, shouts, and moans. The room continued to rock, more gently this time, the wrong way.

The Graken must have landed on their Ship and had tilted it sideways like a child's toy!

Princess Jaylin could shuffle up on her arms and sit up a bit. To her horror, Birgit lay motionless right behind her. It was Birgit that had hit her backside.

"Birgit! No!" Princess Jaylin screamed, trying to turn around towards her, but pain rocked her foot again. She looked at her foot and it seemed okay except that it was swelling.

The room tilted again the wrong way, and she braced herself. More low wood cracking noises could be heard, as well as the screeching sound of the Graken. It was indeed close.

Princess Jaylin forced herself around to face Birgit, noticing other loose, heavy objects that could tip over on the next swing of the room. Birgit lay still, twisted like a doll.

She was gone.

Spits and Dontelle came to them at the same time. Dontelle, gray frock torn, appeared to be okay. Armsman Spits was bleeding from a fresh head wound on his scalp.

Dontelle screamed and sat beside her friend. Spits had his hands and arms under Jaylin's shoulders and was picking her up. "Wait!" the Princess shouted. "What are you doing? We have to help Birgit!"

"Sorry, Heir Princess," Armsman Spits explained, sounding formal even under the circumstances. "I need to get you to the doorway before this room moves again. You will get crushed under all this cargo." With one heavy thrust, Armsman Spits picked her up, turned her around, and put her on his shoulder. Her sore foot dangling out in front of him.

As Armsman Spits walked, stumbling over all sorts of obstacles, Princess Jaylin could see her two friends. Dontelle was weeping and placing Birgit's hands on her abdomen. Then Dontelle got up and followed while another small lurch of the room almost sent everyone tumbling again. Spits reached the entrance and leaned his Princess against the door. "Ow! It's my foot!" she cried.

Crying was all she could do.

The door and room were still on a heavy lean. It continued to sway further from normal. More sounds from outside made it hard to feel safe.

Other People were also congregating by the back walls to avoid another huge rotation of the room. Many were helping others. Many, sadly, stayed still, like Birgit. Arms and legs were sticking out of the rubble, broken cargo, and spilled grain at various angles.

This was a death trap! They were going to sink! They were going to—

With a sudden *crash* of wood, a large pointed black cone pierced into the side wall that was raised higher than usual. It retracted, and then, with another loud *blast*, it came again slightly beside the first hole in the hull. It retracted again.

The Graken was punching its way in with its sharp beak! Screaming resurfaced. Bits of debris sprayed from the wounds in the hull the Creature was making.

Slam! Slam! Slam! It continued. The hole was gaping and Sunlight, bright and white, poured in. The hole was still above the water level, thank

the Heavens. Spits unsheathed his Sword and put himself between it and her. There was no sign of Retinack.

The opposite door opened, and People poured out that way, fleeing from the Beast. The hole was large enough now that the Graken carefully fit its whole grotesque head in. Its left eye scar was pink and visible. Like a hanging Candelabrum, the Graken rotated its head and peered around the ruined Cargo Hold as if looking for something.

It found what it was looking for and stared directly at Princess Jaylin with both cruel black eyes. Jaylin's heart froze.

The Graken's head then opened its beak wide and sent a shrilling screech that reverberated throughout the room. Jaylin automatically covered her ears along with everyone else. Spits dropped his Sword.

Then, after snapping its beak shut again, the Graken popped its head out of the hole it made and disappeared.

A beat. No movement. No sound. Just the murmurings and moaning of the People still hurt. Slowly, with the *Longshot* groaning and creaking, the room rotated again. This time, back towards normal levels. The enormous gaping hole the Graken left behind also began to lower.

Not good.

Jaylin's heart, already beating too fast, now skipped. The Sea was going to come in! She *was* going to drown!

On the opposite side, the People that had left through the door suddenly came back in. They were waving People away. Sea water followed them. Now with a reference point, Princess Jaylin could feel the lean towards the opposite end. Her Ship was going down!

"We've got to get out of here!" Was that her voice? It was confusion. The People were panicking and rushing towards their door. The Sea was now spilling in through the descending gash in the hull.

Spits barked, "Up! Princess! We are leaving! Pray that foul Beast has gone!" Leaving his Sword on the ground, and with tremendous strength, he picked Jaylin up again and cradled her in both arms. Dontelle opened the door, and they raced towards the stairs now heading up. Many others followed at their heels.

"Birgit!" Jaylin cried. But it was no use. Spits had to get them up and out. Up and up they went. Other People were coming from other

rooms and halls to join them up the stairs. No sounds from outside the Ship was promising.

Huffing, Spits was the first to reach the large double doors at the top. They were closed, locked, and appeared undamaged. The lean of the Ship towards the back end of the Boat was more prominent, and it felt that, with the slightest touch, they would both topple backwards down the stairs.

Spits placed her down, and Jaylin stood on her good leg, leaning on him. He pounded on the door. Others beside Jaylin also began pounding and screaming to get out.

Behind her, and below, more People were scrambling up the stairs. Lights were snuffing out as the water level was rising down there. Princess Jaylin did not know how many People did not make it out of that Cargo Hold. Oh, poor Birgit!

The surrounding Crowd got larger. The People packed themselves in, hoping for rescue. It started getting tight and Jaylin felt that she just might suffocate under the intense push of a few niners of frenzied People before drowning in the Sea water.

Then, there was a clang, and the doors popped open under the pressure of the People. Daylight blinded Jaylin's eyes, and she was scooped up by Spits before being trampled underfoot. Commander Dillon was there, limping backwards, and allowing the masses to come out.

Everyone was looking up at the Sky.

"The Graken is gone!" the Commander said. "It flew away, back to the North. But the *Longshot* is going down by the back end; and quickly! Here, Spits, I'll take her! The Longboats are already in the water! Everyone! To the Longboats! Landward side!"

Princess Jaylin was gently exchanged into the powerful arms of Commander Dillon. Spits motioned towards her foot. "I believe it's just twisted, Sire, but she shouldn't put any weight on it just yet until we look at it some more."

They headed towards the side of the Ship. The same side and place where Jaylin had noticed the missing Bulwhales. The Sea Creatures were back now and whistling their tune.

At Sea, the *Bottomless Ryker* was amazingly still afloat but heavily damaged. Two sails stood erect. All around Jaylin, the People were helping the wounded down into a number of Longboats already in the water. Many more Boats were heading their way from the *Bottomless* with a few Crew members at the oars.

Jaylin could see the hole the Graken had made; and it was now totally submerged. Barrels and other debris littered the waters. People, too. Most swimming towards one of the Longboats, but some were not moving. What a disaster! Oh, Birgit!

Princess Jaylin was handed back over to Spits after he had climbed over the side railing. A rope ladder led down to an awaiting Longboat. With little effort, he carried her down.

Jaylin shivered. Others joined her on the Longboat, including Dontelle, and they hugged each other. Blankets were thrown around them and she could hear the commands of her blessed Armsmen and women around her, but they were just background noise. Her thoughts were on Birgit, and the others who had lost their lives this Day, this Hour.

Princess Jaylin prayed for them. She prayed the Graken would never return! A rising Bulwhale surfaced, with a pair of rare, red-striped fins, and blew out steam with a sweet whistle beside her.

It wasn't long until the Longboat was full and heading towards the *Bottomless*. Massive functioning hoists on the huge Ship lifted the entire Longboat up the side and then swung it into an awaiting Cradle on the actual Deck.

People from both Ships were all huddled together in groups. The Deck, now visible for the first time, was littered with wood and canvas pieces. Many People were tending the wounded. Spits picked Jaylin up and out of the Longboat. Glancing towards the *Longshot*, the Princess noticed it was mostly underwater now. The space in between was littered with more floating debris and the dead.

Spits placed Princess Jaylin beside a woman she did not know. Someone from the *Bottomless*, perhaps? Armsman Spits and the other woman spoke, but Jaylin did not listen. The woman then went to tend to Jaylin's foot. It throbbed in the background of her mind.

Was this shock? It must be. She was so uncaring about her own self. She continued to mourn the loss of the *Longshot* and the People that went down with it.

The sound of heavy boots woke Princess Jaylin from her reverie. They stopped right in front of her: tall boots, black, shiny, and not a scuff on them. The Princess glanced up. The Sun was behind the fellow's back so all she could see was a dark silhouette. The shape, hat, and cape were completely recognizable. It was the King's Advisor.

"Thank the Heavens. You're alive," Mahan said.