

CHAPTER 1

The Storm

“No, no, I won’t,” screamed Cilantra as great, fat hands moved closer to her head. “You can’t, you can’t,” she cried, hopelessly.

Unable to move her arms or legs, she watched helplessly as the hands forced a rough leather bag over her head.

The stench within the bag caused her to retch uncontrollably.

With her last breath she shouted, “Falcon, help me!”

Her head jerked left then right. Her arms and legs twitched slightly. She felt cold moist air upon her face and slowly opened her eyes.

Cilantra breathed deeply and peered through the darkness of the terrace on which she slept.

“It’s only a dream,” she sighed, closing her eyes once again; “Only a dream.”

Laying her head back onto an overstuffed pillow, Cilantra returned to a fitful sleep.

Rain pounded incessantly, furiously. Endless sheets of water cascaded over the covered terraces of Rhala'nn's palace.

Prince Rhala'nn was the spoiled, impatient heir to the throne. His father, King Ahala'nn, was ruler of a desert kingdom named Saalespor, populated by a foul smelling people named Saalesporco; "Porco" for short. The King had long turned a blind eye to the needs of his people and to his son's ambitions, appetites and cruelty.

Lightning flashed, thunder echoed down deserted hallways and the rain redoubled its unrelenting torrent. It seemed a lifetime since the desert kingdom had seen the sun. In reality, the freak storm had raged for only a few weeks; a lifetime, however, for Cilantra.

Twelve unfortunate women had arrived in the eye of the storm. The calm blue skies that graced the harbor on that day belied the stormy turmoil in the hearts and minds of the captives.

The women disembarked a slaver called *The Black Claw*, a tall ship brig, and were led to the prince's palace during one brief lull in the tempest. Since then, stinging, wind-whipped rain, lightning and thunder assaulted both great and small in this corrupt, rancid kingdom.

Kidnapped from their homelands, these young women were being forced to forget their past lives and embrace a new one as consorts and perhaps wives of the prince.

Opulent rooms in one wing of the palace were dedicated to this shipment of brides-to-be. Each of the twelve had a private suite with a well-appointed bedroom, a dressing room (with an immense closet) and a sitting room with luxurious furnishings.

Few would exchange their freedom for mere affluence and comfort; at least that is what the philosophers taught. In reality, some of the new captives were already enticed by their lavish new lifestyle.

The sitting rooms each opened onto a covered terrace that offered unparalleled views of the city and the sea beyond. These rooms were now shuttered against the storm; all except one.

In the early morning darkness a solitary figure slept through a reoccurring nightmare. When awake, she sat motionless gazing from the terrace toward the sea. Cilantra had stayed in this same place for days without end. She watched the spot where she last glimpsed her hope, a sloop named *Emeraldsea*, as it sailed away.

At the side of her overstuffed chase lounge was a small table that held a tray and last night's meal. Like the previous lunch and breakfast before that, it remained untouched.

A sudden flash of lightning revealed a woman so striking that even the stormy darkness could not mask her beauty. Her eyes fluttered open. They were like deep, infinite pools of ebony. Tears on her porcelain-smooth skin glistened in the momentary light. Her waist length hair hung around her shoulders like a shiny black shawl.

"Cilantra," whispered a voice from the darkness behind her.

She did not move or acknowledge the voice in any way.

"Cilantra, it's me, Brittany," said the voice, a little louder.

Brittany stepped from the darkness. Her golden blond hair was woven into a thick braid that hung to the middle of her back. It was laced with golden thread and little flowers made of silver. She wore an emerald nightgown made of shimmering silk like the tent that had been her prison aboard *The Black Claw*.

Over her nightgown she wore a matching robe embroidered with tiny silver flowers. Even in the early morning gray, her remarkably green eyes sparkled bright and clear.

“Cilantra, it’s me,” said Brittany again.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, Cilantra pulled her legs up tightly to her chin. She looked at the lower part of the chase lounge where her legs had been and then glanced up at her friend. It was a silent invitation for Brittany to sit.

Brittany accepted the invitation. The two sat looking at one another, mournfully. Brittany tenderly took Cilantra’s hands in her own. This simple act was all that was needed to release a floodgate of muted tears from them both.

In time, the mantle of silence gave way to stifled sobs and aborted words of solace.

“I thought it was all a dream; a nightmare,” wept Cilantra, quietly.

With the speed of thought, her mind filled with dreadful memories of the kidnapping.

She had slipped from the Lord Hiram’s encampment to enjoy a private swim away from guards and servants. Just as she stood at the river’s edge an awful smell engulfed her; the first

sign of hidden danger. It was the putrid smell of her Porco kidnappers which she mistook for a rotting carcass in the nearby brush.

Her husband, Lord Falcon, had warned her of the danger his family faced.

“There are enemies everywhere we go,” he had said. “My father is one of the most powerful men on earth, perhaps THE most powerful.” He did not say it as a boast, but as honest fact.

“You know he is a good man, but enemies are drawn to power like dragons are drawn to gold.”

Gazing lovingly into her eyes, Falcon had pleaded, “Please, never go outside the camp without your guards.”

Cilantra sighed as the voice and face of her husband faded from her mind.

Oh Falcon, her heart cried. I’m so sorry.

She shuttered as she remembered what little she could of her actual kidnapping.

Something, someone struck her from behind, pushing her face down into the river. Strong, beefy hands held her neck and head under water. Others wrapped cords around her ankles and brutally tied her hands behind her back.

Lungs screaming for air, she was finally pulled from the water. Before she could scream or even catch her breath, a dirty rag was crammed roughly into her mouth. A large, coarse body-sized sack was slipped over her head and pulled all the way down to her feet.

She felt herself being carried, over the shoulder, by some foul smelling man-beast. In just a few moments she was thrown, like a sack of tubers, into the back of some kind of wagon.

“It happened so quickly I thought it had to be a nightmare,” sobbed Cilantro.

Brittany nodded and wiped a tear from her own cheek. She too knew the hopelessness of being taken by the Porco.

“The kidnappers,” continued Cilantro with disjointed thoughts; “Being tied up in the wagon, the ship, the storm, The Bag, that awful bag.”

Her voice trailed off into silence as she and Brittany remembered the torturous head-bag used to subdue them all.

She thought of young Coral who had almost drowned with that rough leather bag over her head. To ‘teach her a lesson’ she was hung from a rope behind *The Black Claw* and dragged through the sea.

The threat of such water torture was enough to insure absolute compliance from all the captives.

“On the first day here” continued Cilantra, “I watched *Emeraldsea*, and that man in the red cap, sail away. I was sure he would bring Falcon back to rescue me; us,” she corrected herself.

“It was all I could think of when they introduced us to the other Favored Ones,” she said.

Cilantra all but spat out the phrase used to describe women kidnapped for the prince’s pleasure.

The thought of those who had been kidnapped before and how they now accepted palace life was enough to drive her back into silence.

Taking a deep breath she continued.

“I skipped dinner and snuck back here to watch.” She sighed deeply. “I was so sure Falcon would come.”

“I laid here and watched all night, but my husband never came. Falcon never came.”

Cilantra’s shoulders shook as she silently wept.

“I have stayed here, waiting and watching every day, every night since then – staring through the awful gray of this storm.” Cilantra’s voice trailed off into despair.

“That’s enough of that,” Brittany scolded, gently. “You are the wife of Lord Falcon, first born of the House of Hiram. And I am the wife of Quasar the Dragon-Slayer.”

Brittany took a deep breath before continuing. “We have both survived being abducted by Porco and imprisoned in a slave ship. We sailed through a horrendous storm and are confined in the palace of a wicked prince; but we have survived!”

Momentary visions of her kidnapping flashed through her mind. She saw the Proco smashing their way into her ranch house kitchen, smelled their stench and saw Quasar being beaten. Brittany literally shook her head to clear her mind’s eye.

“We fooled our jailers on the ship and avoided The Bag,” whispered Brittany.

“We have survived,” repeated Brittany, “And we shall survive until we are free!”

There was a new tone to Brittany's voice. Strength had replaced weakness, courage had dispelled despair.

At the sound of her voice, Cilantra looked toward her friend. Brittany was standing facing the window and the sea beyond. There was new fire in her eyes and a blush about her cheeks.

"Look," commanded Brittany.

Cilantra stood and followed Brittany's gaze out the window.

"Sunrise!" Cilantra exclaimed.

"Yes," said Brittany; "Sunrise. It's a new day."

As they watched, the gray mist of storm fled before the fiery sunrise.

"We must hurry," said Brittany, a new urgency in her voice.

"Why?" asked Cilantra.

"First, you must eat something," said Brittany.

"What?" asked Cilantra, again. She was not yet herself.

"It would not do to have you faint from hunger, now would it?"

"Well, no. I guess not," answered Cilantra, a bit dazed. "But, why must we hurry?"

“They will be coming for the dinner trays,” explained Brittany, hastily. “When they do, I want to be ready.”

“Ready for what?” asked Cilantra. Strength was returning to her voice. “What are you thinking?”

“Now that the storm has ended, we’re going to get out of this place.”

“I like what you’re thinking,” exclaimed Cilantra, “but how?”

“I don’t know, but first things first,” answered Brittany. The urgency of her voice was contagious.

She gently pushed Cilantra toward her dressing room. “We need to get dressed and you need to eat. Then...”

The sharp sound of tinkling bells stopped Brittany in mid-sentence. She glanced at the entrance to Cilantra’s suite. The sound came from down the hallway outside the door.

“They’re coming!” exclaimed Brittany.

“Who?” asked Cilantra.

Without answering, Brittany stepped back onto the terrace and grabbed two oranges from the dinner tray.

“Quick, hide these,” she commanded, tossing them to Cilantra.

Catching them, Cilantra could not help but wonder if these very oranges were from the citrus crates that had hid her and Brittany aboard *The Black Claw*.

Without knowing why, she pushed the fruit behind a pillow that rested on a small couch. Then, turning back to Brittany she began to speak.

“What are you doing?” was all she could manage.

She stared as Brittany broke off a few small pieces of flat bread and let them fall back onto the tray. She then picked up a small teapot from the tray and carefully poured its contents into a large potted plant that was on the terrace.

“What are you doing?” Cilantra repeated.

With nimble fingers, Brittany set the teapot down and liberated a few pieces of roasted meat that were impaled on a thin stick. These she wrapped in a piece of flat bread adding a little cheese and roasted onions from the tray. The remainder of the bread Brittany shoved into the potted plant.

The sound of tinkling bells grew louder, closer.

Brittany hurried to where Cilantra stood.

“Eat this,” whispered Brittany as she handed Cilantra the bread and meat. Without knowing it, she may very well have invented the sandwich.

Brittany pushed Cilantra toward the dressing room and added, “Change into hiking clothes – hurry!”

With that, Brittany bounded across the room and through the inner doorway that connected the two suites. As she silently closed the inner door, she heard the door to the hallway open and the deep voice of a man clearing his throat.

A tall, muscular man stepped from the hallway and into the room. He was dressed in colorful silk. Behind him came his youngest daughter, Lee’a. She had little bells hanging from the hem of her skirt. They jingled whenever she moved, thus announcing her presence wherever she went.

The man was named Kuubow. He was in charge of the Favored Ones. Kuubow carried a stick that was as tall as he. It was made of

ornately carved wood and topped with a gold ball encrusted with jewels. As he walked across the room the stick made a slight tap each time it struck the floor. Blind, Kuubow used the sound to find his way.

Lee'a darted past her father and entered the terrace where she had left the dinner tray the night before. She smiled when she saw that Cilantra was no longer on the chase lounge.

Lee'a quickly surveyed the table and terrace and giggled a little to herself. With practiced hands the young girl picked up the tray and moved to where her father stood.

"And so?" asked the man quietly, as if he were in the middle of a sentence.

"She pretends to eat," said Lee'a in a whisper.

"How so?" asked the man.

"The teapot is empty, but the cup is unused," answered Lee'a.

She did not mention that tea-colored liquid was seeping from the bottom of the potted plant.

"Also, the oranges are gone, but no peels were left." Lee'a smiled as if it were all a game. "Nobody eats orange peels do they, PaPa?"

Just then, Cilantra stepped from the dressing room fully dressed and finishing a last bite of bread and meat. She moved with the quiet grace and confidence of one from the House of Hiram.

“It is good to see you, Kuubow,” said Cilantra smoothly. “And you too, Lee’a,” she added, sincerely.

Saying nothing, Lee’a set down the tray and moved to the potted plant on the terrace. There she knelt and quickly cleaned up the tea.

“I am glad you are well,” answered Kuubow. He smiled broadly, revealing impossibly white teeth.

Kuubow turned slightly at the sound of the inner connecting door. Brittany stood at the opened door and asked, “May I come in?”

“Yes, of course,” answered Cilantra, totally in control. She was once again her old self; confident, poised, strong and beautiful.

“Breakfast will be served in the Women’s Hall,” said Kuubow to them both. “Meet Lee’a and the others in the hallway as quickly as possible.” It was a command, but couched in gentleness. “She will show you the way.”

With that, Kuubow turned and left the room. He moved as if he could see perfectly, aided only by the tap of his stick.

Lee'a quickly picked up the dinner tray and followed her father out the door. She paused momentarily in the hallway. Turning toward Brittany and Cilantra, she smiled brightly and said, "I'll meet you out here in just a few minutes."

Still holding the dinner tray, she nimbly closed the door with her foot.



Lord Falcon finished dressing then turned his attention to breakfast. The simple fare was delivered to his cabin at the same time each morning; sunrise. This morning it consisted of hot tea, a wedge of cheese, dense brown bread with honey and a roasted egg. It was the same breakfast enjoyed by each man aboard the brig *Fyrmatus*.

As the eldest son of the Lord Hiram, Falcon could have special food and drink reserved only for him. It was not his way. Falcon treated his men honorably, fairly. In return, his

men eagerly did anything he asked of them, including die. They shared a respect found only among those who faced danger together.

The Reds, as they were known, were the fiercest soldiers in the House of Hiram. They were first in battle and often the first to shed blood. The red color of their uniforms was designed to mask wounds they might suffer. They would never show any weakness to their enemy, even when dying. To become one of the Reds was the greatest honor a soldier in the House of Hiram could hope to attain.

Lord Falcon tore off a piece of bread, careful not drip honey on his smart red uniform, and ate it eagerly. He followed that with a bite of cheese and a drink of tea. Absentmindedly, Falcon peeled off the top of the egg. Steam curled its way around his fingers.

There must be something more, he thought. *What else can I be doing?*

Falcon sighed and picked up the egg. Holding it to his lips like a tiny goblet, he tossed back his head and let the hot golden yolk flow into his mouth.

I must find Cilantra, he thought, frustration burning in his mind.

It had been weeks since his wife went missing. Well he knew that the longer she was missing the less chance he had of finding her.

Falcon's brother, Reed, commanded a spy network known as the Greens. As soon as Reed had learned that Cilantra was missing he ordered his men to find out where she had been taken and by whom.

They traced the kidnappers to the port city of Mecnas, but Falcon arrived too late. A slaver named *The Black Claw* had left port just hours before *Fyrmatus* arrived. Falcon suspected that Cilantra was aboard *The Black Claw*.

Without waiting for the rest of his father's fleet, Falcon sailed after the mystery ship. He even left port against the tide; his men straining at the oars to bring *Fyrmatus* into open sea.

Unfortunately, ever since Falcon left Mecnas his energies had been spent fighting a storm instead of the kidnappers.

Falcon poured steaming tea into his mug and brought it to his lips. The vapor swirled around his face and warmed his nostrils. He smiled as it brought to mind the only good thing to happen thus far.

A chance encounter with the sloop *Emeraldsea* provided confirmation of Cilantra's fate and an unexpected reunion with his comrades Quasar and Nemo. They often shared hopes and thoughts over tea.

Besides members of the House of Hiram, Falcon could think of no one else he would rather see in time of need.

This reunion also brought with it the unwelcomed news that Quasar's bride, Brittany had also been kidnapped.

They will strengthen each other, Falcon told himself.

As he drained the mug he glanced out of the small window in his cabin. What he saw brought a smile to his lips and, for a moment, erased the worry from his heart. On the horizon, rays of sunlight pierced the gray retreating storm.

"Sunrise!" Falcon exclaimed. "Today will be the day!"

Suddenly, Falcon thought he saw a momentary shadow cross the rising sun. He pressed close to the window to make sure, then, hope and fear dueling in his heart, ran from the cabin.

"All hands on deck!"

“All hands on deck!” shouted Falcon as he raced up the steps that lead to the quarterdeck.

Hearing Lord Falcon’s order, the First Mate quickly moved to the steps. On a thick post at the top of the steps was mounted a bell. Mr. Schooper rang the bell briskly and shouted,

“All hands on deck!”

“All hands on deck!”

In moments, the deck of *Fyrmatus* was filled with sailors running to their stations.

Seconds later Falcon and the First Mate were joined on the quarterdeck by Captain Lewis, Quasar and Nemo.

The captain must have also been eating breakfast because he still had a bright white napkin hanging from his collar over the front of his uniform.

Seeing the napkin, Lord Falcon smiled slightly, but turned his head to look at anything other than the napkin. Falcon always tried to preserve the respect each man was due.

Mr. Schooper tried signaling the Captain with his eyes and then with subtle hand gestures. Captain Lewis tilted his head slightly and looked curiously at his First Mate. He took a step closer

to Lord Falcon and cleared his throat as if he were about to speak.

Nemo sighed, then reached up to the Captain's collar and snatched away the napkin. Quasar looked down trying to mask the surprise of his best friend's boldness.

Captain Lewis' words caught in his throat and he turned several shades of red. Recovering quickly, he was about to ask about the alarm, when Falcon turned and pointed to the sunrise.

"Captain", said Falcon loudly. "I saw the mast of a ship sail across the rising sun."

All five men looked intently at the fiery ball hovering above the horizon. No mast, no ship, nothing was silhouetted against the sun.

Without hesitation Captain Lewis shouted, "Come to course one-one-five, Mr. Schooper!"

"Coming to course one-one-five, sir," answered Mr. Schooper.

The helmsman turned the ship's wheel, stopping it to direct the ship to course "115".

The ship responded by turning and sailing directly at the rising sun.

In a short time, the first mate shouted, "Sir, steady on course one-one-five, sir."

Very well, Mr Schooper,” replied the captain. “Steady as she goes!”

“Aye, sir,” shouted the First Mate. “Steady as she goes.”

Still no mast, no ship, nor anything else was silhouetted against the sun.

“A double watch above, Mr. Schooper”, ordered Captain Lewis.

“Aye, sir,” shouted the First Mate. “A double watch it is.”

“Double watch to the crow’s nest,” shouted Mr. Schooper.

As he watched, two sailors quickly scampered up the main mast to its very top where a platform and railing were built. The men were dressed in the dark blue uniform of Lord Norrom, sixth son of the Lord Hiram and Admiral of the fleet. High upon the mast, they could barely be seen against the sky.

As soon as the sailors had tied themselves to the top of the mast, the First Mate shouted, “Sir, double watch posted, sir.”

“Very well, Mr. Schooper,” replied the captain. “Sing out if they see anything, and sharp’s the word!”

“Aye, sir,” replied the First Mate; “Sharp’s the word.”

The First Mate glanced down from the quarterdeck toward three seamen busily coiling rope. They met his eyes as he nodded toward the rising sun. Immediately, all three set down their ropes and ran to the eastern most side of the bow. They, too, were now on lookout duty, and knew to keep a sharp eye for anything on the horizon.

Lord Falcon stood on the quarterdeck facing the sunrise, hands clasped behind his back. If there was any doubt in his mind that he had indeed seen a ship silhouetted against the rising sun, his face did not betray it. Jaw clenched, eyes wide, he was the very image of confidence.

Internally, however, he felt helpless and weak. Without moving his lips or bowing his head Lord Falcon, first born of the House of Hiram, uttered an earnest prayer. He humbly asked for the safe return of Cilantra and Brittany and for the wisdom to know how to make it happen. He took a deep breath, imagining that the wind blowing on his face carried his prayer to heaven.

Captain Lewis approached Falcon and stood patiently waiting for the customary acknowledgment from his commander. None came; not a nod or a glance. Finally, he spoke with a confidence that he did not feel:

“Lord Falcon, all hands are on deck. We sail on a course directly toward the sunrise. A double watch is in the crow’s nest, and three on the bow. If there’s a ship out there, we will find her, sir.”

“That’s a big ‘IF’, isn’t it Captain?” said Falcon, quietly. He turned, toward the Captain.

“No, no, sir,” stammered Captain Lewis. “That’s not what I meant. There is no ‘IF’. There is no doubt. There is a ship out there and we will find her, sir.”

“Very good, Captain,” said Falcon, forcing a reassuring smile and nodding a little; “Understood.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Captain Lewis, as he turned to leave. Then, pausing, he took a deep breath and turned back to face the Lord Falcon, again.

“Sir, just one more thing?”

“What is it, Captain?” Falcon asked.

Captain Lewis looked Falcon straight in the eyes.

“We will find her, sir,” said Captain Lewis, boldly. “Your wife I mean. We will get her back, safe and sound. We will, sir.” Then nodding at Quasar, he added, “And your wife too, sir.”

Falcon and Quasar smiled at the Captain’s solemn words and worried face. Such loyalty cannot be bought or forced. It comes only in response to love, respect and humble leadership.

Falcon put his strong hand on the Captain’s shoulder saying,

“Yes, my friend, we will – God willing, we will find them safe and sound.”

As he spoke, a shout came loud and clear from the crow’s nest.

“Ship ho!” cried a sailor from above.

“Ship ho, dead ahead!” shouted the other lookout.

All the men on deck and on the quarterdeck turned to face the sunrise. Sure enough, the masts and sails of a tall ship could clearly be seen silhouetted against the brilliant rising orb. As they watched, the ship grew larger and larger as she came wholly into view.

Suddenly, Falcon realized that the ship was on a course leading directly toward *Fyrmatus* with all her sails unfurled and full of wind.

Lord Falcon grasped the railing of the quarterdeck and leaned forward, willing himself to get as clear a view as he could. He had expected to merely spot the ship and then give chase.

“Very good, then,” he said as if speaking to *The Black Claw*, “If its battle you want, then battle you shall have.”

Lord Falcon turned to Captain Lewis.

“Battle stations, Captain.” His order was so calm it was eerie.

“Mr. Schooper!” cried the captain, loudly. “Let’s show these kidnapping cowards what the House of Hiram has to offer!”

He glanced briefly toward Quasar and Nemo, and then shouted, “Battle stations, Mr. Schooper; battle stations!”

“Aye Aye, sir,” cried the First Mate as he ran to the bell.

“All hands, battle stations!” shouted Mr. Schooper as he furiously rang the bell.

“All hands, battle stations!”

Instantly, from below deck, streams of the Reds poured onto the deck. Teams of the Reds hauled up weapons that looked like giant crossbows. Sailors, too, ran to fetch other weapons and prepare the ship for battle.

Above the sound of countless soldiers and sailors running on deck came a loud voice from the crow's nest.

"Ship ho," came the cry from above!

"Ship ho, ship ho!"

Quasar, Nemo and Falcon looked up at the crow's nest.

Don't they know their first sighting has been heard, thought Falcon? *No, that can't be it.*

Lord Falcon could clearly see both lookouts pointing and gesturing toward the sun.

"Ship ho, ship ho!" they both cried again.

Falcon quickly turned to again look at *The Black Claw* and the rising sun behind her. To his unhappy surprise, another ship could clearly be seen sailing into view.

The lookouts kept shouting, "Ship ho, ship ho!"

Before Falcon could say a word, a third and a fourth ship crossed the horizon. They both

had all sails unfurled and full of wind. The four ships sailed straight for *Fyrmatus*.