

The *Freebooter's Bounty* turned towards port with understated elegance, the helmsman gently steering the sleek craft through waters gleaming in the sunlight. The deck creaked underfoot as the crew hurried about their business, their shouting easily heard over the breaking waves and the clacking bird in the crow's nest. Even after so many weeks at sea they were practised and efficient, with little sign of fatigue or wasted movement.

Windfinder wore a relieved smile. It was good they'd found solace in their duty. Her shipmates had seen enough misery to have dipped the head of even the most stoic in defeat.

One last ocean wind swept over the caravel as she changed trajectory, whipping the sails and leaving a handful of crew atop the rigging clinging to the ropes, white knuckled and cursing. Their captain chuckled and took a deep draught, savouring the familiar scent. The brisk air swept a chill through her lean frame. Windfinder was not particularly well attired for this cold climate, her tunic was light and goose bumps covered skin deeply tanned from long months around the Numasai and Indarii coastlines.

She fought down a shudder not entirely borne from the cold. The hue burnt into her flesh was a reminder of too many memories for the weary young woman to count, both good and bad.

Near all of the bad had come from the last few months.

Once, running the waters out on the frontier had been a romantic adventure, each day filled with new discoveries. For three years Windfinder and her crew had plied their trade between coastal cities on the fringe of chartered maps. The sights offered by such places rarely disappointed. Majestic spires and palaces soared upward into the skies, wonderous new creatures and landmarks waiting in the wilderness beyond. The people of these distant kingdoms were as warm as the climate and generous to boot, eager to exchange their exotic goods for silver and gold. As stories of such places passed from one port to another the ships and crews in the buccaneer fleet had enjoyed steadily growing fame and riches, the *Freebooter's Bounty* no exception.

But then the *Silent Curse* had returned. And in her wake came only shadows and despair.

It had taken mere weeks for the Pirate King's heir to exert his bloody mark in these waters, the way a brawler used his fists to batter an opponent. Fantastic tales of the unknown were completely forgotten before long, replaced by morbid news of ship after ship being sent to watery graves, their crews either slaughtered or sold to the Numasai fighting pits.

Those who tried to fight back were no match for a true fighting vessel, nor her villainous crew. The buccaneer fleet was intended for exploration and trade only, the men and women manning each ship ill-prepared for bloodshed. Likewise, the local tribes and principalities cared little for the conflict. To these peoples the war at sea was the business of a foreign world and bore no impact upon their lives. Gates and ports closed, kind smiles become stern frowns. There would be no salvation offered for the outsiders.

Faced with such daily despair the surviving explorers fled, Windfinder and her crew among them. She did not harbour a craven heart, but news of so many friends sunk to the bottom of the sea was too severe a warning to ignore.

Even then, the *Freebooter's Bounty* had barely escaped.

The *Silent Curse* had caught up with her as she made her way about the Cape of Old Iron, a stretch of peaks jutting out from the land to mark the boundary of Sult waters. The *Gargoyle* and the *Valentian Banshee* had been with her, both fellow buccaneer craft sailing in line. The warning from the lookouts came too late, drowned out by a deafening volley from their tormentor. It fell mercifully short of the *Freebooter's Bounty* but near crippled the *Gargoyle*, a lucky shot snapping the mainmast and dragging the craft to a stall in the ensuing confusion.

The sight of the *Banshee* turning still haunted Windfinder, the memory of her skipper still fresh, signalling for the *Freebooter's Bounty* to hold course as his own ship raced to the aid of their stricken comrades. It had been a clearheaded yet heartbreaking decision from an experienced hand, Windfinder knew. There was little sense in both craft sacrificing themselves when one might buy enough time for the other to escape.

That understanding still did little to appease her conscience.

Windfinder doubted she would ever forget the faces of the men and women she saw as the two ships passed. Some looked resolute, determination drawn across their features; the rest terrified, pale and shaking, their fear plainly visible in the slow and disorientated way they moved about ship. Their captain had simply borne a grim smile and saluted her, his message clear.

*Farewell.*

Borne by powerful offshore winds, the *Freebooter's Bounty* had quickly left her allies to their fate. As she passed beyond the cape the cannonade between the two ships had begun, loud enough to make Windfinder wince, even at distance.

She hadn't dared look back.

None of the crew had grumbled at their captain's decision. Even those with fiery blood running through their veins saw little sense in remaining. Near overnight, the coin rich east had become a graveyard roamed by a dangerous and unassailable predator. They were survivors, yet in their eyes Windfinder saw only defeat and exhaustion.

But new promises awaited. The Lords of the Deep had blessed Windfinder and her crew during their flight, and she did not intend to squander their benevolence in a skinful of rum and drunken rumination.

Even before the return of the Pirate King, news had reached Windfinder of new developments in the world of Guild Ball, a hint of new possibilities for those of enterprising spirit. As her ship made its way ever westwards, she contemplated what such rumours might mean for her beleaguered Guild. Something had to be done, she knew. Her Guild's power base and fleet had been irreparably shattered.

By the time the *Freebooter's Bounty* had reached the true safety of western waters, Windfinder had long made up her mind, word already sent to the Captain's Assembly ahead of her. It had cost nearly every coin to her name and several favours beside to convince the aged seadogs that the Guild's future lay not on the boundless ocean, but on dry land. But convince them she had.

And so, here the *Freebooter's Bounty* was, coming in to dock at Boujonte for her meeting with the Fisherman's Guild.

Choosing the Fisherman's Guild as partners for this venture had been obvious, although still a carefully calculated and much discussed gamble. Ties had existed between the two institutions for years longer than Windfinder's own, with little animosity to sour the arrangement. And like her own Guild, the Fishermen too were presently adrift on a calmed sea, the continued absence of a Lord Chamberlain eroding their political influence among their rivals. Alliance with a minor Guild offered them a convenient proxy whilst they were rebuilding – both internally and on the Guild Ball pitch, where the team's importance and popularity had slipped significantly.

And for Windfinder and her Guild?

Opportunity, glory, and adventure. More crucially, capital for their coffers.

Capital enough to rebuild and rearm the craft of the buccaneer fleet as mighty warships, fit to hunt down the Pirate King if any amongst their number were bloody minded enough for the deed. There had certainly been a call for vengeance amongst the younger members of the Captain's Assembly, although Windfinder doubted the older skippers much cared for anything so petty. The riches of the eastern seas and their settlements were likely already plundered and lost, and their coasts now well charted besides. There was little sense in returning to a place become a haven for outlaws and tyrants. The wisest knew the real future was in the far west instead, across the ocean beyond Ethraynne.

With the pact made today and the victories ahead, Windfinder would secure that future for her Guild, and personal fame everlasting.

She was broken from her thoughts by a hail from the shore. Leaning over the rails, she picked out Horizon, cocksure smile plastered across his face.

Unlike his compatriots, Horizon had never once tried to hide his smuggling activities. He brazenly came and went under the Lawkeepers' noses, evading the most dutiful and slipping enough coin to the rest for them to look the other way. His lack of interest in exploring the uncharted seas set him aside from Windfinder and her crew, but for all his faults she knew him as a trustworthy man with no lack of backbone at least. No matter how much she wanted to dislike the outlaw, his roguish personality had kept him in her better graces time and time again.

Today she decided to return his grin. She was just as likely to curse it tomorrow.

She recognised the larger man stood next to Horizon all too easily, the same sneer written across his features as when they'd last spoken. Corsair had never much cared for the buccaneer fleet. If Windfinder had to guess, she supposed there was some grudge long in the past which the pirate still harboured. Knowing him, it was something born at the card table.

The final man she didn't know at all, more was the pity. As unlike Corsair as could be, the stranger was tall and well built, taut muscles visible under his jerkin. Blonde hair bleached pale by the sun trailed over his shoulders, sharp eyes set into a handsome face appraising the *Freebooter's Bounty* as it came into port. This could be none other than the mysterious Shark she had heard mention of. Windfinder decided on the spot to make a point of his acquaintance. If more Fishermen were like him than like Corsair, anchoring herself to the soil might be that much more tolerable after all.

They had grown close enough to port now for other sounds to have become increasingly evident; several voices raised in song or shouting instruction, mixed with the dull sounds of cargo being moved about. Windfinder's curiosity tore her eyes from Shark to take in the docks about her. It had been a long time since last she stepped ashore in the west, much less a capital city at that.

Craft large and small were everywhere, most unloading at this time of day. In several places lithe fishermen upended great nets, spilling a slimy tide of writhing silver across the decking. Elsewhere, burly workers unloaded cargo from merchantmen in long trains leading to tall warehouses, dark shapes blocking the skyline. Gulls overhead chattered and added their voices, doubtless circling in wait for a careless fisherman to leave some of their haul unattended.

Satisfied, Windfinder turned to bellow instructions to the crew, making herself heard over the din. Despite the rumours she'd heard, it was clear to her the Fisherman's Guild remained alive - and strong, to boot. The men and women it employed still toiled under the sun, and still bore the rich fruit of their labour irrespective of the stagnancy felt in the upper echelons of the Guild.

Far from a Guild in decline, they were simply leaderless. A ship adrift without direction.

She grinned. Direction she could provide, and she did not intend to miss this opportunity.

It was time for the Navigator's Guild to take to the field at last.