

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST explosion woke up Ashley Jason—or Crafter, as she was better known—with a start.

She lay in the darkness of her bunk in the ship known as the *Yukon*, staring up at the ceiling overhead, which was very close. She blinked several times, partly annoyed that a nice dream involving her boyfriend had been interrupted, partly wondering if the explosion itself had been part of that dream. At the moment, she just felt the softness of the memory foam mattress she lay upon and the blankets wrapped around her body like a snake, the rising and lowering of the ocean waves gently rocking her back to sleep ...

The second explosion—which sounded much closer than the first—caused Crafter to accidentally roll out of her cot and land on the hard metal floor of her cabin with an ungraceful *thunk*. She felt the ship shudder underneath her hands and knees, seemingly in response to the second explosion.

What's going on? Crafter thought, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. *Are we under attack or something?*

Suddenly, the door to her cabin slid open, letting in the bright light from the hallway outside. She winced and covered her eyes, muttering, “Too bright.”

“Ashley?” said a familiar male voice with an odd accent that could be either British or Australian but was neither. “Ashley, are you awake?”

Squinting, Crafter looked up to see the partially silhouetted form of Barret Marcus, her boyfriend and a superhero named Dragon Prince, standing in the doorway. Although the shadows cast by the light made it difficult to make out his features, she could nonetheless sense his worry for her.

Another *boom* rocked the ship before Crafter could answer, making the ship rock even more. Crafter ducked her head while Dragon Prince threw out both hands and grabbed the archway of the door, cursing under his breath as the ship began to stabilize.

“Barrett, what’s going on?” asked Crafter, raising her head to look at him again. “What are all these explosions about? Is it—?”

Dragon Prince shook his head. “I do not know, but I just got a message from Captain Davidson. He says we’re under attack and that we should put on our costumes and get to the main deck as quickly as possible.”

That was when Crafter noticed that Dragon Prince was already in his gold-and-black spandex costume that reminded Crafter of a flight suit. Crafter, by contrast, was still wearing her old pink cat t-shirt and shorts that her younger brother, Jake, always used to make fun of her for wearing.

Crafter, however, didn’t ask for elaboration. Rising to her feet, Crafter put on her own red-and-yellow red spandex costume in record time, even as more explosions continued to rock the ship. Once she was done, she and Dragon Prince left her cabin, heading straight for the main deck.

They were not the only people awake. Members of the *Yukon*’s crew were running to and fro, yelling out orders and commands from Captain Davidson. Few of them gave either Crafter or Dragon Prince a second glance and exactly none of them stopped to explain to them what was going on. That would have annoyed Crafter if she wasn’t still half-asleep, following Dragon Prince more on instinct than anything else.

Fortunately, it did not take them long to reach the top deck and control room of the *Yukon*. A wide-open room set at the top of the ship, the top deck was normally a quiet place, full of sailors quietly operating the ship’s controls, keeping track of weather conditions, and adjusting the ship’s course accordingly. Crafter had only been up here once when Captain Davidson had given her and Dragon Prince an exclusive tour of the ship when they boarded and hadn’t been very impressed.

Now, however, the *Yukon*’s deck was as crazy as the rest of the place. Sailors sitting before computer stations were frantically pressing buttons or tapping touch screens while responding to messages from people over the radio. Fear and panic were so thick in the air that Crafter could practically taste it.

Faces were lit by computer monitors that displayed information and graphs that made no sense to Crafter but which the operators appeared to understand perfectly.

Beyond the windows of the top, Crafter could see that it was still very dark. Her own watch indicated that it was around three in the morning, which explained why she was still so groggy. She longingly noticed that several of the sailors were chugging cups of fresh coffee from their mugs, the crisp scent tempting to her nostrils.

In the center of the room sat a man upon a chair who, despite shouting orders, gave off a steady, solid vibe. Dressed in a dark blue pea coat, with an old, patched sailor's hat on his head, Captain Trevor 'Sea Dog' Davidson was the very definition of a sailor. He yelled orders at his men in his loud, pirate-like accent, but his words were crisp and clear, and Crafter had the feeling that things would have been even *more* chaotic if not for Captain Davidson's steady hand.

"Captain, what is going on?" said Dragon Prince as they approached the elderly man. "We heard the explosions."

Sea Dog's chair swiveled around, letting Crafter see the old sailor's short, scruffy grey beard, a relieved smile poking out from it. "Barrett, Ashley! Glad you're awake. We need all hands on deck if we're going to reach Superbia safely."

Doing her best to suppress a yawn, Crafter asked, in a voice that sounded tired even to her, "Are the Superbians attacking us?"

That had been Crafter's fear when Dragon Prince suggested they travel to Superbia by sea. Although Superbia was currently in the midst of a nationwide civil war that left the reigning government crippled and divided, that did not mean the seas were necessarily safe to travel. Dragon Prince had assured her that the Superbian Navy—already tiny due to Superbia's status as a small nation—likely would not be a problem, but Crafter had still been worried.

To her surprise, however, Sea Dog shook his head. "No. Not unless the Superbian Navy has decided to go old school with their ships. And I mean *really* old school."

"Old school?" Dragon Prince repeated, a questioning look crossing his handsome features. "What do you mean?"

"Shane!" Sea Dog suddenly shouted to the nearest sailor. "Show our guests the attackers!"

Shane, a young-looking sailor who was probably barely out of his teens, fumbled with the tablet in his hands, almost dropping it, before saying, "Uh, yes, sir," and tapping the screen. After a few more seconds of furious tapping, a holographic image suddenly appeared over the tablet's surface.

It was an image of an old, but fine-looking, Victorian sailing ship. Three tall masts rose up from the center of the ship, while what appeared to be cannons poked out of its sides. Crafter thought that the ship had to be huge, given the size of the hologram. Along the side of the ship, the words *Dividing Blade* could be read in bright red paint. Its bow even appeared to be shaped like a huge sword blade, though it probably was more for looks than functionality.

Crafter yawned again. "What ... what is that?"

Sea Dog suddenly held out a styrofoam coffee cup to Crafter, who took it gratefully. "That, my dear, is the enemy ship, apparently named the *Diving Blade*."

Sipping the warm, yet rich, liquid, Crafter could feel herself waking up already. "Barrett, is that one of the Superbian Navy's ships?"

Dragon Prince furrowed his brow. "No. All Navy ships are modern in design and none of them are called the *Diving Blade*. This thing looks like it sailed straight out of the Age of Exploration."

Crafter grimaced. Dragon Prince was the former Dragon Prince of Superbia before it fell into civil war. If anyone would know what ships the Superbian Navy used, it would have to be him.

"Aye, but it *hits* like a modern-day battle cruiser," Sea Dog grunted.

Crafter looked worryingly at Sea Dog. "You mean we've been hit already?"

"Not too much yet," said Sea Dog. "A cannonball struck the bow, but it didn't do much damage to the hull. Plus, Second Mate Geraldo ought to be out there any second now to deflect the cannonballs."

As soon as Sea Dog said that, several loud *booms* could be heard in the night and all eyes turned toward the windows. Even through the darkness, Crafter could see several cannonballs flying toward them.

But then what looked like a mini-hurricane launched up from the lower deck of the *Yukon* and deflected the cannonballs, which vanished somewhere into the shadows beyond their view.

“They were aiming for the top deck,” Dragon Prince observed in a grim tone.

Sea Dog nodded. “Aye. Hence why I had Geraldo go and use his wind powers to protect us. So long as Geraldo keeps deflecting their cannonballs, I think we should be safe.”

Crafter hoped Sea Dog was right. “Where did this ship come from? Do you know?”

Shane pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and glanced at the computer screen. “No. It just appeared on our radar all of a sudden and started shooting at us for no reason.”

“No warning messages, no communications from their crew, nothing,” Sea Dog grunted. “And they’ve thus far refused all radio communications with us.”

“So we’re under attack by a time-displaced sailing ship and have no idea why,” said Crafter. She sighed and sipped her coffee. “Just wonderful. How could things get worse?”

As if the universe was answering her question, a sailor sitting off to the side looked over his shoulder and shouted, “Sir! Incoming video communication from the enemy ship.”

Crafter and Dragon Prince exchanged puzzled looks, while Sea Dog snapped, “Get the holo-screen up. Now.”

The sailor immediately went back to work and, after pressing a few buttons, a holographic screen snapped into existence in front of the windows. Sea Dog turned his chair around to face the screen, while Crafter stood on his right and Dragon Prince stood on his left.

The screen was blank for a second or two until an image suddenly appeared. A dark-skinned man who appeared to be in his thirties was sitting on a wooden throne in what Crafter assumed was the top deck of the *Dividing Line*. He wore blackish-blue robes and had long, dark hair that went down to his shoulders. A strange sword-shaped pendant hung from his neck, which Crafter only noticed because of how shiny it looked when it reflected the light from torches on the walls of the cabin.

“Greetings,” said the man, in a voice that was as smooth as grease. “I demand to speak with the captain of the vessel we are attacking.”

Sea Dog stood up from his chair. “That’d be me. Captain Trevor Davidson, although I usually go by Sea Dog. May I have the honor of knowing to whom I am speaking?”

The man frowned. “Captain ... Davidson. My name is Prince Karos Malock, son of the All-King, rightful ruler of Telos, and future ruler all of the multiverse.”

“Multiverse?” Crafter whispered to Dragon Prince. “Does this guy think he’s in a sci-fi novel or something?”

Dragon Prince shook his head, clearly no more understanding about this situation than she was.

Sea Dog, on the other hand, kept his usual polite expression. “Well, Prince Malock, you used a lot of words and terms that I do not believe I’ve ever heard of. Mind explaining them to me one word at a time, as well as why you’ve chosen to attack our vessel when we’ve done absolutely nothing to you, your crew, or your ship?”

Prince Karos scowled. “Do I look like a dictionary? I am attacking you because you have something I want. Ordinarily, I would just sink your ship and take it myself, but my second mate has recommended to me that diplomacy sometimes works better than force, so I am giving you this chance to hand it over to me without more violence.”

Sea Dog raised an eyebrow. “Awfully generous offer of ya, uh, Your Majesty. But we don’t really know what, exactly, it is that you want.”

Prince Karos scowled even more. “Play dumb with me, will you? I *know* you have the Guard. If you continue to pretend like you don’t know what I am talking about, then we have nothing further to discuss. Prepare to die.”

Karos raised his hand—perhaps to turn off the camera—when Crafter stepped forward and, holding up her own hand, said, “Wait!”

Karos paused. His gaze shifted from Sea Dog to Crafter, although his disappointment and anger were still obvious. “What do you want, woman?”

Crafter gestured at Sea Dog. “Nothing, except to not get blown to bits or sank to the bottom of the ocean. We’d be happy to give you what you want, but we really don’t know what it is.”

Karos eyed Crafter suspiciously. “Hmm ... Tell me your name.”

“Ashley,” Crafter said. “Ashley Jason. I also go by Crafter.”

Karos frowned. “Sea Dog, Crafter ... what is it with you humans and your codenames?”

“We’re superheroes,” said Crafter. “That’s ... kind of what we do?”

Karos shook his head. “Very well then, Crafter. I want the Guard of the Trinity Blade. According to my Seeker, it is somewhere on your ship. Where is it?”

Crafter glanced at Sea Dog, who just shrugged. None of the other members of the crew said anything, either, with most of them averting their gaze or shrugging even more helplessly than Sea Dog.

She looked at Karos. “I’m sorry, Prince Karos, but we don’t have it. If we did, then like I said, we would give it to you. But we don’t, so we can’t.”

Karos’ eyes lit up with anger. “Liar! My Seeker says you have the Guard. I can understand not giving it up, but I do not respect a liar.”

“I’m *not* lying,” Crafter said. “You’re not listening to us.”

Karos blew breath out of his mouth. “Why did I even think this was a good idea in the first place? It is always a waste of time to talk with humans, but especially commoners like yourselves.”

Crafter felt her temper rise. “Commoners? What are you, some kind of medieval prince?”

“I already told you *what* I am,” Karos replied. “It isn’t my fault you are too stupid to understand. But very well. Since you continue to play dumb and treat me like I am some kind of fool, things will have to get *much* more serious. Pray to whatever gods you believe in, humans, because only divine intervention can save you from my wrath now.”

With that, the holo-screen went blank, leaving a surprised and slightly confused Crafter staring at her own reflection in the screen.

“What did he mean by that?” said Dragon Prince in confusion. “Is he going to resume attacking us?”

“Most likely,” Sea Dog said. “Fortunately, Geraldo is still out there, so he should be able to deflect their cannon—”

Without warning, the entire ship lurched to one side as if it had struck something in the water. Crafter fell to the floor, dropping her coffee cup, which spilled coffee everywhere. Sea Dog clutched the arms of his chair while Dragon Prince gripped the back with his hands.

“Captain!” Shane, who had also fallen onto the floor from the blast, said. “Engine crew are reporting that some sort of capsule just penetrated the lower decks of the ship. Not a lot of water is getting through, fortunately, but the hull has definitely been breached.”

“A capsule?” Sea Dog repeated. “Not a torpedo?”

Shane, tapping the screen of his tablet, shook his head. “No. One of the engineers is filming it. Let me get the video on the holo-screen ...”

A second later, the holo-screen showed an image of what, indeed, appeared to be a pill-shaped capsule of some sort stuck in the hull of the ship. The camera was shaky, obviously being taken by a sailor’s phone, and in the background, Crafter heard men yelling and the engine groaning under the effort of keeping the ship afloat. Water trickled in from around the edges of the capsule, but the capsule was big enough to keep the water from pouring in.

Sea Dog’s mouth fell open. “What in Poseidon’s name is that ...?”

Without warning, the lid of the capsule burst open and a heavy smokescreen exploded from within. The smokescreen filled the engine room, instantly obscuring the camera's view of the capsule. More shouts of confusion and fear came from the engineers and sailors.

"Smoke?" Dragon Prince questioned. "Some sort of chemical attack?"

The question was answered for Dragon Prince, however, when a clawed hand that clearly wasn't human suddenly reached out of the smoke cloud and, grabbing the phone, crushed it in its grasp. The stream instantly cut off, making the holo-screen blank again.

"Shane!" Sea Dog snapped. "Get that camera back on!"

"I can't! Shane said, frantically tapping his tablet. "The phone got destroyed and none of the other engineers or sailors are answering their phones!"

Rising to her feet, Crafter looked at Dragon Prince, who nodded once, before turning her gaze to Sea Dog. "Sea Dog, Barrett and I will go check on the engine room. We'll deal with whatever monster that Karos jerk just sent."

Sea Dog pursed his lips but nodded. "Aye. May the seas be with ya."

Crafter nodded in return. She and Dragon Prince then rushed toward the exit, Crafter hoping against hope that they would be able to save the sailors before it was too late.

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