Of all her childhood dreams, becoming a mausoleum was not one Dhrelal would've listed in her younger and headier days. But as the massive sea bore the *Test of Mettle* onward to parts unknown on waves without end, as crewmates new and old assimilated into her, as ancient thoughts drew on her sanity to maintain their wakefulness, she felt *mausoleum* all too fitting.

Her cabin was too small for the tangled weave of bodies trailing her along her like sordid appendages. The windows on both sides were covered with wrinkled half-corpses, all running back to her, connecting at odd angles. She could live forever, if she didn't want to move, and gods of the horizon, she wished she could move again. Lines of sinew and veins crawled up onto her head and onto her face, distorting what was once a pirate queen's celebrated visage with thinly-skinned muscles and liver spots. Twenty years ago, she had to become more efficient with the space she had, attaching the adjuncts who'd come to her begging for eternal life like braids to her skull. The first ones piled around her waist, her sides and backs crowded with heads and decayed bodies like a mother dog with her whelps. The Drudgery didn't care about proximity, only connection. Dhrelal could move in a space five feet by four, on the days she felt she could move at all.

There once was an old desk here, one that once occupied half of the cabin. She'd thought it ostentatious, but her first mate had all but demanded she take it.

"Symbol of status, Captain Dhrelal," he'd said on journey's outset, some hundred years ago. "When people walk into this cabin, they need to know who and what you are without e'er glancing at yore face." His face occupied the space just below her ribs, his emaciated body twisting into several generations of crewmembers. She tried not to look down. The Drudgery hadn't been kind enough to leave him staring at the ground when she granted him eternal life inside the parrock of her body.

For all the years her power gave her, immortality granted through sheer force of will and strength, she knew she'd give it all up for a single moment of sea breeze again.

There were moments of weakness, when the years pulled her into the waters of madness. More than once, her crew found Dhrelal licking the faces of the newest additions, desperately hoping for the taste of salt, a dry and wizened tongue seeking nostalgia and sanity. Her mind would resurface at their gentle address, but no one was meant to carry all these lives within their own. She wasn't going to last much longer, even as new additions showed up to her door on stretchers, begging her to save them from the fear of the unknown.

Every member of the crew saw the Drudgery for what it was. It never stopped them when their time came, though, not a single one in the decades they'd spent searching for Paragon. There was no death on the *Test of Mettle*.

She'd counted four generations, four ill-fated journeys of five-and-twenty years, and not a one refused the Drudgery when it came. None bore the burden of death now, all of them entangled within her mind, free of need of food, water, and other affectations of the mortal life. They simply existed, and would continue to do so until Dhrelal fell to dust or was slain. She was their afterlife, their only hope of continuing onward without facing the dichotomous cavern of the end. Despite her monstrous form, she was a savior to them. She'd accepted the burden of

their fate, one she didn't carry lightly.

Time was, Dhrelal felt invincible just by dint of being alive. Now, living was a curse, weighing on her, threatening to crush her with each addition to her ancient bones. She would meet the new crewmembers, quietly wondering what knowledge they would bring when their time came.

Save one. The stowaway.

They hadn't found her before the storm, when the jib broke and fell upon the barrel she hid in. The staves cracked, the child screamed, the mother she'd followed onboard frantic. They'd brought the girl in, her mother pleading flame for the smoldering wick before her.

"It's not fair, it's not just for a child to die for the love of a wayward mother," the sailor pleaded. "Please, Captain."

Dhrelal knew the cost, knew the crushing expectation of the Drudgery, but dared not tell the mother in her moment of anguish. They'd attached the girl's broken fingers to the back of Dhrelal's, the Drudgery linking the girl to the other entwined lives. She breathed, but the light left her eyes, a small life forever frozen at nine. Her memories were laid alongside Dhrelal's, their lives intermingled until the accident, lost in the void of a network of pasts.

With her left hand—her non-dominant hand—she sorted through the charts on her desk. She missed the old, huge desk. Didn't have to stack the charts so high on that one. The memories of several navigators running through her mind helped with the amount of paperwork, but with each new discovery, new information had to be in front of her. The more memories crowded in on her mind, the more her own grew fuzzy and lost inside the din of...

She paused to count. Seventy. Seventy souls, most of them old sailors who liked the concept of being forever on the high seas. She knew their names, their ambitions, their...

Briefly, she touched the child's hand upon her own. The little one's dreams still moved through the cacophony, stronger than the others. Her heart beat lifeless with the confusion of a life lost at youth, one alive and yet frozen.

They were close. So many had been lost on the journeys, and each sacrifice drove shards of glass deep into Dhrelal's mind. The Endless Tide had swallowed life upon life as they pushed forward into the unknown. The ocean broke the hardiest and bravest people Dhrelal had the pleasure of knowing, their bravery now dulled to information and dim recollections of the sea.

The cabin door creaked open, sunlight pouring in. The gentle warmth caused Dhrelal to reach her hand out instinctively, as if she could grab the light and hold it close to her in this living tomb. It was Holt, her new first mate. New by her standards, he'd come aboard roughly five years ago. The sailor didn't make eye contact, blanching as he stared down at the grime-encrusted floorboards. Most faces she saw screwed up when they entered, either from the sight of her or the smell. She assumed it was the smell, considering the vessels of recall attached to her likely hadn't been bathed in a few decades. When she could still walk freely, she'd done it herself, later becoming a punishment for infractions that didn't require the use of the brig. At some point, she realized it was simply a waste of time and energy, and she let her nose go dead to the stench.

"Mr. Holt," Dhrelal said, her voice a husk being rubbed into powder.

"Horizon, Captain," the man said to the floor. "It's...Captain, we see the Spire of Paragon."" He grew choked up, emotion or the smell making his eyes water, Dhrelal couldn't tell. "You've done it. Gods of the Horizon be praised, you've done it."

Dhrelal breathed out, a shudder running down what little of her spine remained unoccupied. Her own tears began to form. Her life's work, the work of all those connected to her was found. She imagined the mythological sight of the Spire, reaching into the heavens, tearing through the clouds to threaten the stars. Paragon had been found. At long, long last, it had been found.

Turning her attention to her first mate, she smiled, an act that lanced pain through her face and into the rest of the vessels. "Very well, Mr. Holt.," she said, voice even despite her agony. "Inform the expeditionary force to make ready. They walk with the gods this day."

Holt glanced up, his eyes meeting her with a mix of fear, awe, respect, and veiled disgust. "Aye, ma'am. My deepest and best congratulations, Captain. Your name will be rightfully carved into the halls of legend for this."

"My thanks to you and your kindness, Mr. Holt," she replied, neatening one last stack before struggling with the solitary drawer on the desk. "However, I am simply one in thousands making this day a hard-fought reality."

The first mate nodded, accepting the irony of calling herself "one" with zero qualms. "We'll make ready, ma'am. Shall I inform you when we make landfall?"

She shook her head, several arms buried under a century's worth of dry, fragile hair moving back and forth with the effort. "No need, Mr. Holt."

There was a pause so weighty, Dhrelal could almost feel Holt's mind sorting through her meaning. The rest of the vessels with her knew, but they'd reached a consensus many years ago. A quiet peace stole over their community of memories.

In the end, Mr. Holt simply nodded, stepped back onto the deck, and closed the door with a final thud. His bellowed orders pierced the three-inch door, bringing another painful smile to Dhrelal's face. The desk drawer had collected moisture over the years, the wood swelling enough to make her fight with it. There was a moment of panic in her mind as her emaciated left arm tugged feebly at it, but with a loud, friction-laden *hrrrunk*, the drawer gave way, its contents sliding and knocking against the seasoned wood.

Dhrelal pulled a folded, yellowed paper from the desk, opening it as tears stung her ageless eyes. In a quiet, heartfelt whisper, she thanked every soul that brought them this far by name, all of them a part of her as much as she was a part of them. She cradled each memory they'd gifted her, weeping and laughing with the most vivid of them. She mourned their loss of closure. She exulted in their achievements. She passed through the hallways of their memories, inspecting each room, garden, and home they contained.

In the end, Dhrelal convulsed with sobs at their sacrifice to find the land of the Horizon Gods.

Hours later, the crews' preparations were rocked by screaming and thumping inside the captain's cabin. Seventy-one voices greeted the horror of the unknown in a singular, piercing

shriek, echoing out over the ocean, attacking the unfeeling, metallic surface of the Spire. They rushed in to see the ledger of her Drudgery on the desk and the knife pressed through her chin into her head, the dead eyes of the child looking on as her fingers were forced to curl around the weapon.

Thus perished Dhrelal, First-Burdened with Drudgery, Tracker of the Gods, the Signal of Sorrows on the shores of the long-sought land of Paragon.

Several thousand years later

Flank didn't have a name, just a collection of convenient titles.

In his home village, the son of a whore and a passing Antirion merchant, he was Boy.

To the blacksmith who trained him, he was Flux.

To the man he murdered, he was Half-Choked Bastard.

To the warden, he was simply Bastard.

To the ranks of the Arms, rapscallion infantry of the Volsmarin, he was Flank, an expendable slab of meat whose one purpose in life was to take a blade on behalf of his betters, just like the rest of the Flanks.

Ironically, his Arms took more blades than he did. Not for lack of trying on his part, mind, but in his defense, they tended to pair him with the gloryhounds. His shield, chained to both himself and his Arm, could only be in so many places at once during the thick of battle. Six times, they'd paired him with Arms, each with exponentially greater glory lust, and six times, he'd had to drag their corpse off the front line after surviving yet another ill-fated charge.

He wiped the sweat and blood from his forehead with his unshielded hand, then shook his head. Seven times, not six. He'd tried killing his Arm during a skirmish in a trench. To their credit, the other Flanks didn't say anything. They'd likely all attempted it, too. When Flank discovered his chains didn't disappear when his Arm died, no one laughed when he bodily hauled the haughty sod back to the camp.

Naturally, his superiors were upset, but what worse end could they bring upon him? He was already a Flank.

He straightened up, sitting back on his knees, looking out toward the multi-colored ocean gleaming in the late afternoon sun. The Endless Tide hissed, sand and water flowing back and forth in a well-practiced dance. The sand made waves of its own, pushing toward the gritty soil covered in tufts of grass like a badly-disguised balding head. The sea changed color as it moved toward the shore, starting with a deep blue-green, then gold, then red, then finally black as it became one with the sand. Small specks of light dotted the waters, tattletale sea creatures highlighting potential meals for predators, parasites hoping to be swallowed along with them.

Flank shuddered, remembering a few meals ruined by worm-entangled innards. Sometimes it felt like everything in Paragon was either out to get itself killed, get someone else killed, or to control the husks of people's lives.

Speaking of which.

Flank prodded the body of his eighth —and decidedly, final— Arm with his foot. The gloryhound might have survived had he waited for the rest of the patrol to support them. Instead, the Arm charged in and overextended his small squad, outmaneuvered by the smaller force, a detachment of fleet jumping over the flanks' shields. Surrounded, the sure rout turned into a mad scramble for survival, the results of which led to Flank standing on the shoreline, surrounded by bodies, one still attached to him. Despite the casualties, it could have been worse. The grasschewer could've wandered into a contingent of gunhearts, and then where would he be?

Dead, probably.

Small crabs were already pulling the fingernails off the dead, covering their soft, vulnerable bodies with the barely-organic material and shedding the decaying material they'd used previously. Flank watched one discard a fishbone shell for a severed thumb, popping it onto its back with a tiny *squelch*.

This wasn't how Flank wanted his freedom, but if the Horizon Gods were going to be fickle, he'd accept fickle in his favor. Eventually, a detachment would be headed in his direction, if just to strip the bodies of clothing, money, and weapons, all in short supply these days.