



PART ONE

The Island

“**E**asy, Buck!” Phinneus Shae reached out his mind to calm the restless warjack. “Like a damned sea dog on shore leave, you are.”

The Buccaneer stamped its huge feet and flexed its mechanical hands on its long gaff. Buck had somehow developed the quirk of fidgeting like a racehorse in draft harness whenever danger loomed. Shae wouldn’t have cared on dry land, or even on the deck of a ship, but in a twenty-five-foot launch every movement the warjack made threatened to capsize the boat. With three tons of iron and bronze and fourteen sailors aboard, the launch boasted barely a foot of freeboard.

The warjack settled down slightly, its metal frame firmly planted on the reinforced seat, but continued to flex its hands on its weapon. Whether its uneasiness stemmed from the nearing white sand and looming jungle beyond or the deep-blue water only inches away, Shae couldn’t say. Though the Buccaneer knew no real fear, somewhere deep within the artificial intellect of its cortex it registered that a plunge over the side would not be good. Unlike his other warjacks, the heavy Mariners and Freebooter, the Buccaneer could not handle deep water. Total immersion would flood its firebox and transform the mass of semisentient iron, bronze, and magic into an inert heap of dead weight.

Even so, the forsaken mountain of jungle-covered rock that drew nearer with every stroke of the oars posed a more ominous threat. The

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island had no name, at least not on any of Shae's sketchy charts of Caen's vast southern oceans, but none of these islands offered much more than an agonizing death. When they lost one shipmate during a provisioning stop on their trip south, the entire crew learned that while bows and blowguns were no match for firearms and swords in a stand-up fight, the natives' use of stealth and poison evened the odds. Poisoned arrows might not be a threat to a warjack, but the warcaster and his crew were not immune, which was exactly why he was bringing Buck along on this little jaunt.

The boat's keel thumped the bottom in a trough between waves before the next breaker lifted them and thrust them farther ashore. The craft tried to slew sideways, and Shae's sea dogs fought to keep the bow pointed down the wave. Bug Eye Bart Traphone, Shae's one-legged coxswain, swore inventively and hauled on the tiller as they shipped some water over the transom. Beaching in surf was always hazardous, but that was another good reason to bring the 'jack along.

"Avast rowing and ship oars!" Shae ordered. "Okay, Buck! Haul us ashore!"

Smoke belched from the 'jack's stack as it fired up its boiler. The hulk of vaguely man-shaped iron and bronze stood up and strode out of the launch. Any other light warjack would have probably either fallen with the boat's violent roll or tripped over the gunwale, but the Buccaneer was as sure-footed as a mountain goat. It splashed into the shallow water, hooked its gaff to the thick eyebolt set into the launch's prow, and dragged the boat, crew, Shae, and Doc Killingsworth right up onto the beach.

"Don't even need to get yer boots wet!" The smiling sailor stowed his oar and stepped onto the pearly sand.

"Stop worryin' about your boots and keep yer eyes peeled!" Bug Eye snapped as he lurched over the side, his peg leg sinking into the sand. "Locals'll likely serve you up for supper, boots and all!"

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That drew some worried mumbles from his sea dogs, but Shae cut through them with a harsh, commanding tone. “Grab your gear, and don’t forget the shovels!” He stepped lightly ashore, wiped the streaming sweat from his brow, and glared into the dense jungle. The tropical sun blasted down on the iron plate of his warcaster armor, baking him like a crab in its shell. “We’ll be off this rock soon enough. We’re here for Doc’s feverwood root and nothing else.”

Buck turned to him, and Shae got the ’jack’s unvoiced question as clearly as if it had spoken. The Buccaneer had been with him for a long time, and Shae caught himself using the ’jack’s eyes and ears as readily as his own. Every warcaster had to master the art of seeing through many eyes simultaneously, and Shae didn’t even have to think of it any longer. He gave Buck a mental command and watched with satisfaction as the ’jack dragged the launch well above the high-tide line. Once in place, Bug Eye tied the boat’s painter to a nearby palm, cursing with every step in the soft sand.

“What’s this plant look like again, Doc?” Shae eyed the jungle dubiously. The foliage was so thick they’d have to hack their way through. The shade might provide some relief from the blistering heat, however.

“Looks like a little mango tree. Long, thin leaves, with shiny brown new growth. But we won’t find it near the shore. It likes drier ground.” The dark-skinned sawbones-*cum*-ship’s cook gnawed on his cigar butt, tipped his bedraggled top hat, and pointed up the densely overgrown slope. “There.”

“Which we wouldn’t need to dig up in the first place if that pointy-eared, spell-spittin’ wench hadn’t brung the bloody black fever aboard!” The sea dog’s muttered oath elicited a chorus of grumbles from the rest of the shore party.

“Belay that!” Shae snapped.

He’d been angry enough when he learned that the Iosan sorceress

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Lady Aiyana and her pistoleer companion, Master Holt, had disobeyed his orders to stay aboard *Talion* during their brief visit to Konesta. His anger had redoubled when Holt fell ill with black spot fever. Now, with a third of the crew weak as kittens with black pustules and fever, his anger knew no bounds. He would not, however, have the crew bad-mouthing Lady Aiyana. She and Holt had proven their worth on more than one occasion. Her spells and his uncanny marksmanship made them a useful duo, and it was unwise to disdain anything useful, especially now. With a price on his head big enough to set every cutthroat and pirate hunter in all of western Immoren after him, Shae would take any advantage he could get.

“Quit your griping and fall in behind Buck! We’ll get these roots and haul anchor before sundown. Then it’s a sweet sail back to Bottomton with a hold full of Mercarian treasure.”

That shut them up, and no doubt put their minds to the two Mercarian merchants they’d taken north of Zu, heavily laden with the riches of that mysterious southern continent. *Talion* sat low in the water, stuffed to the gunwales with enough teak wood, ambergris, coffee, and rare spices to satisfy even Joln Rockbottom . . . for a time.

Gotta admit, the dwarf’s plan worked perfectly, Shae thought as they followed the warjack up the beach.

Discovering nothing but a bundle of charts after their recent siege of Fort Lamis had seemed ill payment for the blood they’d spilled in taking the stronghold. Then Rockbottom’s examination of the papers revealed their true nature: detailed rutters of Mercarian League shipping, including an intricate series of instructions to reach the afore inaccessible continent of Zu. The charts were nigh-on priceless.

Hunting had been good in the southern ocean. They’d only put in to the stronghold of Konesta for provisions, a quick overnight stop, hopefully without stirring up any interest. The outbreak of fever had set them back a step.

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Nothing to do but press on.

Shae stopped at the forbidding wall of greenery and looked back over his shoulder. *Talion* lay at anchor, sails furled and a faint stream of smoke trailing up from her stacks. The frigate's sleek lines never ceased to tug at his heart, as alluring to his eye as any woman's sensuous curves. Her brightwork gleamed, and the beautifully burnished figurehead, the Lady of Retribution, glinted in the sun. *Talion* wasn't one of those wallowing three-deckers that so many naval builders seemed to favor these days, but she sported forty guns, three towering masts, and a powerful double-paddlewheel steam engine. Shae could outmaneuver more than half the ships in the Cygnaran Navy—and those he couldn't outfight, he could outrun. He wouldn't trade her for any first-rate on the sea.

"Problem, Captain?" Doc asked, fingering the huge cleaver at his belt.

"I just hate to leave her is all." *Talion* was more home than his home in Bottomton, which he hardly ever visited. His life had changed drastically since the mutiny on *Exeter*. The Mercarian League had seen to that. His surviving family had disowned him, his few acquaintances from his years at the Strategic Academy had become enemies, and the League had financially ruined or otherwise persecuted everyone faithful to him as traitors. All because he'd led a mutiny against a man who tried to murder him in cold blood. With *Talion*, Shae had begun to exact revenge for those wrongs. His crew was his family now.

"She's in good hands, Captain." Doc chewed on his cigar and grinned. "Hawk'll keep an eye on things. She didn't get that moniker for no reason, after all."

"Aye. That she most certainly did not." If there was anyone on Caen Shae trusted with *Talion*, it was his surly sword-sliding first mate.

With one last glance at his ship, he followed Buck into the thick

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jungle. As it turned out, he'd been wrong about the shade. The fresh sea breeze vanished, the hum of insects closed in around them, and sweat began to roll down his neck.

Two hours later, despite the sweltering heat, Shae was glad of his heavy jacket and warcaster armor.

"Dirty, blood-sucking . . ." A sea dog swatted at a bloated insect and left a smear of blood across his neck.

"Watch it!" A cutlass flashed, and another sailor crowed with triumph. "Got the bastard!" She lifted the headless corpse of a four-foot serpent on the back of her blade.

"A kingviper!" Doc reached for the scaly corpse. "Deadly poisonous, but damn fine eating!" He stuffed the dead snake in a sack and trudged on.

"Remind me not to have any stew tonight," another sea dog muttered.

"If you think that's the worst that's ended up in Doc's pot, you ain't been payin' attention, mate." Bug Eye chuckled at the newer crewman's pale face.

Shae ducked under a hanging vine that sported thorns long enough to take out an eye and decided to save his breath. They'd progressed barely two miles into the island's interior and found nothing but more jungle. Only Buck's indomitable strength and tireless endurance allowed them to proceed, even at this snail's pace. The 'jack's heavy gaff, now fitted with a long curved blade, swept back and forth like a great scythe, forging a path through the otherwise impenetrable growth. The sea dogs followed in a double line, cutlasses hacking at the few remaining vines or slithering serpents that escaped Buck's tread. Shae brought up the rear, watching behind and also ahead through the 'jack's eyes while listening for the distant thrum of tribal drums. It was rumored that the cannibals of these islands made their drums from human skin and bones, and that their shamans

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bound the souls of those they'd consumed to the instruments to be forever tormented by their drumming. So far, he heard nothing but the curses of his crew.

Stories to scare ignorant sailors, he reassured himself, though his hand never strayed far from Squall, his mechanical sword, or the hand cannon tucked into his sash. Cannibals and headhunters were real enough concerns, and he'd spent too many years watching his back to discount any threat completely.

Finally, they came to a break in the canopy gouged by the fall of a truly immense tree. In the sunlit patch stood a dozen small bushes with thin, glossy brown leaves.

"Feverwood!" Doc cleaved his way through the low brush.

"All right, you lot." Shae gestured his sea dogs forward. "Get those shovels working. Time and tide, time and tide . . ."

As the enthusiastic sea dogs complied, all too eager to finish this job and get back aboard *Talion*, Shae ordered Buck to take station upon the fallen tree trunk. The added height would give him a better vantage, even though neither the warcaster nor the warjack could see more than a few feet through the lush growth. Shae climbed up the immense trunk, fully twice his height in diameter and two hundred feet from its splayed roots to its still-leafy crown.

Lucky Rockbottom's not along on this jaunt, Shae thought. He looked along the massive piece of timber. *He'd insist we take this back with us to sell.*

Such a bole would make a fine mainmast and might bring a thousand crowns, but hauling it down to the beach would likely take several of his warjacks plus a lot of engineering. He had no time for such an endeavor, let alone space aboard *Talion* to stow the thing. He faced downhill while Buck faced up, trying to ignore the incessant buzz of insects and the sweat running down his ribs. In the direct sun, without a hint of breeze, the pauldrons of his armor soon

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became too hot to touch. He listened for drums over the sound of Doc giving orders and the crunch and crack of the sea dogs at work.

“That’ll be enough!” Doc called finally, hefting a heavy sack.

“Good!” Shae leaped down from the log, eager to go. He clapped a couple of sweating sea dogs on the shoulders with a grin. “Good work! Stow the shovels and form up. Back to the ship, and a round of grog for everyone!”

Their cheers were cut short by the echoing *spang* of a bullet careening off Shae’s armor, having somehow penetrated his power field without activating it.



The bullet smashed into Shae’s shoulder pauldron hard enough to spin him around. The slug spalled off to strike Bug Eye in the face. Blood and shattered bone sprayed from the impact and the old sea dog went down, clutching his ruined jaw.

“Down!” Shae reacted innately, bringing his armor to full stoke, a spell leaping to his mind. A nimbus of runes flared around his armor-clad hand as the warcaster summoned a shroud of concealing mist to hide them from the sniper. He knew it was a sniper—and at some distance, for the report of the shot arrived well after the bullet.

The sea dogs reacted like the veterans they were, pistols out, ready for anything. Two of them even fired into the forest in an attempt to deter the assailant, but the noise and smoke interfered with Shae’s perception as he and Buck scanned the foliage.

“Avast firing! It came from far off, but I don’t know . . .” He scanned the surrounding hills, thankful the summoned fog didn’t obscure his own vision as it did his enemy’s.

“Hold still, you!” Doc cursed and pressed down on Bug Eye’s chest with one knee. “Grab his hands, mates! Gotta tie off that bleeder!” The big man applied a pair of rusty pliers and a sail

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needle to the horrible wound in the sea dog's face.

The gurgling shrieks distracted Shae further.

"Quiet, damn you!" They were safe for the moment, but they couldn't sit here forever. He checked the gouge in his armor, as wide and deep as his finger. The shot had pierced his power field with enough force remaining to blow his brains out, if it had struck a few inches to the right.

A heavy rifle, and damn near a killing shot. *Pretty soon, the sniper will—*

A second bullet slammed into Buck's armor hard enough to stagger the warjack. Shae stifled the 'jack's urge to go tearing off through the jungle after the sniper. He cast another spell. Runes flared around the warjack, swirling into phantasmal illusions to mask Buck's position. Turning toward the sound of the gunshot, Shae raised his hand cannon to return fire. A glint of light from the top of a distant rock outcropping caught his eye—too far to hit with a pistol. He lowered his weapon with a silent curse.

"We've got to move!" He looked to Doc, who was wrapping a length of filthy cloth around Bug Eye's hastily patched jaw. "Can he walk?"

"C'n bl'dy run!" Bug Eye said, struggling to rise even as the last knot was tied in the blood-soaked bandage.

"Good man!" Shae gauged his adversary.

Wait for the next shot or run for it now?

The zip of another bullet tearing through the hunkered sea dogs preempted his decision. This grazed a man's shoulder, ripping away a piece of skin and muscle the size of a hen's egg. The pirate cursed and clapped a sodden handkerchief to the gaping wound before Doc could bring his needle and pliers to bear.

"Now! Run for the trees!" Shae said. He ordered Buck to take up the rear guard in hopes that the 'jack's bulk would shield them, then broke from cover.

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He grasped one lagging sea dog and thrust him forward as they dashed from the concealing mist of his spell into the open. Another bullet careened off of Buck's armor, slug fragments impacting Shae's power field in a flare of incandescent light. They reached the cover of the trees and slowed, concealed by heavy foliage.

"Who the hell's tryin' to kill us now?" one of the dogs ventured, trading her pistol for a cutlass to hack at the clinging vines.

"We'll worry about that later. Now we've got to—"

Another bullet ripped through the foliage, passing close enough to Shae's ear to flutter his hair. Unfortunately, the round struck the sea dog he'd been talking to squarely between the shoulder blades. She pitched forward in a spray of blood, and Shae knew she was dead even before Doc knelt beside her. The trees were not the cover he'd hoped they would be.

"Come on! We've got to get out of range of that sniper!"

Shae sent Buck forward, tearing down the way they'd come at a reckless pace. He trusted the 'jack to follow their own track back to the beach and brought up the rear himself, pouring arcane energy into his power field in hope of deflecting the sniper's fire. His field did just that, three more times before they were out of range. Each shot staggered him with its force but failed to penetrate.

"Finally!" he said and ordered them to slow to a quick march as the distant fire fell silent.

The easier downhill course and the already-beaten track would bring them to the beach in a fraction of the time it had taken them to hack their way in. He noted with some satisfaction that Doc still carried the heavy bag of feverwood root, but they'd paid for it in blood. Also, the realization that someone may have come to the island with the express purpose of killing him plagued Shae with every step. The sniper, obviously skilled, was either gunning for him personally or had decided that taking out the warcaster first would

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be prudent. He had too many enemies to guess who was out for his blood, but the list shortened when he considered that he was thousands of miles away from most of them.

Probably some bounty hunter out for reward.

Shae cursed the Mercarian League once again for hanging such an albatross around his neck.

As they neared the beach, however, the distant and deeper boom of a cannon brought them up short.

“That’s *Talion*’s signal gun, or I’m a Carre Dova constable!” one of the dogs puffed between labored breaths.

Shae knew the man was right. “Come on! Rally now! There’s trouble aboard the ship!”

He urged Buck forward, but when they crashed through the last of the jungle’s restrictive foliage, they were met with two more surprises. A squad of twenty marines strained to drag Shae’s launch into the water, thereby stranding them on this Morrow-forsaken rock. Beyond, rounding the western cape of the island, a three-masted ship approached under full sail and full steam. He couldn’t see her hull yet, but a Mercarian League pennant fluttered from her topmast.

“Thamar’s teeth!” Shae reached for his hand cannon and drew Squall.

That answers the question of who’s trying to kill me.

They’d obviously been smoked out. The League had a strong outpost in Konesta and must have identified *Talion* among the dozens of other ships. They’d followed, landed a squad including the sniper on the windward shore, then brought their ship around to box them in. Hawk had already cut their anchor rode and was piling on coal and canvas to allow *Talion* to maneuver in the confines of the bay. She’d either venture into the shallows to attempt to aid the shore party—a chancy prospect in uncharted waters—or engage the

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Mercarians. Shae and his sea dogs had only one option, regardless.

“Have at ’em, Talions!” Shae sent a mental command to Buck and charged the enemy force. “With me!” Runes flared around him and surged outward to his team, filling them with power. Under the influence of the spell, his sea dogs pelted forward at breakneck speed, infused with his rage, his passion, and his thirst for vengeance.

The warjack charged, its gaff poised like a lance, a heavily weighted net swinging over its head. The sea dogs surged across the beach with their captain, howling and firing their pistols. Three of the Mercarians went down before they’d even turned.

Buck threw its net, knocking two more League marines to the ground even as pistol shots ricocheted off the ’jack’s armor. The Buccaneer staggered but forged on, heedless of the damage. Shae called on his magic once again, slamming the foremost of the opposing force back with a hammering gust of arcane wind. The impact knocked the man literally out of his boots and felled two others behind him.

The warcaster charged into the melee wielding Squall in one hand and his hand cannon in the other. His power field flared blue as blades and bullets alike glanced off. Buck’s gaff struck a man’s skull, sending a spray of shattered bone and brains into the faces of his comrades. Shae spun in close to the ’jack’s side, swiping his mechanical saber in a devastating arc that sent two more Mercarians stumbling back, clutching gaping wounds.

“Secure the launch!” Shae ducked under a sweeping blow from Buck’s gaff and lunged forward.

Warcaster and warjack fought as one, unified through their arcane bond, parrying and stabbing, slashing and pummeling in deadly synchronicity. Sea dogs poured through the gap Shae and Buck tore in the enemy force and grasped the launch by the gunwales.

“Push, you swabs!” Doc threw his bag of roots into the boat

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and slammed his considerable bulk to the craft's transom.

The launch surged forward. Shae and Buck closed the gap behind them, guarding their rear with sweeping strokes of gaff and mechanical sword to keep the Mercarians at bay.

The boat splashed into the surf behind them. The chaotic thumps and curses of his crew tumbling aboard, manning their oars reached Shae's ears over the clash and thunder of weapons and gunfire. This would be the point where too many could be killed. As they rowed away, the remaining Mercarians could bring their pistols to bear. Even now, shots zipped past them and sea dogs cried out in pain.

With a thought from Shae, Buck flung another heavy net amid the enemy. His next order, however, the 'jack did not like so much: *Into the boat!*

Buck hesitated, seemingly unwilling to leave its captain behind.

"Move, you iron-plated oaf!" Shae sent another arcane blast of wind into the enemy, throwing a man right into the poised boarding pike of another.

Buck had to get aboard the launch before it reached deep water. The warjack flung its heavy gaff into the enemy and charged for the boat. Shae urged the construct on and continued to fight, backing into the surf with every sweep of his sword to keep the Mercarians from flanking him.

Without turning, he saw through Buck's eyes as the 'jack clambered aboard the launch, nearly tipping the craft over with its weight. A bullet slammed into Shae's shield, and he missed a parry. The sword cut a shallow line in his thigh. He reciprocated with a devastating blow from Squall, severing his assailant's arm and flinging him back into his comrades.

"Captain!"

At Doc's bellow, Shae knew it was time to run.

With another swirling nimbus of arcane runes, Shae summoned a

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cloud of obscuring mist to cover his retreat and dashed into the surf. Bullets and bad language harassed his flight, but neither impeded his progress. The launch's crew rowed like madmen, and the boat was already in deep water, but unlike Buck, Shae's warcaster armor would work when submersed. He sprinted forward and dove straight into a rising breaker, unimpeded by the armor's weight. He heard muffled gunfire through the water and observed the battle through Buck's eyes. His coxswain, Bug Eye, crouched in the boat's stern, his face pale above the bloody bandage as he fired shot after shot to cover the captain. Another sea dog reloaded as fast as he could fire, a box of ammo open in his lap.

Shae swam hard, bullets lashing the water around him. Once again he saw through Buck's eyes as Doc threw a line into the launch's wake. He reached out and grasped the rope with all the strength his warcaster armor could exert, then held on as Buck pulled him in. The warjack reached out to haul him aboard, soaked and spitting but hale.

"Now! Row for your lives!" Shae took a seat at the rudder, where his power field would help protect the rest of the launch's crew, and cast yet another spell, this one upon the boat itself.

Concentric rings of arcane runes swirled around them, forming an illusory shimmer of phantasmal images to obscure their exact position. Shae held the spell intact as the sea dogs rowed for the ship amid the continuing zip and splash of bullets. Once the boat was finally out of pistol range, the warcaster let his spell lapse. Several of his sea dogs sported bullet wounds now, but nobody else had been killed. *Luck of the gods*, he thought, banking the fire of his warcaster armor and ordering Buck to do likewise. They couldn't keep running full tilt for long, and it looked like they were in for another fight.

The thundering report of a cannon drew his eyes up to *Talion*. Smoke plumed out from her high forecastle toward the enemy ship.

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“The Commodore!” one of the sea dogs cried with a grin.

“Aye! Hawk’s giving them a taste of hell!” Shae stood and smiled in approval. Hawk had maneuvered *Talion* close enough for the heavier royal-weight cannon to reach their visitor without venturing into range of the Mercarian guns. *Talion* turned to fall off the wind, aided by a brief back-paddle of her port-side paddlewheel. Sails billowed, and she bore down on the launch at full speed. “Ha! Brilliant!”

Shae’s power field flared around him, and something slammed into his back like a battering ram, pitching him forward into the bloody seawater that sloshed in the launch’s bilge. Pain blossomed between his shoulders, and he wondered if he were dying.

“Captain!” Before Doc could reach him, Buck’s huge hand grasped him by the stack of his armor and hauled him up.

“Thamar’s eye teeth!” Shae flexed his shoulders. He could breathe, at least. “What in the name of all the scions . . . ?” A hissing sound from over his shoulder stopped his tirade. An oppressive weight settled on him, and his armor’s power field collapsed.

“You’re venting steam, Captain,” Doc said, but it wasn’t news to Shae. “There’s a bullet hole right in the middle of your back!”

“Lucky it’s not in my head!” He glared back at the beach. There, among the surviving Mercarians, stood a figure with a rifle. He was shorter than the others, with close-cropped hair the color of snow, and the rifle he hefted was longer than he was tall. Shae watched as his assailant reloaded and raised the rifle once again, but the warcaster was already drawing his arcane energy into another spell. Runes flared, and the entire launch shimmered beneath them once again, phantasmal ghosts swirling to mask their position.

Shae stared straight at the sniper as a puff of smoke issued from the long rifle. The bullet screamed by his head, missing by an arm’s reach. The report of the rifle arrived a moment later, a crack of echoing thunder.

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“Looks like somebody *really* wants you dead, Captain,” Doc offered, but that wasn’t really news to Shae, either.

“I’ll just have to disappoint them, then.” He turned back to the tasks of maintaining his spell and directing their progress into the path of his approaching ship. The huge ’jack crane swung out to starboard. A wide cargo net was being lowered over the side. Lines led forward to an improvised boom from its weighted corners.

Shae grinned. *Good thinking, Hawk*, he thought. Stopping the ship to pick them up would take far too much time with the enemy ship bearing down fast. By the time they furled sails and back-paddled to slow *Talion*, they’d be taking cannon fire. Using the net would be dangerous, but they’d have a chance to get aboard before the enemy came into range.

“Row for it, Talions!” he shouted. “We’ll only get one shot at this, and it’s going to get rough.”

He gave a silent command to Buck as the ship bore down on them. They’d both have to be careful, with his warcaster armor out of commission and the warjack unable to handle deep water. If either of them fell overboard, they’d surely sink like stones.

