

A War-Torn novel contest entry by

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The moment Sai awoke, she knew that today would change everything. She would never go back to the place she had called home and would leave the path her guardians had chosen for her. She would take back her own life and reveal who she truly was to those that mattered. Donning her traveling clothes in the still silence of the darkened cabin, she slipped past the snoring Garthanyx with the practiced stealth of a spy. Sai climbed the steps leading to the *Exploit's* deck. The change from the cool shadows to the light of morning was dazzling on her eyes and she paused to let them adjust. She looked about for Dolan who had already risen; she spotted him standing alone at the stern of the airship, gazing at the passing landscapes, a shiny brass oculus in his hands. Slowly, doing her best to keep her heart from pounding, she made her way towards him. A crewman polishing the golden soarwood decking glanced up at her as she passed, when Sai looked at him he quickly cast his eyes down.

Can I blame the crew for mistrusting us? Landing an airship in the middle of the night in an empty field to take aboard a blood encrusted warforged and his bedraggled companions would shake any man. If they knew I was a changeling there would be mutiny.

Sai approached Dolan and stood quietly beside him. He lowered the oculus and silently acknowledged her presence. For a few moments, they both looked out on the fields of southern Breland passing beneath them. Sai swallowed and decided to break the silence,

“Dolan, you didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“You were talking in your sleep, all I could make out was ‘father’.”

He remained quiet and didn’t respond. Sai reached over, took his chin in her hand, and gently turned his face to her. It was the first tender touch they had ever shared,

“Tell me, Dolan.”

Although the half-elven features of her Relia persona were a facade, the beautiful face reflected the caring Sai felt for him. Dolan’s expression melted with her look, he glanced down at his hands,

“It is my father. I can’t keep him out of my dreams. It’s the same night after night, each time he’s trying to tell me something. His mouth moves but I can’t hear his words. His hand reaches out for me but I can’t grasp it.”

Dolan turned to stare at the sky, “I can’t dispel his ghost, Relia. He died on the day of mourning fighting for the King’s host in Cyre. They say that the bodies of the dead in the Mournland don’t decay. Where they fell on the field that day they will lie forever, unmoving, never returning to the earth from which they came.”

Dolan brought his hands to his face in anguish. She could feel his pain like a tangible barrier between them. Sai reached a hand towards him but before she could console, Dolan turned to face her, his voice cracking with emotion,

“I swear that I will not leave his body there, Relia. Whatever I must go through to bring him home, I will endure it. I will not allow his eyes to stare sightless into that hellish sky for eternity!”

Dolan turned to walk away but Sai grasped his shoulders and looked him in the face. She could see the wetness of emotion in his eyes,

“Dolan, I will go with you. I have decided I am not returning to Sharn, or to House Phiarlan. There is nothing for me there anymore. I don’t want that life, I don’t want their deceptions, and most of all I don’t want to leave the only people I have ever been able to call friends.”

Dolan’s expression turned confused, “Relia, what do you mean deceptions? What are you talking about?”

“If you truly knew who I was you would understand. Dolan...there’s something I need to tell you...”

A sudden whizzing sound split the air between them; the thud of a crossbow bolt lodging in the deck planks behind them caused both to duck. Looking up, they could see a group of creatures flying in the sky above and behind the skyship. Dolan brought the oculus to his eye. With a twist of a dial, he focused in. The creatures were huge and reptilian, with wings of taut skin that looked like stretched leather. On the backs of the creatures were riders, a mix of warforged and goblinoids.

“It’s Torran’s warforged and some new friends he must have made in Darguun. They’re riding glidewings,” said Dolan.

“Can we outrun them?” asked Sai.

“Not with the condition of this ship.” With a muttered curse, Dolan ran to a nearby alarm bell and began to strike it with a brass rod. The crew, reacting to the ship’s alarm began to assemble on the main deck. A moment later, the ship’s captain appeared on the aft deck, his face showing his anger. Dolan stopped the ringing,

“Captain, we’ve got unexpected guests.” Dolan pointed to the flight of glidewings, now angling in a gentle dive towards the *Exploit*. The captain’s eyes widened and he turned to shout down to the assembled crew,

“Gunners, man the ballistae, prepare for a fly-by assault. Marines, prepare for a boarding!”

Crewmen scrambled to remove the canvas tarpaulins that protected the ship’s swivel-mounted ballistae. Others began donning armor being passed up from below and arming themselves with crossbows or boarding pikes and short swords. Dolan, turned back and grabbed Sai’s arm,

“They will be here in a few seconds, rouse Garthanyx and find Bone Render.”

Sai decided to heed him and ran down the steps to the main deck, at that moment Garthanyx appeared through a hatchway from below. The gnome was still in his bedclothes, his ink-stained fingers clutching one of the journals he always ended up sleeping with. When he spotted her his eyes glittered,

“Relia, there you are. I was hoping you would cook me one of those omelets of yours, hmmm? You are a culinary genius my girl, a genius!” In the blink of an eye he produced a baruushi egg from somewhere and held it out with a hopeful expression.

“Garthanyx, are you oblivious? We will be under attack any second!”

“Oh, is that what this is all about? I thought a morning wakeup chime was a wonderful idea.”

Before Sai could act on her desire to smack the egg into the gnome’s face, Bone Render’s massive metallic shoulders appeared through the hatchway. The glow from his eyes seemed to intensify as he scanned around the deck. His gaze settled on Sai,

“Where is the danger, singer Relia?”

“Flyers behind us,” said Sai. Without another word, Bone Render walked with long strides towards the port side of the airship. On his way, he wrested a boarding pike from a shocked crewmember that was smart enough not to argue. Sai turned her attention back to Garthanyx,

“I think you should stay out of the way. Go back down below, *now!*”

With a hurt expression, Garthanyx descended into the blackness of the hatchway. Without any more delay, she turned to where the crew were girding for battle. Quickly grabbing a crossbow and quiver, she ran to the starboard side railing, pausing only to load. The fliers were now circling the ship and picking targets. A bolt whizzing inches from her ear brought Sai’s attention to the goblin that fired it. The rider was cradling a crossbow and reloading, he looked straight at Sai just as she loosed her bolt. In that instant she thought the shot would strike the vile creature between the eyes but the bolt embedded in the glidewing’s saddle. The goblin laughed and made a rude hand gesture at her before dropping out of sight under the airship’s hull.

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Dolan crouched behind a bulwark as the glidewings descended on the stern of the airship in a wedge formation. Two crossbowmen on either side of him fired their rounds with no effect at the oncoming attackers. A flurry of shots from the formation struck the *Exploit* with a series of staccato thuds; one bolt struck a bowman in the center of this throat sending him backwards desperately clawing at the spurting wound. At a distance of about a hundred feet from the ship, the wedge broke formation and the fliers scattered around the vessel. Dolan peered out from behind the rail at the nearest glidewing as it

whooshed off to starboard. On the back of the creature was one of Torran's warforged. By his characteristic markings, Dolan could identify him as Doom Omen, the original warforged commander of the Tagenette contingent and now, Torran's favorite pet killer. As Doom Omen disappeared around the port side, Dolan caught a glimpse of something slung on the underside of the glidewing. A round metallic sphere with a riot of protrusions.

Dolan moved off in a squatting run down the steps to the main deck. He spotted Bone Render and picked his way towards him through the crouching crew and the wounded and dying. A nearby ballistae fired at a glidewing that had strayed too close to the ship, the huge bolt ripped through creatures underbelly and pierced the goblin riding it. The pair, now locked together by the shaft, turned over and plummeted towards the ground below. Dolan reached Bone Render who was standing, eschewing all protective cover, a boarding pike in one hand and a heavy mace in the other. A coiled rope dangled from a slot in the end of the pike. Dolan yelled above the din,

“Bone, get down you metallic oaf!”

“I am going fishing soldier Dolan, fishing for enemy.” Bone Render suddenly launched the pike out into the sky with tremendous force. The point pierced a glidewing-mounted warforged, skewering her through an unarmored shoulder. Bone Render pulled viciously on the rope, yanking the warforged off the glidewing and swinging her with a thump into the side of the *Exploit*. He pulled the wounded warforged up to the rail and with a casual motion, swung the mace bashing the metallic head in.

Before Dolan could fully grasp what he just saw, a glowing red orb of fire came hurtling into the ship's upper bulwark. The fireball exploded in front of several marines

who were at the railing only thirty feet away. The resulting blast sent those near it flying backwards, their bodies engulfed in fire. Bone Render's armored body, which was between Dolan and the luckless crew, deflected most of the blast. The magically protected soarwood planking did not burn, but the charred smell of the burning victims permeated the air. The captain who rushed to the sound of the explosion came up from behind Dolan and crouched at this side,

“If they think they can burn a fire elemental powered airship out of the sky, they're deranged. The whole outer hull is magically protected from fire.”

Dolan glanced at the captain, “Let's hope that's enough.”

With only twenty fliers, how did Torran think he was going to take this ship down?

Suddenly, Dolan remembered the suspicious sphere under Doom Omen's glidewing. With a start, he rose and scanned the perimeter of the ship for any sign of him. The distinctive warforged was not to port or starboard.

Dolan sprinted back towards the stern, taking the steps two at a time up to the deck. Several crossbowmen were still there, as well as two crumpled bodies on the decking. Avoiding the pools of slippery blood, Dolan crouched and looked out into the sky. Doom Omen was flying directly towards the *Exploit* with two goblin wingmen flying in front and slightly below him providing covering fire. The metal sphere remained slung below the glidewings belly. With a sudden realization of the danger, Dolan knew what he had to do,

“Fire at the warforged, shoot his glidewing!”

Dolan cast his eyes about the bloody deck and spotted a charged crossbow lying near one of the dead men. He reached over and grabbed it leveling it towards Doom Omen. This particular weapon was a sharpshooter's bow with a magnified sighting. Dolan took aim at Doom Omen who was rapidly closing in on the stern. No bolts had struck the glidewing that was visibly toiling under the weight of his combined load. He had one opportunity to take a shot and moved the aiming cross gently away from the armored warforged and to the glidewing. A squeeze of the trigger launched the deadly bolt towards its target. Dolan removed the sight from his eye to watch the effect of the shot. The bolt struck the glidewing at the juncture between its neck and wing joint. With an ear-piercing scream, it immediately dipped to its left but did not somersault out of control as Dolan had hoped. Everyone instinctively ducked, as the massive creature soared directly overhead. Doom Omen jerked his left arm and the metal sphere dropped in an arced trajectory towards the *Exploit*. As the warforged veered off to starboard, the sphere crashed into the main deck scattering crew and bouncing towards the bow. A marine, not fast enough to get out of its careening path was thrown to the deck as the sphere crushed his shoulder. After bouncing off a bulkhead, it came to rest on the main deck. An uncanny silence came across the crew as everyone waited to see what would happen. Moments passed with no movement. A few of the crew began to approach it but the captain called them back. Dolan suddenly realized that the circling glidewings were gone; they had flown off in the distance after the device had struck the ship. He looked back to see Relia and Bone Render, who was still clutching his makeshift harpoon, slowly approaching the sphere. He noted wryly that the crew was willing to let the strangers advance on the device first.

Without any warning, six thick rods began to extend from the sphere. A whirring sound could be hear emanating from within; the crew scrambled backwards, some diving into nearby hatches for safety. Bone Render and Relia went into a defensive stance. The rods grew and then bent until the ends touched the deck. The sphere lifted itself using the ‘legs’ and began to walk to the edge of the foredeck wall like a spider. The captain ordered those remaining on deck to fire and several bolts bounced harmlessly off the things metal plating. It came to a stop and from the bottom, a corkscrew device began to descend towards the ships decking. Dolan dropped the useless crossbow and drew his sword as he started down the steps to the main deck. Bone Render began to ram the boarding pike at the machine, but its clawed metallic legs gripped the deck. The corkscrew pierced the soarwood deck boards, turning while wood shavings began to travel up the screw and drop off around it. Dolan came up besides Relia, who looked at him with a concerned expression,

“Dolan, what in Dolurh is that thing?”

“Something meant to bring this ship down.”

The drilling stopped and the corkscrew retracted back up while yet another protrusion began to pipe down to the newly drilled hole in the deck. Dolan cast a glance at Bone Render and shouted,

“Bone, flank the thing with me!”

Dolan skirted around the other side and dove in with this sword. He brought down his first blow on what he guessed must be its weakest spot, the legs. The strike produced a resounding clang but nothing more than a scratch. Bone Render had moved in and was attempting to overturn the machine by grappling its spherical body. Dolan glanced down

just as the second protrusion stopped even with the hole in the deck. Suddenly, a white-hot stream of fluid emanated from the hollow tip and shot down below decks. The glare from the liquid was blinding. An immediate gush of flames erupted from the hole accompanied by terror-stricken screams. Moments before, the men that had sought safety below, now they found themselves immersed in an inferno. The ship was burning from the inside out.

The metallic spider raised one leg and pushed at Bone Render while another swept the warforged from his feet sending him sprawling to the deck. From above came a whooping shout, Dolan looked up to see Garthanyx standing on the decorative balustrade of the fore deck, balancing himself precariously. A vial of strange liquid was in his hand,

“Alright you multi-legged monstrosity! I think its time you tried one of Garthy’s specialties!”

With an impressive leap, the gnome launched himself off the railing landing directly on top of the spider. Riding the thing like a bucking horse, Garthanyx found an opening on the top of the body and slammed the bottle in. An eruption from within knocked Garthanyx off onto the deck. The spider’s legs went wobbly as it drunkenly lurched forward, smoke spewing from its top. Bone Render saw an opportunity and lunged at the machine grappling it with a clang of metal on metal. Using the tremendous strength of his legs, the warforged pushed the mechanical spider to the port railing and with a final grunt, heaved the thing over the edge of the *Exploit* to plummet downwards in a twirl of limbs and trailing smoke.

The damage had been done, however. The flames that were spreading below decks were quickly engulfing the ship. The captain shouted orders for an emergency

landing and to prepare for impact. Gathering Relia, Bone Render and Garthanyx together, Dolan prepared the companions for the crash. The *Exploit* was going down.