

# SCATTERED EARTH



CROSSED PATHS  
A TALE OF THE *DREAD REMORA*

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AARON ROSENBERG

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# CROSSED PATHS

A Novella Featuring *The Dread Remora & Her Crew*  
By Aaron Rosenberg



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# The SCATTERED EARTH

# The Dread Remora: Crossed Paths

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“Derelict ship dead ahead!”

“I can see that, Mister Pyle.” Captain Nate Demming leaned forward in his chair, the motion creating gentle ripples in the water all around him, and studied the view through the forward window. The ship ahead of them must be one of the two they’d detected, but which one? All their long-range scanners had noted was the presence of two vessels close together, which was enough of an oddity, and of itself that he’d felt compelled to investigate. Now one was gone and the other was floating powerless and most likely lifeless, if the gaping hole in its side was any indication.

“Bring us in close, Miss Mills,” he instructed. “Let’s take a closer look. Perhaps we can learn something about the victim—and its attacker.”

“Aye, captain.” Lizette Mills shifted her weight slightly, the wheel rotating gently beneath her small, skilled hands. Her movements were as unconsciously erotic as ever, and Demming hid a small smile as he considered how many men—and perhaps a few women—onboard the *Dread Remora* would pay a great deal to feel the touch of those same slender digits. The ship responded easily, slowing pace and swiveling about so its sleek prow neatly brushed against the other ship’s side. The *Remora* was long, slender, and hydrodynamic, an important factor beneath the waters of the homeworld. Its upper portion, however, was short, stocky, and bristling with weapons, a factor that was far more vital out here among the ether.

“Mister Kesselman,” Demming called into the speaking tube, and was rewarded a second later with affirmation from the boatswain, standing by in the crew quarters. “Ready a boarding party. Full arms please—it looks dead but let’s not take any chances.”

“Aye, sir!” Kesselman was a good bo’sun, solid and loyal. He’d have his team selected and outfitted in a matter of minutes.

In the meantime, Demming continued to consider the ship before them. What was it? Who had been on it? And what had happened to it?

“Miss Scutt,” he called into the speaking tube. As always, he felt a shiver of delight run through him when Amelia answered. “What can you tell me about our friend here?”

“Not much yet, sir,” she answered. Demming could close his eyes and picture her down to engineering, her long features drawn in concentration, that dark braid swinging gently behind her. Her voice was soft and low, and thrilled him far more than Lizette’s husky teasing ever had. “Medium size, lightly armored, minimal weapons—I’d guess a trader or a passenger ship, possibly a colonization vessel. Whatever hit it hit hard, though. Burned right through the plating, fried the engines and the weapons. They probably didn’t even get a shot off.”

He could hear the sadness in her voice. Amelia hated violence, particularly when it cost lives. She’d joined the Royal Navy for the adventure and the science, and had thought she was escaping any sign of bloodshed when she’d signed on to the *Remora*, the Navy’s first-ever ethership.

Little had they known, when they’d launched, that they would find not a vast empty space but an expanse teeming with life, filled with scores of other worlds and other cultures and other ships.

Some of whom preyed upon the weak, just like the predators back home.

The *HMES Remora* might have transformed itself into the *Dread Remora*, feared pirate ship, but Demming and his crew were Royal Navy to the core. They did prey upon other ships, both to resupply and to maintain their cover, creating tales of horror to frighten most into steering clear of them, but they never did more damage than was necessary and never left their victims unable to fend for themselves. Unless they were facing real pirates, in which case they acted as they would back home, eliminating the threat before it could endanger others.

They would never hole an innocent ship and leave its people to die.

Whoever had done this had shown no mercy, that much was already clear.

Demming just hoped they had moved on in search of other kills. He didn't relish meeting such a monster.

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"I've got something!" Leif announced. "Just beyond that asteroid belt!"

Merok turned to study the display over his friend's shoulder. "Aye, that's their trail, all right." On the scope, the radiation traces glittered and gleamed like fresh blood melting into pristine snow. "Even in space, they leave blood spattered behind them like the ravening beasts they are." He swiveled back around, fingers settling on buttons and levers. "Well, let's go give those devils a surprise they won't forget." He flicked the engines to max and their small ship roared forward, hurling itself through space in a mad dash to close with its chosen foes. Merok's free hand went automatically to the blade at his side, and he smiled grimly. Even here, his first thought was of the sword.

But he was practical enough to hope that closing with the fiends hand-to-hand would not be necessary.

"There!" Leif tapped the display. They were entering the string of asteroids, and their scanner could now pierce that rocky veil and paint a picture of the scene beyond. Two vessels hung there, as if pinned to the color-splashed backdrop of space. One was long and spiky and lit all around with light. The other was bulkier but smoother, lacking the weaponry of its companion, and lay cold and dead on the other's side.

"We're too late to save whoever was on that second ship," Merok stated between clenched teeth. "but by the Blade we'll give those devils reason to regret their atrocities!" He twisted a switch and the weapons console rose before him, sights appearing on the front display as the ship readied itself for targeting.

Leif nodded and busied himself with his own controls. "Shields at full," he declared. "Weapons powered. Fire at will."

Merok grinned, lips pulling back from his teeth as a low snarl escaped. "Take this, you hoarse bastards! Taste the vengeance of the Starry Blade!"

He jabbed hard at the buttons, and their ship leaped toward its target, weapons spitting out bursts of righteous death as it closed the gap to its prey.

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"We're under attack!" Pyle's statement was followed almost instantly by a dull shudder as something struck the *Remora's* hull. "Another ship—it just appeared out of nowhere! It's coming fast!"

"Those must be the monsters who did this, either back to finish the job or laying in wait for whoever comes to their victims' aid." Demming banged a fist on the arm of his command chair. "Miss Cuny!"

"Weapons hot, sir," his gunner's mate replied at once. As always in combat, her usual soft whisper had been replaced by a sharp, clear voice as hard as diamond. Molly Cuny might be the most reclusive member of his crew, but she lived for battle. "I've already targeted the other ship's weapons."

"Good. Fire at will." Demming wasn't all that fond of violence, but he had no problem using force when necessary. And in the middle of an etheric battle was no time to hesitate. "After the weapons, go for the engines. Try to leave the cabin intact, however." He got only a grunt in reply, but he knew she would obey his orders.

"Our armor is holding," Pyle reported from his station to the left. "A few more hits to the same spot and we could have a problem, though."

The ship trembled slightly as Miss Cuny fired her guns. A second later there was a faint shiver and

the upper weapons also fired. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” Demming remarked.

He studied the screens, where Lizette had helpfully put up an image of their new assailant. It was small, not even a tenth the *Remora*’s size, wedge-shaped like an arrowhead, and racing right toward them. But even as he watched the tiny ship was rocked to one side by the *Remora*’s return fire. Blossoms of light indicated direct hits, and the hail of fire toward them winked out completely. A second later the smaller ship began to slow, its engines dead but momentum still carrying it forward.

“Direct hits!” Miss Cuny reported, the glee evident in her voice. “Weapons disabled, engines disabled, hull and cabin intact. They’re all yours, sir.”

“Thank you, Miss Cuny—and you, Mister Mirsux,” Demming responded, remembering to acknowledge the alien assistant gunner’s mate who was manning the weapons in the *Dread Remora*’s upper half. “Miss Scutt, any chance we can draw that ship in without hurting its occupants—and without it slamming into our side like a floundering whale?”

“I think I have just the thing, sir,” Amelia replied. “Lizette, can you shift us back a pace, so we’re not in its direct path?”

“Not a problem,” their pilot replied. She glanced back over her shoulder for Demming’s permission, her long black hair framing her round, pretty face, but for once her mind was not on flirting. When she was on duty Lizette Mills was all business. Well, almost all.

Demming nodded, and she used the ship’s maneuvering jets to pull the *Remora* back slightly, leaving a gap between it and the damaged ship at its side.

“Perfect!” Amelia said. Demming could hear her flicking switches. “Now just hang on.” There was a faint thrum in the air, as if the water had picked up a subtle tone from somewhere in the ship. “Go for it!”

Demming watched as the small ship began to angle toward them.

“I modified the electromagnetic pulse we’ve been using for docking,” Amelia explained proudly. “Instead of a short burst, though, this is a sustained stream. It’s drawing that ship toward us, and since it’s being tugged to one side, the sideways motion will actually steal most of its momentum. I can reverse the charge at the last second, pushing it away, so it may just barely scrape against us but there won’t be any real impact.”

“Nicely handled, Miss Scutt,” Demming told her admiringly. There was a reason she’d been a shot-in for the engineer position on the *Remora*. “Mister Kesselman, I want that ship reeled in and whoever’s inside brought in for questioning as soon as possible. Alive and as unharmed as you can manage. Let’s get some answers.”

He gripped the arms of his chair tightly and glanced back at the dead ship beside them. Yes, he definitely wanted some answers.

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“They’ve got us!” Leif announced unnecessarily. Merok had felt the demonfire pummeling the vessel, had been forced to yank his hands back quickly as the weapons console began to spark and smoke, and had noted the sudden silence as their ship’s engines had failed, leaving them adrift and defenseless.

Or so the demons supposed.

“They’re reeling us in like a batch of fish,” Merok muttered, studying their monitors. Those still worked, and showed them moving toward the spiky ship, their pace slowing as they went. “They think we’ll be helpless and meek, like most of their victims.” He drew his sword and admired its gleaming length and fine edge.

“Well, we’ll soon prove them wrong.”

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“Contact!” Kesselman announced. The tall, rugged bo’sun turned as the door behind him opened and Demming stepped through. “Captain?”

“Don’t worry, Mister Kesselman,” Demming assured him, “I won’t be accompanying you this time.” He’d made that mistake before, forgetting his place and his responsibilities to ship and crew for his eagerness to see other ships and other races—with near-disastrous results. “But I wanted to be on hand to see our new friends once you brought them back aboard.”

“Of course, sir.” His concerns satisfied, Kesselman turned back to the three men with him. “Weapons ready.” All three carried sonic rifles and clubs drawn from the ship’s weapons stores. The bo’sun himself carried a sonic pistol, a club, and a sheathed dagger. Demming had not come unprepared either—at his side was his own pistol and the curving blade he had taken off a smuggler, and in his boot was his diving knife.

“Seal active,” the slim olive-skinned man by the forward port announced, studying the console there. Xander Twist was Amelia’s second in engineering, a good man to have around. And far less squeamish than his boss, which was why she’d sent him in her stead. “Cycling the lock now.”

Kesselman nodded, raising his club. He held manacles in his other hand, and more jingled on his belt. His men hoisted their rifles as Twist opened the portal, revealing a pitted expanse of russet metal just beyond, and then affixed a small device to the other ship’s lock. The electromagnetic seal kept the two ships’ hulls bonded together so no air could escape and so the surrounding ether could not seep in. Demming had seen firsthand what could happen when a ship was breached out here, and he shuddered at the memory. A faulty seal would kill them faster than any enemy fire.

After a second the device beeped, and the other ship’s entrance began to open as well. Everyone tensed, unsure what they would face.

The opening was barely wide enough for them to see past when two men came charging through at a dead run. Both had swords—swords!—raised, and were bellowing at the top of their lungs.

“Drop your weapons!” Kesselman shouted, backing up a pace to give himself room to move. “Drop them or we will be forced to fire!”

“Kill us if you can, Moringen,” one of the men responded, swiveling toward Kesselman and aiming a powerful blow at the bo’sun’s head and shoulders. “But we’ll take a few of you devils with us, at least!”

Fortunately, the Royal Navy trained all of its members in personal combat, both armed and unarmed. Kesselman used his club to block the sword blow, the heavy inlaid stone stopping the metal blade easily. Since his other hand still held manacles he couldn’t draw his pistol—instead he slammed that fist into his assailant’s stomach, the force of the blow doubling the other man over.

The second intruder had glanced around, seen the men with raised rifles sighting on him—and spotted Twist, standing off to the side. Unarmed. He’d angled toward the engineer’s mate, arm cocked back to bring his blade whistling around on the hapless crewmember—

—and Demming’s sonic pistol took him in the small of the back.

The weapon’s concussive burst took the intruder off his feet, slamming him into the wall as Twist hastily stepped aside. The sword clattered to the floor, and the man dropped to hands and knees beside it a second later. One of Kesselman’s men was already moving in, rifle slung back over his shoulder, manacles at the ready. In an instant the second intruder was bound, ankles and wrists.

The bo’sun had been trading blows with his own foe, and the stranger had landed several punches, a few kicks, and one head butt, fighting like a crazed animal. But Kesselman had managed to keep the sword itself out of play, and had given as good as he got. One of the strongest men on the *Remora*, his own blows had left the stranger reeling, and finally a solid punch to the jaw sent the man back and to his knees. He was manacled before he could rise again.

“Nicely handled, Mister Kesselman,” Demming complimented, and the bo’sun’s broad, fa

features flushed with pride. "Are there any more in there?"

"None, sir." It was Twist who answered. "We only detected two life signs aboard."

"Good." Demming watched as their new captives were patted down, and daggers removed from each. No firearms, though, which was curious. "Escort them to the brig. Let's leave them to stew a bit before we press them."

"You'll get nothing from us, foul demon!" the first man spat through bloodied lips. "Do your worst! In the end, your kind will pay for what you've done!"

Demming leaned in close to examine the man. He looked human, Demming noticed—the first they'd encountered out here who could make such a claim. Two arms, two legs, two eyes, one nose, one mouth, normal body hair, even normal teeth from what he could see when the stranger snarled at him. No gills, which was interesting, but otherwise the men could have come from their own world. Their gear was unusual, though, and not just the swords that looked like they'd been stolen from a museum—both attackers wore what seemed to be flexible suits of interlocked metal rings, and sleeveless tunics belted at the waist. Heavy, metal-plated gloves and thick leather boots completed the image of men who belonged more on the surface vessels of legend than out in the ether.

"We have done nothing," Demming informed the man, keeping his own emotions in check. "You have attacked an innocent ship, killed its crew and passengers, and then fired upon us. We do not take kindly to such aggression, and you will pay for your crimes."

The second man had started at Demming's words. "Wait, what?" He had black hair, long and matted, while the first had reddish-brown hair and a ruddier hue to his skin. "We didn't attack the ship—you did!" He glanced at his companion, a question clear in his blue eyes, but the first man only growled and twisted, trying to shake the hands that held him fast.

"Don't listen to them!" he warned. "You know their kind! They breathe lies!"

But now Demming was intrigued. "You honestly think we were the ones who attacked this ship?" he saw the confirmation in the second man's gaze. "We thought you were responsible, and had lain in wait for whoever happened along to help—or to scavenge the remains."

"We are no demons!" the black-haired man insisted. "We saw your ship hovering over the remains of its victim and sought vengeance on their behalf!" But his words were less forceful than they had been, and doubt clouded his features.

"We spotted two ships close together and investigated," Demming explained, relaxing slightly as he realized these men might not pose a threat after all. "By the time we arrived, one ship was dead and the other gone. When you attacked, we thought you were the second and had simply hidden from view to await new victims."

The second man turned to his companion. "Merok, we have made a mistake! These are not the Moringen! We missed them!"

His friend grunted. "Perhaps." He had gone from rage to sullenness. "Or perhaps this is some new trick of theirs." But he had calmed as well.

Demming considered this new information. "Regardless of the reason, you attacked my crew," he pointed out. "I must confine you to the brig. But we'll talk more on this later. If this was merely a misunderstanding, I'm sure we can resolve it." He nodded to Kesselman, who led the two men away. Demming watched them go, then reached out to take one of the swords from the crewman who retrieved it. It was an elegant, deadly weapon, its blade sharp and straight, its balance good. This was no museum piece, it was an active tool for combat.

But who would carry such a thing out in the ether where radiation bursts and lasers ruled?

It was all a puzzle. And one he found he was looking forward to solving.

"We are wrong, I tell you!" the dark-haired one was saying as Demming cycled the brig's outer door and stepped through. Over the past two hours Amelia and Twist had swept their captive's ship

and reported some very interesting discoveries—discoveries that led him to believe the men’s claim of innocence. It was clear, however, that at least the ruddier of their two prisoners was not so easily convinced.

“They have not tortured us, or even threatened us,” their second captive continued, not noticing Demming’s arrival. “They have given us food, and made no demands of us, nor come to taunt us at our helplessness. Would the Moringen behave so humanely? So nobly? It is not them, I say!”

“Perhaps,” his companion muttered, picking at the food one of the crew had delivered. “But I still say we stay on our guard. They are masters of deception, do not forget. This may all be some clever ploy to trick us.”

“To what end?” His friend glanced around and noticed Demming at last. “Have you come to release us?” he asked, approaching. Only heavy bars separated them, wide enough for a man to reach through easily, and Demming had taken a calculated risk approaching alone, and unarmed save for his diving knife. Of course, Kesselman and two other armed crewmen stood off to the side, ready to stun the prisoners into submission and rescue their captain if that proved necessary.

But somehow he didn’t think it would.

“Perhaps,” he replied to the man’s question, leaning casually against the barred door. “If I’m sure you don’t pose a risk to my ship and my crew.” He nodded to the first man, who was still nudging things around on his tray. “Is the food not to your liking? Mister Watkins will be sorry to hear that. He prides himself on maintaining the finest galley in the ether.” He allowed himself a slight smile. “Though admittedly we’ve had scant chance to sample his competition.”

“The food was very good, thank you,” the dark-haired man answered. “And a welcome respite from the cold rations we’ve lived upon for far too long.”

The other man only scowled, and Demming laughed. “You don’t agree?” he asked. “Maybe you think we poisoned your fare?” He reached through the bars, snagged a hunk of bread off the man’s tray, dipped it in the stew, and retrieved it to eat in a single bite. “I assure you, it is safe. The Royal Navy does not treat its prisoners so poorly.”

“What is this ‘royal navy’ you mention?” The red-haired prisoner was still frowning, so it was his companion who voiced the question.

“It is the official peacekeeping force of my home world,” Demming answered. “Though we are not to the ether, we are an expeditionary force of Her Majesty’s navy, and still follow the normal rules and requirements of our service, including lending aid to those in need—and punishing those who would harm others.” He straightened and bowed. “Captain Nathaniel Demming, at your service.”

“Leif MacAvoy, at yours,” the red-haired man responded, and offered his right hand. Demming reached through and took it. The man’s grasp was firm and sure, and without the gauntlets his grip was callused as if from years of hard work. “You have . . . gills,” Leif asked then, staring at Demming’s neck.

“Yes, and you do not, I’ve noticed.” Demming had chosen to link to the smaller ship through the *Dread Remora*’s upper portion, and had kept them in the brig up here as well. It had obviously been the right choice. “Our world is covered in water,” he explained finally, hoping he wasn’t making a mistake by revealing so much. But he trusted his instincts, and they said that these men did not mean them any harm. “We can breathe both water and air equally well. The lower half of our ship is filled with water.” He smiled. “I thought you might prefer drier quarters.”

“Fishmen!” The first man laughed. “We’ve been captured by fishmen!” But he rose to his feet and stepped closer. Demming did not flinch from his hard gaze. “Even the Moringen would not be so foolish as to take such an odd form—they would match us, as they often have, or use a shape far more deadly, to give themselves the advantage.” He nodded, and offered his hand. “Merok Belyle.”

Demming shook hands with him. “Well met, gentlemen. Now, can I assume from this that you are

willing to discuss matters with no more threats of violence?”

“Aye.” Merok actually hung his head. “My apologies for that,” he grumbled. “We thought you out of the quarry, and were determined not to sell our lives cheap.”

“A noble sentiment, but fortunately not necessary here.” Demming gestured, and Kesselman stepped up beside him. “Mister Kesselman, kindly open the door so I might speak with our guests a little more easily.”

“Are you sure, sir?” The bo’sun asked, glaring at the two men a bit. Especially at Merok, who had just given him the bruises now purpling his fair skin.

“I think it will be fine.” Kesselman nodded, clearly not convinced, but obeyed as always. With the barred door open, Demming stepped into the cell and settled himself onto the edge of one of the bunks there. “Much better. We analyzed your ship,” he told the two men, who moved to sit on the bunks facing him. “Your systems show that you have been tracking another ship across the ether. And the trail led you here. That tells me your story is true, and you genuinely believed us to be your target and the butchers of the nearby ship.” His face tightened into a scowl. They had investigated the dead ship as well, and had found nothing but horrors waiting there.

Merok noticed his expression. “Slaughtered everyone aboard, did they?” he asked, his gruff voice surprisingly gentle. “And not right away, either, I warrant—took their time with some.”

“Yes.” It had been the worst thing he had ever seen, and Demming knew those sights would haunt his dreams. “Whoever did this . . . enjoyed it.”

“That’s the Moringen,” Leif agreed, biting off each word. “Vicious beasts, callous monsters, the delight in bloodshed and suffering. We have vowed to put an end to their rampage.”

Demming leaned forward. “Then we will help you,” he announced. “I cannot in good conscience allow such depravity to continue. We will hunt down these murderers together, and ensure they will not harm another living soul.”

Merok and Leif glanced at each other. Then Merok nodded. “Aye, and we’d welcome your aid,” he admitted, a grim smile stretching weathered features. “Together we’ll put those demons to rest once and for all.” He offered his hand, and again Demming clasped it. But this time it was more than a gesture of introduction. It was a promise.

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“We have been on their trail for years,” Merok admitted as Demming led him and Leif to the *Dreadnaught Remora’s* upper command cabin. The controls here had been slaved to those below, as had the displays, so they could check scans and other details without subjecting the two men to immersion. Demming had asked Amelia to join him, and the willowy chief engineer was already waiting at one of the consoles when they entered. As always, he felt a jolt at seeing her. Nor did he miss the appreciative glances she drew from his two companions.

“What exactly are these Mooring Men?” Amelia asked, her voice soft as always.

“Moringen,” Leif corrected, his tone almost reverential. Not toward their quarry, though, Demming sensed. The awe and admiration were directed at Amelia. Demming had seen that look and heard that tone before, in hardened sailors after long voyages. These men had not seen a woman in a long time. But judging by the way they bowed to her, he didn’t think she or any of their other female crewmembers were in danger. For all their gruffness, he sensed a broad streak of honor in his two new allies.

“They are demons,” Leif continued. “Monstrous marauders who live to cause pain and suffering, both emotional and physical. They are crazed, vicious, violent, and cruel. The worst beings alive. And it is our sworn task to hunt them down and destroy them.”

“Just the two of you?” Demming found that hard to believe.

“There were more of us, once,” Merok admitted. “Perhaps there still are. The Order of the Star

Blade, pledged to defend our homeworld from invasion—and, later, to avenge its destruction. We divided into small groups, pairs and individuals, and set off to pursue the Moringen as they scattered from the barren carcass our world had become. Our path has led us here.” He shrugged, but there was a gleam in his eye that made Demming nervous. He’d seen the same look from several whalers and shark-hunters in the waves back home. It was the look of the fanatic hunter, utterly obsessed with finding and killing his prey. Thus far Merok and Leif had seemed reasonable, but Demming suspected that would end if they actually caught up with his long-time quarry. He just hoped the two men would still be able to tell friends from foes at that point.

“And you tracked them here by their strange trail.” Amelia put the image up on the main screen and Demming repressed a shudder at what looked very much like blood in the water. “It’s an unusual energy signature, and a virulent one. Very easy to track—almost impossible to miss, actually.” She frowned. “Except that somehow we have.”

That earned glowers from both men. “What do you mean? You lost the trail?” Merok demanded.

Amelia nodded. “It simply vanishes. If it was blood, I’d say it’d been washed clean. But of course it isn’t.”

“We’ve had the same problem,” Leif told her. “It’s why we’ve not been able to catch them yet. Somehow the trail keeps going cold, as if they’re only leaving it when they’re about to strike.”

“If we could just figure out how they’re doing that, we could find them and deal with them once and for all!” Merok smacked one meaty fist into the opposite palm. “But we can’t!”

Amelia turned to study the screen, her long braid flying. “They could be shutting down the engines,” she suggested. “We have four or five different engines in the *Dread Remora*, and we can use any or all as we like. Each one’s got a different energy signature, too. So if I used one or two for regular travel, and a third only when I was ready to attack, I’d be able to take my prey by surprise.”

Demming nodded. He was impressed, especially given Amelia’s known pacifist tendencies. “You’re right,” he told her now. “That would be an excellent way to build more fear, and add to the general confusion—they’d never be able to track you because they’d be looking for one energy signature and you’d have a different one except when you were attacking. And then it wouldn’t last for long, but it would leave residue around the site of your kill, marking them as yours.” He made a mental note to talk to her more about this later. They were actively encouraging stories about the *Dread Remora* as a pirate ship to be feared and avoided. If they could rig up something of that same sort, so no one could track them through their engine noise, it would add to the notion that the *Dread Remora* could come and go in the night like a ghost ship.

“I’m scanning for other energy residues right where the blood trail stops,” Amelia told them, tapping a few keys on her console. “If they did—aha!” She put an energy monitor up on a secondary screen. “There it is—that’s an energy signature, too even to be strictly natural, completely different from the one you were tracking. But now that we have this one locked in, we can follow it just as easily.” She gave Demming a quick little smile of victory, and he grinned back.

“Excellent work, Miss Scutt,” he told her, hating the fact that he was trapped in such a formal room with her during duty hours. To take his mind off that, he tugged out a speaking tube and called through to the foredeck. “Miss Mills, you should be receiving an energy signature from engineering. I want you to follow that trail at all due speed. Thank you.”

He replaced the tube and eyed Merok and Leif. “Gentlemen, the chase is on! Let us see how far our quarry has advanced, and how quickly we can close the distance with them.”

There was moisture in Leif’s eyes. “After all this time,” he murmured, “and to think, soon we may be able to stare in their very faces!”

Merok grunted beside him. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he warned. But he seemed happier and more hopeful than he had since coming aboard.

“We’ve taken the liberty of repairing the damage to your ship,” Amelia was telling the two men the next day when Demming joined them in the upper mess. Usually only those on duty in the ship’s upper, air-filled portion ate here, and he still felt strange breathing dry air and moving through it, but he and a few of his officers had been taking their meals here out of respect for their guests. Empty trays sat before the two men—clearly Merok had gotten over his reservations about the food.

“It was the least we could do, considering we were the ones responsible for it in the first place,” Demming agreed, taking a seat at the head where he could see both Amelia and the men. Leif waved off the admission of guilt.

“The fault was our own,” he admitted readily. “If we had waited to ascertain the situation better, a lot of that unpleasantness could have been avoided.”

“Well, it’s in the past,” Demming assured him. “We’ve also taken the liberty of enhancing your weapons a bit. Miss Cuny, our gunner’s mate, insisted.” Molly Cuny had actually taken great delight in being able to rework the smaller vessel’s weapons—she was still annoyed that Demming wouldn’t let her tack every new gun they found onto the *Dread Remora*, and thrilled to have a chance to play with some of her new toys.

“Thank you,” Merok told him. “When we find these demons, we will gladly make use of your generous gift.”

The door behind them had slid open while they were talking, and now Kesselman entered. “You may get your chance sooner than you think,” the bo’sun commented, setting a tray beside Merok and dropping into the chair there. After their initial wariness the two burly men had formed a clear respect for each other, and Demming suspected they were well on their way toward becoming fast friends. “Mister Pyle sent word that they’ve sighted a ship on the scopes. It’s still a ways away, but it’s dead in the water. The line with the energy traces we’ve been following.”

“It’s them!” Merok pounded his fists upon the table. “I know it!”

“Most likely,” Demming agreed. He didn’t bother to leave his seat, or leave off eating. “But let’s be sure this time, shall we?”

Their new allies laughed and nodded, accepting the good-natured jibe. But Demming didn’t miss the fact that both men were gripping the handles of the swords he had returned to them, and which were once again hung at their sides.

“It’s them all right,” Lizette confirmed when Demming stopped by the foredeck later that day. He’d breathed a sigh of relief, as always, when he’d slipped back into the water and felt it fill his gills and send a fresh surge of energy through his body. How did people such as Merok and Leif survive on such thin air all the time, he wondered as he settled into his chair.

“We’ve been trailing them, and we caught sight of them a few hours ago,” his pilot continued. “There aren’t any other ships in the vicinity, and the energy trail’s still fresh. It’s definitely them.”

“Good.” Demming frowned and leaned forward, studying the tiny speck on the forward screen. “I’ll ask Miss Scutt to scan them as best she can. I’d like to know what we’re getting ourselves into, preferably long before we’re within actual combat range.”

Lizette nodded. “At this point, I don’t know anything about their engines or other systems,” she agreed, “so I have no idea how fast they can run or how quick they can turn. That’d be good to know before we face them.”

Demming rose from his chair and floated back toward the door. “I’ll speak to engineering about this now,” he promised as he cycled the portal open and swam through it.

Besides, it gave him an excuse both to see Amelia again and to stretch his legs underwater. He couldn’t decide which pleased him more.

“There isn’t much I can tell you yet,” Amelia reported that evening. They had joined Merok and Leif upstairs again for the evening meal. Kesselman and Pyle were also there. Their quartermaster Dittmer, was on watch down below. “We’re still at extreme scanning range. So far, though, their ship looks . . . odd. Even stranger than we do.”

Demming smiled at that. They had deliberately attached themselves to the pirate ship *Siren Knife* to create the *Dread Remora*, which had far better armor, far more weaponry, more engines, and a very different and more frightening profile than the *HMES Remora* alone. And the *Siren Knife* had been a piece of work itself—the pirates had cobbled it together from the pieces of their victims, replacing parts whenever something better came along and creating a ship that could not be identified or anticipated by any ship’s catalogue.

“How is it stranger?” Pyle asked. The young first officer was ever curious, and Demming encouraged that. It was a useful trait to have in the man who helped him retain focus.

“Well, the *Siren Knife* is piecemeal but strong,” Amelia answered. “Each element is the best they could find for it at the time. This ship—” She shook her head. “From what I can tell, they weren’t concerned with what made sense. They just stuck parts together whenever they found them, without rhyme or reason. It’s a wonder it’s got any hull integrity at all.”

“The Moringen have always been scavengers,” Merok offered. “They take whatever strikes their fancy, whether it makes sense or no.” He frowned. “Make no mistake, though—for all its haphazard appearance, that ship is deadly. At least a few pieces were stolen from our world’s ships, those that attempted to muster a defense against the foul invaders—and were destroyed utterly.”

“Oh, we’ve seen the proof of their strength,” Demming agreed, flashing again to the ruin they had discovered before, the one that had started all this. He tried not to think about the bodies they had found within. “We won’t let our guard down.” Remembering, his grip tightened on his mug. No, they would be careful. And they would show these Moringen what happened when they faced a foe that was ready for them.

“They know we’re here,” Pyle reported as Demming returned to the foredeck the following morning. Lizette was off-duty and so the young first officer was at the helm. “Leastways they’ve slowed and pivoted on their axis so they’re staring down our throats.”

Demming nodded and studied the image onscreen as he sank into his chair. It was an ugly brute of a ship, to be sure, bristling with weapons in every direction like an enraged sea urchin. There was a wrongness to it, a chill down his back, as if the ship’s strange assemblage of parts projected the madness of its owners for all to see. The problem was, madness was unpredictable, and that made them all the more dangerous.

“Full speed ahead,” he ordered, keeping his tone calm and clear. “They’re not going to run from this fight but neither are we. And if we take it to them before they’re completely ready, we’ll put them at a disadvantage.”

Pyle nodded and put the throttle down, lowering the lever all the way to the console’s surface. Around them the water shifted and thrummed as the *Dread Remora*’s engines revved to full, and the bursts of color and motion in their display danced and shimmered and began to shoot toward them. The ship launched itself forward, hurtling toward this strange new foe.

“What’s happening?” a voice asked through one of the speaking tubes connected to the upper level. It was Leif. Demming had shown him and Merok how to use the tubes the other day, so that they could communicate without having to brave the water.

“They’ve seen us,” he replied as calmly as he could. “So we’re taking the fight to them.”

“We’ll separate in our ship,” Leif said after what sounded like a conversation with Merok. “The

way we can hit them from the side, distract them, make them split their focus.”

“Good idea.” Demming stared at the ship on his screen. “But be careful. That thing’s big enough to eat you alive.”

This time it was Merok who answered. “Don’t worry, we know what they’re capable of. You watch out for yourself and your crew. If all goes well, we’ll toast our victory by noon.”

“Agreed. Good luck.” Demming switched channels. “Miss Mills, to the foredeck,” he ordered. Pyle was handling the helm fine for now, but when it came time for battle he’d want his best pilot at the wheel. “Miss Cuny and Mister Mirsux, to the gunneries. Mister Twist, to the upper seal to assist in detaching our friends. Everyone else, strap in tight. Things are about to get rough.”

He followed his own advice and shrugged into the webbed harness of his chair. He was just checking the clasps when the door behind him irised open and Lizette hurried in.

“I didn’t miss anything, did I?” she asked breathlessly, seemingly unaware of the affect her entrance had on Pyle and Dittmer, who was in his own chair off to the right. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw the ship still a ways away. “Oh, good.” Her face lit in a wicked grin. “I’d hate to have missed all the fun.” Pyle was blushing as he relinquished the helm.

“Not to worry, Miss Mills,” Demming told her dryly. “The fun couldn’t possibly start without you.” That crack earned him a sultry wink and a throaty laugh, and he had to force his mind back to the matter at hand. “They should be in weapons range soon.” He grabbed the speaking tube again. “Miss Cuny, are you in position?”

“Aye, captain,” the petite gunner’s mate answered. “So is Mister Mirsux. We’re targeting her now.” He could hear the frown in her voice. “But sir, she’s got so many engines and weapons I don’t know which to hit first! And her armor’s too thick to pierce on one shot. No matter where we strike she’s going to be able to hit back at least a few times before we can shut her down.”

He’d suspected as much, but wasn’t happy to be proven right. “Use your own best judgment,” Demming told her. “The same goes for Mister Mirsux.” The alien assistant gunner’s mate might recognize some of the Moringen’s weaponry and have a better idea which pieces to take out first.

“Captain, she’s accelerating!” Lizette called from her post. “She’s charging us!”

Damn, they were using the same tactic he was! Demming ground his teeth. It was going to be head-on collision, and may the stronger ship win! The problem was, he wasn’t completely convinced they had the stronger ship!

“Stay alert, and watch for incoming fire,” he warned. “Let’s evade what we can, and try to take a few hits on the prow or the belly.” Those were their sturdiest sections, and the ones farthest from essential systems.

“They’re firing!” Pyle shouted. “Three, four—no, five guns at once!”

What were they doing, Demming mused, leaning forward to study their target. They had to know that, at this range, he could dodge most if not all of those attacks. There was simply too much time between launch and impact for it to make any sense.

“Three more!” Pyle added. “And another two!” Now they could all see the missiles and beams and bursts leaping and spiraling and arcing toward them.

“I can’t dodge them all!” Lizette warned, her fingers flicking the wheel and shifting the *Remora* about to angle her past the first attack. “There’s too many of them, all coming in at once!”

And that was their plan, Demming realized as the *Remora* shuddered from the first hit. They had filled the ether around him with debris, knowing he was bound to crash into some of it. They had the ammunition to spare, and they could soften him up and distract him while they moved in for the kill.

“Get us out of this minefield!” he ordered, gripping the arms of his chair. “Take us sideways so we have a clear field again! But angle us forward so we’re still closing!”

“Yes, sir!” She was already spinning the wheel, and the *Remora* heeled over, her engines kicking

her to the side like a startled fish. Another blow or two shook them, but the rest fell harmlessly behind as they dove to one side.

The Moringen hadn't bothered with any evasive maneuvers. They were still bearing down on the *Remora* at a dead run, straight ahead.

"Miss Cuny, give them something to think about!" Demming commanded, and an instant later the *Remora* hummed as her own guns pealed, sending a warning note to the approaching marauders. Bursts of fire blossomed from the other ship's side, front, and back as those attacks hit home, but it did not slow them down, and then they retaliated with another massive onslaught.

"I can keep us skipping back and forth," Lizette warned as she twisted the wheel, sliding the *Remora* between two clouds of what looked like foaming rock shards, "but every time I do I'm leaving us open for a few seconds.

"And they know it." Demming slammed his fist down on the chair arm. "They're making us dance about while they race in, like a shark and a small fish trapped but desperate to escape." He growled. "Well, this fish has teeth of its own. Miss Cuny, another volley!"

There was a small sideways lurch as he spoke, and at first he thought she had responded even before he'd finished. Then he spotted the rust-colored wedge arrowing toward the massive Moringen beast. Merok and Leif had launched their ship, and were giving the marauders something else to shoot at them.

Themselves.

"Hit them hard, right now!" Demming demanded of his gunner. "Keep them from locking in on our friends!" The smaller ship had far less armor, even with Amelia's improvements. One barrage like the two they'd already taken and it would be nothing but a smoking cinder.

Molly Cuny obeyed, and the Moringen ship sprouted wounds in a dozen places. It still found time to launch an attack on its newest target, but Merok and Leif evaded most of those strikes. That was one advantage they had—their ship was so small it was difficult to hit. Then they were past the marauders, and pivoting to fire on it from behind.

"Now we've got you boxed in, you bastards," Demming whispered, eyeing the screen. "We'll pound you between us til there's nothing but ash!"

They were closer now, and he could make out more details of the Moringen vessel. By the wave was ugly! Jagged metal plates had been welded on over juncture points, weapons sprouted everywhere, lights like small red eyes glowed from a half-dozen portals—the whole thing resembled a nightmarish cross between a monstrous crab, a bloodthirsty shark, and a spiny deep-sea angler. It was hideous.

Hideous but effective, he was forced to admit as it shrugged off their latest attack and responded with a wave of violence that threatened to blot out the ether.

"I don't know how much more of this we can take," Lizette told him, wrestling with the wheel as she tried to slip past the worst of the blows. "If we don't find a way to deal with them and soon, they'll get through our armor and pierce our hull."

And then we're done for, Demming finished for her in his head. He nodded.

"Mister Mirsux," he called into the speaking tubes. The squid-like alien answered a second later. "Prepare to deploy the *Siren Knife*. Mister Pyle, I want you up there—you have the wheel until we can reunite."

His first officer just stared at him for a second. Then he saluted, shouted "Yes, sir!" and raced from the foredeck. Demming could hear the younger man's footsteps pounding down the gangway, and then a distant clang as he closed the seal that had joined the upper and lower halves of the ship. A second later, with a groan and a creak and a shudder, the *Dread Remora* split in two. The top half, which had been the pirate ship the *Siren Knife* before they'd defeated it, slid away and began to target the Moringen on its own. Meanwhile Lizette maneuvered the suddenly lighter *Remora* through another

barrage, and shot them toward the marauders with renewed speed.

They were forcing their foe to split its attack, Demming knew. That should help. He just wasn't sure it would be enough.

~ \* ~

"I don't think they'll last much longer," Leif muttered, watching the displays in their tiny vessel. They could see the two halves of the *Dread Remora* turning to engage the Moringen from either side. "They're clever, and tough, but against these demons they're no match."

"Aye, I thought the same," Merok agreed from the chair beside him. After a few days on the much more spacious *Remora*, it felt strange to be back in these confined quarters again. Strange but comfortable. Like going home.

"We can't let them die," Leif insisted. "They're good people, doing good deeds. True comrades with arms."

"We're not going to let them die," Merok assured him. His face was grim. "They're putting forth a valiant effort, but this isn't their fight. It's ours. Ours is the loss. Ours is the responsibility. And our solution will be the solution."

Leif met his gaze. Neither of them said anything for a moment. Then they both nodded. After fighting side-by-side for so long, words weren't necessary. They both knew what they had to do.

As one, they turned back to their consoles and began inputting commands. And their little ship responded, darting toward the massive Moringen from behind like a dagger in the night.

They just hoped this dagger would be able to fell a giant.

~ \* ~

"They're on the move!" Lizette announced.

Demming frowned at the display. Their foe had not moved except to close the distance still more. "How so?"

"Not them! Merok and Leif!" She waved one hand at the screen, and Demming stared—then started as the display zoomed in to show him exactly where their friends had taken their tiny ship.

"They're heading right for it!" He leaned forward. "It'll swallow them whole!"

Sure enough, as he watched a panel in the Moringen ship seemed to slide open near his friend's much smaller vessel. It took him a second to notice the puffs of smoke along the panel's edges. It hadn't been opened from within—Merok and Leif had shot it open! And now they were driving the wedge-shaped ship directly into that makeshift entrance. Within seconds they had vanished into the belly of the beast.

"I hope they know what they're doing," Demming muttered. But he had a sinking feeling they knew exactly what they were up to, and so did he.

~ \* ~

"We did it! We're inside!" Leif slapped Merok on the back, then quickly drew his hand back to his console. "Scanning now!"

"There!" Merok stabbed a finger at his display, which showed the developing scan of the demonship's interior. A section slightly above and ahead of them strobed on the screen. "That's got to be their central core!"

"We can shoot our way through the decks," Leif pointed out, fingers already on the weapon controls. "We'll be there in a few seconds."

"I've readied the engine." Merok tapped in one last command. Then he drew his sword. There was no room to swing it in these tight quarters, but it still felt right to have it in his grip now. Leif drew his sword as well.

"Onward!" They shouted together as their ship cut its way deeper into the Moringen behemoth. A moment later, the glowing ship's core appeared before them. They wasted no time in steering right

toward it.

~~“It has been an honor, my friend,” Leif said, offering his right hand to Merok.~~

“For me as well,” Merok replied, returning the clasp. Then he grinned at the monitor, and at the tiny, monstrous figures they could just make out scurrying away from the core in a panic.

“The Order of the Starry Blade sends its greetings,” he whispered even as their ship’s pro- slammed into the core and shattered it, sending arcs of energy rippling through the bigger vessel’s interior. “We have not forgotten. And we have not given up. Take that message back to your hell when you go, and know that we will follow you even there.”

Then he stabbed his finger down on the console, and their ship’s engine overloaded, setting off a cascade effect with the ruptured core before it.

The last thing Merok saw was the light shimmering along his sword. It was beautiful.

~ \* ~

“Energy readings are off the scale!” Dittmer announced from his post. “It’s out of control!”

“Pull back!” Demming ordered. “Back away now!” He opened a channel to the *Siren Knife*. “Pyle, get out of there!”

Hearing the alarm in his voice, Lizette tightened her grip on the helm and began spinning it, turning them about.

Then the Moringen exploded.

The shock waves tossed them aside like a seashell caught in a tidal wave. Lizette struggled with the wheel and managed to complete the maneuver she’d begun so that the *Remora* was racing ahead of the blast, riding its swell and staying afloat as a result. But only barely.

A quick scan of the monitors showed the *Siren Knife* running as well. It was less graceful, and was being buffeted about a good deal more, but it was also more heavily armored and could withstand the pummeling more easily.

After a minute the worst of the detonation had blown past them, and Lizette was able to bring the *Remora* about and to a halt. The *Siren Knife* skipped its way to them a moment or two later, and Lizette maneuvered them so the *Remora*’s rear portal was lined up with the *Siren Knife*’s front. A familiar ripple of energy surged through the hull as the two ships locked together, and the *Remora* was whole once more.

“Everyone all right up there?” Demming asked through speaking tube once the ships were connected again.

“Fine, sir,” Pyle replied at once. “A little bounced about, but otherwise good. What about down here?”

“I think we’re more or less in one piece,” Demming acknowledged. “Thanks to our friends’ noble sacrifice.” He directed Lizette to bring them back to where the explosion had begun, but he knew there would be little to find there. It had literally torn the Moringen ship apart from the inside out. Only a few jagged lumps of metal remained, drifting in the ether and cluttering its color-splashed black expanse.

“No life signs,” Amelia reported from engineering. “I’m sorry.” He could hear the sorrow in her voice. She had liked Merok and Leif as well. They all had. The two had proven to be stalwart friends and honorable allies. And they had given their lives to save the *Remora* and her crew. It was a debt Demming knew he could never repay.

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“There is one strange thing,” Amelia commented a few hours later when they all gathered in the officers’ mess. All except Dittmer, who had drawn the watch this shift. “It’s the debris.”

“What about it?” Demming was nursing a mug of steaming chowder.

“Well, it’s hard to be sure,” she hedged, “but I’m not sure there’s enough of it.”

That made him put down his soup and give her his full attention. “Not enough of it? You think some of it is missing somehow?”

“Perhaps.” She tugged at her braid. “I don’t know what the inside of that ship looked like—it could have been hollow like a ball, just a few internal supports to hold the engines and weapons and link the other systems together. And of course some of the debris shot past us, and more fired off in every direction. But it just doesn’t feel like enough.”

“You think they may have gotten away, at least some of them.” Demming frowned, trying to follow her logic. “You think they had lifepods and used those to escape.”

“I don’t know. It’s possible. I can’t be sure.” She shrugged. “It just doesn’t feel right.”

“What about Merok and Leif?” Kesselman asked from the far end of the table. “Did you find any trace of their ship?”

“Nothing.” Amelia glanced down at her hands. “Of course, it was at the heart of the explosion. There might not be enough left to find.”

“Or it might have shot them out like a cannon,” Pyle offered. “Maybe they’re still alive!”

Demming shook his head. “It’s unlikely,” he pointed out. “If they were, most likely we’d have spotted them by now.” He fingered his mug. “But we’ll keep an eye out. I’d be as happy as anyone to learn they’d survived that somehow.”

He stared off toward the far wall, and the ether beyond. “And if any of those Moringen survived, he vowed, his grip tightening, “well, then I say we finish the job our friends started. We owe them that much, and we can honor their memory and their Order by making sure those monsters are put to rest once and for all.”

His officers all nodded, even Amelia, and Demming smiled. If any of those marauders had made it out alive, they were going to be in for a nasty surprise. Because the *Dread Remora* was on their tail, and the next time they crossed paths the demons would not be so lucky.

The End

# **SPECIAL SNEAK PEEK AT THE BIRTH OF THE DREAD REMORA**

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# Chapter One

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Midshipman Nathaniel Demming glanced at his pocket watch again, the luminous face easily readable through the water. T minus four to launch. No worries, old boy, he told himself. After all, we're about to attempt the first launch of an untested ship with an untried crew and an uninformed captain, on a mission to an unexplored domain after an unexplained target.

Why fret?

"T minus four to launch," Lizette Mills reported from the helm. Demming hid a smile. She was half a second off in her count, but what did that matter? And what would he possibly gain by pointing that out now? Far better to keep silent and rib her about it later, in the officers' mess. Lizette was always a fun one to rib.

"Roger that," Captain Mendez replied, sitting tall in the command chair. From his position behind her Demming could still make out the topknot of her dark blond braid beneath her cap. Not a hair out of place, as usual. "Are we secure?"

That last was directed at him, Demming realized after a heartbeat, and scanned his console studying the readouts. "Secure, captain," he confirmed a few seconds later. His heart was thudding so loudly it was a wonder the water was rippling all around him. "All crew in their harnesses, all ports locked down."

"Good. Mister Dittmer?"

"All secure, Captain," the quartermaster replied right away, his voice as lazy as always. With another man Demming would have assumed he had taken the time to double-check while the captain was waiting for his answer first, but with Dittmer he knew that wasn't the case. Dittmer didn't need extra time. He already knew where every scrap of material was on this ship. The man had a memory like a clamshell, latched on tight.

"T minus three," Lizette updated. Everyone on the foredeck tensed with anticipation. Behind him Demming heard someone, most likely one of the ensigns, gasp for breath—and start choking as water filled his lungs. Classic rookie mistake. A wave of quiet laughter filled the cabin. Demming could hardly blame the ensign, though. It was all he could do to keep his own mouth closed, nostrils clamped shut, gills narrowed. What he really wanted was to start gasping himself, but that would never do. He was a midshipman of the line, for current's sake! He had not only his own dignity but the dignity of the entire ship and the entire Royal Navy to maintain!

Plus the others would laugh at him just as they were all laughing at the ensign now. And that was no way to begin a mission. Especially this mission.

"T minus two."

"Throttle us up, Miss Mills," Mendez ordered. Lizette nodded, her hand going to the smooth console inlay of the throttle and easing it down a quarter toward the console. Beneath and all around him Demming could feel the thrum as the ship's engines started to spin.

Soon. Very soon.

"T minus one."

"Ready on my mark," the captain warned. She reached for the speaking tube built into the arm of her chair, and her next words echoed faintly, as they repeated from speakers all throughout the ship. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to embark on our mission. I consider it an honor and a privilege to lead you into history. May the waves grant us success, and water save the queen."

"Water save the queen," Demming repeated softly, along with the other officers and, no doubt, the seamen in their compartments. And water save us, he thought. But did not say out loud.

"Mark!" Mendez hissed, and Lizette's quick fingers tapped controls, releasing the clamps that

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