

### **Winds of Fortune**

“Helm!” Kaylessa Summerwind shouted, trying to be heard over the battle. “Climb hard, full!” Methelidan’s acknowledgment was lost in the groaning of the PAS Victorious as the airship pulled into a steep ascent. Despite her battle-harness being clipped to the ship, Kaylessa still grabbed one of the handholds to steady herself. The rear ballistae fired, and the two Vreechspawn in their wake were both hit with the bolts. A chirping at her neck signaled an incoming message. “Kay, hold steady, you’ve got one on your keel.” Castien’s voice sounded calm, despite her knowing her fellow captain was in as dire straits as she was. She passed along another quick order, and as soon as the ship started to level, an impact travelled through the hull. The ship rocked, and then corrected.

“Got ‘em!” came the follow-up. Kaylessa tapped the necklace. “Thanks Cas. My compliments to your gunnery.” She motioned to Methelidan, and the Victorious fell into formation with the Prime Harmony again. The battle below was, put simply, a rout. The ritual to hold off the Vreech had failed, and the last-ditch defense was falling. The Dragon that had been their last hope had been swarmed and overwhelmed, and the Vreech that weren’t gorging on the remains had gone into a frenzy. The Wardens were doing what they could to slow the attack, to delay the inevitable, but at this point it was simply a question of how many would make the retreat to safety, and how many would fall in the process.

The Skyfleet ships had been doing their best to keep the skies clear, and rain down destruction on the Vreech, but their numbers were far too few. The hard-learned lessons from the Battle of Volawell had been taken to heart, but came after the destruction of most of the armada. Only seven ships had seen the dawn, and of those, only the Victorious and Prime Harmony were still in the air. The other five had taken many Vreech with them, courtesy of their retrofitted ballistae, but the swarm seemed endless. She watched grimly as the starboard ballista crew jettisoned an empty ammo case. She sent a runner to her quartermaster, and soon got the expected return - they were out. Kaylessa activated her necklace again. “Castien... we’re empty. Couple of bolts left, but we’re scraping the barrel.” “We used our last one clearing your hull.” His voice was touched with grim humor.

She shook her head. Of course he had, the fool. “Cas....” She paused for a moment, before she committed herself. She knew her crew well enough to know how they would react to her order. “Cas, I’m going to have the crew jump. Take a skeleton across the line, drop the baffles, and draw them off. You escort the survivors away.” The response came back immediately. “Negative, Victorious, not going to happen. We’ll mirror you, flank starboard while you take port. Draw off more that way.” Kaylessa cut off a curse. She knew Fireheart too well; there would be no changing his mind, and the people below didn’t have the time to waste. “Roger that, Harmony. Open skies.” Kaylessa issued orders; as expected, none accepted the order to abandon ship. The preparations happened quickly, barely a minute later, they were diving for the deck at flank speed. As they crossed over the front line, the few marines they had onboard made a combat jump, crashing down onto the battlefield with righteous fury. They opened a small gap, giving the Warden’s a moment’s respite. She had no time to relish the sight, though.

"Hard to port!" she shouted. "Ripplecast on their line!" The casters who remained on the ship opened up with Magic Storms, rapid-fire casting along the Vreech line. "Drop the baffles!" The Victorious' engineer, Revalor Dreamfire, disabled the wards that had been installed after Volawell, enchantments to cloak and disperse their magical signature. As the spells faded, the other magics layered into the Victorious' hull drew the Vreech's attention like a newly unveiled sun. Between that, and the burst of spells cast at them, the refugees were forgotten, insignificant next to the alluring meal that screamed through the sky above them. Behind them, the Prime Harmony did the same, cutting along the line in the opposite direction, carving a clear path for the refugees, who quickly took the opportunity to fall back. Hopefully, they'd be able to get far enough away that the Vreech wouldn't follow. At the very least, she could give them a chance. Their fate was now their own.

She trusted Methelidan to handle navigating, keeping an eye on the Vreech tailing them. They were going to need to angle back, keep them close enough to not lose interest. "Helm, starboard, 135." She keyed up her communicator again, coordinating with Castien. She didn't need to hear Revalor's report, when it came; the keening of the ship let her know that they were taxing the systems, pushing the engines to get every last bit of speed. They wouldn't need much more. Just... a few minutes. The Victorious was a good ship, and she'd carry them as far as she could.

She could just make out the Prime Harmony as they approached, bringing a swarm of Vreech behind them as impressive as her own. "That's a hell of a party they're bringing, Cap," Methelidan said. "I'm not sure we packed enough wine for this many guests." Kaylessa smirked at him, but didn't say anything - she didn't have the heart. The aft relay gave way, throwing sparks and scattering shards of crystal; the dorsal matrix was emitting some sort of acrid, greenish smoke. As they drew near to the Prime Harmony, Kaylessa could feel a tremor start to pass through the deck of the ship. The Victorious was dying.

Kaylessa stroked the railing for a moment, wordlessly passing along her thanks, and that of the entire crew, to the ship. The Victorious had carried them safely for years, been the centerpiece for many tales, both of bravery and of the more mundane. She'd been their home, and every board and bolt was infused with the crew's love.

Kaylessa keyed her communicator one last time. "Open skies, Cas." "Gentle winds, Kay." Skyfleet wasn't just about how one lived; it was also about how one died. The two airships passed by each other, almost close enough to touch. Sailors on both ships sketched out quick salutes before they were gone, angling to crash into the oncoming hordes that the other had brought along with them. The impacts rocked the ship as the swarms stopped their headlong chase to attack the prizes that had seemingly delivered themselves to the slaughter. Then their engines overloaded, detonating into twin explosions, the shock waves obliterating the Vreech swarms. In the distance, the few Skyfleet Marines who remained bowed their heads after hearing the distant booms, then rallied the survivors for the retreat.