

# Seeking a Solution

Deal with the Devil

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Hap hastily made his way through the Grand Market at the heart of Ardell. There was only one person who could repair Sari and he'd spent the last six weeks looking for her. He hadn't shaved and he'd barely slept, taking the time to bathe only when he was going to meet a lead on the mystic. Today was such a day, as he believed he'd finally tracked her down.

As he wound his way past people he ignored their calls to buy. He heard about the finest necklaces this side of the Durmor Plain, and the cloth made on the Trakari Spires. He also saw Gad, the man who sold the tatterdash, a clear liquid that he'd imbibed much too often in recent days. He was tempted to take a diversion, but Sari was waiting for him so he needed to reach the mystic.

He reached the infamous Black Harbour, though the area was officially called the Northern Sprawl. It was a seedy area, inhabited by the poor and the broken. Everyone who'd give a straight answer about the mystic said she lived on the red-roofed floats in the Black Harbour, but no one would say how they'd come to meet her. Walking the pontoons and barges that made up the Black Harbour's roads was one way to end up at the bottom of the Endless Deep. Even Ardell, a shining beacon in this part of the One Ocean, had its issues.

He'd left practically everything back in Sari's hold. His sandals and shirt, his money and weapons. All he carried was Sari's empty power core in a small sack he kept in his hand. He

wanted to make it look like he had nothing worth stealing, but that didn't stop people eyeing him as he passed. On the right of the main path were the green-roofed floats and on the left were the blue-roofed ones. The people living in these houses or attempting to run businesses were going about their days, but that didn't stop the hungrier looking people from staring at him as if he were a piece of meat. He could see many of them with bottles of fire dew.

Just as he reached the red-roofed floats on the far side of the district, two men stepped out in front of him. On top of their tattered clothes they wore pristine shawls, two-toned red of bright and dark.

"You seek her?" asked one. His accent was unusual, almost like he was singing. He was also a pale peach rather than brown almost as if he'd never been touched by the sun, never been on the open ocean outside the city. Hap had never seen anyone with that skin shade before, though he'd heard the storied of men from other worlds.

"I do," said Hap. "I have a request."

"Then be ready," said the man. He nodded to his companion, who looked more like the rest of the city. They stepped out the way, and as Hap continued the man said: "You'll have to work for your wish. She does nothing for free."

Hap found that this part of the Black Harbour was very different from the rest. Everyone wore those red shawls and they seemed healthy and happy. They went about their business, cleansing water and trading and other ordinary tasks. He couldn't imagine this place being in the middle of such a down-trodden place.

Eventually he found the address he'd been told and approached. He saw people watching him again, but instead

of looking like they'd gut him for a meal they were smiling. They were encouraging him to approach the mystic, and it got him wondering why so many people in the rest of the city were afraid of her.

He knocked before entering, though he wasn't sure of the protocol here. The floater didn't look like any boat he'd ever seen before, being diamond-shaped and unlikely to be useful for travel. The cabin was wide and dark, though he could clearly see the mystic sitting amongst a stack of books. Mystics were a strange lot, and most were employed by the city fleets to keep the living boats alive. Others were like this one, living on their own and fixing ships to make a living. Though this one seemed to have a cult around her, which was certainly more unusual than the regular oddness.

The mystic was completely wrapped in one of those red shawls, with flowing black hair that would probably be longer than her body if she stood. She was sat, looking at a book on the floor. The only skin he could see was a face paler than the man he'd met before, so white he could swear she was glowing faintly in the dark. Her eyes twitched up to look at him, revealing them to be as red as the shawl, then she looked back at the book.

"Your boat is broken," she said. "No normal mystic can fix it." She had that same melodic accent as the man.

"And that is why I am here," said Hap. "I've heard you're more than any other mystic. That you can resurrect dead ships."

"I don't have that one with me right now," she said. He felt he should know what that meant, but it escaped him. A thin, pale hand pushed out from a layer of the shawl and turned the page on her book before disappearing back into the scarlet

folds. “You will have to fetch him yourself.”

“Where is... he?”

“Deeper than you could ever imagine.” The hand appeared again, outstretched and waiting. “Give me the empty core and I’ll send you on your way. I’ll keep her safe.”

He walked to her and gave her Sari’s power core, and he couldn’t help but think how small the mystic was. Most mystics he’d met before for repairs got plenty to eat and made sure to exercise, likely as requirements from their masters, but this one looked like she’d snap in half just from the wind of a moving boat.

“Now, go. Find my Phoenix and you’ll have earned Resurrection.” She looked up at him as she spoke and those eyes were filled with the most mischievous kind of malice. The kind that would capsize you and then drag you down just far enough for you to reach the surface again.

He was about to reply when he fell through the world.