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Opening extract from
Fenn Halflin and the Fearzero

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Prologue

They'd never escape them. No one ever escaped. Tomas knew that, but had refused to give up. He'd been on the run with Maya for two years now and the Terra Firma had never even got close. But that was before this storm had blown them off course. If only they could have got back to East Marsh, the Resistance would have hidden them deep in the almost impassable fenland, where the Terras would never find them. But it was too late for those thoughts now.

Sleeting rain stung like knives on his face and waves swamped the deck. His eyes were black-ringed and blood-shot, and his body clumsy with tiredness. To prevent from being swept overboard he'd lashed himself to the barge's wheel, steering blindly into the wall of water ahead. Tomas looked through the hatch to see if Maya was all

right; she had been in no fit state to help so he'd made her get below deck.

A burst of lightning flashed on her face. Tendrils of damp hair clung to her pale forehead as she huddled on the bed, holding their new baby tight. He tried to smile encouragingly to her, but then he heard the other ship's engines growing louder.

Tomas untied himself from the wheel and cut the engine. He'd pushed the *Albatross* as hard as he could but now the hunt was over. He stumbled over to the cabin steps and staggered down, bolting the hatch behind him. The lamp was guttering out; they had to move quickly.

"Now!" he shouted.

As he reached for the baby, Maya's eye was caught by the glint at Tomas's neck: a chain with a small key on it, the gold grip shaped like an intricate knot of rope.

"The key!" she cried.

Tomas ripped the chain off and looked around wildly. The portholes were at sea level and sealed, so there was no way to get rid of it, and nowhere the Terras wouldn't look. Instead he looped the chain around the baby's head; if the baby was found they were done for anyway. Even if they weren't recognised, it was prohibited to give birth at sea. There were to be no more true Seaborns. Tears streamed down Maya's face and her hands were trembling as she

covered the baby with desperate, heartbroken kisses.

"Everything will be all right," Tomas lied, as he brushed the tears from her lovely eyes; one green and one blue. Then he swaddled an otter skin around the baby, so tight it might think it was still being held and lifted a curtain to reveal a hidden cupboard under the bed. He slid the door open and behind that pushed another secret panel aside – a secret within a secret. Tomas laid the baby gently down. Then he closed the doors, dropped the curtain back and took Maya tightly in his arms. They lay trembling in the dark as the lightning strikes blazed electric blue in the cabin. With each flash the other ship's shadow grew larger, like the dorsal fin of an enormous shark.

Finally it pulled alongside them; the banging turbines reverberated in their bones, and the sour stench of diesel made their eyes water. The waves buffeting their boat stilled as the other ship absorbed the energy of the ocean, then all fell quiet. In the eerie silence, Tomas and Maya peeped through the porthole.

It was the *Warspite*, one of the Fearzero fleet; the only ships permitted on that tract of sea. Vast and brutal, it was more like a fortress than a ship. Sheets of iron, welded together with rivets the size of a man's clenched fist, soared up like a cliff. Lines of rust bled down the iron strakes. On the bow was the Terra Firma logo: a black triangle with the

initials TF in the centre on a scarlet background. Ladders lined the sides and high up, winking in the night, lights began their descent. The Terras were coming.

There was a clatter as grappling lines were thrown onto the barge and scraped on the deck above, then came the vicious snarls of the Malmuts: Terra Firma dogs. Someone swore at the bolted hatch before striking it with a heavy blow. It was wrenched open.

Three huge Malmuts squeezed their sharp muzzles in through the gap and sniffed inquisitively. Scenting fear, the very thing they were bred to detect, the dogs skidded down the steps in a snarling frenzy; their claws slipping on wet treads and their fur claggy with sweat. The creatures crashed through the furniture unseeing; Malmuts could sniff a frightened human a mile away, but barely saw two feet in front of them. They scrabbled up against Maya and Tomas, growls curdling in their throats. Six Terras followed, dressed in grey uniforms, their faces completely covered by black masks that had narrow openings for the eyes and mouth with mesh behind them, to protect from the diseases Seaborns were said to carry. Across their bodies they wore a thick strap that held a gun and a short steel truncheon.

"What a stench!" came a muffled voice from behind the mask as the Terra pulled the Malmuts back, making them yelp in pain. Laughter followed.

"That's Seaborns for you," said another. "Filthy Jipseas and their stinking fish."

"Cockroaches!" another Terra spat. "Swarming back to land, spreading disease!"

He jabbed the end of his truncheon under Tomas's chin and lifted his head so he could see him better, then the Terra signalled to another who disappeared back onto the deck.

"I have a permit ... Wait!" Tomas pleaded, buying time. The permit was fake of course, but Tomas held on to the hope that this might be a routine inspection. There was still a chance these Terras didn't know who they had caught. Without hesitation the Terra flicked his truncheon away from Tomas to Maya, striking her hard on the mouth. Blood spurted in an arc across her cheek, but she knew better than to cry out and gripped Tomas's arm to stop him trying to defend her. These days no one cared if a Seaborn was killed and tossed overboard; the only good Seaborn was a drowned Seaborn in the eyes of the Terra Firma.

A whistle sounded and Tomas and Maya were dragged up onto the deck. At the barge's bow end stood a lone figure. His long grey coat flapped at his ankles and a large, hooded cowl covered his face. He was gently tapping a truncheon in the palm of his hand, as if keeping time to music only he could hear. Tomas and Maya were pushed towards him.

"We have permits, sir," Tomas begged, pulling out the

papers from his pocket. He had paid highly for them on the black market; in a world without money, they had traded every piece of jewellery they owned.

But before the man even turned around, Maya knew who it was; she'd already spotted the gleam of the metal straps supporting his shattered legs.

Chilstone. Commander of the Terra Firma.

She let out a cry of fear; countless Seaborns had been drowned at Chilstone's command.

"Maya," Chilstone murmured quietly.

He pulled back his cowl, revealing a long, narrow face. He was delicately built, with soft skin so fishy-white and translucent that blue veins could be seen snaking at his temples. A fine web of lines was etched across his face, left like tidemarks from constant pain making him grimace and twitch uncontrollably. His large eyes were pale and gelatinous, like oysters, and he missed nothing as he looked Tomas and Maya over. Inhaling deeply to prepare himself, he took one shuffling step towards them, wincing as the steel gears implanted in his knees cranked open and took his weight.

He'd known what the price of saving his legs would be – that each time he moved the iron pegs embedded in his shin would rip at the muscles they anchored – but he never complained. Instead he thanked his suffering; Pain was his

trusted counsellor, the confidant who never slept, muttering in his ear all night long, reminding him of the peril of clemency. When Pain succeeded in wrenching Chilstone from his troubled sleep, the nightmares played on. He saw himself in his mind's eye: on his hands and knees – what was left of them – crawling through the sinking Fearzero's twisted hull, dragging his shredded legs behind him like bloodied rags.

A Terra handed Chilstone the permits. He examined them, nodding to himself, then frowned, as if he'd just heard some sensible advice but was reluctant to take it. His fist clenched as he stared at the permit and the Terra backed away, well out of striking range. But Chilstone continued to inspect the forgery; the names were false of course, but it was useful to note the forger's style.

Then, without warning, Chilstone held the permits aloft and opened his fingers, letting the storm rip them into the waves. Tomas and Maya Demari had played no part in the assassination attempt against him, but they were leaders of the Resistance and without them it would crumble. All trace of the Demaris had to be obliterated. But Chilstone couldn't do it here; even weighted bodies had an irritating habit of washing ashore, such was the power of the sea and its brutal new currents. Chilstone didn't want to make martyrs of them, and make the Seaborns even more determined to

fight back. He jerked his head towards a Terra.

Immediately Tomas and Maya were hauled up the ladders to the Fearzero, where Maya's screams became lost in the icy wind. The Malmuts were kicked back into their steel cage, which was hoisted up the Fearzero's side, leaving just one Terra on deck. He quickly painted a crude yellow scythe on the barge's bow.

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A few hours later a rickety old tug was towing the *Albatross* across the mouth of a windswept estuary. The storm had faded now, leaving the sky a muddy grey.

It was remote: surrounded by boggy salt marsh where the wide green river flooded into the open sea. Once there had been a busy market town nestling in the valley, but now it lay deep beneath a broad expanse of water. It had been swallowed overnight when the coastal defences failed to stop the Great Rising and the sea had surged another three hundred feet, adding to the water that had already engulfed the low-lying lands. The colossal waves of the Great Rising robbed even more of the little land that was left and millions had drowned. Since then, only scraps of higher rocky land were left for survivors to live on – although not all survivors. Only those who could prove

Landborn ancestry, or obtain permits, had rights to land.

As far as the eye could see was salt bog and fenland; hundreds of miles of it smothered by a blanket of murky mist. East Marsh was a labyrinth of waterways and rivers, hidden by impenetrable reed beds. Thickets of groundsel bushes flecked with white flowers grew between the relics of old woodlands, where the branches of brine-dead trees clawed through the fog like a drowning man's fingers. The mists rarely cleared enough for anyone to do more than glimpse the silhouette of an immense Wall far inland, even though it was at least two hundred feet high by now. The Terra Firma were forging ahead with their building programme; it would take years but eventually the two ends of the Wall would meet and the East Isle it enclosed would be safe. Safe from the sea, safe from what was left of the Seaborn Resistance, but near to the marsh and its riches of peat that the Landborns needed for fuel and topsoil; land inside the walls might be safe from water, but it was barren and rocky.

The only high ground that remained here was East Point, the ridge of an old hill; now a spindly peninsula that curled around the estuary like half a horseshoe. On the very end stood an old squat shepherd's hut, surrounded by a scrubby garden of silverwort thistles and sea lupins, scorched so black by the sea winds it looked like there had been a fire. The owner was now at the helm of the tug, a man called Halflin.

If he had ever had another name, he had long forgotten it.

It was hard to guess his age; the mop of grizzled hair that reached his shoulders made him look older than his forty-three years, and his body was shattered by hard work and fear. His skin was still smooth, as if all the wrinkles had been swept away by the harsh winds, but deep, dark clefts ran from his nose to his mouth then down his chin. His mouth was a thin slit, as if made with the flick of a switchblade, and he never smiled. A semi-circle of beard grew around his chin in scraggy grey tufts like sea grass. After years of peering into salt spray his eyes were squinted, but because of this his hearing was sharp. As the tug slowly dragged the *Albatross* upriver, he thought he heard something over the sound of the engine.

In the warm shadows of the barge's cupboard, the baby had woken up. It hadn't cried at first, but now it felt a strange nagging feeling inside, something like pain. Hunger. The baby had tipped its face this way and that, searching for the comfort of its mother. Finding nothing, it had let out its first cry.

The tug was heading into the Sunkyard, which was built across one of the many rivers that flowed into the estuary. The Fearzeros were too big to come here – they would have run aground – so Halflin collected the condemned boats out at sea and towed them in. Here boats were sunk, although

the Terra Firma never used that word, instead calling it “decommissioning”. Just the threat of losing their boat was enough to keep most Seaborns obedient. As Halflin slowed the tug to navigate past the old church tower poking out of the water, the only other person in sight was one of the eel-catchers from the Sargasson tribe, drawing his horses through the frosty reed beds in the distance. It was unusual for them to come this far out, risking being seen by spies; the Terra Firma had made it a crime to take peat or wood reserved for Landborns.

He stared ahead doggedly, hoping the man wouldn’t see him. The Sargassons didn’t look kindly on Halflin working for the Terra Firma, and Halflin could never reveal why he didn’t refuse them. He clung to the hope that if he did as he was ordered there was a chance he’d see his family again.

A new jetty flanked the harbour, where the doomed boats and barges were tethered like cattle waiting for slaughter. The Terra Firma had been especially busy lately, sweeping up the last of the Seaborn Resistance. This morning there had been four boats to destroy, each marked with the Terra Firma’s yellow scythe, the symbol of death to show that a boat was to be scuttled. There was a beautiful houseboat, which would break Halflin’s heart to sink, two fishing boats and now the old barge. One of the few perks of this hated job was that the Terra Firma usually turned a blind eye to

Halflin gleaning whatever he needed from the boats he scuttled. But he had been told to sink this one immediately, and on no account was he to salvage anything from it, so he took the *Albatross* straight to the Punchlock.

The Punchlock had been built in the tributary that had the strongest currents. There were two wooden gates opposite each other like a lock in a canal and over them a huge scaffold had been erected, like a hangman's gibbet, from which a tethering chain hung to keep boats in position. Beneath the waterline there was a lethal mechanism: two metal spikes, sharp enough to puncture the thickest hull. The tug boat would tow the condemned vessel inside the gates and automatically the spikes were winched out. Once at maximum tension they snapped inwards, like an animal trap, punching two giant holes in the vessel. Just as quickly the jaws would open again, leaving the boat free to sink. Within minutes it would be below water. It was easy; no messy explosives, no noise to disturb the peace. Water did the work of destroying the Seaborn's boats, an irony not lost on Halflin. The second gate would open and the current dragged the carcasses down into the flooded valley, where they were snared in the streets of the drowned town. At low tide, if the water was settled, it was possible to see the graveyard of hulks lodged between ruins of old houses and skeletons of trees where shoals of

fish darted between slime-black branches.

The *Albatross* was in position. Halflin untied the tow line and steered the tug in the smooth curve around the Punchlock to go back to pick up the next boat. As soon as the second gate closed, the Punchlock spikes sprung shut on the bow of the *Albatross*, slicing cleanly through the wood. Then the spikes sprang out again in readiness for the next vessel.

Immediately water gushed in, filling the lower deck. For a few moments the barge remained balanced on the surface, but once the front cabin filled, it began to list. Maps and tide charts floated up, their ink bleeding away; cups and jugs drifted off their hooks. When the largest cabin was full, the *Albatross* abruptly tipped forward, nose first, and plummeted down through the thick green water towards the ocean bed. It fell quickly, like a kestrel diving to the ground.

As Halflin watched the stern disappear he was troubled again, thinking about the strange sound he'd heard just before the boat was sunk. Staring at the belching bubbles on the water's surface, he scratched his eyebrow with the callused stump that was left of his forefinger and slowed the tug.

Babies have a primordial instinct to hold their breath under water, and in this one's case it was remarkably strong. As the baby felt the cold rush of water, it gasped in shock, filling its lungs with air so it floated up inside the secret

cupboard. The swirling current of water then drew the baby towards the gaping hole the spike had made. Instinctively the baby closed its throat, flailed its tiny arms and began to swim, out through the hole and up towards the light. In a few moments the baby was bobbing like an apple on the estuary's surface and it let out the air that had saved its life in a long, pitiful wail. Catching the sound for certain this time, Halflin lifted the flaps of his rabbit-skin cap from his ears, cut the tug's engine and looked back.

For a second he thought it was a dying seagull; there were plenty of those in the polluted waters. He narrowed his eyes and peered through the haze. Not a gull; a baby. What he'd taken to be a slick of oil was the black wet fur of otter skin around it.

"A bairn!" he cried.

He put a foot on the rail, readying to jump in, but stopped himself just in time, teetering on the deck. There'd be two dead bodies in the water if he did that; there was no way to climb back on the tug once overboard. Instead he ran to the stern and grabbed one of the landing nets, a wide round one on a long pole that he used to scoop up fish he caught with the line. Halflin balanced on the rail and peered into the water.

The baby was still there, but apart from bobbing in the rise and fall of the tug's wash, it was motionless. Halflin held the net out as far as he could, but the baby was being carried away

from the tug by the suction of the *Albatross* as it slid towards the sunken town. Halflin grabbed another pole and as fast as his trembling hands could manage he lashed them together and dragged the net through the choppy water. After two tries, the baby at last slid in. It was face down.

Halflin hauled the net back onto the tug, trying not to bump it on the sides but still needing to be quick. His knees were weak with fear as he fell to the deck, pulling off the baby's freezing wet shift. It was a boy, no more than a few weeks old. Halflin parted its lips, hooked his little finger down its throat and pulled out a tangle of oily seaweed. The baby flopped lifelessly in his hands.

The wind was blowing lightly and the tug drifted on a slow current. Gulls wheeled through the rain-shadowed sky above but even they were silent for once, as if they too were listening out for life. There was no sound on the tug apart from the soft slop-slop-slop of water against the side and Halflin's own heavy, frightened breathing.

Halflin started frantically rubbing the baby's chest but still it lay motionless. He picked it up and stared into its tiny, crumpled face for a sign of hope, but it was as limp as a rag doll. He carefully laid it back down, took a deep breath, closed his mouth around the baby's tiny blue lips and breathed out. Like a balloon, the baby's chest lifted, expanded, and deflated. Halflin repeated this again and

again, but it was too late. Each time the baby's chest swelled but flattened again immediately; there was no breath in it save that which Halflin blew there. Halflin felt his throat tighten with the loss of something he'd only just found.

"Don't be dead!" he whispered. He picked the baby up again and held it close against his thumping heart, cradling its head on his shoulder, willing it to live. "Don't be dead," he said again, almost angry now; he hadn't woken up this morning expecting his heart to be torn out again. He rocked the baby back and forth.

Suddenly the baby coughed, spluttering water all down itself and him, and opened its eyes. It began shivering and crying.

Halflin grabbed some old rags to dry it and peeled away the last strands of seaweed clinging to it. There was a key around its neck. His face grew ashen with fear as he recognised the design: the key of the Demari family. The symbol of the Resistance.

What idiot would put that around a baby's neck? Might as well tie a noose around it. Halflin scowled as he rubbed the baby's head dry. He didn't want any more to do with that lot; reckless fools, getting people's hopes up but never delivering. One thing Halflin knew was that you only defied the Terra Firma if you stood a chance of winning; all the Resistance had done was poke a tiger with a feather. Since

the assassination attempt on Chilstone, he'd become even more vicious. Halflin ripped the chain off, and was about to toss it overboard when he had second thoughts. It wasn't his to throw away, and as angry as he was, he couldn't destroy something so precious, and once so full of hope.

Instead he stashed it deep in his pocket and pulled the scarf from his neck, carefully swaddling the baby. It was worse than he'd suspected: several toes were webbed. Halflin had seen this before; the deformity was once very rare but, over time, in a drenched world, more children were being born with the defect. It marked them clearly as being from Seaborn stock and it had to be undone. As Halflin had told his own wife when their youngest was born webbed, *better cut now than killed later*. A hot bolt of nausea thickened in the base of his throat as Halflin peered back out to sea. His forehead pricked with sweat as he scanned for the *Warspite*, but it was now a tiny speck in the distance. He let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

Quickly Halflin put the baby into a wicker catch basket and lurched back to the wheel; he had to get the baby as far away from the Punchlock as possible. It was too early to stop work and he shouldn't do anything to draw attention to himself. He steered the tug towards shore, moored it, then ran with the basket to the workshop where he sorted through the loot gleaned from scuttled boats. He lit the

lamp, turning it down low so it would burn all night and anyone passing would think he was at work. Halflin then carefully buttoned his reefer jacket over the baby to hide it and keep it warm. From a distance no one would think he was carrying anything, although they might wonder how an old man could get fat in times as lean as these.

Checking no one was nearby, Halflin hurried out, slipping into the gorse like a wily old fox. He was wise to be cautious; who knew who might be watching in these dark days? Terra Firma spies were everywhere.

It was nearly night time when he stumbled through the back door of his hut, clawing for breath. He quickly bolted the door behind him and closed the shutters to hide the light. Then he fumbled along the driftwood shelf, found a candle stub and lit it. The hazy light revealed two sparse rooms, separated by a threadbare sail sheet. In one room was an upturned crate next to a bed, which was made from a door laid on top of two old oil cans and covered with a sailcloth pad stuffed with bulrush seeds. In the larger room a second door bridged two crates to make a table, and next to an oil drum stove stood a wooden clinker boat cut in half – the bow pointing upwards – where Halflin could sit to smoke his pipe, protected from needling draughts. Plants hung from the ceiling to dry: marsh cinquefoil, red baneberry and gypsywort. Over the mantelpiece gaped

a shark's jaw, its teeth glinting, and inside this perched a gull with a torn wing that Halflin had rescued. Now it eyed the bundle beadily and squawked for fish before flapping clumsily to the ground. Halflin shooed it away and shuffled over to the table. He propped the candle in a cup and shoved the dirty plates aside, then carefully laid the baby down and pulled off the scarf.

He took a penknife from his pocket, slid out the bright steel blade and lifted the baby's foot, noticing how the skin had pruned from being in the water. He quailed; Halflin was as tough as old leather but he'd never had the stomach for hurting any living creature. Even stoking up the stove he'd break the bark off each log to give the woodlice a chance to escape, singeing his fingertips as he plucked them from the flames. Folding the blade back into the handle he stared glumly at the baby wriggling helplessly on the table before him, but he knew he had to protect it. He gritted his teeth, pulled the knife out again and tested its sharpness on his thumb, drawing a thin line of blood across his own skin. A sharp blade would hurt less and the wounds would heal better. The Terras had got wise to this trick and looked for scars now; you had to be so neat.

He rummaged on the shelves and found the precious jar of honey he'd been saving. There was just enough. He stripped some leaves of dried woundwort into a cup and

poured water on them, then held the blade in the candle flame for a moment, wiped it briskly on his cuff and tore two strips of cotton from his own shirt. He dipped the stub of his finger in the honey, put it in the baby's mouth and let the baby suck. Holding the baby's tiny foot in his rough hand he spread the offending toes out, stretching the wafer thin cobwebs of skin, like a frog's.

He made the first cut, biting his lip as he trimmed off the bits of extra flesh as though he was paring an apple and tossed the scraps of skin into the fire; there could be no evidence. Immediately the baby yelped in pain but Halflin put more honey in its mouth. He worked swiftly. The honey had barely dissolved on the baby's tongue before he gave it more again. Soon the toes were separated.

Halflin gently slid the damp woundwort leaves between the baby's toes, then cleaned the honey jar with the cotton rags and wound them around the baby's feet to heal the wounds. With the baby crying and shaking, he wrapped the remains of his shirt around it and laid it in an old box he had packed with sailcloth, then tugged a sweater from where it hung on a nail and tucked it around the baby. But it still wouldn't stop crying; it needed feeding. In the corner stood a wooden bucket of water where a pitcher of goat's milk was kept cold. That'd do.

Halflin filled a bottle with milk, cut the finger off an

ancient rubber glove, pierced this with the end of his knife and fitted it over the bottle neck, then squatted down by the stove to feed the baby. It sucked and mewed, then at last, worn out with crying, the baby blinked drowsily and fell asleep.

Halflin pulled on his only other shirt and flopped down in the clinker boat seat. He needed to think; a smoke would help. He fumbled in his pocket for his pipe and felt the cold of the chain. He took it out and held it aloft, staring as the key twisted back and forth, glinting in the firelight, then stuffed it away again. He tamped some dried yarrow into his pipe, lit the strands, and sucked hard several times to get it going. Damp smoke unfurled up into the rafters like a ribbon.

Halflin shook his head and frowned at the box and its contents. If he ever discovered a Seaborn hiding on a Sunkmarked boat, he was supposed to turn them in. How was he supposed to keep a crying baby hidden from the Terra Firma when he was collecting boats for them every day? He'd had some bad luck in his time, but this baby was the worst thing to ever happen to him. Even so, he'd pulled enough tar-smothered gulls from the oil-slickened sea to know that if you rescue something, then you're responsible for it. Only one person could help: Lundy. She lived deep in the treacherous marshes; the baby would be safe out there, for as long as she'd have him.