

Chapter One

The ship that would change everything in a manner unplanned by her creators waited to meet her doom. The flat-bottomed cog, sixty feet from stem to stern, looked unlike any other such boat in history. Harbinger possessed neither mast nor sail and sat cradled in her specially constructed dry dock at the fairgrounds east of the city of Averporse – far from the nearest body of water.

Hundreds of people from the city and its surrounding countryside crowded this field, normally dedicated to jousting and tournaments during fairs. Today they came to see history made. Scores of common folk had arrived with the sunrise to secure a precious seat on the wooden stands alongside the field. Nobility from across the Imperial Principality of Tremmen and beyond filled both tiers of the shaded, semi-enclosed platforms that made up the tournament judges' stand.

A dozen lords and ladies of various official positions in their counties, two counts, a small body of ministers led by Bishop Deris of Tremmen, Princess Arvella, daughter of Tremmen's elderly Grand Prince, and Imperial Princess Jileen, eldest niece of the Emperor of Amuri himself, all waited to see Harbinger's groundbreaking magical artifice in action.

Of all the people waiting for the demonstration to begin, only one man knew the Harbinger's terrible destiny.

This man nervously watched the preliminary speeches and the prayers and the blessings far from the crowd. He stood atop a rise almost half a furlong east of the Harbinger, far enough away to be safe from the inevitable disaster, and wished again he was alone there. Morten Lopen glanced at his unwanted companion, wondering if the nobleman would interfere with his escape.

Lord Harlow Tammadore stood a head taller than Morten, and dressed as most fashionable young noblemen dressed this season. Soft leather shoes, striped trousers, a silk waistcoat over a simple cotton shirt made expensive with gold embroidery, and a wide golden buckle with the his family crest embossed upon it made up Lord Tammadore's outfit. It made a severe contrast to the simple worker's togs Morten wore, the best he could afford.

Though brilliant, Morten's intelligence meant little in an empire dedicated to keeping power in the hands of an aristocracy. His entire life had been a desperate scrape to earn a living worthy of his talents, but he'd always had to settle for the scraps that the nobility had been willing to throw him. That would begin to change – today. Soon. As soon as the last speech concluded and Morten's employer, Lord Demoslin Wynlimore, Lord Tammadore's cousin, began the demonstration.

Watching the current speaker, who from the hilltop looked smaller than a man's little finger, Harlow shook his head. "The Count certainly loves to give a speech, doesn't he?" he said.

Morten nodded. A gesture of deference more than agreement, as nobles expected. He made a note of it. This might be the last time he would ever have to do such a thing. "Didn't they offer you the opportunity to speak, my lord?" Morten asked. "After all you had a critical hand in the artifice construction yourself."

Harlow nodded. "They did. I turned it down. The artifice was Demoslin's design. I just enchanted the silver star to meet his requirements." Now he turned to look at Morten. "I'm surprised you weren't invited to speak. Demoslin had high praise for your skill with the calculations."

Morten snorted. As if any noble would let a commoner on the same platform with them, much less give a speech like a social equal.

"Don't be modest," Harlow said, mistaking the true meaning of Morten's snort. "Demoslin said you saved him weeks with your work scaling the astrological factors to the design changes. Without that, some other wizard might have beaten Demoslin to the Xanderlin prize."

Like most of the wizards throughout the Amuri Empire, Demoslin Wynlimore had been working to win the Xanderlin

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prize for over a year. Grand Prince Xanderlin, ruler over the Imperial Principality of Itza, announced he would award land grants, exclusive trade rights, and a huge amount of cold hard gold to anyone who devised a reliable method of large scale overland cargo transportation. The Amuri Empire featured the best roads in the world, but nothing could move faster than the animals hauling the wagons of trade.

As word of the Xanderlin prize spread, wizards began hiring assistants such as Morten like never before. Morten was an arcanist, that group of professionals thoroughly familiar with magical theory but, due to either a lack of training or lack of talent, unable to cast spells themselves. The lack of noble birth made the real difference so far as Morten had always been convinced. He knew of no wizards who'd been born poor.

That was something else that today would begin to change. Today would be marked as a turning point in history and Morten felt proud fate put him in such an important role. He'd been working, living, for this day since he first saw Demoslin's plans for Harbinger. The wizard had designed a ship the size of a merchant cog with enchantments to allow levitation of its own weight plus twenty tons, and a magical method of thrust that tapped into the elemental plane of fire. That magical propulsion artifice was the breakthrough. When activated, it opened a pinpoint gate to the plane of fire, letting the raw elemental energy rush out like water pumped through a hose. Trevis, an engineer in Demoslin's employ, devised a chamber to give the energy something to push against, allowing the whole machine, and the ship that carried it, to move.

The first test thrust the prototype faster than a racehorse at full gallop right into a tree. Six months of testing and intricate adjustments and Demoslin's team established ways to control acceleration and direction without sacrificing significant speed. And not once had there been an explosion. Harlow's magical device, his enchanted silver star, saw to that.

Morten toed the pack at his feet, careful not to look at it and risk Harlow taking note of its presence. But Lord Tammadore paid him no attention, focused instead on the nobles' platform down on the field.

“I think that’s Demoslin coming forward at last to speak,” Harlow said.

Morten seized on what might be his last chance to be rid of the nobleman and insure an unnoticed escape. “Are you sure you don’t want to hear his speech, my lord? I would suppose your cousin would want you there with the rest of the family.”

Harlow waved him off. “I heard his speech three times as he rehearsed it,” he said. “I came here so I wouldn’t need to crane my neck to see the Harbinger in full glory as she employs the artifice. I’m sure the rest of the family is enthralled though. A shame Elizabeth had to miss it for school.” He pointed to a black clad figure emerging from the crowd and with a tray in his hands. “Oh look. Here comes Rollin with the drinks. We’ll be able to toast the Harbinger’s first flight.”

Rollin, Steward of the Tammadore Estate, the head of its many servants, and a man twice Harlow’s twenty-five years, mystified Morten. The man actually enjoyed his servile role. When Harlow forced his company on Morten as he began slipping away from the crowd, Rollin had even smiled and volunteered to bring wine up when Harlow hinted at wanting some. Now Morten would have two people up there with him who might hinder his escape.

Morten wrung his hands in trepidation, trying to convince himself it didn’t matter two others stood here with him. If they noticed his escape, so what? Morten could claim panic took him. Besides, Morten suddenly thought - with Lord Harlow Tammadore this far away from Harbinger, he would not notice that the silver star he’d enchanted for the propulsion artifice no longer hung in its proper place.

Again Morten resisted looking down at his pack. So far the nobleman had said nothing about it. Morten wanted to keep it that way.

Down on the field, Demoslin Wynlimore continued speaking to the crowd of people who didn’t know they were deathly close to disaster. The assembled Tammadore family: Harlow’s parents, his younger brother, his older sister with her husband and children, three cousins, and Demoslin’s mother, all beamed at

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their celebrated relative. Off to one side of the stands on the field a handful of Tammadore servants stood in smiling adoration.

Except for Rollin, who was now about half way up the rise.

A cheer erupted from the crowd. Demoslin finished his speech at last. Morten watched as his employer for more than a year signaled Trevis, waiting on the deck of the Harbinger.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. But Morten knew the activity happening on the ship. He could imagine himself hearing Demoslin's apprentice, a seventeen year old girl named Loreena, noble-born of course, carefully casting the levitation spell from an enchanted scroll. Spells were simple to cast from scrolls; even talented arcanists such as Morten could do it.

Harbinger began rising into the air. Many in the crowd began to gasp and point at the display of a massive ship floating impossibly in the sky. Others held their breath waiting for the next, truly breathtaking part of the demonstration. Morten felt his heart pounding in his chest.

The sailless ship rose fifty feet high in the air, came to a stop and simply floated there. A hush fell over the fairgrounds. Even the wind fell still, giving the spring day a humid thickness that added gravity to the wait. Morten made ready to get his pack. Any moment now it would happen. On the Harbinger's deck, Loreena read the magical scroll to activate the propulsion artifice.

A small spray of flame shot out from the stern of the Harbinger. The ship eased forward as smoothly as a bird gliding on the wind. The crowd below gasped and cheered. Harlow applauded. His steward Rollin stopped and turned to watch.

The flame suddenly erupted. A column of fire burst out from the stern. The airship lurched then exploded in a deafening fireball of destruction. The cheers below turned to screams. Broken, burning wood and red hot metal began to rain down to the field, and to the people gathered there.

Harlow, Rollin, and everyone on the field stood frozen in horror, too shocked to realize the danger about to fall upon them. Morten grabbed his pack and hefted it to his shoulder with a grunt. The enchanted silver star that he'd hidden there was heavier than it looked.

On the field, the bulk of the destroyed airship's burning hull fell on the platform that held the nobility. It crushed the wooden structure and then set it ablaze, burning to death those not already dead from the impact. Metal fasteners shot into the crowd, killing dozens more in an instant. Shards of shattered, flaming wood fell throughout the fairgrounds. Panic took hold and people scrambled over each other to get away from the burning horror.

"God and Saints!" Harlow shouted. He grabbed Morten's arm. "We've got to go help them," he said. Shock and fear drained the color from his face.

Morten felt the same fear. The explosion had been greater, fiercely greater, than he'd expected and he knew he wasn't far enough away from it to be safe. He moved to shove Harlow away and flee, when a spear-sized piece of wood, sharp where the explosion split it off from the airship, came flying down at him. Morten tried to dodge it, but Harlow's grip on his arm stymied him. The shard of wood plunged right into Morten's thigh. He screamed and dropped to one knee. His pack went flying.

Another piece of falling wood struck Harlow's head and he fell. Free of Harlow's grip, Morten examined his wounded leg. It bled, but not overmuch. Harlow wasn't moving. Morten didn't take the time to see if the nobleman still breathed. He retrieved his pack as little bits of debris rained down around him.

Suddenly Rollin was there. He reached down and helped Morten to his feet. "Lean on me," the Steward ordered. Morten didn't argue. He leaned on Rollin, who supported a barely conscious Harlow on his other side. The three of them took a step and Morten staggered, nearly bringing them all down.

"Drop the pack," Rollin ordered.

Morten shook his head.

"I'll return for it, you have my word," Rollin said.

Morten shook his head again. He couldn't risk anyone opening the pack and discovering he'd sabotaged the Harbinger. Morten shoved himself free of Rollin's grasp, determined to keep his pack. He took one clumsy step and fell. The wood impaled in his thigh broke off with a crack that seemed louder than the screaming crowd below. Fresh pain shot through Morten. He yelled and dropped his pack. Rollin reached for him, trying to

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help him stand again. Morten slapped the hand away. He got to his knees and reached for his pack. His hands closed around its strap and he pushed himself to his feet.

“Come on!” Rollin shouted at him.

The heavy debris had all come to ground, but the sky around them was still filled with the lighter shreds of burning fabric and the smallest bits of wood. The noise from down in the field grew louder as people howled in pain and wailed at finding loved ones dead. The smell of burnt fabric and charred wood mixed nauseously with the smell of molten metal and fire blackened flesh.

Morten pushed himself to his feet, pack in hand. He had to get away from the fairgrounds and from the man trying to help him. After one step Morten’s wounded leg betrayed him. It gave way and he tumbled down the hill, losing his pack somewhere along the slope.

When he came to a stop, pain kept Morten from standing. He saw Rollin pick up the pack and begin down the hill, half-supporting, half-carrying Harlow.

Morten’s vision began to blur. He saw a fuzzy image of someone in pale robes beside him. Then his vision went white with sudden, debilitating pain at his thigh. He felt hands on him, heard someone say, “That’ll stop the bleeding. He’ll live.” Someone helped him to his feet and helped him walk a few steps.

Then the blackness finally overtook him.

When he woke, Mortan found himself on the bed in his room at the Tammadore’s estate workshop. His window stood open to the darkness of night outside. He felt heavy bandages around his wounded thigh.

Morten heard voices coming from the next room, the big, almost warehouse sized room where he and Demoslin and the others had done most of their work this past year. One of the speakers left and Morten heard the other curse. Morten recognized the voice as Demoslin’s, the wizard he’d worked with all these months while secretly serving another master and a greater cause. Immediately, Morten knew what he had to do.

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He carefully rose in his bed. Then he gingerly stood and put some weight on his leg. That hurt, but it was a bearable pain.

Next, Morten looked for his pack. In less than a minute he determined the pack and its incriminating evidence were not in his tiny bedroom. But since he'd awakened here and not in a cell, Morten knew no one had examined his pack – not yet. It was only a matter of time though and that meant he had none to waste.

Morten took a breath and set himself to the dirty business at hand.