

STAR SAND AND LAVIN

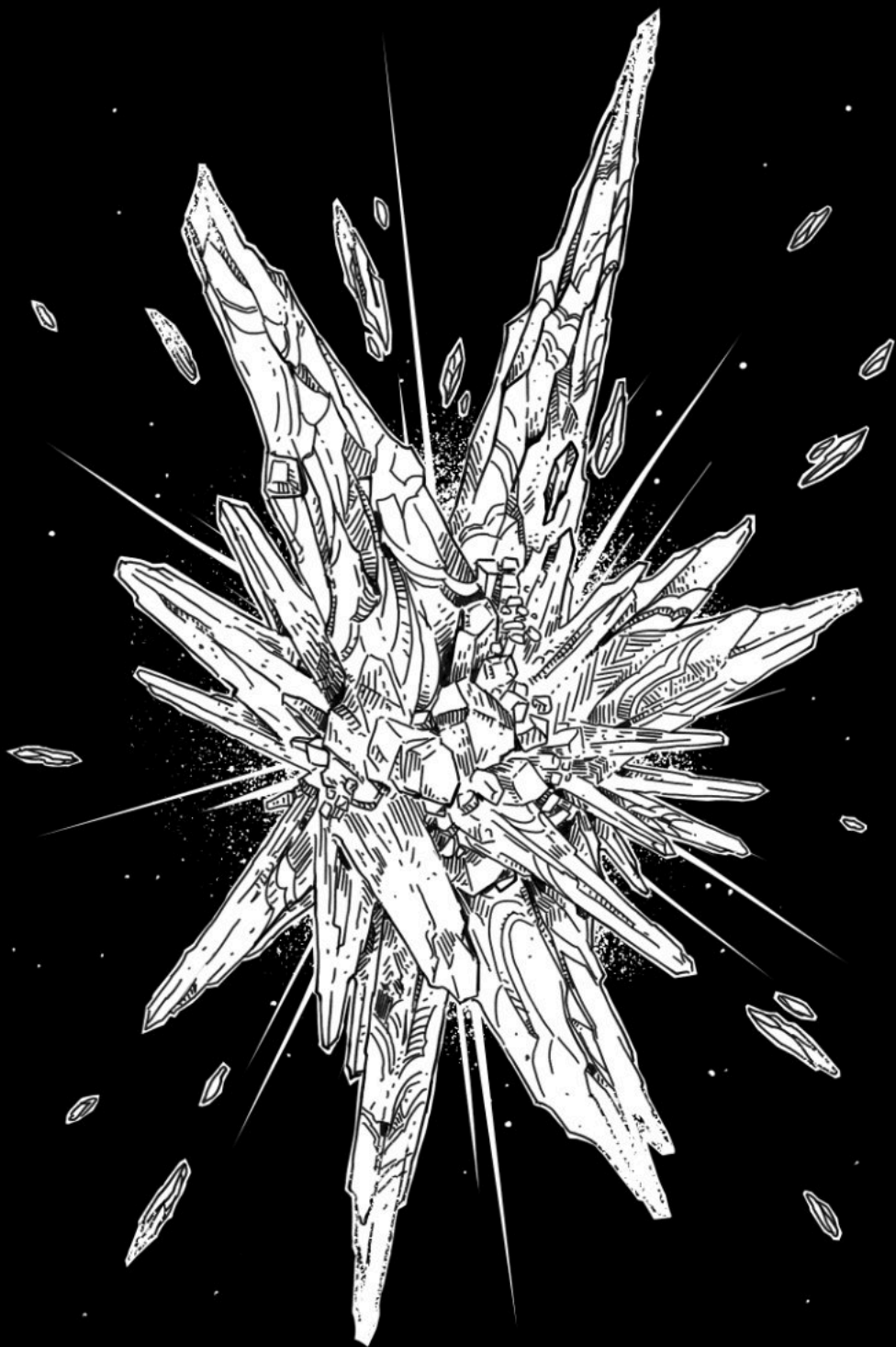
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AT THE EDGE OF
THE EMPIRE



IEA Travelogues
Prequel

1R #1/2



After repeated harassment from my editor, I have agreed to write about how I first arrived in Ringspace. For those familiar with my travelogues, I am writing this as I recover from the aftermath of "On the Maelstrom's Edge".

Also, this isn't exploratory, so if you're looking for the new worlds I so enjoy chronicling, maybe select another of my works. Despite what he put on the cover of this, I personally recommend starting with, "At the Root of Corruption". That was a joy to write, and the sequence of these things isn't especially important.

The point of light resolved into a lopsided crystal in the empty black of the void. It was about sixty feet across, but for two long spikes stretching from the star's core. If it were going to be a world, it would have revealed itself as a hazy aether-wall, reality flattening and stretching as I approached. Just another star.

A deep breath slipped out. My cloak curled tight, perhaps trying to comfort me. I pushed away an urge to thank it. I'd been alone in the aether too long if I started talking to my cloak. It may be a woven-crystal object of staggering magical power, but that doesn't mean having a conversation with something that can't talk is a healthy way to live.

Pushing thoughts of my cloak's feelings away, I returned my focus to the astral sea about me. The aether was emptier here, barely a wisp of silvery aether in sight, the stars spread wide apart. I could always turn back, snatch up some food from that last world and try another direction.

I didn't want to, though. The last place I found was a mean little world. No, I could keep going. My gaze settled on a cluster of stars that felt hopeful, and—

I blinked, mouth slipping open in shock. My cloak began to flutter, sucking in aether and weaving itself longer, glowing brighter.

That was a ship. At perhaps two dozen miles distant, and with my spyglass lost three worlds ago, there wasn't much to see, but anyone who grew up fishing the coast knows a ship at any distance, with or without sails. Someone else in the aether, someone else who found a way to leave their world behind, someone else who dreamed of exploring the vastness of the astral sea.

Actually, two ships, I realized.

A flicker of lightning, darting from one ship to the other. Another blast. A dozen at once.

My heart sank. Soon, thunder reached me; two cracks, then a great rib-rattling wave.

Years wandering the aether, finding worlds and failing to explain to them how to escape into the astral sea, and when I finally found someone out here they were killing each other.

Some deep instinct bubbled up, telling me to stay away. My cloak protects me from a lot, but between two warships flinging lightning bolts is no place for a halfling.

It was an easily-quashed instinct. I've run from less before, but I wasn't going to run from the chance to find other astral travelers.

Not that I had any real choice.

As the editor expects new readers to start here, perhaps I should explain: There's nothing in the astral sea. There are stars, which sometimes shed layers of crystal in nova-bursts, and there are nebulae that form glaciers and rocks and the like from the charged aetherdust that forms them, but that's all just aether. A glacier's ice melts into aetherdust, rocks grind down to aetherdust, the star-crystal shards sublime into aetherdust. There's no water, there's no food, there's nothing but aether.

Aether itself, clinging to everything that passes, is raw chaos, the potential reality that fills the gaps between worlds. As with most powerful things, it's dangerous. I may be aethertouched, using that chaos to fuel my spells, but even I handle the aether with the utmost care. If you let the aether in, it will sustain you

despite the lack of food or water. That silvery dust will spin an entire false reality for you, until you're left drifting in the void, empty-eyed, body slowly warping as chaos remakes you.

As food runs out and hunger gnaws, that pull becomes impossible to resist. If I hadn't been weeks into the astral sea, supplies dwindling, I wonder if I would have run that day.

No, I breathed deep, drawing aether from all about to fill the well at my core. Power strained me to bursting, spilling into my cloak until it shone like a new star.

Trailing its endless weave in a comet-tail a hundred feet behind me, I shot forth.

Weeks alone, years without seeing another astral explorer, and suddenly an hour was too long to wait.

I pushed deeper, further from reality, into the chaos that lies below. The blackness became richer, the faint flows blossomed into rich jewel-tones. The gaps between stars shrank, the opposite of the stretching of reality that happens in a world. No longer five or ten miles apart, the gaps between stars were three miles, maybe four.

Deeper still, the jewel-tones bled across everything, the enduring stars struggling to shine through. Aether grew thick and forceful, battering me as I plunged through a storm. There were flickers of greater things below, here the shadow of a many-jointed limb, there a hint of fractal eyes, but I wasn't in their reach quite yet.

Ahead, the ships were barely visible, until a burst of light, this time purplish in hue, flared past the dense aether in which I swam. They were still fighting.

The current gripped me, threatened to drag me into the depths. I pushed more power into my cloak, breaking the aether's grip and hurtling towards the surface.

Tucking tight, twisting my cloak close as a crystal barrier, I tumbled past the ships, shedding light and speed.

Still at last, I oriented myself and looked at them. What was left of them.

Twisted chunks of brass, half a keel, and plenty of splinters remained of one. The other was only half-missing, steel plating bent wide and timbers broken off where I expected to see the poop deck.

On the deck that remained, there were people. Seeing the wreckage, I'd worried nobody could have survived, but there were what looked like humans, orcs, and possibly a pair of goblins, although they were all in shades of gray and white, rather than the pinks, browns, and greens I expected.

They aimed crossbows my way. I tucked my chin, crystal cloak covering all but the slit of my eyes.

Nobody fired.

Not wanting to look too defensive, I loosened my stance. The people on the deck all wore uniforms, black with silver trim. A warship, then, unsurprisingly considering the circumstance. The uniform with gold trim, and more of it, would be the captain. He was a tallish goblin, ice-white skin a sharp contrast with night-black eyes and hair.

There was motion lower, down one deck. People were there as well, difficult to see with no lamps, but one had stepped closer to look at me. I didn't need more than a trickle of starlight to guess that the blue-black dragonkin wearing a gold-and-azure jacket was not of the same crew as those one deck higher.

So, one ship was gone and the other broken, but they were still trying to kill each other.

"Guard the light-cursed lip!" the man I'd identified as the captain bellowed.

On-deck, crossbows reoriented toward the edge of the deck, the open sides, and the ladderway between the two groups.

There were voices rumbling belowdecks as well, but none I could make out.

"Greetings," I called. "I am Sar, sometimes called The Silvercloak." I've found that calling attention to my cloak actually frightens people less. If I pretend I don't have an

impossible, glowing cloak that lets me fly about with ease, it seems like I'm hiding something.

"Captain Tombatten of the Calrivi Naval brig the Tombatten."

Great, people who named things after themselves. Or maybe changed their names to match what they sailed, no need to jump to conclusions. Either way, I hid my instinctive disgust. More important was that organized navies meant kingdoms and empires. It seemed I'd at last reached an aether-spanning civilization.

"If I come down, have I your word I won't be attacked?"

A quick glance about the deck, and Tombatten said, "By me and mine, no, although the pirates below may try something."

Pirates, of course it would be pirates. It seemed you couldn't have a civilization without them. All the same, I willed myself into motion, drifting toward the ship until its fragment of reality asserted itself. My cloak glowed a touch brighter, granting a gentle drift towards the deck where gravity wanted me to fall.

Even this slight display left a tightness about Tombatten's eyes. He gave a bow, deep enough to get his forehead level with mine. "In normal circumstance, I would try to give an individual such as yourself accommodation, but I fear the current conflict will—"

There was an inarticulate yell and a crossbow bolt thudded into the ship's deck.

Instinct sent me six feet higher, cloak wrapped tight. Every eye, and every crossbow, was aimed my way.

"Crossbows down!" Tombatten ordered. "Down, I said!"

The crew adjusted their aim.

"There best be nobody aimed anywhere near our guest," Tombatten said.

A chorus of, "Yes, sir."

He looked at the man who had shot a bolt between his own feet. "Garrin?"

"Sorry sir," the orc said sheepishly. After a pause, he braced

the lever to reload his crossbow.

I drifted back down.

Tombatten returned his focus to me. "As I was saying, we are somewhat distracted."

I considered being coy—on primitive worlds, hiding that I descended from the heavens was usually the safest option—but these were members of a genuine astral navy. They had seen plenty. "I am at a disadvantage. I've never seen a ship crossing the aether before, and here are two in, well, the aftermath of a battle. Much as I want to avoid others' battles, I cannot pass such an opportunity."

His mouth was open but not speaking. At last, "With no ship, then, you are here, just yourself, not from something nearby?"

"I'm looking for another world. It's been too long out there." An off-hand gesture indicated the direction I'd come from.

"You crossed the entire void?" He looked that way, then visibly swallowed. "It seems I will be the first to return to the emperor with news that there are worlds beyond. But I get ahead of myself." A long pause, the man organizing his thoughts. "I assure you, once these pirates are dealt with, we will find a way to aid you."

I was doubtful of this much acquiescence. He seemed cautious and considered, which smells the same as plotting. Everyone knows to take a wizard by surprise.

A twitch of motion, half-seen, to my left.

I tucked my cloak tight again, accidentally drifting off the ground. I was definitely too long out alone if I was keeping that much power flowing through my cloak without noticing. There was a faint blurring, little more than a ripple of motion, that slipped past the guards and down the steps to below. Not quite invisibility, but something close to it.

Tombatten followed my gaze.

I considered explaining what I'd seen. It didn't look like magic, but reminded me of invisible assassins and thieves.

Before I could decide what to say, a voice from below

interrupted. "Still your swords, let us parley."

Tombatten chuckled. "It seems all we needed was a wizard's arrival to shake us out of our deadlock. Apologies again, but I suspect ignoring the pirates will turn things violent." A moment's pause, as if I would disagree. Tombatten approached the ladderway. "A parley is agreed upon. Only you come up, Lavin. No harm shall touch you."

My understanding of the situation changed. It may seem minor, to those who haven't been in a navy or actually dealt with pirates, but rarely are such criminals known by name. Usually, you only know the ship, don't care who's on it. Tombatten's tone had been familiar, the way you speak to a rival, not a common criminal. Whoever these pirates were, they were dangerous.

Unsurprisingly, Lavin was the draconic man I'd seen near the edge. Lightning flickered in his eyes, illuminating the blue-black scales about them.

Tombatten puffed his chest, some instinct to try looking big as Lavin approached, but it only served to accentuate their differences. "So, have you come to admit that you've lost this battle, pirate?"

The pirate captain looked my way, nodding his head respectfully. "Lavin, captain of the Flitwick." He looked back to Tombatten, who was clearly annoyed at being talked past. "And no, I think anyone would agree we both lost. I came to keep you from lying to this traveler."

Tombatten's eyes darkened. "You accuse me of deception, you scoundrel?"

"We'll find a way to aid you?" Lavin quoted. "They've never seen a ship, so they won't know how completely we've ruined one another, so I'll explain it." He looked to me again. "The Flitwick is flinders, obviously useless, but this ship arcane jet has exploded, leaving it equally dead. We're both far enough out that nobody will know where to look for us."

Bristling, Tombatten declaimed, "Perhaps you should not

have charged the arcanist, as is known to be bad form throughout the aether for this precise reason!"

"It wasn't my men who activated all the runes at once," Lavin snapped, and I could see that the promise of safe conduct wasn't ironclad. His gaze shot back to me, lightning now arcing from his eyes to play across his brow-ridges. "The point, Silvercloak, is that we're deep in the void and neither of our ships can move. We'll never make it back to a world before the float takes us. At this point, the fact that we keep fighting is habit, not need."

"How far is it, that you can't swim home?" I asked.

There was a stumbling effort at explanation, until Lavin said, "Let me get Drafe up here, as your navigator seems to be dead."

"And whose fault is that?" Tombatten snapped.

"War being what it is, I'd say the fault lies with the commander."

As the tension between the pair strained towards snapping, I cut in with, "Whoever did whatever, maybe we still ask the navigator for specifics."

Tombatten regained his calm first. "Yes, of course. Men, let this Drafe come up."

Drafe was, it turned out, a turtle-person of some sort, unclothed as he apparently considered his spiny shell sufficient. Pointing off the port side of the ship, he said. "See that even triangle of stars? Follow the lower-left point to an uneven quartet, and the brightest star there was the last sight-point. I don't have a sextant, so you'll have to trust me on the distance."

As you move through the aether, the stars slowly warp and shift, constellations inconstant, requiring an experienced eye to follow. Where he was pointing out was near the limit of what could be seen. I sighted down my arm to measure angles, then said, "So about a hundred and fifty miles out?"

"Miles?" He rolled his eyes, a bit of a feat considering they had no whites. "Whatever you measure things with, that's just

the first leg. There are another ten stretches like that."

"I could do that in a week, I figure. I meet some ship, send it your way, we all have some ale without killing each other."

Lavin chuckled, a guttural sound that seemed more threatening than jovial. "Even if you could manage, their bottles blasted our supplies into so much smoldering waste, and they lost most of their own when the jet blew. Rationing, we might last five days before the float sets in, but we'd never endure until aid arrived."

A stillness settled, and we all understood the unspoken corollary: Half as many people would last twice as long. As with too many questions, violence was a rather effective answer.

In that silence, I felt a quiet rage building. In my core I could feel all the runes carved on my soul shifting, runes of fire and force rising instinctively to the surface. I had seen a hundred worlds, and violence was a constant, but it had never cut at me like this.

I was thrust back to when my own world died, when my cowardice had left me alone, not one solitary soul saved alongside me. Here I was again, trying to save people who would rather squabble than sail to safety.

I'd thought that hope was gone forever, and feeling it again, feeling like I might save those people, all it did was cut me. The anger grew, flowing through every bit of me, not so much at these people as at my own failures.

I opened my core to the aether, drinking so swift and deep that the runes strained before the pressure. I funneled the power into my cloak, lifted from the deck by this torrent of energy. As I rose, my cloak wove itself out, expanding as a rolled flag unfurls.

Those who have read more of my travelogues will know that, while I am a wizard of some skill, I am not one of the world-shakers that most imagine all wizards to be. I can, however, put on quite a display.

My soul shook with the torrent, my skull threatening a

month of headaches.

To those on the deck before me, I was a new star, washing the broken deck in harsh white light.

Keeping a rune of illusion steady, I aligned the facets of a small spell, amplifying my voice to a grand roar. "I intend to save this ship, not watch you fight and die. Who here intends otherwise?"

Suddenly, none of them intended otherwise.

Lavin here.

After writing the previous story, Sar said, "That is an end to the story of my arrival. What remains is an overwrought epilogue that I do not intend to write."

Aside from my position that Sar is entirely incorrect, our editor also thinks the readers want more. As I have never seen leaving money on the table as a good way to fund an enterprise, I'm going to write about how we actually got back from that wreck.

The work to save that shattered ship began, as so much in life does, with food. I couldn't risk splitting my crew up too much, and Tombatten's men were apparently terrified that being alone with a scaleback would suddenly make them taste good, so the teams moving through the wreckage were overlarge and wasting too much time eying each other nervously.

We had to be careful, though, lest one side steal the other's wreckage. It sounds like nonsense, but there was food in that wreckage, and food is all that matters in the end.

The aether responds to people, so trying to swim makes you swim. The best can just will it to happen, but my crew instead flailed like the half-drowned as they moved. The Calrivian survivors were mostly marines, not pressganged sailors, and their rigorous training showed in smooth, elegant strokes. They were little faster, though.

Tombatten and I were still trying to negotiate a deal, but that was mostly for Sar's benefit. Neither of us would ever trust the other enough to let our guard down.

The actual negotiation was in the sorting of goods as they came in. Clō was at my side, updating her mental tally of everything we had, while Tombatten had a man named Semerell keeping records in a small logbook.

Generally, readers of anything I write are already familiar with Sar's other stories, but it occurs to me that this will be the

first thing many readers see. Some context, then: when Sar arrived in Ringspace, we were still trying to break Calrivi's grip. My crew, called the Scalies, were out in the colonies trying to bring more into the fight.

Among the Scalies, this story has included Corliak, Clō, and Drafe.

Corliak is the scaleshifter that Sar halfway-noticed spying on the Calrivians. He is a quiet fellow, although he was still a bit more talkative when this all happened, some fifteen months before the rebellion broke entirely.

Clō is our quartermaster, as much the core of the Scalies as I have ever been. She looks and dresses like any soft merchant sort, and I've seen her lift a weapon only thrice in my life, but the Scalies were the only crew in the rebellion that kept their finances positive, which any proper captain knows is key.

Drafe, as Sar described, is a hardback who's got an eye for navigation and better-than-decent skills at tending wounds.

Then there is Sar, who has of-yet not described themself. Even for a halfling, they are small, but their glowing cloak makes them seem larger than most. That and their magical manner. In that moment, they drifted several inches above the crate they had seated themselves on when I offered a strip of jerky, as though they had forgotten to allow the ship's gravity to affect them.

They finished the jerky, then launched into the wreckage thirty minutes after we started dragging provisions aboard. It took three more hours yet to account for all the food: four days for the Scalies and seven for the Calrivians at half-rations.

As we finished consolidating our respective piles, both crews looked out to Sar, who was adrift in a ring of re-organized arcane-jet shards. They leaned in close on a chunk of mithrite, tracing a rune-path with their index finger. A mad wizard, drifting alone through the Endless Void, was where we had pinned our hopes. Tombatten and I jumped off the rear of the deck, leaving gravity behind, and began swimming out, my

flailing a subtle embarrassment alongside his smooth motions.

Sar didn't notice our arrival until Tombatten cleared his throat. They looked up, eyes bright, and said, "This spell is fascinating. I can almost see how the structures facet." Whatever that means.

"We have supplies left for seven days, on half-rations," Tombatten said.

"They do," I said. "We have four, unless some sharing agreement is reached, and that accounts nothing for yourself."

"We'll supply full rations for you, Sar," Tombatten said, "provided you can actually get this ship moving."

Sar grinned, the broad grin of an excitable child or an arcanist who finally gets to test a theory. "Of course I can move it. How fast, well, I'm hopeful. Now, we're going to need a mast, a pair of booms, and some guide-ropes." They pointed at the remnant of my shattered Flitwick's keel. "I think that should do for the mast, but I'm less sure of the rest."

Anyone who has laid a keel will understand the sharp pain I felt in knowing that the ship I had spent so long sailing was now just a tool, soon to be discarded. "We'll get it moved," I said.

Sar darted to the keel, far faster than either of us can swim, and said, "I just don't know how to anchor it."

Their cloak billowed out, as if a gale somehow stretched it to dozens of meters in length. Ignoring every rule I new about the aether, they started moving and dragged the keel with them, not touching it at all. Faster and faster it went, until the huge wooden beam slid clattering across the deck, stopping inches from the prow.

"Narn, Martam," I bellowed as I stumbled onto the deck almost a minute later. The pair came running. These two are from what used to be warring tribes, when we warred amongst ourselves instead of uniting against Calrivi. They don't always get along, but both are skilled carpenters. "We need this upright as a mast, braced to drag this shard of a ship along."

A Calrivian human I did not get the name of tried to take

charge. He seemed competent enough, and with some prodding the three worked together instead of arguing. Shockingly soon, they had mortises through the deck layers down one side of the ship, all a neat enough fit that the mast only took a minute of rope-gangs tugging to seat fully. Two other lengths of wood had been found and were tied crosswise, the boom-arms Sar had requested.

The deck fell silent as Sar looked across the work. They hadn't explained how a sail was supposed to work in the aether. As they remained still, the silence ate at both crews. Claws scraped on scales as hands neared hilts. Calrivians rested their own hands on crossbow butts and cutlass pommels. People shuffle-stepped subtly into better positions. I searched for words to forestall the looming violence, or perhaps to order my crew to act first.

Eyes closed, Sar was oblivious. Their cloak billowed. They lifted from the deck, then drifted back down. That cloak, glowing brighter, kept rising without them. Their face was tight, sweat beading only instants into whatever magic they worked. Their lips twitched, little spasms as half-formed words tried to get out.

I held out a hand, trying to calm my crew. All sane scalebacks feel fear when a wizard works great magics, and this was clearly a great magic of some sort.

The cloak continued to stretch, beyond even what it had been when it startled our warrior bands into peace. It wasn't a cloak anymore, either. No, this was just a crystalline expanse, filling the void between those wooden booms. Its four corners knotted onto the ends.

Sar seemed to relax, the half-murmured words fading. The cloak snapped full, as if a gale-wind were blasting through the still aether, throwing all my presumptive knowledge of the astral sea away.

A great creaking came from the repurposed keel, loud as a dragon's roar. We were moving, the creaks growing louder as

we accelerated. People grabbed the gunwale, crouched on the deck, braced wherever they could as the ship groaned under the strain.

The screaming creak became a steady drone as we sped along, then fell to near silence as the mast reached some final bending point.

Still faster we moved, and I started to have real hope. We were approaching the speeds a modern aethership can manage. I looked to Drafe and saw worry in his eyes. I tried to think through the math myself. As I finished, I looked to Tombatten, seeing doubt on his pale face.

We were not going fast enough.

Sar began moving again, just a touch. Feet planted, expression remaining tense, they grasped the rope at their feet. A belaying pin and an iron loop kept it from leaping away, but it clearly took a lot of effort for them to pull it the few feet to their shoulder. With a sharp jerk, they tweaked the angle of the top spar and adjusted the knot to hold the pin in the new location.

Glancing back at the watching crews, apparently oblivious to how on edge everyone was, they said, "Now, we see if we can go deeper."

Their face hardened with implacable focus. The cloak flared brighter. Reality changed. The empty black saw silvery particles filtering through it. The distant stars gained faint, lopsided halos of mist, like nascent nebular clouds. We were, as they had said, going deeper.

Everyone who sails the aether knows about the deep chaos between worlds. Down there, one ill move will vanish a ship, no sign it ever existed. So the stories go. Most ships aren't designed to dive into the chaos, as most ship-owners are not foolish enough to try such a thing. I had surely never gone into the depths, and had never heard of someone doing so for a long journey.

The gaps between stars shrink, the opposite of the expansion that happened in worlds. We didn't seem to be moving faster,

but we were definitely covering more ground. With this much warping, measuring if we were moving fast enough was impossible without my reference books, now so much ash.

The gaps between stars shrank further, the silver about them attaining hints of color, the vast dark of the Endless Void feeling like a proto-nebula. Looking down, I saw aetherdust accumulate, just a thin layer of yet, but we had only begun the journey. We would need teams scrubbing, as though this were a nebular passage in truth.

The beasts that lurked in such parts— I began looking about, a panicked worry that these depths might summon up the beasts that lurk in clouds of dust.

That was when I saw the worry in the eyes of the crew. Knowing about the chaos between worlds is fine, but to see it, that is another matter.

"Steady!" I stomped towards my Scalies. "We're moving, and fast, which is what we were all hoping for. Be thankful, and keep your heads on straight. Sar keeps us moving, we keep the ship together. Avinos, you're swabbing next hour, then we trade. Martam and Narn, you're in that order on turns watching the workings for damage. Leane and Corliak, an eye on the other half of the deck. Rest if you are not working." Nobody moved. "Do I need to repeat myself?"

The trio of serpentkin started searching for something to scrub with while the rest of the crew tried to settle down, searching for conversations that wouldn't show their fear. Still, the sailor's instinct to take any break you can is strong, and soon there was actual calm in my crew. There were still nervous glances, for Sar as much as the thickened aether and the nearby Calrivians, but the panic had broken.

Tombatten got his men in line as well, and we were back to two tense camps on an open deck, inches from battle.

Soon, Sar called for Drafe, asking about the next points to sight off of.

"In this?" he said, gesturing at the colorful chaos about us.

"Just describe it," Sar said, listening as he talked through the next constellations he expected to form, even though nothing we could see resembled that reality.

Sar apparently thought it was enough, sighting along their own arms as though they were themselves a sextant, then adjusting the rope. Each tweak set off more groaning of wood as the wreck warped into a new configuration. For hours, this continued, until Sar groaned, sighed, and sat with a thud. Space distorted about us, the empty black we were used to returning. Their cloak unwound its knots and drifted back to wrap about them.

Tombatten and I approached. "That was quite impressive," Tombatten said.

"Indeed," I agreed, not wanting to start by broaching my concerns.

Sar rolled their shoulders and grunted as they stood and turned to face us. "I think the speed is fine, but it's more of a strain than I expected. I've never moved this much before."

"Is the speed fine, though? How much of each day can you do this?"

Sar waved him away. "Don't worry. A few hours to recover, then we can make for that strong cerulean flow port-low."

"The what?"

They gestured towards the prow. "When we were deeper, there was a steady aetherflow bursting from a star that way." As standard navigation is not done based on aethereal hues, that was all just meaningless chatter to me. "If I catch that, I know I can make better speed, I'm just worried about the strain on the ship. Is there any way it can be reinforced?"

I glanced at Tombatten, and we both looked to our crews. I said, "Possibly. How much rest do you need?"

Sar had their hands at the small of their back, pushing as they twisted, trying to loosen kinks. "I'm going to try for sleep. Probably a few hours, then do a proper push once I'm fresh. I imagine I can go as long as I just did three, maybe four times a

day, with an hour between each, then we'll call it night for a bit. We'll make it, if your measurements are correct."

Four days later, as huddled sailors gnawed at their last day of rations, our measurements proved correct. Rising from the chaotic depths, we approached a swift-growing pinpoint of light. Rather than slowly revealing itself to be an astral crystal, this grew swiftly beyond the scope of what a mind can comprehend, until the astral sea was a distant horizon about the vast sphere of this patch of reality.

There's an odd sense, on approach, of stillness. Reality expands faster than you move through it, and you just see everything receding as you remain still. A minute of that and the distortion evened out, the ship seeming to move once more. The pinpoint star we approached was now a vast, misty sphere that marked Nresh-Tm's boundary.

As we neared, we slowed.

Tombatten and I both headed towards Sar. They looked back at us, eyes heavy, shoulders hunched. Groaning, they half-fell into a cross-legged sit, the tail of the guide-rope loose beside them. They started to speak, then burst into coughing as their throat rasped.

Tombatten had thought to bring a canteen and poured a drink into the cap.

Sar took it gingerly, slowly sipped down the increasingly-scarce liquid. They finally spoke. "There's barely any currents somewhere this shallow. I can keep us going, I think. I'd better."

"I'll handle the rope," Tombatten said, snatching up the belaying pin.

"Very well," I said, feeling like I'd lost a step. We were almost back, and while the Devlienner colony would be officially neutral, everyone knew the great powers favored each other.

I returned to the corner of the deck where my crew was feeling increasingly cramped. Sar stayed where they were, elbows on knees, head heavy in their hands. The makeshift sail billowed fuller. The guide snapped tight, Tombatten slipping a

half-step before they braced properly.

At the slightly-reduced pace Sar was managing, it was another hour to actually reach the world-boundary. The fractured prow of the ship hit the wall of mist, parting it like a curtain. These world boundaries look like mist from a distance, but as you near them, they do not fade into dimness as fog would.

That moment, as the world-boundary slid aside to let us enter that patch of reality, safety and hope were richer than any meal. A small cheer came from the Calrivians, echoed by my Scalies. We were all just survivors, any thought of war banished.

I looked across my crew, watching the boundary close behind us. A few miles in, twenty minutes at our pace, and the mist faded from sight. The view towards the aether, as from most worlds, was of empty blackness speckled with distant stars, the world-boundary invisible from within.

Ahead, the dense Nresh-Tm system loomed, orbit after orbit of planets and rocks, the gap between each a matter of miles as we weren't close enough to a planet to be fully inside its stretched reality. We slid through the outermost shell of asteroids easily, then passed a couple miles off of a red, gaseous planet with two rocky moons. Thirty miles past that, we were into a denser mess of asteroids. Ahead, another sixty miles on, Nresh-Tm itself loomed, a blue-brown globe with no moons about it.

In the thick of the asteroids, a flicker of light caught my eye. The green glow of a Volpithi jet pushed some ship our way. Flashes of light, a message cast by mirror and lantern, flickered on its prow. Not a standard message, but something secret.

I had a bare instant to realize my worries about the Calrivians had been focused on Tombatten, not his crew. I have never been more a fool than in that moment.

Drawing in a great breath, letting the storm that rests in my heart begin to rage, I spun. Two humans stood shoulder-to-shoulder, hiding a goblin, the flicker of a mirror-and-lantern barely visible past their knees.

Crossbows came up. With my roar, lightning spilled forth, blasting into the crowd before me, turning the nearest marine into a blackened corpse. Thunder rolled across the deck, and any among my crew who hadn't noticed the battle leapt to it.

I turned my focus to Sar, too late. Tombatten let the guide-rope fall, drew a blade, and lunged for the defenseless wizard.

I learned then that some people are never defenseless. The deck leapt. Their impossible cloak tore through the wood that bound it, hurling the Flitwick's massive spruce keel as so many spears of wood.

The crystal cloak slammed into Tombatten. His broken body hurtled past me.

As the mast vanished, the creaks that had sounded as the ship warped under the strain sounded once more, a great shriek of wood springing against wood, ending in the thunder of splitting wood as the deck fractured. We were all tossed by the bucking deck, while Sar's cloak enwrapped them.

"Even advance!" I yelled to Martam, who knew how to lead the Scalies in a charge. As they advanced, I stepped back, assessing the situation. That other ship was closing, would reach us soon. If we were to win, it would have to be fast, and even then we would be on some wreckage, helpless before that other ship. Actual victory was a longer path to survival, and that still went through Sar.

They knelt where they had been, cloak hovering just behind, as if waiting to be worn.

A quick glance confirmed that Martam had the crew together. I sprinted towards Sar, sliding to a stop a careful distance away. Blood spattered the deck below them, dripping from a huge rent in their shoulder. Clearly Tombatten had been closer to success than I thought.

"Sar, we can probably clear the deck, but we'll need your help to get to Nresh-Tm alive."

They looked up at me, the tightness of pain almost entirely hidden by the weight of sadness I saw there. "It's always war,

isn't it?"

I did my best to display what softies think a scaleback should look like when giving a friendly smile. "Right now, there's a war. And you know who ambushed you and who kept their word."

They pressed a hand to their wound, hissing with pain. "I suppose so."

"Alright, so—"

Ignoring me, they stood, a powerful, incoherent chant, spilling from their lips, white energy flowing from their fingertips to swirl into a red-gold orb of flame. With an overhand throw, they sent it into the mass of the Calrivians. A few saw it and dove for cover, but most were caught unawares by the explosion. Martam and Narn were close enough that they were flattened by the blast, Narn screaming and slapping at his burning tunic.

The lines of that messy conflict were irreparably broken, and into that chaos Valk swung his ten-foot blade in the way only a crocodilian can, cleaving one Calrivian in twain as the others stumbled back. The rest of the scalies followed, and we all knew that battle had ended.

I rushed in as well, tearing a throat out in passing as I made my way to Drafe, dragging him physically back from the battle, catching the wild swing of their mace as they turned on me.

"Get to Sar."

He looked about us, seeing Narn struggle to stay upright with a crossbow bolt between the plates on his thigh, seeing Corliak clutching a gash as he slipped back and tried to fade into the patterns of the deck. "But—"

"Tend Sar!"

They obeyed.

Free to join the battle, I leapt into the thick of it, feeling the softness of Calrivian flesh beneath my claws as we dealt with the last of the softies.

While Martam executed the last few as they begged, far too late, to be spared, I returned to Sar. Their cloak was twitching

as it floated about, not interrupting as Drafe whispered quiet prayers to spirits of healing and peace, stitching the wound as they chanted, leaving behind a neat, unbleeding line.

Drafe stood, and I nodded, all the permission he needed to hurry towards our own wounded.

I knelt beside Sar, although nothing was going to make me seem small alongside them. "Can you still get us to Nresh'Tm?"

"Can I run from my enemies?" They let out a sharp laugh. "Gather your lizards close."

I made no comment about their word choice.

We carried the wounded to the prow of the ship, gripping the gunwale where we could, kicking new divots into the planking with our claws for those too far from it. Sar's cloak spilled from their shoulders, its motions sharp and snapping, as though it did not wish to go. Instead of attaching to a hastily-crafted mast, it knotted onto the deck in several places.

It billowed full, and the deck creaked. A great rending sounded, the cracks that had formed earlier tearing wide, and the last whole portion of the deck became a raft, scarcely large enough for us all, dwarfed by the straining cloak that dragged us forward.

Sar knelt by the prow, eyes largely unfocused, yet still working despite the obvious exhaustion and pain. It was as much luck as anything that we didn't simply slam into an asteroid, as they weren't steering in the slightest.

Still approaching was the Calrivian merchantman, ahead of us, but not far enough to fully cut us off. It had doubtless been here to purchase supplies from the Devlienners, not expecting battle. Most times, I would have considered it a defenseless ship, while now I was praying it was armed only with frost-nets.

On the off-chance that it had lightning bottles, I stood between Sar and the enemy, shielding our chance at survival from any threat born of the storm. As we neared, I saw the arms of mangonels creak back, heard the sharp crack of them snapping forward. A glimmering white knot unfurled into a

lattice of blue-white bands, like the vastest snowflake ever seen. One went wide, but another enwrapped us, tugging at Sar's makeshift sail. The chill bit at me, tried to steal my strength, the whole mass dragging at us.

Our raft slowed.

"Send anything you've got!" I called, and my Scalies responded.

The last spears were hurled, a few bolts from stolen crossbows fired, and I lost my voice roaring out ever-weaker blasts of lightning until my heart felt empty, the storm a distant memory.

I like to think we helped, but the truth is that, even with two additional nets sending a deep chill through the ship, Sar kept pushing, kept us moving just enough faster that the Calrivians couldn't cut across our path. A final barrage of frost nets dissolved into dust far short of our raft as we sped towards Nresh-Tm.

During the descent—it should have been far slower, but at least we weren't in free-fall—Sar gave a last few nudges of steering, aiming us towards the smallest continent, at a major river, the exact spot we'd told them to land at when this desperate journey began.

We came down on that river hard, water spraying up in vast sheets, until we skidded into rushes and up the bank about an hour's walk outside of town. I dragged myself from the muck where the crash had tossed me, looking back to see the others in much the same state.

Nish and Sayta helped their brother Mohk up. Leane ignored Valk's insistence he was fine and supported the massive man. Clō stood on her own Drafe carried Corliak. We were injured, but we had survived.

I looked last to Sar, sprawled on the broken deck, asleep or unconscious, cloak wrapped about them like a star-crystal blanket. I lifted them, leading my Scalies on the march into Nresh'Tm.



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Regarding the Astral Sea

Normally, after the travelogue, I append a short guide about the world I visited. As you've just read, this is not a normal travelogue and has no world to describe.

As we appear to somehow have readers from beyond The Ring despite never advertising outside of Navidem, I think this would be an appropriate place to discuss the astral sea itself, and perhaps a little of what is found within it.

What is Aether?

1. Nobody knows, despite all the theories they peddle.
2. Aether is everywhere, even within the boundaries of a world.
3. Aether is magical, powering some runic creations.
4. Dense aether will mimic reality, as it does in nebulae.
5. Aether is inconsistent, refusing repetition of testing.
6. Aether is dangerous, causing float-madness for those who forget to eat in the void, and causing aether-mutations in people who stay out too long.

What are nebulae?

Nebulae are dense clouds of aether, sufficiently filled with energy that they start gaining weird magical aspects. Thunderstorms, psychic chaos, icebergs, you could find anything in a nebula.

There's no way to account for every possible sort of reality a nebula can create, but keep in mind that none of it is real and all of it is dangerous.

What are novae?

Outside of nebulae, the astral sea is much safer, but still not entirely safe. Stars are formed of nigh-indestructible crystals, and as they change, they sometimes explosively shed a layer of that crystal. This usually pours out as a rippling wave of shards that can slice deep into the hull of a ship.

Given time, star-shards will dissolve into raw aether, starting by losing their razor edge, but they are still dangerous if you are careless enough to ram into them.

How do you navigate in the astral sea?

The same methods used in navigating a planetside ocean somewhat apply, but the differences are enough that a sailor will not be prepared.

Most think that the ability to go in any direction, not being stuck to the surface of the sea, will be the largest change, but this makes little difference. You're still usually going directly from one world to another, whatever angle that might be in relation to some other path you've taken.

The largest issue is that aether's inconstancy affects the stars you sight off of. As Lavin described quite well, entering a world stretches the scope of reality. What was close is suddenly far, to a degree that is quite obvious.

Less obvious is that this happens everywhere. The more aether there is, the more stretched reality gets, such that the interior of a nebula is generally half-again as large as its exterior. This same fluctuation happens in empty aether, meaning that the stars you sight off of won't be identical between different locations.

If you are diligent in your measurements, you can track and calculate the change as you travel, but most skilled navigators just learn to feel it out.

What are guidestones?

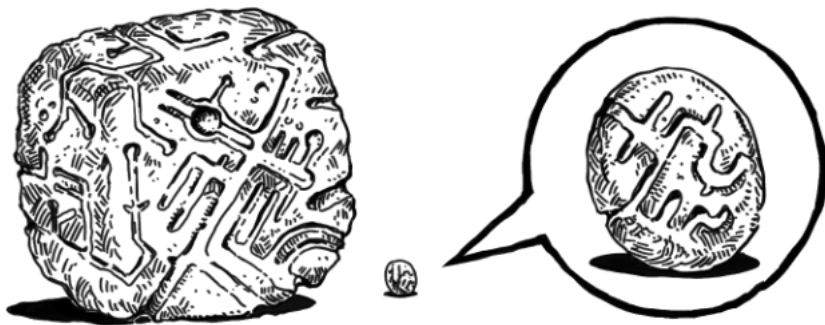
To solve the issues with navigation, the arcanifexes of The Ring have invented guidestones.

Similar to the compasses that work on some worlds, a guidestone gently tugs toward some destination or other. The effect is unreliable, pointing less-precisely the further you are from a place, but if you keep following a guidestone long enough, you will arrive.

These are not infinite, however. A guidestone is made by an arcanifex ichor-etching the correct series of runes into the right type of boulder, creating a guideway. This guideway is taken to a world, where it is activated in contact with the world's boundary. Half of the boulder dissolves away, and the other half falls into a collection of guidestones.

As the stones recall their connection to the guideway, they can lead you back there.

Unfortunately, the more guideways are added to a world the less efficient this process is, so guidestones to worlds in The Ring are now too expensive for us to sell, but for the new worlds discovered by the Intrepid Explorers' Association, we always make some guidestones publicly available.



A guidestone and the guideway it was cut from

What lives in the astral sea?

There are quite a few beasts out there, and doubtless more that nobody has yet discovered. Aether can create anything, so it's impossible to fully describe what exists, but some things are common:

Astral Kraken. Huge beast, resembles a regular kraken. Run from it.

Barnacles. Big, ship-eating shelled things. They camouflage themselves very well.

Buwakara. Fluffy little things that, if you're careful not to harm them, will do an excellent job of cleaning your decks.

Congeaed Nebula. Weird space-ooze thing. It moves faster than you'd expect, and is very difficult to spot at a distance.

Star Mites. Mostly pests that infest uyanleth and krakens, these will sometimes attack ships, although I've not seen it.

Seven-Fin. A weird imitation of a fish, proof that the aether will keep making more beasts as people sail the astral sea.

Uyanleth. Impossibly-large but mostly-harmless creature. Commonly called a space-whale.

How do Aethershops Work?

Fairly well. All joking aside, this is an incredibly complex subject. The actual designs for a standard aethership take dozens of tomes to compile, and that is still just the practical implementation, not touching on the theory behind it.

Fundamentally, each aethership has some part of it which directly interacts with aether, converting the raw power of aether into the energy needed for the ship to fly.

The methods vary widely according to the type of ship. I will make an effort to cover the ship types I have worked on enough to speak about, but you should be aware that these clearly are not an exhaustive list of ways that a ship can be built.

Crystal Sails

Spun from crushed starshards on a mithral loom, these resemble how my cloak propelled the broken Tombatten. Though they appear to be the simplest of methods, mirroring the sailing vessels people already know from planetside experience, in practice most find them more difficult.

All ships are somewhat pushed by aether-currents, but only weakly. Crystal sails are pushed strongly.

Unfortunately, it is more difficult to see signs of aethereal currents than it is to read the wind from its impacts on the sky and sea.

In open aether, any who aren't aethertouched cannot see the currents and have to watch the rare wisps of cloud, or react as the sails themselves respond to the currents. In nebulae, the dense aether makes the currents quite clear, but most avoid nebulae due to their inherent dangers.

Arcane Jets

Built from mithrite—an alloy of steel and mithral—arcane jets have a collection of interlinked runes. Some sort of collector channels aether into the runes, which send it through the inner structures of the arcane jet.

Somewhere towards the rear of the ship, plates decorated with large runes will convert this aether into a fiery arcane plume spilling from the rear of the ship. Traditionally, these plumes are violet with Navidemi jets and green with Volpithi jets, although more varieties have arisen as more people construct their own variants.

The primary difficulties while running arcane jets are in avoiding overloads and preventing clogs.

As aether runs through the runic channels, effluvia accumulates. This faintly-glowing residue will eventually clog runic channels. To resolve this, the channels have to be cleaned consistently, but they cannot be cleaned while operating.

To allow for consistent operation, various channels can be switched on and off. The ship's arcanist is tasked with adjusting the channels so the ship keeps moving but no single channel operates so continuously that the ship cannot run.

You also switch channels on and off to increase power and speed your ship up, preventing arcane jets from maintaining their top speeds indefinitely.

If too many channels are opened at once, an arcane jet can explode, as was seen in the Tombatten. Being able to run close to the line for extended periods requires a skilled arcanist.

Incantation

The last of the ships I've helped build, incantation vessels are also the simplest. There are stations along the whole of the vessel—usually rune-carved seats, but there can be many other styles. People sit or stand at the stations, chanting the appropriate chants, and their souls form the conduit for the aether.

The best designs can be moved by simple songs, but some require more complex chanting.

These are popular over short distances because the space normally dedicated to a propulsion system is dedicated to manpower, so a ship can carry far more marines. However, constantly chanting is exhausting, and overworking a crew swiftly becomes deadly.

Chained Stars

If you find a sufficiently small star, usually ten or fifteen feet wide, it's possible to dislodge it from the firmament. If you chain them with rune-scribed mithral chains, it's possible to drag a ship as you might a chariot.

Needless to say, stars are powerful. This grants them more power and speed than other ships, but also makes them difficult to steer. The stars leap against their restraints, jostling about as the ship flies. Keeping the controls in hand is quite exhausting, requiring far more strength than I have.

Theoretically, if you could find identical stars, they might balance properly and resolve this issue, but I doubt any identical stars actually exist.

Oil-slick kraken hearts

If properly extracted, an astral kraken's heart can be kept alive indefinitely. Its ichor is replaced with a thick oil, usually extracted from an uyanleth, and attached to a series of pipes that run throughout the ship.

Once connected, the heart will adapt and treat the ship as its body, sailing under its own power. People still need to steer and manage the valves to ensure oil is flowing evenly through the ship, but the heart does most of the work.

These are especially valued by merchants, as they require far fewer personnel and provisions. Conversely, they can't run as continuously as an overstaffed ship, thus making them unpopular with the military.

Oil-slick barnacle agglomerations

A recent invention, these use the same principle as a kraken-heart, but with hundreds of collected hearts from barnacles. The oil becomes highly acidic, which can be problematic, but there's the significant advantage that you can always add more barnacles.

To power a ship with a kraken's heart, you need a single heart that's large enough for the whole ship, making large ships impossible to construct.

The other difficulty of the barnacle agglomerations is that the various barnacle-heart clusters have to be spread throughout the ship, so managing them entails a lot of running about and tending to individual clusters.

While traveling the astral sea,
keep in mind:

1. Aether is dangerous, especially if you run out of food. Don't stay out too long.
2. Anything formed from aether, even if it appears to be real, will in time dissolve back into aether. You cannot get water from the ice in a nebula.
3. Nobody, least of all you, knows everything that aether can do.
4. It may just look shiny and nice, but if you don't keep scrubbing the aetherdust away, your ship will fracture under crystalline growths.

Created by Micah Abresch
Cover by Bruno Romao
Internal art by CAUSTIC

Ringspace

