

THEY EAT THEIR OWN

a Thung Toh jig

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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PROLOGUE: VINDYL



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“I hope they resist.” Baaraja opened her mouth, tongue touching the roof, and dropped in a tablet of akka, powdery pink. Like creeping frost on a window, her rosy lips faded to sickly green as the drug dissolved. “I’ve got an itch.”

Vindyl snorted. It had been more than a quartern since the raid on the freighter *Fayrill*. That vessel had offered the boarding party no resistance, and now the *Nimomyne*’s escort had fallen with only one shell; no relief for Baaraja’s itch.

The sea slapped lightly at the bow of the launch as Fattrick eased them toward their quarry, his sun-ruddied mitt on the throttle ready to bring the impeller drive to full when Vindyl gave the cue.

Like Baaraja, the rest of the squad was itchy, ready for a bit of violence and some silver in their purses. They were a good group who’d follow her orders without hesitation—despite the series of feck raids the Harir, had handed Captain Bikhark.

For nearly two days now, their ship, the *Twilight’s Blight*, had been anchored a few miles beyond the horizon from Dockhaven waiting for their next target, the *Nimomyne*, putting them dangerously close to one of the Middle Sea’s busiest shipping lanes. The location made Vindyl twitchy. Though they’d handily taken the *Fayrill* in these waters, she didn’t like fishing with the same net twice.

When the spotter ship’s farspeaker had reported their target a

half-day out, Bikhark had sent a detachment to adjust the warning buoys used to guide vessels through the narrow channel of Dockhaven's southern barrier reef. No land could be seen in this stretch of sea. Excepting those buoys, all navigation was compass and stars. The *Nimomyne* would sail into their captain's snare just as the *Fayrill* had. The target's navigator would notice the disparity, but not before the cargo ship was trapped, notoriously treacherous reef before them, menacing raider ship behind.

When the *Blight's* lookout reported the *Nimomyne* inbound, Bikhark had moved them close to a fork in the spread of buoys and gave the order to raise the yawl and scimitar. He intended to intimidate, to herd their target into the altered course through the reef, and the *Nimomyne's* captain did not disappoint, veering east upon spotting the raider ship. The *Blight* pursued. The *Nimomyne* picked up speed. Bikhark called for the *Blight* to heave to, allowing the *Nimomyne's* crew a moment of reprieve, certain they'd outrun a Yenderot raider ship, before their keel cut into the reef's first ridge.

"They're caught now!" Baaraja shouted as the *Nimomyne* dragged across the coral.

Vindyl waved the signal flag and braced as the launch lurched to full speed.

From behind, the clatter of the *Blight's* guns being brought round carried across the waves, muted but not lost.

"Prepare to be boarded," Bikhark called through the loudhailer, his baritone made meager by the tin. "Resistance will be met with lethal force."

The *Nimomyne* came to rest canted to port, its starboard side splashed playfully by foam-tipped waves well below the waterline.

With a *crack* and whine, a shell from the *Blight's* long nine cut the air above the launch, terminating with a sharp *clang* as it ripped a hole high in the stack of their target's fore aspirator sail. Bikhark expressing his earnestness.

The bright contrast of the reef line came into view just before

Fatrick cut the drive, letting their momentum carry them the final distance.

“Guns out and ready,” Vindyl told her squad, and for a moment, the boat was filled with the soft *ba-rum* of mag-weapons powering up.

When the launch bumped quietly against *Nimomyne’s* freeboard, Marit lashed it to the pilot ladder.

“My turn.” Baaraja grinned, revealing her drug-greened gums, and stood with the practiced grace of one accustomed to balancing against the sea’s roll. As the squad’s second-in-command, she held the unenviable position of first boarding.

Baaraja jerked a steel helmet over her web of long braids, *hopped* three times—the squad answered in kind—and scaled the freeboard ladder while Fatrick kept his rifle trained on the *Nimomyne’s* rail. She paused just below the gunnel and lobbed over a stunner that went off like a ball of lightning. She followed it by a moment and hollered, “Clear!”

The rest of the squad scrambled up behind her, leaving only Vindyl and Fatrick in the launch.

After a surprisingly short time, someone started yelling, “You Yenderot know that this is a Marthoth Air & Sea vessel! This is in violation of our agreement!”

Vindyl tugged on her Ebb Weave cap, checked her weapons, and climbed the ladder. As boarding commander, recalcitrant captains were hers to handle. She climbed aboard the dull freighter, its rust-streaked bulk painted grey, Marthoth’s red logo wrapped around the aft aspirator sail. Nondescript crates and equipment were lashed to the deck. The air smelled faintly of ozone and piss.

Big or small, the stunner had knocked the crew on their asses. Faces flush with winter chill, a half-dozen karju and twice as many of their diminutive puka crewmates were sprawled about this section of deck. The group appeared to have been standing in rows until the burst went off, some dropping where they stood, others in mid-

dash. All were now either unconscious or visibly dazed, groaning and weeping as Vindyl's squad checked for weapons before anyone made it to their feet.

Near the open door of the bridge castle, a tight-faced chivori woman in red-and-grey overalls—assumedly the ship's captain—was wagging a finger in Baaraja's face. The raider laughed at the effort, her karju bulk eclipsing the yapping slip of a chivori. The captain was either stupid or far too confident in the Yenderot's unwritten agreement with Marthoth.

“Bring your captain over here and my farspeaker will contact Mister Marthoth.” The *Nimomynne's* captain shoved an aging puka forward. “Or my farspeaker can contact your leader—what is it you call him?”

“Harir,” Vindyl answered, walking up on the pair.

The woman spun, finger still wagging like an irritated schoolteacher's. “Yes, you can tell your Harir to—”

“Shut her up,” Vindyl told her second.

Baaraja shoved the admonishing finger in her mouth and snapped her teeth closed, slicing smartly through the chivori's grey flesh. She'd probably hit bone. The captain shrieked, a sound so piercing it could have alerted ships miles away if the wind had been right.

“You're the captain?” Vindyl asked when the screaming tapered off into gulping moans.

The woman tugged tentatively to free her finger. Baaraja held tight.

“Are you the captain?” Vindyl asked slowly, her voice dark.

“Y-y-yes.”

At Vindyl's nod, Baaraja pushed the mangled finger free with her tongue. Blue-black gore smeared her akka-greened lips and dribbled down her chin.

The captain slumped to the deck, finger extended before her like a repulsive insect. “What are you fecks waiting for?” she screeched

at the sky, tears spilling from her long eyes. “Get out here before this crazy quim eats any more of me!”

The words made no sense.

Then Vindyl realized the trap.

Behind Baaraja, a hooded figure emerged from the doorway, boarding gun shouldered.

Baaraja laughed on, unaware.

Vindyl watched the moment play out in the slow smoothness of underwater movement. “Get down!” she yelled.

Baaraja’s expression went quizzical. She turned, saw her opponent, and raised her pistol. Little more than an arm’s length away, the hooded figure fired. Scatter shot sprayed Baaraja, blowing through her head, little dimples bursting from the back of her steel helmet. Baaraja crumpled.

Marthoth had hired a protection detail. This was the price to be paid for the Harir’s arrogance.

From behind Vindyl, Marit yelled, “Eyes to fore!” The crack of his pistol followed.

Vindyl fired her scatter gun on the hooded karju who’d ended Baaraja. He went down, blood gushing from the side of his neck. A second mercenary took aim and fired as he exited the bridge castle. Vindyl sidestepped, catching a few pellets in her arm. She dropped her spent gun. Knife in his offhand, the merc closed fast. No time to draw her own blade. Vindyl swung, her fist popping him in the temple. He wobbled, eyes rolling, arms drooping. Vindyl caught the sagging man, pivoted, and tossed him overboard. Before he struck water, bright pain burst in Vindyl’s haunch. She’d been stabbed.

Vindyl spun—the ache in her ass ignored—and wrenched the knife from her attacker’s hand. A lithe chivori woman with purple hair glared at her, metal glinting on her raised fists. She swung awkwardly upward, aiming for Vindyl’s chin. Vindyl leaned back, the mercenary’s knuckle-dusters barely brushing her ribs, and kneed the woman in the gut. Air whoofed out, and the chivori stumbled but

kept her feet. Tougher than expected. Vindyl drew the knife from her haunch as she closed. The chivori raised a hand to block. Vindyl drove the blade down, through the merc's palm, pushing until it was buried in the woman's throat.

When she shoved the body away to scan for her next adversary, Vindyl found the skirmish had ended almost as quickly as it had begun. Her squad had either killed or were busy killing the rest of the mercenaries—eight including the one she'd thrown overboard, each one wearing a baldric buckle that marked them as Abog Union. Marthoth would double, probably triple that number on his next ship making the run from Tehtaemah.

She saw one of her men with his guts spilled laying among the dead. Vindyl bit back the order to execute the *Nimomyne's* crew immediately. She still needed them to find what she came for.

"Marit," she called, "you're my new second."

The rangy old chivori nodded.

"How many of ours are down?"

"Two wounded, three dead, counting Baaraja." His reply trailed into a grumble.

Baaraja would be missed, she'd been a good compa to most of the *Blight's* crew for quite a few cruises. Vindyl would sort out her own feelings about the loss later in her bunk.

"Now...Captain." Vindyl limped over to where the bitten woman cringed, wounded hand cradled in her lap. She hoisted the aging chivori by the collar, dangling her with toes barely touching the deck. Lips to the lower lug of the captain's ear, Vindyl whispered, "If you have any other surprises prepared, you best tell me now or I'll add your blood to the mix."

Unable to produce coherent words, the Captain shook her head.

"Right," Vindyl said. "Me and my compas—the ones your Abog gang didn't leave on the deck—are going to take a look around this manky vessel of yours. If we see something we like, we're scaling it. Understood?"

“The—” The captain breathed in short gasps. “The cargo’s all industrial...nothing but building materials.”

Vindyl chuckled. “Oh, we know about the cargo.”

“I-I-I don’t understand...” The words tapered off into hysterical gibbering.

Vindyl dropped the woman before she passed out or pissed herself and addressed her second. “You know what comes next?” she asked.

“Send a pair to make sure the ship is clear,” Marit said, “the rest round up crew, then we pick the boodle.”

“Move fast. These whinging gobies wasted our time. The others will have reset the buoys and have a crew ready to offload the loot before we’ve searched a single hold.” Vindyl pointed to a slice across Marit’s forearm. “And wrap something around that. I don’t need you bleeding out.”

She turned to the *Nimomyne*’s dazed crew and let her gaze roll slowly over them. “Which one of you is the cargomaster?”

No one spoke.

Vindyl strode up to the biggest one, a karju with a pot belly and a chinstrap of a beard, and pressed the bloody knife into the soft flesh beneath his chin. “Is it you?”

“Cargomaster’s dead,” he whispered and pointed to the body of a woman with a fist-sized hole in her chest.

With the tiniest pop, the tip of the blade punctured his flesh. The man made a terrible face and whined like a rutting cat.

“Who can take me to the owner’s hold then?” Vindyl asked, voice raised. Blood trickled over her hand.

“I can show you,” said a nasal voice down the line. A peat-green puka stepped forward, middle-aged for her species and showing every moment.

Vindyl returned to the whimpering karju. “Is this true?”

“Y-yes,” he said, attempting to speak without driving the blade deeper.

Vindyl withdrew the knife and followed the puka down into a hold filled with massive ceramic building components stacked inside one another like bowls in a pantry and enormous panes of thick glass piled high and strapped to the hull. At the far end was a bulkhead decorated with lewd scenes painted by bored sailors. At karju-height hung a hygrometer, its dial the size of Vindyl's face.

"Lift me up," the puka said.

Vindyl tapped the blade against her thigh dubiously, wary of another ruse.

"I need to reach that." The puka stood on tiptoe and swiped vainly at the hygrometer.

"Why?"

"I need to pull the trigger. It's in an opening behind the casing." She put hands on hips and frowned. "Or *you* can reach into the mystery hole and see if anything bites."

A stashed weapon was more likely than a door trigger. Vindyl moved the device to one side. A dark opening loomed behind. Eyes narrowed, she studied the puka, who crossed her arms.

"Is this gonna slice my hand off?" Vindyl asked.

"*Pfff*. Let me do it if you're too scared," the puka said.

Vindyl reached wrist-deep into the darkness. At the back was a handle. She pulled, yanking her hand free at the end of its travel. Gears creaked and a large section of the bulkhead popped back.

With a grunt of effort, the puka slid the panel to one side and pointed. "Is this what you're after?"

Inside were two crates large enough to require a pair of rhochrots with a pallet jack to haul. Both bore the Marthoth Air & Sea logo and Tehtaemah inspection stamps. One also sported a Dockhaven inspection stamp; curious since the package hadn't yet arrived in that city.

"Open this one," she told the puka, pointing to the crate with the Dockhaven stamp.

"Tritic. My name is Tritic."

“Fine. Open it, Tritic.”

“I need to use a prisebar.” She rubbed at the fin of a nose that sprouted from the top of her skull, where a hairline should be. “Can I get one or will you...?”

“You can grab one but,” Vindyl crouched, eye-to-eye with the puka, “you use it for anything other than opening crates, I’ll slit your throat and leave you in this hole to die staring at all this dross.”

The puka scampered to a nearby locker, returning with two bars, and offered one to Vindyl. While she pried free the lower nails, Vindyl popped the uppers. Inside they found dozens of smaller crates and boxes, the largest as big as a karju’s torso, the smallest the size of Vindyl’s palm.

“You know what’s in these?” Vindyl asked.

The puka spent a moment scanning the contents. “I don’t see any packing lists.”

Vindyl’s nostrils flared. She was beginning to wish she’d dragged chinstrap down here instead. She grabbed a tall, narrow crate and worked it open. Inside was a painting of a rock formation set against a desert sunset. The work was nice enough, but not what she was after.

Someone on deck fired a pistol. The puka yipped. A few people screamed, a few others cheered. Marit was doing fine as second.

“Get busy.” Vindyl opened a square crate of various geegaws. She retrieved a delicate bronze bowl, studying the four-legged creatures running circles around its belly. Though she recognized the style of markings from the *Blight*’s stopovers in Reilemynia, this wasn’t what the Harir expected.

“Any crate smaller than this,” Vindyl demonstrated the dimensions with her hands, “move out into the main hold.”

The puka nodded and sorted parcels while Vindyl picked through the rest.

The intermittent shots from the deck continued.

“I’m gonna die here, aren’t I?” The puka stood in the main hold,

staring blankly at her collection of sorted crates. “You’ll kill me if I stay here. They’ll kill me if I go up.”

Another shot from above. The puka cringed.

“Yep,” Vindyl said.

The puka produced an almost musical string of curses.

Vindyl chuckled. She tossed a beaded belt back into the crate and started on another’s lid.

Tritic yelped at the next shot. “I have an awful husband and six awful children,” she said.

“Keep sorting.”

“Well, five awful ones and one my husband hasn’t ruined yet.”

Her voice caught and Vindyl could almost hear the tears falling. “I guess now he’ll have his chance.”

Vindyl fished a bare-chested, four-legged icon from a crate and tossed it back.

“I always heard raiders gave crewmembers a chance to join up instead of dying,” the puka ventured. “I’d like to join.”

“Usually we do but not this jig.”

“Wh-why?”

Vindyl shook her head. She didn’t know the reason, just that the Harir had specified they were to leave no witnesses.

“I’m a farspeaker,” Tritic said, hopeful tone in her voice.

Vindyl stopped digging through a particularly thin crate and scrutinized the puka. “Have you already sent a distress call?”

The puka flushed and nodded. “The captain ordered it as soon as she saw the Yenderot flag.”

Vindyl adjusted her grip on the prisebar and stepped toward Tritic.

“Wait, wait!” the puka raised her hands protectively. “I can send another message and tell them it was a false alarm.”

“Do it.”

The puka closed her eyes, flinching with each pistol report. Her lips moved with silent conversation. After a moment, her dinner-

plate eyes popped open. “Done. They said Marthoth sent an Abog skiff out to escort us in. They’re not calling it back. It’s about halfway here.”

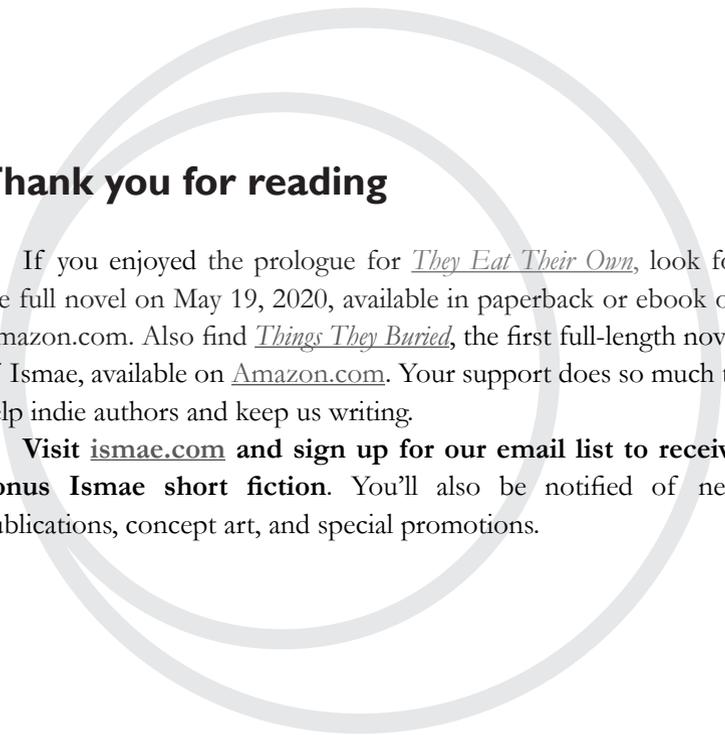
A short succession of shots rang from above.

“Sax’s tit!” Tritic yelled. “I don’t want to die in this hole!”

Vindyl pried the lid off a long, thin crate, tugged out hunks of stuffing, and withdrew a shadowbox framed in dark wood. Settled in the velvet-lined interior was a grotesque platinum face unlike any species she’d ever met. *This* was what the Harir wanted.

Vindyl smiled.

The face smiled back.



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