



THE
CALDARIAN
CONFLICT

MIKE KALMBACH

PRELUDE

Raising her hand, Captain Shannon “The Cannon” O’Connor shielded her eyes from the sun and gazed off in the distance. Her red hair billowed in the wind as she grasped the hilt of the rapier at her side.

Shannon inhaled the salty air of the Shalladian Sea. *Ah, the smell of freedom*, she thought.

“Merchant ship ahead, Cap’n,” the lookout called down. “Hails from Caldaria, by her colors. She’s floatin’ low, and looks heavy in the water.”

“Aye, just where ‘e said she’d be,” Shannon muttered. Raising her voice, she called to the helmsman, “Adjust course to head ‘er off. We’re gettin’ paid today, boys!”

“Aye-aye, captain!” The rippling sails captured the wind, propelling the *Iron Feather* to its full speed. Running light on the water, the ship would have little trouble catching up to the heavily laden merchant vessel.

Shannon took her place on a specially constructed platform. As the *Iron Feather* approached the intended target, the platform shuddered. With a clatter, it separated from the rest of the ship and rose into the air. The platform’s enchantment allowed her to hover above and guide the battle from a strategic location.

The pirate captain gripped the railing that surrounded the platform. Flying through the air left her vulnerable, but she had never been hit. Still, she hated the height, knowing all that stood between her and a fall to the open sea was a few boards and an old enchantment.

She whispered a quick prayer to Lady Luck, patron goddess of all pirates. *Asking for a little help in battle never hurts*, she thought.

Speaking into the amulet she always wore, Shannon gave the command to fire the cannons. The amulet broadcast its message to sister amulets below, worn by key members of her crew.

Wooden planks creaking in protest, the *Iron Feather* drew parallel to the merchant ship.

Cannons boomed, and chain shot flew. The spinning metal tore at the sails of the merchant ship and slowed the heavy ship even more.

The merchant ship returned fire. The shots splashed harmlessly into the sea. The other captain appeared to be aiming low.

Shannon smiled. *If he were to aim at our sails, he might stand a chance. Even if he did, he's too late. His own rigging is tangled, and his sails are torn. All he can do is wait for us to finish him off, or hope for a lucky shot.*

“Clear their decks!” Shannon bellowed into the amulet.

The *Iron Feather's* cannons fired again, blasting the merchant's ship with more chained ammo. Men unlucky enough to be above deck on the merchant vessel found themselves swept over the side, into the sea.

Again the merchant ship returned fire, but the captain still aimed too low. The *Iron Feather* slid by unharmed.

Shannon paused for a moment, considering her strategy. *We need to take more men off the main deck, but eventually we'll have to deal with those blasting the merchant's cannons.*

Most often that meant using swords, but she always tried to preserve the men on her crew. Hand-to-hand combat meant several lives lost.

Do us both a favor and just surrender, Shannon mused.

Almost in response to her thoughts, a fluttering white cloth began its ascent to the yardarm.

Smiling, she muttered, “That were almost too easy. Thanks be to Lady Luck.”

Into the amulet, she called, “Hold yer fire, men. They be surrenderin'!”

Turning her head slightly, an indication to the amulet that only her second-in-command should hear her words, she said, “Bring the ship around and make ready a boardin' crew. Let's relieve them of some of their burden.”

“Aye-aye, captain!” a voice echoed in her ear.

As the *Iron Feather* neared the captive ship, Shannon steered her platform to rejoin her crew. *Another battle, another treasure,* she thought as her ship drew close enough for her crew to board the merchant vessel.

Grasping a rope, Shannon swung across to the enemy ship, eager to meet the man who gave up so early in the fight.

As she landed, the other crew, clearly having been boarded before, had already knelt down on the deck, their weapons in a pile and out of reach. Only the captain stood, his face hidden by a wide-brimmed hat.

As she approached, the captain lifted his chin.

Shannon recoiled. *What's wrong with his face? Looks as though somethin's eatin' it away.*

The captain's wicked smile morphed into a grimace. He scratched a match against a banister and dropped it into a jagged hole in the deck.

Too late, Shannon realized her mistake.

The tip she'd received of treasure had been a trap. She growled in defiant frustration and cursed Owen Roberts, the man who had fed her the lie.

The ship responded with a much larger growl, the explosion blasting apart the merchant ship. Shrapnel pelted the deck of the *Iron Feather*, and the concussive wave from the explosion tipped her over.

Water flowed into the ship, and she slowly sank beneath the sea.

Admiral Cain watched his magical map as two small ships disappeared. He smiled and turned to his assistant. "Now, *that*," he said, "is the right way to deal with pirates. Let their greed get the best of them."

The admiral hefted a large bag of coins, and tossed it to his assistant. "See that the families of the crew we sent get their promised gold. Find others who are willing, and we'll go fishing for more pirates."

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CHAPTER 1

“Pirates are a disease,” Admiral Cain declared. He paced in front of the prisoner chained to a chair. “They drain our resources, increase the risks for our merchants, and provide little of value in return.”

Greasy hair dangling in his eyes, Owen Roberts glared at the admiral. “Ye forgot to mention,” he replied, “our freedom threatens yer *civilized* way of life.”

The admiral spun around, hand raised. Thinking better of it, he placed his hand on the back of the man’s chair. Cain growled in the pirate’s ear. “Your *freedom*? Look around. How far can you go?”

“Me body is all ye have. Me spirit is free.”

“Your body will do. I have no need of your spirit.”

A knock came at the door.

“Enter!” Cain commanded.

A small man carried a box into the room. The smell of cedar filled the air, but something malodorous lingered under that strong scent.

His eyes darted towards the captive pirate. “Sir, I have a message from the patrol near Amishan.”

“Get to it, then,” Cain replied. “Don’t worry about the prisoner. After tomorrow morning’s hempen jig, he’ll only be able to tell the crows.”

“From Captain Adair: We’ve confirmed the mission was successful. We also found one...*gift*...floating among the wreckage. Until we receive further orders, we will continue our patrol of the northern shore.”

“Thank you. Is there anything else?” the admiral said.

“No, sir.”

“Then place the box on my desk and take your leave.”

“Aye, sir.”

The man swept a small pewter dragon and several papers aside and set the box atop the desk.

As the door closed, Cain unlatched the box. “I have a feeling you’re going to want to see this,” he said to his prisoner.

As the latch came undone, the box’s sides fell away, revealing a shock of red hair.

Shannon O’Connor’s head.

The admiral stroked the long auburn hair. “So smooth, for someone who called herself a pirate,” he commented. “And she’s not bad looking either, even for a few days gone. Almost a shame. Did you know her?”

Owen glared at Cain. “Ye shouldn’t disrespect the dead,” he said. “It has a way of comin’ back around—even to the admiral of the Caldarian navy.”

“I have no respect for a pirate, dead or otherwise,” the admiral snapped. “They’re good for nothing but the peasants’ entertainment in a hanging. As you will be, in fact, tomorrow morning. Just food for the crows.”

The captured pirate stared silently at Shannon’s cloudy, lifeless eyes.

“I’ll leave the two of you alone. You’ll be talking again soon enough, so consider what you want to say to her.”

Cain left the room. *No better way to face death than to look it in the eye*, he thought.

Candlelight flickered across Brother Mendell’s face. He shivered in the slight draft, and pulled his brown robe tighter against his chest. The paper crackled as he turned a page of a tome bound in old leather.

Three men stood accused of similar crimes: each had been accused of stealing from a merchant.

The first came forward to be judged.

When asked to explain his actions, he said, “The man had it coming. He’d stolen from me often enough, so I felt justified in taking his horse in compensation.”

The judge shook his head. “While that may be so, you were the one caught. It’s not your place to judge others and sentence them for crimes. That responsibility lies with the courts. Your punishment stands.”

The first man was taken away to lose his hand.

The second man came forward to be judged.

When asked to explain his actions, he said, "I was hungry, and took only what I could eat. This merchant seemed well off, so I hoped he would not miss this food."

The judge thought for a moment. "You could have taken charity, or asked the merchant for help. However, I cannot take a man's hand for his hunger. You'll pay your debt to this man by working one month in exchange for food. Perhaps he can teach you a skill that will help you avoid hunger in the future. You will bear a brand to remind yourself what will happen the next time you steal."

The second man was taken away to receive his brand and work off his crime.

The third man came forward to be judged.

When asked to explain his actions, he said, "The fault is not mine. His daughter took a liking to me, and the merchant accused me of stealing her heart."

Laughing, the judge replied, "I'll not interfere with affairs of the heart..."

A door slammed, yanking Mendell from his reading. A novice scuffled across the floor of the library, his eyes trained on the monk.

Always while I'm studying, Mendell thought. He slipped a cloth bookmark into the tome to keep his place.

"Brother Mendell," the novice gasped when he drew near. Though he kept his voice low, the sound drew irritated glares from others studying nearby. "Father Ramsey has asked to see you. It's urgent."

"Of course, Brother," Mendell replied. He blew out the nearby candles and closed the book with a heavy thud. Nodding to the librarian, he hefted the book briefly. The librarian flashed a smile and a quick wave.

"Do you not need to sign out the book?" the novice asked as they approached the exit. His tone indicated a gentle reminder.

“Brother Tobias knows that I’ll return the book in good time,” Mendell said. “It’s one of the many benefits of growing into a full-fledged monk. Signing out the books is only required for novices or other strangers who visit our anethum.”

As the two pushed through the carved doors, Mendell admired the likeness of Lord Cultivation that adorned the top of the doorframe. God of knowledge, culture, and growth, his arms spread wide over a flourishing field of flowers. Etched buildings soared into the sky along the edges of the doors, symbolizing that nature could coexist with civilization. Above his arms floated mathematical and musical notations, indicating that an educated mind was as boundless as the sky.

The novice remained quiet as he accompanied Mendell to the abbot’s office.

The new ones are always shy at first, Mendell thought. Seems so long ago when I began my own journey here.

“What is your name, Brother?” Mendell asked.

“Leverett.”

“Brother Leverett,” Mendell echoed. “When did you begin your studies?”

“Less than a fortnight ago.”

“What have you learned so far?”

The novice shrugged. “Only that there is much more to learn about the gods and their ways.”

Mendell laughed. “There is always more to know,” he said, gesturing to the book he carried. “Which of the gods do you feel most drawn toward?”

Leverett pursed his lips. “It’s difficult to say,” he replied. “I’m certainly interested in Lady Storm so that I could help farmers with the weather, but I’m troubled by how her followers tend to become obsessed with power. Lord Cultivation would also allow me to help farmers by encouraging plants to grow, but I’m not sure that I want to spend all my life in study.”

“Do you come from a family of farmers?” Mendell asked.

“My grandfather was a farmer,” Leverett replied, “but my own family grew up here in Cadmus. I guess I’m most concerned about helping people live better lives.”

The pair arrived at Father Ramsey’s office. As Mendell raised his hand to knock on the abbot’s door, a thought occurred to him. “Perhaps you should try talking to Brother Jacen. He follows Lady Mercy, and you might be interested in her healing powers. You can find him at the infirmary.”

Leverett nodded. "Thank you, Brother Mendell. I'll do that. Should I say you sent me?"

"If you wish, go ahead," Mendell replied. "However, don't hesitate to ask for advice from any of the brothers or sisters. We're all here to help you find your path."

The novice bowed and left. Mendell rapped on the door.

"Come in," called a creaky voice.

Mendell entered to find an elderly man sitting at a desk. Behind him, a pair of recessed shelves bore twelve idols representing the gods and goddesses recognized by the abbey. Two of the idols faced the wall; the banished gods: Lady Deception and Lord Destruction.

"Thank you for coming, Brother Mendell." Father Ramsey's voice pulled Mendell away from his thoughts. "I need your help."

Mendell bowed his head. "How may I serve?"

"A prisoner is slated for execution tomorrow. Two priests have tried and failed to help him come to terms with his death. A new strategy is needed." Ramsey adjusted his glasses. "Perhaps you can help the man find peace. Will you do this?"

Mendell bit his lip. *I know it's a necessary job, but I hate assisting with executions. Every time I feel like I'm the one holding the rope or swinging the axe. Even when it's deserved, the whole thing feels...distasteful.*

"Yes, Father. What is his crime?"

Ramsey cleared his throat. "Piracy."

"A pirate? Surely death is the just reward for that crime. Why should we care about his inner peace?"

Ramsey fixed a stern gaze on the monk. "Mendell, what is the first lesson learned by those who follow Lord Justice?"

Mendell sighed. "Justice can only be served by considering each individual circumstance. Use the guidance of the other gods to help choose the right path."

"Very good." Ramsey settled in his chair. "In this case, I think Lady Mercy is an appropriate guide. Show compassion for this man accused of piracy, and see what you learn from the experience."

Lost in his grief, Owen barely noticed the door close when the admiral left. He continued to stare at all that remained of Shannon O'Connor. Even in death, and through the burns, her beauty still amazed him. Her eyes, though lifeless, seemed to accuse him.

Shannon, he thought, *I've failed you.*

“Argh!” Despite knowing they were too tight to escape, Owen struggled against the chains.

It's no use. Even if I could somehow get free, I'd still have to get past the armed guards. There's no way out.

Resigned to his fate, his thoughts turned back to his last encounter with Shannon.

“Shannon, me friend! It's good to lay eyes on ye again.”

Smiling, Shannon sauntered across the tavern. “Owen Roberts, ye scoundrel! What brings ye to this dingy hole?”

The bartender behind the counter growled. Shannon tossed him a copper coin as an apology.

“Ye're lucky it's early,” the bartender said as he caught the coin. “If we had a few more payin' customers, ye'd need more than a copper.” He grudgingly returned to wiping the bar.

Shannon chuckled. “If ye had a few more payin' customers, I wouldn't have said it.”

She turned her eyes back to Owen. He smiled as he grabbed her hand, pulling her into a brief hug.

“I bring some news ye'll be glad to hear,” Owen said. “The profitable kind.”

Shannon's musical laughter bore a stark contrast to her dark and dull clothes. “Aye, that is what I like to hear. Come, have a drink.” Shannon turned and called to a buxom woman, “Barmaid, bring us another round, and some mutton as well!”

As they waited, Owen continued, more quietly so the few patrons in the bar couldn't hear. He covertly pulled open his coat to reveal a roll of parchment. “There's a merchant ship comin' out of Musrak in seven days. A new *friend* plotted the planned course for the ship. He says that she'll be carryin' a cargo of jewels and gold—a gift to the sultan of Amishan. It's a ripe treasure, and even a fraction would be enough to retire on.”

Shannon's eyes narrowed. “Out of the capital, eh? How are they protectin' the ship? They'd not let such a treasure travel without guards.”

“True enough. From what I know, they're plannin' to send five ships, each on a different route. King Lothar doesn't want to draw attention to the ships by sendin' an escort, so his military suggested

false paths as the next best method. They'll still be heavily manned, and armed to the teeth. Takin' her won't be easy."

Shannon pursed her lips, considering Owen's description. "Somethin' doesn't smell right. How did ye come by this?"

Owen nodded. "A fair question. I wondered about the details meself. I were forced to serve a night in prison for gettin' in a bar fight—a man spilt me mead, but that's another story—and found meself in a cell with a man called 'Raven'."

He paused and took a gulp of his mead. "Raven and I got to tradin' tales, and found we both had an eye for opportunity. He didn't have a ship, but he did have this map, and sold it, and the story, for nothin' but a share of the treasure. All we have to do is give him a first mate's share of the plunder, in return for the information."

"What's to stop us from simply takin' the treasure and cuttin' him out of the deal?"

"Oh, aye, that were me first thought as well. In return for the map, he made me sign a bindin' scroll. On pain of losin' me sword hand, I must ensure he gets his share. If we earn no plunder, we owe him nothin'."

Shannon smiled. "He must be pretty confident if he's allowin' that ye might not pay him anythin'. But wagerin' yer sword hand? Is that wise?"

"'Tis not all that unusual," Owen replied. "He just wants to ensure I'll keep my end of the bargain."

"I see," she grunted.

"What's crawled on yer rudder? Looks like yer mind is sailin' on troubled waters."

"Aye. Allowin' a ship with so much gold and jewels to leave without an escort? Unusual at best."

"Oh, aye, I agree. But without an escort—"

"There's nothin' to distinguish it from any other merchant," Shannon finished. "Aye, there be a crazy cleverness here—safety through camouflage. Just insane enough that it might work. Too bad for them; their military has a leak."

"Ah, well," Owen said. "Lady Luck favors the pirate."

"Aye, sounds fair enough. Let's have a look at yer map," Shannon said.

Owen glanced around. "Not here," he whispered. "Too many pryin' eyes. We should go to the *Iron Feather* and discuss the details there."

The barmaid returned with steaming plates of mutton and mugs of mead.

“Aye,” Shannon said. Juice dripped from the meat as she lifted it to her mouth. “After we eat.”

“I’m sorry, me friend. I should have told ye to listen to yer gut. Ye always were better at sensin’ a trap,” Owen said quietly, staring at Shannon’s lifeless face. “Fear not, I’ll join ye in the mornin’. I expect both our heads will end up above the eastern gate.”

How did she die? Owen wondered. She fought differently than other captains; rather than sprinting to the front of the battle, she floated above, watching and shifting her men to where they were needed most.

Her strength had been strategy, not hand-to-hand combat.

She rarely set foot on the enemy ship until after they’d surrendered. As such, she frequently escaped injury. If her ship had sunk, it was certainly possible she’d drowned with the rest. Fire on the ship would explain the burns. Yet why didn’t she use her platform to escape?

His mind raced. Had the *Iron Feather* been boarded? Was someone able to attack her on her floating platform?

How had they fooled her?

As hard as it was to see her face like this, he forced himself to examine her more carefully.

Singed hair and cheeks covered in burns, he noted. *That’s easy enough. The merchant captain could have defended his ship with flaming arrows, exploding shot, or other burning ammunition. An out of control fire could certainly cause some burns.*

Owen spied a thin brown splinter tangled in her auburn hair. *What happened, me friend? If only ye could still speak.*

The door opened behind him. He turned his head, trying to see who entered. Just for a moment, he prayed that someone came to end his life.

Dying by a sword would be faster than hanging at the end of a rope.

It would also be more fitting. A pirate should die in battle.

“What are your thoughts on the difference between good and evil?” A man asked from the entryway.

Another priest, Owen groaned. *On second reckoning, hanging doesn’t sound so bad.*

Footsteps sounded against the hardwood floor, and a figure wearing a brown robe came into view. The man’s eyes remained on Owen. “You do speak Common, correct?” he asked after a moment.

“Aye,” Owen said grudgingly. “No offense, priest, but as I told the others, I have no use for someone tellin’ me about the wrongs in me life. It’s a bit late, ye see: there’s little I can do to correct them now.”

The robed man leaned against the desk, then flinched as he realized what rested beside him. “How can someone show such disrespect to the dead?” he asked in disgust.

He began to put the collapsing box back together.

“Leave her,” Owen said. “It’s nice to have a friend nearby.”

The man hesitated, then complied. He pulled a chair over to Owen and sat slightly in front of the desk, with Shannon’s head out of view. “Actually, I agree with you. It’s far too late to fix any mistakes you’ve made. And in fact, I’m not concerned with what you did. I’m here only at the request of my elders. I understand others have tried to talk with you, and gotten nowhere.”

Owen nodded. “That be true enough. Ye don’t sound much like a priest.”

“You can call me Brother Mendell. I’m not a priest. Their focus is to herd sheep and grow their flock. My goals are more personal. I’m focused on building a deeper relationship with my god. As a monk, my calling is to help others on their path. Today, that means helping prepare you for what comes tomorrow.”

“You mean me death,” Owen said.

“Exactly. Let’s talk more about that. What are your thoughts on death?”

May as well be honest with him, Owen figured. Apparently, he’s not going to push me to repent. And it’s not like I need to worry about what people will think of me when I’m gone. “I’m fine with death. I’ve dealt out more than my share. It’s the act of dyin’ that bothers me.”

“I can understand that. What do you think happens after death? Why doesn’t it bother you?”

Owen considered this for a moment, struggling with how to phrase it. “I were always told there be another life, full of pleasures and old friends. A time of reunitin’ with family.”

“And do you believe this is true?”

“I hope it’s not,” Owen said without thinking, then paused.

Mendell remained silent and let Owen take his time.

A few moments passed, and finally Owen continued. “Me father ne’er had time for me...he served as an officer in Caldaria’s fleet. On the rare time he came to see me mother, he’d get drunk and beat me. Told me I’d end up hangin’ from a rope one day. Guess he be right. I have no want to see him again.”

“Sounds like an unpleasant man. Don’t you think your father would go to another place? Somewhere you wouldn’t have to see him?”

“I hope not. At least when he killed, he were followin’ orders. When I killed, I only wanted my share of the plunder. If he goes to a place of punishment, where would I go?”

Mendell frowned. “His killings may have been legal, but that doesn’t make them right. Only the gods can make that final judgment. Perhaps that may comfort you.”

Owen shrugged. “Suppose I’ll find out soon enough.”

“Indeed,” Mendell paused and waited for Owen to continue. When Owen said nothing, Mendell cleared his throat. “If it were within your power to choose, where would you hope to go?”

Owen thought for a moment. “I’d want to spend me time on the ocean, sailin’ forever. That’s where I feel most free.”

“Do you see yourself alone? Or are there others with you?”

“Aye, I’d like some of me crew members to be with me. Shannon, for one,” he said, nodding at her disembodied head. “She were a captain when she died, but we served on the same ship together for many years. Skilled with a blade, but her mind was even more deadly. She always seemed to find the right way to get another ship to surrender before it cost the lives of our crew. That skill is what made her captain, more than anythin’ else.”

“It must hurt you to see her this way.”

“Aye, but not as much as knowin’ ’twere me own actions that put her in this spot. I gave her the map that led Shannon to this fate.”

Mendell considered Owen’s words. “Surely you didn’t know that this would lead to her death.”

“That be true, but me job is to make sure I don’t let greed blind me to traps. I didn’t do me job. I should have known the treasure was too temptin’.”

“Isn’t that the nature of a good trap?” the monk asked. “The prey isn’t supposed to see it until it’s too late.”

“Aye, but the hunter isn’t supposed to become the prey. I’ve been a hunter for so long that I’d forgotten what it were like to be hunted. I knew that if I were ever caught, I’d hang, but we’d gotten so good at avoidin’ capture...”

Mendell nodded sympathetically. “I understand. That must be difficult.”

“Aye,” Owen said, tears in his eyes. “That it be.”

The two men sat in silence for a moment. Mendell shifted against the desk, and a talisman slipped out of his robes.

Owen watched as the disk spun. One side depicted a balanced scale, and the other showed an unbalanced scale. “So, ye worship Lord Justice, eh? Not so surprisin’, when ye think about it. Who better to send a condemned man to the hangman’s noose? A pirate,” his voice turned sour, “a man so evil that he must be kept alone, save for a priest or monk. A man left to his guilt, with the company of a man meant to remind him of it.”

“From the way you talk, you seem to consider yourself a better man than that. Do you consider the people who caught you to be evil?”

Owen shrugged. “I’m not a spiritual man. I don’t believe in good and evil. There be only what a man can do, and what he must do.”

Before Mendell could say anything else, the door flew open with a loud clank.

Admiral Cain marched in, flanked by two guards. He drew his sword and pointed it at the monk. “Who are you?” he growled.

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