

A new Life in Ventis

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4Star Scifi

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ISBN

Published in 2017 by 4Star Scifi

4Star Scifi, Brixham, Devon, England

www.richarddeescifi.co.uk/4Star

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Blurb

What has happened to Horis Strongman since we saw him last? The events in Aserol and beyond have changed him and given him adventures that he could never have imagined. His life is now completely different in every respect. He had travelled far and wide and seen things that he never would have thought were possible.

But those who were against him have recovered and can still do him harm. Before he and those he cares for can be truly safe, he must face his foes again, and this time, the stakes are raised. By the time his journey ends, he will find that he has allies in the strangest places for the final confrontation that he hopes will secure his future.

The story takes in foreign lands and new dangers as Horis fights for the freedom to live in peace.

*A new *Life in Ventis* is the sequel to *The Rocks of Aserol*.*

The *Swiftsure*

Chapter

Meanwhile, the subjects of the manhunt were blissfully unaware of the hue and cry they had raised in Northcastle. The *Swiftsure* ploughed through a low swell, rolling and pitching easily. They were no longer on the way to the Eastlands but now headed to Omnipa in the far south-west of Norlandia. The change of orders had not been expected and the way that they had been delivered had been one last thing to keep Horis on edge.

Having passed between the harbour breakwaters, the *Swiftsure* slowed and a lee was made. The pilot left the wheelspace, escorted down by the duty officer to the approaching cutter. As it closed to land the pilot it signalled them by flashing lamp.

“Why are they signalling?” asked Horis, as he saw the winking light. Hector concentrated as he read the coded message of short and long flashes.

“They have dispatches for us,” replied Hector.

Immediately Horis shrank into a corner. “Are we discovered so quickly?” he asked.

“Fear not,” said Hector, “it will probably be some mundane message from my agents, a change of orders I expect. They would have been unable to deliver it as we were forced to sail early. If we were required to hand you back for some reason, a warship would be here to make us turn about, not the cutter.”

Horis relaxed somewhat as the bucket was lowered and an envelope placed inside it. The duty officer returned with it after seeing the pilot safely away. Hector split the flap and read the note. "As I thought, it is a letter from my agents; there is a change in our itinerary."

"Where are we bound now?" asked Grace, who was unconcerned. Horis realised that he was the only person who had been bothered, this must be normal practice, perhaps all seafarers were used to it.

"We sail to Omnipa," Hector replied. "For a load of exported goods to Tarpitt, thence loading coffee and cacao beans, returning to Norlandian ports."

Horis and Grace exchanged worried glances, this was not what they wanted, if it should be suspected that they were aboard there would be soldiers waiting for them on the jetty in Omnipa. There was plenty of time to get a message from Northcastle to Omnipa overland long before they would arrive. Omnipa had no Rail but there was a garrison and a speaker station for the military.

Hector tried to reassure them. "Omnipa is quiet and out of the way, they only have the mail delivered every fortnight or so, and even that depend on the brigands in the area. If they are active then the place is isolated. Likewise the speakers, as fast as they are laid and connected, so the criminals steal the copper wires and sell them back to the foundry. It is more than likely that they will not have heard any news about you. In fact, this might well work to your advantage."

"How might that be so?" asked Horis, he wanted to be away from Norlandia as soon as possible and stay away until any fuss had died down. How could this diversion possibly be to his advantage?

“Well, firstly, as far as anyone in the port is concerned, we are sailing to the Eastlands, only the sender of the letter knows different. And as they are not in Northcastle, they may not be asked.”

Horis could see the sense in that. Hector continued, “Also, if you wish to withdraw funds, Omnipa is a good place to do so as any, and it might be an idea to realise your assets while you still can.”

Horis understood; he could retrieve his money from an unsuspecting bank. Especially one that had no way to communicate with its head office, except by unreliable post. The longer he left it, the more likely that word would have reached them and he could find that his account had been blocked.

“Then it’s good that I have my passbook,” he said, “in my pocket safe with my other papers. Perhaps you are right.”

“I can keep things safer for you on my ship than in any bank,” said Hector, “especially under your name. It would not be long before everything was seized on the orders of Terrance.”

Horis had already lost his apartment in Metropol City and the few possessions that he had there, to lose the small savings he had would be the last straw.

And with that thought, it was time for dinner. As Horis and Grace entered the saloon there were cheers and applause for them from the assembled crew and officers. They took seats at the top table, next to Hector’s place and were soon answering questions about their adventures. Grace’s tale of capture and imprisonment brought gasps and mutterings, then when Horis spoke of the rescue there were cheers and more applause. They all remembered

his earlier voyage on the ship. Then he had been accompanied by Maloney and Grieve and to a man they were shocked at the turn of events.

“Hector charged you with looking after Grace,” the engineer said, as Horis stopped for a drink, “and you did so admirably.”

“It was not just my doing,” he repeated several times. “I have Mr Maloney and his men to thank for most of my good fortune.” Even so, he basked in the praise.

The cook on the *Swiftsure* had produced another superb repast, after a mixed root soup there was grilled Bovine steak with accompaniments, all followed by a rich fruit pie and creamy sauce. The conversation continued, the conversation dissecting the tale, when they got to the Drogans’ attack and the appearance of the flying machine there was surprise.

“We never knew of such as these flying machines,” said one of the artificers. “The Drogans must have been alarmed at the intruders in the air; I suspect that they see it as their domain.”

The engineers then entered a long discussion about the mechanics of flight and Horis found that he was no longer the centre of attention, eventually Grace pled tiredness from the excitement and excused herself to sleep. Horis also sought to escape but as he made to follow her, the engineer produced a bottle of spirit and the toasting began. After a while, and another bottle, Horis began losing his grip on sobriety; eventually he staggered off to the passenger cabins, chose an empty one and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke, he found that he was still fully dressed, his head ached and his mouth was dry, it was not unlike the morning after his adventure in the *Drogans Rest* in Aserol; all those months ago. That had been when he had first met Grace, they had gone to view the harvest celebrations and that had been the start of all his adventures. The morning after that,

he had felt wretched, he had still Ministry duties to perform and Terrance to impress. Now, for the first time in ages, he felt relaxed and complete. All of his worries had been assuaged.

He was blissfully happy to be reunited with Grace, the fact that she had suffered on his account made him all the more tender towards her, and after he had made himself presentable and broken his fast they spent the day just walking the deck and holding each other, while they talked of her imprisonment and her treatment by Terrance.

He sensed that she needed to talk, to break the spell it had over her and cauterise the wound. The day was chilly but fresh and the low sun broke through scudding clouds every now and then. Occasional spray splashed the deck as the vessel moved in a short sea, and they laughed as they were damped by the salty water.

“It was so foul,” she said, after she had laughed at his protestations of a pounding head, her expression changed as she remembered the cell and the desolation; she shook while Horis held her. She spoke in short sentences, punctuated by sobs; he knew some of it already but let her talk as she repeated all the horrors of her ordeal.

“Being captured and having to watch Grieve die horribly was the start,” she said. “Then, the man I wounded was shot by the other thug.”

Horis praised her for her bravery. “I felt anger,” she said, “not bravery, how dare that man come in and try to hurt me?” She touched the scar on her face from the pistol butt. Horis took her hand away and kissed the puckered skin. She moved her face and their lips met again. After a long kiss she continued, “I wondered at the savagery of it. What had we done, save steal a rock and have some knowledge? And when I saw you from my prison in the mobile, but was unable to speak or get to you, I felt true despair. Then I recall a room and the smell of flowers. I must have slept because the next thing I recall was waking in that cold cell, not

knowing where I was. Terrance seemed to take joy from my discomfort; it was only after he had received a call from his senior that my situation improved.”

Horis tried to imagine the helplessness that Grace would have felt, knowing she was so far from help. “And it was all because of me,” he said. “I’m truly sorry to have put you through such an ordeal.”

She held him tight. “The one thing that kept me alive and sane was the knowledge that it was for you,” she whispered. “I knew you would come and rescue me and I knew that I would have to keep you safe by being strong and revealing nothing that could help them destroy you.”

They kissed again, against the ship’s rail, whilst up in the wheelspace Hector gazed down on them. He envied their happiness, and again marvelled at the power of emotion to overcome the worst trials.

Grace told of her time after Terrance had relented somewhat and she had been given work to do. “Once I was working in the kitchens and had a little more freedom, then I felt better. At least I had a purpose, something to take my mind away from my situation. It was when I became the steward to the flyers that I met Ralf. He showed me the truth, that he was just as much a prisoner as I was, in a better cage it was true but nonetheless still a captive.”

She told him again of her despair as time passed and she began to wonder if rescue would ever come, and how Ralf’s plan for her to escape had shaken her from her torpor. “It was wrong of me to give up hope,” she said, wracked by more sobbing. “Can you forgive me?”

Horis held her against him. “There is nothing to forgive, I wish I could have rescued you sooner,” he said. “We had to make plans and it was important to get things right.”

“I had planned to follow Ralf’s lead,” she said, “and use the items and information he had procured for me. But then Sapper came on his reconnaissance and that threw my plans awry. Once I knew that you were on the way, it was easier to think of the whole thing as a holiday with work. Even so, I had to be careful not to change my mood too much and arouse suspicion. As the day approached I became impatient for my release. But by then I was content, for I knew that I would be free.”

“My poor love,” replied Horis, “you have suffered so much and all because of a chance meeting with me, I feel guilt at your treatment and would do anything to make it right.”

“Ahh, but you were not responsible for that,” was her answer. “That was all Terrance’s doing. We met and I chose to be with you and if I had known the future, I still would have accepted it.” She looked into his eyes and he saw the truth of her words.

“In any event,” she continued, “you gathered a band of helpers and risked all in coming to my rescue, I will never forget that. I knew the first time we met, back in Aserol that we were meant to be and that whatever happened we would be together. You have proved yourself to me and if I had the chance, I hope that I would do the same for you.”

The sea air and conversation did her good and helped her to exorcise the demons in her mind. They were blissfully happy together, yet that evening, as they embraced outside his cabin on the deck, with the moons shining in a starry sky and the air warm, Grace declined his tentative suggestion that they spend the night together.

Horis wondered at the reason, perhaps it was a result of her captivity. “Why not, my love?” he asked. He was perplexed; she had been the enthusiastic instigator when first they had met. Were they not now bound by more than the fate which had initially thrown them together?

She quickly sought to reassure him. “You silly man,” she said. “It’s too public and not for any other reason. Aboard ship everyone knows what everyone else is doing. My uncle is Captain here and will doubtless tell my parents of my actions. I could not bear it if the first news they heard of me were about what they would see as my sinful behaviour. And they would think badly of you, which is not what I want. I love them both dearly but they have a different way of looking at things. They would say that we were not yet wed.”

Horis could see the logic but was unimpressed, he had been separated from her for long enough. “But everyone will assume that is what we are doing anyway,” he argued.

“Hector would not approve, and he is the law here,” she countered. “And we will be wed, just as soon as it is safe for us to return to Norlandia.”

She slipped from his arms. “Goodnight,” she whispered as she went to her cabin. Horis stood, deflated as he heard the door lock behind her. He went to his own cabin but could not sleep.

Grace must have reconsidered her position; for Horis was woken later that night by the sound of her sneaking into his cabin. However, her reluctance to be discovered made her retreat before dawn’s light.

They spent the next several days in happy companionship, talking all day and snatching moments in the night whilst they rounded the Cape and turned to run westwards, past Aserol to Omnipa.

Then Horis had an idea, he went to see Hector to explain it. As he sat in the Captain’s cabin he thought that the seat felt warm, it must have been the sun shining on it through the window. Even though it was late in winter, the further they had ventured from Northcastle the more the weather had improved.

“Well young man, what can I do for you?” asked the Captain, attired in his full uniform, his braid gleaming. He had a serious expression and Horis stammered out his request and then collapsed into silence. He thought that his speech had not gone as well as when he had practised in front of his shaving glass.

Hector nodded thoughtfully after he had said his piece, the delay in his response did nothing to calm Horis’s stomach, which seemed to have taken on the form of a basket of serpents.

“I wondered how long it would take you to work that out,” he said, the serious face cracked into a grin and there was a twinkle in his eye. “And to be honest, I thought that the *Swiftsure* had been invaded by rats, with all the nocturnal scuttling that I have heard.” Horis had the grace to blush while Hector found his discomfort amusing, after all, had he not been young once?

“Do not worry,” he said. “I might not approve of your actions but I can understand them. Grace is safe from my criticism, and I will say nothing of it to my sister, should we speak. Grace is old enough to decide for herself how to spend her life.”

There was a pause before Hector spoke again; he appeared to be weighing his choices.

“Very well,” he said at length. “We have a few days to spare in our schedule before we are due to dock in Omnipa. I intend to drop anchor in a sheltered bay I know and perform some maintenance works once we have passed Aserol. We could do it then.”

As Horis departed, Hector allowed himself a private grin, Grace had come to him with the same idea, and had departed not five minutes before Horis had arrived; ‘great minds’, he mused.