

Excerpt from *Valkr's Wing*
By Raymond Witte

Grey raised his field glasses once more and quickly worked through the sums in his head. They had gained a bit more than a half-mile on the Plesioleviathan.

Yes, it's near time to launch.

He nodded to LaGrasso.

“You may order the crews to ready for the chase.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

LaGrasso began to bark orders to the deck hands who ran steam lines out to each of the four skiffs. The luftskiffs were built off the same chassis, a small hunting platform flanked by a set of lift tanks with a coal oil engine attached to an oversized propeller in the rear and a central steam tank to service the skiff's weapons, but each one invariably evolved to reflect the preferences of its chief harpooneer.

As the steam lines began to charge the tanks on each skiff, the harpooneers attached their weapons to the hunting platform of each craft. The weapons were an assortment of lances, barbed spears and explosive charges, some long and narrow with spade shaped tips, designed to finish a kill cleanly on a disabled Plesioleviathan. Others had explosive heads, intended to cause horrific wounds should the prey attempt to dive before it could be killed. Still other harpoons sported broad heads with stars of wicked points to slow the beasts as they sliced through muscle, tendon and fins. Two of the luftskiffs sported weighted barrels of powder to stun the animals and to force them to surface.

Grey, like most captains, left the loadouts of the skiffs to their crews. The harpooneers knew they needed to work as a team to score a kill, and smart captains knew better than to try and micromanage them.

The chase ground onward as Grey's men swarmed over the little airships, making them ready for launch. For the most part, Grey kept his eyes on their prey, obsessively measuring the slowly closing distance, though he would cast his eyes about the deck occasionally. It was always good for the deck hands to see that their captain was interested, even if it was LaGrasso who did the real work of making sure each harpoon crew was ready when the launch order came.

“The crews are ready, Captain.”

Grey put down his field glasses for a moment to inspect his crew. Each harpoon team stood at attention in front of their luft skiff, ready to launch on his order, less than ten minutes after the order had gone out. His crew was a good one and they were getting better each day. Grey hoped that this kill would be a quick one. He was nervous. He had already been beneath the deck for longer than he would have

preferred, and he had no idea what other vessels might be in the area.

He was tempted to climb above the clouds to make sure the Valkr's Wing had the skies to herself, but that risked losing their quarry. The creature might reach a trench and dive or shelter in one of the dense reed islands that dotted the Marsh Sea before they sighted it again. Grey would have to chance a launch without any additional reconnaissance.

"Alright boys, you know your business so I'll not waste breath telling it to you. Make it quick one and we'll back in port three mornings hence and the first round's on me."

That brought knowing smiles and even a few chuckles to the faces of the crew. Port Venture meant cashing their shares, then women, drink, gambling, and a few weeks of safety on dry land until they had spent everything and needed to risk another hunt. They knew the dangers as well as their Captain did, and they were just as eager to top off the holds and head home.

"Luftskiffs away, Mr. LaGrasso."

"Aye Captain. You heard the man, cast off and good hunting!"

The deck crew of the Valkr's Wing first hauled in the steam lines then began to manipulate the lifts and hoists cradling each luftskiff, swinging the light craft so they were well away from their mother ship. Once the booms were at full extension, the crew sparked the coal oil engines, bringing the propellers up to speed as each skiff's engineer manipulated the Liftium tanks until the little craft achieved neutral buoyancy.

Then they were away, darting off in pursuit of their quarry like a pack of angry hornets. As the skiffs launched in staggered succession, first port fore, then starboard fore, then port aft and finally starboard aft, Grey took the helm and let the Valkr's Wing come up to her full speed. It put too much strain on her coal fired boiler to fly at flank speed when she was hauling the skiffs, but with them away, the converted frigate could really spread her wings.

For a few glorious moments, Grey's concerns melted away as the ship's engines gently thrummed beneath his feet while the air began to rush by. He nudged the Wing's nose slightly down and began a slow dive, picking up more speed as he descended. He could never hope to keep pace with the skiffs, but his ship was still fast and fairly nimble and he reveled in her speed and with it the chance to recall the ship's glorious history.

The Wing hadn't always been a hunting ship. Once, years ago, Grey had used her to run guns on Mars and as burdened as she was by the necessary tools of industry, beneath it all she was still built to be a pure blockade runner.

Even now she looked it. Her hull was long and sleek, coming to a sharp prow, designed to cut through the air and offer no purchase for drag. A single tank of

Liftium stretched her length, secured closely to her deck to keep her profile small. At the rear of the ship was Grey's parapet, a two-tiered structure that allowed the captain to either supervise the deck or scan the skies around the ship.

In the aft were the ship's four squat smoke stacks, belching black fumes as the engines churned in her belly. She was a beautiful ship and fast, much faster than almost anything her size, when she was properly outfitted.

A shrill whistle from the fore interrupted Grey's reminiscing. Already knowing what it meant, he raised his field glasses anyway. The whistle from the lookout signaled that the skiffs were making their attack runs on the massive sea creature. Grey's crew had been lucky. This particular beast had not tried to dive nor did it change course as the creatures sometimes did, it merely tried to outrun its pursuers, the Plesioleviathan's enormous tail churning the water as it endeavored to gain speed.

But it was a futile effort. The skiffs had closed the distance and now mates on each vessel would use semaphore to coordinate their strikes. The colorful flags flashed quickly, far too quickly for Grey to keep up with their message and moments later the kill began.

The lead skiff dove steeply, and through his glasses Grey watched one of the crewmen aiming a harpoon launcher fixed to the bow of the little vessel. In a puff of pressurized steam, the lance was away and Grey could tell well before it struck that it would be a good hit.

It was a broad headed lance and it cut savagely into the tail of the beast. The Plesioleviathan's toothy head reared up as the creature bellowed in pain. It tried to swim more quickly, but the lance had sliced muscle and tendon and the strokes of its tail grew sluggish and truncated. Meanwhile, the crew of the luftskiff busied themselves reloading their weapon.

Two more of the luft skiffs swooped down to make their strikes; this time each one fired a thin harpoon into the bulk of the creature's back. As crippled as it was by the first strike, the kill was effectively assured.

But the Plesioleviathan was not yet dead and the hardy animals could linger near death for a long time before they finally expired. A long kill meant more time vulnerable to pirates, so now the crews of the skiffs had to finish the kill.

Unlike the lance of the first skiff, the harpoons of the second and third boat were tethered to the hulls of the craft that launched them. As they sunk deep into the animal's flesh and found purchase, the crews of those skiffs would cut power to their propellers, forcing the whale to tire itself by dragging the small craft behind it. As soon as their steam launcher was charged, the crew of the lead boat sunk a harpoon into the serpentine beast as well, adding their luft skiff's weight to the effort.

The final luft skiff darted in front of the Plesioleviathan and held position.

This would be the kill boat, its launcher loaded with an explosive tipped harpoon designed to finish the job, if it got a good hit.

However, quickly killing something as large as a Plesioleviathan even with an explosive harpoon, if you didn't want to blast it to a mountain of chum, required a hit on something vital. And each of the explosive charges was frightfully expensive. Needing to shoot a second shot would cost a good chunk of the profit from this kill.

Even though the entire crew constantly worried about privateers, no one wanted to cost their comrades money by being too hasty so they were forced to wait until the whale was exhausted from the chase. Only then, when they were guaranteed a clean shot, would they make the kill.

As the luft skiffs made their assault, the Valkr's Wing closed on the creature, faster now, as the animal was slowed from injury and dragging the hunting skiffs behind it. Meanwhile, the crew that remained on the Wing's deck began to set up the works to process the Plesioleviathan's oil.

The oil was stored in spongy tissue and in its natural state was quite dilute. The engine crew was in the process of stoking the Wing's engines to keep up speed while a portion of the heat was directed to the enormous vats of the try works where pools of the spinal fluid from the creature would be concentrated so it could be stored for travel and later use. This would run the boiler hotter than was technically safe, but as long as the try works were in operation, the excess heat would have a safe outlet.

After ten more minutes, the kill boat was in position, low and just behind the head of the Plesioleviathan. By now, the beast was hardly moving. It bled from a half dozen wounds and already the penguinopods had gathered around the creature, waiting for it to expire so they could move in and feed. With a puff of steam, the harpooneer launched the explosive shot.

It was a good strike, hitting just behind the Plesioleviathan's skull and sinking deep. A moment later that was a muffled thump and the animal jerked suddenly, its head drooping nervelessly and beginning to loll at an unnatural angle.

A cheer went up from the crews of the skiffs and spread to those still on the Valkr's Wing. It was a good kill, neat and professionally done. Now all that remained was to process the beast and make best speed for Port Venture. The luft skiff crews began work almost immediately. The pilots maneuvered their craft low and close, bringing them as near to the carcass as they dared, while other crewman hung over the gantries, wielding long handled flensing spades to slice into the flesh of the Plesioleviathan, casting slabs of muscle and fat into the sea to clear it out of the way. As they worked, the sea reddened with blood and began to churn as the viscous penguinopods worked themselves into a frenzy over the scraps.

Once more, the sheer scale of the waste involved struck Grey. But meat didn't

bring in enough geld to haul it back to port, and it needed to be out of the way before the crew could siphon the precious spinal fluid, so it went into the brine. As the Wing continued her decent, the luft skiffs slid out of her path, making room for their mother ship and her more extensive butchering equipment. Thick lines attached to flesh anchors were cast overboard and sank into the Plesioleviathan's flesh, allowing the Wing to take the whale's weight from the skiffs.

Relieved of the burden of supporting the weight of the beast, the skiffs rose once more, their crews now serving as scouts, keeping watch for pirates. It wasn't a great solution. The skiffs didn't have the lift ceiling that the larger ship did and it was still possible for a privateer to approach undetected by taking cover above the clouds, but it was better than being completely blind.

Grey felt himself relax as the Wing settled into position and the crew started processing the animal. The hard part was nearly over, and soon he would be above the clouds once more, heading for port with a full hold and an intact crew. He allowed himself a small grin, while the crew set to their task, lowering the long, hollow iron tubes which they would use to tap into the Plesioleviathan's bones to extract the precious fluid.

Suddenly, the furthest luftskiff bucked wildly as a spray of splinters erupted from her deck. Before he could react, Grey saw the small craft buck again and this time he heard the sharp report of a naval rifle. Then a third round hit, but this time, instead of bucking, the skiff sagged at midship, her back broken by the shot, and began to lose altitude and list, spilling injured and dying crewmen into the sea. Grey turned to raise the alarm, but LaGrasso was ahead of him, ringing the ship's bell wildly and calling out "ENEMY CONTACT! ALL HANDS MAKE READY!"

"Order the skiffs to cut lines and run at best speed. Give us all power to the engines," Grey barked his orders, his ensigns signaling wildly with semaphore flags or shouting down the speaking tubes into the engine room.

As the lines were cut and the crew scrambled back aboard their skiffs, the Wing's assailant broke cloud cover. She was a corvette and bore French markings on her sides. She was half the size of the Wing, but she was built for war and fully armed, with a trio of fixed heavy guns in an armoured housing on her prow. Those pieces were silent for the moment, but the pair of Hotchkiss guns mounted to the underside of her forehull barked again, this time in tandem. The 42 millimeter cannons dismantled a second skiff with a string of well placed shots, their cylinders rotating to feed round after round into their breaches, sending another boat full of men to their deaths.

Looking horrified, LaGrasso asked, "Why are they shooting up the skiffs Captain? Aren't they worth enough to take?"

"The Wing is the prize they're after, Mr. LaGrasso," Grey answered with as little emotion as he could, "These are French Privateers, not mere pirates. I'd bet

you anything they're under orders to take only heavy shipping, so the luft skiffs aren't worth their time. Murdering the men on the skiffs just means fewer for them to deal with when they board us. I doubt they plan on taking us alive either. No Letter of Marque provides compensation for taking prisoners, so we're not worth their time. In fact, I expect to see their Oriflamme any moment now."

As if on cue, the French ship unfurled a long, red three tailed banner with a prominent gold sun, the ancestral Frankish signal that no quarter would be asked or given.

And there it is, Grey thought morosely.

"Crew's accounted for captain!" The shout came up from the Chief Deckmate.

"Take us about and all speed to the engines! Dump everything you can overboard and tell the crew to arm and make ready to repel boarders."

The Valkr's Wing banked into a turn and began to slowly pick up speed as casks, tools, and even the precious spinal fluid all went over the sides. The two remaining skiffs dashed out well ahead of the converted frigate. The privateer was a much more immediate threat to them, and they could try to link up with the Wing later, if the larger ship were able to escape.

Despite jettisoning most everything that was not permanently bolted to the deck, the Wing was not gaining speed fast enough. Slowly but inexorably, the French corvette was gaining ground. Grey peered through his field glasses at the approaching ship. Other than the occasional wild shot at the pair of fleeing skiffs from the Hotchkiss guns, the corvette's heavy weapons were silent. However, her decks were crawling with men taking up firing positions with an assortment of small arms, taking aim for the moment their prey came within rifle range. Grey's crew were arming themselves as well. The Valkr's Wing carried rifles enough for her officers and many of the crewmen had scatter guns or pistols amongst their personal effects, but the majority had simply grabbed whatever tools were at hand, improvising a motley assortment of melee weapons.

"LaGrasso get everyone to cover," Grey barked, "I don't want to lose people to those riflemen."

As if to emphasize his point, one of the deck hands spun to the deck clutching his shoulder and cursing. The air began to grow thick with thuds and whines as sharpshooters from the privateer began to crack away with their long guns.