Ever Adrift

Down North

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aka Acorn

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Beer to Start 1
Feast or Famine 4
Qui'i Avas'o Ucidi 9
The Meat of the Matter 11
U Votan 20

The Library 22
The Beached Whale 32
The Black Cat 36

Twin Blooms 44
King on Land 46
The Toll 49
God at Sea 51
Weeds and Wolves 54
Knockout 58
My First Success 63

Full Circle 66
Secret Mission 76
Alive Ideally 80
Details and the Devil 87

Of Fine Form and Craftsmanship 91
Lady Rhodelia 94
Long Overdue 98
Sharks 106
The Boss 108
Long Story 109
Bodies 113

Buttercup Bites Back 116
Good, Evil and Snakes 124
Word and Deed 128
Discretion in the Dark 137

Convincing Sir Rasid 145
Al Alonostra: Spring 148
Al Alonostra: Summer 155

Al Alonostra: Autumn 160
Al Alonostra: Winter 164
Al Alonostra: Midnight 170

Setting Sail 183
The Thresher 185
The Twin Horizon 190
The Mako 192
The Cardinal 195
The Compass 202
Last Supper 207

Fragile Cargo 212
Liquid Planet 220
Love and War 223
Solid Footing 231

Adventure Aside 238
The Language of Love 251
True Thievery and the Quarter Knuckle 252
Blood and Bullion 256

Lesser Halves 262
Dark Corners 271
Remedy 279
Retribution 284

Of Toys and Tortoises 288
The Ascent 290
The Obvious 296
The Keep 299
Fate and Fondness 304
La Follia 306

Ever Adrift 313
An Exceptional Morning 318
The Sermon 326
Coming and Going 331
The Twins 336

A Note:

Well-traveled people should skip this portion and proceed directly to the story. But in the interest of everybody else, I am (apparently) forced to state in writing, thanks to the repeated arguments of a few scholars I refuse to name, that all the species referred to in this work are quite real, and have been quite real for quite some time. Regardless, as all know, there can be great confusion when speaking colloquially as to exactly which hominid is being referred to at times. Also many of the planet's various peoples will be largely unfamiliar to the average bored Caledonian or English for whom the story is intended. Therefore a short course on the recent evolution of man, including terminology, may came in handy.

And here we have our first ambiguity already. For by man, I mean all of the Earth's myriad lifeforms that can both talk and do a push-up, even though the term, spoken in its singular to mean many individuals, is most often used to refer to only *Homo sapiens*; specifically *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as opposed to *Homo sapiens exiguus* (*fortis* in Caledonia). Hereafter, I will conform to majority rule myself by limiting the use of 'man' to *Homo sapiens sapiens* themselves. Although other characters may use the word in its broader sense. Elves, notably, never fail to include both the *sapiens* and *exiguus* peoples in the same category of man, while dwarves often reserve the term for themselves, labeling bigger people gunes or tallfolk. Regardless of title, *Homo sapiens sapiens* is, of course, the people who inhabit the majority of the Archaean continent, the western portion of North Caledonia including Saerohan, Valverde in eastern Caledonia proper and Velai in the west. They are five or six feet tall; which comment I understand means little, for some people's feet are bigger than others. But a foot is a rather standard measure. Far more standardized than a pint, anyway! Twelve knuckles exactly. The Allans are very firm about this, and the rulers they make are all supposedly identical and correct, no matter these measure their own feet as rarely more than seven knuckles. In any case, *Homo sapiens sapiens* are of average height and build, let us say. Natural skin pigmentation to such an extent as to warrant a label of black or even dark is a purely human trait. As is man the only hominid to sport red hair in any large population, though blonde, brown and black are far more common. They are lazy and willful. At best, their lifespan approaches a hundred years and is often far less thanks to the qualities just mentioned. They are the cockroach of hominids, having existed essentially unchanged for over two million years. All other peoples extant today are descended from them.

Homo sapiens exiguus, the dwarf or Caledonian, will certainly be for the reader a people at least as familiar as man. The two are of the same species actually, according to even the least imaginative of scholars. We do interbreed freely, and the traits of those of mixed blood are a simple random combination of their parents' or grandparents. There is a significant difference in constitution between those of pure dwarven blood and man, though this disparity is routinely exaggerated. Dwarves range in height from as little as three feet to as much as four ten, with most falling in the mid-four-foot range. They inhabit the near entirety of Caledonia of course, but most Archaean cities have a significant and increasing population of dwarven men. It is to the Caledonians that the existence of most of the sciences and arts is owed. They are on the whole very industrious if a bit possessive. They can last quite a long time; three hundred years is not uncommon.

At the time of writing, they are more numerous than any other people. They are postulated to have diverged from man sometime during the early Nehemean Era, about 1 mYa. But ask a dwarf and he'll tell you there've been little people on Earth for just as long as there've been big ones; maybe longer.

Homo sapiens veritas, the titan, deserves mention, no matter they are extinct. The titan was bred by the Nehemeans about 400 kYa; the records of the matter are extensive and detailed. They were bred for great projects. Titans were as solid as a dwarf but often exceeded twenty feet in height. It is written that the oldest titan survived until her five hundred thirty-second birthday. They were supposed to be extremely docile, but the truth of the matter must have been a bit different, for the records of their rebellion and subsequent elimination are no less picturesque than those of their origin. Not all were slaughtered, however. There exist towns in the south of Middle Caledonia comprised today entirely of *Gomerius giganti*, the giant, or - depending on how polite one intends to be - troll. Whatever one calls them, time has not been kind to them. While their ancestors were supposedly a people of great beauty, these are anything but. They might stand fifteen feet tall were their natural posture not a constant squat. They have little hair on their heads, and that they do have is wispy and tufted. They are too wiry. And their faces look like the skin was at some point stretched painfully across their skull. In any case, those that survived the million-year empire's retribution must have been in fact the most well-tempered of the titans, for the giants of today are as peaceful as cows. They are expert miners, even more able than dwarves. Though they play no part in this story, I mention them and their ancestors not only for completeness; for among the Varioca and English who sail the Shallow Sea are certain families that every now and then produce men and women of uncommon proportions, whom many claim to be the true descendants of titans. I, like most, had my doubts before sailing; but a man ten feet tall who nobody on the planet, himself included, remembers being young is too odd to not mention at least in passing.

Gremlins, as far as I'm aware, exist only in statue form from the late Nehemean era, 200-100 kYa; though all that I have seen are oddly lifelike and similar.

Homo sylvatica, the elf, is our next closest relation after the dwarf. They diverged from man - or orc; the matter is hotly debated - no more recently than 1.3 mYa, about the time the Caledonias could first be called a continent. Stories one has already heard about them will surely do, though a trait regularly left out is that they can hear absurdly well. As for their longevity, there is a great range. Ancients are said to be at least ten thousand years old, even if the high elves who produce these claims I have heard otherwise trustworthy men portray as often less than that description. Wild elves, on the other hand, are expected to make no more than half a century. The average wood elf, meanwhile, be he Dryad, Serenashi or Lleuanashi, is said to reach three thousand. These all have a childhood accepted as twenty-five years and an adolescence of a further seventy-five; though the term adolescence might be a bit misleading, for ionnas are as fertile as human females only during this phase of their development, saving a single immortal egg past then for the rest of their lives for use at their supposed choosing. Half-elves are relatively common and, like those of the ancient half-neanderthal lineage, fertile regardless of species designation. Their traits are, as one might expect, a mix and blending of their parents; though unlike dwarves, oddly enough, an elven parent confers little additional longevity to their offspring with man. Halflings are hybrids between dwarves

and elves. They are very, very small and certainly very long-lived. Elves inhabit the majority of mainland North Caledonia and a portion of Saerohan. Half-elves are generally to be found living among man. And small populations of halflings have, according to some, congregated in the heavily wooded areas of central Caledonia. My own sighting of one was at a tavern far to the southwest of Valverde. He came in, downed a pint, and, quite drunk from this, the lucky little bastard, stumbled off to the hills once again, probably to return some days or hours later to repeat the process.

Aquaticus homo, the sea elf, is, as is all too common when it comes to nomenclature, not an elf at all. Even their ears, the cause of this labeling, are very different from the landed elf's; for while slightly pointed, they can also fold back into specialized depressions on the sides of their skulls to assist them in sliding effortlessly through the water. Only the color of their hair, black fading quickly to silver during adolescence, is a trait shared with some landed elves; though in the sea elf's case streaks or whole sections of raven will often remain throughout adulthood. Sea-elven languages are still to this day a mystery of sounds, mostly vowels, unfamiliar to other peoples, though some few of them can speak rudimentary English. They can walk on land even if it is an awkward process, for their feet have lengthened over time to such a degree that it looks like they have two sets of knees. But they can of course swim with amazing ability, and might spend their entire lives in the water outside of the time required for sleep, sunbathing, and the rearing of their young. Sparse and often contradictory are the records of their longevity. Sea elves exhibit large differences, both cultural and physiological, between the sexes. The females are exaggeratedly shapely round the hips and wear the hair on their head as long as possible, ten feet long sometimes, spending much of their days managing this mess or staining it various colors, while males are all muscles, shaved/sheared domes and twenty-foot-long spears. There are two types of sea elf acknowledged by (most) scholars, the northern and the southern. The one of which nobody doubts the existence, the latter, can be found across the whole of the Amician and most of the Imperial. This southern sea elf is not only wrapped in a thin, insulating layer of blubbery fat but also covered in a coat of hair, head to toe, so thick it may be more accurately called fur, to allow them to comfortably inhabit cold waters. They often shimmer as they flit through the waves, in fact, giving one the impression that they are little more than large fish. Even when not in motion, the combination of their fur and features gives them an alien aspect. Kanakai, northern sea elves, on the other hand, are, except for the heads, utterly devoid of hair and therefore much more reminiscent of their human ancestry. It is these poor creatures that my detractors from culjya sœrou refuse to accept exist. I'll admit that Kanakai females inspire what are undeniably the most unbelievable of sea stories, and their inevitable comparison to legendary mermaids doesn't help in any attempt to portray them realistically. But they are indeed actual two-legged creatures, if extremely elusive ones. That they don't swim up to every person with a mind to document one, and that they don't seem to inhabit every warm sea that they might be able to were they of such a mind doesn't make them any less real. The truth is that they simply prefer the more wild waters of the planet, or at least those like the Shallow that are so intricately arrayed round the land that it is impossible to bother one that doesn't want to be bothered. Sea elves are postulated to

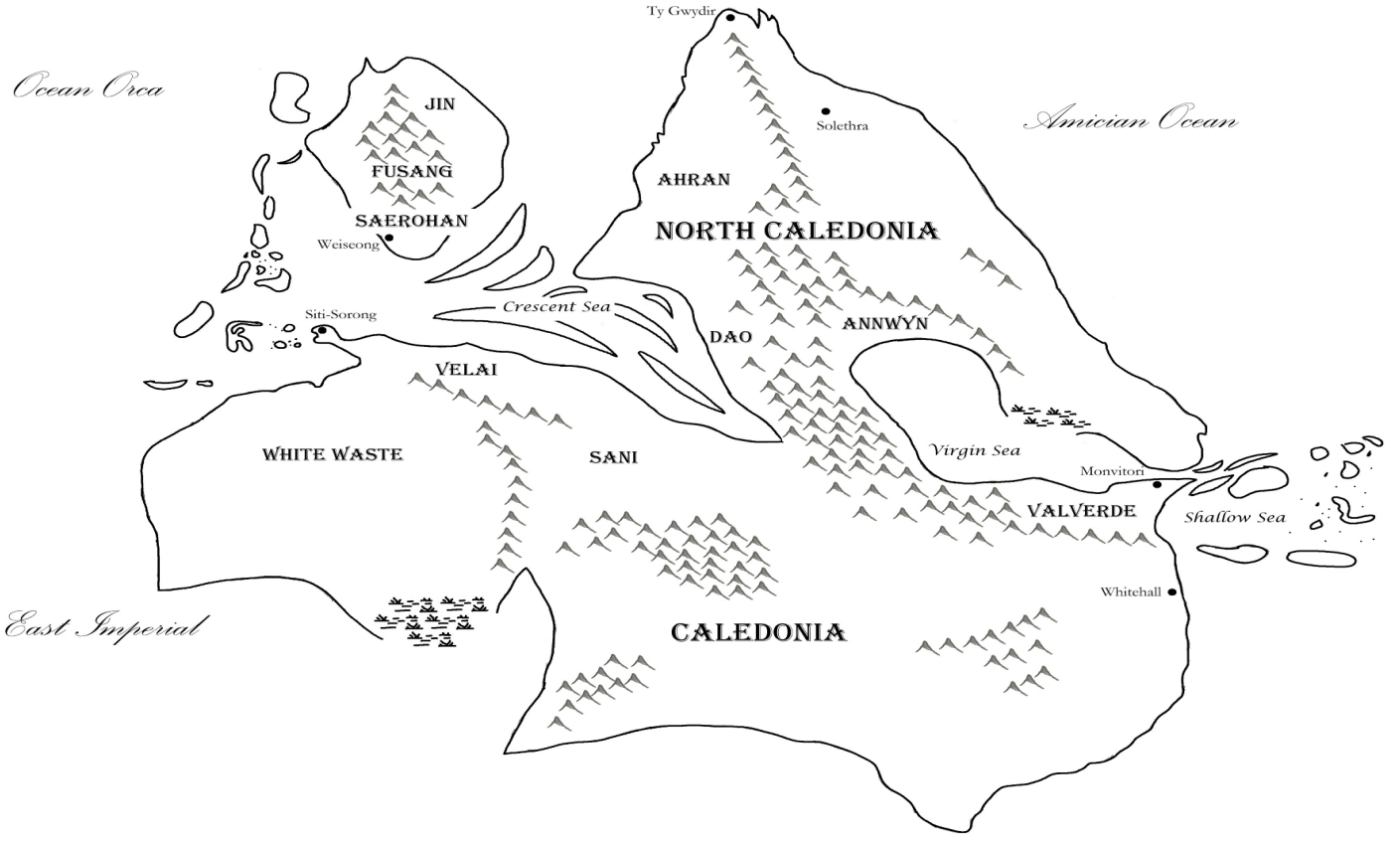
have diverged from man sometime during the late Dark Era, ~1.4 mYa, with extensive fossil finds from that period dotting the northern shore of Valverde and eastern plains of Caledonia. Evidence has been at times been offered to suggest the presence of an intermediary species between man and Kanakai called the neiad or nymph that, among females at least, though humanly proportioned overall, possessed not only the sea-onna's massive rump, but also her layer of reflectively smooth skin and therefore, as they do, appeared blue while submerged in anything deeper than a puddle, but here is where I draw the line of fiction, for attempting to fully detach this possibility from myth and pornography is fruitless. Also, there exists a very different potential ancestor of the sea elf called the goda cat, *Hominus feliformis*, which according to Ruumio and Jioli found its genesis around the same time, that lives on land still but is covered like the southern sea elf in thick fur and lithely strong and tall, as sea-elven males generally are. These thrive across the entirety of Adalanta, but seeing as the continent is claimed and fiercely protected by the Empire from permanent settlements, few are the first-hand witnesses. Many deny the goda cat the label of people at all, claiming that they are a separate evolution to erect stature from hominids entirely, descendants of some second simian or other; a not entirely ludicrous theory, as many of Utala's southern islands are as fiercely protected as Adalanta and home to various undisturbed primates. But I must agree with those of Orula's rangers who pointed a pack of them out to me when we visited those wild shores; they resembled man exactly to my eyes, were man stretched, furry and filthy, with ears placed on top of his head, twitching this way and that in search of danger. It has long been said that hybridization between sea elves - goda cats moreso - and other peoples is impossible. This is an assurance of custom more than nature, however, for I personally have met a young half-breed between Kanakai and Caledonian, a lively rascal, equally at home on land and in the water. Whether he is fertile himself only time will tell.

And last, but certainly not least, the orc. *Noctens diabolos.* Diverged, likewise, from man during the Dark Era. And the sole cause of those long, nearly three hundred thousand years being labeled thus. None deny the orc's existence as they might the sea elf's, to be sure. Although few are those who meet one who live to describe him with any level of detail, for their favorite food, outside the Atlas and a handful of islands in the Amician, is man (or dwarf - dwarf especially, actually). They also exhibit extreme sexual dimorphism, with females all being very voluptuous and pleasing to look upon, if one doesn't mind the fangs and claws, and males easily twice as large and muscular. Both sexes, however, often mount the horns or tusks of their proudest non-hominid kill on their heads by faculty of intentional, careful sawing of the skull and insertion, which wicked contraptions heal over in time - hopefully - to make ornament as sturdy as if they'd actually grown the things. The vast majority have straight black hair and skin just as dark thanks to their custom of entire and regular tattooing. The average orc, therefore, is tinted horn to toe like the deepest of void, but there are exceptions. Redheaded orcs exist but are exceedingly rare, for those that survive to adulthood are feared and despised by the rest in equal measure. Aztlan orcs, meanwhile, are said to often tattoo all sorts of designs on themselves; skeletons are common, with the face superimposed by a skull as sinisterly smiling as they like, often opposite another on the back of a shaved head. And among the Atlas tribes, most prefer colors for their skin, if still very dark ones. Even these are on the new moon all but invisible, while during the day, for a few

weeks after reapplying their ink in any case, their skin shines like gold and during the full moon like silver. Orcs may wear furs or go naked depending on the climate of their home. They inhabit all of the Aztlan and islands surrounding, make the deepest caves and darkest forests of the Caledonias home, and, until recently, occupied a full third of Archaea. They lack childhood completely; their young are born able to run and play within the day. They last thirty years at most and are ready to breed by age five. Hybrids are certainly not unheard of. Hybrids borne of human mothers are hideous creatures detested by man and orc alike, thankfully sterile. The English label of goblin is apt. Female goblins are usually discarded or eaten but the stronger males have occasional use. Thousands of these were used by the Archaean orcs against the approach of the Alliance, and, sadly, often replenished to ranks from new births at a rate exceeding even our slaughter of them. A human hybrid borne by an orcess is far more rare, for in orc society generally only those who have bested a female in combat are privileged enough to impregnate her. These are called ogres after the legendary monsters and indeed resemble them with uncanny similarity. Even the females are a bit brutish and the males can exceed twelve feet in height, significantly larger than orc males. As outcasts, they don't dare tattoo themselves too extensively and though some are able to survive in orc lands, they are more often found living among man. They lack the claws of their mothers but not the fangs or the temperament. Males are extremely fertile while female ogres are, in a, let us say, logistical sense, verymuch not. Hybrids between orc and elf, while rare, are well-documented. They are called keres. Keres, apparently, are all female. They are known for their long fangs and extreme pallor; though some tattoo themselves in orcish fashion. It is said that they are without exception solitary, intelligent, voracious and cruel creatures, but I can personally attest that that is not always entirely the case.

As to the existence of 'true' immortals, I'm afraid I have little more to offer on the subject than your average collection of mythology. One will have to read the whole of my story and judge for yourself. So. To the matter at hand...


Ocean Orca
Parthenia
Reedsport
Elendsall
Amician
ARCHAEA
Barren Sea
Hank's Hold
Sudden Sea
BOD
TERRA
Andria
Ekaldia
North Atlantic
LUSITANIA
Mazminat
SONOSALIA
ONII UTALA
Absynnian Sea
Ocean
Santo
Omomji
Kusu
Vert
South Atlantic
East Imperial
West Imperial
Shallow Sea
ADALANTA


Ty Gwydir
Ocean Orca
Amician Ocean
JIN
FUSANG
SAEROHAN
Weiseong
Solethra
AHRAN
NORTH CALEDONIA
Siti-Sorong
Crescent Sea
DAO
ANNWYN
VELAI
WHITE WASTE
SANI
Virgin Sea
Monvitori
VALVERDE
Shallow Sea
Whitehall
East Imperial
CALEDONIA

1.

From late autumn 899 until the first hints of summer 900, I was little better than a permanent fixture of the Beached Whale, a tavern situated in the northernmost portion of ɶlia less than a hundred feet from the Sudden Sea on a uniquely streamlined outcrop of basalt the builders of the road there had for some reason given up on carving out. The way accordingly narrows as it passes our great fish, so for a stretch of about a dozen yards it is barely wide enough to accommodate even a single cart. When the route is in high demand, the backed-up traffic can stretch for miles. Attempt after attempt has been made to widen a platform out into the water to ease the occasional congestion, meaning engineers from the aθɾlϳθa would come occasionally to view the damage the waves wrought on the their work's eastern side, to the great amusement of the other regulars. It was futile after all. No matter the stone they were able to add, the sea would invariably sweep it all away to the depths in time, continuing unimpressed its slow consumption of the limestone slab behind that formed the only somewhat permanent passageway. On stormy days, in fact, the tavern could more accurately be said to lie on the shore directly, since the tide would completely engulf the narrow shelf and the waves reach easily to the sides of the outcrop, splashing one after the other mere feet from our porch and the half-barnacled chairs set there in the spray. The other patrons and I would never fail to spend some time on these days to inspect the situation, with great satisfaction at the inability of the engineers to achieve anything in their fight against the sea despite their fine clothes and flowery speech, before slouching inside once more to huddle round the massive fireplace and nurse our drinks.

It was on such a stormy night that I first heard McGee tell his most famous tale. I'd been fortunate enough to meet the dwarf before becoming a fly on the wall there; he was in fact my supervisor (of a sort). And so, despite - or perhaps more because of - having noted me there doing my best to remain unheeded as was my way then, upon being challenged by Douglas 'the doorman' Duncannon Malloy-D regarding the validity of his story, he demanded loudly in his best overseer's voice that I pick up my pen at once in order to write down his every word for future inspection and verification. I actually remember making an honest effort to do so, for some reason. But I was quite drunk already, and once he gets going, he talks as if possessed regardless. We had, in fact, later on, back at our posts at the library, to fill in the details I was forced to skip to keep up then, whether I remembered him saying anything of the sort or not. In any case, once so edited, his story read something like this:

'Was I not on the End until she docked in Monvitori? I was. You ask Aedis when they get here! You ask Whaker. And did I not head north from there? I did. No, I was not left behind, before you even try to say it. It was a business opportunity! Same reason I'm here: business! And was I not, a couple months later, at Siti-Sorong? There, doing my best to fit in? I was. How did I get there, then? I walked, is how. So let me tell you about it, instead of you yapping all night about something you don't even know a damn thing about!

So. I left the ship, even though Aedis begged me to stay, and took the ferry to

cross over to the north. They all said I was daft, of course. And I'll admit it: maybe I did let the thought of all the gold to be had get a hold of me. But the Wildern have more of the stuff than they know what to do with. And all it takes to get 'em to part with every bit they've got is to get 'em sloshed. They'll give it all away for nothing more'n another sip of wine. That's what I'd heard. So I went, as any self-respectin' McGee would've, having heard about the dirty bastards.

First thing I had to do was find 'em, though. Which is no easy feat. Now. Wildern might seem like a funny name. It is, I guess. But they're only called that because they ain't got no real name for themselves. Wild ones's what we called 'em; back when we first caught sight of 'em. So now that's what they call themselves. If you force 'em to call themselves something, that is. Wild'uns is what they'll say: Wildern. But it's just them doing their best to copy us. They don't really have names for things like we have names for things. Not a single thing - besides rain and trees and rocks and so on, maybe - cause even if they did, they'd never use a single one. And I mean that. You can watch a Wildern for a week, dawn to dusk; bastard won't open his mouth to talk a single time. They absolutely hate to talk, seems. Rather just hunt. And drink. And fuck, the filthy savages. And dance. And play their little flutes. I know: you think elves, you think some tip-toeing, pretentious skeleton with skin. And nine times outta ten you wouldn't be too far off. Most elves, that is. But it's not them I'm talking about. Yet. I'm talking about the wild ones. These ones stomp through the woods breakin' shit every step they take like any normal person. And as for being so skinny they look like they're about to starve, well they sure don't get *fat* on what they manage to eat. More like the deer they like to hunt is how they seem once you meet 'em. With thick trunks of muscle to send 'em bounding off into the woods. Which, before you ask, *is* their 'onnas only saving grace. Sure don't have a decent pair of tits in a hundred of 'em, and their faces... Well, as for me, I can't stand lookin' at an elf bitch any longer'n I have to. But they do each and every one of 'em have those thighs. What make you wanna just grab a handful and give it a shake to see how long it'll jiggle for. Course, they're awfully aware of what the sight of their asses does to a man. They catch you staring - which you're gonna do; especially if you're a normal height like me; all that tail's right at eye level, after all - smile is all they do. Makes it right hard to concentrate on robbing 'em blind, anyway.

So. Where was I? Right. The ferry. Wasn't a ferry, really, so much as one guy and a leaky dingy. How he makes it from one side of the Hymen to the other every day without getting swept out to sea I have no idea. But that's your introduction to the north; doesn't get any more civilized from there. Anycase, he laughs when he finally manages to get it in his thick head what I'm after; doesn't speak a word of English, of course, and I have to grab the nearest non-retard I can find to translate for me. Didn't feel quite right to me then, having to go through so much just to get started. And knowing now how it all turned out, I think it might've been better if I'd've just turned around right then. But the End was already long gone and I didn't really have no way but forward. So on I went.

The Darn Lumeer or something - The Last Light - is where he points me to once we get to Bojardim. This shack with nary a candle in it, in fact. Just a drafty fireplace on one side and some half-spoiled barrels of ale on the other. Diesucky (Daisuke) is who he tells me to find to guide me north, I manage to get from all his jabbering. Who's pouring the beers at this place.

"Forget it," though, is what Diesucky tells me soon as I ask.

So, "Why not?" I say. I'm *gonna* pay him.

"Maybe if you ask last week," he says, like he's sorry it wasn't so. "But I now have new barrel. Still much left!"

He obviously doesn't know squat about McGees, though. "Still a bunch left?" I say. And I sling that thing over my shoulder 'thout so much as a fart. Half-full barrel of booze ain't nothin' but a feather to me!

So he takes one look at me, one look at the two sad, broke bastards sitting there at his crappy little tavern chewin' on the dregs of his last batch cause they can't afford a decent pint. And he tells them to lock up when they're done; he'll be gone for a year or two. And off we went.

Diesucky, now, was a sort of legend there in the Verge. You ever hear someone there talking about 'the catchador' or something like that down there, it's him who they mean. They say he can read a trail a boodhound'd have to give up on. That he can talk to the jungle well as you and me are talking here. That he can land a bear in bed, and all sorts of other nonsense. Me? I didn't find him to be capable of such things, really. Only trail he could follow, I found, was the shortest one to a mug of ale and the only soul on this planet who could understand him when he spoke most times was himself. Or his dog, Fred. Which is, in fact, what he did with most of his time: talk to himself. It's this unending stream of mumbles he spits out, while he's flipping his head this way or that at the trees and the birds and the mud. And you never know if he's actually directing any of it toward you or not. Try to answer him, or ask him what on earth he's talking about, he just shakes his head and throws up his hands like, 'No thanks.' Catchador, my foot! Just some moron from the west who liked to drink in the woods and talk to himself; who'd gone too far one day, gotten lost and ended up in the Verge. Five days we wandered in the woods round Bojardim, I'm telling you; me following him every step of the way. Pushing through these rutting thickets what seemed to be everywhere the ground was flat, dodging snakes and tigers and monkeys and I have no idea what else, sleeping on the ground and living offa' little more'n bread and booze. When just like that one morning he tells me the Wildern aren't there. Right when the beer's about to run out. How convenient.

So back we have to go. Back to twenty-shack Bojardim and the Last Light. Nevermind I'm trying to get across the whole of the north before the End catches the westerlies. Him, though? He's in a great mood.

"Is OK," he says. "Elf-wa beer don' like. Wine-ga. Wine-ga," he says.

"So what we been doing the last five days if they don't even like beer?" I ask the dumb bastard; understandably upset, I feel.

But all he does is grab my shoulder and say, "Very strong. Veerry strong." I'm ready to punch him!

But I don't. Least not then. What we have to do now is sneak back into his tavern cause he's worried those two what we left days before are still there and for some reason he's more scared of running into either of them than all the poisonous, clawed, gnawing beasts the woods been throwing at us since then. So, quiet as a mouse, far too early in the morning for doing anything, really, we throw open a trap door outside the place and sneak down into the cellar. Or I have to, anyway. He didn't want to. It was tight even for me; I seen bigger cellars in a Murdoch's mansion, if you know what I'm saying. Anycase, so while I'm slithering

around down there, he keeps poking his head in and half-whispering, half-yelling at me, "Wine-ga. Wine-ga." And pointing at the back corner. As if that is helping at all. But I find it in the end. Stashed behind a hundred empties of ale, there it is. His "wine-ga." This horrible concoction. Rutting elves'll love it, I think; and he seems awfully proud of it, too. So with this stuff on one shoulder, n' the hundred other things he thinks to grab this time on the other, back we go into the woods.'

'Next morning, bright and early, what do I wake up to but the sound of flutes! So, there they are already, I think: the Wildern, doing their weird elf stuff. I get up quick as I can, hoping to catch 'em in the act; but by the time I stumble outta the lean-to, they must've all run off cause when I get there it's just Diesucky (Daisuke), dancing around a dying fire all alone like a rutting idiot. Till I come up and ask him what's he doing! Did he try to get their gold or what? Last thing I wanna do is get to the west with nothing to show for all my trouble! But he acts like he doesn't understand a thing I'm saying. Just mumbles, "Very strong. Very strong," again and grabs my shoulder like he knows me. And he starts to point over to the clearing he'd brought us to, where there's a bit of corn left on the stalk that the animals and bugs hadn't gotten to yet. He starts to try to get me to help him pick the good, dried ears. But I've had enough of this shit. Ten days wandering around in the woods, lugging around that stupid barrel, when he can obviously meet up with the Wildern whenever he wants. It was time I put my foot down; the one thing a McGee don't do is work for free.

"You want me to work?" I say. "I no pay. No pay! You take me to the Wildern; then to the west. I work? No pay."

And he smiles and grabs my shoulder with a, "Very strong, veerry strong," again. I'm not entirely convinced he understands a thing I'm saying at this point, of course; but fuck it, I say to myself. Worse comes to worst, I've saved myself some money now and picked up that wine to boot. I'll just leave him behind soon as I can; once I get my bearings. Well, that was the plan, anyway.

So. With all the supplies we'd grabbed from his place, and the wine, and all this dried corn now - most of it loaded up on my back, by the way - we finally head off for good.

We follow this creek for a mile or two, then stay along the stream it turns into, and when we get to a big river, we head northwest. Well, if I thought it was bad before round the village, it was really hard-going from there. This "river" wasn't a bit like them up south: like they're supposed to be. More like a massive swamp that'd flow a little here'n there. We'd generally have to go a mile or more off to the side to dodge all the crocodile-infested bogs and good old Diesucky didn't seem to know where we were, really, anytime past getting to the thing. Went so slow it was agonizing. We'd be up and on our way soon as the sun rose, and go until the thing fell; but I don't think we could've gone more'n five or six miles as the crow flies on any given day. Not that we were getting any closer to civilization. Even slow as we were going, I couldn't help reminding myself every step I took that I was now just one more away from the nearest properly constructed, wooden structure. Diesucky, even, started to get a bit jumpy at the noises of the night. Sleep became

more of a luxury than anything. I can remember waking up now and then and seeing him or Fred staring off into the black; times like that, I could fall back asleep. But soon as I noticed them close their eyes, it'd be my turn. I'd sit there like someone'd fed me a thousand coffee beans, staring off into the woods with my hand wrapped tight round my axe. We went on this way for a week or more. I don't know; the days started to blend together. Nightfall was pitch black when we left his farm, and we went on till the moon started to get full. But I guessed we were still no more'n a hundred miles from Bojardim.

"You don't even know where on earth we are!" I finally yell at him in the middle of some thicket he couldn't seem to figure a way around, Fred runnin' round like we was playin' some game. And I throw my pack on the ground and refuse to go another step until he makes a rutting decision.

But just then he stops talking to himself. For once. And he throws a hand up to his mouth to try and get me to do the same.

"What is it now?" I ask the idiot.

But he shushes me like I'm a child.

Better part of an hour, seems, we stay like that; staring off into the trees. As if they could bite. Then I notice that he's got his hand down his belt and there's a bulge - not that kind of bulge, Douglas, 'fore you get excited - where he's got a blade hidden. Never seen him reach for it before then. So for a second I start to think too much; he'd obviously heard something. Wyrm? Wyvern? I have no idea. But you can be sure I get my trusty axe ready anyway.

Now. I never thought I'd be the type to go on about the mysteries of nature and all that, but if I say it once, I can say it a million times: you have never seen the real face of them jungles down north till you've seen 'em weapon in hand, half-expecting any given branch to transform into some flying, clawed, poisonous death-machine. I mean, it's all green this and brown that, with yellows and reds and blacks all mixed in. Start looking too good at any one part, there's nothing your mind can't turn into a jaguar's grin as it gets ready to pounce. And it's not like your ears are any help. Even besides the beating of your heart, pounding through your head, there's birds, and bugs - so many damn bugs - and who knows what else screeching and screaming away, all of 'em trying their best to outdo one another, seems. And being out there in all that noise, all that mess - stomach grumbling away for some real food; was days since I'd had some meat - you can understand just how hungry a creature can get. Not to mention how nice of a meal *you* might make for whatever's out there big enough to bring you down. Right unsettling, it is. But there we were anyway, ready to beat nature into submission if need be. All for the sake of money-making. Course, it wasn't the beasts that was so much our problem as the dirty Wildern we'd finally found. Or'd found us, rather.

It came completely without warning: a single arrow, flying straight at me. So, quick as a cat, I jump off to the side and it just barely misses. A couple of seconds go by. I'm under a downed trunk now, and I try to look. But I can't get sight of the fuckers. So, finally I risk a glance over the trunk. Within a millisecond, of course, what happens but another arrow comes straight at me. But I was ready for it this time; it just scrapes the bark above my head when I duck back down. So there I stay now. And I expect that Diesucky's doing the same. But when I look his way, what do I see but him farting around way out in the open still. Completely unworried. He's talking to himself again, if you can believe it, craning his neck like

he was trying to watch a show round someone who keeps getting' up in front of 'im! Idiot'll be shot for sure, I think. Till I start to understand.

Of all the... I think. Talk about holding a grudge! I mean, sure; we'd kicked their asses at Gog's Wheel but they'd licked us at the Point. And that was all years ago! Well, apparently, it was shoot to kill still for the elves, at first sight of anyone short enough to form a proper rutting sentence; but a gune in their woods was fine.

I don't move a muscle, anyway. Till I notice Diesucky's following my lead now and he's ducked down behind another trunk maybe twenty feet away. He's waving me to a different spot in front of us. Right, I think. We'll meet up there and take 'em out one by one. So I give it a quick glance to check my path and off I go. Quick as a cat, I run over to where he's pointing. So fast I take 'em all completely by surprise; I'm halfway there before the arrows even start. But when they come now, they come in force. They zip by me one after the other after the other, each one splitting the tree behind me the moment I pass it. All I can do is jump off to the side to give 'em the slip. When suddenly, not three feet away from me, closer'n from me to rasid here, this massive wall of fur rises up above me from behind a bunch of vines. From out of nowhere. One second it was all leaves and twisty shit and the next it was nothing but horns and eyes and this gigantic chest, coming at me fast as the eye can see. Comes right at me, before I can even get my footing again. But it's harder than that to sneak up on a McGee. So I grab my axe. And I plant my feet. And before anyone can say 'purple paradise,' I swing it up towards the beast's head. Slice it clean from the thing's shoulders; one swipe. Hit it so hard, the body flies ten feet off to the side; while the head flips end over end over end and comes to rest right at my feet. And it looks right up at me with its dead eyes; a gigantic marsh deer. Or what's left of it, anyway. Must've been a hundred years old; the antlers were wide as I am tall, almost. And so. Just like that we met the Wildern we'd been looking for at last.

Must've been pretty impressed by my swing, cause they all came out of hiding. They come round us and the deer, and start pulling their arrows from its side to see what they'd done to it. As if that was anything at all: I mean, I'd chopped off the thing's head! Didn't say a word to each other, of course, as they're doing all this; but I could tell they were all pretty angry. And they keep on looking over my way. Gets so awkward, I get ready to start swinging again, till Diesucky comes over to explain it to me. "Finishes the deer he the heart gets," he tells me. Which, even though they'd each and every one of 'em stuck an arrow in its side, was me apparently. They'd all bounced off a rib or missed the heart by a knuckle. "Great honor is," he tells me. Well, color me honored, then, I think.

So. While they start tearing the thing apart, I let 'em know how I feel about all this by getting the damn rocks out of my boots. Diesucky helps 'em. They cut open the chest, and pull the guts out. And just like that, they toss the heart my way.

"And what am I supposed to do with that?" I say.

"You eat," says Diesucky. And he motions with his hands, like. Strange time for him to start getting specific.

I, anycase, say, "What? Now!? Ever heard of, I dunno, cooking your food? Or... salt and pepper? Or a meal that doesn't consist entirely of raw meat, covered in rutting leaves, now, by the way? Heard of carrots, maybe? Broccoli?" Of course not, the savages.

Long story short, I had to eat the thing then and there; they wouldn't leave me

alone about it. Fucking disgusting. Anycase, after that we pick up all the pieces of deer and head off into the woods again. Uphill a bit, we come to this footpath. Was a lot better than following Diesucky around, but calling it a path at all is giving it a bit too much credit, I think. Even if you'd spent an hour pointing the thing out to me, I wouldn't've been able to tell the difference between it and the rest of the woods. But I stumbled along it well enough. Them ahead of me skip along like it's a wide-open road, of course. Don't even bother to stop for nightfall. They just keep on keepin' on like they're going down the hallway from their kitchen to the bedroom and it just happens to be a bit of a walk. I can barely see a thing by this point, but somehow, a couple hours later, we make it to their camp.

This place, now, was something else entirely. How they stand to live like this I have no idea. Was essentially a field of miserable little hovels they'd either dug out under a plant they liked or cut up into one. The fire in the middle of the place seemed the only thing that really mattered. Must've been keeping it going full tilt for a year; the woods around it for a mile in any direction'd been cleaned of anything and everything that could burn. Wasn't no tents or houses or anything; just a million animal pelts laying around. Big ones, little ones; some stretched out on racks, some on branches, some draped over their hovels. Most, though, were laid out in gigantic, twenty-foot-wide beds. You could almost walk from one side of the place to the other without having to touch foot to dirt one time. And some of the beds seemed thick enough you might dive in and bounce off without a bruise, almost.

Most importantly, though, it's on these beds that the women were; it was just the men who'd been out hunting. They're just lounging around, these 'onnas, watching us as we stumble on in. Some of 'em were wearing furs - or little bits of fur, more like - here and there round their ankles or shoulders and hips. But even then past nightfall it was still pretty hot; most of 'em were bare-assed as the day they were born, tiny little tits jigglin' away in the moonlight. But I barely notice all that. Since the one thing all these ladies had in common was that they were covered in gold of one sort or another. Young, old: didn't matter. It glittered away in the firelight there, a little on each of 'em. Sometimes it was the only way to tell where they were, they blended in so well with the woods, brunettes tanned brown as bark as most of 'em were. I immediately start counting the karats, of course; while they must've gotten the wrong idea, since they start acting like they don't like my staring. Some of 'em, anyway. Like I said before, most of 'em don't seem to mind; just smile back and give me a little show. Nice as all that is, though, my eyes are focused on one color and one color only: yellow. They've got earrings. They've got bracelets. They've got necklaces. They've got these stocking-looking things with little golden leaves that spread out in a mesh that'd hug their thighs. They've got bras of gold wire without the cups. They've got garter belts, like, to hold their other shit in place. They've got toe-rings and finger-rings and gold through their nostrils and lips and tongues. It was the most fantastic thing I'd ever seen in my life. Hundred pound of the stuff, I guessed, glittering there round that fire. What's more, you could see it in their eyes right off: they didn't really care about a bit of it. Had absolutely no idea how much it was all worth. To them it was pretty much on the same level of importance as the flowers they had in their hair, but shiny, and maybe more convenient cause they didn't have to constantly switch it out to keep it all looking good. So I hugged that barrel of wine tight. A karat a sip would be fair,

I figured, supply and demand all considered.

But Diesucky, the bastard, grabs the thing from me when I'm not looking and starts passing it around for free! I immediately try to behead him, of course. But the elves hold me back as they're laughing and dancing, laughing and dancing, putting the hunks of deer on spits, playing their stupid flutes. And drinking all of my wine! No matter what I tried to do from there, I was outnumbered. I yelled. I made speeches. I appealed to their sense of common decency. I tried to punch whoever had the barrel. Didn't matter. They just kept on dancing and laughing, Diesucky included. Until finally, I give up. There's barely any left in the thing by this point, and I figure I'm gonna have to play nice or I won't even be able to get drunk myself. So nice I play, and they finally let me have some. But to my surprise, instead of trying to take it back immediately once I'd had a little, they keep on motioning to me. Like they want me to kill the thing. First they steal it; now they want me to have it all? Diesucky has to explain, once again.

"The rest for you is," he says. "Finishes the deer he the feast gets." And with a smile, he leans down to me to point out what else'd been set aside for whoever downed that deer, apparently: one of the 'onnas, sprawled out a single skin big as a house, what was rolled out middle of a bed of moss and flowers a hundred feet wide, across the fire from us. Who'd coincidentally acted the most like she was better than all my staring at her gold. Which; she also had more of the stuff than all the others. And this... is how I met my Meryl. She's staring right back at me with the meanest expression I've ever seen on a woman. Got her legs bent off to the side, like, showing off those fat, tan hips of hers but with the goods closed up tighter'n the gates on the Promenade Whitehall way. Till she sees me notice her, that is, and she opens 'em up with a look off to the side, like.

Well. Didn't need to tell me twice. I down the last of the wine as I step up to her and her skins. Not exactly a nice, cozy mattress - if I roll too much to the side, I'd end up skewered on some tusks the size of my... - but it'll have to do. And as if to make sure I knew this wasn't anywhere close to civilization, they all start hollerin' moment I pull down my pants. Like someone'd put 'em all out on the rack. Girls included, even. They come up behind me as they're dancing round the fire, one after the other. And smack me on the ass, each and every one of 'em. I kid you not! One after the other, they come at me from behind and give me a wallop right on the meat of it. By the time I'd think to try to defend myself against any one of 'em, they'd've landed the blow already and another was coming from the other side. Diesucky, too, the crazy fucker. He even gives it a second go and pushes me right onto her. So, ass stinging like I'd tried to take a shit on a beehive, I trip right onto my prize. Headbutt her a little, in fact. Took a moment to get settled, as you can imagine. But eventually I hit the mark and start to give her what for. It's so nice and warm in there I don't even care she won't look at me as I'm going.

So. I start pumping. And this is where I win her over, of course. These elf guys may look pretty, after all, but throw 'em on top of a broad, they'll be done in thirty seconds. Not a McGee, no sir! I start out slow, to get the juices going, then get into my rhythm. Smack, smack, smack! Unh, unh, unh! And by the time I get into the groove of it, she's screaming hundred times louder'n they are and holdin' on for dear life. "Sa, sa, sa!" And it starts to drizzle a little in the middle of it, so we're slipping and sliding around while she's yelpin' her head off. So I let her get off a couple times and finish up once and for all. She scarpers after that, and I have to

go through another round of ass-smacking - or attempted ass-smacking, rather, since I managed to cover up a bit this time - before they let me roll over and go to sleep.

But. Little did I know that this whole time it wasn't us who was doing the real hunting. Rather, it was us who was the prey. High elves, see, have this crazy system where each and every animal that might be hunted anywhere in their lands is reserved, for lack of a better word, for some particular elf or other. And generally speaking, the older and bigger the animal in question, the more important the one it's reserved for. Turns out that deer I'd butchered; the one with the antlers wide as I am tall, what'd gotten me nice and laid? Well, turned out that poor, dead deer was reserved for none other than Reyslandil, prince of Annwyn and the Ancients himself, and...'

"Now wait just a minute!" complained Haeggar suddenly, cutting the story off mid-sentence. It'd seemed the oarsman had been excitedly on the side of believing McGee as the tale had unfolded - or at least unwilling to doubt him aloud thus far - but was now clearly joining Douglas in trusting not a single word. He demanded incredulously, "*You* brought down the deer of defiance? It was John *McGee* who started the war between the elves?"

But the dwarf paused for barely a second to respond angrily, "Well, I'd've probably told you all about it by now if you didn't insist on interrupting all the time." And he puffed deeply on his pipe for a time to better continue,

'Well... Yeah; long story short, I suppose you could say it *was* me who started the war. Though things'd been getting bad between the Wildern and Silvern for a while. Only thing what was needed to bring it to blows on a large scale was a spark. That's all I did: hit flint to steel. Since as I was *saying*, it was none other than Reyslandil, turned out - prince of Annwyn and the Ancients himself - who our dear deer in question had belonged to. And him'n a hundred lackeys'd been on its trail for the better part of a month; a hunt that might seem a bit long for any rational being. But like I said, the elves have this ridiculous, called-it-first system of bringing down their food. And if it turns out the deer you've got dibs on has wandered across half the continent in the meantime since you called it, well if you want to eat it's your job to find it, wherever it is. High elves, now, is who this applies to: the ones with the sticks all the way up their asses. Wild elves obviously don't care about any of that; they kill just about anything they can get their hands on. And the rest of 'em really only pretend to follow the rules when a silver-hair comes round. But the high elves take this shit seriously. Each and every kill is planned out years before. More than that: they know what buck'll end up going with what doe somehow, how many fawns they'll have, seems, and every single deer they let live has a name, a birthday they remember probably, and who knows what else. They look the other way generally, if it's an unnamed deer you bring down, and you regularly make a show of respect to them. But the Wildern don't do any of that. High elves hate 'em with a vengeance. Hate 'em more than us, even. And for a troupe of wild elves to bring down a deer what was reserved for the prince, of

all people, no matter how far the thing'd wandered, was a death sentence.

Silent they came, Reyslandil and his boys. Break of dawn, the very next morning after our feast. Wasn't more'n a handful of us not completely useless, hungover as we all were. Half the deer was still on the spits, so there was no pretending it wasn't us. We're passed out all over the place; only defense we had was the piles of furs we were layin' in. The arrows started while we still slept - and they call elves civilized. A dozen of our Wildern friends were dead before anyone even knew what was going on. But then the screams woke us all up. From there it was like they practiced it every morning. Arrows started flying both ways, and the yelps started coming from the woods just as often as from our campfire. But in the end it was hopeless. We were taken completely by surprise and outnumbered two to one. When the Silvern swept in on their horses once and for all, they had us completely surrounded. They leveled dozens of bows at us from every direction. All we could do was crawl out of the skins and throw up our hands.

That's when the interrogation began. They were furious, the high elves. They took the Wildern one by one and asked them the same question: "Qui'i avas'o ucidi?" Same guy it was who did the asking, this towering-tall taut-rope of muscle, with features so sharp and elven, looked like someone'd put his face in a vice. He asked this three times - no more; no less - to each of the Wildern they brought in front of him, while the prince looked on without a word. But the only answer they'd get every time was a spit in the face. Three fuck-you loogies from each of our boys, right in vice-face's fat face. So one after the other, our new Wildern friends met the sharp end of his sword; this half-halberd, half-scimitar thing with a blade sharp as a razor.

Somehow Diesucky'd (Daisuke) survived the arrow storm, so I crawl over to him to find out what was going on during all this. Him who'd finally let me have that wine the night before was up to Reyslandil by that point. And the prince's second asked him the same question he'd asked them all: "Qui'i avas'o ucidi?" Which apparently meant, 'Who killed the deer?' As you can imagine, my first instinct was to scarper and let these pointy-eared bastards figure it all out for themselves. But once this latest sod got his dose of steel and that pile of corpses grew by one more to reach almost to the belly of Reyslandil's horse, the next one they pulled up to ask was Meryl. My Meryl. And that sassy bitch let 'em know how she felt the same as the rest. Must've been saving it up the whole time, since it looked twice the size as the others and had some booger in there to boot. Hit his eye moment the question left his lackey's lips. The prince, this time. And this. Was the point they lost their patience. Didn't even bother with the second or third asking with her; just like that, vice-face's sword raises toward the sky and I get ready to see her head fall. But. Don't ask me why; moment I get it in my head the picture of her face going still with some messed-up scream frozen on those big, pouty lips, I jump forward with a, "Now hold on a second, you bastard!" Surprised no one more'n myself.

"It was me," I tell 'em. "I killed the rutting deer; on earth business is it of yours?" And Diesucky translates: "Koito di. Koito'i avas'o ucidi." Wasn't a head in the place that didn't turn in my direction. So. Having gotten the spotlight thusly, I spit on the ground at the prince's feet to let 'em all know how I felt about the whole thing.

Reyslandil didn't waste a second in coming up to me. I knew then just how badly I was screwed but fuck it, I figured; I stared right back at him like I could take him

and every one of his boys. While him? Had this look on his face like he'd just eaten something awful as he looked down at me. And for a moment we stood just like that. In complete silence. Him, with his picture-perfect features, shining silver hair down to his waist, covered in fancy armor lined in velvet and silk, mounted on top of this magnificent beast in front of a hundred soldiers. And me, well... Looking same as I do tonight mostly, sorry to say, except with a fair bit more mud on me. Didn't even come up to his horse's shoulders; only thing I was mounted on was these here balls of steel. Made quite a pair. No one in the place moved a muscle. Cept Fred, growlin' away still, dumb mutt. Till with one last look of pure disgust, he says at me, plain as day, like he was ordering an extra on his breakfast, "Cith'ael." And he sweeps off back to the woods while his boys start in on me with a hundred swords aimed right at my neck.

I was done for fer sure. No two ways about it, but I got my trusty axe ready anyways. When out of nowhere, one of the Wildern - a child, in fact; couldn't have been more'n ten - springs out from behind a tree moment the prince gets into the shadow of the forest, past the light of the fire and the dawn. And in the span of half a second, that pretty-boy prince was made pretty no more. Kid sliced Reyslandil from balls to chin and pulled out his guts same way they'd cut up that deer down by the river, leaving the insides likewise on the wayside for the ants and rats and dogs to make their dinner.

From there was complete chaos. Most of the Wildern who were left got out of there in the blink of an eye, seeing as the Silvern were now a bit distracted; made straight for the prince as if they could sew him back up and everything'd be fine. Meanwhile, the Wildern hunters start hacking away at 'em as they figured what to do. Me and Diesucky made short work of them who were still coming for me. Finally, the bastard was some help. That sword of his might not've looked like much, but it was great for taking out their mounts' jugulars one after the other - quick as lightning. Theirs too, for that matter. And I smashed whoever was left. Screw these elves, I thought. Was just like I was back in the army. They didn't stand a chance against me'n good old Diesucky. Must've taken down twenty of 'em ourselves. When finally the other Silvern get their shit together and vice-face screams out, "Cith'aela mina! Cith'aela mina!" And they sweep round to finish any of the Wildern stupid enough to be around still. Diesucky slips off with the last of 'em into the woods. So much for helping me out, I think. Since when all was said and done, it was me and me alone who was left to face what was left of Reyslandil's boys, seeing as there was no way these stubby legs of mine could've gotten this oversized ass away from 'em. I'm ready for the end again, till a moment before they take my head, vice-face calls out, "Cerath'os!"

I was alive still, once the dust settled. Fat lot of good it did me.'

By then the storm was truly raging outside. It had reached its center and would remain at full force throughout the remainder of the story. So we were all, like it or not, trapped there listening unless we preferred a swim in the surf to start our trek home. Only Douglas had had the foresight to leave before the road was impassable, with barely a grumble at our speaker to try to break the spell he held us

under, though his shaking head showing clearly how tall he thought the tale. No matter. In the atmosphere further isolated from reality by his absence, bounded so convincingly as it was by the din of waves and wind outside, McGee's story slowed without losing a bit of its enchantment. He paused, even, here, to await the end of the furious scratching that was my attempt to catch up with its telling. Then with little more than a nod, directing the barkeep's idle hands to fill my mug (which did not help me in my scholarly efforts at all), he continued,

'Weeks later, round about the time the End was making Cape Cunya, halfway to Siti-Sorong, I was still locked up in a cell deep in the elven east. Course, I say, "cell." But calling it that is probably being a bit generous. Tangled up in a bunch of grapevines is what I was, really. Told me it was so they could go for their hunts a couple times a year without worrying about feeding their prisoners, the elves. Which laziness I was grateful for at first. Figured it'd take me a day or two at most to get out of the stupid thing if no one was going to be watching me for a while. But on closer inspection I saw that it was twisted together so plaguey tough - by someone with entirely too much time on their hands, was clear - that it was impossible to figure how to open it up once they dumped me in there any more'n to get an occasional glimpse of what was going on outside through all the leaves.

Couldn't see very far. The only thing I could make out, really, was maybe twenty more cages in the area. Some were still in the process of growing together. Some were ready, seemed, but open on top, waiting for their prisoner. Some'd grown together so tight it was clear whoever'd been unfortunate to get thrown in was long since smooshed. The vines grew up to an arbor of sturdy wooden arches, supported by columns of marble three feet wide each, twenty feet tall, spread here and there across the place. There was a design to the arches that spiraled on and on, so the columns were anything but regular. No rhyme or reason, seemed, except to make the top look pretty. Couldn't think of a thing more elven. I had one by me, anyways, five feet away more or less. If I swung my cage real good, I could catch hold of some of the bigger vines that wrapped around it to pick the grapes that hung down all the way round. I made a long catching stick, too, to get everything else within ten feet or so all directions. Got a hold of so much I even tried to make some wine, but it didn't turn out so good. Not like wine ever does, really. On the other side of the pillar, anycase, was another cell filled by a poor sod like me; still alive and kicking. Or alive, anyway; he'd long since stopped kicking. A Malloy of the highest caliber - forget his name - who'd been dead back home for ages. Prisoner there since the war, he was, who apparently wasn't worth the ransom the elves'd demanded from his cheapskate clan and so'd been left there to rot. Wasn't the greatest conversationalist, to say the least. You'd think with nothing else to do but hang there all day you'd find some time to have a decent chat every now and then. But all he'd ever say to me when I tried to get his attention was that the elves could hear us. "They listen now," he'd say. "They listen always." Then not another word. Right nut, he was. And as time wore on I figured I'd end up the same, sooner or later; till my cage grew closed round me of course and I suffocated slowly over the course of months or years. Well... If the smell of whatever it was that coated the ground below us, a pleasantly fragrant mix of a couple millennia of rotted grapes and prisoners' shit and piss, didn't kill me first, that is.

They left me hanging like that for a while. Wouldn't be able to tell you how long,

exactly. We'd had to walk a couple days to get to the Endara from the fight at the Wildern's camp. Then we took a ship. Then hiked up into the mountains. A couple weeks' trip altogether, so by my reckoning it was early December when we got there. Whatever the case the fruit on the vines were the size and color of blueberries when they threw me in and by the time I got out, not only had they ripened and I'd worked my way through everything I could reach, the leaves'd fallen and new buds were bursting out.

Before all that, though, I got a pair of visits. From a Lleuanashi named Ementhygar, and later from my Meryl. Must've made quite an impression on her! First was Ementhygar, though. I had no idea what it was, the sound he made as he approached. Pop, pop, pop, it was like. Sometimes far away. Sometimes almost within sight. But always the same thing: pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. With a hollow finish like clicking your tongue at the back of your mouth. Lasted for a week off and on, for hours at a time. Interspersed here and there by a crash as a whole section of vine was tossed down below. They'd started throwing us bread by then, since the grapes were long gone. But that they did silently. Nothing but a second's flash of silver and slippers and you better be ready to catch or you ain't gonna eat that day. Couldn't figure what it was for the life of me, this sound. But never have I pruned a grapevine, of course. That's Murphy work. Finally, though, he comes right up to me. Before I can say a thing, he's snipping off the tops of the vines right above me with shears and sliding some of what he'd cut into a giant sheath he carried with him as he went. I must've been some kind of desperate for company, since I called out for him to wait. Which he did. He dropped his pack and, legs swinging down from one of the arches nearby, pulled out a bit of bread that he munched on - not sharing a bit with me, of course - while I asked him every question I could think of about what was going on outside.

Didn't learn much. "You are very curious for a dwarf," he told me after a while; once he'd dodged every answer I'd wanted from him with either a grunt or a single word that did nothing in the way of me getting a grip on why I was there.

So finally, I got to the meat of the matter. Said, "Well, why am I in here then, instead of dead out in the woods? What on earth do they want with me, your bosses? A fight to the death I understood. But this waiting around is killing me!"

That was the first time he took more'n a single breath to respond. Raised his eyebrow the littlest bit, and told me to watch what I wished for with an evil little smile. Then he added, "And what makes you think I have superiors, dwarf? We are not like you, with charts needed to demonstrate who is better than whom. All are equal under the sky, after all."

So I told him to stow it. Didn't need no charts; with elves it was simple. The clothes he wore, the shoes he didn't, all that shit painted on his face. He was Lleuanashi, clearly, which meant the silver-hairs told him what to do or else. I'd learnt a thing or two in the war, I told him. And last thing I needed was to be talked down to by some sheet in the wind what spent most of his days stoned or hopped up or both. He laughed pretty hard at that, so I finished up, "Well, go ahead then; you snip me on outta here with those things and go get me my axe. I'll show you what I mean."

So he says, "I think not, dwarf. I learned much in the war as well: for instance, that you can never trust a McGee. Since you spend most of your time drunk." Which is true, of course. Not the trust part. You can trust us just fine. The drunk

part. Well, not drunk, really. But I wouldn't call it sober, either. Look. Everybody knows men'll die if we go too long without booze; McGees just like to keep a healthy dose up in our blood to make sure we stay hale and hearty. Maybe that's why I thought it was a good idea to talk with this elf then; I was going insane from lack of liquor. Anycase, he tells me, "You would probably run off as soon as I let you out to fight, and I would be left to explain this to Favaris and Lithonasa."

"So they *do* tell you what to do!" I say, figuring these two to be the silver-hairs who kept him in line. Caught him red-handed, I did!

But he puts a face on just like any McGee might when we get on about these Allans or Malloys and tells me, "They certainly think they do...."

We both laugh at that. So I introduce myself properly at last, and he wipes the crumbs off his hand to shake mine through the vines. And off he went.

I only mention the bastard because I can't think of no other way she knew how to find me, my Meryl. Nose in the air like the rest of 'em he was, but he must've run into her somehow, since it was the very next night she came to see me. Surprised me something fierce, she did. Climbed up that pillar in the middle of the night while I'm fast asleep without a sound and wakes me up by... Well, I won't say what she grabbed to wake me up, exactly. Or what she let me grab on her. All I will say is that by the time she left, I was hornier than I'd been in my entire life, and I've thought about little more'n pussy and booze since the day I turned thirty-three. Even if all I had to show for her visit was this little knife she gave me. Didn't say a thing as she handed it to me, of course. Only thing she did do was make clear that I was *not* allowed to pull out the blade. She simply would not have it; second I'd try, she'd grab me to stop. I could only wonder at what it was all about. Something else perfectly and entirely, elvenly nonsensical. The thing was useless to me. It was too small to cut the vines that held me. Although it was very pretty. The pommel was twisted into two snakeheads, with four little rubies for eyes and it came with a matching, curved sheath. Had I been in a market, I could've gotten five hundred pounds for it, no problem. But I was not in a market. I was in a cell in the middle of nowhere and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure why she'd given it to me then scarpered off without even trying to get me out. So I slipped it into my pocket and forgot about it, all the better to get back to my busy routine of sitting on my ass and slapping mosquitoes. Until they finally let me out not long after.

It was vice-face himself leading a pair of other silver-hairs that came. Made me look like a complete idiot. All it took was pulling a single vine from below and the whole cage fell apart; split open into halves and out I fell into the slime. The two lackeys dragged me up and from there we started out.

I think it worth mentioning that these vineyards, now, went on for a good three hours of walking. And we went the shortest way to our destination, I assume. Who knows how long we would've gone for if we'd set off in some other direction. On and on we trudged, with vice-face above us on the arbors, arrow nocked and ready, pointed my way. And on and on went this prison of vines. My opinion of the place got even lower, if you can believe it, since back in my cage, I'd been free to assume that it was just a little bit that was used to hold captives - we'd walked in on a neverending bridge that went over the arbors and I hadn't been able to see anything below the canopy on the way. The fact that only one of the cages around me had been filled, too; I'd figured there were maybe a hundred prisoners total. A thousand at most. How many could they possibly want to keep? Seemed

a whole lot of effort to grow the vines like that. And no matter how ridiculous of a person he is, every elf I've ever met always presents himself as some kind of nature-lover first and foremost. Might use that image to justify all sorts of strange things, but holding as many people captive as the Silvern were then just never crossed my mind as something they might want to do. At some point you have to see it for what it is: a crime against mother nature herself, to keep so many living things locked up. But there was an endless field of prisoners: men, gunes, orcs, other elves, didn't matter. On and on and on it went. Just on the line we walked, we must've passed a thousand souls. Now I saw the real truth: the high elves were higher, even, than nature in their minds. And this place was the pinnacle of their greatness: controlling one kind of life completely only to imprison another. To me it was even more despicable, since not only were there in fact an insane number of prisoners locked up there, they didn't even use the rutting grapes! All of them went completely to waste. We walked all morning almost, and every single step we took was muddy with the juice. It was revolting. Not a single animal save rats could stand the place; they'd scurry away as we made our way, and their shit made yet another layer of disgusting on top of what was already pretty rutting bad. Only other thing that made any use of the place was the coating of mold that we had to push through to get out. Was so thick, the air around us was cloudy with what we kicked up as we went. I still had my boots on, thankfully, and we're sturdy types regardless, as you all know, knowing me. But the two who dragged me along didn't do so well. They went barefoot, with their pant legs tied up above the knee. Was hard enough for them to keep all their fancy silks from dragging in the muck. And the smell of the mold and the mud got to them something awful; seemed they might puke with every step they took. Vice-face watched us from above, of course. He was the boss, clearly, and he wasn't about to come down below that canopy, no way. We made it to the exit, anyway, after our trek. To a bathhouse where I had to wait another hour for the two who'd pulled me along to strip, soak and get dressed again before we finally started up. Air still smelled like shit for a while. But eventually, we came to a very different kind of scenery.

The palaces of Annwyn, in case you haven't heard, are something to behold. Not in a hundred years would I be able to figure how they pieced 'em together. Each and every one looks as if it'd been carved from a mass of solid marble. Might be the case, for all I know. They gleam away in the tropical day like some lifeform grown on the surface of the sun itself; with spires and towers and great big arches that rivaled the peaks around us, stained glass that glittered away across the whole of the horizon. There were hundreds we could see once we got far enough above the arbors, spread across a hilly plateau that went off in every direction, ringed by snow-capped mountains so tall you could barely tell where they stopped and the sky began. And all around us, from where we were to the tops of those peaks to the Endara to the south, was covered in color. Thick woods of dark green over most of it, with little openings here and there letting the light green and oranges and reds of grasses and flowers through, and the purple and pink of the trees in bloom. Even the prison we'd just left was worked like magic into the landscape; flowed along like waves frozen in wood over the hills, a neverending sea of arches covered in the bright yellow buds of the vines as they busted open in new growth, with not a bit of indication as to what exactly hung below. The palaces themselves were worked into their surroundings as if by nature's hand, too. Some were nestled

nicely into little valleys. Some spread over the slopes of the hills. Others arched over the rivers that flowed away toward the east. But the one we headed for was the fanciest. Perched over all the others on top of a solitary peak what sat right in the center of the place, high above the hills. A gigantic, magnificent thing 'at seemed rooted in the mountain below it like an ancient, massive tree might've been, with knobs of white that protruded over the canopy of the surrounding forest and extended in ridges halfway down the slopes to where we walked, gripping the rock below. Most magnificent thing I've seen to date and let me tell you, I've been around the world ten times if once. Would've been quite an experience, had I not been certain that I was being dragged there to my death.

We walked for an hour or two after we left the vineyards. At first there were all sorts around: Silvern, Serenashi, Lleuanashi; and Wildern to do the heavy lifting. They'd all point at me and prattle on in their strange tongues as we passed, except the Wildern of course, but always they gave us, and vice-face especially, a wide berth. As we made our way up, though, it was us who'd have to stop and wait for the ones we passed more often'n the other way round. Silver-hairs all by this point. Vice-face and his boys'd bow deep, and not dare to look up for even a second; while I'd sit tight and scratch my nuts. Deeper and longer they bowed, seemed, the more oblivious and in a daze the one they did it for was. Ancients, I thought to myself. Must be. I'd never seen one before. Few men who do live to tell the tale. Seems they mostly spend their lives walking around in a complete haze. Contemplating the mysteries of the universe is what any elf'll tell you. Batshit crazy from old-age is what it looked like to me. But who's to say?

Finally, anycase, we get to our destination. Highest part of one of the towers round the perimeter of the palace, it was. Could see most of the rest of the castle high above us still to the north. But even only halfway up, with the beating sun directly overhead and clear skies, it was downright cold there. We came to a huge courtyard surrounded on all sides save our entrance by the raised seating of an amphitheater, the whole thing covered with a spire of marble that shot up hollow into the sky above us, held up by a hundred arches. Day was still as could be down below, but up there the wind howled away. The spire blocked the worst of it, but flags of silk with the King's banner fluttered around us endlessly on every side; and every now and then a big gust would burst through and make everyone grit their teeth against the cold. There were a thousand elves there waiting for us, but not a word was uttered as we made our entrance. Vice-face forced me to my knees in the middle. And as he left me there, a solitary voice echoed through the place. A single silver-hair it was, seated front and center. A foot taller than the rest, and dressed in a thick gown of silk lined with velvet. Was fifty feet away from me and the wind howled away still, but the spire and seating reverberated his voice down to me so loud and clear he might as well've been whispering in my ear.

Said, "You stand accused, dwarf, of the murder by most brutal of means of Regifaranthus, noblest of the hoof, who was life-partner to Reyslandil, prince of Annwyn and the Ancients. My son. And of provoking our prince's death by enabling his killer. Which crimes earn you death a hundred times over. Nay, a thousand! But moreover are you known to have fought viciously against us in the brutal combat of those fifteen winters ago. In that unprovoked conflict which your people brought to our verdant lands; which was so cowardly, so motivated by arrogance and by greed, that the words of your language on my lips now taste of

the fruit of the water-hemlock and sound of the shrieking of bats in the night! Here assembled are those who have equal right to hold the sword that releases your head; they are the family of the Onumei who were murdered then. Kneel!"

Well, I was already kneeling. And by this time my knees, not to mention my ears, were getting a little sore. But I looked back up at him with not an ounce of fear. Spat on the ground and asked him, "Well? Who'll do it, then? Who'll be the one to raise a hand against me? Go ahead. I'll rutting bite it off."

Which of course was just a bit more wind; bastards had me tied up tight. I was going to die. That much was certain. A child could've taken me out without breaking a sweat. But even so, not a single one of 'em moved a muscle to do the deed. Fact, it was clear there was a nerve I'd hit somehow. A thick pall fell over the place. None dared meet the gaze of the one who sat to their either side. And a whole half of 'em looked down at the ground.

So I keep on. "Who'll it be, then?" I say. "Go ahead. I'm ready!"

Still none move a muscle. Until finally, there's a tussle by the King's side and two figures make their way forward, one pulling the other by the ear. The one getting pulled around was no elf, was clear. Stood eight feet tall, ugly as sin, with black skin and thick limbs, buck naked with not a trace of silk or silver to be seen. A rutting orc in the middle of Annwyn! But that wasn't the worst of it. The one doing the tugging was the real problem. Was dressed head to toe in wyrm-scale mail, with an emblem on the chest that brought all the wrong sorts of memories racing back to my mind. Last push we'd given 'em at the Point; it'd been futile, almost, we were outnumbered so bad. Although they do say it was the only reason the rest of the army was able to escape. Was me and less than a hundred others who made the charge. We cut through the elves like butter but were stopped by a single man. A single rutting man. A wall of devastation that budged not a knuckle, and left dozens of my buddies there to fertilize the field. I'd been the last to retreat that day. And the only to survive a brush with his blades. Was this the same bastard? I knew in an instant that it was.

"That's it, then!" I say. "Might be the noblest and highest of the high elves gathered here! And each and every one of you just dying to be the one to put me in my grave! But it's another that gets to do the deed. Another that calls the shots: an orc! And this bastard!" And I spit on the ground and tell 'em they make me sick; tell 'em, "It may be me that meets my makers today, but it's you who're headed for the worst of it. Made a deal with devils; serves you right!"

But the walking wyrm-armor says to me, "You will be quiet!" And he throws the orc into the courtyard, then throws the bastard a spear. Says, "The devil is a fairy tale. You face Gunuaza, son and end of Kikuaza, who was son of this Kaliya, *U* Votan. And you will fight to the death. You may pick one." And he points at a pile of busted, old weapons what'd been thrown on the side of the courtyard, like. So I take a look. There's a spear, which I go for first because it was even longer than the orc's and I thought I'd be able to use the reach; but the pole was too flimsy and I've never been all that good with one anyway. Swords were out; garbage the whole lot. And as a last fuck-you from whoever'd put that pile together, there wasn't a single axe to be seen. But I finally see my weapon lying there: only thing in the whole pile what wasn't about to fall apart. A shield. Second I pick it up, I was forced to wonder how it'd ended up there, since it was made of silver of all things but'd been covered in straps of dingy, old leather to make it look like the rest.

Someone in that crowd was rooting for me after all, it seemed. So. With that up my sleeve but not much else, I turned round to face this rutting orc.

He, meanwhile, had picked himself up and brushed himself off; and any qualms he might've had about fighting that day were forgotten. He snarled and howled like a wild dog, and pawed at the ground like a rutting bull, sweat glistening off his coal-black skin even way up there in the cold. "It has been too long since I have feasted on one with so many kills, dwarf," he says.

Which as you might imagine is a bit intimidating, to be honest. He wants to *eat* me!? Because I've smashed some skulls before? But who cares, I thought. I was ready.

So, "Let's go, then!" I say.

Bastard comes at me quick as lightning. Spear flies at my head, then my legs, then my side, and my head again. Like a bee you'll never hope to be able to swat, but with a ten-knuckle blade instead of a stinger and backed up by two hundred pounds of muscle. But that shield did me good. I barely had to move it to cover the whole of my body. So we got to our dance of death at last. I did my best to close the distance but the fucker was incredibly fast for someone so big. If I came in a foot, he'd be back by three and that spear'd be zipping in for my neck again already. And he did not slow. You fight a gune or an elf, only thing you really have to do is wait for the bastard to get tired. But orcs are a different matter entirely. They're made of the same stuff as us dwarves. So on and on we went. Him with that spear singin' and me with my silver shield, leather cover long cut off, clangin' right back. The elves round us, meanwhile, watched on, waiting for my head with bated breath; while the wyrm-armor sat there, not moving a muscle.

Till finally, big bastard messed up. Spun around after an earthquake of a strike and tried to stick his spear through his legs, thinking he'd get me like that. But it was too much dancing around to pull off and I saw it coming a mile away. I pinned that spear with my foot and rushed forward. And smashed his hip to smithereens with the shield. Could hear the bones crack from a mile away. Thought I had him once and for all, but somehow, he got his weapon back up and managed to fend me off. Even if he did start limping around like a dancing-girl swingin' her hips on stage for money. But the limp was nothing but a ruse in the end. He exaggerated it to bring me in close, then swung round my back like a rutting snake. Got that spear round my neck and started to pull. I managed to get an arm in there, though. So we were left like that to muscle it out. Bastard was unimaginably strong; and he had the best of the leverage to start since he'd surprised me a bit. But once I dropped the shield and got my other arm in there, it was no contest. Have I mentioned I can bench an easy five-fifty? Forced that spear out to full reach, then slammed his head into the ground with the back of mine, since we were rolling around by this point. And I swing up to my feet, using the momentum to flip the fucker down the road. Sent him flying end over end, right back to the wyrm-armor's feet. Only then did they really see what it was, exactly, to mess with a McGee.

But it was too late to start over. I left the shield on the ground, and hefted up his spear. And sent it straight for his head a million miles an hour. Was made even a bit uglier, if that was possible, since I gave his face a good gash down one cheek-bone; he just barely managed to block it to the side. From there it flew by him to hit the stone not a foot from the King. The elves there all drew their swords, but

one look from wyrm-armor and they put 'em right back with no more'n an evil eye his way. So me'n the orc got back to it. It was nothing but fists from there: how every good fight should end. You might think it was him who'd have the best of it with so much reach on me, but he couldn't hit low with any power; while I had a pocket of safety underneath all his swinging from where I could just wail away at his legs and waist. Only took a couple of minutes for me to bring him to his knees. So, bones broken, muscles pumpin' acid in place of blood, he went for one last hit. A punch so strong had it connected, it would've been the end of me for sure. But I caught it with my right and wrapped up the momentum. And we ended up in a final contest of strength, fist to palm, a furious battle testing the very limits of our flesh. A full minute and a half we stayed like that, pushing against each other's brawn with everything we had. Didn't move more'n a knuckle the whole time; we were perfectly matched. But in the end it was me, of course, who won. Pushed him back and down a knuckle at a time. And as he started to lose ground, I managed to bring the whole of my weight to bear to leverage him down to his hips. And I raised my left to finish him off.

When with a last flash of speed, he pulled out the knife he'd had hidden in a holster on his arm, sending it straight for my heart. Any other day it would've been the end of me. But not that day. Somehow I saw it coming. I slipped sideways to dodge the strike and without a second thought, my hand moving of its own will, seemed, it found its way deep into my pocket and pulled out the knife my Meryl'd given me. And I stuck the blade deep into the villain's heart.

Wasn't a soul in the place that didn't jump to their feet at once. Gunuaza slumped over, dead, bouncing off my shoulder like a felled tree. I'd won. Fat lot of good it did me. Since all it did was knock the first off the list of a thousand what wanted me dead. So once again, I readied myself for the end.

But it'd be the last time I'd have to. For a while, anyway; since it was right then that the Wildern finally arrived to save the day. And not just them but a bunch of Lleuanashi, who are rutting crazy and love a good fight. And some Dryads too, who if they lose their tree are good as mercenaries. You could see a dozen silver-hairs in there, even. The stands around me erupted into chaos. And before I knew what was happening, the whole place was slashing away at each other.

Vice-face and his handful of silver-hairs made a bee-line for the King. Cept they wasn't there to help. Stead they made a ring round him, fighting tooth and nail to bring him down. It was the most intense fighting I've ever seen in my life - that I didn't take part in myself, that is. Royals managed to hold their own for a spell. But once the wyrm-armor joined in against them, they all fell and the King was finally skewered. Although it was the Wildern that came out on top overall. In the end, it was wyrm-armor, vice-face and a handful of Silvern alone, standing against the mix of elves of every type. But the bastards had one more trick up their sleeve: just before they managed to ring 'em in, Kaliya grabs none other than arianwen fiona ni'anguis, the King's granddaughter, and, with a knife to her throat, threw himself and her both over the side of the tower, vice-face right behind; down into the abyss of green below, never to be seen again.'

'And that was that. Wildern'd won; high elves had lost. For the longest time, see, Silvern'd hunted the wild elves same as they did any other predator that lived in their lands: just enough to keep their numbers in check. Not that that makes it any less despicable, but at least back then the Wildern could go about their lives as they wanted to for the most part. Once we marched down the Muddle and the high elves turned to orcs to help them kick us back up south, though, things changed. This Kaliya, the wyrm-armor, was the one who set it all up; the one who somehow managed to keep these orcs from killing each other long enough to march against us. And after the war, having proven himself to be such a handy guy with his little orc army behind him, he managed to make Annwyn his new home. Was even made the King's right hand, U Votan. He installed his grandson, Gunuaza, son of the ogre Kikuaza - there are stories about that one, lemme tell you - as the King's executioner. And before anyone knew what exactly'd happened, U Votan's every command was followed before the actual King's. He was the one really in charge of everything. He kept a whole slew of Wildern 'onnas for himself in the palace they gave him, of course. And big surprise; not long after he settled in, all the high elf lords would find a reason to visit him pretty regular, like, if you understand. Even the ones what wouldn't help 'em outright turned a blind eye, content as clams, knee-deep in sweaty, Wildern pussy as most of 'em were. Seemed a perfect crime. Except for the fact that before long, there were little bastards getting born from Wildern mothers right there on the floor of Kaliya's bath house. Course, not all of 'em were kept around. Males, of course, got turned out to the woods. Or eaten depending on how hungry Gunuaza was at the moment. And girls too, if their hair didn't turn silver. Pretty soon, there were hundreds - thousands, maybe - of Wildern living there in the forests round Annwyn that didn't fit into the high elves' supreme plan because they shouldn't have even been born according to their know-it-all shepherding. What's more they all had the same faces as their fathers, the highest of the high elf lords. They mixed with the other Wildern tribes there in the woods and multiplied like rabbits. The King, meanwhile, they say had known nothing and neither had his son. But by the time Reyslandil found his way to our camp that night, there were whispers everywhere in Annwyn about the "Wildern problem." And the lords were desperate for any excuse to cover their tracks before their wives found out about what they did in their spare time. When we gutted Reyslandil they finally got their excuse. They rounded up every Wildern they could find round Annwyn and slaughtered them, down to the last head. Problem solved. But massacres like that never go like you want them to. The Wildern that escaped'd been pushed too far. Them. And the Wildern from all around, who were sick of being hunted like animals. And any Silvern who knew what was going on and didn't like it. And a whole bunch of Lleuanashi, who like I said are rutting crazy as a rule and love a good fight. And some *western* wood elves too, apparently. All of these fuckers got together and took the capital. On the very day they let me out because Gunuaza was hungry or whatever their reason was. And that, like I said, was that. Lords what didn't meet the sharp end of a sword that day ended up picking grapes, while the Wildern went back to the woods, and most of the Silvern fled to Serenashi lands in the north.

As for me, I rested up there in the palace for a couple of days. Was nice, I guess. Meryl found me after the fight and nursed me back to health, which was every bit as raunchy and disgusting as the sickest of you bastards can hope to imagine. Was

then she told me her name, though surprisingly it was like ten syllables long. Started with an M, though, which is why I call her Meryl. But it's too rutting quiet there. And none of the clothes fit me. So I figured it was time to get on my way. Not to mention the fact that the day Meryl told me her name, she grabbed my hand and rubbed her belly with it, then said something else that was way too long to be a proper name. But I got the message anyway and so made sure to get out of there as soon as possible. Diesucky (Daisuke), too, was fiending for some proper ale, apparently. He'd helped 'em take Annwyn and survived somehow, the son of a snake. And Fred, too. So we immediately packed up as much silver and wine as we could find - well, I packed it all up; he just mumbled, "Very strong," over and over to himself as I did, then guessed his way through the woods. Eventually, though, we made it to the Dao. From there it was a boat to Velai. And finally, at long last, three whole days before the End arrived, we made it to Siti-Sorong.'

As if planned, just as McGee was summing up, in walked Undr the apprentice blacksmith, who told us that the road was once again passable. So most of the crowd quickly downed their drinks and went to leave while the dwarf boomed over the rustle of their departure, "And *that*, my friends is how I made it from one side of North Caledonia to the other. With a little chest of silver to show for it, not to mention this knife." And he pulled out one just as he had described, with a gold pommel twisted into twin snakeheads, four tiny rubies for eyes, a long, curved blade and matching sheath. Although the gesture went largely unnoticed, seeing as the tavern was nearly empty by then. So after one last curse directed at Douglas, he pulled me up by the belt, grabbed what I'd written and dragged me back home.

2.

I was born in Terra, as many of us are, to an unmarried mother who subsequently found herself an outsider good enough to pay for her misdeeds not to mention those of her child. My birth father was an Allan she had swindled into providing her the most lavish of comforts for a time. I remember little of him other than his lessons in math and English, especially his insistence that they would have to serve me in his stead because my mother was bleeding him dry and he would shortly be unable to afford her. Indeed, before my tenth birthday he had disappeared. I was raised among the abadis and ʒendes who are to be found camped in the valleys round ʌra malta in summertime and am well-known to all of them as a proper scoundrel to be avoided, if not feared. I was not in any way, therefore, a man of the sea. At best back then I might wet my ankles to follow a creek a ways when stealing a horse. My sole connection to the wide world beyond our forests and fields was my step-father, Etro, who was a man of the south beyond the mountains. His interest was of course generally centered round about my mother's hips, but he took a distant liking to me as well, I suppose. He would often speak in his native Suaja to me, and I might spit back something I'd heard him say before as way of reply - for Suaja and Terran are often very similar. In this way I came to speak three languages in my youth, though none of them especially well. And at some point I was taught script too. But no more knowledge than this was given me, since round about my twelfth year my half-siblings started to be born and I found myself increasingly relegated to little more than a second thought by my parents. Not that I would have had it any other way. I happily joined up with the fœlcirs, who travel one side of the Sudden Sea to the other and far into the Atlas on their whim, and found their lifestyle more than acceptable. It is from them that I learned the finer points of thievery which would see me through until my sixteenth year, which is when I fell in deep adoration of a wide- and wild-eyed mǝʌiɟa girl with hair as black as night named samara, who I had known in my youth and who had in my absence grown as full as a fattened chicken. I was accordingly forced to settle down around ɕelia once more to find my way between her thighs as often as I could.

She quickly found any resistance to my advances futile, since I was very persistent. And I'm certain she came to love me in time as well; I can still recall with complete clarity the way I was able to make her young features light up. But no matter how I might do the deed, whether by jest, closeness of body or mere promise, I will be the first to admit that her countenance never assumed an expression of joy as through as when I managed to gift her a new piece of jewelry. Therefore I slowly came to exhaust the whole of the wealth of my relations, both close and distant, that I was able to take for myself in pursuit of new items to adorn my beloved. Afterwards it seemed an obvious choice to make my way towards the city in search of more.

Although anyone I talked to about moving there - those few who still talked to me, that is - warned me about the place most heartily. I knew little of ɕelia then other than that the fœlcirs were not entirely welcome in many parts, that the price of horses was greatly inflated there, and that the Church of Remembrances on its northern extreme was an excellent place to get a free bit of bread and wine if one

doesn't mind sitting through a seemingly interminable, arcane ceremony. Which impression made the whole place seem quite benign of course. Regardless, it was not a journey to be taken as lightly as I then was, they would say. My cousins rɑmjn and nørmjn, for instance, had made their way to the city with similar aspirations as mine, never to be heard from again. And they were in no way special when it came to the place; Terrans who descend the daiɾas with intention to stay more than a few days fail to return regularly. The tone of my advisors would assume various levels of apprehension as they related the myriad stories so odd they bordered on super-natural that surrounded the metropolis. I heeded not a single one. The fœlcirs, welcome or not, traveled there routinely. And if the rest of my fellow Terrans failed to come back to the country from cælia, I reasoned, it was surely because our land, while so pristine and beautiful, is such an incredibly boring place; while the city is filled with wealth and excitement.

It was my cousin and occasional accomplice fernjard who told me about the library. He said I might find a wage there the size of which also bordered on the supernatural, since the work was only difficult in it being a challenge for some to abide its necessary, near-complete lack of satisfaction of achievement. I was all ears. He said I would be sure to get the job if I followed his instructions, chief among them not mentioning him in the slightest, since he had that very day left under somewhat bad blood with his supervisor, an especially reckless and devious dwarf named John McGee. So I did what he bade me do, waiting six days, the morning, and even an hour into the afternoon before dragging myself to the place, dressed as if I were eager for serious labor in sturdy shoes and loose-fitting clothes, and asking for employment unannounced. I was immediately ushered into a private nook under the biographies. Though McGee made me wait another hour before deigning to interview me, it was clear the process was a mere formality. One glance at me, ready as I seemed for tossing a ton of hay, and he slapped his assistant on the back, chiding the younger for apparently worrying about filling the recently opened position.

"I told you. These things work themselves out if you let them," he said. Then to me, he continued, "That's why I never post an ad in the papers for at least a week. Always a hard-working, honest man on the hunt for a job. Works every time!" All as I wondered not a second at how similar fernjard's interview might have been.

As the other rolled his eyes and turned to leave, McGee grew very serious, bunching together his thick eyebrows in order to read my proffered resume. In a nutshell, it said I was from cʃʃ and had worked an identical position there, was fluent in not only Terran and Suaja but also Emegora (which I had misspelled), and was learning proper Dwarven as well. "Since," I told him with a gravity approaching his own, "all serious works have been translated into the tongue."

He was completely sold by this, the idiot; though he did make sure to correct me, "Proper English!" For dwarves of course generally refer to themselves simply as men or people, adding the term 'little' for the benefit of others only with a certain raising of the chin; and for some reason, they speak the same tongue as the planet's many farflung seafarers, even going so far as to insist that the English only learned how to talk at all by emulating - poorly - their language long, long ago. Our language, I might say, since I am technically half-dwarven on my birth father's side, as I have already mentioned.

The library is an immense construction that sits high above the rest of cælia atop

the promontory called ɑɾtiᴄɹa, which extends from the rest of the city's northern heights down a strip of ridge narrow enough to spit across. It fills a sizable portion of that extended tongue of the hills; gardens cover the rest save the Church of Remembrances at the southern extreme. The current construction is one hundred forty-two thousand years old, McGee told me; though there has been a library on or near the spot for as long as the city has existed. As such, there were no less than five plates denoting the site's use saved from older constructions strewn about, the oldest of which he made sure to show me first. It read simply, 'Biblioteca Comunale' in unadorned dwarven letters on a small, cracked slab. This, he told me, was the better part of two million years old. Even in the protected atmosphere of the interior, the chisel marks on it were barely visible thanks to the passing of so long. "Damn thing's falling apart," he said. The building itself, though, McGee assured me, was completely safe. Sturdy as a castle, he told me as I eyed the many cracks in *its* stonework. But to its credit, it did in fact still stand after so long, having managed to survive without major damage the countless earthquakes and storms that must have assaulted it over its long history.

The works of nonfiction, for which the place is widely known, were to be found on the ground floor. There were two thousand, five hundred sixty-eight cases divided into twelve rows of one hundred ninety-eight with two wings of four rows of twenty-four under the alcoves to the east and west, he told me. Each case was exactly thirty-six feet long and had eight shelves on its either side. So at an average rate of a book per knuckle of shelf space, it meant a collection of nearly eighteen million tomes. Seventeen million, seven hundred fifty thousand, to be exact, he stated seriously. No one had ever made the full count, however, because *that* would have been ridiculous. He continued without noting my eye-roll: the collection of fiction was nothing to scoff at either. Though not nearly as large, it held every work of literature worth mention and more. These tomes were situated on the balcony, which extended from the third row of columns to the wall on the north side for half the building's cross section.

He had just started on a summary of what laid below-ground when the cart arrived, at which point he quickly concluded the tour by declaring, "And a whole bunch of other shit you don't need to worry about." Then he directed me to the creaking wagon, from which apparently the majority of my responsibilities were to stem. It was my job, he told me, to organize what was coming in and fetch what was to go out. Why they'd insisted on building the library so high above the city he didn't know, but it was too far for "folks who spend all their time... reading" to reasonably hike. So they had a cart. The cart brought people their books, then picked up what was being returned along with the orders for new checkouts. I was to organize what was coming in into three smaller carts. This I was to do from two-thirty (he meant nine-fifty; he *was* standing in ᴄɛlia, after all), when the cart arrived, until the task was complete, generally around four (eleven-twenty), though sometimes it might be much later. Paudrik and Neilson would take two of the carts, the one to nonfiction and the other to fiction, while McGee himself would take the last. This was the cart that went downstairs. Some days there would be nothing at all on this third cart, but he assured me that when there was, every single item on it was the equal of a hundred normal items in terms of the effort involved in reshelving. At four, or whenever I was done with the big cart, I was to begin fetching the checkout orders. For this task I had even my own small cart, an

allowance he seemed especially proud of. I was permitted to pull items from the shelves, he made sure to tell me. But never was I to ever even think about putting anything back! The length of the stories he told me of the potential consequences involved with such a heinous abuse of the new guy's liberties impressed upon me how thoroughly forbidden this was. The unintentional loss of a book that - here he listed twenty or more names that I made sure to immediately forget - any number of people were searching for was likely to result in every manner of disaster short of the death of all involved. Although he couldn't rule it out. In any case, it was one less thing for me to do. Even though I was then following him around with the same comportment as an eager puppy, I was of course doing my best to figure how to avoid actually completing any of the tasks he'd reserved for me. A list which was getting longer by the minute. I was to finish gathering the checkout orders by no later than ten (five-twenty) in the morning. It was my choice whether I wished to work late or to get up early to complete the task, but he and the others generally chose to finish their own responsibilities in the evening to avoid ever getting up earlier than nine. But this task had to be done by ten. Gordon, who drove the cart, would bother him if it wasn't. At ten I was to sweep the whole of the place, from the far back of the balcony to the last corner of the kitchenette below it. I was allowed twenty minutes for lunch. And at two-thirty, the whole thing started again. I was to do this seven days a week; if I had a girlfriend, I'd have to visit her when I was done. The position at this point seemed a less than desirable one as one can imagine. I started to think that fernjard must bear me some sort of resentment, in fact, and was then laughing at me, safe from the thought of such unending labors, lounging in a comfortable cœrevɜn out in the woods as I should have been. But immediately upon finishing my list of responsibilities, McGee pulled up his belt and told me, "For this you will be paid a pound weekly; I can go no higher." Which was leagues above what I'd generally manage out in the country. So we shook hands and I started throwing books around on that cart with an enthusiasm that surprised none more so than myself.

In truth, the job was far easier than my supervisor had made it sound. His overbearing demeanor ceased abruptly at the end of the tour, only to resurface on the rare occasion someone from the city actually made the trek up to the place, at which time I gathered I was to be sweeping or pulling books or looking busy in some other way. Once they'd left, I would be free to fill my time as I wished again. So the days passed most agreeably, my only real regret being my sudden lack of tan. I was unable to visit samara as often as I wanted, but when I did finish early enough to find her camp, I did so riding a fine horse, bearing the largest, most ridiculous piece of jewelry I could find down in the ʒalifa. It got to the point that even the sight of my pay sitting there in McGee's hand was enough to rise a tent in my pants. In short, I was very happy in my position and resolved then to fill it for the rest of my days.

At first I wondered why, exactly, a group of dwarves, so renowned for their stinginess, would choose to part with a full pound weekly in exchange for so little. But after a time it became clear. Considering the fact that they have only started to live in Archaea in large numbers over the course of the last few hundred years, the library was of course designed for larger people. So there were any number of tasks to be done which were literally beyond their reach, the top two shelves of the bookcases and the attainment of anything deep in the back of the cart from the

ground being the most cumbersome. The regular use of a ladder was an idea as unacceptable to them as that of glasses to an aging hunter or whatever other crutch one might consider for a task that is routine for others. So they simply hired a gune for these duties, since the one thing more ingrained in the dwarven mindset than frugality is their superiority to big people, and their extravagant employment of one is all the proof they need to show the natural directionality of any relationship between the two. It only took a week, in fact, for both Paudrik and Neilson to start to offer me a few diamonds daily to reshelve those books destined for the highest shelves, with an air of extreme generosity.

And so my wage rose even beyond a pound a week; their daily doling out of a few pebbles quickly became a payment as regular as that I received for my official duties, showing how established a practice this was. Further proof was the complete disarray of the top two shelves. I was unable to discern any sort of system above the dwarves' reach; books were to be found misshelved not only by what might be considered honest mistake, a misread digit or decimal, for example, but just as often by complete disregard for the very concept of organization itself, shoved in next to whatever other tome happened to fill the cart that day most likely, sometimes clear on the other side of the building! For whatever reason, despite my firm intention to accomplish as little as possible in my position, I found this state of affairs simply unacceptable, even going so far as to examine a single shelf daily for misplaced books and to quietly place them where they belonged.

Though I had by this time done my best to convince the others that I was at least partly one of them thanks to my paternal lineage, without exception my dwarven coworkers would only look up at me to laugh at such aplomb, no matter how subtly implied. But upon catching me reshelving books correctly one afternoon, Paudrik couldn't help giving a little chuckle. He even slapped me on the shoulder as an uncle might, mentioning an Allan's need for perfection. This compliment I was able to accept gracefully, but once he grumbled at our having to work under a "McGee of all people," I was completely lost. So he quickly returned to his employer's comportment, placing a single coin in my palm with a wink. All while our supervisor happened to round a corner and eye our exchange with a scrutiny that bowed the younger, sending him scurrying round to the next shelf.

I, of course, cared far less for either the one's acceptance or the other's suspicion than I did for the weight of the coin that found its way quickly into my pocket. A full second pound silver for the week it was! With such a sum given so unexpectedly, I thought myself quite rich and decided to leave my responsibilities until the next day, departing at once to explore the city fully and survey the many pleasures it hid with a childlike spring in my step. I felt as important as a king; there was nothing my eyes perceived that I couldn't imagine immediately having, even though my own emerging frugality allowed me the actual purchase of fine food and drink only, all in order to save for an especially obsequious bracelet I had eyed the week before which I thought samara would adore. It was on that day, in fact, that I found the Whale. Hoping to find a shortcut back to the library, I followed the sea road as it winds its way northward from the docks to the tavern. I made sure to sample its wares fully. And when I emerged in the late afternoon from my revelry to notice the distinctive edifice of my workplace surprisingly perched high above me, up a slope so steep it might also be called a cliff, being a bit drunk I thought it a good idea to brave the straight ascent. I styled myself a great adventurer once I

made it to the top. Although as I was soon to find out, the route was well-known by another and used with mundane regularity.

One might wonder justifiably at my decision to brave this climb to my place of employment at the day's end when my abode must have been more accessible. But in truth they had recently become one in the same. I'd found a small room for rent in one of the closer neighborhoods at the start of my time in ᴄᴂlia, but was quick to save myself its cost, not to mention the effort of a daily uphill walk back to work from it, by simple faculty of never leaving the library at all. It was my added responsibilities above the dwarves' reach that brought the idea to my head. Though I was happy for the extra money, being anything but tall myself, I wasn't much better than them with high places. I could in fact only achieve the second-to-highest shelf easily, having to jump a bit or pull myself up to reach the very top one. One day, hanging there, I decided for some reason to poke my head above the shelf for a look around, finding it a surprisingly easy task to pull myself up fully, legs swinging down round the works I might have read if I cared at all for actually learning Emegora. McGee was searching for me at this exact moment. Thinking me to still be perusing the 490's, on top of which I was now actually perched, when he turned the corner, he found only my cart. Paudrik as well could find no trace of me. Even Neilson, when McGee demanded loudly to know if he'd seen me, could apparently not discern me from the balcony. And so I turned, wondering how the higher at least had possibly failed to catch me in my impromptu game of hide-and-seek. But by luck, from the place up to which I had pulled myself, the many columns holding up the ceiling arranged to block my view of nearly every single aisle upstairs. All I could make out between the pillars were the sides of the fiction shelves, which extended fully to the rail, blocking all vantage points not provided between. Therefore neither could he see me, I gathered. I had unintentionally found a little pocket in which I was essentially invisible. I climbed down quickly to keep my discovery a secret; even if I was forced to wonder how much McGee assumed, since when he did eventually find me, he made sure to grumble frustratedly about the "rutting nooks and crannies in this place." In any case, the next day I made sure to get there before four in the morning to sneak up a bed-roll, a few changes of clothes and some candles. And by the end of the week, not only were the entirety of my possessions stowed carefully above the 490's, I had gotten used to sleeping there without falling off.

After a time, I came to explore this no-man's land completely. There were no less than a dozen spots on top of the nonfiction shelves which were likewise hidden by the regularity of columns and balcony shelves. One quickly became my favorite: far in the southeast corner above the 230's. Not only was it entirely concealed, blocked from every single point of view, whereas anything I left in most other spots must be discovered eventually by luck, being visible from an odd upstairs aisle or two, but from it, one had an astounding view of the gardens of ɷɾtiᴄɟa, with sea on their one side and city the other. I could spend literally the entire night perched there with a bottle of wine, wondering happily at the goings-on of the various critters in the gardens, sea and metropolis below; this latter especially, lit so serenely as it was by a million lanterns for a few hours after every sunset. I thought myself very clever for having found such an existence of course. Not only was I the recipient of what I considered a considerable salary, for which I had to do next to nothing, I was moreover the occupant of what seemed the most magnificent abode

ever occupied by man; yet more my possession of it was entirely free! I therefore went through every pain to keep my sleeping there a secret. I would be down off my shelf long before the others rose for the day and at my tasks as they arrived, and either still at it or out exploring ꝑtiꝯa as they left. Even after I assumed I was alone there, I would always do my best to remain silent, risking only a single candle by which to read and only after an hour or so of complete noiselessness. I never thought to worry about getting locked out, since despite hearing McGee fumbling with a fistful of keys round sunset every evening, I found that one, the same that pointed in the direction of the Whale, was always left open upon my return from wandering the gardens. Never did I think to check it the other way until months into my stay.

It was one particularly still evening - sometime in testudo, if I remember correctly - that I must have had too much to smoke and accidentally knocked some books from my perch, a noisy enough mistake in itself committed long before I was entirely sure I was alone there. What's more when I went to retrieve my materials, not only those few but an entire shelf came loose, dripping exactly thirty-six feet of books to the floor, not to mention one extremely startled, half-stoned half-dwarf. I scurried back above to lay motionlessly on top of the next shelf, dreading my inevitable discovery. But as time wore on it appeared as if I was indeed alone there. So I cautiously made my way back down to clean up the mess I had made. To my renewed surprise, however, just as my big toe hit the ground, I heard a door open loudly from somewhere under the balcony. I immediately scurried back above once more. Though it might have been safer to wait completely out of sight, I couldn't help poking my head off the side of the shelf to keep an eye out for whoever had made the noise. What I saw when the figure finally emerged astounded me more than if it had been a ghost suddenly turned substantive. It was in fact McGee, dressed in what was clearly his pajamas, a ridiculous getup printed throughout with maple leaves, cap included, bounded at either end by a buttoned flap round the privates, that shimmered in the light of the candle he bore in his one hand as he stalked between the shelves barefoot, pointing the contraption he held in his other round each corner he turned before exposing any part of his torso to the unknown that awaited beyond. When he found my mess of dropped books, he lowered the contraption and I hid myself fully at last, barely able to contain the mirth his appearance brought me unbidden; while no matter the ease of his dress, he declared, "This ploughing place," in his normal, gruff complaint of a tone before returning beneath the balcony. He reemerged a few minutes later, clad once again in his usual linens and leather, heading off toward the northeast, in which direction the Whale alone laid.

Heart still in my throat, I found myself unable to either sleep or read after the incident. So I thought to follow him outside for a breath of fresh air, perhaps to observe whether he did maintain course toward the tavern I'd come to frequent down the hill. I unexpectedly found the way barred, however. I wondered for a time at this sudden change of events. But eventually, I came to realize that it was likely this way every night. I had simply never noticed, since I had never attempted to leave the library after hours; only had I ever returned to it from the gardens or tavern. So that night - and perhaps every other I had slept there whether I'd been aware of it or not - I found myself locked in. Perhaps it was a trap for whoever might want to steal some of the books, I thought. They would find their entry

surprisingly easy but be unable to leave with their prize, meaning not only were the books ultimately retained but the would-be thief apprehended the next morning. I thought this tactic entirely becoming of my supervisor. It would explain his being so careful to check each and every door at closing time, which process I had thought a bit too much effort for the farce I had assumed it to be until that night. As I looked around the place for an alternate exit, I noticed that the windows were located far beyond the reach of even the most adept of climbers, without exception perched above twelve feet or more of smooth stone from the ground and likewise equally distant from the nearest bookshelf. It was quite a prison, I laughed to myself, spacious and pleasantly appointed as it might be. So I continued to chuckle at my predicament as I considered what to do with myself for the night. It was no matter to me, after all. I had wine to drain and a bathroom to use, breakfast and even a second dinner awaiting me if I felt confident I might use the kitchenette under the balcony undetected. What else needs a man? So I grabbed my bottle, a vibrant, plum-red ɠɷme ʒ'avɟgnɟe I'd found at the Whale at stunningly small cost, and the handful of tomatoes and cheeses that were to be my midnight treat, and my pipe, and made my way to the back, whereupon I noticed that the door to the downstairs - which was always locked; I had checked repeatedly - that night had been left slightly ajar. Perhaps McGee had forgotten, I thought, considering his apparent aversion to the place and rush to leave it. In any case, I'd always wanted to see what awaited downstairs, since the dwarf was regularly conspicuously scant on the details. Now knowing that it hid at least some comfortable nook that he had reserved for himself as an abode, I desperately wanted to explore it. And perhaps borrow his pajamas. So the food stayed in the kitchenette to await my, and my smoldering pipe and bottle of red's, return.

Maybe it would have been better if I'd left either the one or the other, however, since I soon found myself as lost as only the combination of the two can leave me. I have repeatedly managed to fade from reality thanks to their simultaneous influence to such an extent that a return from mere yards away from our camp has been made successfully only with extreme effort. Yet for some reason I still insist on wandering as soon as their taste hits my tongue together. And that night I found myself in an environment entirely unlike my pleasant woodland home. Archway after archway and turn after turn emerged from the cold darkness past the light of my candle, all of it equally foreboding with its overly ornate, silent stonework. Far from the handful of boring hallways and storage rooms I had assumed the basement to be, it was in fact a veritable maze of intricately carved passages and stairways. Even had I been sober, I would have found it difficult to remember my way. Though I made sure to make mental note of the path I took from the start, after three or four junctions I'd forgotten it completely. Yet still I stumbled on into the dark, sipping my wine and puffing away on my pipe, caring not a bit for my loss of direction. I did, however, make sure to inspect every room that I was able to open. Someone had left notes nailed to some of the doors, of subjects that grew increasingly obscure as I made my way farther below the ground. 'Maps of Helia, Kish: 4-1685.' '52: Wars, Reclamation, Genocide, Renaissance, More Rutting Wars.' '1220s: Elven crafts, Titan breeding.' '475: Flora, Fauna of New Caledonia, Other.' '4: orcs,' they read. And by pulling a book or two from the shelves that waited beyond the doors thus denoted I saw that indeed was each room filled with that material, or at least something from the indicated millennia. But not every doorway was

marked. Neither did the rooms always hold books. At times they were what seemed ancient apartments, filled with dusty, if carefully arranged, furniture, hole-spattered tapestries, and clothing that disintegrated off its hanger at a mere glance. Other times there were countless potteries or other crafts of a particular type lining endless tables. Yet other rooms were starkly empty. But no two were the same. I creaked open each and every door that I came across, gritting my teeth against the sound the neglected hinges made as I wondered at what awaited beyond. I eventually thought to return above by noting which doors I'd left open, like a line of breadcrumbs back to the kitchenette where my dinner awaited me. And so with this trail behind me, I continued on unworried for some time, checking all I came across for items of interest. So immersed was I in my search that I never thought to fear anything in the dark, nor McGee's imminent return. I was entirely engrossed by the surprising realness and antiquity of the labyrinth I'd found and the treasures it contained; until finally I became aware of the length of time I'd spent below ground by the grumbling of my stomach and I thought to return above at last.

The way back was clear at first. Here I remembered the room of books without denoted subject but with screaming birds carved into the archway. There the room filled with various works of glass. Then the one marked 'First Age hist; Fauna and Flora of Europa, Africa, Asia: 1-4.' Not having ever even heard of these places, I realized that I must have wandered very far from the surface. It was then that I started to pay actual heed to the thickness of the dark past my light. And the longer I walked, the more my imagination got the better of me; I don't think it too embarrassing to admit that I jumped in fright with every one of the frequent animal likenesses that would lunge from the stonework into the light of my candle as I shuffled along. Unnerving as it was, however, my trek was uneventful; until its near conclusion, that is, when I was stopped in my tracks by the all-too-familiar sound of creaking hinges screeching down to me from somewhere above. I remained completely motionless as I listened for another sound. Yet there was only silence after. Finally, I recalled my supervisor. It must have been McGee returning home, I thought. A single creaking hinge as he opened his hidden apartment. What else could it have been? It wasn't as if the place was haunted. Neither was it possible for anything to actually be alive down there besides the dwarf and myself. What would such a creature eat, after all? I must have chosen to forget the beads of light denoting pairs of rodent eyes that had occasionally met the advance of my candle as I'd made my way down. But no matter my self-assurances, I slowly became aware of how endlessly some of the stairways I'd come across thus far seemed to spiral down into the dark. I even trembled my way to the nearest, dropping a small rock down it. And as I listened carefully to the clatter the stone made as it fell, my throat closed slowly of its own accord. For the sound continued for quite a while. It in fact faded into indiscernibility rather than ceased abruptly as I had imagined - hoped - it might. I stood there with one ear cocked to the depths, straining my perception to catch occasionally its endless descent for long, long seconds, and might have remained there all night had a door not suddenly creaked open a mere turn or two down the hallway from me, thrown open with a careless abandon that was entirely out-of-place there in the stillness. I was not alone.

I stuttered off into the darkness, "V-very funny, McGee: you got me. I wanted to get a good look at those pajamas. Caught me red-handed!"

But a slow return to silence was the hallway's only reply.

So, one trembling step at a time, I made my way forward into the dark. Past the door I'd left open to 'Nehemea: 608-1594' Past the one from beyond which countless stone animal figurines stared back at me, frozen forever ready for action at the edge of my candle's light. Past the three doors to rooms holding the scores for every opera of the 1684th millennium. Still not a single sound came back to me from the darkness beyond. One trembling step at a time, I continued. Past the room where only cobwebs hung, flowing like wisps of smoke in the stirred air of my passing, unburdened by even a single spider. Past the one that hid what might have made a cozy home a hundred thousand years before. Still not a sound; until finally, I came across a door that had certainly been locked during my descent but was now open, just after the one marked '10-1 B.C, 1327: Tantric ritual and reemergence.' This mystery door still creaked a bit on its hinges, coming to rest fully only as I came up to it.

Breathlessly, I pushed open the portal. It was heavier than the rest, embedded throughout with wrought iron. The stonework round it was more ornate. The creak it made as it opened even seemed more desperate, cutting through the air with a deeply disturbing surety. And awaiting me immediately within were two snarling panthers carved from black obsidian who gave me quite a fright. To this day I have no idea why I continued. But at first, after the panthers anyway, it seemed harmless enough; the room beyond was filled with wine. From one side to the other, bottles covered in dust filled endless racks that continued far past my candle's light. And what wines! They were exquisite to a bottle. Here was a priceless ɕwɛlɐn ɑ'vudrɟc from 852. There what I assumed were the only bottles in existence of the highly sought-after moɳtsɐɟɐn 865. My ɠɷme ʒ'avɟgnɟe had a full twenty feet reserved for it, from which a handful of bottles were missing. And so I wondered not at all how the many surprising deals I had found at the Whale had made it there. It was McGee, of course, who had trudged down the hill with the rare reds, even if he was completely unaware of their true value. Ironically, the bottle I was holding had now found its way back to the very room from which it had come. I was completely convinced by this point that the door had been thrown open by none other than my supervisor; that he was simply toying with me. I laughed at myself out loud for thinking that I had fooled him up to this point. How many chances had I given him, after all, to figure out where it was, in fact, that I slept? Many, I thought; foremost among them that very night, when I'd dropped those books so clumsily. He was surely having a great laugh at my expense somewhere nearby at that very moment, I thought, as I chuckled at the fear that had consumed me mere moments before. "Very funny, boss," I whispered to myself. "Very funny." And as I mumbled to myself, I continued forward, farther into the massive wine storage, coming finally to what laid at its center; an object that confirmed every suspicion I now had about how I'd been caught and was being toyed with by him. It was a pile of pornography. And by pile I mean more precisely a mountain. Higher still than I could reach on my toes, arms overhead; wider still than ten paces made in earnest. And composed of the most vile images ever to grace paper. Here was a substantially more recent work than everything else I'd found below ground. So I did what anyone would do: I placed my pipe and bottle of ɠɷme, with its last few sips swirling still at the bottom, down on the ground behind me to peruse the pile for something good. But a sudden move-

ment behind me pulled me abruptly from my reading material. There was a sound that accompanied the flash of motion, though I would be hard-pressed to place its exact nature. Perhaps it was a laugh. At the time I assumed it must have been my supervisor's grunt of exertion as he swiped my bottle of wine. What else could it have been, I thought, since when I turned around my pipe was now conspicuously alone, smoldering next to the single drop I'd spilled as I took my last sip and relinquished the bottle to the dark.

"Very good, boss," I said. "Very sneaky. For a dwarf." So I grabbed another bottle, taking a handful of the least offensive mɷnga I could find from the pile, and departed to make my dinner. If I had indeed been caught living there, I might as well eat and rest well that night, after all.

Therefore, I didn't even bother to return to above the 230's to eat. I sat there in the kitchenette as if I was the true owner of the building, chuckling at the silence that hung still from below the open portal to the basement, wondering just how far McGee would take his game. But my musing was short-lived, for a few minutes after I made my way back to my perch above the shelves, who other than John McGee came bursting through the northeast door to stumble his way under the balcony, mumbling to himself the whole way about someone named Douglas, completely unheeding of the smell of my dinner that hung still in the air.

To say I was disturbed by the events of my brief adventure is an understatement. But I was certainly not so frightened as to leave the place and start paying rent again.

"Do you ever find things... missing around here?" I asked McGee, as nonchalantly as I could, not long after.

To which he only replied, "I told you you're not supposed to be reshelving the books, dammit," booming over my forming protest, "I don't care what the others say. Especially that Paudrik. Thinks he's such hot shit, that one."

That was the last I tried to broach the subject. Although there was one revelation made that night I could simply not abide: for him to go through all the effort of bringing my wine - I so label it since none apart from myself bought even a glass of the stuff as far as I could tell - down the hill only for me to have to carry it all back up again; at a net loss no less, since the Whale of course charged me more than it gave him. But I could think of no way to change our apparent arrangement without revealing that I took the same liberties with the library as him, an assumption of privilege I thought he would certainly frown upon. He made sure to lock the basement door as regularly as the others after that night, so I was unable to return downstairs to get some more for myself even if I'd wanted to; I had, after all, no desire to further my acquaintance with our ghost. Why McGee was bothered less than me by its presence I knew not. Perhaps he was as unaware of its occupancy of the building as he seemed of mine, though I wondered how it might be so. It was clear from his attitude about the place that he had seen or heard his own share of strange things there, and I doubted strongly that he was able to attribute any more than a single odd occurrence to coincidence. In any case, I was determined to cease the ridiculous trekking back and forth of my wine by whatever

means, even if the steps I might take to do so were not immediately apparent.

So I began by paying more careful attention to his comings and goings, thinking I might be able to 'happen' upon him one night and offer to relieve him of his burden at a fair price without asking too many questions as to where he'd gotten it. But he never strayed to a place I might do this. From the door he slipped out nightly, it was a straight shot down the hill with not even a single step on the sea road where I might meet him accidentally. He went directly in the back door of the tavern without pause, probably in order to drop any wine he carried in the kitchen without being seen by anyone besides the bartender with such shameful cargo. And there he would stay until midnight at the earliest, trading his many stories with the other patrons. I learned little from trailing him other than that he frequently forgot his keys there, which is why he always left the doors to the library open for entrance from the outside. If he had another key stashed inside the building to allow his readmittance to the underground, I never found it. But I did discover one important thing: that the Beached Whale late at night was actually a passably exciting place. So over the course of the next few weeks, I formed my own nightly ritual.

"Ah! There you are, young master," Dervi the bartender would say to me with the same note of feigned surprise as I made my daily entrance round two in the evening - being frequented most by dwarves and seamen, English was the franca there as it is in most of the city. And he would pull a random bottle from the shelf behind him, as well as a random price for it from the supposed depths of his memory: "Got some more of those reds you like so much. This one's special just for you. My cousin says I shouldn't part with it for anything less than five diamond; but since I like you, and you don't start no trouble, I'll give it ye for three." Or four; two if he was feeling generous. No matter some of the bottles he gave me were worth that many pounds. And he would remind me nightly once I forked over the stones: "Well met, sir. Here's one of them glasses I picked up for you as well. I'll open 'er up and set 'er there by you and you can go wherever you like. I'd pour it for you myself, but then I'd have to charge you by the glass. Them's the rules, sorry to say." And so I would take it, as well as however many others I thought to reserve for my return to the library, and be free of him to spend my time there as I wished.

Not being much of a talker myself, I would generally take an open spot by the windows, far from the bar itself, and pretend to write or draw until my bottle was drained. This was my wont from before following McGee as well, though back then I would make sure to leave the place before it got busy to avoid having to actually converse with anyone. But once I thought to keep an eye on the dwarf's habits, I made sure to wait at least until he arrived. At first I did so only to see what exactly he did with my wine upon his entrance, but after a time I realized that his appearance was in fact when the night really began. His tales, no matter their tallness, seemed an attraction of the house as indispensable as the liquor it sold. Those nights he deigned to tell one, there were few who didn't pay undivided attention, and when someone else dared pull one from their own repertoire, they would without exception wait for him to arrive to begin. He was more important there than he could have suggested on his most boastful of days. I was even forced to wonder whether some of his tales might be true; not only owing to the position of respect from which he told them but also because of the fact that he had never

bragged of this lordship over the place to me or anyone else as far as I'd heard, so the exaggerations he made seemed constrained in their purpose at least. But after hearing a few, it was impossible to believe the entirety of a single one. No matter. The place hung on his every word. And as time wore on, I began to jot down what I heard, thinking perhaps to sell his fabrications, seeing as they were so popular. Or I made an effort to keep up with his ramblings at least.

There was another reason besides socializing that McGee frequented the place, I learned after a time. Once a week, he would arrive before three in the evening. And around three-thirty, a child - a lively, handsome boy of ten or twelve years marked surprisingly by a share of elven blood, for his pointed ears and high cheek-bones were in clear contrast to his sandy red-brown hair and square jaw - would barge his way in, loudly demanding a pint to the universal amusement of those gathered. It took me a few tries but I eventually managed a good view of the brief exchange the two shared; a simple shake of the boy's head in return for a single coin slipped into his palm. By this point my curiosity about McGee far outweighed even my desire to buy my wine direct. So I tried to follow the boy to learn more about him, but was quickly left behind the moment we came within earshot of the docks.

I wondered even more at the purpose of their meetings afterwards. So the next week I posted myself above the bottleneck in the road at three-fifteen exactly, wearing my favorite spoiled lordling disguise. And with feigned clumsiness, I knocked over the small boulder I had positioned at the edge of our outcrop the night before, watching with great delight as it fell end over end to smash a passing wagon's wheels, thus blocking the road fully mere yards from the ladder up to the tavern. And down I 'accidentally' slid right after.

"On earth is it now!?" cried the boy upon arriving at the scene.

"This idiot broke my cart," said the merchant. "You'll have to wait until I get it fixed to get by."

"I've already offered to pay for the damage," I insisted, while the boy writhed in impatience. "I only meant to let you pass by waiting above; it was purely accidental."

"Look," said the child bluntly, "I ain't got the time to be chattin' with you lubbers. Some of us got places to go. Outta my way; I'm goin' under."

But the merchant had already braced the broken axle. "Wait just a minute, will you?" he complained. "You'll knock it all over again. Just wait. I'll have her fixed in a second."

"But I'm going just there," cried the child. "I can see the damn ladder!"

And so in I jumped: "There, you say? I noticed a house as I waited. Tell me: I've heard there is a man who tells fantastic stories somewhere on the sea road. Is that so? Is it there?"

I hoped of course that the boy would immediately divulge his connection to my supervisor, proud to be associated with one so apparently celebrated. But he instead grew instantly suspicious. My luck had doubly run out, it seemed; for just at that moment, up the road came Earl, the tavern's supposed cook, a man taller still than we would be if one placed the child on top of my shoulders and twice again more burly than if you had unrolled us and combined our waistlines.

"Well, hullo there, Earl," said the boy. "Fancy-pants here is asking all sorts of questions about our Mr McGee. Wants to lick his lollies, he does!"

Earl's frame fully blocked the tavern's flickering lantern as he towered over me to ask, "Why you wanna lick our Mr McGee's lollies, then?"

To which I stammered, "I only meant to..."

But I was cut off. The boy continued, "Wait a minute. Was him who followed me last week. He was dressed different but it was him alright. I'm sure of it!"

I found myself in quite a spot; the shadow I found myself in deepened even more as the giant of a man bent further over me to demand, "Why you following our Mr Lyus, then?"

But I had no time to reply before this Lyus spat, "*And* I seen him there at the Whale-o before. Drinkin' *wine*, he was!"

This last was of course a crime of seriousness far beyond even the first two of which I had been accused. But I didn't wait for Earl to ask about my choice of beverage. For never had I met justice for my many misdeeds before then, rarely have I since, and never shall I again. "I'm terribly sorry," I crooned, confident that the combination of dress and my own mixed features would allow me the character I intended. "Allow me to introduce myself. rasid Allan, Doubly-So, at your service. Yes, of *those* Allans. It would seem your Mr McGee has racked up quite a sum with our institutions. Enough to warrant our sending of an exploratory emissary (a spurious title of course) to assess his finances and ability to pay. And whom do I have the pleasure to address?"

They stiffened up immediately, the idiots. "Lyus - uh, Leonderus Mellis, sir," said the one. And, "Earl; just Earl," said the other.

Reveling in my role, I scribbled their names in the book I'd brought that night, spitting simply, "Indeed. And seeing as you have so adeptly divined my intentions, I might as well ask you bluntly. *Is* your Mr McGee able to pay, to your estimations?"

To which they nodded immediately: yes, yes of course he would pay. Anything that was owed.

"Indeed," I repeated nasally, barely able to hide my smile at their sudden docility. From there I quickly slunk back up the hill, determined never to take out my young nobleman's disguise again anywhere in ꝸelia.

Therefore I waited two more weeks, until my beard was full and I'd earned a thick coating of dirt under my nails, before risking a return to the place to fill my evenings. I dressed myself in the most miserable rags I was able to find, slinging myself around the place with the kind of bodily complaint at my existence I thought experienced sailors never failed to practice; so I felt quite secure in my disguise. Even Dervi was completely fooled, sliding the pint I ordered my way without a moment's hesitation. Not a single glimpse did I risk toward the neglected bottles of red that awaited on the shelf behind him, no matter their absurd lack of cost. I only smiled to myself as I reserved my favorite corner to enjoy the stories that might be told that evening. And was taken completely by surprise when McGee cried over Douglas's complaint, "Well, then! rasid! You get that pen ready, will you? He wants to write it down, we'll write it down. And everybody on the End when they get here can either vouch for me or not!"

And he started in on the tale of his trek across North Caledonia, as I fumbled for my pen.

"Hey! Wake up! What does that say?" demanded McGee first thing the next morning. We were in his apartment; I stretched out on an ornately framed, plush, purple sofa I'd never expected to find anywhere near him, he bent over the machine nearby that took up a full third of the room.

I might not have crossed every qaaf and dotted every gaaf, but it read, كنورعبنلعت: 't.s.l.n.ʃ.s.r.v.n.c,' which to me was clear.

"But isn't that one a' them weird 'ng's?" And he started trying to make the 'ڭ' sound. My best description of the noise he made is something like a bear getting a blowjob.

"No, it's supposed to have three dots: 'sh.'"

"Still. There's no 'sh' in conversationalist."

Wincing against the pain that facing reality brought to my head, I replied, "There is when you're trying to write English in script at a dozen words a second. Where *am* I?"

"Library, where else? Had to half carry you up the damn hill," he complained. I tried not to eye him too directly as I prepared to ask why, of all places, we had slept at our workplace. But the game was up. "Imagine my surprise," he sang, "When I hear there's some fool pretending to be a - what was it; exploratory emissary? - pretending to be some douchebag Allan asking after me and my many debts, supposedly. And this moron is named rasid. *And* first chance he gets he makes a beeline for here. I mean, you gave them your real name; did you really think I wouldn't find out?"

I shrugged.

"You a spy?" he asked suddenly.

"A spy?" I laughed. "And who would I be spying for?"

He only hummed incredulously in reply, before reasoning, "Make a sure sorry one if you was. So you sleep here. Somewhere in this... ploughing place."

"On top of the shelves," I admitted.

"Figured as much. With them big, long, gune arms. Look like a rutting monkey, you do. rasid, the hairless chimp, who's 'fluent' in seventeen languages. And I hired you! Ha!"

I had managed to rise by this point, and was desperately searching for something to drink. I call it McGee's apartment and will always to myself. But the one thing of which I was certain was that it wasn't he who'd appointed the place. Every corner except the one dedicated to the machine was as richly embellished as my sofa. The bed was especially lavish. And large. Had there been two McGees there that morning instead of one, I might have arranged them in any direction head to toe and still have had mattress to spare. He refused to go near the thing, it was clear. There was a dingy bedroll and pile of clothes thrown against the wall not ten feet from the doorway that was his main contribution to the decor; next to a brass and glass table with bird's talons clutching orbs for feet, whose intricate artistry was layered in spilt beer, for indeed it was topped with a tapped barrel. It wasn't the water I wanted, but I made do. And as I poured myself a mug, I wondered aloud, "So I'm fired, then?"

"Fired!? Ha! Won't get out of here that easy; you owe me now. I'll make sure to work you extra hard."

And with that the editing of his story began. He used the machine before him to

press countless lead letters into a few dozen leaves of balsa. The plates were dipped in ink and pressed onto clean pages, which were then bound and titled, "Adventure in the Elven Homeland," by John McGee. And to my list of responsibilities was added the hauling of these hundred novellas produced - not to mention any others the shop demanded from us in the future, for there were stacks and stacks of similarly lettered balsa ready to press again onto paper lining my supervisor's room - to McGee-Kilkenny Booksellers, licensed, a miserable shack that had somehow yet to fall into the sea, perched precariously as it was halfway on land and halfway on the most decrepit dock I've ever had the misfortune to come across.

There is a change in the air as one gets close to the place. And I mean more than the loud singing and suddenly unbearable stench of fish that confronts one's progress at the corner past the Smoked Oarsman. It is a tangible seediness that has seeped into the atmosphere from the collective missed opportunities of generations, and clings to one's body, forcing an unnatural uncaring and ease of motion on every gesture. Gone are the busy corner markets and quaint abodes of the ætnea to be replaced by structures the describing of which as functional is a great oversimplification. The men there all have a drink in their hands as they pretend at their work - and no weak beer or wine do I mean; it is liquor only that meets their throats - while the women flash wholehearted smiles as they tease up their skirts at the every one of them who passes, promising whatever they want. For the right price. There are two posted at the door to the booksellers, in fact, who never fail to accost any who attempt to enter. That first time I made the trip, this pair clutched at me most convincingly, cooing, "No need to go in there, handsome. It's nice and warm in here." And they grabbed at my free hand to shove it between their legs each in turn. I thought for a second to follow them into the nearby alley if their price was reasonable, of course. But I dropped my cargo thanks to their efforts, and when they managed to read the author of the works, their comportment changed instantly. They twisted away their wares, laughing, "Well, he's got an assistant now, to do his heavy lifting. Think this one'll bear to fork over a single diamond? Or does he make love only to his hand as well?" And they chided me yet further as I fled from them into the shop.

The proprietor of the bookstore, a dwarf whose polished pate is the only part of him visible until one peeks over his counter, slapped down a pair of coins without a word at the proffered stack of paper.

"Is that all?" I demanded. Even if I was to return the whole of the sale price to McGee, I had hoped to feel the weight of many pounds in my hand at once for the first time.

But the bookseller merely lifted his gaze drunkenly to mine at the complaint, patronizing, "Two diamonds a novella. One hundred of the things. Would you like me to do it out on paper?" And he pulled ninety-nine of the works behind his counter, throwing the last back my way, pointing to the door to my left, marked simply, 'Porn.' "With the others," he commanded. An insult if I've ever heard one; the work was part mine, after all.

"There must be some kind of mistake," I insisted. "It might not be literature exactly but I wouldn't quite call it pornography either!"

"What would you call it, then?" he demanded gruffly.

"Well... fiction, I suppose."

His reply was a grunt and repeated gesture to the porn sign that elaborated his

point for him efficiently enough. But still he tried to educate me aloud. "You must work at the library," he said, to which I nodded. So he explained, "There you've got it all split up into fiction and nonfiction, right? Well here, we got porn. And not porn. Understand?" I did, sadly enough. So in I went without further complaint, finding a small section dedicated to McGee's previous works already reserved on the wall to my left. They sold for four diamonds a copy whereas anything with pictures sold for at least seven.

I was nearly back to the library when I suddenly remembered the filth I had grabbed from the basement. Doing the math in my head, I groaned to myself that it might in fact be worth the effort of a repeat trip: ten or twelve mœnga at (hopefully) four or five diamonds each was half a pound, after all. In any case, I had gotten all the use from them I thought I would ever by then. So I made sure to finish my responsibilities that night and the next morning, I slipped out the door with them concealed in a lunch basket covered with bread and tomatoes.

I was in for a pleasant surprise. "This, now, is what I'm after!" declared the bookseller happily as he grabbed at the first to examine it. And he pulled up a stool to better inspect the rest. Halfway through the pile, he stopped short, his breath caught far down in his throat. "Can't be!" he stammered. "Is that a... it is!" And he flipped the thing back my way, pointing excitedly at the stamp that passed for publishers information, cozily situated just underneath a finely illustrated figure of an obese man's bare ass covered in red paddle-prints, likewise carefully positioned horizontally so as to not hide either the cheering crowd in the background or the stake onto which the poor man's enormous globe was clearly descending. (Before one judges, the cover was not entirely representative of what awaited within; it was more about what happened to the man's many wives and daughters after this incident.) The stamp read simply: 'ETR - 822.'

"An Eter! Haven't seen one of these in months! Where'd you *find* this!?" he spat. But he failed to wait for a reply. Instead he kicked open a section of his counter to drag me underneath, pulling the stack of booklets down with him to peruse it more privately. Separating the one from the others, he slapped down a full pound on the shelf beside us, saying, "Fifty for the Eter. And fifty for the rest makes one. Not a bad haul for the day, my boy. And if you happen across any more, you make sure to bring 'em down here to McGee-Kilkenny, you hear?" So I returned to the library with a spring in my step, at least, since I could not help parting with my prize in return for the eagerly provided services of the pair that awaited me outside the bookseller's door.

Although I found myself in quite a spot thereafter, seeing as I could consider myself rich in all ways save actuality. McGee was as careful with the basement door as ever; moreso, perhaps, now that he knew where I spent my nights. I had finally managed to get him to allow me the privilege of hauling my wine down the hill. (I of course simply took the stuff once he brought it up and returned a reasonable sum to him some hours later.) But now I was even a hundred times more desperate to find my way to the basement for myself, ghost or no. I would do the math in my head nightly. If the pile was a cone, of sorts, with a base thirty feet wide and a height of eight feet, it meant one thousand, eight hundred something cubic feet of pornography. Furthermore if each mœnga was one fiftieth of a cubic foot - a reasonable assumption - and sold for only five diamonds, even, it meant a net worth of forty-five hundred pounds! But alas, one locked door and one John

McGee stood in my way. And I was not about to split that sum with him in return for entrance, especially since I knew it was I who would do the actual hauling of the terrible things down the hill.

So I waited. And waited. It was almost a month before I was able to find my way below-ground once again. The remainder of testudo passed in agonizing slowness as I pined away as did most of salamandre. The hellebores were even bursting into life along the main path to the library before I finally found my luck.

She'd embedded herself at my side the night McGee dragged me back from the Whale; a cat. Black she was, from the tip of her ears to the tip of her tail. A small dish with the name Tuna - or perhaps it was simply a label of the usual contents - had sat by his machine, and I saw that her gaze would pass every so often over the empty dish as we traded our recollections of his story as it'd been told the night before. Only once he found her food after a time did she spring from my lap to grace him with her presence, purring loudly as he slopped down her breakfast. I thought little of the creature aside from the fact that I found her an oddly appropriate pet for my supervisor to keep. Weeks passed. One evening, as I gazed out at the city under the waxing moon of a freezing cold evening, I gave a start when I noticed her purr her way under my bottle of wine and into my lap, there to rudely force her way between my legs, hollowing out a bed for herself on top of my blanket. And so we remained for the entirety of the night. Her eyes would occasionally pass my way exactly as they had over her food dish there in McGee's apartment. And for a single millisecond as she met my gaze each time, I was enchanted beyond compare. Held firmly by the spell she'd cast on me, I dared not move for the sake of her comfort, remaining cross legged the whole of the night. I would even happily part from sleep every now and then to check if she was still there. And there she stayed until sunrise to my delight, at which point she unceremoniously stretched and departed.

From then on I seemed her plaything. Daily, almost, she would be sure to surprise me, cuffing my ears from a perch she'd find above me as I attended to my duties between the shelves.

"She's taken a liking to you," Neilson told me one frigid afternoon. And as we shivered under our many layers, he explained, "That there's the real boss of this place. None know her nooks and crannies like she does." All while the cat blinked back lazily from the shelf above, her face turning slowly to look out the windows once she'd bored of us.

Some days she would even descend to the ground to toy with me when Paudrik was elsewhere. She would always surprise me from behind, with a loud and violent stroking of my calves. After a moment of this, off she would wander, I clearly to follow. Ten times she did this. More, perhaps. But without fail, she would stop in the end under the same shelf; halfway through the 930s, situated in the southwest corner. And there she would sit, staring back at me occasionally as was her way until I thought to pet her. I thought the gesture a logical end to our game of tag, but she clearly opined otherwise. Only rarely would she allow me this treatment for a time before slinking off to some hole nearby. More often she would turn fiercely to scratch at me before deigning to depart. But it was always the same shelf that she led me to. I assumed at first that it was because of the pleasant lighting of the aisle in the late afternoon, when she would generally do this. Perhaps it was indeed mere partiality. Or perhaps she simply knew more than me, seeing as one day I

thought after her departure to examine that same shelf for misplaced books as my self-appointed duty for the day, my hand reaching first for a tome peculiarly lit by the setting sun above me, one 'Metamorphoses,' by Ovid, clearly out of place there by as much as an entire floor. But pull easily from its place on the shelf the book did not. I was forced to grab at it with both hands, and even then only the top half came loose, the thing to stay there sideways, held from behind by some unseen mechanism. I nearly spat up the bottle that had served as part of my midday meal at what happened next: the whole shelf gave way to sink slowly below the floor, each two-foot portion sinking a few knuckles more than the one before, making a kind of stairway! At first I thought to run. But the dwarves were elsewhere and the thing surprisingly made very little noise as it descended. Which is of course when I remembered the pile of money that awaited me below.

By providence, the passage thus revealed led downward to spill me directly into a certain ornate archway poised over a certain door worked throughout with wrought iron. So I immediately sprang above once more to grab the nearest candle I could find, having to light it again and again as I slunk back down, since I could not refrain from running. But no matter my fitful progress, there it was still once I got there: the same monstrous pile of monstrous mœnga that I had stumbled on before, which was apparently worth thousands of pounds. So I immediately grabbed as much as I could carry, giggling my way back to the exit at a near sprint. But I was accosted once more before I achieved the light of day by none other than she who had led me there. The cat wound her way between my legs from behind exactly as she had minutes before at the start of our game, then departed down the hallway, her tail, lit by my candle, swaying playfully in the still subterranean air like the beam of light reflected from the sea under a full moon on a windless night. Never had my soul been so split. Here were my two parts being torn apart at the seams. The dwarf in me screamed to leave with my prize and collect payment in silver; while the man in me lusted for yet more, for who knew what else awaited below in the dark. In the end, I followed the damned cat.

On and on she led me, waiting to lick her paws if I ever strayed too far behind, turning suddenly to bound off into the darkness should I happen to get too close. So we made our way; until finally, she slipped with obvious familiarity through an open portal we came to some twenty floors below ground, not turning to see if I followed. But follow I did, surprised at the soundlessness of this door as it swung open on new hinges, moreso by the pleasant comfort that awaited within. There were massive landscapes on every wall, the paint on them barely dry compared to all else that rotted underneath the library, interspersed here and there with tapestries and other works. An entire half of the place was dedicated to a series of shelves that held countless pieces of clothing likewise finely designed and fashioned. And just opposite them, midway along the wall to my right, was a single bed covered with silk stained an intricate pattern of black and red. Wordlessly - without breath, even - I made my way forward towards the bed, leaving my candle on the floor some twenty paces away, from which distance I thought it might not disturb the resting. And I saw that here, at last, was our ghost.

She was serenely beautiful, gently lit as she was by the distant flame. Her every feature might as well have been painted on by the same master that had crafted the adornment of her abode; features that twitched in response to her apparent deep dreaming, hinting at the unease of her soul even if it lied within such an artful

shell. And not just artful but alluringly so. Far more enticing than those on which the working women above prided themselves as they plied their wares by the docks. Even more captivating, I thought, than the one my beautiful samara boasted. For her shoulders and arms visible above the covers, while gracefully formed, rippled with a strength that I was certain my young love would never achieve, and the mounds formed by her hips and breasts under the silk put even those more familiar mountains to shame. Her skin, stained a deep reddish-purple, like moŋtsɐɻɐn before it is released from its bottle, reflected the light of my candle so perfectly that it seemed as if the tip of her nose and the ridges of her cheekbones were fashioned from light itself. Nevermind the smallest glint where her fangs pressed against her full lips. Such were my first (or second, perhaps, if one counts her stealing my bottle of ɡɷme) impressions of Rose. She was the first orcess I'd ever seen; the orcs who call the High Atlas home, some of whom trade regularly with the fɷlcirs, keep their females hidden away with an eagerly open distrust of all others. And so I froze there, the better to enjoy the artistry or her form, only forcing myself to depart by sheer willpower after some time.

But I was deceived! For the door to her chambers had closed of its own volition, seemingly, in the meantime. And as I pulled at the thing uselessly, wondering how exactly it had become so firmly lodged, from behind me came a sudden laughter that shook me to the hollows of my soul. So deeply sinister yet filled with glee was the sound that echoed through the dark that I thought it an impossibility to have come from that sleeping beauty I had admired mere moments before. But come from her it had. She'd risen and was coming towards me by this point, now not only the graceful features of her face shimmering in the light of my candle but the every boundary of her naked body, from the arch of her sprinter's calves to the curve of her swinging hips to the bulge of her heaving breast above. I was frozen yet again, overcome, as one may imagine, in precisely equal measure by opposite urges; an insistence that I flee at once on the one hand and a longing to grab her in my arms no matter the evil she clearly intended me on the other.

I will never forget the first words that came from her smiling lips. "Ma tlatoa," she purred, translating for me after another swaying step: "Look! at what the spider has caught in her web." And as she pressed herself up against me to examine me by scent, I dared only tremble away from her into the tapestry behind.

"A little fly," she whispered in my ear at last, after long seconds of sniffing apprehension. Only then did I take more than passing note of the more functional aspects of her form, for as she smiled down at me, the knuckle-long fangs that passed for her canines hovered immediately before my eyes, and I could feel just how sharp and strong her claws were as her hand pressed into the small of my back. All I could do was arc further back into the wall behind me to await the inevitable sinking of those various weapons into my flesh at her convenience, for McGee's story was not the only one I had heard in my life about her race and their preferred diet.

But she was not yet ready for her meal, apparently. She caught her breath in surprise as she reached down instead, laughing with briefly widened eyes, "Aver... Maybe not so little after all." Then pulling her hand back once more, she left me in suspense as she bent sideways, knuckle by agonizing knuckle, arching her back and hips more and more exaggeratedly as she lowered, her gaze never leaving mine for a single second until she turned her eyes to the candle that hung limp in my hand at

the bottom of her descent, and, with a playful smile, the image of which would cling to my mind far past the darkness that ensued, still clings to it, in fact, and springs to the front with every sudden descent into the unknown, gave a little blow.

No matter how long it had taken us to get to this point, what followed was a frenzy of violence. She was incredibly strong; I had no chance of resisting her machinations. She pulled me off into the depths of her cavern by the back of the neck like I were a snake that might try to bite. Though I imagined for a second that we must have been headed for the bed, reasoning as I stumbled along that there were worse ways to be sent from this world, I realized quickly, once I tripped over and onto the mountain of broken wine bottles I'd noticed on its far side as I examined her, that she must not have wanted to soil her bedding with my various fluids. After dragging me to my feet again, she slammed me up against a nearby wall with such strength that the wind was forced from my lungs, then secured me, dangling in the air, to the ready restraints there, the better to furiously rip off my clothes. She was now free to toy with me most expertly, but the smell of the blood gushing from my forearms and hands stole her attention, driving her into a wild delight. She attached her face to me eagerly to catch some of the liquid, sampling it fully; or as best as she could considering the circumstances, for much failed to find its way through her lips; I could feel the drip, drip, drip of it as it splattered onto my chest whenever she released me to take a laughing breath, and would soon be able to see the extent of her monochrome artwork for myself when she lit a nearby candle to reveal a thin coat of red across my whole front. We continued like this for a time, my blood falling from her chin to lubricate her adept manipulation of me below. I admit that I succumbed to this treatment with surprising agreeability. I was eager, even, to be enveloped more completely in her grasp no matter the pain I was sure she would cause me in time. All while she made no attempt to hide her eventual intentions. She nibbled here on her travels of my body, bit forcibly there to open up fresh wounds that she would enjoy for a time like the first; until finally she came to my neck, where my arteries bulged with each heartbeat behind only a thin layer of skin. No matter the near black; no matter the complete silence that reigned there between her soft moaning, I could discern her hesitation. There I was in her hand, which thing she clearly intended to use for her pleasure, and which despite the nature of her assault on me raged like a bladder plunged into a flooding river. But closer still was this meal she seemed to long for equally. She licked, even, at the pulsing skin under my ear, before returning to toying with me in the end and, with an exaggeratedly slow descent of her tongue down my chest, finally pressed herself onto me, forcing a laughing groan up the organ that reverberated through me to even the last corner of my heart.

So what's a man to do? I arched forward as far as my restraints would let me. But past this first, full swallowing, the miserable bitch refused to descend onto me completely! No more than half a knuckle would she allow me to enter. Neither would she take any more than this into her when she dropped me to my knees, turned and pushed herself back onto me, hunching over to receive me from behind. It was infuriating. She even laughed aloud in full recognition of the agony she was inflicting on me, as she wiggled this way and that, face planted firmly on the chaise lounge in front of her in order to free her hands for the direction of her symphony of self-satisfaction. I would have preferred any torture to this treatment. She might have torn me limb from limb or taken each of my digits over the

course of hours and I would certainly have been happier. This was far worse, and it lasted for what seemed forever, until she finally collapsed down before me with a terminal cry.

I was left hanging there, an afterthought. All I could do was wonder what still awaited me, though I was certain whatever it was would involve my last moments on this Earth. After some time of listening to the forced breath of her recovery, I felt her bring herself to her feet and, lifting my restraints to their original height, press herself up against me once more, as she had at the start of our meeting. And she kissed me, an intense longing I had apparently been unable to relieve evident in the violent thrashings she made within my mouth. I, meanwhile, as one may imagine, was throbbing between her thighs. I could feel the warmth of her round me, and more than that, the dripping humidity coming from above. It was mere semantics to me, therefore, whether we were in fact one, and I couldn't help thrusting forward again and again, uncontrollably, as if we were. Finally, slowly, as she wrapped a leg around me and slid down my front, she guided me inside her fully, coming to rest herself on me with one last animalistic thrust that left me sore from the impact. I longed to finish at once, so deep inside of her did I find myself. But she had toyed with me for so long by this point that I'd become quite used to my place, which was clear to sit days away from ecstasy. And the knowing laugh she forced into my mouth as she renewed her kiss showed, much more than her own pleasure in our now complete oneness, her satisfaction with herself at a so patient control of my body. For some time more, therefore, we joined ourselves, achieving a firm but slow rhythm that sent our two slabs of flesh rippling away from the impact time after time. Finally, she pulled her mouth from mine to embed her face in the crook of my neck above the shoulder, her fangs the meat around my jugular to gently squeeze. As I prepared for the end.

But it was never to come in either sense! For at that instant, who other than John McGee arrived to break open the door to her lair. She pulled from our embrace at once to confront the sudden noise of his entrance. But it was too late. The strange light he bore blinded us both; all she could do was throw up an arm in front of her eyes and wince against the onslaught of the beam. She was completely unprotected against the unloading of his weapon, that same contraption he had pointed round every bookshelf the night I first found my way below-ground. There was a deafening boom, then a cry of hate and pain that she released before she slipped off at last, back into the dark. There I hung in the end, quite drained but still whole, to await his strolling approach; whereupon he released me from my bonds and dragged me once more to the light of day. No matter how loudly I begged him to allow me to stay.

3.

We spoke of the subterranean rescue not a single time. If one failed to note my quiet acquiescence to McGee's every whim for a time thereafter, in fact, it was as if it had never occurred. Our return trip from the orcess's lair was spent in near silence; beyond his occasional smug suggestion that I forget about whatever madness'd ended me up there, the only full sentence I remember him sparing for me on the way back up was an all-too-familiar direction to remember to have the checkout orders ready by ten (he meant five-twenty) the next day as we emerged into the open air of the main floor. And when I dared venture back to the 930's, the shelf that had allowed my passage to the underground was once more indiscernible from the rest. Whether this was the dwarf's doing or simply the nature of the machinery that controlled it, at that time I knew not.

As I sat there staring at the thing, one eye on 'Metamorphoses' goading me, I made a firm resolution to never visit the basement again. And I certainly *intended* to see this promise through for all my days. But less than a week wore the whole of it away. For I was very bored. And more than that, I would never have been able to forget the wealth that awaited below. Still a patchwork of gashes and bites was my top half when I made my way down once more. I did, however, make sure to construct barricades out of whatever I could find in the nearby rooms. Therefore I felt fairly safe after a time in my daily, rushed descent - for the bookshelf would rise again after only a few minutes and I never managed to find another switch underground to open my way above once more should I ever tarry too long there - to load a backpack with the raw materials of my new enterprise, being protected from the rest of the underground by ten feet or more of piled-up ancient furniture, bookcases and tomes. Even if every now and then I was able to discern a set of eyes - feline perhaps, perhaps not - staring back at me and my candle's light from the darkness as I hurried along.

In any case, in this way did my income rise exponentially. As did my debts, for I now quite literally owed McGee my life; a situation that need not have become a problem once properly accounted for so long as my expenses remained constant. But alas they did not, for the Whale hired two new barmaids shortly thereafter to assist in the managing of its growing clientele. They said they hailed from the land called Sani, which lies in the near middle of Caledonia on the southeastern extreme of the Crescent Sea, and which both the dwarves and men who live in the countries that surround it refuse to name as one of their own. The people of Sani have the raven hair, heart-shaped faces and almond eyes of other occidentals, but while western men can often grow very tall, the Saniese are of middling stature at best. And when it comes to their behavior, they have much more in common with their industrious dwarven cousins to the south and east than their reckless and often lazy relations to the north and west. That is a generalization, of course; Cherry and Peach, for example, were the definition of reckless and lazy, respectively. But they seemed otherwise unremarkable representatives of their ostensible homeland, which meant they were pleasant to look on, and even only a mere knuckle or two taller than me. They were in fact the first women I had ever met who were forced to raise their gaze to mine almost as often as the other way round, since the dwarves who live in Archaea are of course all men. In short, I found them very

attractive, and it took less than a week after their arrival for the lion's share of my new income to start to find its way into their hands directly.

Although I was forced to wonder at the ease of our acquaintance. The start of their employment was awfully conveniently timed, after all. They were professionals, to be sure; if professionals marked by a wholly lackluster response to payment. And pay them I did! But the every time we met privately, Peach would be sure to throw my coins, no matter the number, in a drawer with little more than a "thanks." I found them both extremely interested, however, in the oddest things; things that I noticed after a time were often the same as might appeal to my supervisor. The coincidences gathered upon themselves rapidly. They began insisting on me occasionally spending the night with Peach in her room at the Whale, for instance, the very same day that McGee suggested a comfortable, "reasonably priced" apartment which his second cousin was for some reason having an especially hard time renting out. But my suspicions, no matter how often they came up, remained exactly that: conjectures only.

They were even openly hostile to him to start with, to the point that it seemed they must have borne him some resentment. Indeed, their first night behind the bar, they made sure to treat him most rudely. When he made his usual entrance and was forced to explain to Cherry not only his ale of choice but that he generally paid only a single diamond for it, she called out into the kitchen, loud enough for all to hear, "Hey Dervi, do we give a senior discount on that cheapest beer we have?" failing to pause more than a second to repeat what none of us heard, for he wasn't even there that night, "No?" All while Peach awaited McGee's two diamonds expressionlessly, hand outstretched, the Saniese's combined callousness setting the whole of the place snickering. And as time wore on, their hostility tempered only to mere avoidance. Never did I see them share more than a word with McGee, and only when was absolutely necessary.

Me they adored, however. They were mine and mine alone there. Not once did they bother with the other patrons to my knowledge, I paid Peach so well. And to show off their commitment in return for my golden (silver, more precisely, but who's counting?) generosity, they had a game they played as often as they liked. They were quite hard to tell apart when made up - they claimed to be twins, in fact - and it was all too tempting to take bets on exactly which of them was which. A pound was the usual wager, and two the return if one guessed correctly; but despite that apparent fairness they would always make out like thieves. For they were very devious in their deceptions. Though most nights Cherry would line her eyes with a pastel purple and Peach a pale orange, it was not always so; their irises themselves were an identical silver-grey and the slight extra roundness of Cherry's eyes was easily sharpened with her makeup. The only sure way to differentiate between them - when they allowed it, that is - was how they did their hair, Cherry generally tying hers back in a single simple black ribbon while Peach preferred it down, a distinction of course all too easy to reverse. Neither did they wink with their left or right eye at the better with anything but an aim to confound. I, however, would more often than not have watched them fret over which color to do themselves up with that morning and how to do their hair; as well as assisted them in painting the characters 桜 and 桃 on the small of their backs, that served as final say as to who was who there at the tavern that night, that all assumed were permanent tattoos, but were in fact a mere part of their daily makeup ritual and as interchangeable as

they wished. And so I would always guess right, and chuckle along with the few who refused to bet at all while the other idiots threw their money away time after time with a smile at the declaration of, "Nope, I'm Peach!" for example, accompanied by a playful gesture to her backside. No matter her tits needed be pushed up a bit to equal the other's cleavage, she'd not eaten a thing since noon, and the smell of her eleven o'clock hit of opium still clung to her clothes.

Therefore I quickly came to forget about the orcess - outside of my nightmares, anyway - by enjoying the company of these two. My wounds healed, and I forgot how much I owed my supervisor. Which is why despite his insistence that I take my pen and paper to the tavern every night, I had my hands filled with only a bottle of wine in the one and Peach's midsection in the other when Douglas began his story. I still remember the exaggerated condescending behind McGee's nod, clearly indicating he had deigned to allow his rival the privilege of my labor. I cared not. Of the two it was Peach alone, after all, whose affection could be wrested from her own vice of choice, food, by offer of less than a limb. But McGee had not to repeat himself. Since funnily enough she had a pen at the ready, which she allowed me to retrieve playfully from between her breasts after she dropped it there; as Cherry, in between sips of ale, while I was thus distracted, slapped down a stack of paper retrieved from Dervi's accounts room in front of me without a word.

Douglas waved at the air in front of him to better begin,

'Halfway through the Amician lies a fell mire. Sea to the east. Sea to the west. Swamp in between for hundreds of miles, as far as the eye can see. This Aztlan, as they call it, stretches on-again off-again for ten thousand miles north to south. And within are collected the most foul, wicked creatures the Earth has ever produced: kerkins... mandibals... wyverns... wyrms... and, of course, orckind, masters of the islands that rise from the muck and the mud. It is a thing of fang and bone. Of blood and sorrow. Only the bravest of souls dare sail near. And protected by that terrible reputation, in the middle of a windswept waste of water called the Barren Sea, five thousand miles from the nearest signs of civilization, there lies a desolate spit of land named the Isla Concordia.

Of the dozen small islands that bear the unending bombardment of the white-capped waves of this sea, it is near the only one that survives the average hundred tides without a single dose of salt; the mountain at its middle, Mount Diablo, even rises hundreds of feet above the waves. There's an amazing view from the top. On a clear day you can see the peaks of the Razorbacks to the east, the Rogues far to the north, and the tip of the Sword's Edge there to the south; all of the green and white of the larger islands surrounded and engulfed and preceded by the blue of the water, the Amician Ocean spread out at your feet like someone'd rolled out a big, wavy carpet for you to walk on. But few can claim to have climbed the mount, since the whole of the island's coastline save a lone, rocky beach hidden on its north side is far too steep for a man to find his way ashore by any means. And even if you were to somehow manage to plant your feet on her rugged shelves, I doubt the view would be your biggest priority. Because much more important than

what waits at the top is what lies at the base of this Mount Diablo: on its north side, deep in a grove of ancient trees, a pit. And in that pit, buried deep, lies the bulk of King Aedis's treasure.

He has troves the world over, our King Aedis, not to mention his coffers at Monvitori. But none are so large as this one. Inside, crammed into hundreds of chests as big as a man and spilling over into the crevices between, are piled the riches that his father Aedeon demanded in tribute from Valverde before he conquered them anyway; also his share in the clan Allan and the whole of his hereditary wealth, since his house is as old and noble as any on Caledonia; not to mention everything he's managed to accrue in his own lifetime, what he's earned from his never-failing protection of honest seamen the Shallow Sea over for the last fifty years, a sum that rivals the whole of the rest. None who know of this treasure dare approach the island for fear of our King's retribution. And those who don't fear the stories he's spread. But this is a different kind of story: a true story, about how he almost lost it all.

Because not only is he King, he is also captain of the finest ship ever built, the Mako. And the one thing even the noblest of captains can never fully prepare for is a mutiny. It's not men of character and virtue only that heed the call of the wide-open sea, after all. Not a single ship that sails is free from the labors of base and vile men. And though there might be a hundred ways or more to keep these scoundrels in their place, there is no way under the sun to cure them of their villainy once and for all. So a captain must walk a tightrope at all times. If he should lean off his path to one side, he allows them to decide half the affairs that must be his responsibility alone, for the sake of the fair and equitable management of his ship's business. But if he should err to the other, it's much worse. He ends up skewered along with any who try to defend him and the ship becomes theirs wholly. For a time. Because no matter their cunning and ruthlessness, the average mutineer knows how to run a ship about as well as he knows how to shave - which is to say not at all.

Mad Tom McGee, though, was far from your average mutineer. None know from where he hails. Although he speaks Orcish better than he does English, and is as familiar with the coast of the Aztlan as he is with any of the lands that support the civilized men of this world. It was for these talents that Aedis brought him on, when he found him in a brothel in Fomoria. Because the Shallow Sea extends far more easterly than most dare explore. And if our King intended to be the protector of the whole of it, we would need patrol even its furthest edges, no matter how close to the dangers of the Aztlan such task might take us. Tom was our guide for these expeditions. Ten years he was our guide, and he shared in our spoils. And never did he guide us wrong. Through some hairy adventures, let me tell you! But all the while what he was really doing was planning his inevitable betrayal. What he was really doing all the while was lying and cavorting his way into the minds of every one of the stupider members of the crew, sowing his dissent and jealousy at the station of others. To Aedis himself, he was ever a humble and willing servant, of course. And like I said, he never knowingly put us in harm's way. Although to do so would have been to endanger himself as well, so I hold no medal here for him in secret, to be sure! Ten years, he was one of us. Until he finally saw his chance.

It was on a different island that his treacherous stroke fell at last. This one much

larger; a jungled mass of rock without a proper name, but that we call the handle, since if you look at the Sword's Edge on a map, it lies where the handle of that long, curved blade ought. Far to the south of the Isla Concordia, maybe eight hundred miles. Past the Barren Sea and the whole of the Sword's Edge and deep into the Amician this island lies. Though close enough to the Aztlan to have to keep a guard posted at all times while sailing near. This is where the Mako was to be built. The jungles there are the only safe place on this planet home to the teak tree, the wood of which is better for shipbuilding than all others, thanks to its strength, flexibility and resistance to rot. And the design of the Mako was ambitious to say the least. Of no other wood could this ship be built if it was intended to last more than a month on the open ocean. She was to be a schooner to the Thresher's sloop; mast-rigged with added square topsails at her heights and six jibs. Instead of an oversized mainsail, the shape of which is what gives the Thresher her name, she'd have her foresail and mainsail perfectly matched for balanced running. From the line of the waves up, she was intended to be indistinguishable from any of the countless other schooners that make sail; the kind of ship that looks so impressive with its over-tall rigging, that rich men take out at their leisure and play at traversing the ocean's waves in, no matter they rarely leave the safety of their harbor. But all similarities were to end there. Because beneath the waves was to be hidden her massive hold, far bigger than a schooner ought have by two or three times over. So big that she'd have to be loaded at all times or she'd tip with the first wave to hit her side. Her draft would be fifteen feet; deep water was to be her permanent home. But with such a belly below the waves, she could bring sails twice the area of even the Thresher's to bear, and would cut through chop like a knife that ships twice her size dared not traverse. Her design had consumed all of Aedis's days and nights for the past year. And when we arrived there at the handle, we were prepared for all manner of disaster to see her finished; except, of course, the machinations of our guide.

A tide-hungry bay made the perfect home for our labors. First we made a dock of pine that spanned the whole of its mouth. From there the real labor began. Boards were cut and steamed, and nailed in carefully one at a time. And as she took form, we dropped her in the water to be finished upright. It was then that Mad Tom decided to strike. The very night we spent celebrating her inevitable completion, and felt the strength of her construction as we loaded up the hold with the heaviest of our cargo so she'd behave there in the bay. He and two dozen others slit the throats of the few honest seamen we'd left on the Thresher and departed silently to the north.

It was nigh on noon the next day when we finally admitted to ourselves what had happened; once Vex's body drifted back to shore from the watery grave they'd intended for him. But there wasn't a thing we could do that day. The Mako wasn't yet seaworthy. The rudder still hadn't been fashioned, along with a hundred other things that needed finishing before she'd be able to make way. Aedis'd set aside the whole of the next month for us to complete our work. And as you can imagine, at this point he feared nothing more than pushing us too far. But needs must, as they say. To beg us to work with our every fiber was his only choice. Because we knew at once where Mad Tom was sailing; it was the bastard himself who'd shown us the relative safety of the Isla Concordia in the first place. And far more than just a pile of gold was at risk. Because it was specifically much Allan gold that laid there, and

for someone other than Aedis to hold even a single coin of it was as good as him throwing away his crown. And without him there would surely be war in the east once again.

So he brought the body of Vex into our makeshift hall for all of us to see. And he shouted, "Comrades! Men of the Thresher and of Valverde. My family: Caledonian, Varioca and English alike. This day we have been played false by him that I held in the highest level of trust. This very day, Tom the scoundrel - Mad Tom henceforth - Mad Tom McGee has stolen our beloved Thresher; surely with the intent to take for himself every bit of the gold we have piled up in the north. He has shown himself to be a coward, and worse yet has shown our trust to have been misplaced. He was not worthy to hold even a single word in confidence! But if he thinks he will get away with his treachery; if he thinks he will profit from turning on that trust we've given him, he is sorely mistaken. For gathered here in front of me I see the bravest, most fearsome men I've ever had the displeasure to meet. And is it not you who have been insulted the worst? Is it not you from whom he intends to steal? It is not merely my gold that lays in the trove he makes for. It is ours. As per the agreement I signed with each and every one of you when you were taken on. Will you let him do it? Will you let him take from you with one hand, while the other he extends to you in friendship? Before you is our only hope. The Mako; a beast yet untried, but as hungry for blood as the most heedless of creatures that call the ocean their home. You can feel her bloodlust, and the strength of her bones! Can you not? She waits only for us to finish! Will you see her completed in time to catch our enemy? Will you!?"

Well, as you can imagine, by this point we were as riled as if we were face to face with him who'd done us wrong. And so we set to work with a fervor I've never seen in man since. A fervor that only strengthened as time wore on. Because as each of us looked around, between our hammer-strikes and our saw-lengths, who did we see surrounding us but men as inspired and respectable as ourselves. Tom had done us that favor at least; of taking from our presence every one of the villains that had found their way into our crew. Who was left but hard workers? Men of valor? And so we labored away as is our lot, as our captain made the rounds.

"Stay that line, sailor," he'd cry. "That knot cannot come undone." And he'd boom, "Brace those guns! We'll need every single one before this is done!" But he only laughed, "You can forget that rail, sailor! That we'll finish once we've caught our enemy. All well and good for ladies on a cruise to lean on, but here are hardened sailors only. We'll stand on our two feet or not at all!"

And so within the space of a fortnight, we were ready to chop off the last bits of dock that clung to her hull. The Mako was freed at last, and she was hungry for her first taste of blood.'

'Meanwhile, the Thresher had already made the Sword's Edge and was headed due west at great speed on a strong wind from the north. Two days on this route was all she needed to bring her round the jagged peaks that jut out into the sea round the curve in the blade; to where the two routes she might take northward

diverged.

The first was the safer. Tom could have stuck to the open water. A mile out to sea you have to sail in order to avoid the rocks that hide here and there beneath the froth. Twenty miles is better, for there are things not spoken of by sailors that swim in those waters. At such a distance, you're subject to the Amician's every whim, good weather or foul. And though she can be as agreeable as a maid Malloy for most of the year, those summer months were still far in the future. In March, storms can blow across her with a sadistic rage. But no matter the weather, still was this route the safer. And had he taken it, there's a good chance he would have gotten away with his villainy.

But Tom decided to follow the other path. Because nothing more than a confrontation with us did he fear; he surely knew we would soon be on his tail. And no matter its dangers, this other route he chose did shave quite a distance off the trip to the Isla Concordia. As he turned the Thresher eastward, however, toward a coastline that appeared to be nothing but an unbroken line of mountains, the scoundrels that now comprised his crew made sure to pile their objections upon his ears. He expected these complaints. Welcomed them, even. He said not a word in retaliation as he jibed his way forward again and again, since the Thresher cannot run, with her mainsail big enough to tip her if it's ever fully extended, getting closer and closer to the Sword's Edge with each pass. Finally he zigged into the hidden canyon that starts the Ventana; that breaks the mountains into two parts through their very center and leads straight to the Barren, a direct path of calm water running cross to the trade winds for almost three hundred miles. Though they grumbled still to themselves, none of the weasels dared challenge him too directly as he sailed her into the hidden notch. Until at last, the canyon they found themselves in narrowed to less than a mile wide and they spotted the knife-slim vessels called Ahuizot' coming their way. Hundreds of them, each rowed by a single man - wild men, though, who speak the Orcish tongue - a single man with such familiarity that the crafts might as well have been the living, lower half of their bodies instead of mere shells in which they sat. The wild men got closer, and closer, and closer. But still none on the Thresher dared challenge their new captain head on, so feared was he. Until at last, the scoundrels could make out the weapons that were strapped across the wild men's backs, macuahuit, great clubs with shards of obsidian wedged where they might do the most damage. Worse yet, at the head of the fleet of crafts were two orcs, painted head to toe in black. And though much of our dear Mr McGee's story about how he traversed the Caledonias was likely embellishment, the one truth he surely told is that orcs are made of a different stuff than your average man. Their approach must have rattled the new crew of the Thresher something terrible. So finally, one of them dared speak up.

"We go to our death," the sailor called out. And he drew a knife to convince the captain of his errors in judgment. But with little more than a yawn, and the wicked strength and wile given him by the endless struggling of his existence, Mad Tom disarmed the fool and slit his throat with his own blade. And tossed the body overboard.

"The toll is paid," he said simply to the others, who slunk back to their oars like chastised children, as the band of wild men picked up the fresh meat that awaited them, their expected payment for use of their cut from those that know their ways, and turned back to the shore. Tom yelled out, "And let it be known that whoever

else thinks to question me will meet a similar fate. Though from now on, I'll make sure to leave you alive in the water for them to find. And they won't bother to kill you until their children have all had their fill. This is what it means to be on the crew of my ship. The Thresher no more; from here on she's the Decade's End. *My* Decade's End. Do not defy me, and your sweat will be properly rewarded. No more will you be forced to bow to some landed King what fancies himself a seaman, who pays less than what's even necessary to fuel your labor. Do not defy me, and yours will be an equal share of all the fruits of the labors of others, that we can take for ourselves. Since I know you all better than you know yourselves, and what I understand most of all is that your best skills lie in how you carry your steel. But you will work at whatever I tell you to work at; and today that work is simpler. Today you row."

Then he whipped whoever failed to put the whole of his back into his oar, since the wind had all but died and the Thresher - I refuse to call her by the name our villain chose - the Thresher's sails fluttered uselessly. So they rowed with all their might, and their progress remained steady. All while Tom, though he couldn't help but smile at himself and how quickly he'd maneuvered his new ship into the upper hand, did his best to hide his fear. For they still had a long way to go.'

'We on the Mako, sadly, had not a bit of luck to start our journey. The same north wind that shot Mad Tom round the Sword's Edge only forced us out to the open sea; and though we prayed for a quick return to the trade winds, that would've allowed us straight passage northwards at last, all we got was the same sudden stillness that came over the Thresher as she made her way into the cut.

We were two hundred miles out; not a single strip of land to be seen in any direction.

"We must row!" we all declared at once. But Aedis wouldn't hear of it.

"A tight spot we find ourselves in now," he lamented. "Had the wind only shifted, we might have caught them at sea. But now it is doubtful. No, men. Remain at rest. Surely they also find themselves adrift; they can only gain on us farther by hard labor. And they have yet to dig up our treasure and haul it to the Thresher. No matter their progress this day, these tasks will surely cost them most of their lead - as well as the whole of their energies. We will catch them at anchor. And once we do, you will need every bit of your strength, for it'll be a fight to the death they'll surely demand."

So we were forced to wait, all the while watching the horizon for an indication of the sea's mood. But she remained as passive and uncaring as ever. A full day we sat stranded on the open water. Until we felt a slight increase in the sway beneath us.

"Aye, I've noticed," said our captain when we thought to bring it to his attention. "'Tis the calm before the storm, now. Recall that the waves of a cyclone carry farther than the winds. Relish this moment of stillness, men, for it won't last much longer." And he returned with a deeply furrowed brow to his charts.

By the time the sun rose the next day, the grey of the storm was already upon us. Mere minutes did the fiery orb peek above the horizon before it was lost behind

clouds the color of chiseled stone. But the winds slowly returned as these ominous clouds descended to the horizon. And no matter the darkness of the day, it seemed as if we finally had some luck. Because they blew now straight in from the west. Exactly as we had hoped for.

Aedis, however, was of a different mind. "The very tip of the cyclone, this is," he said. "It's a mere taste of what blows in. If we take this wind and go to the northward, as we might have in fairer weather, we won't make the curve in the blade. We're still too far east, damn the gods! Aye, we'll make it to the coast. But there'll be no tacking to the southward then! Nigh in the center of the gale we'll be; and to go to the south at that point would only take us deeper. No; she'd slam us onto the rocks without so much as a fare-thee-well. Only one path lies open to us now. We'll take this wind and go to the south. And as the storm gets closer, the winds will shift. Which is when we turn to the west and shoot past its center. If we can keep the gale to our starboard, she'll throw us right into her wake. Which is when we open these sails out and run on her tails to the northward at last. It is that or we flee. Let us take a vote!" As you can imagine, not a single one of us chose the latter.

The breeze turned gusty as the sky grew darker, and we finally started to make headway. Such headway, in fact, that we rode up on the waves, cutting our draft by a third to allow for even higher speeds - though not rising so high as to diminish our stability. And as Aedis peeked over the side, hands on his hips, toes off the deck, he laughed like a man possessed, "Can you hear her sing now!? Can you hear the song of the Mako? Hear it, sailor! Feel it! Feel the strength of my beast. She heels not a bit, even though we've got the sails nigh on her center. No; she whips her tail with equal frenzy instead, and plays in the surf! Look how she breaks the waves! They are as ripples on a lake to a skipping stone. Feel the power of my construction!"

He stayed like that, leaning over the side, one eye on the water and the other on us, for the most of the morning as he belted out his commands: "Secure the rations below! If you intend to eat tomorrow. And you pull those sails in, sailor! All the way! We've a long way to go to round this storm if she's as big as she plays at. We'll need every knot."

And so we sailed, heeding our captain as he heeded the storm and the ship, picking up more and more speed as the day wore on. But hours later the wind still hadn't shifted. Still it blew in from the west, with not the slightest change in direction as far as we could tell.

"The cyclone slips to the southward, captain!" cried the first mate, a fool of a Terran we call Whaker. "It drifts with us to the tropics. We should tack now and carry on as before, now that she'll let us by. This way puts us too far out to sea; and too far from our path."

But Aedis knew better. "No, you fool. Do you not feel the warmth of the wind!? She blows with the strength of a southern storm in autumn. Only is she bigger than we thought; to the north lies death still. We must pull to the windward - use her fury - if we hope to stay the course. Or we flee to the southeast. Not yet does she have us fully!"

So Whaker gulped as he obeyed, yelling out to the helm, "Ten degrees to starboard, sailor. And make sure to brace that wheel!" We all gave a prayer, for now were we pointed even further into the center of the storm.

But the Mako was a beast not to be trifled with. Even now, turned part way into the wind, she cut the chop with complete disregard, though it berated her hull with wall after wall after wall of water. Not a single knot did we lose. No; we went even faster now. Because as we made our way farther into the storm, the wind increased to a ripping, tearing frenzy of air. But no matter our speed, not a single one of us expected to make it out alive at that point. Surely our rush to finish the ship had left a corner cut somewhere too far, we thought. Some line that wasn't tight enough. Some board that hadn't had time to swell for its entire length. The wind and waves beat our construction with ever-increasing bombardment while we waited to witness her breaking point; for the inevitable crack of sound as a crucial part broke, that would signal her end as surely as ours. But the moment never came. No matter the fury of the storm, the Mako remained as solid as ever.

But Whaker still complained. He cried over the wind, "We cut too close to the center, captain. We'll be in the worst of it shortly. We must let out the sails and turn to the leeward! We must start the run! Storm'll surely lessen as it hits the mountains!"

But the wind had only just started to shift to come at us from the north. Nearly a full day of sailing and we had yet to pass her center; still we lingered to her northeast. "No, Whaker," yelled Aedis. "It's too late to turn back now! Only can we stay the course. Never have I seen a storm this size, damn the gods! But no matter her fury, we will pass her nonetheless. For this is the best ship ever built and she can take it! Give me an hour more, and we will do as you say! You will see!"

So we did as the captain demanded. We made for our lines, while Aedis himself now went to the wheel. The waves by this point had started to reach up to the deck. They would've kissed the rail with their every crest if only we had one. But the Mako barely heeded them. Even did Aedis turn us further into the wind and waves to better cut our way. Until all at once, the wind shifted to come at us from the north, and we pulled finally to the leeward to save our broadside the onslaught.

"Make ready for the run," cried Whaker desperately, not bothering this time to ask for permission. And we prayed. Because here was the moment of truth. To jibe with the mainsail was suicide. The first to suffer the wind's onslaught; even had we a crew of a hundred men, there'd be no way to ease it past the wind without breaking the mast or flipping us. The foresail would have to be the one to switch. But the thing was bigger than most schooners dare attach to their mainmast, even, and if she was to fill too quickly on the other side, our end would be just as certain. What's worse, none now dared to touch the topsails. We'd left them unfurled to better make our way when the wind was less. But now the storm raged around us wholly unrestrained. A single stray gust to our heights as we made our change might double any misstep. And the wind was not our only concern, to be sure! As it'd shifted, the waves'd gotten more and more and more chaotic. No rhyme or reason did they follow now. We found ourselves buffeted by water from all directions at once, it seemed; our deck was awash more often than not. The only discernible pattern the sea bothered to follow was to be found in the massive swells that underlaid all the rest, that now came at us from varying angles of the north, twice as tall the ship, that took what seemed an hour to pass us every one. At their crests and troughs, we might maneuver a bit. But otherwise we dared not turn from the line of their passing a single knuckle. So with one eye on our stern to keep it pointed close to the crest of the next mountainous swell, and with every

living soul that remained - that had not yet slipped overboard - holding fast to the line of the foresail, we made our jibe. Somehow, we remained upright. And from there we flew to the south.

So quickly did we make our way with the fury of the storm, it seemed we must have grown wings. How many knots I have no idea. How long we stayed that course, even, I wouldn't be able to tell you for certain. A few hours perhaps. More, likely. Whatever the case it seemed forever. Bigger and bigger did the waves get and more chaotic, until those that came at us from the side were nearly as big as those that overcame us from behind. Not a single thing could you hear above the din of the rushing air. If Aedis or Whaker had further commands for us I haven't the slightest idea what they were. All we that still lived dared to do was fasten our lines with the speed and freethinking of zombies and grab onto whatever we could to hold on for dear life. The spray hit us from every side at once; any who dared to leave their handhold to make for the safety of below-decks was thrown overboard at once. Through it all, our captain stayed at the wheel. How he managed to even see the approach of the waves, I don't know, the rain flew so terribly. But never did one surprise us from the side. This way and that way we slipped and flew. Though the topsails swayed compliantly with our meandering, the mainsail and foresail slapped open or fluttered alternately, and the ship lurched to the side with their every filling. Still did we stay upright somehow. And we flew ever forward. Wave after wave our captain dodged, as if he had been the one to set them at their mischief to start with. As if it was the sea-god himself that made sure our course from his perch on our quarterdeck. Night fell as we braved the worst of it. Still he guided us, though only the faintest difference could be discerned between the grey of the water and the grey of the sky. As if he had been the very artist to mix the paints with which they achieved their hues; and the one to brush both of them onto the swaying canvas of our passing. Still did we hold fast onto the ship. No food did we eat. Nothing did we drink save the salty spray that found its way into our mouths unwelcome. Such a time passed that I wonder still to this day whether I really survived. Or whether I in fact fell, and this terrible city I now call home is no reality at all; rather my punishment for the misdeeds of my youth. This long and longer did we hold on to the Mako and not dare to release her.

Until the next day dawned at last. Until the sun rose once more, a brilliant yellow haze to the east that cleared as the morning wore on. As the last of the storm lifted from the waters around us, and we could make out great peaks to the east along the whole of the horizon. A hundred miles northward past the bend of the Sword's Edge the tailwinds of the storm blew us. Five days' journey made in the interval between two sunrises.'

'But our gains were not wholly unmatched. Because the Thresher, while denied the full strength of the storm, protected as she was by the separate ranges of the Sword's Edge, still found in its distant passing a reliable wind to make her way very quickly to the north. Few can match her speed with such a wind to her back quarter, and had Tom had the forethought of our Aedis, it might have blown him to within a single day's journey of the Isla. But no matter his guile, he is ever

an impatient fool; and his way forward was to be blocked by the most expected of obstacles.

It was the kelp which was to be our savior in the end. Great underwater trees that stretch a hundred feet or more from the seafloor to the water's surface. The plant grows in a nearly unbroken line hugging the Aztlan coasts, that continues through the waters round the Sword's Edge and extends far, far, far to the north, in stands so thick they can stop even the fastest ship dead in its wake. Tom knew all about the stuff, naturally, as well as he did the nameless things that hide in its recesses. And he'd done a fine job in guiding the Thresher past most of it; a well-trained eye like his can spot the stands from hundreds of yards away. Though the waters close to the entrance of the Ventana are thick with their tangled tendrils, he'd sailed her though them without so much as a single slithering slap to her side. And once the wind'd died and they'd started to row, he'd been able to keep the growths at a safe distance with ease, even showing enough intelligence to stop and rest for that first night so they might not be surprised by a stand in the dark. But the storm presented too good of an opportunity for him when it hit. They were only fifty miles into the Ventana when it revealed its full force; with its wind he was able to make his way far into the northern half of the canyon, which is much wider and deeper than the southern part; too deep for kelp to grow in except at its very sides. So he felt safe enough to sail through the next night. But he should have known better. Because it's not only the actual stands of kelp that are a danger. Patties, plants that have broken off from the sea's floor and tangled together with others over the years into nearly solid masses of seaweed sometimes hundreds of feet across, collect in the calm waters of the northern Ventana like ice at the top of this glass of freshly poured whiskey. He should have known better, but still he sailed through the night. And you can well imagine how terrible was his fury when he heard the inevitable, heart-wrenching scraping that came from the Thresher's hull as he sailed her straight into the biggest one he could ever have hoped to find, and their progress came to a sudden and complete stop.

There's little you can do once you get stuck in a kelp paddy. Can't row; you stick your oar in and all you do is push the stuff around a little, as well as get it tangled all over the blade. Sails are useless. Only thing you can do, really, is cut your way out. But for that you need light to see what you're doing, and Tom'd managed to get himself stuck not an hour after the sun set. So they were sitting ducks. Now, there're a few things that surely went through his mind at this point. First was their drift. They were helpless to go anywhere but where the patty went, and the mass of floating green might very well find its way straight to the nearest rock instead of staying there in the open water. That would be the end of his captaincy right there. But even were that to happen, it would take time; so their drift surely wasn't his most pressing problem. No; his crew, which had been willing to put up with him until then, might decide that they were better off without him once they realized he'd led them only to this spot of water and no farther. But it was he and he alone who knew where Aedis's treasure was buried. No; they would not dare, he thought. What he feared most - and rightly so - were the sounds of the night around them; that echoed off the distant cliffs in an unending animal chorus. Though they'd managed to safely pass the wild men and orcs at the rugged southern end of the Ventana, that far north the land was gentler and more bounteous. He knew it to be the territory of a different kind of tribe: one that even orcs dare not challenge.

The Aztlan and the islands that surround it is a land of beasts. An impenetrable thicket of wicked beasts from one side to the other. These are the masters of much of it. They were wolves once, as recently as the First Age of Man. But now they are something quite different. It's not only their size that sets them apart from their canine cousins, but their intelligence as well. The same cunning of a man is what you'll see if you're ever so doomed as to get close enough to look into one's eyes. It's not that they can use tools or talk. But they can open doors if left unlocked. They know to steal your weapons before they attack in the night. They'll pretend to be wounded in order to surprise you when you go to finish them off. They can set traps, and are masters of the ambush. I've heard of a group of sailors that risked making camp on the wrong island, who thought themselves safe round a great, raging fire. But while one of the resident kaiyotles distracted them from over here, another came from behind to steal a single log off that fire, spreading a blaze round them in a full circle that closed in to burn them all alive save one; who they let escape to spread the tale. Some say it is they, in fact, who were truly behind the end of the First Age. That there was no worldwide plague or famine. No last great war save the one against them; against those wolf hybrids that changed for the wicked as they learned to feast of man. They are creatures of pure evil, an enemy nearly as ancient as humanity itself. And just as Tom had feared, as the night wore on, their yelping calls came to silence all the others of the hills round them.

The moon was full that night; they could easily make out the shining, silver fur of the hunched, giant dogs as they darted this way and that along the beaches and cliffs. The pack was twenty or thirty strong. Massive beasts all, but with movements disturbingly joyful. They bounced on their front paws like puppies before a new toy at the very edge of the water as they pined and yelped out to the trapped ship. All except one, the biggest, who pawed and paced behind the rest with not a single call to match their unending din. Until at last, the alpha released a mighty howl up to the night above, and crashed into the water to make straight for the Thresher alone.

"It can't get us up here, can it?" one of the sailors trembled aloud. They were transfixed to a man by the reflection of the moon in the beast's unblinking eyes as it paddled steadily toward them.

"No, its plan is different," said Mad Tom. "Get every bow we have ready. Now. If you intend to live."

But a murmur was the only thing to spread between his crew. They had finally had enough. Not a single one made ready to arm themselves with anything but a knife; weapons that they turned as one not to the approaching danger, but to Mad Tom instead.

"We had something else in mind," their apparent leader declared. "See, we learn quick, and what we think is that if we toss you in like you did old Billy Boy, these dogs'll make for the hills same as them orcs did." The fool was sorely mistaken, but backed as he was by twenty men, it was clear he intended to try his plan regardless.

Mad Tom had different ideas, however. Only did he chuckle softly to himself as they approached, a strangely mirth-filled cackle that grew and grew and grew in volume, until he was forced to throw back his head to open his throat for its finale. "A shame," he cried as his laughter died. "That you won't live long enough to haul

my gold for me. A true shame." And he grabbed his heavy, furred coat and a nearby polearm, diving head first into the water.

"Shoot the bastard dead," the leader called out into the dark. Only then did the rest of the crew grab their bows to fire off into the night, ignoring the approaching kaiyotle to focus on Mad Tom.

But not a single arrow scratched the man. He dove past the thickest of the patty and swam off to the north without so much as a gulp of air to fuel him; to a rock that jutted up out of the water far out of their range, pulling himself atop it like a frog with a mind to croak into the moonlight. And croak he did. His wicked laughter sounded again for a time, before he yelled out to them, "He doesn't have very far to pull you, actually, before you're sucked into the tide. Say hello to my new pets for me!"

Only then did they finally realize their plight. The leader of the kaiyotles had by this point grabbed the thickest, sturdiest bit of seaweed that he could find, and was paddling with all his might back to land. Patty and ship alike were like toys before the incredible strength the beast managed to summon. They drifted off after him, to where the mouth of an inlet awaited them. And the rising tide of the full moon. Only then did they think to fire arrow after arrow toward the alpha, until they had exhausted their every projectile. But if ever they managed to hit him, the beast was wholly unaffected. And after a few minutes, he quit his labor to make once more for the shore, where his pack awaited him, greeting him with their din of ever-more-frenzied, yelping howls.

Though it took the better part of the night for the sailors' doom to be fully enacted, it was by then quite decided. The tide pulled them farther and farther and farther into the inlet. Until it started to fall at last and they were stranded on a beachy outcrop, from which the kaiyotles were able to leap in single bounds to the deck to begin their feeding. The sailors' own yelps of pain and surprise intermingled with those of their killers for a time; until finally one pierced the night air above the rest, only to be abruptly ended with a vicious, growling snap of jaws. They met their end to a man. All except for their leader, who locked himself in the captain's quarters to wait out the slaughter; while Mad Tom huddled under his furs, watching and listening with a smile painted on his face.

The kaiyotles made the ship their home for the rest of the night. They ripped and tore at the fools' flesh at their leisure; the beach around the ship was stained with red, so freely did the blood flow. But kaiyotles are creatures of the night only, so just before sunrise they slouched, sated, back to the woods. All except for the alpha, who still awaited the emergence of the last sailor, head on his paws, sprawled out in a spot of shade mere feet from the door to the captain's quarters, as patiently as a cook awaiting a kettle.

Only then did Tom finally spring from his perch, diving into the water once again to make for shore with a lazy breaststroke. He paused for not a moment as he climbed the rigging up to the deck, coming face to face with the alpha after a few steps. Any other man would have been made the creature's chew toy in a matter of seconds on matter of principle alone. But the kaiyotles know their own. And in Tom, covered as he was in animal furs, eyes shining with that same beastly intelligence, the alpha saw only a creature worthy, perhaps, to join his pack. So the villain made sure to earn his place.

"Tom, thank the gods," the fool of a mutineer dared to exclaim when he saw the

portal open. "Are they gone? At last. My life is yours. I'll do whatever you want. Please don't kill me. You'll need me; it'll be near impossible to sail her alone!"

But Mad Tom's sole response was to grab the sailor by the jaw, forcing it open in order to cut out his wagging tongue. And minus that part at least, Tom tossed the fool out into the sunlight, to where the alpha still awaited.

Only then did he descend to cut and haul the slops of seaweed away from his hull. Noon would see another high tide. He would have to be quick or risk another night there among the kaiyotles, and they would be hungry again soon. So he labored in place of the crew he'd left behind; while the last sailor, still gurgling and gasping his complaints through the spray of blood that filled his mouth, was dragged off into the woods.'

'Therefore, the two ships were close to equally matched for their last run to the Isla. By the time Mad Tom managed to catch the next tide, weasel his way out of his inlet and start north again, we'd long since filled our water barrels in the uppermost valley of the Sword's Edge - a deep, meandering chasm too steep for the kaiyotle's liking, but too close to their favored hunting grounds for the comfort of any orc or wild man - and were approaching the Barren Sea at last. We sailed through the night in rotating crews to make sure of our safe progress. And on the next day, the dawn came as bright and clear as any I've seen since. We caught sight of our quarry long before we did the treasure-laden shores of the Isla.

"There she is," Whaker called out suddenly from his perch in the crow's nest. "The Thresher! Less than a league to our northeast. We have her now!"

But the steady southwest wind on which we both drew was to our back-quarters. And while the Mako is designed to use all breezes equally well, for the Thresher, the wind came at exactly the angle she was adapted to utilize to its full. We dared not run in to approach her. No; we were fastest staying parallel to her route, even if we were unable to gain on her. But we were not worried. We had her in our sights, and there was nowhere she could hope to hide from our coming. Nowhere she might safely make anchor in order to steal our treasure unmolested. It was exactly as Aedis had predicted.

Half a day we kept on like this. On a course due north, two miles behind the Thresher's port side as she flew ahead on the undying wind of the bay. Until the sun neared the top of its arc to shine down onto the twisted trees of the southern slope of Mount Diablo as it peeked over the curve of the water, and shortly after onto our destination at last, the churning waters that buffeted its shores, once revealed by the departing horizon.

Aedis mumbled, "She'll make straight for the bay, anchor as close as possible, dig up and load whatever she can before we approach, then make haste; it's her best chance to get away. But only in this wind are we evenly matched. We will overcome her whichever way she tries to flee." No matter how reasoned his words were, however, there was still a clear note of doubt behind them. Our retribution seemed too sure. Our path too simple. Because it was Mad Tom, after all, who we were chasing, whose villainy and treachery know no equal. And so, though we made ready our weapons for boarding, we remained poised and prepared for the

unexpected that would surely come.

And came it did shortly after. Suddenly, just as she made the Isla's southwestern shores, the Thresher jibed hard to the southeast, on a course that passed directly between us and the island. None of us could discern the reason for the maneuver. It was senseless, it seemed; not only was she half retracing her steps and going the long way round, she'd given up her favored wind to settle for the full crosswind. *And* she had her sail out too far to even use that to full effect. She limped along lazily instead, firmly set on a course to nowhere. Not even did she make to follow the curve of the island to the east. No; straight out into the Barren she continued. A path seemingly designed for easy interception. So, despite our growing unease, we made to do just that, jibing to the east and keeping the wind on our back quarter - but now to the starboard.

"Perhaps his crew sees our approach and they rebel," suggested Whaker. "Maybe Tom is even now already tied to his own mast or dead, and they wait for us to arrive to beg our forgiveness." But none believed the villain would be so easily outdone.

"No," said Aedis firmly at last. "He intends to fight. He tries to sink us. The fool." And a smile spread across our captain's face. Because he knew we had the upper hand; what little gunpowder remained on the Thresher would be enough for a single barrage and no more thanks to the efforts of Comal and Undrik, two Duncannon brothers of particular daring and fortitude. They'd been unfortunate enough to have been asleep on the Thresher when Tom and his lackeys stole it at the handle. But they woke at once when they heard the sounds of struggle above and hid themselves. Until they realized how they might do the most harm to the mutineers. All the gunpowder in the hold they bagged up and made off with; every ounce save what sat ready in the cannons. They'd hauled it up to Renee, the Thresher's bigger skiff, in the dead of the night and rowed back to us at the handle with their prize. So we dared to hope that Tom knew not of his own defenselessness. That he had still to check his provisions as he made his last jibe and might not do so even until he thought to grab the powder for reloading. Why else would he put us on his broadside no matter the disadvantage to his progress?

But the truth was far different. Tom had long since noted his near complete lack of powder, though it was a fact he'd kept to himself. He knew full well he had one barrage and one barrage only to spare if it ever came down to a firefight. Any other man would have avoided such a struggle at all costs. But the diabolical Mad Tom was not just any man. He gambled correctly that we'd be all too happy to risk his broadside, knowing as we did that we in fact risked little. And so he was able to set the perfect course to keep us right where he wanted us: to his southwest; while he made ready Rema, the Thresher's smaller skiff, for flight the other way, his departure to be hidden behind the Thresher's lazy progress.

So he braced the wheel. And made sure the sails. And sauntered his way below decks, bottle of rum in one hand, firing stick in the other. He struggled to maneuver the guns as best he could alone and with one hand, since I doubt he put down his bottle to do so to good effect. But his plan was only to draw us in and so he made no extreme efforts. The first cannon, in fact, he fired when we were still far out of range.

"Never were any good as gunners; any of 'em," laughed Aedis as we watched the ball hit the water little more than halfway between the two ships. And he told us to

get the bow guns ready: we'd give 'em one. Half a minute later we were returning fire. Though we had only the two in front with which to do our damage, we could hear the cracking of the Thresher's hull even at distance as both the balls found their mark.

Mad Tom, however, was far from concerned. He made his way slowly to the second cannon, kicked it hard from the side to match our approach, and dropped the firing stick carelessly into the vent. Another swig of rum assisted him handily in sidestepping its recoil.

"On earth are they aiming at?" Aedis demanded to no one in particular. "Return fire! We'll draw out their every ball before they have a chance at range. Fire!" He had more breath than that to spur us on you can be sure! But Whacker had descended unexpectedly from the crow's nest to interrupt him.

"Captain!" he demanded. "Look!" And he passed his glass to Aedis, who saw at last that the deck of the Thresher was entirely empty.

Little more than a chuckle did he spare for the revelation. He laughed, "Has he murdered them all already? Serves 'em right. Fire!"

And so the fight continued. Barely did we have to dodge the shots coming at us from the Thresher, they were so poorly made; while her progress was perfectly straight and we connected with our every volley. Shot after shot we sent her way. But we counted only five from our enemy before we thought to spare the Thresher the onslaught.

"There won't be much left of her if we keep on this way," Whaker demanded. "We've won, Aedis. Spare us the repair work!"

But our captain refused to relent. Though he could see no path save the one what led to inevitable victory, he knew that Mad Tom was not one for desperate last stands and a noble death. No; some other game was afoot; of that he was sure. Although its parameters had not yet revealed themselves. But so long as the Thresher returned fire, we knew it was Tom himself who was doing the deed. A cannonball would end the villain as well as whatever further trickery he intended, no matter the damage to the Thresher. So we returned fire again and again and again, and as we got closer we were even able to aim more accurately at the next cannon to discharge.

"No, the sixth!" Aedis demanded over the bow to the hatches below. "Five shots thus far, and the fool goes from bow straight to stern. Concentrate your fire round the sixth cannon!"

But no matter the devastation of our volleys, still did the languishingly slow shots from the Thresher return our way. The snake was impossible to hit. No; no such ending for his villainy would do at all. He slithered his way from gun to gun, lurching forward and back with the rocking of the Thresher as he drank from his bottle. Until he deigned to fire the next. Seven. Then some minutes later, eight. And finally, just as we could start to make out all the familiar details of our beloved Thresher. Nine. Finally she was spent. So we made ready our weapons, because though we could now all clearly see that her deck was devoid of life, we knew not how many awaited below.

But Aedis knew. Even once we saw the smoke billowing out her hatches and Whaker cried out, "Surely they rebel now! They see us and realize that they have no powder left. They will beg for mercy, but we will show none!"

"No," Aedis said simply. "There is but one left to fight now. And he is not on

that ship!" So while we were gathered on the port side, the captain made instead for the starboard. He made straight for Renee and took out his famous sword, Durandal, to slice through the lines that held her in place.

"Captain! Where do you go? Our victory is at hand!" Whaker cried out to him from the aft deck.

But Aedis had little time to argue. Only did he call back, "Save the Thresher, Whaker. Save my ship at all costs!" as he jumped into the skiff while it was still suspended over the side, chopping the last lines left holding her with a single swing. Without a misstep, he rode her flying descent to the waves. And he sat to row toward the island with all his might.

Only after he'd departed, once we'd bridged the gap to the Thresher, did we see the debacle that awaited us therein. Not only was she sinking, and sinking fast, thanks to our repeated barrages, but Tom'd left us one last farewell present before he'd gotten into Rema and sailed off. Ten barrels of rum did she still boast; and he'd set them ablaze every one. The fire raged below-decks unrestrained by this point. It'd already consumed the footings of the mast and was spreading along the main deck at great speed. The only thing, we feared, that might be able to put out the conflagration before it started on the hull was in fact the salty sea around us; that was rising steadily toward the rail as our beloved Thresher sank. But there was still time to save her, we hoped.

"Water!" cried Whaker. "Water. Bring up the water. We'll need all of it. Comal! Undrik! Grab hold of those lines and swing to her sides. Close every hatch. We'll starve the blaze of air." And so we obeyed. We hauled up the fresh water barrels, and rolled them across to the Thresher and directly onto the fire; while the brothers closed her hatches from the outside at great risk to themselves, since the sea around us was of the coldest water, and so buffeted by the wind that to fall into it without a line was certain death. But even once we'd exhausted the whole of our fresh water and taken the strength of its draft, still did the blaze burn hot enough to prevent us from plugging her battered hull.

"The sea, you fools!" Whaker cried. "What need for water! Use the sea if the barrels are spent!" But we were already fetching buckets. We could bear the heat enough by that point to make lodgments on the Thresher's deck; so using ropes, some of us would dip the buckets into the sea below, a distance to traverse that, thankfully or otherwise, was steadily decreasing, while the others grabbed them as fast as they could to dump them onto the flames. In this way were we finally able to stop the blaze.

But our problems had only just begun. Because over two dozen breaches did the hull have in her. A foot every few minutes was she sinking; the floor of the hold was already below the sea's surface. And every bit she sank brought even more breaches to the level of the waves to bring her down faster still.

Now we had to take out even all the water we'd just put in. It stank of ash and fire as we did our best to throw it back overboard, but still we labored. "Open the hatches again, you fools. Toss it out the side. Why do you haul it to the deck!?" cried Whaker; while our Earl here made ready the giant hammer and canvas-covered dowels, ignoring those holes that remained dry in order to focus on those from which already stemmed a geyser. Though it was dangerous and difficult work, that required every bit of his great strength, not to mention a man or two brave enough to hold the dowels in place while he hammered away, in mere

minutes he had plugged every hole to be seen. But still we sank!

"She's holes left below!" Whaker lamented, in a tone fit to precede orders to give up at last. But we were already getting the planks and nails ready while Comal and Undrik stripped off their shirts and shoes to be able to warm themselves upon returning from the frigid water, just in case they were indeed able to make it back from the roiling, submerged deathtrap that our lower hold had become. But they dove in without a moment's hesitation once their tools were delivered. What seemed an eternity passed before they emerged again from their dangerous task, coughing up half the sea before they managed to spit out that they'd done for every last breach. Our pumps finished the job. The Thresher was saved at last.

As for Aedis, no matter his strength and endurance, he was wholly unable to keep pace with Tom in the lighter, sail-driven Rema. Only for a minute did our captain catch sight of the villain before his skiff was hidden behind the curve of the island. And every bay Aedis passed as he made his way round the eastern shores he knew saw Tom farther ahead by two. Still he continued. Because though the danger of losing the whole of our wealth had passed with the death of most of the mutineers, still the danger of allowing an evil deed to go unpunished remained. And so long as there is even the slightest hope of justice to be done, men with the mettle of our Aedis will strive ever onwards. Though the hope was slim, he continued to row, because he knew that all his adversary had to do was sail to the beach in the northernmost bay, dig up a single backpack's worth of gold and slip back into the water to be richly rewarded by his wickedness. It was an unthinkable ending, so he continued to row as if his foe was in sight directly before him.

And in the end it was our captain who fate chose to see rewarded. Because the steep cliffs that extend past the northern beach blocked most of the wind that day, so Tom found his progress suddenly and unexpectedly stopped once again, even in full sight of his destination. If only he had brought a paddle, he might have gotten away. But he was, as ever, a careless fool when not guided by a stronger hand. No matter how desperately he slapped at the sea to make his way forward, nearly half an hour did it take him to go the last quarter of a mile. And though he had the time to load up a bag filled with enough riches to see him well fed for the rest of his days, he would not have the time to escape to see those days; because just as he made it back to the beach with his prize, who came into sight round the last point but Aedis.

From there it was all but decided. Our captain bore his famous sword, while Tom had only a dull knife. And while Tom might have been able to outmaneuver Aedis on any other day, in any other bay, then and there he was essentially stranded. The only thing that remained was for our captain to decide which manner of dispatch to employ. In the end, he chose to leave the villain alive. Some say it is because he is ever merciful while others demand that it was instead to ensure the villain suffer for a longer time. But whatever the case, the chase concluded there in the bay with a single punch, that bore the accumulated fury and righteousness of the whole of his crew and more, propelled as it was by the giant, leaping bound he made from one skiff to the other. Mad Tom was knocked out cold, and might have drowned had the frigid water of the Barren not brought him back to his senses as he was thrown from his craft.

And that, as they say, was that. Mad Tom makes the desolate Isla Concordia his home still to this day, I am sure. If he yet lives. Never has he dared to molest us

when we go there to take from our gold or leave more. He fears to touch it. And the only thing left in this world to remind us of the vanity of his wasted life is a makeshift nameplate that hangs on the side of the ship he managed to captain for a week; that reads 'Decade's End,' in a sloppy, half-backward-lettered splatter of red paint. Because Aedis rather liked the name, and allowed it to remain on his ship in the end.'

In reality, Douglas's story extended long past the conclusion of this recording; it was I who took the liberty to end it with a single punch. He, on the other hand, talked on for most of the night. According to him, Mad Tom just barely managed to slip past Aedis at the bay and the chase continued "far, far, far" to the north, to some other ending that might have come or might not. I failed to listen. Mine, meanwhile, was an appropriate finale to the tale, I felt. And I was not alone in my opinion. Few at the tavern that night bothered to listen to him much past getting to the treasure, while McGee, far from demanding that I continue on until the end, merely smiled to see that I had given up on the story with the rest of the place and returned to heaping my usual praise on Peach and Cherry.

Though McGee made sure to forbid me from doing anything to circulate what I'd taken down, my new acquaintances demanded an ever-increasing income. And I soon found that my pile of thousands of pounds, that sat there in the basement awaiting only transportation to see its inevitable conversion to silver, should more realistically be valued at far less. For as I picked at it, it revealed itself to be comprised of only countless reprintings of the same few volumes. I quickly began to have a hard time finding new material; McGee-Kilkenny would only take a few hundred of any single one. Therefore I decided to create my own stuff. And here, even, was my first work already completed in the form of Douglas's tale.

So I reserved the ten pounds necessary to purchase something I had always desired, a lockpick set, from Smyth-Murdoch, which in fact borders McGee-Kilkenny to the north, and is poised even farther out on the decrepit dock its neighbor calls home by only half. The set is not something widely known to be available there, however. Neither is its sale an entirely permitted practice; the watch supposedly keeps a keen eye out for such dealings. Accordingly, I had quite a hard time convincing the proprietor to even show it to me.

"What's your clan, son?" he demanded to my surprise when I finally managed to stutter what exactly I'd come for.

"My what?" I replied.

"Your clan, son! Your clan. You're only a gune by part, it's clear. What's your clan!?"

"Don't have one."

"Well, who do you *work* for then?" he asked, the suspicion in his voice audibly diminishing to be replaced instead by curiosity as I revealed my innocence.

"John McGee," I admitted.

"Brave lad," he made sure to grunt. "Well, that makes *you* a McGee, then. Until you pull your head out of your ass and go find another job, that is. Or start your own business. Your father got a clan? I'm assuming it was your mother who was

the gune."

And so I told him, "Allan."

"Allan!" the proprietor spat out. "On earth you need a lockpick for? Nevermind; I don't wanna know. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well what!? Well, what's your grandfather's name? That's your mother's father."

"abadi, I suppose."

"Well, rasid," he said; for I had already told him my own name, "that makes you one rasid McGee Allan-abadi. Don't think I've ever done business with an Allan-abadi before. Matter-a-fact, don't know if I want to. How well you know the city watch?"

My answer was immediate and from the heart: "Well enough ta know they prolly couldn't catch shit even they tried."

And so he laughed heartily, eyes impatient to see his payment.

"You do know how to use it, right?" he sang once I handed over the tidy sum.

I insisted that I did. Although perhaps I would have been better served if I had only admitted my ignorance, for it took me nearly an hour to open the door to McGee's apartment once I dared dismantle one of the barricades I'd constructed in order to find my way there. It might have been easier if I'd had different surroundings. But as it was I could only spare one eye for my task while the other scanned the darkness around me ceaselessly for the slightest motion. Every tiny clink I made as I maneuvered the separate parts of McGee's lock I feared would bring the orcess running to finish the job she'd started during my last visit to the deep. But no matter how long it took me to gain my admittance, she was either unaware of my presence below-ground or chose to leave me alone for its duration. And so finally, after many long lessons learned of the anatomy of the average lock delivered to me by the flickering light of my candle, the bolt slid backward and the door creaked open.

McGee was at the tavern and would remain there until midnight, I knew. Therefore I had more than enough time to teach myself how to use his press and create a handful of novellas at his expense. I feared using too much of his ink or paper, however. So I made only ten copies of the tale, which I titled, "Adventure on the Aztlan Coast," by Rasid McGee Allan-Abadi. And I made sure to take my stacks of lettered balsa with me when I left, hiding them on top of the 230's with the rest of my belongings. Now that I had managed to gain access to the press, I reasoned, and had done the work of creating the plates, it would be a simple task to break in once again with a ream of paper of my own to make more copies. In the meantime, I would be able to test the waters with what I'd printed so far. Although I quickly found my plan had one last obstacle to overcome.

"Where's the stamp?" McGee-Kilkenny demanded at once when I brought them to him for sale. Only then did I realize that the 'JMG,' printed in tiny block letters surrounded by an embellished frame that had been on the top of the spine of every work I'd brought there on my supervisor's behalf thus far was more than simple adornment.

I stuttered, "Ah, the stamp, well..."

He finished for me, "Yes, the stamp. So we all know who printed it. And that they were paid. That stamp."

"Well, to be honest..." I began.

But with half a smile and an exaggerated shake of his head, the bookseller cut me off, "That John McGee... Looks like he forgot it again. Well, I'm not saying I won't take 'em. I will. Because I like you. But I can only give you a diamond each. So you just make sure next time, that he makes sure, to remember to put his stamp right there on the side, see? Or if he forgets again, I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you did it yourself. You'll probably find the thing sitting right there by that big old press he likes to brag about." And so with a bit more wisdom not to mention an apparently willing conspirator to assist me with my plan, but only ten diamonds to show for my investment of ten pounds, I forgot about any attempt to create my own material before I even made it to the door and admitted to the pair outside that I didn't have enough to afford them this time.

But I hadn't to forget my scheme for long, since when next I made it there, equipped once more with my customary backpack full of mɑ̀ŋga, the bookseller crooned, "Wouldn't have any more of those sea stories, would you?" He had given one to a lady friend of his from the ɛ́tnea whom he made a practice of visiting while her husband was away, and she had since demanded from him as many copies as he could provide, as she knew the story to be the rare sort of thing many in her neighborhood would permit their children to read.

He told me with a wink, "No, no; you can forget about the stamp. They'll like it better without it, she thinks. More like pirates would make. If they ever figured how to spell. And no one need know I'm involved, agreed? You do that, I'll give you seven diamonds a copy. When can I expect the first hundred?"

And so I had my first success. I brought five loads before he even tried to lower the price on me, at which point I returned to hauling mɑ̀ŋga until he asked for more of the novellas at seven again. If I was able to print even a single similarly popular story every now and then, I calculated, the thirty pounds a month I quickly came to expect to be in my future might last until the end of the year. Longer, even, depending on how quickly these still unwritten stories and the mɑ̀ŋga moved. In this way I intended to ensure the continuation of the lifestyle I had come to enjoy. And for most of paisiz, I did.

4.

It didn't hurt much and only lasted a few days, so I thought little of the rash when it first appeared. But the second time around was different. The second time not only my extremities but the whole upper half of my back was covered in a blistering, peeling tapestry of pain. I begged McGee for some time off to recover, but he refused it to me. He'd discovered my use of his press somehow, and though he never chastised me for the break-in, his attitude toward me had grown steadily more distant as the success of Douglas's tale had increased. And by that point, nearly half the ɐtnea owned a copy. All he did was look down at his watch for a moment at the request before demanding to know what month it was. Late libɐla, I told him. He started the terrible English poem that attempts to make the Terran months easier to remember: "Thirty days has aɹdea..." but didn't remember much more than the end, which, after some mumbles he embellished a bit as, "All the rest have twenty-nine, 'cept ørɟga, which for some stupid reason, has eleven. Why on earth you idiots have one rutting month with eleven days?"

"It's early April," I said. He only scoffed loudly at the sound of the date, saying I'd just have to sort it out for myself: there was a lot of work to be done.

Yet my duties remained as unimportant as ever! I was more than willing to part with my salary for a time if it meant I might be able to recover from this illness sooner and save myself the pain of bodily motion in the meantime. But the only relief I found came in the form of the elixir I received from the doctor he recommended, one Hendrik McGee Malloy-M. Which cost two pounds a bottle. Therefore I would be forced to make a trip almost daily down to McGee-Kilkenny with a backpack full to the brim with porn, the thing rubbing and chafing against the open sores on my back the whole of the way, to be able to afford even a small sip of the stuff with any regularity; for I had yet to write a second popular story, and had long since worked my way through every Eter I could find to come to rely on the cheaper stuff to make my money. What's more, nearly as bad as the suffering through which I put myself to complete these trips was the added stigma I earned because of them. No matter how thoroughly I covered myself to hide my symptoms, the closer I got to the docks, the more the bystanders somehow knew of my plight. To a man, they made sure to give me a wide berth and they continued to do so for some time afterwards. Only the bookseller risked even indirect contact with me, for though the price he was willing to give me per booklet plummeted as his shelves grew thick with the stuff, he was still all too willing to relieve me of the every new one I brought him no matter the risk of contagion, surely hiding them away somewhere to ensure future sales.

I lasted a week or so like this, until my existence became unbearable. Peach refused to touch me. Neither would she suffer me to sleep in her room, not even as a dog might on her carpet. And by this time the rash had gotten so bad that I was unable to climb the 230's to sleep above them as usual. So with a final declaration of intent, not to mention a loud curse directed at my supervisor, I left the whole of my possessions behind except for the silver I had managed to accumulate, bought a horse and a pendant with a large ʒe as its centerstone, and rode off to the country, my samara and her comfortable cœrevɜn to find.

Luck was finally with me, it seemed, for I caught her just as she and her family

were breaking camp to head for the mountains.

"ya mɹscɹn!": 'Poor thing!' she cried when she caught sight of me and my pained movements. I nearly broke down in tears then and there to see her pretty, healthy features, and to hear the sweet sound of our tongue as it escaped from her unpainted lips.

"mɔna ma," is all I managed to stammer back as I embraced her, sinking happily into the softness of her frame. Though the rash had hurt me most dearly on my way there, the thought of my return to her had brought all manner of pleasant fantasy to my mind. So sordid were these dreams, in fact, that my pain had seemed to recede for a time. And they were in substance very close to past reality. I had the pendant ready in my hand to give her the moment I arrived, hoping to have to spend moments only in conversation before we found our way to her bed as we had countless times before. But at this point, upon noting exactly how soft her touch had become in my absence, I quietly slipped the thing into my pocket. For she had surely put on an extra ten pounds at least since our last meeting. I rationalized silently to myself that I was simply waiting for the best moment to give her her present, when I might be less in pain and more able to do what was necessary for the both of our pleasure, seeing as having been robbed of the meat of my fantasies by the mental image that came to me unbidden, of the rolls of flesh that would comprise the whole of her form if such weight-gain were to continue uninterrupted, the pain of my illness had returned to me in full force.

But no matter how plump she had become, I was wholly glad to see her. And she seemed relieved, for some reason, to not be presented straightaway with a gift. Our embrace was as agreeable as any of the more carnal I'd had since last holding her. I remember it fondly still, while the details of those others fade away with the passing of the years.

She halted her family's labors to pack up with a pair of words. "suɐ marid,": 'He's sick,' she said simply to her father, sadəʃ. And all know the man is helpless to resist the satisfaction of even her smallest whim; so with a shrug, he bowed to set up their firepit once more, the better to prepare a meal for me. In this manner was my illness finally broken. With good food and fresh air, clean water and milk straight from the udder, brandy instead of wine. With relaxation and good company instead of endless labor, surrounded by the majesty of nature instead of the vanity of the city. I awoke daily to birdsong and fell asleep to the babbling of the nearby creek while my duties consisted of little more than noting the spring flowers as they emerged from the melting snows, in between the casual picking of fiddleheads which, once fried in sunflower oil, filled me body and soul. My recovery took mere days.

'It must have been something foreign,' samara complained to me once I had regained most of my faculties. 'Something foreign, that you picked up there in the city somehow. Did we not all warn you?'

I was forced to agree, for no such illness is known to we Terrans.

'But it's alright now,' she said. 'You're better now. Just in time to come with us up ʌra malta! I couldn't be happier.' And she embraced me as she had when I arrived, finishing the hug as before with a single, familiar kiss. Although no matter how pleasant, the gesture had become all but prosaic. Indeed, it seemed as if we had spent the most of our time alone thus entwined, with arms locked tightly around one another, lips rarely far apart, yet our two layers of clothing arranged securely

between us. And though she might stroke my cheek fondly and kiss me wherever she wanted to, her affections seemed heaped on me in the same manner a mother might onto her son. All while I eyed her growing midsection and checked to make sure her pendant had not strayed from its place in my pocket.

Which is not to say that I was at all uncomfortable there. No matter the reservations I held regarding my future with samara, her family, in perfect Terran fashion, seemed eager conspirators in any enterprise that might help to corrupt her. Even for as long as I've stolen into their camp at night to defile her, they have treated me as kin. They've always known how I earn the most of my money, and never have they made me suspect that they disapprove of my thievery. On the contrary; some of her siblings happily play the part of my accomplice from time to time, if we think my intended prize worth the efforts of two to obtain. And unlike the fœlcirs and the ʒendes, there is no sense of individual possession in their camp; what belongs to one truly belongs to all. Therefore never have I been accused of stealing from them. Even if I have ever reserved something for my own use valuable enough to merit an accusation of theft, it's harder than one might think to spend much time around the mɐʌiɾas and not give something back in return eventually. Then as always, they accepted my presence with an attitude of amused encouragement. They only smiled further now to see the inevitable diminishing of their youngest sister's and my previously uncontrollable lust. Such acceptances, no matter how resignedly given, are the true ceremony behind a Terran marriage. Rings and vows play little part in the whole affair, no matter what samara says nowadays. In any case, thinking myself essentially joined with them already, my ease was increased still further.

My only passing concern was iacopo, samara's younger half-brother, sadly abandoned by his mother upon her drama-filled refusal to be mere second bride to sadɘʃ. Try as they all might to hide it, understandably or otherwise, the poor boy was considered with a bit of distance by his siblings. The result was an innate desperation for empathy from his elders that found its strongest expression in his complete idolization of me. For as long as I can remember, he'd follow me around like a hungry, stray dog whenever I might visit the mɐʌiɾas, the only difference being that a dog might stay quiet while he waited for scraps to fall. iacopo, on the other hand, seemed utterly incapable of silence for long. "cua'sta ʌiafɐn?": 'What'cha doin?' was by far his favorite phrase; one can likely imagine the rest of our interactions, including my equally repeated but ultimately futile attempts to rid myself of him every now and then. At least he would intersperse his constant curiosity with great praise: one day he'd be just like me, join up with the fœlcirs and land a fat job down in the city; that sort of thing. I suspect he was simply smart enough to know that this would buy him a few minutes of uncontested company. But his cleverness ended there. No matter he could be exceptionally sneaky if he chose, indeed priding himself, of all things, on his undefeated record at hide and seek with his nephews and nieces, he would never make a good thief. Even then, I knew his path in life would either involve staying with his family until well into his adult years, or be tragically short.

The weather was mild and sunny from the moment of my arrival onward. Only after I had fully recovered and was entertaining the idea of returning to the city in the back of my mind did it threaten to rain at last. But the threat amounted to little more than an afternoon drizzle. And that night we gathered, each and every one of

us, round a handful of fires to celebrate the surprising clearness of the night, as well as the boar ʒeaŋ, samara's eldest bother, had caught. But what we were celebrating most of all, I felt, was the long-awaited, hopefully lasting end to that sad, huddled, inside existence (even if inside for them meant only lounging within a cœrevɜn stranded deep in the woods) demanded by the cold, to be replaced instead with our true lifestyle, one provided by permanent residence outdoors. The next coming winter was certainly too far away to worry about that night.

It was the first time I'd seen stars in what seemed ages. The evening glow of the city always drowns them out, and my arrival to the camp had been made under a bright, full moon that'd done much the same as the million lanterns of cɛlia. That night, however, the moon hid below the horizon for a time still after sunset; it would only bother to rise round midnight. Therefore we had a wide window of time through which to admire the stars in all their glory. ʒeaŋ worked on his fiddle while the rest of samara's siblings worked on their brandy and the footwork of their favorite dances; while she, iacopo and I joined her father and niece, gita, at the edge of the smoldering pile of embers that remained of the fire on which we'd cooked the boar. I remember clearly how the soft glow of the coals illuminated the undersides of our faces without demanding detail from the eyes, a lighting which every now and then would cast a noticeably sinister pall on the every one of our countenances. Even if it was only an illusion, gita was thoroughly enjoying this effect on her grandfather's face; she pawed at his features without remorse as he tried, admirably if not entirely successfully, to maintain enough composure to enlighten her about the stars shining above the lake.

His lesson eventually turned to the constellation oraion. samara had her head on my shoulder as I chewed happily on a bone, while he, doing his best to dodge gita's tiny but relentless palming of his lips and nostrils, laughed, "ɛani, matɹcɐ ʒ'ɲnstaŋ...": 'Well, enjoy him now. Because soon he'll dip below the horizon and we won't see him again until fall time.'

"pɐɾ cua," said gita, in between her tiny slaps: 'Why?'

'Because he dances around the sky with the rest of the stars,' said sadəʃ. 'You remember where the sun went?'

gita pointed eagerly to the west.

'Well, imagine there's a big circle that goes from way over there in the west; all the way from there up through the center of the sky, to all the way down there in the east. All those stars we just pointed at? Well, they fly around the sky every night. It's just that they fly so slow you never notice till they've moved across half the sky. But they do another dance on top of that. They spin around us with the seasons too. Now in libɐla, just after sunset, it's oraion, ørɹga and tørɹs that we see right behind the sun. But soon it'll be leo, aramɐq and ɾaqis. And they keep going like that until sɹmia, when just before the sun rises every morning - if you were up, which you never are, but if you were - you'd see oraion peek up over the horizon there in the east again just ahead of the rising sun.'

gita stopped her pawing for a moment to exclaim, 'It's like a play. They're dancing around just for us!'

So sadəʃ laughed to agree, 'Yes, I suppose you could say that.'

'What about that one?' iacopo demanded, pointing to the north.

'Well, that's uaza, the snakecharmer; and round him, tanin, the great serpent,' said sadəʃ. 'They stay right there, uaza in the middle, tanin dancing round.'

"pɐɾ cua," demanded gita.

'Well, because it's not the snakecharmers who dance, silly. You and uaza have a lot in common. Only thing he likes to do is spin around in circles till he gets dizzy and falls over. Just like you.'

gita's only response was a return to the exploration of his face to the tune of a wicked little chuckle.

So sadɐʃ craned his neck almost past her reach to continue, 'It's because the stars, the sun, and the moon; they all go around us. Forever and ever. The moon is the slowest. And she doesn't really know where she's going, either. Up, down, up, down. She doesn't care. She's like your aunt samara trying to dance.'

No matter the forming complaint that came from my side, iacɑpɑ sang, 'So the moon is drunk?'

'*Very* drunk,' agreed sadɐʃ, though he was wise enough to add, 'But aren't they both so pretty anyway?' Which comment samara allowed by nestling her face within my neck as she grabbed me more tightly around my midsection, freeing her father to continue, 'The sun goes a little faster than the moon. But the stars go even faster. If you watch them for just one night, you'll think they move right along with the sun. But once a year they go around even him. And the way they go, uaza and tanin are just there at the top. They don't move; they just spin around. Like this. See?'

'Hey,' gita exclaimed suddenly. 'Remember when we saw those snakes dance at θɑman?'

As she jumped off him to demonstrate the technique, sadɐʃ exclaimed, 'We saw snakes dance at θɑman!?'

'Yes, silly,' gita echoed, hands on her hips as they swayed still to the charmer's flute. She must have been a bit confused, though, since the gyration she attempted was far more belly-dancer, which θɑman also boasts an absurd number of, than starved, frightened cobra. I wasn't entirely comfortable watching the maneuver coming form an eight year old. And for the briefest second, I was sure she was able to read my thoughts; she met my stare with a soulless little smile, pouting without pause to her grandfather, 'Don't you remember!?'

'Sorry, little gita; I must've forgotten,' said sadɐʃ. 'Funny snakes dance just like us, isn't it?' But a single shrug from the girl as she reembedded herself on her grandfather's lap was the end of the matter.

'Isn't oraion kind of funny-looking for a man, though?' iacɑpɑ asked after a time. 'Like he's stretched out; and bending way back like this; and sticking his head way out.' It was his turn to rise to demonstrate for us at just the right angle to mimic the constellation from underneath our view of it.

'That's not his head; that's his arrow! See? He's getting ready to string it,' said sadɐʃ.

'Oh,' said iacɑpɑ in a tone fit to admit his lack of imagination. 'But why's he have to have weapons? There's nothing to fight up in the sky!'

'Because that's what hunters do: they fight animals. And as for there being nothing to fight up there, what about tanin? The big snake, remember? Don't think people and snakes will *ever* really get along.'

"lɛ pɐɾ cua," insisted iacɑpɑ: 'But why!? Why do the stars look like that? Why is oraion a hunter and tanin a big, long snake?'

So sadɐʃ said, 'Well, I'll tell you but gita has to leave my face alone for a second if

you want to hear. Alright? Good. See, the stars didn't always look like they do now. A long time ago, the night was just as bright as the day, since there were so many. And they all moved around and did whatever they wanted. But then, the thousand brightest stars got together to make the sun and the moon. And when the sun and the moon started going in big circles, they traded big clouds of dust as they went. Lots of big clouds of dust that went all over the sky. Some dust they left in the middle of everything though, which eventually became the Earth. And every one of the thousand stars that got together to make the sun and moon became spirits who decided to live down here, since it was the middle of everything.

So these thousand spirits swirled round in this dust that was becoming the Earth, and they loved being together so much that they filled it with all the wonderful things we have here today. The waves on the ocean moved because they wanted them to. The wind blew. The ground quaked. The flowers bloomed, the trees grew, and the mushrooms sprouted all because of the spirits that used to be stars. But no matter how nice it was here, they still missed being stars a little. So they came up with a plan. Each of them found a bunch of stars that were still in the sky that they liked, that used to be their friends. And they sent their tail - just their tails, now; most of their spirit bodies stayed down here because it was so nice - they sent their tails back up to the sky. And so the stars in the sky moved a little because of the spirits on Earth. Just like the spirits here started acting like what they saw up in the sky. And that's how animals came around. Each of the thousand spirits started gathering bits of dust together to act like what they saw in the sky. Us, and every other animal on Earth; we're just bits of stone and lightning and fire and water piled together that move the way our star spirit tell us to. All the lions on Earth are just a part of a single star spirit, bears a part of another, eagles part of another and bees part of even one more. That's why there are so many different kinds of animals. There are a thousand different kinds! Just like there are a thousand constellations, since there are a thousand spirits that made the sun, moon and Earth so long ago, talking to their old star friends up above.'

"ɒɒ..." iacopɒ replied; *now* it clearly all made sense.

sadɜʃ was far from done, however. He continued, 'But now that all the spirits were busy and happy in their new, animal bodies, it seemed like the waves and wind and everything else might stop. So they had to think quick, since their bodies depend on nature, as everybody knows. But the answer was simple. They decided the best way to keep nature going was to *use* their new bodies. So today, the waves roll on and on only because the fish and the sharks and the whales beat their tails so hard all the time. The wind only blows because all the birds and bugs and butterflies beat their wings so hard forever and ever. The ground only quakes because the fentoni and karkadans and horses stomp so hard all the time. And the plants only grow because us and the bees and the worms work so hard to make them happy. So when all was said and done, everything stayed the same. Some animals keep this or that thing going so everybody else can enjoy it. You see? It's a big web. One part gets lost it all comes apart. But there was something new created as a result. Twelve new spirits - and constellations too - were made from all the animals' work: the primal spirits. These twelve new spirits split the sky into twelve equal parts, and each called that part home. That's where you'll find their constellation. uaza is one. oraion another. iuɾi over there another. Each one has

five neighbors, five strangers, and one opposite. Their constellations wander round their part of the sky, sometimes coming right up to their neighbors, but they always look the same no matter where they go. That's how we know they're primal spirits; all the other constellations change, little by little, night by night. So in a thousand, thousand years, all the lions will look a little bit different than they do today, just like leɑ's changed a little bit too. And the same with all the rest. But the primal spirits; they'll look just the same as they do today.

"le pɐɾ *cuaʔ*" cried gita.

'Well, they need an animal body too, don't they. Long ago; a thousand, thousand, *thousand* years ago, they lived in twelve big fish. Then twelve gigantic lizards, that could eat you both in one big gulp. Then twelve big, fierce cats. Today it's twelve people. And just like the big fish and lizards and cats before, these twelve people can live for as long as the waves crash on the shore or the wind blows or the lightning flashes down from the sky. If the waves ever stop, even for just a second, ifaɕ will die. A moment of still air everywhere would mean the end of ɑses. And if there's no lightning for a whole day anywhere, that'll be it for iuɾi. It's only when their animal body finally passes on that their constellation changes, all at once. We call them the twelve gods: ɐnɑsɾgees, uaza, oraion, euastir, astrɾd, ɑses, ɑɾɾula, ion, en, iuɾi, ifaɕ and ɑres. But they have many names. The dwarves call them one thing. Beyond the mountains, in the rest of the Empire, its something different; except for ɑɾɾula of course. Bod something else; the Anda, Lusitani, elves... On and on. But no matter who you ask, they always have a deep connection with animals. We say its the animals of the constellations around them. So ifaɕ, wherever she is right now, loves dolphins, whales and all the rest; iuɾi loves lions, bears and so on; oraion wolves and eagles; euastir bulls, snakes and panthers; but uaza only loves big old snakes since tanin goes all the way round him.

Now. Except for ɐnɑsɾgees, oraion and uaza are the oldest of the twelve gods alive today. They're bothers. They were born so long ago that there weren't even that many people around on the planet. And back then the few that there were didn't live any different than the animals, really. Well, that was just the way the old gods liked it. But oraion and uaza wanted to change that. They said to each other, "This is very silly. Why would we live like animals when we can live like the spirits of the sky?" Since even though they were gods and could live forever, they were still just people in the end and didn't understand that the two things were really the same. Worse yet they disagreed on how to do it. uaza said that people would be better off if they settled down to make cities. But oraion said that we should be free to wander if we wanted to be just like the spirits. And so they both set out to do what they thought was best. uaza settled down with a hundred other people in a land that they all liked, and they sat down together and thought up all the amazing things we have now. Like silk. And steel. While oraion and his wolf friend, sɾies, went off into the wilderness. They were perfectly happy to do nothing more than walk a little every day. And when they were hungry, they hunted. They walked for so long, and so far, in fact, that one day oraion realized he'd gotten to an entirely different land. So he made a boat, and they sailed back to where they'd started.

And he said to uaza, "Brother, I have seen so many wonderful things, and the spirits talk with me every day."

But uaza said, "Brother, you've only wasted your time. Look at how many more wonderful things we've created here while you were gone. And all the food we

have. And how our population grows. We have doubled, in fact. Now we are two hundred! Which tells me the spirits approve. To live like them is to be something different than an animal; you only play at this game."

Well, they were both a little right, and a little wrong, I suppose. So oraion went to make his journey again, while uaza went on with his great city. But this time, two of the people that lived with uaza - who had heard the brothers talking and thought that uaza was a fool - followed oraion on his journey and helped him on his way. And when they got to the land where oraion made his first boat, they worked together to make another. And they sailed back to where they'd started.

And they said to uaza, "Look at this vessel, then! Is it not wonderful like the many things you have here? What animal can sail a ship?"

But uaza said, "Only do you play at living like the spirits. Here we have ever better boats. And we use them to catch as many fish as we can eat and more. We are four hundred now! Twice what we were when last you were here. While you are three and a dog, who only try to be more like the fish in your little boat."

Well, they were both a little right, and a little wrong, I suppose. So oraion went to make his journey again, while uaza went on with his great city. But this time, four more of the people that lived with uaza - who had heard the brothers talking and thought that uaza was a fool - followed oraion as well. And so they were eight this time. And when they got to the land where oraion made his first boat, they made paintings in the sand. And since it did not rain in this land, they knew that what they'd made would last for as long as the land remained above the sea.

So when they returned to uaza they said, "Look at what we've done, then! We can make wonderful things here, there and everywhere; though they are not as numerous as all you have done here, they will surely last longer. And one day the world will be filled with our creations, while your works will only ever fill this one land."

But uaza said, "Still you only play at living like the spirits, little brother. Drawings of animals, only, have you made. Still you remain a beast. While we here have doubled in size yet again. Now we are so many that our children must move into other lands, and all of our creations they take with them."

Well, they were both a little right, and a little wrong, I suppose. So oraion went to make his journey again, while uaza went on with his great city. But this time, eight more of the people that lived with uaza - who had heard the brothers talking and thought that uaza was a fool - followed oraion as well. And so they were sixteen this time. And when they got to the land where oraion made his first boat, they built a great city in the mountains where they might stop and rest every time they came to it. And they talked to the spirit of the great tree that lived there, and the tree told them which plants to grow to eat. And so they rested, and feasted. And when they tired of their resting and their feasting, they built another boat. And they sailed back to uaza.

And they said, "Look, then, what we have done. A city like yours we have built. But one that follows the wisdom of the spirits; that we leave for now so that the land may heal before our next coming."

But uaza said, "Still you don't understand. A boar can push rocks together into a pile, sleep beside it for a night and walk away. Can he not? While we tend to the land as if it was our child. This is surely the way of the spirits."

Well, they were both a little right, and a little wrong, I guess. So on and on the

brothers bickered. Until there was a vast country to the west of the great sea filled with many, many people and all the things we enjoy today. But every time oraion came back to this land, even though there were so many nice things there, he took with him exactly as many people as had just made his last circle with him. So next there were thirty-two, then sixty-four, then more than a hundred; and on and on until there were thousands and thousands, and they all walked around in oraion's circle. Some went one way. Some the other. Some went fast. Others went slow. Some went so slowly it was their children, or their children's children, or their children's children's children, even, who would finish the trip. But always they traveled. And the farther they traveled, the more they grew.

Until uaza cried, "No longer does my city double in size every year. We have filled this land to its brim as well as the next over and the next over still. Worst of all they now war with each other as often as birth new children! But the company of my brother, which traverses a hundred lands and more, doubles with his every return, showing that the spirits approve. How can this be, when he lives as an animal and so opposite to their ways?"

And oraion said, "Only do you play at living like the spirits, big brother. What I have learned over the course of these many years is that to live like the spirits is to live like a beast; for more than anything the spirits are true, and the truth is that we are only animals who can make so many various sounds with our mouths that each can have its own meaning. And while in a little talking is much gain - this you have shown - in much talking lies only deception; since the thoughts behind the sounds we make exist in our minds alone. You say you are more than an animal because you can gain so much by talking with your friends. But what is our speech in reality compared to birdsong, or the sounds the dolphins and whales make below the waves, the howling of a wolf, even the rustle of leaves in the wind? They are the same! So because you believe a lie, and the spirits are always true, your words fail to lead to more gain; while we who see the truth gain more in the end."

And so uaza finally admitted that it was oraion who was the wiser that time. And they had a great festival to celebrate, since by then the whole world was filled with all the different types of people that live today.'

No matter it was clear sadɘʃ considered his story completed, iacɑpɑ and gita both only continued to demand an explanation for his every following statement. So, with a last wink our way, he hauled them off, she still pawing at his face, leaving samara and I to join her siblings for a dance. One dance turned into a hundred of course. And by the time we were spent, not only was the moon high in the sky and the woods illuminated as if at day but I was also very, very drunk.

As such, I made a sudden decision. Until then, I had clutched my bag of silver to me at all times, either hiding it under my shirt-tails or slipping it into a secret pocket I'd made in the upper portion of my boot. But neither place allowed me the freedom of motion I desired that night; it pestered me awfully as I flailed about to the sound of the fiddle. Perhaps I was inspired by sadɘʃ's story and thought I might be better off without any urban burden. Or perhaps it was the brandy alone that drove my coming madness. But in any case I saw the silver as only a dragging anchor - which point of view I still don't entirely deny, for its security hadn't left my mind a single moment since my arrival there - so I flung the filthy stuff into the trees and the fire and the creek, to the universal amusement of all those gathered. They even helped me in my efforts. Into the trees and the mud they helped me

throw my twelve pounds, saving for themselves not a single diamond. And we drank the whole of the brandy they had; for all knew there were funds enough to replace it ten times over littering the nearby moss and wildflowers. Never had I felt so free. My heart rejoiced to find itself firmly back in the traditions of my mother. And so I decided then and there to cease my base existence in the city in order to live the rest of my days as a Terran should. I would go with them to ʌra malta. And I would marry my samara no matter how fat she got. And she would bear me a litter of children while I built a still - for I thought I would be very good at that. I would operate it over the winter months just as oraion resided only for a time in his city in the mountains. It would surely be enough to see all of our needs met and more. We would be able to repeat my simple plan year after year without change. And I would live happily and die happily there in my beautiful Terra as a Terran should, surrounded by nature and the love of a good family.

But though the stars may respond to the dreams of a single man, the necessities of life of course rarely do. My next morning began with a despair more pure than ever I'd experienced as I clutched at my empty pockets - empty save samara's pendant which I had still to present to her, that is - and cried out at my foolishness. But by then the woods had been picked clean of the entirety of my wealth by the many children of the camp. All I had to show for its distribution was the wincing, similarly liquor-laden smiles samara's siblings flashed back at me as I made a brief, hopeless search. And though the mɐʌiɾas were happier than ever to ply me with good food and hospitality; though they insisted I eat first and never be subject to even the lightest of duties; though iacopo said he'd follow me to the ends of the Earth and be my slave if I wanted, I was beyond devastated. For I knew that they wouldn't give back a single diamond. So I packed a bag and made ready to return to ʇɘlia. The irony of my plight was painfully plain. Had I only held on to the fruits of my urban efforts, I would have been able to afford to cease them for the summer at least. But having tossed away the whole of my wealth, I would be forced to return to the city directly. For my true skills are not well-suited to summertime in the mountains. I have no patience for hunting, and despise the monotony of fishing even more. Neither have I ever been successful in any of my attempts at the kind of farming that is done on the terraces there. I'm not even a particularly good cook. In the sober light of day, I knew I would only be a hindrance to the mɐʌiɾas; not to mention bored beyond measure. Therefore I made my plan to return to ʇɘlia clear to samara that very morning.

She was twice more distraught than me, and cried for what seemed an hour, begging me to come with them time after time. But no matter her protests, I could see no other way for me to retain my pride. In any case I had noted carefully the joy with which she attacked her food over the course of my stay. So I left. Although in the end I could not deny her her pendant of ʒe at least. That much at least I felt I owed her. No matter my good intentions, however, all she did was weep yet harder when I gave it to her. For even though I meant it only as an honest gift of thanks for her love and tenderness, what she saw most then was that I had hidden it from her the whole of my stay, instead of being bodily unable to give it to her at my earliest convenience, as I had been countless times before.

I could barely look sadɘʃ in the eyes when he came to see me off, after she quit me at last. But it seemed that he understood every thought that had raced through my head and heart over the course of the tumultuous last day. He placed a single

pound in one palm, a bag of bread in the other and patted me on the shoulder, telling me that he'd always known I was a good kid, and that they'd be back in ɔsɐn after they tired of the mountain snows.

So I finally fled their camp, returning to the library, as luck would have it, exactly six days after my departure from it. McGee only grunted knowingly at my entrance. And pointed to the pile of incoming books that had since accumulated, which of course no one had done a thing about.

The next day, at home at the Whale again as if I'd never left, I was sipping on a glass of red when to my surprise who other than Lyus and Earl, the mismatched pair, the smaller of which I'd earlier intended to use as an informant to find out more about my supervisor, sat themselves down unceremoniously in front of me, the larger now doing his best, seemingly, to block the pleasant view of the waves I customarily enjoyed from my spot by the corner window.

"We wanted to apologize to you, good sir," said Lyus, mixed features struggling to hide the smile that accompanied his sarcasm, which he likewise clearly intended to suppress. He was forced to repeat himself to subdue the sentiment entirely: "We wanted to apologize to you, fer bein' so auspicious a' you afore. And fer callin' you a dirty rat to yer back afterwards as well."

Earl nodded his seconding while I tried to remember who, exactly, they were, searching unsuccessfully for the right question to pose that might allow me to understand what exactly was happening. Unsurprisingly, the words failed to come, so I stammered instead, "Apologize? Whyever? It should be me who apologizes to you. Fer..."

The two traded matching, face-consuming smiles as the boy admitted, "Yeah. Well, you sure did have us going. Course that's not sayin' much, since ain't no one ever accused me a' bein' a great thinker. Not yet, anyway. And Earl, well; everybody knows he's dumber'n a bag of potatoes."

Earl only shrugged in agreement. Lyus continued, unheeding, "You had us going alright, I'll admit. We thought you was a fancy-shot mister moneybags right up until our Mr McGee told us otherwise. And you sure had him pipin' let me tell you. But now he says you're alright, and that we should introduce ourselves proper-like, seein' as we're gonna be crewmates."

"I'm sorry?" I spat, sacrificing half a mouthful of my gɯome to better make my complaint.

"What, he hasn't told you yet? Well, you get ready then. Cause you're comin' with us. That's right. From here on you're part of the crew of the Decade's End. Not a single sailor what sails don't want on. And you are. You're welcome."

I frankly haven't the slightest recollection of what I replied, exactly, I was so stunned. But surely the words, 'Thank you,' remained far from my lips.

Lyus was barely listening in any case. "So. Seein' as we already know all about you," he sang, "we might as well introduce ourselves proper-like. I'm Lyus; Lyus the Lucky, son of the infamous Beau Mellis, who sailed from Hank's Hold, who took on twenty arks with a single ship and survived - for a couple days anyway - and who took the Baroness a' Conte without firing a single shot. Look here.

That's my medallion. That's platinum, case you didn't know what that looks like. Was right there with me when they found me outside the orphanage. Called a skull. This ugly bastard? That's Beau. They *say* he did all his own killing, but there he is on a skull anyway. Only one like it in existence, says McGee. Anycase, this here is Earl. Just Earl. Come to think of it, I don't know a thing about him either; other'n the fact that he's a rutting giant, obviously, and that he can't cook a lick without Dervi's help. Where are you from, Earl? How old are you? Blondes or brunettes?" But another shrug was Earl's only reply. So, ears seeming to grow taller as he roused himself to start his complaint, Lyus turned back to me to continue, "Course you ain't been doin' such a good job of it lately, have you? Galavantin' off in the woods like a damn monkey. And here you are: eight in the afternoon with a glass a' wine, of all things, in your hand. When you got things to do! Which is why we're here. We're on a secret mission, see. And right now that mostly involves gettin' you offa yer fat ass. Make a fuss, Earl'll just carry you off till you simmer down. Understood? So drink up, mister moneybags. We're goin' for a little walk."

Earl's last shrug revealed that his compatriot spoke the truth regarding his instructions, so off we went after I reluctantly downed the last of my wine. Not ten seconds out the door, however, Lyus turned back to me suddenly, pulling from his waist the same contraption McGee had used to save me from the orcess those months before. As he pointed it my way, the boy laughed, "Whatcha think? Scary, hmm? Ever seen one of these before?"

"No," I replied, seeing little reason to inform him otherwise.

"This," he exclaimed happily, "is called a hand-cannon. And it's exactly what you think it is. Shot goes here, pull the trigger and boom: off goes whatever you're pointing at. Most of the time, anyway. Sometimes all it does is explode and fuck up your hand real bad. Allans make 'em. So you should know all about 'em, am I right?"

I did my best to chuckle in agreement.

"Well, today, we have to go get bullets cause we're out. And something called batteries. Come on. We got a long way to go." So we departed along the sea road.

Despite its many intricacies, ɶlia can be broken down into seven neighborhoods of sorts. Although instead of occupying an area each their own, these seven districts are arranged around the main avenues of the city, which, except for ʃɘɾa ilɚl, go in rough semi-circles around piatza moanɚᴄ and al ɑpeɾa; from which arrangement the metropolis derives its solar title. The outermost neighborhood, or daiɾa as they're called in Terran, is daiɾa mɷcsɪma. Some fail to include the mɷcsɪma in any description of the city, for it is quite far from urban in character. But even though it has a country feel, there is little that goes on in the mɷcsɪma - shops, inns, farms and public works alike - that isn't oriented toward the goings-on below. The library is off ʃɘɾa mɷcsɪma, as would the Beached Whale be if it weren't for the cliff that ends the avenue in the north. Next is daiɾa ɚtnea, in which I found my apartment at the start of my stay in ɶlia. The best views of the rest of the city and sea beyond can be had from the ɚtnea (while not risking direct contact with spaces not tended daily by gardeners, that is), therefore in it are found the bulk of the city's wealthy residents. The whole of its length is dotted with mansions, and what lies between the sprawling estates is no less artfully crafted and maintained. Below the ɚtnea is daiɾa aθɚlɟθa, the university district. Three schools domi-

nate the landscape here; one in the northwest, one the southwest and one the south. Though any historian employed by these institutions will tell you the same thing about the layout of the city - that it was carefully planned by a collaboration of leading scholars from all three - the truth is different. The metropolis, my friend Adoneus tells me, in fact only grew as the sea shrank from it over the course of millennia. Each of the avenues along which the daiɾas are now arranged, except ʃɘɾa mɘdia which was only added recently, was once simply the sea road for a time, until it was abandoned to other uses in favor of the next farther down. In any case, after the aθɘlɟθa for most of their navigation round al ɒpeɾa is this ʃɘɾa mɘdia. Every single person who calls the mɘdia home I've found to be a first class liar and cheat, who rely on their words alone to make their way in life. How they stand to live around each other I have no idea. Although they seem very happy. Below that is daiɾa aɾɾabia, where most workers can be found, along with the numerous workshops and factories, well situated for the supervisors who live in the mɘdia above to visit down the hill. Then ʃɘɾa ƃalifa, market street, and its surrounding daiɾa. And finally daiɾa ilɘl or the docks, which district, owing to the large influx of dwarves to the city over the past century, now extends farther along the avenue of the same name than not only the road's intersection with ʃɘɾa ƃalifa, but aɾɾabia and mɘdia as well, meeting and merging with daiɾa ɘtnea directly, in fact, since the wealthy dominate the coastline in place of the aθɘlɟθa and mœcsɟma even until the last stretch of road up to the Whale. Our destination, in any case, laid across the whole of the city; in the mœcsɟma still but nearly opposite the house from which we started.

Therefore the journey consumed most of the afternoon. We walked along the sea from the Whale along ʃɘɾa ilɘl to the docks, there dodging the million cats and drunks who call the area home to make our way, the reverse of my usual path when returning to the tavern intent on spending some of the money I'd gotten from McGee-Kilkenny. We only turned from the coast after passing al ɒpeɾa, veering off to the southwest to cross ʃɘɾa ƃalifa. There the merchants shouted their ceaseless din of special offers and once-in-a-lifetime bargains over each other as always. But despite the fact it seemed the only secret behind our mission was a shopping list, we failed to stray, crossing the ƃalifa without pause to pass into the aɾɾabia. Here were no carefully worked facades or skillfully tended gardens like in the daiɾas above; the residences of the aɾɾabia are crammed one on top of another with not a square foot of space put to waste. Dogs fight for scraps in the streets unconcerned with the closeness of passerby. They outnumbered people, even, at the time of our passing, for most of the residents were then still hard at their labors. Lyus seemed to know them all somehow, dogs and people alike. With a halfhearted kick at the one's backside, he'd demand they leave some for the other mutts while to the other he'd demand they slow their work to better enjoy life. Though neither paid his words much heed, they would both flash similar expressions of amused endearment the child's direction. From there our journey took us to cubri cɘlitos, which passes over the depressing sameness of the mɘdia to deposit the traveler directly into culɟya cɘlitos, the university of the southwest portion of the aθɘlɟθa. Halfway across the bridge, Lyus informed me that the bulk of the passerby in this part of the city would be "stoned off their ass more often'n not." And indeed, as he tipped his hat at every one of them we met, their responses seemed tailor-made to confirm his generalization. Their return smiles were comically wide, or they

jumped in fright to be greeted so directly; otherwise they ignored us completely to better examine the most obscure detail of their surroundings. Only when the responses to his salutations turned into an identical, half-hearted grunt of disgust at our appearance and audacity in daring to address a superior did we know that we had returned to the ɐtnea at last. Thereafter we made haste to pass through to reach or destination, a large, run-down shack that leaned with the slope of ʃɘɾa mœcsɲa as it ran down the hill toward the coast, from whose failing gutters a carefully crafted sign that read, 'Omni, Co.' in perfectly symmetrical letters creaked on makeshift hangers.

We were greeted straightaway by a dwarf who introduced himself as Maddox Malloy, at our service, who followed Lyus around with a pauper's persistence only to be met eventually with the boy's exasperated declaration, "Enough already! We're here for bullets and batteries, you hear? Nothing else!"

But this Maddox was undeterred. "You *sure* you don't want something else? Our sunglasses are very popular. So much sun to deal with down here! Or how about some radios? Here, try it out. Aedis'n McGee'll love these! Look. You press this button here and talk, and your voice comes out the other one there like magic. Try it out!"

"No!" Lyus spat. "That's stupid. Why would we want those?"

"You sure?" the dwarf crooned, with perhaps feigned offense. "Or have you changed your mind about those ears of yours, maybe? Clip, clip! We'll put you under; won't feel a thing. *Anything's* possible here at Omni, Co."

"Oi," Lyus spat again. "You're not touching my rutting ears, you hear?"

"Fine, fine," Maddox croaked. "Just making sure you know what you're missing. So what are we talking about this time?"

Lyus's only response was to hand the dwarf a short list and the hand-cannon, which Maddox passed off at once to his assistant, a nervous, skinny man he addressed as Lotho. Since the boy clearly communicated by his expression and exaggerated avoidance of the other's gaze how little he desired their conversation to continue, Maddox turned to me as I curiously perused the litter that covered the tables of his shack.

With a smile identical to those that had met us as we crossed the ɢalifa, he insisted, "Everything here is for sale! Whatever you like. This here, for example, is a light bulb. There's a little one of these in every flashlight we sell. Only looks so bright because of the mirrors! But this one's big enough to light up a whole room all by itself. Back in the First Age of Man, there were enough of these things to light up the night. Like it was high noon! Now, of course, they're only so practical, seeing as you have to have a stove a hundred times its size to run it. Course, once you get the stove up and running, you can keep thousands going for as long as you've got wood or coal to spare. You mark my words: one day the whole world'll catch on. Just like back then, and this rock'll be an amazing place again."

I made sure to fail to second the sentiment, while Lyus only spat on the floor at the thought. Accordingly an awkward silence followed, which quiet was only broken when Lotho returned to us with our order.

"Fuck me dead! It stinks in there," Lyus cried as soon as we made our exit. Indeed, the place had reeked, a heady mix of what I thought might be freshly exhumed corpses and refuse. But thankfully, its stench was soon left behind, for the scents of spring were all around us. A soft rain dripped noiselessly down the

vibrant, emerging leaves of the currants and beech that surrounded us and onto the grasses bursting into renewed life below them, clinging to each blade in swelling beads for a time until forced by its accumulated weight to quit its perch and race down to the soil at last. Among the freshness lent the air by the drizzle was the scent of the countless blossoms of the nearby orchards, not to mention the hanging aroma that arose from the fecundity of freshly plowed earth for miles around. I breathed it in happily, but no matter his elven features, Lyus only sniffed again, complaining, "Not that it's much better out here. Come on." And so Earl and I tightened the straps of our backpacks, the one filled with secret bullets and the other secret batteries, to better trudge after him.

There is little in life I wish more than that I had paid more careful attention to my surroundings on the return trip. Having no desire to descend back down to the coast with our heavy burdens only to be forced to climb up once more, we followed the mœcsɟma back to the library. I'll admit I noticed the campsite not far down the road from our destination; even wondered if it had been there the last time I'd passed that way. But shrugged the mystery off without a second's pause in my weary step.

"D'you forget where it was?" was McGee's greeting once we made our entrance to the library again at last.

We dropped our burdens, Earl and I happily laying our heavy packs on the kitchenette's table while Lyus grudgingly placed the hand-cannon in the dwarf's outstretched hand. Paudrik and Neilson had long since left for the day; McGee's voice and the every sound we made there in the small room under the balcony echoed throughout the building and back to us as eerily and forebodingly as noises made there after-hours ever did.

Lyus spat, "Yeah, well, these two kept on getting distracted by the birds and the bees and all that. Wasn't for me they probably'd've tried to make a camping trip of it, brought a ploughin' picnic basket."

"Careful with that, now, rasid," said McGee. "Enough powder to separate you from every one of your little bits in that bag, assuming that idiot Maddox didn't fuck it up."

"What on earth do you need a whole backpack of powder for?" I demanded as I manually returned sensation to my blood-deprived shoulders. I immediately regretted asking the question, however, for I knew the answer would involve nothing wholesome.

Although it could have been worse: "Shit... It's not *that* much powder!" he said. "That's clayshot you're carrying. All I use. Stop a bear in his tracks you want without killing 'im. Unless, like I said, you or that idiot Maddox fucked it up."

"All's I told him's that we're on a secret mission," Lyus said in way of explanation of my ignorance. But it was clear the boy had no surer picture of our purpose than me.

Indeed, the dwarf grumbled, "You and your secret missions. This ain't no rutting game, Lyus! Treat it like it is and you'll lose the thing for good, if you get what I'm saying." The boy's unchanging smile indicated clearly that he did not.

Regardless, "We," McGee began, his forming explanation sent sidelong at each of us for a nearly equal portion of the duration of the long syllable, "are going to wake 'im up." Lyus's smile vanished in an instant at the statement.

No further explanation forthcoming, I was forced to demand hesitantly, "Wake who up?"

McGee's only answer was to pass the hand-cannon my way.

Lyus complained, "Aren't we going to wait for the rest of 'em at least!?"

But McGee shook his head as he tossed a letter on the table, saying, "Aedis wants 'im up 'fore they get here. All rights we should've done it already. But *someone* was off on an unscheduled vacation!" This last, no matter my uncaring, was directed firmly toward me.

I only laughed, "I think you may have misplaced my list of responsibilities, McGee." I dared not hold on to the weapon for a moment longer than was necessary to get it safely away from me. "Maybe I should go and sweep something. Or something."

But McGee's response was immediate: "Never bothered to dig too deep in that pile downstairs, did you rasid?" My departure slowed the teensiest bit as he pushed up onto his toes for a moment, just as he had when he'd offered me a pound a week for my time those months before, all the better to sing, "Never wondered *why* someone would pile it up so high, did you? Just took some, counted your money, and got back to fucking every whore you could get your overgrown mitts on, am I right?" I had paused entirely by this point. So, with a forming smile, he crooned, "Maybe what's down in the middle of that pile's worth a lot more'n the couple of pounds here and there you been getting from it so far."

"Wake *who* up?" was the eventual, repeated question I threw back over my shoulder to the terrible man. But he only wordlessly extended the hand-cannon to me once more.

Lyus was happy to fill the silence. "Dammit, McGee," he complained. "I wanted to use that!" The dwarf, however, turned to him with a different contraption in hand.

"No," he said. "You get the flashlight."

"On earth am I gonna do with that!?" Lyus demanded.

"You're gonna go first is what you're gonna do."

"But Rose'll eat me 'fore you even know what's happening!"

McGee scoffed, "Rose don't eat kids!" Although he added softly afterwards, "I think." Only then did I notice the leather armor he was wearing under his tunic and the many hatchets he had started to strap to himself wherever they might fit on his person. As he did, he further rationalized, "Look at how big Earl is, you idiot. She'll go after him first. I'm sure of it."

It was now the colossal man's turn to complain. He mumbled, "Don't like the basement."

But McGee demanded angrily, "You're going and that's that, you overgrown baby. Or Aedis'll hear of it." And to me, he grumbled, "You can't leave me alone with these idiots, rasid. I'll make it worth your while... Cherry'n Peach are just the start of it, believe me."

Though I protested, "Believe *you*!?" I still grabbed the damn hand-cannon.

Lyus, meanwhile, had departed the kitchenette and was hopping unsuccessfully up a nearby wall in hopes of reaching one of the crossing, antique sabers decorating

the wall above.

"Do you know how old those are?" McGee laughed out to him when he noticed.

But Lyus only demanded angrily, "He gets a rutting hand-cannon and what do you give me? Who's stuck by you through thick and thin for half my life almost! A flashlight is what! Ridiculous!"

"Lyus," McGee chuckled. "I met you a couple months ago."

The boy quit his jumping for a moment to spit back, "Yeah, well. Time flies when you're having fun," before commanding Earl to grab him one of the sabers.

"Do you even know how to use that?" McGee laughed, eyebrow raised, as the weapon was unhooked at last. "Just as likely to stab one of us than either of them, I'd think."

Lyus only replied, "I'll figure it out." And to prove his point, he swung the saber around him in flourishing, overlapping circles. Then with an air of complete satisfaction and surety, the boy kicked open the door to the basement, snatched the flashlight from the dwarf with a cry of, "Gimme that stupid thing," and slipped into the darkness below. Earl, now bearing a pack whose contents could be guessed at by the trickle of blood that escaped from the seams at the bottom, and I descended wordlessly after him while McGee, with one final exasperated shake of his head, hefted the last of his axes, the biggest, and followed behind, leaving the door creaking open behind us.

Though it was not my usual entrance to the underground, by then I was able to guide Lyus to the wine storage without getting turned around. We approached it from the west, however, so were confronted at the end with my remaining barricade. Earl made short work of the blockage, while the chuckle that came from the darkness behind me showed clearly McGee's opinion of my attempt at security. In any case, we made our destination without major event.

"Some progress..." McGee complained, once what was left of the mountain of mœnga came into view. Only then did I realize that his every direction to me, or likewise, lack thereof, over the course of the last few months, since I'd found the terrible thing, had but a single intent: to convince me to do the work of relocating the bulk of this pile somewhere else - even if no matter my apparent willingness to be so used, at most a quarter of the booklets had been hauled away by then.

I defended myself, "I don't remember you ever including anything about this in my job description! Maybe if you'd just told me about it instead of being so clever. And paid a little better!"

He only hummed in way of reply, before directing Earl and myself to complete its removal fully. Lyus, meanwhile, was sent to keep a watch on the doorway. I made sure to instruct Earl to keep an eye out for anything that said 'ETR' on it, no matter how disgusting it might appear to be, and set it aside. And so, with that we two got to it, taking as much from the pile at a time as our respective reaches would allow and depositing our burdens each on opposite sides of the room. After a mere minute of labor, however, McGee pulled me aside and, returning the hand-cannon to me, which I had set on the ground nearby to better move the booklets, explained, "She'll be sure to come again tonight. She wants Adoneus up more'n any of us; even if she'd rather just slaughter us all and do it herself if she thinks they can get out. Which they can, since I've got the keys right here on me. And there'll be no surprising her naked this time. She'll have her armor on and fangs out long before we see her. Now, you've got two shots in here. I'd've given you

more, but if you fuck it up, the last thing I want to do is give a rutting orcess a rutting hand-cannon with shots to spare. We want her alive. Ideally. Which is why I've given it to you instead of the kid. One clayshot at her torso from a foot or two away'll put her out of commission without killing her. Any closer'n that'll be the end of our darling Rose once and for all. But miss twice, me'n Earl'll have to do it the hard way." And he slapped the weapon in my hand definitively once more, turning thereafter to join Lyus at the portal.

I grabbed a bottle of red from a nearby rack to assist me in my labors once I firmly secured the hand-cannon in my belt. Though McGee had failed almost entirely to fill me in on what he and the others clearly already knew about this Rose and Adoneus, I thought I had some idea of what was happening. The question of why a person was apparently buried under so much pornography as well as that of how he had survived such treatment - not to mention, most importantly, how exactly McGee intended for me to profit from his awakening - remained a mystery. But here was another black cat directly in from of me, it seemed, waving its tail in the dark, so I continued my work without complaint, hauling stack after stack of booklets away from the pile in between casual sips of wine. At last, after an hour or two, what appeared to be a stone coffin was revealed. Although it was twice as intricately designed and chiseled, even, as the ornate archway through which we had passed to gain our admittance to the room, with a twisted, screaming satyr, massive member included, embossed on the cover, supported on either side by charging bulls. On the head of one of which McGee started banging most rudely with his axe.

"Wakey-wakey; hands off snakey!" he boomed happily, if with an eye on Lyus, the portal by which the boy stood watch and the still empty hallway beyond, while I departed to replace my now-empty bottle with another and Earl deposited his pack of meat gingerly on the other bull.

There was no response from the cist. Neither did a thing stir in the hallway. The only movement in the room at all, in fact, came from myself as I passed my candle over the rare rack that I had yet to extensively survey. Finally, after long seconds of silence, McGee grumbled to no one in particular, "Something's not right. She knows why we're here. Should've made her appearance by now."

Only then, of course, did Rose deign to reveal herself. I had just made it to the furthest corner of the wine storage, which had remained in darkness the duration of our visit, in my search for an untested varietal when McGee spoke. Not a second after his voice trailed off, behind a rack some ten feet away, the indelible memory - for it had haunted my dreams until even that very morning - of her countenance was seconded by my surprised sight of it in reality, not to mention that of her similarly unforgettable silhouette. But McGee had spoken truth: that night she was dressed for business alone. Besides her face, not a single knuckle of her body was without the protection of a suit of leather armor. And I realized with a crippling alarm: she'd been in the room with us the whole time!

I made to pull the hand-cannon from its resting place on my hip at once, but since, thanks to McGee's little speech, she knew precisely how I was armed, I soon found myself empty-handed. She was on me in an instant, before I had even the slightest chance of firing to halt her advance, taking the weapon without a single breath of exertion and thereafter unloading into Earl's and McGee's chests each in turn. Earl had only a cotton shirt and perhaps a sturdier than normal ribcage with

which to protect his organs; if he indeed still lived, he found himself with breath sufficient only to crumple onto the coffin as if dead. McGee, meanwhile, dropped to his knees and clutched at his armor, which might have shielded him from the worst of the hand-cannon's blow but was then only an added obstacle to an effective inhalation, as Rose, hips swaying as if she were the composer who'd fashioned the silently syncopated bridge to which she strutted, and therefore knew the details of its conclusion already, paced slowly ahead, one step at a time, to stand over him at last.

Her deep, throaty laugh filled the room. She repeated after him, "We want her alive. *Ideally*." Sinking to her haunches to grab his chin in her hand, squeezing his face in her one palm, she let the other descend to his groin. And she asked, "With what parts would you like to survive, dwarf? Ideally?"

But McGee was not to be so easily outdone. For the smile that spread across his face, while it only angered her further, revealed to me that he had hoped for nothing more than such a close encounter with her. I saw then that the whole of our entrance - every word he'd spared for us, and, coincidentally, the darkness that reigned beyond our candles - had been a carefully scripted play meant only to draw her in. And as he quit his exaggerated gasping, I realized that the shots he'd loaded into my weapon were likely far less devastating than described. Slowly, as she squeezed his face tighter, her focus wholly set on his bulging features, his hand passed over the many axes strapped to his torso to come to his waist, where I was certain another hand-cannon awaited his eager grasp.

But he would have no chance to use it, for Lyus had come running at the sound of the shots and reacted straightaway to what was revealed in his light. Rose was blinded by the boy's approach; she quit her hold of the dwarf to defend herself against this mystery opponent, her arm rising instinctively in order to protect her face from Lyus's first onslaught. She was fortunate, for it was an unexpectedly accurate and forceful attack. But she was not so lucky the second time. Unable still to recognize that her opponent was in fact a child, she lunged forward to swipe only the empty air above his ducking head, and from there Lyus spun quickly, kicking off the nearby wall to reach her level, opening a wound on her face from ear to lip. She howled in surprise and pain as McGee joined in the fray, using his axes now in the hope of perhaps subduing the orcess "the hard way," as he had put it, though I'm sure with a hand ready at all times to lower to his gun again should she and the boy ever stop whirling around long enough for him to unload into her accurately.

From under the satyr, meanwhile, a series of bangs had started to arise. At first, they were muffled by Earl's weight. But as whoever laid inside tested the limits of his prison, the relentless thuds started to concentrate round the other end, which was unburdened. After a time, a crack could be seen opening under the cover with every impact given it from underneath, and a cloud of dust arose around the cist as its separate pieces were able to move independently after being so long stuck together. I left McGee and Lyus to battle Rose by themselves in order to spring onto the loosened lid, grabbing at it desperately in hopes of closing it again. Perhaps I might have been able to manage it had Earl not gasped out suddenly like a man brought back from the grave himself, clutched at his chest, and rolled off the thing to the side.

As I struggled now to somehow secure both ends of the coffin, Rose was having

little trouble in subduing both of her attackers. Lyus she had finally managed to pinpoint behind his light and though McGee brought every one of the axes he had with him to bear, she was too agile to fall victim to a direct blow from any. The fury with which she defended herself instead launched them one after the other into the black. It was only a matter of time before he ran out and was forced to rely on his biggest, for she still danced around him with such speed that he dared not waste a shot from his hand-cannon. Finally, she sent Lyus flying into a wall with a single well-timed, fluid kick, and McGee to his knees with a blow so strong it would have broken his collarbone had it not been for his armor. What seemed less than a second later, she was there beside me. She shoved me to my knees at the foot of the coffin with ease and assisted its occupant in removing the cover. Together, they heaved the thing to the side.

Therefore I was at the perfect angle to witness the emergence of Adoneus at last. He gasped out in renewed life as Earl had shortly before, rising to his seat with the desperate breath of someone woken from a nightmare. The mental image of fearsome, likely orcish, villain I'd assumed was dashed at once. The man revealed was gaunt and shaking. Only once Rose lowered to assist him from his seat did he relax. But his calm didn't last for long. The emotion behind his gaze evolved after mere seconds into solid hate. And as McGee crawled toward the sound of Lyus's pain-filled gasping in order to tend to the boy, with Earl still wheezing in his own desperate search for oxygen, he stood to look down on me.

Though still frail in form, his voice was sure and ready. "Ah Rose, you thought to wake me with a meal. You've always been so thoughtful," he said. Then to me, as he tested his legs and found his strength, he admitted, "To be honest, I've never enjoyed the taste of your people, dwarf. But tonight, I can think of nothing sweeter." His steps became more certain as he bore down on me, until his face was mere knuckles from mine and his advance was halted by a surprisingly timid call that came from the edge of the darkness.

"You might not," Rose half-whispered, pausing as she searched for the right words to soften what she intended to convey. "Might not want to do that, my love."

"And why wouldn't I?" he demanded over his shoulder, gaze barely parting from his intended meal.

McGee's chuckle filled the room long before she dared try reply. Even then words failed her. She was only able to show him her hands, on which an all-too-familiar rash was spread.

My assailant's countenance sprung backwards from me as quickly as might have been appropriate had I been on fire. So I breathed freely for a second, despite being forced to admit to myself that I was likely subject to the debilitating condition McGee then named as the sims.

After a long minute of thought to the tune of McGee's increasing laughter, Adoneus finally demanded, "And how, Rose, would you know this?"

The orcess still dared not answer a single word; so he was forced to repeat himself: "How, Rose, would you know of this? Unless of course, you made love to him! For you have the disease as well and he still breathes. If you'd eaten him, he'd be dead, now wouldn't he?"

McGee used the opportunity afforded us by their quarrel to pull Earl to his feet, dragging the man toward Lyus and the open portal beyond, as a cascade of expla-

nations spewed from Rose all at once. She had only nibbled on me a little, she swore; but had been interrupted. She'd long since ceased fucking her prey before she ate them for the sake of his peace of mind. Not for years had she dared to defy him, he knew.

McGee finally broke her train of excuses. "That's right, Adoneus," he said. "We all have the sims, in fact. Did you think we'd give you the slightest chance of recovering at our expense? You should know us better than that!"

Despite the fact that Adoneus seemed to shrink away from us further, he reasoned, "Is that right!? Next you'll tell me that this boy is infected!"

But McGee was in his element. Never had his exaggerations rung so true, so clearly did his audience fear them. As Lyus moaned in pain, unable to deny the coming claim, McGee professed, "It's a tragic story. Got it from his mother, in fact. Insane by his tenth birthday. Very sad."

But Rose had had enough. She approached McGee as he started toward me. "Let us take him, Adoneus," she hissed. "He was foolish enough to bring the keys. Let us take our revenge on his flesh and make our escape to the night; so your captors may know what it is to try to cage a god."

It was clear she still thought she had time enough to subdue us all again. She was likely correct: McGee was out of axes, Earl and Lyus already retreating and I no threat. So she stalked her way back to the dwarf as confidently as she had when she first made her appearance that night. I have to say that he played his part beautifully, retreating from her and towards me a knuckle for her every swaying, anticipatory step and no more; exactly as his mix of pride and trepidation might have demanded, had he not still had the upper hand strapped to his waist.

But their final contest would be interrupted. The tiniest flicker of motion beside me accompanied a demand from Adoneus that Rose wait; that there was someone else in there with us. The cascade of events that followed was nearly immediate. Both the orcess and McGee turned suddenly, searching for this mystery intruder. Perhaps things might have ended differently had McGee not been quicker. But as it was, iacopo must have looked to be quite sinister as he, assuming me to be frozen in fear, rushed to my side to assist me in fleeing. McGee fired once directly into the boy, ending him without allowing the smallest chance for farewell. It all happened so incredibly fast, all I could do was jump in shock and cry out the boy's name.

"Enough," spat Adoneus at last, as I whimpered over the crumpled figure in my arms, trying to understand how he'd gotten there, while Rose hesitated, oddly unsure of herself, and McGee looked down in horror at what he had wrought. "Go," said the man. "And take your unfortunate friend with you."

We buried poor iacopo in the gardens, and understandably went immediately after for a drink. Despite our operation being a clear and complete, utter fiasco from start to finish, McGee spent the first few minutes down at the Whale saluting us and our efforts time after time. It was mere compensation, I knew, for the guilt he was surely struggling with. But he was right about one thing: that we four at least had come out of the mess whole and should appreciate the fact. Whether we cheered ourselves or not, however, Earl remained in great pain - even if his discomfort was mitigated by the efforts of Peach and Cherry, who made no attempt to hide their association with my supervisor that night, so filled with animation was he. They acquiesced at once to his management, in fact, no matter how high-handedly indicated the task he intended for them was; he spared not a single word for the women, merely pointing to them, the crippled man, and the rooms upstairs each in turn. And though I cringed involuntarily to imagine their supple fingers relieving the built-up tension of another's various appendages (especially all twenty of them at once!) I declined to bemoan that particular turn of my fate for long, for even if I trusted not the vast majority of the words that flew from McGee's lips, he had yet to make a direct promise to me that he had failed to keep to the letter. And he had quite clearly said earlier that he would "make it worth my while" if I accompanied him to the basement; furthermore that the two Saniese were "just the start of it."

But that kind of reward would have to wait at least until I could close my eyes and not see iacopo staring up at me, features twisted into that lifeless remnant of shock and confusion that painted his face until we covered him in earth. Any sort of happiness would be postponed for days; I could bring myself to do little more than hang my head and sigh for the remainder of the night. And McGee, I was sure, no matter his outside pretensions, was consumed by a despairing regret of depth equal to the one that had stolen my soul. Although his response to the emotion was a bit different. So defensive was he that the very moment Douglas dared address him directly, he instructed me at once - with little more of a gesture, by the way, than he had just spared for Cherry and Peach, though by then I was familiar with his intent when he scribbled on his palm with an imaginary pen in my general direction - to take down his every word.

"Well, so speaks the great Douglas!" said he after some benign, offhanded comment from the other. And he downed half of his mug to better continue, "Nevermind the every word that comes out of your lips is a fucking lie."

Despite the aversion the two had clearly always felt toward each other, I'd never witnessed an insult so plainly uttered between them. Silence reigned in their vicinity after the sudden accusation.

Finally, Douglas dared demand, "Is it me, then, who can't be trusted?"

"You heard me," McGee spat back, angrily licking the froth from his beard and mustache. Though Douglas made to protest yet again, the 'doorman' was no match for my supervisor that night, so thoroughly had he needed harden himself against the tragedy committed by his own hand. Pointing to me, he demanded, "You see that thing over there? Well, that there is rasid. And rasid works for me. You remember that little story you told last month? Well, he took it down; every last bit of it. And guess what? Couple days more at the most, the End'll be here. And we can ask *them* all what they think about it."

Douglas could barely stammer to restart his protest before McGee cut him off

again, booming, "*First* of all, storms rotate *counter*-clockwise down north. You idiot. Second, teak don't grow on the handle! It's nothing but pine there. Anyone who's sailed with us for more than the couple of months it takes to get from Whitehall to here would know that we get our wood on the islands of the Shallow. Third! You didn't even get the main character right. It wasn't Aedis that had the End built; it was his daddy Aedeon! *And* you didn't get the names of the ships straight. Decade's End's the one we built; the one Aedis calls the Mako. Not the Thresher, which, by the way, can run just fine, and does her best work pointed *into* the wind. *We* gave it that name. The ones what built her. But most importantly, it wasn't no mutiny that started the End swimmin. It was a strike! Course, you wouldn't know a thing about that, since you haven't worked a day in your life. Have you."

Douglas had by then quit any attempt to pretend the tale in question was any more than a pleasant fabrication thanks to McGee's surprising directness. His tone, however, when McGee finally allowed him to respond, conveyed clearly his forming intention to return any damage caused his credibility to his accuser twice over at his earliest convenience. Softly, he crooned, "Why don't you tell us how it went then, McGee?"

McGee was all too happy to comply. Slamming down his now empty mug, which Dervi swept away to refill at once, he acquiesced, "Alright, then. See, Mad Tom ain't mad because he's some villain. Only reason he's called that is cause it was him - and only him - who was crazy enough to go head to head with Aedeon. Didn't turn out too well for him, of course. But that don't make him no scoundrel. Hundred percent the opposite; it's cause of him that we get two months R'n'R a year instead of two days. It's cause of him that we get almost as much liquor every day as we get water, if we want. And it's cause of him that we all get together once a month to have our voice heard regardin' the ships' business. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Cause you wasn't barely ever part of the crew. You was a passenger who tried to act the part at best. Matter of fact, the only part of your story that was true was that bit about the gale; that one where you held on to the mast and wouldn't let go for the life of you. I still remember the look on your fucking face! Like you was being tortured."

Here McGee hopped off his stool and clutched at it desperately, with an imitation of the pure terror Douglas had apparently shown that stormy day lining his features. Then as his forced smile returned, he cried to any listening, "Came out for a look around and would *not* go back down, he was so scared to take a step away from the mast. All while we're just strolling about our business. Wasn't even that bad of a storm!"

By then the whole of the tavern heeded my supervisor. So, briefly addressing one man at a time as was his wont, he continued, "See, before Tom, it was worse than slavery. Aedeon had us worked half to death near every day. And you ever dared to speak up against him, what would he do? He'd work you twice as hard and cut your water ration in half. Let's see how much energy you got to express your opinion then! He was the fucking devil! Before Tom McGee came along, we was like ants under Aedeon's boot. But that all changed when the End was half built. It was plain as day what we intended to do; how he didn't see it coming I have no idea. But sometimes a man tells so many lies he must start to believe a few of 'em, even. And by then, the fucker'd been tellin' us every damn day that the ship would

half build itself, he'd designed it so good.

Now. Before anybody goes off searching for some mystery island out there in the Barren what's supposedly got half the globe's gold hidden on it, Aedeon at the time happened to be broke. Not a coin to his name. King of Valverde, sure; King a' the poorest, backwardest nation on the planet. Spent more of our booty on keeping that fat queen a' his happy than we ever got outta 'em. All he knew was that to take any of the new ships his sometimes friends the Allans'd started to build, massive things, fifty cannon a side, the Thresher wouldn't be enough anymore. He needed another ship no matter how broke he was. So the End was to be built from nothing but hopes and dreams, apparently, was his plan. He offered all sorts of things to see it done. The stupider half of the crew was convinced they'd be made first mate of our old ship once the new one was completed. And to the rest of us, he was talking posts in Monvitori he knew weren't his to give away, captaincy of the Thresher, shit: even told me he'd give me his first-born daughter to do with what I wanted. All so he wouldn't have to admit that he didn't have the slightest idea how to actually pay us for our work. Since the one thing we realized when we finally started to admit to each other the near-identical promises he'd made us all was that the fucker didn't plan on following through with a single one.

Course, we didn't realize he was scint till we had the thing half in the water already. So what's a working man to do? We quit then and there is what. Sat on our fat asses and said we wouldn't move a muscle till we saw some rutting money. It was Tom who took the lead for us. At no small risk to himself, mind you, since no matter how low he ran on funds, Aedeon had a team of gunes ready to pounce on a poor bastard at half a command - who always got paid somehow.

We knew full well the only thing we'd earn ourselves by not finishing the End was a first-class ticket to try to swim back to the mainland. And Aedeon's opening position when we started our strike was that we get back to work or he'd have us hanged one by one till we did. But eventually, Tom got everyone together. And he wrote down every promise Aedeon'd made us - each and every one - and every single word the bastard'd told us in bad faith was just one more concession he was forced to agree to; one more percent of future profits that'd go to us instead of him. As it should've been from the beginning! We wasn't asking for anything other than to be treated like human fucking beings, and for enough pay to send the mothers of our children a pound or two every now'n then. But every bit closer to even that was like pulling a tooth from the bastard, demanding a fucking finger, even. In the end, though, Tom saw it done. Aedeon was forced to sign a stack of papers half the size of the ship to see 'er finished. And wouldn't you know it, moment he did, we got back to it and put together the finest boat ever built.

But the one thing that was left in the air was the choice of who exactly was gonna be captain of the Thresher, since he'd promised the position to just about half of us. We, of course, felt it should be up to us. So we got together and the result was just what you might've expected. Captain'd be none other than Mad fucking Tom McGee, the crazy bastard. Now, Tom didn't want to be captain all that much. All he'd wanted really was the same as the rest of us: passable pay and a little rutting respect. But he wasn't the only one what didn't want him at the helm. Aedeon, of course, took the whole thing awfully personal, like.

So he marooned him. That much, at least, Douglas's story got right. Course, it happened a thousand miles away from the Aztlan. Not that it was any better where

it actually happened. Island we used to build the End was home to lizards and gulls and not much else. Didn't tell a single soul what he planned. But when we finally set sail with our two ships instead of one, it wasn't Tom who was at the helm of the Thresher, it was Aedis. Along with the dozen scabs who'd recently decided to join their little gang of bodyguards. And anyone who suggested that we go back for Tom seemed to change their mind about it real quick, like. Course it didn't turn out so well for Aedeon either, seein' as 'our noble captain Aedis' murdered him in cold blood not long after.

But that's how life is sometimes. Don't ask me the details. Sometimes seems you get what you deserve. Like Aedeon did there." Here he took a moment to draw a deep inhale, slapping me on the shoulder with the start of his coming ridicule, "While other times... only thing what saves you from your final curtain is your dumbest mistake!" But his tone changed at once afterwards. He hung his head the slightest bit and, almost in concert with a sudden spray of rain splattering against the nearby window, as if to remind any who cared to remember of the briefness of all things good, fine weather and life included, he confessed, "Just like sometimes... its your best intentions that fuck you in the end."

5.

I found the End to be wholly deserving of the praise I had thus far heard heaped upon her. It required no great seafaring experience to guess at her stability at least; she wallowed calmly at anchor in the steady surf of the Sudden as it starts its approach toward the Whale while others her size bounce this way and that with every wave. But even beyond such manifest calm, there was a less conspicuous sort of superiority to her. The artistry of her form was subject to the kind of attention one reserves for a single enterprise over the course of one's entire life down to her last board. Though she was not yet even twenty years old, her every joint and planed surface were as smooth to the touch as those of an antique piece of furniture worn for every day of its existence by an owner's loving hand. And in the energetic step of the sailors who manned her was an obvious pride at the station they'd earned for themselves, even beyond the respect demanded by the crew of the three ships then under Aedis's command in general, in fair recognition of the quantity of blood they'd collectively returned to the sea's flowing embrace over the course of their employment thereupon.

I might correctly be called a liar if I said that I failed to keep an eye out for their approach with my every spare moment after we woke Adoneus. As did Lyus still, once he was able to make the trek from the docks again without too much pain. His and McGee's weekly meeting became a daily one, in fact, once panθeɹa was well under way. But their every exchange remained the same: a single shake of the boy's head in return for a single coin. I thought instead to keep an eye out to sea from my vantage point above the 230's and was rewarded after a time when I caught sight of three ships heading straight for the Whale from the open water; the first a large sloop with a yard-rigged sail so massive as to nearly double its total length, the second an even bigger schooner with tall masts and topsails, and the last a massive ark. I made sure to fetch McGee at once. At the time, he was in his apartment, hunched pensively over the piece of balsa he had made from my recording of his revised account of the birth of the Mako. A single moment in our long travels have I dared think him indecisive: this one. But his usual surety returned to him at once upon my entry, even if the only result of its restoration was the immediate destruction of the plate in his fireplace. Had I not intervened, the pages I'd taken down that night would have fed the blaze as well. Only after we had watched the plate burn to the last letter, and all that was left of the narrative, save what found its way deep into my pocket and he made me promise never to let Aedis read, a hunk of melted lead that collected round the fading embers, did we depart for the tavern at last.

By the time we made it down the cliff, six skiffs could be seen approaching the house's floating dock, among which I attempted to discern Rema or Renee from Douglas's story. As only one had a sail, I quickly decided it must be Rema. In her was room for a single occupant. The sailor, a handsome, clean-shaven and well-dressed dwarf, clutched lazily at a line tied to the top of the mast with one hand to balance the small boat against the steady wind of the day, while with the other he toyed with the sheet. The rudder he held fast under his foot.

"Is that Aedis?" I asked McGee, thinking the dress and the confident maneuvering of the skiff appropriate to what I'd heard of the King.

"No. That's Renault, Aedis's half-brother, captain of the Thresher," said he. He lifted his arm with the same resignation and gravity of a farmer indicating a sprouting weed to declare, "*That* is Aedis."

He was pointing to one of the rowboats; the one making way noticeably ahead of the other four. The man at its head leaned on the bow with one leg, arms bent across his knee as he gazed ahead sleepily at the shore. All others in the boat rowed.

"D'you forget where it was?" McGee called out to Renault once the prince reached us, as he spun the skiff adeptly against the dock.

"If only, McGee," he complained. "If only!"

"On earth is *that*?" my supervisor demanded, grabbing at the line he was tossed with one hand as he pointed with the other to the third ship, the Twin Horizon, of which there had been no mention thus far to my ears, nor apparently his.

"All in good time, McGee," said Renault. "First I need something other than whiskey!" And the prince hopped onto the dock and halfway to shore in what seemed a single bound, McGee to follow in agreed, shared purpose.

I, however, was still curious to see exactly what kind of man this Aedis might be, so I remained on the dock until the slower boats arrived, helping to pull them in once they tossed toward me a line. "Where's that McGee!" was all he demanded at first, in exactly the exasperated, self-important tone I expected from a king. But he surprised me heartily shortly thereafter, once I informed him McGee'd gone for a drink of course.

"And you are?" he asked, an amused note of curiosity evident under the question as he approached and was able to examine me more closely.

Most of all I was surprised to note that he was possessed of the same form that I had ever regretted to see staring back at me in the mirror. He stood noticeably taller than the pair of dwarves behind him as they raised themselves from their rowing, and was forced, like me, to hunch over the slightest bit to effectively manipulate his arms that seemed too long for his body, even if they hung with strength enough to warrant their peculiar reach. It was clear; he was a half-breed like myself.

As I was addressing a king, I thought it best to use my full name; or that which had been assigned to me as I'd bought my lockpick in any case. "rasid, sir," I replied. "rasid McGee Allan-abadi."

At which mouthful he only laughed as he pulled himself up to the dock. And he looked me up and down one last time before chuckling, "McGee Allan-abadi! What a tongue-twister. Leave the clans and seven names to the southerners, rasid. Free men only here! Who save our breath for more important matters!" And he slapped me happily on the shoulder as an uncle might.

Which surprising camaraderie was well received. Although I, of course, was far more interested in the lone female that stepped from the boats that day. She was no half-breed to be sure, rather a pure-blooded dwarf, standing four six at most. Her features were striking, with piercingly bright, blue-green eyes, delicate nose and full lips to bear a ready smile; though what struck me most about her was the controlled grace with which she moved. Not a single gesture she made was without poised purpose. She sat erect, as if assisted by a rigid backboard, nearly motionless at the stern of the largest of the rowboats until it was tied off securely, at which point she rose as gracefully as a bird taking flight from the choppy water

below to accept one of the many hands offered her from the dock. I was unable to tear my gaze from her body as she rose herself up. She was as pleasantly proportioned as a statue; the lines her hips, waist and breasts made under the blouse, leather pants and corset she wore came together in three dimensions as perfectly as the joined petals of a flower. Owing to her company and perfection of form, I assumed she must be some sort of princess. It would turn out that I was half right. Though royalty among dwarves is a designation reserved for no relation of hers, indeed only when she had reached land and was free from the worry of perhaps having to touch anything unpleasant did she finally deign to remove her leather gloves lined in velvet, the better to retame her hair, an immaculate wave of what might have been chestnut brown before her voyage but which had over its duration been bleached by the sun to nearly the color of ripened grain ready for harvest, flowing in the summer wind.

"Where *is* that McGee!" Aedis demanded again as she shook herself.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance, sir," I insisted eagerly.

He allowed me the interjection hesitantly at first, stammering, "Yes, well..." But then with sudden surety, he demanded, "Yes, well; the lady Rhodelia will be needing an apartment. I doubt the Whale will be able to accommodate her satisfactorily."

"I would be honored..." I began.

But he cut me off as he evidently changed his mind again, instead insisting plainly, "No, my friend. It is that McGee I require for this sort of thing. He that I pay for it in any case. You will fetch him for me. Before he gets too drunk. If you would be so kind."

But this Rhodelia laughed to me, "There will be no need of that, young sir. I will accompany you both to this tavern that I have heard so much about. The matter of my accommodation may wait for the moment, I think."

Aedis unfortunately denied me the view I did my best to position myself to achieve; that provided from directly underneath her swaying hips as she climbed the ladder up the outcrop. For I thought it better not to cut in front of him as suddenly as would have been required to achieve it. Even once I did dare follow, I found my way forward obstructed by the hurried descent of none other than Lyus and Earl.

"Move yer ass, you overgrown baby!" Lyus cried up to the larger once the boy had cleared the ladder in a single bound, as Earl made sure to locate each step carefully by feel before committing his full weight to it. Thankfully, Aedis had made note of the giant man by the time the comment was uttered; had he not it might have ended very badly for Lyus, for the King lingered still at the top of the ladder as well.

"I said move it, Earl!" Lyus spat. "I'm not spending a second more on this rutting rock than I have to!" And he unceremoniously threw the bag he was carrying with him into the same skiff that had borne Aedis to shore. Jerking his thumb at the two that remained inside, he cried, "Move it! I'm the newest member of the crew, you lubbers. You can ask McGee about it." The pair in the boat were all too happy to comply. They sprung from their ferryman's posts to start their run to the tavern at once.

Aedis, having heard the boy clearly but not having the slightest idea who he was, for good measure repeated once more, "Where *is* that John McGee!?" and turned, fuming, to follow his sailors.

Meanwhile, Lyus called, "rasid! On earth you waiting for? Hop in! This thing ain't gonna move itself. Don't you wanna see the End? No orcs to deal with there, at least."

I decided in the end to follow him, since I doubted very much any effort I might make toward either Rhodelia's heart or her pantline would bear fruit that day. Although, as I turned one last time in hopes of catching a final glimpse of her before she departed for the Whale, what did I see but her still standing at the top of the ladder, hands on her hips and half a smile turning the corners of her mouth. And staring right back at me.

Therefore, though, like I've already mentioned, the End was a fine piece of craftsmanship and a pleasure to explore, I was dreaming of stroking something quite different the whole of the time that Earl guided us around her, as my hand passed over her every smooth, rounded surface.

It was just as McGee had said: the crew expected and received without question two months of rest and relaxation per annum. And since they had just completed the three month trip from Whitehall, and planned to set out on a yet longer voyage upon their departure, the bulk of that reservation for that year was to be spent in ꝺelia. The crew rotated through the many taverns of the city and back to their shifts at watch in an endless stream, while I did my best to quit them all for a time in order to heap my efforts upon the lady Rhodelia.

It was I, McGee and Aedis both urbanely insisted, who should be the one to guide her to the apartment my supervisor managed to reserve for her, once I had returned from my exploration of the End. We talked of wine and the world on the way, while I wondered how little it might cost me to bring her slight frame to such mood as I thought might be likely to land me in her bed. But I dared not be too forward outside my fantasies. I left her with no more than a fond farewell that day and was happy to receive no more affection from her than a graze on my arm from her ungloved hand as she passed by me into the apartment. My restraint was well rewarded. She insisted that I be her escort whenever might not inconvenience me too much, and we made plans to go for a walk farther through the ꝺtnea together the very next day.

Rhodelia Malloy was her full name, for maids in dwarven society are not encumbered by so many labels as the men; only do they go by their chosen clan name or that of their husband, not caring to list those of their every male relation afterward. She was born in Sylvenek, a small city of the very south of Caledonia, situated at the mouth of the great and wild river of the same name. Her father practiced medicine there and had wished to marry her to his near clone, a man she refused to name. She, on the other hand, had for the last forty-seven years dreamed of little more than the adventure and excitement of going to sea, her bedroom window surely being perched at the perfect distance from the port of her city as to easily enable her to see and hear the excitement below while not forcing her to smell its inevitable result. In any case, she had found her opportunity at last in the management of a certain business of ꝺelia that had been, according to her, "poorly run from the start and therefore, not surprisingly, all too easy for we Malloys to claim as

our own." And for some reason, her relations and clan compatriots had all agreed that she would make an excellent choice to see the business thrive. As did I, for that matter, not even having the slightest idea what her newly acquired enterprise was adapted to sell, precisely, she so exuded a quiet sort of innate ability. Therefore she had sailed to Whitehall. And from there to ɕelia, a passenger on the ship she had deemed the safest, the Twin Horizon, which Aedis had recently taken captaincy of at the behest of the Allans, apparently, to finally land in this strange city at my very side.

We made excursions through the ɐtnea and aθɐlɟθa near every day until we bored of them. I then risked a single trip to the lower daiɾas, cutting through the mɐdia and aɾɾabia as efficiently as I could to more quickly make our way to the ɢalifa. She was very impressed by the market. Of anywhere in Caledonia, she said, only the Promenade in Whitehall boasted a wider selection of goods in one place, and at much higher prices. Indeed, the whole of the city she was coming to enjoy. It had seemed too large to her at first; she felt that tallfolk - she never used the word gune - were wont to build their cities too grand, and with too little planning, ever too eager to forget the virtues of more restrained centers of population. But the place was getting smaller with our every trip into it, she said, for which service she was very grateful. And she took my arm in hers quite suddenly, the better to direct me to those stalls that interested her.

At the last intersection before one stumbles into the docks from the northern end of the ɢalifa is a great courtyard where livestock are bought and sold. She cried out in glee at the white stallion she found there, beating the ground anxiously round his owner; a man who, by the way, I knew to be a first-rate villain when it comes to negotiation. But within the space of a minute, she was atop the beast, having worn him down somehow to a mere three diamonds to ride for the day. Never had I been so aroused in my life as I suddenly became at that moment.

But my frustration was only to worsen, for the maid was an absolute demon in the saddle. The stallion seemed barely to notice her, she was so slight. Yet her every softest touch seemed to draw a carefully measured response from the unruly horse. We made our way up ʃɐɾa ilɐl to the north at a fast canter, drawing the ire of half those we passed; those unprepared, in any case, to dive headlong into the nearest alley to avoid our sudden approach. Then once past the ɐtnea, she let the stallion have his full freedom at last. Though she sped away from me and out of view in mere seconds, I can still see the every heave of her hips as she did so. As the horse's hindquarters flew in mid-air, she would rise up to straight legs with a gentle arch of her back, pushing the horse back down to the ground as she went. And just as the beast kicked off again, she would free him of his burden for a time, bending to soften the impact even her small frame added to the effort, only raising her hips back up once she had touched the saddle ever so softly with the front of her hips. Again, and again, and again. I wondered at the true purpose of the technique, of course. But it was quite effective regardless; they flew with the wind. And when we reached the Whale, she turned, breeze still in her hair, on the limestone ledge that passes so close to the sea to ask, "Where, then, would the gentleman think a pleasant place to rest?"

And though I am surely no gentleman, rather perhaps thief, whoremonger, liar or lush, she couldn't have chosen a better companion for the day, for within this head of mine lies the most detailed map of the woods round the city of ɕelia that exists,

especially including those glades that might do as a setting for romance.

"I know a pleasant path," I said therefore. "Although if you don't mind waiting a moment, I might be persuaded to find something to take with us from here."

"Take with us?" she wondered aloud. Then, noticing the tavern there beside us, she cried heartily, "Ah, I see! rasid! Quite the scoundrel as always! Though... I suppose I don't mind waiting. A moment!"

I made my way at a near sprint to the Whale, where to my surprise, none other than Cherry had a bottle and two glasses ready for me on the counter, having seen my desperate approach from the window. "Just go, you idiot," was all she told me when I fumbled in my pockets for a coin. Which generosity I attributed to her finally warming to me (at last!) and assumed had nothing to do with who, exactly, it was that awaited me outside. But I failed to linger to worry about it; for not only was I spared the expense, it was one of the few remaining moɳtsəɟən that she gave me, the correct choice of course.

So Rhodelia and I rode off to the north along the sea again, side by side, until I took her up the road that passes by a great oak grove on its way to the hamlet of ləntini; beyond which trees lies a pasture covered in daisy and clover, the white and yellow of the one then yielding slowly, in a patchwork mass of color hundreds of yards across, to the white and scarlet of the other. Our horses happily fed of all the green between and underneath the blanket of petals while we rolled in it as contentedly as two hounds freed from long confines.

"rasid," she demanded abruptly, some time after we had opened the moɳtsəɟən, "what are your plans for the future?"

"My plans?" I stammered. With a ready smile of my own, I returned, "Need a scoundrel have plans?"

"Why of course," she insisted. "I would think a scoundrel might have twice the use of careful planning when compared to a normal man. But that is neither here nor there. Because you are no scoundrel, rasid. Not like those who manned the ships who brought me here, in any case. There is an innocence, still, in your eyes, that they have lost. One that I quite fancy, in fact."

Smooth devil that I am, I continued for her, "Not to mention I'm handsome. And well-read. And hard-working..."

"I suppose," she laughed, as she looked for a second at the ground. Then smiling back to me with briefly widened eyes, she admitted, "I suppose you are *passably* handsome. In the way that young men sometimes are. But well-read? You are far too freshly hatched for that! And do not think that I am not already aware of exactly how hard-working you are not. I have begun my affairs here, you should know. And the one thing that our Mr McGee is sure of with regard to you is that you do not enjoy physical labor. Although... Is it true that you can pick any lock?"

I laughed heartily at the exaggeration, not bothering to correct her overestimation of me, wondering aloud instead, "What do I have to do with your affairs here?" For this was the first time she had implied that I was anything other than her escort while she explored the city. "Or McGee?"

She replied frankly, "Well, Mr McGee works for us. Though indirectly. Which is to say that he works for His Majesty, as you know; and Aedis, at times, works with us. When he is not in shared purpose with our rivals instead. He is a dear friend, the King. But let us not talk of him. It is your plans I wish to know about, which is why I asked. And please be honest."

I searched the sky for a moment to better recall my intentions, if indeed I had a single one besides somehow making love to her then and there in that field of flowers. "Well," I stammered, mind racing for some profession that might impress her. "I suppose I hope to write for a living."

"So you might stay, then?" she asked, with a brief lack of breath that gave me great hope for my prospects that pleasant afternoon. And she twirled a stray piece of grass as she went on, "Or will you travel on the Mako to broaden your horizons, perhaps. I found my voyage quite inspiring, and if I had any skill with the English language I might have begun to pen a novel such as those I loved in my youth the very day we set out.

"Well, Rhodi," said I, finally daring to be honest. "The truth is that I don't know. I don't have any plans for the future because one can never be sure what the future holds. Plans are all well and good to get something done. But in much talking lies only deception, I find. And what are plans but talking to yourself so quietly that even the birds might not hear."

It was at that very moment, I swear, that the every nearby sparrow chose to answer my opining with a sweet song of their own; while Rhodelia let herself be lost in my eyes, only bothering to croon after some long seconds of silence, "rasid. You are a singularly intriguing individual." And she drank heavily of the glass she held.

Though it took what seemed an eternity for our lips to meet, she still tasted of mɔŋtsɛɲɛn when we pressed ourselves together at last. The kiss we shared was soft to start, and broken time and time again by the short but necessary bursts of chuckling that came from our lips in turns. After a while, however, we opened our mouths into a more serious, permanent and hungry joining. Slowly; so slowly that I might have been trying to catch the very birds that had suggested our embrace, I lowered my hand to her waist to pull her close. How I feared to push her too hard! I laugh now, of course. But then, I made sure by my gentleness to let her know how I thought her no plaything to be manhandled; rather it was I who let myself be manipulated. Our closeness made it impossible to resist how she mounted me in either case. And we remained thus entwined for some time more, our hips rubbing against each other's firm return instinctively, as I let her direct my hands to less provocative areas and away from the clasps and ties that held her clothes together.

Which is when things took a turn for the strange.

Breaking from our kiss of a sudden, she perched her face over my shoulder to whisper in my ear, "Do you remember that zucchini?"

One may not believe me when I claim that I genuinely did not see where this was all going. How, exactly, I had failed to note the vegetable's hardened top rubbing against me as we pressed ourselves against each other is a yet deeper mystery. But I will here honestly swear upwards, downwards and every way between that I was clueless as to why she was talking about the ingredients for her dinner at such a time! For she had bought from a vegetable seller just before finding the horses.

Slowly, however, I managed to piece it all together. Although only after asking naively, "Wasn't it... two?" And she'd chuckled in way of reply.

From there, our embrace evolved rapidly. She pulled on my hair just enough to make me catch my next inhale as she started breathing harder herself, rubbing herself against me heedlessly, her tongue a tornado of flesh within my mouth. Finally, after one last heave downward, she rolled off me to stare up at the sky

beside me, panting in and out through opened lips like a sprinter having run their distance.

After a time, entirely unheeding of my continued struggle to adjust our conversation to recent events, with another giggle, she told me, "I have read your novella, by the way. It was there by my bed already; the previous tenant had left it, it seems. I thought it simply too much for coincidence then. For I was still thinking of you when I found it there. I thought, His Majesty must be behind this. Such a blatant attempt to see me happy here. And I assumed, of course, that you must be a professional of sorts."

Doing my best to ignore the rawness the fabric of my pants had left on me, I rolled to my side to demand, "And how are you so sure now that I am not!?"

She laughed, "No, rasid. That I would know! No; you are more than that; you are instead... a fateful friend. Yes, a fateful friend, as vibrant and full of boldness and life as..." And she looked round at the trees that surrounded us, finally crying after some moments of thought, "As a sprouting acorn! A friend whose company I have come to enjoy very much. Perhaps..."

"Perhaps?" I crooned.

"Perhaps for our next meeting we might stay in," she ventured, voice far too light and breathy for the complete confidence she generally exuded. And she rolled to me to insist, "I might be persuaded to spill a tale or two that I know from our homeland, that are not so well-known here, if you can be bothered to bring another bottle of moɳtsaɲn. For it is quite delicious."

I could do little more than repeat, "Delicious, yes," so lost in fantasy was I.

"After, that is," she insisted, "you see a doctor of course."

And so, on that sour note did our first romance - if one can call it that - end. I accompanied her back to her door and returned the horses, then nearly sprinted back to the Whale, my sweet Peach to sample, so frustrated was I, wholly unheeding of the sudden silence that came over the tavern as I bound up to her to ask if she was busy.

But I should have guessed that my exploits that afternoon would not have gone unnoticed. Her only response was to roll her eyes at me as she handed a pound to her smiling sister, who insisted simply, "Told you so." Half the place likewise exchanged a coin or two. They had all, it seemed, placed bets on my chances. McGee, notably, made out like a bandit.

"I really thought you'd get it," Peach smiled at me, before pulling me toward the stairway with a cry of, "Come on, lover boy." McGee took the opportunity of my passing to slap me on the ass as if I was a horse that'd thrown a race at his request.

No matter the excitement I found in Rhodelia's company, my daily chores remained as dull and unrewarding as ever: books in, books out. Without end. Perhaps the monotony was worsened by the fact that I did little but dream of the dwarven maid throughout every minute. But in any case the time only oozed by, quite unconcerned with my pining or lack thereof. What's more the total number of hours I was forced to spend at labor necessarily doubled, for my income had been severely curtailed by the permanent locking of the wine storage. I found

myself dependent on my skills as a pickpocket, in fact - a risky enterprise I tend to avoid, since a true thief only attempts to steal from a mark he is certain would be unable to beat him in a footrace and I am no sprinter to be sure! - to even be able to afford Peach with any regularity. Worst of all, I soon exhausted the Whale's supply of reds (save their few bottles of monʦɐɹn which I was saving for my next time alone with the maid Malloy of course), forcing me to spend that much more on ale. I had, therefore, to comply with McGee's every whim in order to continue the lifestyle I had come to enjoy.

Thankfully, there was a near-endless supply of things to be hauled down to the ships. No matter Douglas's occasional implication, McGee was indeed in ɕelia on business; in a quartermaster's capacity no less. As such, he had been charged by Aedis with obtaining the long list of supplies that would be necessary for the voyage they intended to take once they left the city behind, a task that had been so cumbersome as to fully warrant the many months he had been forced to spend there. He had piled it all up - or that portion that might feasibly be so collected - in the room adjacent to his apartment at the library, ready for when the ships were there to be loaded. So, every afternoon I failed to idle away with Rhodelia I instead spent laboring alongside him and Earl, packing the library's cart with crate after crate of provisions. And we would wind our way up the mœcsɟma then back down the ɐtnea to the tune of his less-than-entirely-serious (if still unending) direction to make it to the Whale at last, there to spend our evening, not to mention in my case all the quarter pound I would receive in compensation and then some.

The tavern, meanwhile, seemed to transform into an entirely new enterprise. Peach and Cherry were indeed only the start of it! There was a new delicacy to be sampled every night. The girls would rotate in and out one after the other; one night at the Whale and the next at some other house. Only my sweet, twin blooms remained on a permanent basis. Someone, after all, had to continue the labors they had reserved for themselves pouring and cleaning, though they were now forced to share a room to leave space for the many private encounters the new girls would engender. There was Venus, who was in fact the same who had chided me outside McGee-Kilkenny those months before and to whom I attributed my sickness, who no matter her continued risk of contagion was still as voluptuously appealing as a baked caramel apple. There were Daisy and Lily, the one a shapely brunette and the other an athletic blonde, who were rarely far apart and made quite the team, I'm told. There were Veronica and Violet; Heather and Hibiscus; Primrose and Rosemary; Daphne, Dahlia, Peony, Sage, Abelia, Hazel, Violet, Ginger, Fuchsia, Alyssa, Marigold, Lilac, Lavender, Tulip, Azalea, and of course Poppy. McGee kept his promise by treating me to Jasmine, a tanned beauty so flexible and accommodating I'm sure the hour we spent together set him back more than a few pounds. Beyond her, however, I was so enamored of Rhodelia - though her perhaps overly liberal use of nature's bounty might have scared away another man, in me it only caused greater endearment - that to taste any others seemed a dishonesty. Not that I would have been able to afford them in any case. Peach and Cherry were another matter entirely, of course. For, after all, I had met them before Rhodi. And besides that we three had grown quite used to each other by then; I was essentially another employee of the Whale, I spent so much time there helping them with their duties in the hopes that they might have the time for me. Although of the two, Peach alone might succumb to my pleading and the odd pound I was able to

scrounge up, and only when she was very bored. Cherry would merely laugh at the paltry sums I offered her. Still I would try, however, for the act of rejection I noticed pleased her greatly; she was unable to hide the smile that refusing me brought to her face. This, in fact, became the meat of our interaction for a time. For which service I was rewarded as I hoped: she would often forget to charge me for my pints, if with the occasional jest at how "scint" I was.

The crew of the ships were a conspicuously unending source of funding for the other girls, however. Ten pounds was their maximum weekly distribution, they were quick to boast to me. Yet I doubted a single one of them held on to most of their earnings for much longer than the time it took to row from ship to shore. Aedis, I learned, was forced to pay them all not only on different days of the week, but at different times of day to give the girls a chance to manage their affections without injury. But no matter their haste in arriving at the tavern, the sailors grew quite relaxed and loquacious once their pockets were empty. I was happy to jot down the exaggerations that ensued in the hope of finding a second success. And after some time, I did.

A gaggle of would-be sailors had started to frequent the tavern since the arrival of the three ships. They pushed their way into the horde of crew with relentless friendliness, offering drinks or one of the cheaper girls to anyone with a deep tan before even knowing their name. All while Douglas and McGee both made sure to follow their every quip and query with their good ear, sparing only a tenth of their attention to banter with the other regulars. And at the mere mention of the ships, or Aedis especially, the two would lunge with sudden glee toward this fresh meat; this fodder apparently eager for the barrage of tales the rivals held in reserve about the subject, the one entirely fantastic and congratulatory toward their audience's prospective captain, the other often the complete opposite.

So I made sure to take down their every word. First there was the story from my supervisor about how the crew saved the day at Daenemora, which McGee-Kilkenny took at the usual two diamonds a copy because it included a detailed account of one of my supervisor's apparent sexual conquests of course. But the bookseller's eyes lit up upon scanning the first few lines of my recording of Douglas's response, the tale of the soul-saving romance between Aedeon the Odious and the Varioca princess after his conquest of Valverde that preceded Aedis's birth, with Aedeon's first mate and Renault's grandfather, the loyal but eccentric Mensch Murphy, playing the role of the villain. I managed to squeeze six diamonds a copy out of the stingy mendicant for this one, and would surely have gotten more had I not been forced to beg him for the use of an associate's press, for I dared not use the one in my supervisor's apartment to produce the tale. McGee's counter-response, however, was where I really started to rake it in. Focusing on how Renault beat out his half-brother for the affections of a sea elf princess - that such a thing even existed was news to me; all I had ever heard of the Kanakai was that they are less civilized and prone to attaching titles to themselves than even the Wildern - named Mathilda on their exploratory voyage into the Virgin Sea after learning of the fall of the high elves, the change that came to McGee's normal tone from him switching his narration to a subject other than himself did wonders for the tale's telling. McGee-Kilkenny and I produced two versions of this tale, the original to grace the shelves behind his porn sign and another (less detailed, if only slightly so) to make its way to the Aetnea via the book-

seller's lady friend. And even beyond buying an unprecedented three hundred copies from me to start, the rate was set at an obscene ten diamonds a copy without a bit of negotiation necessary. He was in fact forced to pay me by script, for he surely lacked thirty pounds or its equivalent in gold or gems hanging about his shop. And so I finally made my first deposit at an Allan institution, even if it was made under McGee's domineering, he hanging over my shoulder anxiously for his cut, barely able to resist paternally shouting the sum we were depositing to the every passer-by on our way up the Galifa. Our success seemed to disturb Douglas greatly. His next tale was as hackneyed and boring as a sermon, and fetched only five diamonds a copy on my budding name-recognition alone. Therefore McGee's cu je gta was next. While apparently all his other stories had at least a grain of truth behind them, the only visible response from the crew to this last tale - the sound defeat of someone named Sever in battle by a pack of orcs and the necessary retribution wrought on them by a team of misfits including himself, the King and Renault in order to preserve the peace round the kingdom of Lusitania, not to mention his steady seduction of a fair Terran maid (who funnily enough sounded much like my descriptions of samara) they rescued along the way - was an unending series of groans and shaking heads. But still the story was belted out to a crowd that only thickened as its telling wore on, until the Whale was packed from wall to wall with bent ears and full pints. We must have netted the tavern a hundred pounds or more that night, and in the span of an hour or two my twin blooms pulled in three or four apiece, no matter the sour face Douglas donned throughout. Peach nearly dragged me upstairs the moment the crowd died down; in part to help her carry the sack of diamonds they'd earned, in part to meet her smiling sister for my true reward: both of them at a time. Or so I let myself imagine on the way up. They were exhausted, of course, and in no mood. It wasn't all bad, however. I was allowed to help them wash the ale that had somehow made its way to even the smalls of their backs and behind their knees, the dishscrap from their fingernails and the sweat from the rest of them that they apparently preferred to the various fluids the other flowers earned in their labors. In return I was allowed the rare treat to lay between them on their one bed for the entire night, even if they were asleep in moments upon settling down on my either side, Peach pinning me there like I was an oversized pillow. But the next morning she was as accommodating as ever, if Cherry as distant. And upon returning to the library, I was so exhausted, I didn't even try to count the funds that might have been mine had I been prepared to haul the copies McGee and I were to make then down to the docks. He was unusually happy to take care of the details that day; he hummed away at his press while I dozed on his couch offering clarifications to the sloppy script I'd put to paper the night before. And once we were done, with a wink, he tossed me a single topaz for my efforts before he turned to leave.

I think back on this time with a smile of course, if a half-hearted one. Had I a single logical thought in my head, I might have used a bit of the money I was making to enjoy the services of some of the flowers at least. Or better yet, been more generous with my sweet twin blooms. But I was young, and so had not a bit of sense. I even thought my budding success a hollow one. For no matter the sum I was able to earn or the growing affections I was able to receive from Peach, the lady Rhodelia remained beyond my reach. Our walks grew less frequent the more accustomed she grew to the city. Then they stopped entirely, and the only time I

would see her was the odd visit she might make back down to the Whale. My place on her arm was taken by another Malloy girl, daughter of a very important man I was told. I couldn't have been more distraught. Although as jealous as this replacement made me, I still thought the new girl as perfect an adornment for my love as the turquoise necklace she wore at times, that so matched the beauty of her eyes. This Thera Malloy was indeed pretty in her own way, but far younger than Rhodelia; a skinny slip of a thing just well-formed enough to exemplify the perfection of the elder when pressed by her side. Not to mention Thera was rambunctious like a puppy at play, an ideal sort of rowdy to further dignify Rhodi's constant poise. The two would visit the Whale once a week at most. They might stay for a glass of white apiece, then leave after talking with some of the girls, chatting with them one at a time with not a single hint of disgust evident, as I was sure would have shown itself had the two known how eagerly their audience waited there with a mind to perform carnal misdeeds on any able to fork over a pound or two. Rhodi a bit maternally, even, I thought. She would never fail to grace me with her presence during their visits. But she spared no more time for me than she did any of the flowers, no matter how eagerly and enthusiastically I boasted of my budding success as a writer. She would only ask if I had seen a doctor yet, to my bashful denial, for indeed I never found the time, and after a few pleasantries depart. I still clung to the hope that she fancied me, for she would always come to me last, and never fail to hold my arm in her naked palm for a time as we spoke, occasionally making signs absentmindedly - affectionately, I was certain - on the back of my hand. But still our time together was all too fleeting, and while she once stayed and smiled by my side for the whole telling of one of Douglas's tales, peeking over my shoulder at my suddenly very pretty script, McGee's yarns it seemed she could not bear to endure. The moment my supervisor opened his mouth to begin a story, she and Thera would be sure to find excuse to leave. And I would be forced to guess the number of days before I might see her again.

I despaired that so might our relationship continue in stagnation forever without some action on my part, and became determined to approach her on her own turf, thinking that might earn me the opportunity to impress upon her how compatible we were. But I lacked pretense to make the journey to the ɐtnea or aθɐljθa, where I assumed the kind of business she was so well-adapted to manage must be located, without her invitation; until finally an opportunity presented itself. It was the very day after taking the topaz from McGee, when bright and early, we received a visit at the library from a smartly dressed dwarf named Dunedin, who I learned later was a sort of Allan boss, if a younger one; he was perhaps around the same age as my supervisor: fifty or so. The spring in McGee's step that had emerged since the success of his stories fled him at once upon the conclusion of their meeting. He in fact paced around the shelves muttering to himself for a few minutes as was his wont before such passing happiness, until he apparently decided of a sudden to find me. I thought to flee his approach above the shelves for a moment of course, but was too slow to act; he was on me in a second and his command to come was as brashly and rudely uttered as ever.

I was sleepily searching for the checkout orders at the time. "Forget about that; come on," he said. And after a mere second of hesitation on my part, he spat angrily, "Come on, I said!" I dared not disobey.

We made our way back to the kitchenette once Gordon, Paudrik and Neilson

were likewise summoned. It must have been a great emergency, I thought, since it was the first gathering of the library's staff in the whole of my time there.

"This," McGee spat, once we were all assembled, "is a list of all the books we've got missing from this ploughin' place, seeing as someone..." here he made sure to glance Gordon's way, "someone! is too pansy to push people who... read around a bit to get the stupid things back. And since someone *else*..." here he sent Paudrik a gaze so sharply it might have skewered the man had it been material, "thought it might be a good idea to let his little bosses know just how long this list's gotten. Now. I'm gonna be off to sea pretty soon. But before you all cheer, just know that I refuse! I refuse to leave this ploughin' place worse off than I found it, 'n have them fancy-pants Allans lookin' down their big noses at an honest McGee any more'n they already do on account a' all their high 'n mighty bull... Not to mention there ain't no way I'm paying these bastards the..." here he turned the list back towards himself to examine the figure at its very bottom, "the one *thousand!?*, seven hundred eighty-eight ploughin' pounds they think these ruttin' books are worth."

Therefore we were all assigned our tasks. Paudrik and Neilson, seeing as they were "the ones what told," were to get offa their fat, lazy asses and find all that stuff on the top two shelves while Gordon was to take over the entirety of the normal operation of the library himself, seeing as we had to do his job now. To me he simply said once more, "Come on, rasid." And he threw me the list. I made at once to protest. No matter the steepness of the cost to him, it seemed an utterly unrewarding task to traipse all over the city to track down these books; if they were even out there, that was, and not all mixed in on the top two shelves thanks to the efforts of those like fernjard who the dwarves had insisted on hiring so that they might avoid the simple use of a ladder. But my voice caught in my throat, since I couldn't help perusing the names of the books and to whom they were last lent upon grabbing the sheet from the air, especially that long section devoted to those with the last name Malloy. And so above that same damn tiptoe pull of his belt, the terrible dwarf crooned, "Unless you've got something else better to do." I mumbled that I did not.

Indeed, he must have been sure of my motivation from the get-go, for we didn't visit a single Malloy until the rest of the list was complete, so I was forced to see the effort through to its very end. It took almost a week of drudgery before I dared hope to run across Rhodelia. Although thankfully the process was a simple one. We would pick a section of the city to conquer on any given day, and all those who had dared check out a book that was subsequently misplaced got a visit at the address provided us by the list. We skipped the docks entirely, since the total worth of the books that might have ended up there was a paltry ten pounds. The galifa was likewise a near waste of time; to ask after a book there is to only endure a tirade of sales-pitches for any of a long list of book-related products: pens, paper, leather for binding; book*shelves*, perhaps. We got our first batch of returns from the arrabia, where to my surprise we were aided by a pack of orphans who knew of McGee and held him in great esteem; they took the list from him and in a matter of hours returned with a great number of books, some of which we were actually in search of. Those few we had to find ourselves came with the declaration from their recipient that they'd been waiting for the cart; did they have the time to walk all the way to the library for a single book? "Rutting Gordon," was McGee's repeated complaint. But no matter his sour mood, the first hundred pounds was

thus easily knocked off his penalty on the first day. We found much more in the mɐdia, where I did my finest work. My opinion of the place sank even lower, if one can believe it. For the people who lived there would to a soul either deny ever having checked out the book in question or swear that they'd returned it on time. Yet when we returned there that night after spending some time at the Whale, and McGee boosted me up to one of their second-story windows, what would I find at each and every place, neatly cataloged by author among the rest of their likely unread attempts at erudition, but the very tome we were after. And so the total value of the remaining missing books after our time there was less than five hundred pounds, not including the dozens of books Neilson happily found among the top two shelves or the two Paudrik begrudged the effort, one of which he had been the last to check out. McGee even thought aloud for an evening to simply pay the Allans the remaining sum. But I would not hear of it! I had helped him with all the rest; we would visit every Malloy on the list and find every last title if it killed us and that was that. So we departed for the aθɐljθa at last.

McGee's comportment changed drastically the moment we visited the first of the clan. Suddenly, he was as agreeable and pliant as a butler. "If they would be so kind," and "please excuse our rudeness," were phrases sure to pass his lips at every address. He was like an entirely different person; it was up to me to play his usual part and insist that we receive what we'd come for. The Malloys would be sure to menacingly raise an eyebrow at my boldness, and demand to know my name and clan. To which query I would reply happily: rasid McGee; McGee *Allan*-abadi. And so, with a simple "Aha," in understanding, they would finally deign to find the book in question and fork it over, while my supervisor groveled that he would be happy to return it to them the moment he showed "those damn money-lenders" the stupid thing, and that it hadn't been lost under his care. For these books were quite expensive, to a title five pounds or more: medical texts, thousand-page tomes on anatomy, bricks of study on chemistry and alchemy, etc. But his conciliatory attitude was well-received, and I saw that he was well-known among the Malloys, even seemingly trusted by them. I received no such consideration. To me they talked down as to a child. The every other one would dare inform me directly, in fact, that the information contained in the books we sought was better reserved for those who had a more complete understanding of the topics they approached; certainly not offered for free to any idiot, in a long chain of amateur surgeons and would-be apothecaries. I hadn't the slightest interest in these matters; I only sought to play the part that might lead me to my Rhodelia.

But the encounter never took place. Not once over the entirety of our numerous excursions to the Malloys on our list did we run across her. Not until the very last did we even come close. This was to the mansion of none other than the father of her new friend Thera, an especially self-important and condescending dual-centenarian named Gunter.

McGee close to begged me not to go. He'd even attempted to cross out the title when I wasn't looking: 'The Complete Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs, Terra and Surrounding,' worth a paltry ten diamonds. He didn't care, he said; he could make that kind of money in a couple of seconds. But I still had yet to run into Rhodelia, so I insisted. And besides, I said, the place was only a few minutes walk from the library. I saw no reason not to go. Still McGee warned me that this Gunter Malloy was not a man to be bothered with such trifling matters. In the end

I was forced to take Lyus instead of him to avoid hearing his complaints, for the boy had heard of our exploits and started to join us whenever able, thinking our occasional break-ins great fun. (He had apparently tired of waiting for the ships to leave and deigned to come back ashore, if only temporarily.) But no matter the warning McGee leveled at us, I thought myself very wise for having made the trip, for I noticed Thera the moment of our arrival; even if I had to check twice to make sure it was indeed she. For instead of bantering happily with sailors and flowers in skirt and camisole as I had grown accustomed to seeing her, she was now embedded somewhere within a richly embroidered dress, at work knitting a sweater conspicuously like the one this Gunter, no matter the peasant weather, was wearing as he bore down on us and our arrogance to call at his mansion uninvited.

I opened my mouth with McGee's usual deference already painted on my lips, but was cut off almost before the first sound. He snapped, "Yes, yes. I have heard of your recent exploits, boy." And once the book in question had been named, he went on and on about how he had received special permission to renew the item at his leisure from my supervisor - it was quite rude for him to have changed his mind without warning - and that furthermore, for the good of all he thought it safest that the title remain in his possession. Or his daughter's, rather, since she so adored the topic. And with that we were told to leave.

The matter was far from concluded, however. For not two hours later, who did I see striding purposefully toward the library but Thera herself, legs and half her chest once again bared happily to the sun above. I made sure to appear busy somewhere near the entrance for a time to better receive her.

"He's such an *ass*," she complained, as she made straight for me. And with so skillful an imitation of Rhodi's ready smile that I could not bear to tear my gaze from her features, she handed me the missing book. Although that was not all. There was something inside; she had pressed a flower between the pages. It was a bloom of the softest pink, that perfectly matched the illustration on the page behind it, and barely covered the warning set in bold beside it, 'Poisonous.' I wondered at the gesture for a second; but before I might inquire about it, to my surprise she pressed close against me to whisper in my ear, "It's a present: my flower for yours. They say I'm very much like an Anemone: *strong*... yet delicate."

And with the third to last word, she grabbed me. I won't say where she grabbed me exactly, but I will note that I jumped at the initial force of the effort. Only once she had relented with the trailing of her voice on the word delicate did I dare stammer, realizing what she intended, that I couldn't; it would surely cost me the affections of her friend.

But with a giggle so like Rhodi's that I couldn't help being drawn fully into the girl's embrace, she crooned, "Oh, I don't think she'd mind..." And with a second soft stroke to me, she addressed me with another of Rhodi's smiles as, "Acorn..."

I think it fair to mention once more that I was young. And quite straightforward of a person. Had I been a bit wiser, I might have wondered at her suddenness, or at least her choice of title, for more than the time it took to turn her around to face the shelf behind her. But I did not. Only did I happily succumb to her. And so we made such a mess of the 740's that it would cost me half the day to put them back to rights once she'd spared me one last imitation of my love's giggles, mysteriously and without explanation pressed a pound into my palm, and limped back home.

I might have guessed at my true place in Rhodi's heart after this encounter. But still it would take me some more time to see clearly! No matter the snickers the other flowers gave me upon my every entry to the Whale afterward and the acorns that would find their way onto my favorite stool for me to sit on, to their great amusement. No matter, even, the older women that started to frequent the place, made-up as if their lives depended on it, who would ask with a wink if I knew a man named Acorn the moment a room freed upstairs. No; the truth would have to be spelled out for me. It wouldn't be until some time later, once panθɘɾa's warmth had faded fully into tørɹs's heat, when my love made her next visit to the tavern. A fateful night for many reasons.

We entered together, McGee and I, to the surprising sight of Aedis literally flying from atop the bar across the room and onto his brother, fist extended. Whether the King truly intended to hit the other I don't know but he connected indeed and sent Renault flying backward to the amusement of all. No matter the prince's complaint, the whole of the place roared in laughter, Aedis especially.

Which cry was only outdone by the cheer that came from Rhodelia at the sight of McGee and myself. She yelled, "And there he is at last! Come, rasid. You can sit here by me." Her copy of 'Adventure on the Aztlan Coast,' sat there beside her, pages still flexing slowly back to closed after being so long opened for her to read from. The tavern was filled to the brim with crew from the Thresher, Twin Horizon and Decade's End. Any of the regulars who might have heard the story before had long since moved along to the next house down the road. All except for Douglas, who was then planted in none other than McGee's favorite seat, a smug little smile already spread on his face.

McGee surely smelt the change that was coming. But he didn't resist. He only made sure to get his daily dose of ale before the axe fell, making straight for the bar and the pint Dervi extended toward him. He must have lingered too long, however, for though he failed to claim any stool as his own, there came a sudden warning from Aedis regardless.

"Not you, though," the King demanded, his rolling laughter falling flat in an instant to make his disgust at the other's presence known. The every other patron likewise followed suit, and silence hung over the whole of the place. I thought to interject something to lighten the mood, but was stopped by the cautionary palm McGee placed on my arm.

He budged not a knuckle though Aedis bore down on him most sinisterly. He only leaned his head back, the better to down the whole of his mug, then placed it down gingerly, as if to say that he in fact preferred the quiet to their ruckus, while all others watched the standoff without a word. Then after a deeply satisfied belch, he pulled a long list from his chest pocket and laid it down next to his now refilled mug. We were forced to wait yet another few seconds for him to swallow half of this new pint before he bothered explain, "There's your list back, Aedis. Hundred barrels of liquor. Check. Hundred water. Check. Five hundred pounds salted pork. Check. Two hundred pounds powder. Check. Two horses of middling stature well acquainted, ten easels of mahogany, hundred square feet top-quality

canvas suitable for oils, seventy-two fine timepieces of size appropriate for adornment, three pound sweet-smelling bath salts. Check, check, check, check, check! And the million other things. Me'n the boys loaded the last of it up just now. As requested. Sir."

Aedis's flat gaze failed to hold past McGee's uncaring downing of the rest of his second pint. An odd expression - like the start of a deep laugh battling its way over a deeply furrowed brow; or perhaps the other way round - spread across his features instead. As it did he picked up the list and made a tour of the still silent room, while I finally noticed that the crowd that night was a bit different from the usual boisterous ragtag that came off the ships. They were better dressed, not to mention burly and armed to a man. Nonetheless, I made once more to interject on my supervisor's behalf. This time it was Rhodelia's soft touch that gave my breath pause.

"You know, McGee," Aedis finally deigned to sing once he'd made a full circle of the room. "I'm trying to be a different man nowadays. A different sort of man, yes. A better man. Although there's not a single soul in this room who doesn't know what I'll do to any fool what crosses me. Today, you're lucky enough to be talking to that better man. Or at least an improvement from what I was before, I hope. Even though you might have noticed a certain lack of camaraderie among the crew - camaraderie for you, in any case."

"I noticed," was McGee's sudden reply, as he wiped the froth that remained from his third pint from his lips.

The clear challenge that hung underneath the words only fueled Aedis further. With a now sure smile, the King continued, "Yes, well. Ben McGee thought it best to remain in Guernsey, you see, and take the five pound I offered him as severance pay. Fid as well. Lod met with an accident outside Mere Harbor and was forced to stay to recuperate; Pod thought it best to accompany him. Firi was always the cleverest of the bunch; it cost me twenty pounds and the services of a young girl to rid myself of him in Fomoria. And Tom, as you know, is likely still slapping mosquitoes on a small island halfway in the Shallow Sea thanks to my father. But like I said, nowadays I'm trying to be a better man. I thank you for your good work, John McGee. Here is payment in full, prorated for the last six months at a generous rate. I will require your services no longer." With that, the King dropped a bag of gold and gems on the bar right where the list had lain, the satisfying clunk it made as it bounced off the wood breaking the spell of silence that held everyone at last. Underneath the bag was pinned a single sheet of paper, at the bottom of which in bold letters was written, 'EXPIRES: Jan 1 900.'

McGee made sure to count the sum - to my estimation it was worth no less than five hundred pounds - before he departed with a single grunt as reply, not forgetting to slap down four diamonds on the bar for his drinks. Aedis breathed a great sigh of relief the moment the other left his line of sight. But the sentiment was short-lived. For two steps from the exit, McGee turned to him to sing, "You know, Aedis..." Though few bothered now to heed him, my supervisor (of a sort) still held my ear at least. He said, "You know, Aedis, it's funny. Couldn't help but notice the two different names there on my ship. Mako, it says there on the stern, of course, as always. But sure enough, in big bold letters up there on the forecastle, her real name: Decade's... End. Still. How long, exactly, has it been like that? Twenty years almost... Must be, because this'll be my second contract. Ever

thought about setting it straight?"

Aedis spun at once to demand, "It's the Mako, damn it! Thresher; Mako. Two different types of sharks! Get it, McGee!?"

McGee only hummed before reminding him, "But it's the front of the ship that everybody sees, Aedis. And no matter how many times you rip down that board, there's another up there within a fortnight. Am I right? And nobody ever knows who did it." Only then did he turn to leave.

"You'll have to excuse my directness, young rasid," was the apology Aedis made sure to direct to me shortly afterwards. "A bit of necessary housekeeping, I'm afraid. A shame, for the man was quite useful at times. But his comportment was often unbearable."

"Please, Your Majesty!" Rhodi insisted over my own forming niceties. "The man was a brute. You've nothing to apologize for. And perhaps now seeing the inevitable fate of such a sort, our young rasid might think of a clan other than McGee, of the many choices, with which to align himself." Placing an arm on Douglas's beside her, she chirped, "Perhaps Duncannon! Artisans all; it would be very appropriate."

No matter my continued inability to get a word in edgewise, Aedis repeated, "Duncannon, yes. rasid Duncannon Allan-abadi; it has a certain ring to it. I shall expect great things, my young friend."

"Expect great things?" I complained to her once the man had left, unable to hide the note of irritation that crept into my voice.

But Rhodelia insisted, "Never mind that." And she asked as was her wont if I had seen a doctor yet, adding for good measure, "And I don't mean that Hendrick McGee. His father may have been a Malloy but he is a fool. His elixirs are all strained poppy leaves and vinegar to a vial. I mean a true specialist."

To which query I replied as always that I hadn't managed to squeeze it in.

"Yet you find the time to visit this tavern every night," she crooned matronly, a mild exasperation now slipping into her voice. But she regained her usual poise at once, smiling as she continued, "Well, no matter. I have made arrangements." And with a stroke of my cheek, she left.

"Quite a lady, she," came the surprising declaration from behind me, as Dervi swept up my empty mug while I sat, still mesmerized by the swell of Rhodi's hips bursting from the constraint of her belt as she departed.

"Mmm, yes," was my automatic reply, as I reached reflexively without looking for the new pint I expected to come. But arrive as usual it did not. When I turned, the man still stood there, smiling dumbly at me as he swirled a cup of steaming liquid.

No matter my yet empty hands, he went on, "Speaking of which! Was a girl in here a while ago looking for you. Another beauty, this one. Although norm... I mean taller - like the rest of 'em here tonight. Hair as black as night, and just how I like 'em; a little thick. Should always remember to pay your tab, if you catch my meaning. But don't you worry, Cherry took care of her. Lesse, must've been that day you went off with the lady on the horses. That day they was all placin' bets on your chances."

I had to think for a second to remember samara. Although I was sure she was nowhere near Celia. So I replied, "Only girl I know looks like that is long gone with her family to the mountains."

"Well, don't ask me," he shrugged. "You wanna know more you'll have to find that Cherry."

"Where *is* that Cherry!?" I wondered aloud suddenly; for only then did I realize that the twins were nowhere to be seen that night. "And Peach!"

Once more, the barkeep shrugged as he stirred, "Long list's built up for those two in the time you been keepin' 'em to yourself. They're to work their way through it, if you catch my meaning; hope it don't offend you none. Boss's orders."

And so the true nature of my recent romance was finally all but spelled out for me, not to mention the exact ware that Rhodelia's recently acquired business peddled. Although I still required a fuller explanation. Unheeding of the half a glance the man had sent toward my love as she busied herself across the room fixing the mess that had been made of Erica's makeup by one of Aedis's acquaintances with her carefully gloved hand, I mused aloud, "Boss!?" For it was the first time I dared assume there might be another in charge of the tavern other than him.

"Yep," said he. "What's, no one told you? What a laugh! That same one you been fawnin' over all month. Right over there." And he nodded once again, now with exaggerated slowness, toward Rhodelia before sliding me the concoction he was stirring at last. It was the same sickly blue-green color as the mold that grows on bread and oranges. "Drink up, Acorn," he said. And he refused to give me another pint until I'd finished the whole thing.

"I thought we might be more comfortable here," Rhodelia said once the door shut behind me. It was Peach's old room she had reserved for our use that night; the barmaid had been relocated to her sister's down the hall. Rhodi was seated at the chest opposite the bed. Her gloves were off and she was brushing her hair in long, smooth strokes as she gazed at herself in the large, elaborately framed mirror that had materialized above the chest in place of Peach's unadorned plate of copper; until she caught my staring reflection, that is, in her bright, aqua eyes to insist, "You're always so rigid at my apartment. And I want nothing more than for you to be yourself tonight."

The room was immaculate. Although I wondered not at all how it had happened. There had been a child at the tavern that night who I'd never seen before, whose job it clearly was to ensure the completion of the twin's more rote tasks while they were busy serving their many admirers, not to mention apparently the added chore of rushing to turn over the bedrooms of the house from a variously fluid-stained den of breeding into the sort of pleasant setting in which even the lady Rhodelia might feel safe enough to remove her gloves. Only when the child had sprinted down the stairs into the main room to fetch her had Rhodi begged the King's leave, demanded a bottle of monʇsɐɹɹɐn and two glasses from Dervi, and departed up the stairs with a single glance over her shoulder at me.

"You may sit," she assured me, as I looked down at the bed, no longer dressed with the tattered but plush, black comforter Peach and I had shared so many times;

now topped with an intricately embroidered blanket of white instead. "My child is very good. You need not fear anything... unpleasant there."

"Your child!?" I demanded, not daring to rule anything out regarding the lady that night, on which so much had been revealed to me about her already.

"Goodness no," she laughed. "Not *my* child. Mine only in the way that any of the flowers are mine. Although she is far too young for that, of course. I have no children. Yet."

"Yet?" I sang.

"Yet," she repeated. And she caught my eye once more to insist with her ready smile, "Perhaps I've not yet found the right man."

"What of Aedis?" I asked at once; for it was clear he was equally as enamored of her as me. "I wouldn't think it beyond you."

But she pouted at me through the mirror as she cried, "Aedis!? Never. I would be his third woman, and ever placed below the other two. Not to mention I find him... indecisive. To say the least." And so I saw my opportunity laid out clearly before me. I stroked her shoulders tenderly from behind as she smiled up at me, continuing, "Why? Would you be the one to try to tame me?"

"Tame you!?" I demanded. "I wouldn't dream of it! Especially not on this night, when I realize at last your business is in fact the taming of others. Although. If I had only known earlier, I might've been convinced to patronize your enterprise more frequently. As it was I dreamed of you so often that I only managed to enjoy the services of one of your flowers. And only to be polite, really. McGee demanded I try her, you see."

"Only to be polite, you say?" she laughed up at me.

"Indeed," I insisted. "Nothing but a sacrifice of my labor for his peace of mind."

"A sacrifice of labor!" she cried. And with the exclamation, she rose suddenly to push me down onto the bed, mounting me as she had in the field - minus any accompanying vegetation, that is, for I made sure to check. And she crooned, "You *would* be one of my flowers, then! The position might have some... added benefits. For such a *hard* worker." Therefore I readied my lips to meet hers, corners turned upwards as they were in a lopsided, perhaps more honest smile, that I had yet to see grace her features. But she lowered her face to my ear moments before we kissed to whisper, "Though. Are you sure it was one, and not... two flowers you've had since I arrived?"

Of course she would have known about our happy family! (If unaware, apparently, of how the entirety of Thera's - or perhaps I should say Anemone's - free-time was spent.) For a second, I wondered how much that information had influenced her choice of locale that night, since as she smiled her lopsided smile down at me once more, clearly quite satisfied with herself, I could hear Peach and Cherry moaning alternately in the next room between the grunts of what could have been an ape or a man; I knew not. But the twins were pushed almost entirely from my heart thanks to Rhodi's closeness. I would have happily sworn to never see the both of them again; a lie to be sure, but the words would have passed my lips without hesitation had I thought they might secure me a place inside her for even a second. And though I arched my hips to imagine the pleasure of our joining; though she kissed me with a passion that put out previous encounter to shame, in the end she only rose from me and flopped lazily to her side on the bed facing me once she tired of the taste of my lips, as I wondered at the depths of her cruelty.

My complaint was as heartfelt as any in my life. I nearly cried to the ceiling, "What must a man do?"

To which desperate query her response was immediate. She laughed, "Would you have me set a price? I wonder how much I might be able to get from you right now?" And she lowered her hand to stroke my thigh as I swelled within my pants. "Ten pounds?" she sang. "Twenty?" Although we both knew I might have jumped on the chance had she asked for a hundred.

"No, rasid," she said plainly. "I have told you already: tonight I have something different for us to do. I would have you take down a story. A famous story from Caledonia, your homeland, though you have never seen it."

"A story!?" I complained. Not an hour had passed since I was freed from McGee and here was another demanding I pick up a pen! I spat in all seriousness, so frustrated was I, "So you are just like your flowers, then. Only your method of payment is different!"

Her expression darkened for a time at the accusation. But her insult was short-lived. For she merely shrugged, "*All* women are somewhat like my flowers, rasid. Whether they accept it or not. Even those who keep all men at bay. Especially such women, in fact! They simply await an able and honest long-term customer, and are smart enough to know that they should be as tight as a newborn when he comes along or he will surely pass them by. And as for method of payment, you might be right; the best of us rarely need touch something so unfeeling as gold to get what we desire. But make no mistake. I do what I want when it comes to my body. Such is my reward for managing others' so well. And though right now I would like very much to feel you inside of me, rasid, I would rather see something else much more. I would rather see you succeed."

"Succeed?" I wondered aloud. For the only success I could imagine at that moment was splitting her open like the two halves of an orange, I raged so below.

But she sang, "Did you not say that you wished to write for a living?"

I tried to catch myself before I admitted how blatant an untruth the statement I'd made in the field had been. But I only managed to stammer, "Well, that! I..."

"Was lying. I know," she laughingly continued for me, as her hand rose now to stroke my cheek. "Or exaggerating, perhaps. But there is no harm in a little lie now and then, is there? And a lie once spoken aloud must often become truth; am I wrong? The stories of yesterday become the reality of today with alarming ease, do they not? This, a writer should most certainly know!"

No matter how reasonable her words, however, I simply could not miss the opportunity her body next to mine presented. It would take far more than pleasant fantasies to lift me from that bed. So I grabbed her in my arms. And I forced my hips between her legs as she rolled her eyes at my rebellion. But no matter her unvoiced complaint, for a moment she forgot herself. She couldn't help heaving back against me. So I started to lower my face down her body slowly as part of her succumbed to me, kissing down her neck and across her breasts and stomach, all to better position myself to lift at her dress at last, as I murmured, "You would deny us what our flesh demands? For dreams!?"

But she was far more patient than me. "Yes, rasid," she insisted, pulling my face back forcefully to hers. "I would have you satisfy more than just my animal desire. I would see you pile up gold and gems until we are hard-pressed to find space for them in our mansion." And she grabbed me through the fabric of my pants with

one hand, lowering the other to between her legs, as she crooned in my ear, "Since is it not actually the thought of riches that is the source of the blood that courses here? And here? A funny thing, our flesh, is it not? So clearly superior to the lifelessness of gold; of steel. Since what is a blade without a hand to swing it; and what is gold good for, really, other than to adorn the body? Our flesh is much more: a miracle of life and motion. But though it demands from us one thing and one thing only, its own replication, it has a weakness! Nothing can stem the flow of this blood faster than despair. A man especially can do little with his flesh without hope for the future. *That* is the difference between us and the animals: how we come to swell. Here. And here. They take their cues from obvious things: the heat of summertime, the size and shape of an organ, the steps of a dance, even, to guess at a mate's ability in life. As do we, for our part, since we remain animals in a sense after all. But we require something else to swell so fully that a more human joining is possible. What we require more than anything is hope; hope for the future. A trick of the mind, only, that fate saw to be the best predictor of a full belly during pregnancy and after birth. And what better way to measure hope than in the piled-up coins of our fantasies? A strange thing indeed, our relationship with the Earth. So dream, rasid. Dream of you. And of me. Atop a mountain of gold. And let our dreams make it so. Since if I choose to breed, it will be with a man and not a beast."

As she talked, she pushed me to my knees once more. Then to my feet. Lost in her eyes and voice, I was helpless against her manipulation of me, letting her lead me away from the bed and to the chest, where once the every accumulated, random possession of Peach had been strewn wherever it might fit but on top of which now rested only Rhodelia's mirror and hairbrush, a single pen and a neat stack of paper. I was not so malleable as to surrender to her will without a last struggle, however. Indeed, I would give it my all. The moment she forced me down into the seat, I pulled her onto my fingers; for I neglected to reach my hand to the pen as she wanted, placing it instead turning upwards in my lap for her to descend onto. All talk from her ceased as the surprise of her thrust downward onto me took hold, and for a second, she happily let herself be subjected to the pressure I curled up into her, even being forced to bite my ear to hold back the animal moaning that came from between her sharp, halting inhales.

But the technique backfired! For she heaved so strongly in response to my efforts that she bucked me and the chair alike back onto the floor. Suddenly remembering herself, she pulled the pen and some of the papers down with us as we fell, landing them in a spreading stack that she then rolled onto halfway, pulling me on top of her once more. She ripped my fingers from her with one hand as she reached down to grab at me with the other so firmly that I nearly cried out in pain. Only once I had picked up the pen and planted its tip onto whatever paper I could reach did she lessen her grip to caress me more tenderly, though with a firm finish forced at the bottom of every stroke. All while slowly, so slowly it was agonizing, she began to tease open my pants one button at a time.

"Long ago," she cooed, as she released the first.

"Long ago," I repeated after her, barely able to form the letters on the page behind her head.

"So long ago that the twelve gods were two: Rhodelia of the Earth..." She popped open the second button. "And rasid of the sky..." Down went the third.

"There lived the hero Orlande, who had a *mighty* sword named Durandal."

I was bursting from my pants by this point; a mere knuckle was all that separated us. But with every push forward of my hips, she grabbed me with renewed heedlessness and I was forced to relent. I only managed to approach closer to her by the greater swelling the combination of her hand and voice forced from me.

But her control of me was only temporary, we both knew. Our joining at this point was inevitable, and the story she began was emitted through a desperate search for breath. She was even forced to repeat herself to remember the yarn she intended. As I obediently copied her every word, she moaned, "There lived the hero Orlande, with his mighty sword. The sword of *hardest* steel ever forged by man. Who was forced to do battle with the great bird, Hrafn." Pop went the fourth button. "They did battle for many days and many nights. Their battle was fierce. And savage. *In* they danced. And out. *In*. And out. But in the end Orlande skewered the bird with his mighty sword. So that his people could live happily. In the land of Cælia, so that his wife... his faithful wife could bear his sons without worry." And with that I was completely freed at last. She pulled the last button aside with such a yank that my pants would later need be thrown away and pulled me into her with little more than a, "The End."

It was in this way that my firm intention to become a man of letters developed. Though I suppose the story thus told might have been lacking in some detail, it is certainly my personal favorite out of the few pieces of work I now call my own. I still keep the single paper covered in barely legible, diagonal scribble folded neatly on my person to read occasionally to this very day. As one can imagine, however, the story she truly intended was not yet complete. So we did our best to work on it throughout the rest of the evening. And so thorough were our labors I felt quite bad for her child afterward.

Assuming the door to the basement would be locked as usual, I made my way to the 930's immediately upon returning from the tavern, gave a little hop to pull down the book-shaped lever titled Metamorphoses, and slipped down the stairs once revealed; only to stumble headfirst over the three well-dressed, if extremely dead, bodies sprawled out on the floor in front of the ornate archway at their bottom, and straight into the now wide-open wine storage.

"Told 'im three wouldn't be enough," was the explanation that came from within. It was McGee. He was clutching a candle and some of his hatchets in his one hand while in the other hung four or five booklets from the pile. The one on top I could see was focused on the subject of wide women and the specifics of how - exactly - one might make love to a shorter man.

"McGee! What are you doing?" I spat. "I mean, what will you do!? Aedis, he..."

"What do you think I'm doing?" he laughed. "I'm going on vacation! Maybe visit some relatives I haven't seen in awhile. Think you're the only one who can disappear? Thought I'd bring some reading material along. Case I get bored of the same old; you understand."

So I demanded, "But how can that be it? How long have you sailed with them? To be forced to leave just like that!?"

He only scoffed, "Hah! Can't get rid of me that easy! Listen, rasid. More important than all that; I need to know what you intend to do. There's a spot for you on the End if you want it. I can use a clever idiot like you. There's a lot more going on here than meets the eye."

Looking once more behind me at the bodies, I chided, "You don't say!" And I pushed myself up to seated to sing, "Well, maybe I'll sail and maybe I won't. Plans are only good until they're not, after all. Things that blow out one day blow in the next. But I'm not even saying whether I will or won't until I know what on earth is going on!"

He laughed, "Enough of that Terran shit, rasid! You'll sail. And you know why? Because you know - well as I know - you'll regret it if you don't."

I failed to try to contradict him, instead demanding simply, at long last, "McGee, who is Adoneus?"

So with a sigh, he slid the booklets he carried under his shoulder to help me to my feet once more, as he said, "Come on, this thing needs a decent meal. Can you believe we locked her in here too!?"

He was right. Our cat was then twirling happily round his ankles. So we carefully stepped over the bodies obstructing the exit to make our way to his apartment, where I saw his bedroll was gone and his barrel of ale had been tossed into a corner to join a handful of others. A bag laid neatly packed beside his press; he dropped most of the booklets he carried into the open top, reserving only the one I'd noticed to peruse as he slopped down a full filet of trout for the violently purring cat.

Only then did he bother explain, "Adoneus is - well, Adoneus *was* - the boss of this place. ꝺelia, that is. Was, I say, because now it's the Malloys who run the city in case you haven't noticed; or at least the more interesting parts. aɾɾabia, ꝺalifa, this ploughin' place: they're still in the air. It was us who locked him down here. Me, Renault, Aedis, Earl, Ari and Diarmuid. This was Adoneus's little house up here. Before we put him away, he ran the whole of the city from these corridors. Bastard thinks he's some sort of god. Spends half his days asleep and is convinced he'll live forever because of it. Only came out to feed. On man, by the way. On some poor idiot him'n Rose'd split; like they was at a restaurant and didn't want to rack up too big a bill. He ran everything from here: the universities; who gets what stall in the ꝺalifa if there was a fight; orphanage; churches; all of it. He's the one we can thank for the city watch as well, the fucker. They were paid with money Rose'd collect from all his whores. Just a big circle of the most predictable douchebaggery you could ever hope to come across. Until we came around. All Aedis wanted from him was information, really; and he offered to pay... so rutting much. This was last September. Aedis is obsessed with someone named Kaliya, see. Never left me alone about him, anyway, moment he heard tell how I got across North Caledonia and that I'd caught sight of someone by that name there in Annwyn. Says Kaliya's at the center of some family curse, if you can believe it. That's how Aedis is nowadays. Before, he was as bad a bastard as you could find. Badder'n his father, even. And we loved him for it. Most times, anyway; long as it helped line our pockets. Now he believes in curses and talks about becoming a better man! Ha! But he was the same old Aedis for one day, at least, last September. Adoneus refused to tell him what he wanted to know about Kaliya, so we left Adoneus to sit in his goat-boner coffin there for a while to think real hard about how much he

really wanted to try to keep secret from us. That's when the Malloys said thank you very much and started getting their grubby little fingers into all of Adoneus's pies here. I... might've helped 'em with that. I was very, very bored. Before you judge. Although, now Aedis seems on better terms with the Allans than the Malloys, no matter bein' the chosen one what gets to bring that Rhodi here to run the flowers. The Twin Horizon's their ship, see; the Allans. And they do *not* give things away for free. That's what I know. Just about all of it. That, and the clear fact that there's a lot of money to be made from all of Aedis's little schemes. So. Whaddya say, rasid? Care to throw the dice on a real wager?"

My response was immediate. "Unlike you, I don't gamble, McGee," I said definitively.

"To shit you don't!" was his equally forthcoming reply. "Just don't bother to do it less you're sure you'll win. Or that you'll get some pussy out of it. Now, listen. Speaking of pussy, I'm gonna be gone for a while. This here is the key to the basement and this one here is for this room. Paudrik needn't know any of this, you hear? And that there is my chest. Don't get a key for that one; sorry. You'll find it a good bit harder to get into than this room, anyway, however you managed that. That's an Allan-made lock. Top 'o the line. Oh. And you should probably do something about those bodies before they start to stink. So. Guess I'll be seein' you."

And with that he was gone. I wouldn't see him (or Poppy for that matter) for quite a while.

6.

Dervi wasn't lying: samara had come asking for me at the Whale the day I rode off with Rhodelia; she'd had a sudden change of heart halfway to the mountains. One moment she was trotting along at sadəʃ's shoulder, head held high if with a forced smile, and the next she was riding at full gallop back toward cælia, tears streaming down her face, determined not to let me jilt her without a last say so. For she is often as reckless and foolhardy as me.

She asked for me at the library and Neilson, the fool, happily sent her to the Whale. Then Cherry sent her farther up the sea road - if with the warning that she might not want to go. It was no hardship for her to find our tracks to the abandoned pasture, since it was together with her, in fact, that I had found the pleasant field years before. And when she noted two sets of hoofprints headed there that day instead of one, her suspicions demanded that she dismount to better sneak through the oaks to the edge of the daisy and clover, from which vantage point she was just able to make me out, along with the maid Malloy plastered atop me of course. Had I been looking for it, I might have noticed the mutilated oak sapling that took the brunt of her anger for me as we departed the grove. But she'd disappeared by the time we rose to leave and as I've already mentioned, my only priority at the time was to drop Rhodelia off and visit Peach as soon as humanly possible.

After coming close to performing a few indiscretions at the Whale with anyone who knew my name in the name of revenge, Cherry forced her to admit that she'd been made a fool of and there was little she could do about it (also that no one wins if you give it away for free), so she decided to return to her family directly. But she'd brought no supplies with her for the return trip. Neither did she have any money. So she turned her bay mare, reɲna, up the aɹɹabia when she came to it, toward the orphanage that lays under the library's promontory near the road's northern end, an excellent place to get a free meal as every mɐʌiɹa knows.

The orphanage, however, was completely gone. Not a single sign remained to hint that it had ever even existed. The squat, two story, converted warehouse it had claimed for as long as she could remember had reverted into storage once more, and the only souls who could be seen using the front door though which countless children had so recently ebbed and flowed were the McGees responsible for the many barrels of aging liquor that had somehow replaced them. samara could not believe her eyes. She wandered around the block to be sure she was in the right spot. But sure enough, there was the bakery with its three resident, striped cats slinking around in the nearby alley the next street over, and the facade of vines tended by Mrs Vroyal two houses down. It was less than a year since she'd been there with ʒeaŋ, on their way back to the hills after selling a horse. They'd had to dodge near a hundred children on their way to the kitchen to demand a meal from the cook, one mm ɡedɘin, an unapologetic scamp who'd somehow ended up married in the aɹɹabia, who would give half of the orphanage's supplies away for little more than a bit of gossip from other Terrans. But now not only mm ɡedɘin but the entire kitchen was gone; vanished, seemingly, into thin air. So samara, perhaps a bit more emotional then as might have led her to anything but trouble, set herself to know what, exactly, had happened.

The dwarves were of little help. They didn't have the slightest idea what the

building had been used for before they'd started piling up their barrels there a few weeks before. All they knew was that the rent was far too good to pass up, though they would've preferred if they were able to use the whole of the building instead of only the first floor. The neighbors were almost equally useless. For one's opinion of the orphanage generally plummets the closer one lives to it; the children raised there were, after all, thieves to a pair of hands. The every passerby she asked about the place and its former occupants only raised their hands to the sky to declare, "Gone somewhere else, thank the gods!" All except for Mrs Vroyal, that is, who made sure to look both ways down the street before inviting samara into her house for a cup of tea.

"You're from the country, aren't you?" said the widow once samara had put down enough bread to feel her spine again above the complaint of her belly. And she continued, "You all would come down here every time you passed through just to get a bit to eat. I always thought it quite daring."

It took samara a moment to remember her English. She managed, "Yes. I am Terran."

"Well," sighed Mrs Vroyal, as she did her best to signal, "you won't find it so easy around here anymore, I'm afraid. The dwarves have taken it all away, you see. Yes, taken away. And it used to be so lively..."

So samara asked, "lɛ ɑ filjɑ! The children! Where go the children?"

"Wouldn't be able to tell you, love," was the reply. From what samara could understand, it sounded like they'd been split up; the young girls first, led away in small groups, then the boys all at once (or those who didn't manage to escape, that is, which dozen or so punks would soon be guilty of gross book theft on account of me and McGee), pushed around by dwarves in strange armor and loaded up in carts that then departed toward the docks.

So samara knew that something was amiss there in the aɾɾabia. Although the building itself was her only lead. She thought it odd, after all, that the McGees had only been allowed to rent out the first floor of the place, the basement and second floor being so firmly refused to them. What's more, the two levels they had failed to secure for themselves were completely sealed off! For when they allowed her to snoop around the place, she noticed the old stairways had all been hidden behind new walls. The attempt at deception was obvious; the bricks used for the work were chipped and faded in exactly the same way as the rest, clearly carefully sourced. But the mortar between them was fresh and bright white. And samara remembered exactly where the stairways had been in any case. It was evident: someone was hiding something on the second floor they very much wanted no one to see. The basement was the true entrance to whatever was hidden above; the three stairways surely passed by the liquor storage unobstructed on the far side of these new walls. The McGees were a distraction only, for from the outside, it appeared as if they used the whole of the place. And though they might grumble a bit about that not being the case, they were either too dense or too drunk - or perhaps too clever to risk the deal they'd gotten for the first floor at least, by talking too much - to guess at the true motives of their landlords, so they dutifully played their part in the whole scheme. Although samara knew of no separate entrance to the basement from the outside to gain her entrance to find out more.

So she made sure to keep the building as well as its surroundings in her sights as often as she could. Which was no easy task! It wasn't as if she could simply post

up across the street with a tent and a campfire for a few days; she was sure the place was being watched if someone had gone through the trouble to conceal the goings-on of an entire floor. So she would only ever pass the building by, always on the move. She'd slow as she started to get close, at times making as if to buy from the odd stall shoved here and there between the nearby houses and shops, negotiating for as long as she could for some trinket, all while she kept an eye on the building and the alleys surrounding it. But that would be all the time she'd risk. She'd turn down the much-fought-over item with a sigh once it was clear the seller would go no lower, for she remained without a single diamond those first days of her stay in ɕɛlia, and remount once more to trot slowly off elsewhere, only to return some hours later.

At first, she spent most of her free time in the mɷcsɹma; for the wide-open spaces around the avenue were much more to her liking than the pressed-in alleys below it. And it was there that she knew how to find food for herself and reɲna regardless. Since she had no money for hay, the ever-available roadside pasture was the only option for her steed. Not that the mare would have had it any other way; reɲna happily devoured the neglected clover and grass that others only ever drove their steeds past on their daily hurries. As for samara herself, strawberries are almost endless in the wilds of Terra in spring if one knows where to look. As do the thickest fields of moss make for pleasantly soft bedding if covered for the night with a blanket. And the farms along the avenue surely wouldn't miss an odd growing carrot or chicken, samara thought; the resident connies did far worse than she ever could.

But after a while, she tired of the long, repeated trip from there to the aɟɟabia, so she chose to risk staying in the next daiɟa down. At first she met with failure in her every endeavor. Even once she managed to snag an inattentive woman's purse and began to offer to pay, even, for food, a great condescension to be sure, she was turned away. She finally admitted to herself that she must wash her clothes at least once - with soap - and bathe every day to appear as if she was of the same species as they that strolled the picturesque streets of the ɐtnea in their dresses and suits. How they lived like this she had no idea. For the stream passing between two mansions that she found for this purpose, that emerges from a spring just outside of the Church of Remembrances, was still very cold at that time of year. Yet she would suffer the indignity of washing herself regularly, if with vocal complaint to the nearby trees and squirrels, throwing the water over her every naked knuckle each morning with a fervor that bordered on hatred, working the frigid fluid into her crevices and hair with a repeated cry of "ya ɕara! fredo!" She would need remind herself of her purpose to see her through such hard times. The more she thought about it, the more she was sure that something terrible had happened to the children of the orphanage. She was determined to find them at any cost, hoping that iacopo, whose camp she had found abandoned despite his satchel still being stashed in a nearby tree trunk, might be among them. Therefore she even deigned to buy a hairbrush, a thing she'd never imagined she might bother to own, and hid it under a rock by her stream so that she might attempt to untangle the two decades of knots that her hair had become after her every hopping bath to better blend in. No matter the pain involved, after a week or so of this harsh treatment, she radiated such beauty that the rags she called clothes were near beyond the notice of all she met. She found a pair of forgotten, garnɐt earrings I'd given her

years before at the bottom of one of her saddle-bags; all that remained, in fact, of the many pieces I'd provided her in our youth, for she'd sold the every other piece in order to make her family's life easier (well... some I suspect she traded for sweets). All except the pendant of ʒe, that is, which remained on her person still. Though she had refused to wear it until then, neither had she been able to sell it, fearing that it might be the last thing she would ever receive from me. Only then did she find reason to don it at last. So with the pendant perched boldly above her full breast, the shining void of its centerstone outdone only by the glimmer of her raven locks above, and the bright, red earrings hanging by her cheeks, blushed at the expense of whoever had lent her her fine purse, she would lead her steed up the ɐtnea wherever she liked. And to explain the state of her dingy dress, in practiced semi-English, she'd tell the every restaurateur she came across that she had been thrown from her horse: she'd ruined! her goodly riding outfit and was so shaked that she was not wanting to top the beast again, but she was still very far from her houses and very hungry. She was very successful in this ploy, assuming her mark was a man.

For which accomplishment she surely couldn't help smiling at herself. Although she never lost sight of her true purpose there; she made sure to pass the old orphanage by as frequently as possible. She was often to be found under the cover of one of the various hats she'd buy on one end of the street and sell on the other. Sometimes she'd go atop reɲna, sometimes afoot. And she might or might not hide her jewels and clean her face of blush depending on the character she intended that day. But she was ever on the lookout for anything out of place, that might indicate the true entrance to the old orphanage. And finally, some time into her vigilance, she was rewarded when she noticed an alley that passed between two silent houses some five buildings down, that was frequented far too often for coincidence by men of a quality of dress quite out of place there in the aɹɹabia. And who were more often cloaked than not.

She dared not enter into the alley after them herself, however. She would wait instead for one to leave and follow them. Some traveled only a few blocks away. Some trekked to the mɐdia and many farther to the ɐtnea. Men, all. Married, most; if the women who awaited them outside the houses they returned to were any indication. It took no great powers of deduction for samara to guess their business there at the old orphanage, since the change in their composure over the course of their visit belied their every misdeed; their entrance was always furtive, hurried and somewhat desperate, while their exit was made as if to the tune of a song, if a bit drained of gait. Therefore she wondered for not a second at what awaited within the second floor of the orphanage, or how Mrs Vroyal had failed to note the departure of the eldest of the orphan girls. And her opinion of men in general sank yet further, no matter how improbable it might seem that it could after my own less-than-gallant contribution to our collective reputation.

But my poor samara would only be haunted once more by that betrayal - unintended! or otherwise - I visited upon her. For her suspicions regarding the orphanage were confirmed no more than a week after starting to watch the hidden entrance by none other than Rhodelia, as my new love-interest led a young girl, if still one old enough to tower high above her, down the street toward the alley without pause. samara had not dared to approach close enough to us that day in the pasture to be able to make out the details of Rhodi's face. But as I have said, a

dwarven maid in Archaea is nearly unheard of, and Rhodi's habitual poise, even while engaged in her occasional less-than-ladylike behavior, is quite distinctive in any case. samara recognized her as the same who had been atop me that day in the abandoned pasture right away. And she nearly spat up half the ale she was sipping in a cafe down the street upon noting the maid there, heading straight for the orphanage. She made sure to watch the alley extremely well once she noted her rival disappear with her charge directly into it.

Rhodi wouldn't emerge again until after nightfall, now with a different young girl, this one barely taller than her, in tow. So samara (now very drunk, she admits, since she hadn't dared move from her spot at the cafe for the last few hours lest she miss Rhodi's reemergence and had been unable to keep her casual sipping from accelerating over the whole of her stay) made straight for the alley the moment the two disappeared down the ąŗabia. She would get to the bottom of this right here and now, she thought. No more slinking around in secret; it was time these terrible dwarves learned a lesson. She feared nothing. They were so short; what would they be able to do to her, after all? And the cafe would surely fail to notice the loss of a single sturdy broom stick. Although; just as surely did she fail to notice the dwarf dressed from head to toe in leather who sold little wooden carvings most days from a stall shoved between houses directly opposite the entrance to the hidden alley, who'd ever failed to negotiate with her with anything close to enthusiasm those times she'd lingered by his stall, eye on the orphanage, that followed behind her, mace appearing suddenly in his hand the moment he crossed into the penetrating dark provided by the looming, silent houses on either side of the passage.

samara tiptoed deeper and deeper into the alley, coming to a stop only once she heard a conversation coming from the far side of the lone doorway hidden in the darkness. She refuses to share any of the details of this conversation beyond spitting out that there were two voices, and that they were discussing the only thing that men know *how* to discuss. In any case, her eavesdropping didn't last long, for the dwarf who had followed her came upon her after only a few seconds.

"There you are!" the maced Murdoch screamed as he clutched at her behind the crates. Every one was sent flying as they struggled, but the fight was over before it began. The dwarf was far too strong for her and when she tried to clobber him with her weapon, the broomstick only cracked across his rock of a skull. With little more than a chuckle at the attempt, he twisted her arm behind her back to bring her to his level and directed her without remorse toward the doorway, demanding, "Open up!" with a kick to the wood.

But the conversation raged still inside; this part she feels no compunction describing disdainfully and in detail. One of the voices was complaining, "Sure, Malloys need to get paid for us to get paid; and these gune girls do grow so quick. But still! Woman's a child till she's thirty-three; everybody knows that."

samara's captor fumed to be so ignored. He grasped the both of her arms in one hand to pound at the portal with the other, crying louder, "Open up, you rutting idiots!"

But the door remained motionless and silent; until finally a call came from inside: "What's the password?"

samara's arms were forced to even more of an unnatural position as her captor raged, "It's me, you rutting idiot!" followed by what she assumes are various refer-

ences to regret of family ties between the two. So the portal finally cracked open and samara was thrown to the floor inside.

"Another gune girl!" the one complaining Murdoch cried at the sight of her.

"But where's lady Rhodelia?" murmured the other. "The way she smiles at me..."

"Clam up, you two!" spat the elder dwarf. "Pains me to think we're related. Listen. This one's no flower; she's a spy. Not a very good spy, but... So be on your guard! You know who we're dealing with. I've given you the talk."

The one snapped to near attention at the mention of 'the talk,' returning automatically, "Yes sir!" and something about smugglers and Allans.

"No, you rutting idiot!" snapped the boss Murdoch. "That was two months ago! We're stuck. In an alley. A mile from the sea. Where on earth are these supposed smugglers!? What we have to deal with this time is much, much worse. One of 'em's an orc, dammit. How do you forget that!?"

"An orc?" wondered the other. He was apparently dubious.

More complaint preceded the boss's cry, "And you! Take this thing upstairs. Throw her in with the mean one if you can't find an open room. And give her some medicine. Bet she thinks she's special. Well, she'll get the worst of 'em tonight and she'll be a flower by sunup. And we'll get that much more from these rutting Malloys! Gods know they're always on the lookout for more of these gune girls."

Even not understanding how medicine might play into it all, my sweet samara's heart skipped more than a single beat as she guessed at the fate the dwarf had in mind for her. But she was completely helpless against them; they were far stronger than she thought they'd be. One of the complaining Murdochs pulled her by the hair without a single grunt of exertion toward the stairs the doorway opened into, that descended down into a dark tunnel. She struggled with all her might but it was to no avail; she only managed to make her passing that much more painful. And even if she managed to wrest herself free from this one dwarf, she knew that at least another two laid between her and her exit. Perhaps more. As they rounded the first corner of the tunnel, in fact, she despaired even more at her chances of escape, for she could just make out the head Murdoch screaming behind her, "And you two! You're supposed to be out in the street still! Who's watching the alley?"

But the call, no matter her despair at thinking her escape yet more unlikely, was in truth the sign of its start. Not a second passed afterwards before the sounds of a fight began above. The dwarf dragging her quit her at once with a grunt of surprise to turn back toward the entrance, mace in hand. samara thought to flee down the tunnel at first; she had no desire to meet an orc, after all, if that was truly who was behind the sounds of battle coming from above. But she changed her mind in the end and sprinted after the Murdoch, reasoning that the enemy of her enemy might be her friend.

She regretted her decision at once, however, for she emerged at the top of the stairs to witness the most gruesome sight of her life. The body of one Murdoch laid headless just outside the door. All that remained of another was a twisted mass of blood and protruding bones sprawled across an empty crate. The second complaining Murdoch was pinned to the wall by the shadow that was their fear - none other than Rose - as the orcess tore at his throat with her free claw, while Adoneus was knelt down between samara and the boss, hand extended toward the villain's own mace, which he had somehow embedded so deeply in the dwarf's skull

on passing inspection it looked as if it indeed belonged there. samara was forced to make a quick decision. For no matter how terrible the carnage before her, she knew she owed these two her freedom, and the Murdoch who had been dragging her down the tunnel seconds before was then no more than a few steps from Adoneus, mace raised in the air behind the supposedly unsuspecting (I have my doubts on that matter) man's head. Regardless, she lunged forward to grab at the dwarf, reaching him just before his blow fell, clawing and scratching at his arm and face with all her might. She even sank her teeth into whatever she could manage, pulling a whole section of his ear clean from his head. All as Rose, noticing the struggle, finished the job she'd started with a firm yank on the unfortunate dwarf's windpipe. So samara fell backward to stare up at her mismatched rescuers at last.

Only once the various twitching came to a complete stop did Adoneus rise from the boss. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the blood from his face and hands as he looked down on samara, crooning, "And what have we here, Rose?"

"Silly, drunk girl," said the orcess simply, hand on her hip as she stared down at samara remorselessly.

But Adoneus flashed a charming smile at my young love as he reminded his companion, "Though the same silly, drunk girl that precipitated our entrance to this place at last. And one who is quicker than both of us at times, it seems."

The orcess only exhaled sharply at the thought. And she kicked the last of the Murdochs to emphasize herself as she spat, "Sneaky dwarves always! Always so sneaky!"

But Adoneus spared far less emotion for their foes, it was clear; he only swept his gaze back down to samara with curiosity evident on his features, looking her over with a single raised eyebrow while she tried to hide her instinctive squirming backward away from him. The man had long since recovered his strength by then. His eyes were beyond penetrating; it seemed they saw right through her and straight into her earliest memory. They were of a soft hazel, the same color, almost, as his carefully parted, flowing hair, and only slightly darker than his skin. Although it was clear: the man preferred black. Nearly the every strip of his flowing getup, from prominent collar to the very bottom of his coat, was stained the color of night. Only his handkerchief and the hems of his sleeves were more than a shade of shadow, a bright, blood red both. The corners of his mouth turned upward as he bore down her, for she had neglected to remove her garnɐt earrings and pendant of ʒe that night, and considering his own choice of dress, thus adorned she must have seemed the perfect vision of beauty to him.

Finally, after a long study of her features, he risked, "ʒende? suɐ ʒende?"

samara shook her head.

So he smiled once more as he said definitively, "aa. mɐʌiɾa! aram soɳ... gɾaɳpeʁ? sadɐʃ.": 'I know your... grandfather? sadɐʃ.'

"suɐ moɳ peʁ," said samara.

"Mmm. Busy boy," crooned Adoneus. But his smile disappeared in an instant as he demanded, "cua ʌiafi vu si?": 'What are you doing here?'

"uɾɟdi i filɟi!": 'I'm here for the girls!' was her immediate reply.

"As are we," said he. And he peered sideways with a now even fuller smile at the orcess as she searched through the Murdochs' pockets for anything useful. "What do you think?" he called out to her.

But Rose only spared a single half-annoyed glance for samara between her callous manipulations of the bodies. "Buttercup," was her terse reply.

To which declaration Adoneus couldn't help replying with an annoyed exhalation of his own. "Buttercup!" he demanded. "Surely such a beautiful creature deserves better!" I can hear his exasperated tone as if I were there.

But Rose merely muttered sideways, "It's Buttercup or Aster; all the others are taken. This one clearly eats too much. So she can be Buttercup. Start giving their names away and *none* of them will come back." This as she pulled a ring of keys from the boss Murdoch's boot, murmuring, "selfish bitches. *And* the customers will get confused. You know this..."

So Adoneus rolled his eyes to more gracefully extend his hand to samara, sighing, "What is your true name, mɔna ma?" Once she'd told him, he continued in perfect Terran, 'Well, samara; I am Adoneus. And this lovely creature here is named Rose. What once was an enterprise of many hundreds was then reduced to two. But now we are a team of three it seems; a move in the right direction at least. Tell me: do the abadis still linger round my city until the last of the strawberries have faded?'

samara nodded.

"aba..." he said. 'Then our task remains as plain as I had hoped. manuʁl will not refuse them. You will guide the girls we release tonight to them so they can clear their minds from the opium and sex of this place in the mountains and perhaps return to me as women grown.' "ʌari?"

An emphatic nodding was samara's only reply.

"dari," he said: 'You understand' And he took her hand in his to continue, 'As I would love to see you return to me, my sweet samara, although perhaps much sooner than they. We will surely be at the "grand reopening ʒ'al ɔpeɟa." Do you know the place?'

No matter her fear to make any promise to this man, so mesmerized was samara by his piercing gaze and the soft caress he forced into the back of her hand, all she could do was nod once more. He has this way with women of a particular age.

"aba..." he said. "ɛəɟto aʊdamavi avan aɟɔ. ʌari?": 'Wonderful. I will be sure to find you before then. Do you understand?'

All while Rose, with the slightest of smiles now turning the corners of her mouth, bent to the two of them to snatch Adoneus's hands from samara's. And, imitation of him dripping clearly from her voice, she crooned, "*If* you're quite finished!" before she charged down into the darkness without another word, her companion, blade sheathed and in hand since it was as longer than the hallway was wide, to follow dutifully behind. But not before the orcess slipped something into samara's palm and curled the girl's fingers over the prize.

"lari?" my young love murmured as she opened her hand to see what awaited her within. It was the Murdoch's severed earlobe. She screeched out in surprise, waving her hand desperately in the air in front of her to send the thing flying out into the night. And as she turned to follow the pair, she wondered what exactly she had gotten herself into. Although not before being sure to extract the boss's mace from its bloody holster with a whimpering moan at the sticky mass she was forced to wipe on the dead man's tunic to free the weapon for use at last.

McGee would be overjoyed to hear later just how thoroughly things fell apart in his absence. The extent of malfunction at the library was the most complete: Gordon stopped bringing books back up the hill entirely, and his attitude upon showing up at all in the morning to bring the things down showed clearly how far above even that effort he thought himself. Therefore Neilson and Paudrik's responsibilities were essentially eliminated. The one was generally to be found stoned, lounging in the sun of the gardens buck naked, novel in hand, while the other would fret endlessly among the nonfiction tomes, pretending to reshelve the same dozen books over and over, surely wondering where the rest had gone. For the whole place was now in his charge. All as I, with no desire to be the only one at labor with such fine weather afoot, would most days rise around four, pick the oldest hundred or so checkout requests from the shelves and upon Gordon's departure stumble down the cliff myself to start drinking around noon.

The Whale, likewise, was a different place without McGee. Although his was not the only noteworthy absence there. To my dismay Peach disappeared around then as well, leaving only Dervi, Earl, Cherry and Rhodelia's orphan girl, who settled happily into the closet under the stairway, shyly insisting we call her Shell, to look after the place. But no matter my own sentiments, it was the dwarf's shadow which was the deepest. Gone were the crowds he'd draw with his stories. Besides the regulars and crew, who mostly bored of the place without him as well, the only other patrons to visit would stay for a drink at most then leave, certainly lamenting the lack of entertainment there, but not so much as to stay and drown their sorrows in our lousy ale when there were far nicer places back in town with tables outside to frequent. Worst of all, Douglas was quick to assume his lordship over the place. He ran out of decent stories to tell in a week, and thereafter, in between repeating time and again his firm intention to leave our Celia behind to return to his more civilized Caledonia as soon as possible, he would complain about the state of art in the city so loudly that none dared argue or even attempt another topic. Those few of us who still made the trip there in the name of sentiment or frugality - or in my case income, since not only did Rhodi expect me to be available for purchase nightly, I had managed by then to convince both Erica and Myrtle, the only flowers besides myself (and Cherry, even if her price when Rhodi wasn't watching was *far* too high for the types who stumbled in) who for some reason continued to frequent the place, of the superiority of red wine and was therefore obliged to provide them with it at the Whale's expense - were hard-pressed to enjoy our time there thanks to the Duncannon's constant whining. Although I have always found it easier to bear people I despise deeply than those on whom I have still to decide. Cherry felt the same. She and I would both roll our eyes at each other on the fool's account daily; no matter the mere diamonds a day we would generally earn for our own time there.

It was the inevitable result of McGee's sudden departure from the employment of the Mako and Malloys, however, which was the most appropriate, I felt. For Adoneus's escape would likely never have happened under his continued watch; might even have been quickly reversed had he not been summarily dismissed minutes beforehand. And it was Adoneus free that was apparently as damaging a state of affairs to the prospects of the one of his former employers as it was to those of the other. Aedis, for his part, was beyond distraught; whatever information he wanted from the man was apparently of great importance. But more than

that, the King was clearly afraid. He started to carry his sword with him, a blade which no matter how magnificent to my great amusement he called Durandal after that of the legendary dwarven hero, everywhere he went. He even angrily despaired aloud at the "nerve of that damn McGee," to "abandon" him at such a time when he and his brother came to pick up the bodies of his fallen comrades at the library. For I refused to lay a hand on the dead fools. And so my first real interaction with Renault was comprised of the same clandestine exchange of eye-rolls Cherry and I might have spared for Douglas's sake; no matter we both hung on Aedis's every word.

As for the Malloys, their recent gains in the city were in a far more obvious danger. To a woman (and man! since I remembered my first interaction with the orcess all too clearly), we flowers feared Rose far more than the whole of the dwarven race. I, in fact, was doubly as scared of her as the rest. For she knew where I slept. A mere week after being released, she'd started to visit me in the darkest hour of every night, within which sightless black she would molest me to her heart's content, being sure to demand at some point in the process some more "dwarven magic potion" to clear her of her sims, or she would be sure to give the disease right back to me. An unsettling experience, to be sure, no matter how satisfying. In any case, where the month before the girls had happily turned over nearly half of their earnings to the Malloys in return for medicine and efficient organization, now they might noncommittally fork over five pounds a week at the most. And once the first body turned up with a missing limb, some idiot who according to what I heard had gotten a bit too comfortable in Rose's absence with his wild proclivities, the payments to Rhodelia almost stopped entirely. Not mine, of course. I was happy to continue in the position I had earned for myself, and would often exaggerate my own earnings in pretense of paying what I owed her if it meant she might spare me some time to collect her due.

But even the chaos that descended upon entire enterprises in McGee's absence was a paltry thing compared to the cascade of events round Cherry that ensued as a result. Although the torrent started slowly, if edifyingly for myself, for I was finally privileged enough to uncover the details of their relationship. I had managed to open his chest all too easily; a simple double lock, the first of which was designed to turn the specially designed key of the second so that it might hit its mark. (Finally, I found a worth for the few pieces of my lockpick set whose use had until then eluded me!) The break-in had been purely an exercise; I had no desire to risk the dwarf's wrath, after all, by stealing from him so directly. But I was instantly taken with the chained, golden dagger, with its twisted-snakehead, tiny-ruby-embossed pommel, that laid on the very top of his riches, that I had noticed he kept on his person at all times; except, apparently, when he was on extended vacation with a female other than his Meryl. I snatched it up to keep on myself almost without decision. To this day I cannot actually remember picking the thing up; it might as well have found its way round my neck entirely of its own volition. Although thereafter it was never far from my thoughts. I would examine in nightly, noting with awe the every intricacy of its form, from the serpents so finely molded they seemed they must be real, to the jewels of an impossible sort of blood red, up the blade with its pair of odd channels running along the flat on either side, to the frightfully sharp, alloyed point. Even during the day, I would finger it through the folds of my shirt habitually, telling myself as I did so that I was only being certain

to keep track of it so that I might be sure to return it before McGee came back. On some level I knew the gesture was much more, and might have guessed how deeply affectionate I'd become toward the thing had I been able to see the half a smile that was sure to spread across my face as I caressed it. In any case, it was on a pleasantly warm evening like any other of late spring that Cherry noticed it hidden under my shirt as I reached for my pouch to pay her for my drinks. And she leaned forward across the bar to purr, "Now, what is that you have there, rasid?" So I told her that if she wanted to know she'd have to take it from me with the rest of my clothes if she was smart enough to take a pound for it for once. And though she snorted with her usual disgust at the thought, not a minute passed before she turned and departed up the stairs with a bit more wiggle in her waist than was natural, I to follow immediately behind.

"Do you have the slightest idea what it is you have here?" she gasped as she handled it reverently herself, once she'd taken it from me and convinced me to put my pants back on.

"Nice, isn't it?" I boasted. "Although don't get too attached. Especially if we're not... Anyway, I have to put it back."

She relished one last surprisingly adept flip of the thing in the air before replying, "That you do!" And she hurled it toward me with the same sudden surety that prefaced her disposal of her beloved pipe at times. Which dragon-adorned backwards flute of little less artistry than my dagger she then made sure to prepare as I tried unsuccessfully to mimic her skillful manipulation of the dagger across the back of my hand.

"You know," she finally said from the hollow she made in the mattress beside me, once smoke had wafted to every corner of the room and I'd begun to feel its lifting effects myself. "There're stories in my homeland of a blade just like this one..." And she suddenly propped herself on an elbow to face me, tight curves of her hip and waist exposed to my sidelong stare as she continued, "Of a blade just like this; that drinks blood sure as you and I drink water and wine. No; that *needs* to drink blood or it will turn on the one who holds it. A blade of pure evil. Or that's what some say. Some say that it's actually more of a test. A thing of good. That if you hold it and your heart is pure; that you love all creatures of this planet equally, down to every last slithering serpent; that when you hold it with that kind of heart, you're invincible. Hold it with the slightest bit of fear, though..."

"Good, evil and snakes, hmm?" I hummed back to her. And considering her rare, forming familiarity, I risked getting more personal than usual, crooning, "Sounds like something straight out of Sani."

But she only flopped, almost angrily, backward again to insist, "We are *not* from Sani," no matter what she and her sister had claimed a dozen times or more.

I thought for a second to press the topic further, but for whatever reason did not that day. Instead, I chuckled, "And McGee? You think McGee can hold on to that kind of thing for so long. That John McGee, of all people, has a pure heart?"

She turned to face me again slowly, almost as a mother, concerned for her child's shortsightedness, might, declaring with sentiment I'd yet to see grace her features, "Of course." But she sprung up right after, her usual self, to complain, "Although where is he now!? Not here, is where! Partners in crime, he says. I watch your back; you watch mine. Since everyone's left us both behind. But where is he now? I mean, it's not like *I'd* ever fuck 'im. I do *not* fuck dwarves. Or half-dwarves,

honey, case you haven't noticed. But Poppy? She's the size of a house! And where does that leave us, hmm? In the middle of Œlia of all places! No; not even the middle of Œlia. Slightly outside, even. Here, screwing sailors, counting diamonds and listening to that idiot Douglas just so that bitch Rhodi'll let my... let my Peach..."

I didn't say a word. Over the course of her rant, her hand had tightened round my thigh with such surprising strength that I don't think I would have been able to without great will and force of breath regardless. All I could do was stroke her forearm in a desperate attempt to calm her. A long minute passed before she acquiesced at last, whereupon she turned to me suddenly to demand, "But you! You can go check on her! I've been hearing all sorts of things but they won't let me anywhere near the opera house anymore. You, though! You they'll have to let in... Please. She's the only one I care about. I just want to know that she's still smiling like usual; that's all. I don't think that's too much to ask. You'll go for me, won't you? And if she's not smiling like usual, you come back here and you tell me. Cherry'll take care of it."

And that was all. A single last squeeze of my thigh and she forced herself to calm, reminded me to button my pants, and sauntered off back towards the door.

No matter how brief, however, I would be unable to forget our conversation that night. For months afterward, I would wonder absentmindedly about the subtle distinctions that might be drawn between good, evil, and how the many creatures that crawl, canter, slither and sprint across the Earth might be categorized to one or the other side with my every spare moment; while Cherry's voice, stoked to either a whisper or shout in the back of my mind by the fervor with which I stroked my dagger as I mused, presented whichever truth about the weapon I fancied at the moment. One morning, especially, I recall our talk consuming my thoughts. It was a few days later as I perched myself on a boulder not far from the library, from which a better view of the sea could be achieved than from above the 230's, though the city was hidden completely from sight. It was dawn. The nips and scratches Rose had given me that day were still fresh. Our combined sweat had barely started to dry from my hips and chest. And as I leaned back to enjoy the light of the sunrise I had been made to witness by the schedule she'd forced me adopt, a sense of unavoidable permanence descended on me. A knowledge that I was part of something; something as eternal and extensive as the water spread out before me. I might be little better than a worm compared to such immensity, I thought, my bones my only accomplishment of import; surely born of the waves, if blessed with the ability to walk the land. A worm that would one day just as certainly return minus those bones to the sea. Although only after screwing and humping to my heart's content in order to ensure that such mischief continue uninterrupted forever. This was life, and I loved all of it. I was quite impressed with myself, I remember, and my sudden wisdom. Until my cleverness got the better of me, that is, and the dripping fangs of the imaginary serpent that was slithering toward my hands as I gripped the boulder behind me flew of a sudden toward my unprotected skin; as Cherry opined, equally immaterial, beside me, 'Hold it with the slightest bit of fear...' And I snatched up my hands, away from the cold stone, closer to my dagger, to protect myself from the unknown that surrounded me as I gazed out toward the horizon.

It was a long walk back to the country. Strutting proudly by the beast's side the whole of the way, samara let the orphan girls ride reɲna in turns. Her only burden beside the sad news she'd learned from him about her younger brother were Adoneus's swords and shield and a letter he'd likewise requested she deliver to manuʁl. She found the abadis in one of our usual camps. Although she could have followed her nose had she not known the way, for the place reeks of strawberries that time of year; strawberry jam gelling for winter, strawberry wine fermenting for summer, strawberry sɜnɡria for drinking then and there. Strawberries. Everywhere. It is a labor we make that borders on obsession. I always did my best to disappear for at least part of tørɟs when I lived with them still.

They were happy to take the rescued girls in. Some of the men a bit too happy, she thought. But the women of the camp just rolled their eyes at their husbands and sons and directed them in their daily tasks with a bit more violence than normal. Ignoring samara's darkened visage at the sound of my name with half a smile, my mother told her to make sure to instruct me to visit when she next saw me; or at least to send some money before I disappeared into the depths of the city for good, since she'd heard that I was quite rich. She gave samara a pair of the so-colorful-they're-nearly-ridiculous dresses she insists on wearing every day, and so freshly clothed at last, my young love got back on her horse and departed towards the south once again.

She had yet to make up her mind as to whether she would return to ɶlia, however. For no matter how much she wanted to find the remaining orphans, she wondered how much help she might actually be in the whole affair. And after spending a few nights back in the soft embrace of the hills and woods of Terra, the city seemed twice as chaotic and stifling as it had in reality been. But since her road would be the same until she reached the mœcsɲma whether she went down from there or veered southwest to the mountains, she left the choice for another day. And by luck, just before the two paths diverged, she overtook none other than the fœlcirs of an afternoon, who were on their way down to not just the city but the very opera house which Adoneus had mentioned.

"ɡɒ's gonna be actors!" cried that same fernɲard who'd sent me to the library when she asked why; for the fœlcirs, far wider-ranging than might lead them to spend more than a tenth of their time within even the most generously drawn boundaries of our country, often speak in English to each other - sort of.

"ɛna ʒɛ vɒ conɲardjɒ puʁ ʌɛθila?": 'Which of you idiots can act?' chuckled samara.

To which belittling fernɲard likewise laughed, "ɡɒ puʁ all act, mɒɛɲrɒɳ! eθilɘn's half the battle pɤʃ a good thief. suʁ iuɕanɘn cua's la muʃcila!": 'It's the singing that's the problem!'

"ɕani, ena ʒɛ vɒ conɲardjɒ puʁ ʌiuɕana ɲntaiʔ" trilled samara.

So fernɲard insisted, "ɕani... laʌa fat fuck puʁ tiuɕanam." The man thus denoted rose happily from his fire to demonstrate at once. Indeed, the sound that came from him was staggering. And so controlled of tone that the every note he belted out begged to be repeated on stage. Although he needed a bit of work done in other areas to fit any paid part. The quarter pheasant hanging from his hand, assisting his every manipulation of the air in front of him as he sang, would have to go before then; as would his pants with a hole big enough to see the half of his backside including the cleft. But he roared away proudly regardless. And an equally rotund fœlcir woman, in a dress almost as tattered as his pants, jumped at

the opportunity to join him. They twined their free hands together - for she dared not part from her own bird leg to do so - and twirled round each other in their best imitation of urbane dance as they glid their powerful voices chaotically over the whole of the scale. Until fernjard and others' random but ready projectiles forced them to quit.

"aida li puɐ tiuɛani awui, 'pparently," said fernjard once they'd finally quieted. "pɐʃ cua? puɐ vu ʌiuɛani, samara? vu wanna join us? You won't believe bi cem mal ɑ dwarves're shellin' out pɐʃ ɕaʌa. Or! Who wrote their play!" And he tossed her the playbill that had somehow found its way to them, across the bottom of which was boldly writ, 'Al Alonostra: An Opera by Rasid Duncannon Allan-Abadi.'

I, of course, hadn't the slightest idea that I had written an opera. Because: women. Not a single mention of it had Rhodelia spared me during our numerous meetings. She'd taken the story we so vigorously concocted together at the Whale and adapted it for the stage entirely without my knowledge. Neither had Cherry thought I deserved to know, apparently, when she'd directed me to the very place my ostensible work was then being rehearsed. And it's not as if samara thought to go through the evidently monstrous effort of simply trying for me at the library again with a, 'Heard you wrote an opera. Maybe we can be friends even if you do sleep with other women.' No; not a single one of them told me a thing. It wouldn't be until ɵrjɡa eleventh, last day of the year and the very day before the solstice opening of my masterpiece, in fact, that I would be privileged with the information; when I finally thought to visit al ɑpeɟa as Cherry had asked, and upon stating my name at the front door was immediately ushered in by two idiot Murdochs who pressed me with all sorts of questions about the creative process and whether I thought there might be some dwarves in my next play, because they both thought they'd make fine actors.

"There he is!" cried Rhodelia when they brought me to the stage, ready smile hiding from all but myself the furrowed brow my entrance had engendered. And to the assembled cast and crew, she sang, "We have a special treat today, everyone! Finally! The writer of our little performance has chosen to grace us with his presence. What took him so long, I have no idea!" All while a throng of congratulatory Murdochs and fœlcirs surrounded me to violently barrage my shoulders and offer me a drink from their ready flasks respectively.

"I just wanted everything to go right," she pouted up to me in explanation once the throng had dissipated. "It's always better if there's just one person in charge. And you... can be a bit pushy when it comes to art in case you don't remember." But to my delight, she pressed herself against me, singing upwards, "Can you ever forgive me?" And though I've never thought her more appealing than when she begs me so, in that moment she was almost beyond my notice. For it was then that I caught sight of Peach. Gone were the girl's dish rags and cheap, pastel orange eyeliner. In front of me stood the very vision of beauty. Her familiar flesh was pressed somehow into a black dress that only accentuated her natural, youthful appeal, with a slit up the side to nearly her waist and a single strap to replace what might have been its back half being the only reason she didn't spill out its front. It'd been a team of fœlcir women, I was sure, who'd done her face; her almond eyes seemed twice as beckoning and full of life and love as usual, bordered as they were with the deep blue that is any Terran's favorite, that we refine from the fermented leaves of the sini plant. Most of all, however, her joy at seeing me was as enticing a

feature as all the rest combined. She was nervous, even, to be seen in such a getup. And she risked only a single step at a time to close the distance between us at first, until finally she threw herself onto me with a smile twice as large as I've ever seen spreading across her face and demanded to know what I was doing there.

"Oh, nothing," was my own smiling reply. "Your sister just asked me to check on something. She'll be happy to know it's there as usual."

"My sister!? Oh, Cherry!" the beauty cried out happily. But upon noting Rhodi still there beside us, her smile faded at once to be replaced with something far more serious. She almost bowed to the maid as she insisted, "The lady Rhodelia has been very, very good to me. It's all thanks to her - and you, of course! - that this is possible."

"This masterpiece is your doing?" I exclaimed to Rhodi, as I reluctantly freed myself to point at the former barmaid, hoping flattery might save me from having to bear comment on the length of our embrace.

But Rhodi somehow managed to hide what must have been her deep jealousy of my fawning over the other, explaining, "Peach, here, will be playing the supporting lead role in our play: that of the great bird. Or; the bird's deceptively enticing, human form that is." She beckoned another nearby to continue, "dɐtie, here, will be playing the part of Orlande." I might have guessed. For strapped to the actor's waist was a near replica of Aedis's sword, Durandal, on which the man rested his hand as proudly as if the blade within its ornate sheath not been made of painted wood.

Since it is a common Terran name, I extended my hand at once, demanding, "dɐtie! coz vu daiɡam bi lɑ fɷlcirs awui. ɑ conjardjɑ!": 'So you ride with the fɷlcirs as well. The rogues!'

But the ass waved the heartfelt greeting aside with an affected air that bothered me greatly, insisting, "I don't... speak Terran. It is an unfortunate thing, my first name. A last insistence of my father before he left for the woods in which he belongs. Therefore I go by my mother's last name: Rouge. That's with a 'g,' not a 'ʒ.'" He pronounced it Roo-zh*ay*, though; which isn't even how the English say it. Although it did rhyme, I suppose. I'm sure I took the greatest joy in stroking my golden dagger through my shirt as the fool whined, hand on his fake weapon.

This is also the moment I remembered him from McGee's list of overdue books, for it is not a name one easily forgets. Without thought, I spewed, "dɐtie Roo-zhay? Of Horshod Way?" Had I not caught myself I might have spat out the name of the book we had yet to collect, one, '100 Quick Ways to Make Money Quick,' a title which no matter my own sentiments was in high demand, and therefore I was a bit sad to fail to find when we broke into number 156 no matter the current resident's insistence that he'd never heard of the thing.

My gaffe was slight, however. Rhodelia and he shared little more than a confused exchange of glances before the man exclaimed, "Of Horshod Way no longer! I live in the ɐtnea now, thanks to the lady here. It pays to have friends in this town, does it not? As I'm sure you're aware!" And he elbowed me. At the conclusion of my tale, one may note how I never truly forgave the affront.

Still he rambled: "Although acting is not my primary vocation. A man of such repute must surely be aware of my sermons! I have been the voice of the Church of Remembrances for o'er a year; only now that we are freed from that - Adoneus! - do I have the freedom to express my own opinions at last. You must come when-

ever you are able. It would mean a great deal!" So I said that I surely would, since only after these tiresome formalities were Peach and I were free to insist, no matter dɐtie's complaint as he tried to hide his constant ogling of her, that we depart for a time in order to visit her sister.

All this while samara, who had followed the fœlcirs to al ɑpeɟa and noted my entrance but been sure to be thoroughly hidden for its duration, wondered angrily at exactly how many women I'd been sleeping with the whole of our relationship. For here was yet another right in front of her, it was obvious. So the moment Peach and I left to return to the Whale, she sprinted to reɟna and mounted to follow, just as she had made sure to follow the men who frequented the old orphanage. What she hoped to accomplish I have no idea. Neither has she ever been able to try to explain herself without a tell-tale shrug of her shoulders. But in any case, her trailing of us that day was a short affair. For the moment she passed the courtyard at the northern end of the ƈalifa, where it meets the sea road, her mare turned without prompting to the very same villainous horse-seller who had by his lending of that white stallion to Rhodi precipitated her last fateful ride. And no matter samara's repeated insistence, vocal or otherwise, that the horse continue after us, reɟna would go no farther until the man divulged the carrot she'd somehow known was concealed in his pocket.

"Ah, feɟna! How suddenly you return!" the man exclaimed. For the horse had indeed been there before. I'd tried to sell her to him after borrowing her from a man who'd boasted of stealing her from a keep in Sonosalia. But the merchant had insisted that the mare would not do well in his courtyard; that she would do better to learn the ways of the woods while she was still young, and had offered me no more than a pound for her. Only after I'd turned him down did I think to gift the mare to samara.

In any case, my young love had no clue as to the horse's history. She only insisted automatically, "suɐ reɟna!" in way of response, as she'd had to do countless times before, since the name I'd given the beast myself had stuck around camp to her dismay.

But the man failed to hide from her tone as might have her brothers, returning, "ia coz vu ƈisi, ƈabibt...": 'Or so you say, my beauty.' Then in English - for the man was surely no Terran! - he continued, "Mares have even less interest than stallions in the meanings we attach to words."

But samara was in no mood for argument or conjecture. With a last annoyed glance over her shoulder at my and Peach's departing shadows, she declared, "ƈani, it's *my* horse. And I'll call it what I want," as she pulled at the reins one last time to no avail. For reɟna was still busy searching the man's backside.

"Well, your horse is in no condition to ride," the man shot back. "And the way you ride her! It's as if you think her a machine! Here, there. With not a single day's rest!"

Even though samara admits that on some level she already knew why the man intervened so, still she complained, "cua ʌaram ʒe mana!?": 'What do you know about me!?"

It seemed the merchant had awaited the question for years. "cua laram?" he returned happily. "To sell horses in Terra is to know all about its people! I have seen you, ƈabibt! Time after time this last month, as you ride back and forth, back and forth. What can a seller of horses do? Other than hope that one day you

might turn to your companion and notice the obvious; that she is no more than a month from foaling."

samara near sprang from rejna once she was forced to admit the truth; that the mare had indeed gotten a bit swollen around the belly, not to mention less than patient with her forced marches across the city. All talk of possession quickly forgotten, she held the animal's head to her breast to soothe, "rejna, rejna, ya mjscjn!" And she complained to the sky in a long Terran tirade, which might be translated without too much shortening to: 'What have they done to you? Some terrible stallion! Some terrible man! One minute here and the next atop another mare. And who pays the price?'

Little more than a chuckle did the horse-seller spare for the girl's concern, as he crooned in turn, "Do not worry, ɔabibt. For such is the way of the world. And what talk of paying a price!? Your rejna, I am sure, does not think of it so! Only you, who depend on her for her labor." samara wept at once in shame, for she knew the man's words to be true. So on he went, merchant's banter barely hiding his joy in explaining, "But you need not depend on her alone! For all things are connected, ɔabibt. What is this life, after all, but a mountain of minutia? Word leads to deed leads to word again. *Fate* has led you here, in your moment of need. And I am a man who specializes in beasts! In fact, your coming is more than I could have hoped for. For I have a horse that was born for you! A steed on whom you can depend until your dying day. *If* you have the strength to tame him, that is!"

She was sold at once, of course. Beautiful and faithful my samara may be, but wise in negotiation... Indeed, she only moaned, "ʒe veɟa," at the man, tears still streaming down her face.

"ʒe veɟa," said he simply. And the villain pulled none other than the same, white stallion Rhodi had ridden that beautiful day the month before up to him, complaining, "I have no time for the beast. He needs a strong hand. One, perhaps, more happy to be firm with a willful male than myself. As it is, I am forced to lend him to whoever he likes, and can only hope he finds his way back to me before breaking a leg. A constant worry, this one. I would be happy to sell him to you - along with taking in your mare and her foal, of course - for... a single pound, let us say."

It was a terrible, terrible deal! To trade two horses for one and still the man managed to get some silver from her! But she thought it was a bargain, of course. For she was in a hurry. So after one last fond farewell to rejna, she grabbed her new horse's reins and patiently if forcefully directed the beast to the place she was sure Peach and I would head.

The Whale was as quiet that day as I had ever seen it. It was still too early for the regulars and not a soul save a lone pair of sailors had thought to visit. Dervi was nowhere to be seen yet. Only Cherry and Shell were there, sprawled across whatever support they could find in utter boredom; while the two sailors nursed the dregs of their pints with the kind of forced patience only truly penniless men can espouse. Until Peach and I entered, at which point they all rose at once to surround us. I cannot remember her ever being so happy. To bring the sudden smiles her entrance roused to her sister and a handful of strangers was as great a pleasure to her as any the world might provide, the angel. Cherry fretted over her proudly, for the girl was still made up so, while I, since it was such a small crowd, declared loudly in celebration, "A round for the house!" So all rejoiced as Shell and

I slipped behind the bar to pour the six pints - or five and a half, since the girl had somehow yet to form a taste for the stuff. My attempt at restrained generosity would not go unpunished, however. For Myrtle was upstairs with Perrin the fiddler at the time, if not so enraptured by him as to be unable to hear my cry and fail to stumble at once, half-clothed or otherwise, down to us to demand she not be forgotten. So a single glass of ɡœme was added to my bill along with a seventh pint, since no matter the complaint that wafted down to Myrtle from the stairway at her departure from him, Perrin was no more likely than her to turn down a free drink. And when the two had finished some time later and returned to the main room together arm in arm, the flower was sure to elbow him sharply in the ribs, to which prodding the poor man grumbled, "Another round, then!" as he forked over a further twenty diamonds to the house; for a pair of McGees had by luck entered not a few seconds before his cry.

The evening, if one can believe it, progressed in much the same way for its entirety; until the place was as full as possible. And not with just the usual crowd. There were as many fine dresses to be counted as salty, sailcloth suits that night. Word that the star of much-anticipated, upcoming opera, the first in almost a year, had graced the place with her presence had spread up the ɐtnea like a fire. They packed in until there was only room to stand, and the tavern was filled from wall to wall with the kind of forced mirth only truly worriless women can espouse. Perrin was more than happy to regale this crowd with his customary, unending reel; he opportunely made his twenty diamonds back ten times over. As did I make a tidy sum, for after only a short time, I was instructed suddenly by Cherry to make an emergency trip up the hill in desperate search of more wine, since she had poured every last drop they had. The first of many excursions.

samara, meanwhile, was hiding in none other than my favorite corner under the ridiculous hat and dress she'd bought a few stalls down from the horse-seller. I am ashamed to admit that I remember the outfit quite clearly, but failed to recognize my young love within it (if not all that ashamed, since the thing was designed to demand the full attention of all who viewed it; nearly half a garden was perched precariously on the brim of the hat and the dress was no less ostentatious). In any case, only in this way did she come close to finally forgiving me my indiscretions with other women, for the joyous atmosphere of the place reminded her of a mɐʌıɾa bonfire. She was forced to admit that I had simply been lucky enough to find a new kind of family there in the city, and had never intended to hurt her by returning to it for a time. Indeed, she says now without hesitation that the only jealousy she felt that night was one born from being an outsider to such celebration herself. Which is why the moment I left to retrieve more wine, she departed herself with the firm intention of reaching her family that very night; even if she regretted the decision at once, since though her stallion seemed ready and happy to accomplish the feat, she was forced by her surprising drunkenness to stop for the night at her first opportunity. Thankfully, she hadn't to wait long for a suitable campsite, for the ɐtnea was her most direct route to the southwest from the Whale, and therefore by luck she passed none other than the same canyon she had found at the start of her time in ɔɘlia, which she had used to bathe.

It seemed a completely different place that night. Gone were the mists and lingering coolness that settle in valleys in Terra in early spring. That night it was truly hot. Even hours past the late sunset, the air hung heavy enough to replace

clothes entirely. Not being one to turn down an obvious invitation, samara happily stripped at once upon slipping into her hidden grove to enjoy a refreshing bath in the stream that babbled through it. And afterwards, her vision straightened just enough by the sensation of the water on her skin to enjoy the view of the rising moon through a hole in the canopy above her, she perched herself on a nearby rock to stare upwards toward the sky, back arched towards her hands behind her, full bosom bared happily to the heavens above. And since it was the same rock behind which she had hidden her hairbrush, her hands eventually found their way to its nook. But her two-diamond boar-hair torture device was gone. It had been replaced! And with what a work or art! The handle of the brush she found that night was of polished mahogany that fit in her hand as if designed specifically for her, while the head was so intricately cushioned that the every stroke she made of her scalp was near rapture. In the end, she was forced to confess to herself that she was not so sneaky as she thought. Her baths had clearly not gone unnoticed. Although this admission was accompanied by no frown. She couldn't help smiling from ear to ear, in fact, as she bent forward to stroke her raven locks stained silver by the moon above, and dropped her gaze to admire the enticing softness the light lent her skin. So satisfied with herself was she that the expression might have painted her face the whole of the night had a sudden sound, that of a cracking branch followed at once by a surprised grunt, from the rim of the canyon not broken her reverie. Only does she shrug today, as innocently as the girl I'd seduced years before, though accompanied by the mischievous grin that she has taught herself since, in way of explanation as to why she didn't disappear from the place immediately. But her lack of caution would not cost her, since once she'd dressed and made her way up the hillside to the small outbuilding that was perched almost out of sight above her grove, from which vantage point she'd always been careful to hide - not well enough, apparently, but... - she was confronted with as unmenacing a sight as had ever met her before. All that assaulted her upon her entrance was the sudden burst of heavy fragrance that hung in the air round the single, well-dressed dwarf in the building's center, and was slowly roiling across the room in still visible tendrils of swirling mist.

"Ah...ahem! Caught at last, it seems," was the extent of the dwarf's apology.

And so samara, ever a fool for unabashed scoundrels, was instantly taken with him. For he was quite handsome, and clean-shaven as she likes. No matter his haste in arriving there ahead of her, he had managed to arrange himself and slick his hair back into a neat pony-tail; and the cabin was tidy and clean, as she thought it must always be.

"You'll have to forgive my rudeness, my dear," the dwarf crooned. "It's not every day such a beauty bathes naked in one's back yard! I am only a man, after all."

samara thought only to reply, "And I only woman;" once she'd meandered across the room, that is, to point the telescope that sat by his window away from her grove and back to the heavens, and she'd made tiredly if happily toward the beckoning softness of the house's single bed.

The dwarf was speechless, of course. For a such a meeting is the stuff of a man's wildest dreams. But he was clearly a trained gentleman. He only hummed in way of reply, with not a single lewdness on his lips, before offering her a drink. And once she had taken the glass, he made sure to make no movement toward the bed, leaning instead on a nearby table as he did his best not to stare at her too directly.

Although the gesture was understandably the full extent of his ability to restrain himself. In the end he wondered aloud to her, "Do you... believe in fate my dear? dɐstin?"

No matter his true meaning, samara couldn't help exhaling sharply at the comment as she flopped exasperatedly back into the bed to more convincingly exclaim, "Before. But no more!" And dropping English almost entirely, she related to the man the every detail of the last decade of her life in an endless tirade; from the details of our carefree relationship and her happy belief in a fateful world, to her realization that she'd been spurned and the sudden end of her optimism. Her story once begun continued without relent. She divulged without prompting the tale of her assault on the old orphanage, all the way through the days to her recent return to ʊɐlia. The words came out in a river. She even revealed without hesitation the whole of Adoneus's plan to recapture his city from the Malloys on the very next evening as it had been related to her by the fɷlcirs. For they were willing conspirators in the scheme; their deep ties to the boss of ʊɐlia have lasted for as long as any Terran alive can remember. The gathering of all of the Malloys of the city in one place for the opening of Rhodelia's masterpiece was an opportunity far too tempting for them to pass up, especially if it was to occur at none other than Adoneus's ɒpeɟa, which construction he prized above all others. Not a single moment of suspicion did samara spare for her audience, so thoroughly was she absorbed in her story and so ready was she to believe that he only truly understood her occasional translation. She did warn the dwarf suddenly not to attend if he happened to have a ticket upon remembering to note his race, however. For she'd heard the place would be quite dangerous for any of his kind. She wouldn't quiet until the moon had departed the clear sky above to hide behind the tall trees to the west.

"Don't you worry, my dear," the dwarf soothed when she was done. "Fate... dɐstin... isn't something that can be crammed in wherever we'd like. If you're meant to be with your rasid, you will surely meet again." No matter her forming declaration that she'd rather the reunion pass her by, he continued, "Have you ever... slept inside, my dear?"

To which query she bashfully admitted, "Once..."

"Well, then! You are in for a special treat!" he exclaimed. "I had only come down to retrieve the last of my belongings when I noticed your sudden return to the grove. A bed is already prepared for me in the house above, you see. This shall be your house for the night, and the whole of the morning if you like. And when you awake, there will be food above. My brother and I will only be here for a few more days - especially if your story is true - and so we feel it is our duty to finish all the eggs that have been laid by the hens during our stay these last two months. You must help us... I will send someone for your horse."

At the same time samara was enjoying being fretted over by this mystery gentleman, I was doing the complete opposite; for the Whale had been all but ransacked by the crowd from the ɘtnea over the course of the evening, and Cherry and I both firmly refused to let Peach help clean up, no matter the girl's repeated attempts.

"You'll ruin your dress!" was the declaration from Cherry that finally gave her pause. Only then did Peach look down at the thing to note the precarious hold it somehow still managed over her flesh and drop her rag. Although afterwards, she

could do little but sit at the bar with a look of despair on her face so complete that she might as well have been watching us all be led off somewhere in chains.

Finally, Cherry was forced to demand that Perrin - for the man had somehow lasted many hours behind his fiddle and was still there at the tavern, slumped against the wall in exhaustion - play us a tune. Unsurprisingly, the man refused. It wouldn't be until she brought him a glass of whiskey and forcibly tilted his head back to more effectively administer the gift that he reanimated and began to saw mechanically on his instrument again.

Which is when Lyus, happy witness to the night's excitement and perceptive beyond his years as ever, strutted proudly up to Peach to demand a dance. The frown departed her face fully after only a few seconds of twirling around the room with the boy. They seemed the perfect match. No matter the syncopated delivery of the tune, they were as thoroughly in time as the two halves of a tornado. But it was no simple whirlwind they emulated. It was as evolving and joyous an enterprise as I've ever seen, their dance. They pulled and twisted round each other with such an unexpected delight that we all - Cherry, Dervi, Myrtle, Undr and Earl alike - ceased whatever we were busy with at the time to watch with the same dumbfounded smile spreading across each of our faces; until the night's last frivolity was suddenly interrupted by none other than she who had demanded its beginning, when Cherry barged in the moment Lyus's right hand began to slip through the slit in Peach's dress to better manipulate her hips.

"That's enough now!" she demanded. And with as artful a maneuver as their twirling thanks to the efficiency with which she hurled the boy to his backside, she tore the pair apart.

Unexpected tears began to well up in Lyus's eyes. And Peach turned to her sister angrily, unconscious imitation of a Malloy's expectation of deference as heavy on her voice as I'd ever heard on Rhodelia's, shining dress still flowing in the air round her, to pout, "Enough!?" All noises in the room, music included, ceased at once, while Peach, clearly regretting the forcefulness of her tone, departed for the upstairs with tears bursting from her eyes as well.

Cherry was left looming like a monster over Lyus. So I thought to interject some banality. But the moment I started toward her, she spun to me, and no matter we had yet to discuss her meeting samara a single time, demanded, "And you! It's men like you! Men like you, who would land a nice girl in the middle of ꝛelia without a diamond to her name!"

I was completely rebuffed. For a deep sadness had overtaken her eyes, which might as well have been heaped at my feet in its entirety thanks to the sharpness of the gaze she leveled at me. But I wouldn't have to defend myself, for Lyus had recovered his composure by then. Even though he was forced to wipe the tears from his face to make the comment, he sang back to her with a bitterness to match her own, "Is that how you ended up here, Cherry? A man like him? Broke your little heart?"

Her sudden pause was as sure - if fleeting - a tell as ever. And she spun to him at once, even slapping his backside as he squirmed away from her, with a cry of, "Why don't you go to sea already, you little brat! Go on, rid us of yourself once and for all, never to return!" Only after the boy had fled her to the night did she turn toward the stairs to follow her sister at last.

"You'll have to excuse that Cherry," Dervi sighed to me, once a sense of

normalcy had returned to the room. "She's always done as she likes. Used to be the favorite, you see. Was so with the old boss, anyway."

"With Adoneus, you mean," I returned.

"Aye, young sir; with Adoneus," said he with half a chuckle. And for once he quit his constant polishing to muse aloud, "So you've heard of Adoneus then, have you? Doesn't quite surprise me. Never thought a waif like you'd be so quick to rise to the spot you've managed. But here we are. On the night before the opening of your grand opera no less. This time tomorrow, you'll be as well-known and -respected as any of 'em. Matter a' fact, I hear there's even an apartment a certain little lady's reserved, right on the ætnea, with a view of the sea and city you wouldn't believe, whose front door'll be worked over by some fool Duncannon with acorns and oak leaves of all things. If 'e can ever finish, that is. Don't suppose you'll bother to visit the old Whale much after tonight. But speaking of Adoneus, young sir, I'll give you some last advice: you'd best be careful. And not just with what you do. With what you say as well. Cause words can lead to deeds easy as the other way round, if you understand. Your new friends, the Malloys, well... It may look like they've got all in hand. But you just remember: it ain't over till the fat lady sings."

So only then, mere hours before sunrise marked the day of its opening and new year alike, was I able to guess at the true drama that had been planned to unfold during my opera. All as samara made a last revelation of her own. For so impressed was she by her mysterious host that she decided after a sobering nap to join him in the bed he'd said had been prepared for him in the main house. But when she arrived, she saw that he had yet to retire. He and another were clearly visible through one of the house's windows, locked in conversation. And when she pressed her ear against the pane in curiosity, what did she hear but her host, who the other addressed as one Renault, demand, "Fuck the Malloys, Aedis! I'm telling you. Let them battle it out with Adoneus if they like. We'll just grab him once the dust has settled. It's the last thing anyone'll expect."

Rose was relentless. And she only got worse as the nights grew hotter. Handing over the every pouch of sims medicine I could find at the Whale didn't save me from her nightly assaults. Far from it; my acquiescence only seemed to excite her. Whether Adoneus refused to pleasure her to be sure to avoid catching our disease I knew not. But in either case, once she had me in her grasp, she simply refused to let go. Hiding served no purpose; she could sniff me out like a hound. I would only earn myself "punishment" for the attempt. And she must have pulled a master key from one of Aedis's men when they tried to subdue the two of them, for locked doors were no barrier to her anymore. Not a single night of early ørjga did she fail to find me the moment the moon set; the last few days she got me before it rose, and one will please allow me to skip over what she did to me when it was full. My need for sleep was of no concern to her. She would grab my crotch and flop her breasts onto my face to wake me with the same respect for privacy as the cat working herself between my legs in the depths of winter. And similarly ready claws should I displease her. Or not last long enough; she expected

on average an hour of labor from me nightly. And though the accomplishment was less heroic than one might expect, for she was as patient and perceptive as she was demanding, considering my other pursuits, every night without fail was a bit too much. I felt like a cow on whom an entire village survives. Which is why the first morning of conser saw me barricaded in McGee's apartment, fearing to open the door despite the banging until I heard the voice calling my name from the other side confirm that it wasn't she.

It was Thera. The maid Malloy barged in the moment I cracked open the portal to extend to me the ticket for my opera I had yet to receive, fully ignoring my wonder at her ability to find the place. Then after little more than a surprisingly practiced tour of the room and a reminder to wear something nice, or easy to get into at least, since we would be sharing a private box, she departed.

Renault would be my next meeting. He was at the Whale already when I got there, accompanied by Lyus and a southerner the two introduced as Ari, who they said spoke for the crew when McGee wasn't around. "So... Most of the time," they were sure to add. And after wondering aloud at whether the dwarf would ever return - no matter his dismissal, he had apparently been expected by the rest of the crew some days before - they demanded as many tickets as I would be able to provide them, if as politely as possible. Anything would do, they said; even something "a mile from the stage." So I told them that I was little better than an audience member myself and had no such powers. Renault and Ari seemed to understand, but Lyus was less credulous. The boy pulled a playbill from his pocket and thumped on my name at its bottom to complain, "But you wrote the thing! How can *you*, of all people, not get us a ticket?" I told him it was a long story.

As if on cue, Rhodelia entered the tavern not a moment later. "There you are!" she exclaimed. Without a single word of explanation, she dragged me out the door and all but threw me onto her horse, she to mount hurriedly in front of me immediately after. Twenty minutes later we arrived at the mansion of one Gunter Malloy, where while Thera did her best to hide unnoticed within the pink, frill-formed dress she had surely been forced into, for her visit to the library shortly beforehand had been in her usual comfortable getup, the man did his best to apologize for being so rude to me at my last visit. He would be honored if I escorted his daughter to the opening of al alonostra, he said, so that she might be seen in respectable company for once. Furthermore, there was a "special service" the Malloys would request of me during the performance; Rhodelia would be sure to fill me in in due course. His attempt at geniality was so thoroughly planned, he even extended toward me a newly bound copy of 'The Complete Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs, Terra and Surrounding,' admitting that perhaps the knowledge contained therein might be allowed to circulate freely without too much harm. And inside the book were two more first-class tickets, since he thought that the man should "surely be the one to hold on to both his and that of his companion." So when all was said and done I had three.

Gunter was then led off by his gardener, a man he proudly dismissed as a sickly-tall layabout good for little other than disappearing for half the day, who still held himself in such high regard that he dared take a year-long vacation without permission and somehow thought to return to employment unscathed. "But my daughter so adores his work on the estate," he crooned magnanimously after such an introduction. "And in his absence the place did grow into a veritable jungle, since our

dear Thera allowed no others to touch the plants."

I might have listened to Rhodelia fret over me more closely afterward had I not recognized the gardener at once. For it was Adoneus himself. In the flesh, if carefully dressed to convey his ostensible poverty. The devil even smiled at me in clear recognition, without an ounce of fear that I might name him. Indeed, I found myself utterly tongue-tied. Long minutes I watched as he and Gunter discussed the fate of the magnificent oak by the mansion's entrance - which few damaged branches might be removed in summertime to better its health before the rain Adoneus expected that day came upon them - until finally the dwarf exclaimed, "Listen. I don't care! It's in the way of the view. Now, I have a great number of things to attend to today. Cut it down as I've asked a hundred times or I'll have you out on the streets by lunchtime." I saw Thera noted their conversation with as great an interest as my own.

"Cut it down!? Entirely, you mean." said Adoneus.

"How many times must I say it? To the very root!" exclaimed Gunter.

Dervi's warning to me the night before repeated itself time and again in the back of my mind as I watched Adoneus bow to the man, even, before picking up a nearby axe to make resignedly for the tree. At last, I cut Rhodelia off, for she was still at my side instructing me on how to present myself at the opera, spouting suddenly, "Rhodi... Rhodi. My love. Are you sure you've got all in hand?" She guessed not at my true meaning, of course. She only pouted at me maternally as was her wont, as she talked of seating arrangements and what to wear. So, eye still on Adoneus and his axe, the only weapon in the vicinity save the dagger I was gripping fast through the folds of my shirt, I repeated, "No, Rhodi, I mean, perhaps tonight is a mistake entirely. Perhaps you're only putting yourself in danger. Perhaps you're far more vulnerable to a *certain* recently freed person than you think. Do you all even know what he looks like?"

Finally she understood me (if not entirely, for I dared not point out the man then and there; not only was he the only one truly armed in the house, a whole team of dwarves then suddenly appeared to be directed by him in taking down the tree). She only caressed me fondly on the cheek in response to my concern, telling me that they had people for that - and much more - before reminding me not to be late. No; that I should be "absolutely certain" to leave the library to pick up Thera by no later than eight. (She meant three-twenty.)

Which deliberate if seemingly unconcerned reminder is the reason I made sure to take the whole stack of tickets marked, 'LAWN,' that I'd noticed by their entryway and upon my departure from the mansion made straight for the Twin Horizon and her aftdeck.

Aedis and Renault were in the captain's quarters bent pensively over a schematic of the opera house when I arrived. But they swept it aside the moment I entered, stack of tickets in hand, for Renault to croon, "You see, brother? All in hand. A bit of patience is all that is required at times."

So the prince departed after counting the tickets - fifty-three in all - with the happy declaration, "I'll get the suits, then," as Aedis and I reassured each other of our firm intention to protect the lady Rhodelia from the coming night's excitement "no matter the cost."

All in all, a dramatic start to the day. Although by the time I made it back to shore I noticed to my dismay that it was already nearly seven-twenty noon and I

had yet to have my first drink. So I slunk up the ladder to the Whale to remedy this sad state of affairs.

I would have to wait the remainder of the day for Cherry to arrive. Sunset was nearly upon us when she finally dragged herself through the door to her labors. As I expected, she was curt with me to say the least. "You again. Don't you have somewhere to be?" was the extent of her greeting. But she was sure to add a few moments afterwards, "She's already gone, if that's what you're here for." For Peach had only just left her to prepare for the performance.

For once in my life, however, my intent was far from carnal. Or perhaps simply not immediately so; since despite the fact that she clearly hadn't bothered with makeup or any preparation for the day beyond tying her hair back in that simple, black ribbon of hers, the sight of Cherry's features as always stole half a heartbeat from me. In any case, it was the only instant I can clearly remember not happily fondling McGee's dagger in the whole of the time I possessed it, since at the time I made sure instead to flip through the three tickets I'd received that morning as they sat in my pocket.

"Cherry!" I cried. "mona ma! You hurt me so. I've come for you!" And to the bottom of my heart I meant it. Although I added at once, with equal honesty, "...and another drink."

So she poured me a glass of ɠome that she allowed to spill half onto the bar to better turn away from me. But I would not be so easily avoided. "Come on," I demanded simply, palm open to beckon her close again as I sipped on the little that had made it into my glass.

"Come on what?" she demanded in turn, sidelong glance at me as suspicious as ever.

"I've got something to show you," I insisted.

"Well, I'm sure I've already seen it," she couldn't help laughing.

It wouldn't be until she thought to look around the tavern that she realized leaving with me for a moment might be in her best interest; how disagreeable the start of the night promised to be otherwise. For not a soul that had witnessed her outburst the night before had failed, for whatever reason, Lyus included, to be sat then firmly in their favorite seat.

"Go on," was the statement that freed her, from Dervi as he dropped a basket of liquor on the bar to restock. "Sure to be a slow night tonight, what with the goings-on down below. And our Acorn's got an itch he can't scratch, it's clear."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she returned. If only as she finally let herself be led away from the place.

Although our trip would be short. "I'm not... dressed for this," she cried the moment she realized that I intended to drag her to the library above. She was indeed far from prepared for what I had in mind. Which situation I remedied by letting our tickets rest on her table as she changed so that she might notice them at last. I couldn't help chuckling as she grumbled her way from rags to sturdy shoes and pants, then suddenly and without further comment changed into black, leather boots to her knee and a tight-fitting dress of lavender to match the eyeliner she then produced, whose lack of modesty I had yet to be lucky enough to witness, it beginning a mere knuckle above her bust to slide down her curves to only an equal lack of distance beyond the round of her hips, her attitude toward me changing as markedly as her dress.

And her rare agreeability only deepened as we departed through the dozen unabashed stares that awaited her in the main room. Head held high, hips swaying just wide enough to dent the floor with her heels her every step, she happily took my arm in hers to better pass them all by. Not a single question as to why we might not head straight for the opera passed her lips. She bounded up the cliff as contentedly as a leopard instead, and would have left me behind had I not called out to her to wait. Not even the rumble of thunder in the distance gave her pause. She actually seemed to relish the tension in the air. And when we got to the library, she discarded one of her boots to climb the 230's without a word of complaint, crying "Is *this* what you do with your time!?" as gleefully as I've ever heard her declare a thing, once the whole of the city was revealed under the blood-red, departing sun set amid the thickening clouds to the west, as she hopped happily from shelf to shelf.

"I'm glad I could show this to you, Cherry," I said. And I added slyly, "Only way this view could get any better is by watching you enjoy it in that dress." But regardless of how magnificent the sight of her was, I didn't want to tarry too long there because it was considerably past three already and I'd hoped to at least make it to Thera's before the rain started. So no matter the happy half a wiggle Cherry gave me to cement such a pleasant view in my mind, I extended my hand to her to assist her back down the shelves after only a minute or two above.

But all of a sudden, she snapped up a hand to halt me. "Do you... hear that?" she hissed, as her head flitted from side to side like that of a sparrow. I heard nothing other than the first drops of the approaching storm as they started to hit the windows. But after a few seconds of searching the near silence, despite my reforming insistence that we be on our way, she grabbed me to force me to my belly. And we remained thus splayed across our shelf for some time, she half atop me with a hand to my mouth and a single leg wrapped round mine.

Finally, I tired of her game. Wriggling my head to free my mouth, I whispered, "It's probably just McGee. He was supposed to be back days ago."

And so I tried to wrest myself from her control of my lower half as well. But she forced me down again with surprising ease as she reminded me, "McGee talks to himself wherever he goes, rasid. And only has two feet. So, unless he's grown fourteen more..."

"Fourteen more!?" I hissed in turn. "Cherry, how can you..." But she grabbed me round my mouth before I could finish; as I noticed a single shadow slipping into the building silently from a side door, delineated clearly by the first clash of lightning to break the pall of evening. I recognized the silhouette at once.

"It's Rose," I murmured through her hand, with the heavy implication that she shouldn't be so scared. It was only the library's resident orcess on her way out to likely murder someone and eat their choicest parts before coming back home to force herself on me to more contentedly retire for the daylight. Nothing to worry about: completely mundane.

But Cherry whispered, "I know its Rose, you idiot. It's the other ones I'm worried about." And it seemed the orcess shared her concern. For the next flash of lightning revealed her crouched behind one of the shelves, concentration bent wholly on the door through which she'd just entered. Which portal then creaked open eerily over the sound of the increasing rain, between approaching rumbles of thunder, to reveal her pursuers: five maced Murdochs followed by two flits of

shadow that I could barely hope to make out, that seemed, somehow, to know exactly which steps to take to avoid being caught by even the flashes of lightning growing in frequency outside.

Cherry gripped me with such sudden force that my pain-filled gasp nearly revealed us. But after a moment, she noticed the pressure she'd unconsciously put on my neck and knee. And she petted me, even, as she whispered in my ear, "Yokai, rasid. Elven assassins. *Paid* elven assassins. Wood elves once, but now... Seems you might get to use that dagger after all." Indeed, the thing hung heavy around my neck, as if to remind me of its presence. So I brought it forth while she slid a weapon of her own from the side of the boot she'd refused to discard, which wicked blade extended the full length of the thing, a foot long at least, a barb of the sharpest steel that shone in the storm's intermittent light with bloodlust to match the ruby eyes of the twisted snakeheads waiting eagerly for their due on mine. As I did my best to hide my growing fear, she told me simply, "Don't make a move until you see me jump. Go for the dwarves. You'll have to kill at least some of them, rasid. One stroke to the neck. Done. Or we'll be done." And with that, she was gone, sliding across the top of the shelves in the direction of one of the Yokai without pause and without sound.

A long minute of straining my sight passed before I was sure she'd disappeared into the abyss of the main floor at last. Although even had I missed her departure I surely would have still noted the sudden gasp of pain and surprise she drew from the dark at the bottom. So I gathered all of my courage and crept forward across the shelves, blade in hand, toward the dwarves still slowly spreading out from the entryway, hoping that I would not be alone in my efforts, trusting that Rose at least would join me in facing them. But I never arrived there. For less than a handful of bounds across the shelves saw a small blade fly toward me from somewhere in the dark. The thing tore into my back, the pain of its entry nearly forcing me to the ground. I was only just barely able to catch myself on the rim of the next shelf as I made my last bound, and had to endure a searing agony to push myself back up to the relative safety atop it, where though I had to twist my shoulder most awfully to be able to reach the weapon, I somehow managed to extract it so that I might roll over onto my back to finally check my surroundings. As I feared, I was far from alone. The first glance I risked back the way I'd come revealed the remaining Yokai skipping toward me across the shelves, now quite unconcerned with the flashes of light coming from the windows. For he had me in his sights. Had I not rolled off the shelf at once, I would have met the sharp end of his blade. Somehow, I managed to evade the strike, but I was certain the elf was just behind me. So I ran at once deeper into the maze of the shelves, where I knew the odd rack was interrupted by the columns with just enough space to hide between. After making a series of quick turns at random, I arrived within the books to sit and listen in silence.

The tempest had entered the meat of its crescendo by then. Thunder rolled in a nearly uninterrupted cacophony that filled the empty air with a substance thicker than stone. The windows rattled as the rain drove against them, while my eyes tried desperately to adjust to either the dim of the gloaming or the flashes of the lightning with little success. Minutes passed. Perhaps a good portion of an hour. Finally, a pain-filled scream interrupted the din of the storm; a Murdoch, I was certain, who had strayed too far from the others and met our Rose. And not a

second later, a door in the distance crashed open to allow the clamor that marked the entrance of our missing McGee, as he slammed his axe into another of our assailants with such a racket I was sure the poor Murdoch met his end at once. So I dared tiptoe out from my alcove, since by my reckoning the odds were now even.

But the remaining Yokai had followed my flight and awaited me above the shelves not a few feet from my hiding spot. Had I been his true target, I would have surely met my end. But I was mere bait. For Cherry had heard the rattle of the blade as I'd dropped it to the ground and found my trail of blood, somehow guessing exactly where the Yokai would lay in wait for me; as he must have guessed at her ability to do so, for he knew it was no common woman who had been able to ambush his partner. He feigned a single halfhearted lunge toward me to convince Cherry to reveal herself, while so complete was her attempt at him, he had not the slightest difficulty using her momentum against her to fling her over his shoulder by the arm, disarming her in the process. And so, even though she was flipped only directly back onto her feet, a maneuver she accomplished with such feline surety I barely recognized her as the stingy barmaid I'd known for months, she was now defenseless against him and his dual weapons. Which daggers I then noted were remarkably similar.

But she was not alone. Rose burst forth from behind the Yokai not a moment later to tear at his shoulders in an attempt to clamp her fangs onto the back of his neck, forcing him to the defensive, as Cherry made sure with her usual stubbornness to keep her hands close to if not grasping firmly on his wrists, so that any odd strike he managed to make at the orcess or her was deflected or softened.

I had little time to wonder at her ability. For the sound of their battle had brought one of the three remaining Murdochs running. I hid at once to ambush him. And so absorbed was he in locating the sounds of battle, he failed to notice all else. My serpent dagger flew through the darkness toward his neck with a desperate desire, as I prepared to send my first soul to the afterlife.

But something deep within me railed against the assault. For months afterward, I would be unable to explain myself. I shook, even. As surely as if it had been my own life the weapon intended to claim. And so I failed to slide the blade into the man's neck as Cherry had instructed, instead sinking it into the nearest meat I could find; that around his clavicle.

Which restraint I regretted not at first; the blow I delivered seemed of equal utility to the one I avoided. For the dwarf dropped at once in pain, his one arm swinging uselessly at his side as he dropped his mace from the other to clutch at the wound. But my success was only temporary. He eventually picked up his weapon again and rose. And no matter the strikes I was able to make thereafter to his every vulnerability; his ankle or knee, his sides or even his hands; no matter the blade of my dagger shone happily as red as the last sliver of sky between the thunderclouds, he would rise again from each of my strikes to bear down on me with practiced patience, only emboldened by my every nonfatal blow, knowing that despite the close quarters his mace would find its mark eventually. And one blow would be all he needed.

But even with Cherry's repeated cries to finish him, something within me still insisted on wearing the dwarf down without killing. Which angry order turned after a time to a desperate plea for help. The Yokai proved to be a match for even her and Rose combined, since he was unencumbered by the worries that assaulted

me; every maneuver he made was intended to kill. It was only thanks to her armor and Cherry's efforts that Rose still lived. And though Cherry had managed not only to avoid his every strike but to even near break the man's arm to retrieve her dagger, his repeated barrages on Rose had worn the orcess down to far greater effect than mine on the Murdoch. She finally fell to her knees, head in shame, blood pooling on the floor below. At which point the Yokai was able to redouble his efforts on Cherry. And no matter the awkward angle of his twisted arm, he seemed to be inevitably victorious. Every other strike he made would graze her skin mere knuckles away from a kill; while she was forced ever backward. Finally, the Murdoch took a last wounding willingly to better force me to my knees. And raised his weapon to deliver my end.

"rasid, help!" Cherry cried out one last time, even as she saw me fall. All was lost, it seemed. But the desperation in her voice had disappeared. Only her usual unimpressed calm remained; a confidence that I might notice the narrow if sure path to victory that she saw. At last I guessed at what she had in mind. So I turned from the blow that I was sure to come and threw the serpent dagger at her in an attempt to deliver her the edge she needed to emerge victorious. What seemed a century passed as the weapon floated in the air, flipping clumsily toward them end over end. I was sure for fifty years that it would skitter uselessly to her feet. But somehow, it flew directly toward the two as they struggled, as I prepared for the coming crash to my skull. All I desired in that moment was to see Cherry delivered to safety by my sacrifice. But my heart only sank as I watched the Yokai drop his own weapon to grasp at the present I had given him. For he'd forced her from its path with a strength she could not hope to resist. He must have wanted the weapon something awful. The deep lunge he made toward it belied how sure he was it would somehow deliver a killing stoke on its own; that he had recognized it as the same cursed, blood-thirsty blade of Cherry's homeland. And so for fifty years I was sure he would sink it into her heart the moment it hit his palm. But he had overextended himself to reach the blade, not to mention dropped his defenses for the millisecond he was without a weapon. Cherry struck in the meantime with animal fury and speed. She slid her dagger between the Yokai's ribs the moment he grasped the twisted snakeheads. And before he'd even dropped to the floor dead, she'd delivered her weapon to the space between the Murdoch's eyes above me.

7.

A week later I found myself at sea, summoned by our 'Interim Captain' McGee from my cot in the forecastle to his quarters at the stern. Accordingly I picked myself up with great care, for the wound from the Yokai had only been the beginning of my troubles that night, in order to make my way toward Œlia once again; temporarily thankfully, since I was bounded by the ship's floating confines.

The day had been sweltering and the night was little better. We were then sailing the Reiki, surrounded on both sides by lands parched by a relentless summer sun, with only the occasional early morning mist to provide brief relief. The breeze, barely strong enough to keep our sails from sagging, lazed across the deck dry and unrefreshing as McGee led me towards the quarterdeck shortly after midnight. The inside of the ship was still stiflingly hot as well.

We were the last to arrive; all the ship's other decision-makers were already there, awaiting us. Ari and Diarmuid, second and third mates, were sat at the table in the middle of the quarters while Whaker, Sever and Bellio were posted against the ornate bookshelves facing each other on opposite sides of the room; first mate leaning against the one on my left, two crew staring back at him from my right. As if in an effort to maintain the ship's even keel, McGee took the open spot by Whaker, while I shifted nervously by the entrance. Except for the furniture, the quarters had been stripped of everything of value. The most expensive things there within a single man's ability to easily carry away and fence were McGee's bedroll, haphazardly jammed up against a wall just as it had been among the opulence of Adoneus's nest under the library, and the barrel of ale he had likewise provided himself as his sole captainly privilege, that tottered on a nearby stool and dripped down to create an ever-expanding stain on the thing. Aedis was not there to complain. He and his brother were not on board, the price for commanding their growing fleet. Through the massive window that separated the quarters from the night beyond I could make out the lights of the vessels they preferred, the Twin Horizon and Thresher, as they bobbed next to each other far behind on the gentle wake of our passing.

Bellio was first to talk: "Cap'n's quarters's a step up from the bowels, boys, to be sure. But we're still gathered in the dark like rats here, I'd like to point out."

Ari defended our seclusion at once, however, crooning, "It is necessary, my friend. Is it not? I'm sure you agree that our suspicions, if warranted, justify mutiny."

"Mutiny!?" spat McGee. "Now wait just a minute..."

"See that!?" spat Sever in turn. "Give 'em a title and suddenly he's on Aedis's side. It's always the same. I say the dwarf leaves. And Whaker too, while we're at it. Always had a soft spot for the bastards. Only reason he's gotten to where he is. Either one of 'em might go off and rat on us for a pound. Then it's a rope for all of us."

"I've a right to be here same as you," declared Whaker. "More'n you, fact. When have I ever betrayed the crew? Just because I can talk to Aedis and Renault without spitting in their face every word doesn't make me their pet. Who was it worked hand in glove with Tom to get us all the things you rutting children take for granted? Hmm? At's right; was me!"

"Alright, alright! Enough," complained Diarmuid. "Both of 'em stay, I say.

Neither of 'em ever been a rat. Sides, it's a long way to Minat still. People fall overboard all the time. When they forget which leg their footin's best on."

"I agree," said Ari simply, and so Sever flicked the air in front of him in perhaps coerced capitulation.

Finally, McGee was free to defend himself. He spat on the deck to better declare, "Not a single soul's ever had the denseness to accuse me of bein' afeared a' doin' what needs be done, Sever. I'll let that one go on account a' your not knowing fucking shit 'bout a thing. But today that makes two of us. Mutiny? On earth you all talking about."

Diarmuid's exasperated response was immediate: "Don't tell me you haven't given it a good think, McGee. Look at who went down to that opera and who stayed behind. Fifty-three of us. Some from the End. Some from the Thresher. But not a single one in Aedis's good graces. Course, them what lick his lollies every chance they get? They was settin' safe 'n pretty on board. And look how it turned out: Us. Surrounded. All while him 'n this boy here was off somewhere, just watchin'. If it wasn't for..."

"Wait just a second, Diarmuid. What are you saying, exactly?" demanded McGee.

"What I'm saying, *cap'n*, is that me - and a couple others, mind you - think the only reason we got mixed up in all that mess was so Aedis could get rid of those of us he doesn't much like, nice 'n tidy like. And as of right now, I don't see a bit of proof that your boy here wasn't involved. I seen 'im at the Whale-o before. Always seemed awfully chummy with Aedis to me."

By then I could just manage to lift my arms without searing pain, so, understanding the seriousness of responding vehemently against such accusation, I leveled my right at him, demanding, "That's ridiculous..."

But McGee cut me off at once with an angry swipe, insisting, "Not a word, rasid. I see what he's after, now. Always had a bit of an imagination, this one. How many times I have to explain it to you, Diarmuid? It was the Malloys, dammit, that was shifty. Aedis's too dumb to plan it out like you're saying."

"So you say, *cap'n*." crooned Bellio.

McGee had to take a moment to think how best to respond. Finally, he declared, "Look. Enough of this cap'n nonsense. All of you. You call me McGee like always or I'll start acting like a captain for real. Was the Allans that put me here. Not Aedis. And what do I get out of it? Look. Nothin but a rutting... fancy little table-thing to hold the barrel a' booze I need to deal with all your bullshit. And as for Sido, you think he's some mastermind? Well, that's rich. Kid doesn't know his ass from his elbow. You think he's the one who planned it all out? If you'd a' seen the state he was in when I got back into town, you'd be singin' a different tune!"

No matter Sever's forming rebuttal, Ari declared simply, "This. Perhaps we should hear, then."

So McGee rolled his eyes to better explain, "Well..."

'Was one of those vacations where you need another one right after, you catch my drift. That big old bitch Poppy kept me busy night and day for near on three ruttin' weeks. But. Nevermind the fact that neither me or her can barely walk straight at this point. We're back in town not a couple a' hours when what do we hear upstairs but this idiot - your mastermind, Diarmuid - and his two little girlfriends getting their asses handed to them by a pair of elves, of all things. What these bastards're

doing in ҡelia I have no idea. But you know me: I'm not one to ask questions. So I grab my axe. And I kick open that basement door and take out four of their Murdoch dogs just like that. Three more with my hatchets 'fore they even know what's going on. Must've felled ten of 'em all by myself. Twelve. All while these three idiots could barely manage two puny elves and a single dwarf or two. Long story short, anycase, we're all alive in the end. Although Rose was all sorts of cut up. Cherry don't care, of course. She's yappin' away. As usual. "Why didn't you just ki-ill him, rasid!?" Till she sees me, that is, and she says, "And *you*! Where have *you* been!?"

So I spit right back, "*I* was downstairs! Expecting to come up here to I dunno... anything other than you three idiots covered in blood, with little bits of person everywhere. And all over the damn books! Paukrik's gonna have a fucking fit! On earth are you doing here, Cherry? In that *dress*!? And who are all these dead people?"

So while Poppy does her best to stop the worst of Rose's bleeding - nevermind me telling her a dozen times bitch's a rutting orc; she'll be fine - these two fill me in on what's happened since I've been gone. Which... all that matters is that it's pretty clear to me the Malloys're gonna try to kill rasid at his opera.

So, "Why can't you go?" I say. "Because its suicide, clearly. That Rhodelia's playing you for a fool. Trust me: only time Gunter Malloy is remotely polite to someone is right before he stabs 'em in the back. Special service? My foot! They'll have you checking a deserted alley for some gems they forgot there last week. All the way at the end. And you; you'll skip happily along right down the thing. Till one of their dogs buries a mace in your skull from behind, that is. Cause you're so in love with that whoremaster it's disgusting. Hate to break it to you, rasid. But the moment you show your face at that opera and the city sees you happy and smiling - native-born country boy, Allan father no less, gets his big chance thanks to the Malloys - that's the moment they don't need you anymore. Probably still hold a grudge 'bout all them books you was so rude about. They've killed for less. Not to mention the fact..."

"Not to mention wha-at?" he says.

"Well... During my little vacation, I might have made some new old friends. Close associates of one Dunedin, speaking of books. If you remember that prick. Well, they were much more persuasive than they usually are, so... Well... I'm with them now."

Still he don't follow: "With who-o?"

Seems I gotta spell it out like usual - same as with some other fuckers I can think of: "With the Allans, you idiot. Look. It's simple. Anytime anything gets fought over in this world, you can say it was cause this guy wanted some damn thing or some other guy got pissed about something else. And it might *look* like that on the surface. But truth of the matter is: not a single thing worth shit gets fought over in this world without an Allan on one side and a Malloy on the other pulling the strings, scooping up the prize for their side whoever wins. And the big prize here is ҡelia. Biggest city on this miserable rock called Archaea. And home to more money and idiots than all the rest of 'em combined. Now. People say Adoneus this. Adoneus that. And sure, he's no pushover. But at the end of the day, that prick ain't nothing but a manager - glorified debt-collector, more like, you ask me - for the Allans. They actually think the way he runs the city's good for business.

Ain't none of my concern, really. So long as they're paying for me and mine, well... Malloys'll sure be sorry they told me to fuck off, you can believe that!"

But, "The o-opera, McGee," he's complaining. "Why can't I go to my o-opera?"

So I tell him, "Well... I might have heard your name discussed with my new old friends. And... I might have suggested that you'd make a fine patsy to keep their eye off the actual spy they've got in Gunter's house. Since not a thing the Malloys've done in this city's been a secret for months now and they know it. See what I'm getting at? Allan father; insists on spending every second he can with that Rhodelia; visits each and every one of their houses to snoop around after some stupid books, of all things. Didn't have to try too hard to convince 'em to serve you up. I mean, you practically tried to make it look like you were a spy. Fact, you should thank me. Least now you know where things stand."

Well, our boy here didn't... take that all too well. Looked like he was gonna stab me, in fact, for some reason; for a little longer'n made me comfortable. With my own knife, by the way, which was for some reason *not* in my chest where I'd left it! Anycase, finally I see the wheels start turning. And he says, "No... She couldn't have. She wouldn't have! These for me-e? But she told me to not be here. 'No later than eight: make absolutely sure,' she said."

As I make sure to take back my rutting knife. "*Give* me that," I say. "Woman's weapon, that. I'll give you an axe if you want." And once it's back in my pocket where it belongs, I tell him, "Well... either she wuvs you too after all. Or. Rhodi knows like I do the best way to get Sir rasid Allan-abadi to do something is to tell him to do the exact opposite. Or probably she's got something else in mind for you. But don't kid yourself. Two Yokai for you? Don't make me laugh. No; these were for Rose. Only... How they knew *she'd* be here, I don't know."

So in jumps miss orc, still spitting blood a little, "Because I do not go to opera, fool. All know this. I do anything for Adoneus. But not that! Why they always have to sing? It makes no sense!"

Well, she's a mean old sow, but she's right about some things, so I tell her, "You know, Rose... I think we're gonna like being friends."

She don't like the sound of that, lemme tell you! Might've gotten to me if Poppy didn't weigh three hundred pound, with a, "Treacherous, sneaky dwarf. I kill... I kill..."

So, "Told you she'd be fine," I say. "But trust me, rasid. The last thing you want to do is show up at that opera.'"

"So," McGee spat. "Long story short, rasid would've been gutted by the same bastards what did us foul long before his little play if it wasn't for me'n Cherry. It was me'n him - whether he liked it or not - who were the only ones on the right side of things from the get-go. While you all thought you was playin' both sides still. You wanna blame someone fer gettin' surrounded, I suppose there might be some to be put on Aedis fer sendin' you in without seein' all the angles. Plus a hefty dose for yerselves fer not watching yer six. But not this idiot here. And as for Aedis, one thing what's not new is a fight bein' fought and won by us what he don't much care for. More skulls you save up, more he fears you, more he

sends you to the front. It's also why we win every time. Was the same with Aedeon, and it's the same with every other captain what picks a fight to fill his pockets every now and then."

"But this time was different," interjected Ari. "It has the smell of a trap, you must admit. Although I agree, this boy is innocent. It is clear that he has not yet even taken a life. To think that he collaborated with another to plan our demise is too much for me to swallow."

"What's he doing on the End, then, if he's no killer?" spat Sever. "All the more reason not to trust him. Let him go dust something on the Horizon with the rest of the lubbers if he's no spy for Aedis."

"He's here because I want him to be here," spat McGee. "You got a problem with that, I'm always ready, Sever!"

"Enough," interrupted Diarmuid again. "The kid's a pussy. It's obvious. But he *was* up there with Aedis the whole time. That's what I want to hear about."

"I as well," said Ari. "I would hear of our captain's mind that night. And more of this Rhodelia. So we may judge who, if any, bore us ill-will. Please describe for us how they presented themselves that evening, young rasid. And leave nothing out, even if it be personal or shameful to recall, for we are none of us perfect here."

So, over McGee's half-hissed comment, "*That's* for sure," with an eye on Sever still, I told them, if not in so many words, that no matter the dwarf's advice Cherry and I arrived at al opeja shortly after of course, to find Thera pacing impatiently outside the northern entrance, awaiting her ticket. She had apparently not failed to entertain herself in the meantime. She was soaking wet; the excitement of the passing storm had more than sufficed to keep her busy. The same pink dress she had been forced into that morning, that had filled half a sofa with its frills, now hung limp and heavy around her, revealing the every curve of her skinny frame. Of the Malloys, only Rhodelia had bothered wait for her, if surely from a more protected spot, for unlike the younger, Rhodi was still made up to perfection. My love was squeezed into a magnificent gown of yellow and white that pressed her top half toward the sky with such a disdain for gravity, it seemed she must have hidden a pair of unripened mangoes within; and that choked her waist to so narrow a band that her hips forced the rest of the fabric outward at a near right angle, as if her lower half was in fact a giant pumpkin on which she had only to roll to make her way. She had curled her honey-blonde hair so that it hung to only her shoulders, which enterprise I thought lent her features even twice their normal appeal, especially as she'd matched her own colors with those of the exquisite earrings of turquoise set in gold that hung heavy from underneath her bouncing locks. And when she looked up at me coyly, repeatedly having to push the single shining strand that insisted on falling to almost hide the bright blue-green of one of her eyes, as she and Aedis made their way toward us, all McGee's warnings at the library faded to the back of my mind, to that same spot where I hid my recollection of his most outlandish ramblings. Her haste in accosting us when we finally arrived only confirmed what I'd hoped despite all: she'd been afraid for my safety.

Indeed, she cried, "*There* you are! We were beginning to worry!" Although the concern she let creep into her voice was quickly overcome by her usual exasperation at my lack of restraint as she continued, eye on Cherry and her sleeve of a dress, "I had thought you might have come to some harm along the way. But I see

now that you were safely engaged elsewhere. Far from danger, it would seem. Thankfully."

As I dared not say a thing, Cherry's simple greeting would need do for the both of us. "Rhodelia," was all my companion crooned.

To which unimpressed triplet Rhodi replied, "Cherry," in an accented staccato of her own. They had to pause a moment, even, to let the contest of their tones fade.

All as Rhodi made sure to look her flower up and down as she might a horse before showing it to a buyer. She tried to pull that skimpy dress down to cover a bit more of Cherry's legs, but when she did, she noticed the single nick it had received from the Yokai, a knuckle-long cut to the left thigh. So she gave up her attempt at forcing the thing downward in the end, instead pulling her 'emergency' razor from her bag to make a matching incision on the other side. Which only allowed the fabric to rise higher, of course. Now the fleshy meeting of Cherry's backside and legs was visible to all shorter than myself. But neither of the two seemed to mind. Rhodi even made a circle of the other to happily inspect her handiwork, before coming once again to look up to Cherry's flat gaze with notable lack of forgiveness for the other's rebellious attitude, advising, "You really *must* watch what you eat, my dear. Such a beautiful dress. But no fabric hemmed so tightly might be strong enough to contain your thighs as they've grown recently. Perhaps once. We shall have to make it so again."

To which (completely false) belittling Cherry failed to reply.

So Rhodi, ready smile doing little to banish the tension in the air, continued, "Thera has explained the mix-up with the tickets this morning. I must say that all has worked out rather well. I must seem a regular villain, to have failed to invite the sister of our star to the opening. A simple misunderstanding only. One which our rasid here has rectified by bringing you. He must have read my mind. I will make sure to have another seat added to your box. You three will be right next to Aedis and myself, so we can all chat at the intermissions. But we really must go now; the show is set to begin in short time."

"Oh, fun!" cried Thera. And she took my arm in her hers to better pull Cherry on my other toward the entrance, opining, "*I* think that pink and purple go very well together. We shall be the talk of the town! Come, now, rasid."

Only once we'd braved the horde of swaying McGees that demanded our tickets was I freed from my dual escort and Rhodi able to take a minute to inspect me as she had Cherry. With a smiling groan, she complained, "Oh, rasid! Would it really have been too much to find yourself a decent outfit? Why, just look at yourself! It's as if you spent the whole day cleaning an apartment. Although I'm sure you achieved no such thing! While look at Aedis. Now, this is what a gentleman should look like." Indeed, the two of us were polar opposites in appearance; I unshaven and dressed in my customary rags while he was as made up as any of the ladies: silk shirt, tailored jacket, sword and shoes so polished I could make out my shadow dancing upon them as I shifted nervously under Rhodelia's scrutiny. But considering our shared purpose there, the King made sure to defend me.

"A true artist's getup, I must say," he insisted. "Such aspect is the price of genius, it seems, my dear. I, for one, am happy to be seen in such company." And with a protruding elbow toward Rhodi, he sang, "Shall we?"

The orchestra had started some time before. Our entrance to the building was met by the sound of violins as they chirped out a lilting, syncopated tune that

bounced and echoed off the ornate, flower-adorned woodwork of al opera as pleasantly as if its shape had been duly considered before a single note was put to paper. No matter the rapidly approaching hour of the performance's start, the grand entryway was filled with a great swirl of people of every variety, not to mention the countless McGees that staggered here and there between them, trays uncaringly extended. Short and tall, male and female, the guests laughed and belted out pleasantries in such an unending din that it nearly drowned out the music. Although all conversation would cease the moment they noticed the pair that preceded us; the one still soaking wet, forced to repeatedly pull up her garment lest it slip from her breast, the other so scandalously pressed into her tube of silk that her part-time profession was clear to guess. Only then did I notice how well-known Cherry was among the richest men of the city. While the women there might gawk for long seconds before having to turn away, the speed with which their husbands directed their gazes elsewhere belied just how familiar they were with the flower's curves. Finally she was hidden from view by the throng of unattached admirers that made sure to surround her and Thera before they were even able to make their way to the stairs.

From which small legion the maid Malloy slipped some minutes later to grab me from Rhodelia in order to direct me to them, near having to shout to pull their attention from Cherry, "And may I introduce our escort for the evening, gentleman: one rasid Duncannon Allan-abadi. Or is it McGee? I've heard it both ways."

So while I was forced to repeat at the gentlemen's insistence that it simply *must* be Duncannon, Cherry did her best to free herself from them so that we might make our way to the third level where our box awaited us. But so long had she been absent from their company, apparently, that our escape proved impossible. Finally Thera and I were left alone aside from them, as the circle pressed in closer around her. Only then did the maid Malloy give up on trying to share the other's notoriety and direct the whole of her attention to me. She took a moment to try to tame the bird's nest above my face before insisting, "Don't you listen to Rhodelia, my dear Acorn. I think you look quite dashing. Who cares about clothes, anyway? Clearly not I. And! I've heard we have a friend in common who I can attest shares such opinion. Wears nothing but black and red, though he far prefers nothing at all. Perhaps you might be aware of whom I speak?"

So I made sure to check both shoulders before whispering sharply, "I hope you're aware of what you're doing, my dear Anemone. I think it's a very dangerous game you're playing."

But she only scoffed, insisting, "Our mutual friend is the only one anyone should be scared of. I may despise my father and the clan he has forced me into, but have not the slightest fear of them. My Adoneus holds me in very high regard, you see. And so I am well protected. I am his secret flower and have been for years. No others may have me. Yet. Only those I chose to give myself freely for my own pleasure. Such as yourself, ungratefully or otherwise! Even Rhodelia has no idea the *rigors* of my training."

At last, I saw no recourse for her lack of decency but to demand, "How... old are you, Thera?"

"Older'n you!" was her immediate reply, as she pulled a small mirror from her bag to reapply her makeup.

So, "Really," I declared flatly, clearly the only adult in the area.

Indeed, her lingering adolescence was plain to see as she attempted, "Thirty-three..." But my single raised eyebrow quickly forced her to admit, "Fine! Thirty. But that's still older'n you!"

No matter how long we argued over the math (it was I who was older, of course, since no matter her insistence that the translation didn't matter, the conversion of her dwarven thirty to fifteen gune years failed to exceed my sixteen and a half from a mixed-race twenty-two), however, Cherry still found herself unable to extract herself from her many admirers. Our flight was only made possible when Rhodelia mounted the first few steps of the stairway to demand that all please take their seats. Although her urging was only partially successful, for now a small congratulatory throng insisted on crowding around none other than her. So now that it was Rhodi who was overwhelmed with the attentions of others, as the host of the evening did her best to wave these fawning stragglers toward the audience hall with ready smile painted on her features in an even thicker coat than usual, Aedis was finally free to pull me aside.

"We shall have to decide how best to admit our fifty-three friends, rasid," he whispered, relishing the dramatic secrecy we were forced to adopt a bit too much. As he haughtily swung an oversized arm to grab at a nearby goblet-laden tray, he crooned, "They will be awaiting us on the lawn. I shall count on your skills as a thief to assist my brother in finding a way. Since one of us must surely remain by lady Rhodelia's side for the duration of the performance. Although we have some time yet. Our plan is to allow the drama of the evening to unfold completely before we make any move on Adoneus. We shall have to talk again at the intermission..."

I never had an opportunity to respond, for Rhodi had by then dispersed the last of the crowd and was approaching us as Aedis talked. "And what are the boys discussing so quietly, I wonder," she sang.

"Nothing, nothing, my dear," crooned Aedis. "An exchange between captain and crew: pirate's affairs, only. Which matters you have oft told me fail to interest a lady."

"Oh, but you misunderstand, Your Majesty!" cried Rhodi. "For our dear rasid has no intention of sailing away with you. If anyone should be his captain, it is I! He is quite content here. Is that not so, rasid?" I might have agreed with her aloud had she not pulled me so forcefully from Aedis that it seemed I must have left my voice where I'd been standing.

Therefore it was the King who was forced to trail behind awkwardly for a time as Rhodelia and I started up the stairs; until we crossed the line of McGees and Murdochs waiting at the top whose job it was to ensure that those in the floor seating be denied entry to the balconies, and she yelled ahead for Cherry and Thera to wait. "My dears," she insisted. "Would you be so kind as to accompany His Majesty to the boxes? You will find them one more flight above us. The last two on the top floor, excepting Gunter's; closest to the stage. I would appreciate it greatly." Only when the three had disappeared up the next flight did she gesture with an understated nod that the Murdochs who had tried not to surround us too noticeably in response to the King's overbearing protest at not being allowed to remain by her side return to their posts, as she pulled me into a nearby alcove and pressed my lips to hers with abandon.

Despite its intensity, however, the kiss we shared was a short one. "I'll have you

know that I was quite worried, rasid," she complained once she'd broken away from me. And she turned to examine our surroundings. Not a single one of the many Murdochs who patrolled the balcony was safe from her searching, suspicious gaze. Even the dampened violins wafting through the open doors and stairway seemed to have changed their tune to a more tense and foreboding, minor key. Finally she whipped herself back to me to whisper, "I don't have time to explain it all, but you were right to be concerned this morning. It was all that John McGee's fault! That he who was responsible for so poorly managing my enterprise before I arrived escaped. But Adoneus will be sure to make his entrance tonight, I am told. The performance is a trap only, my dear. A trap to draw him out."

All I demanded was, "This special service, Rhodi. What is it?"

But she refused to explain my task bluntly. She only made a tour of the environs, as obviously reluctant to discuss the topic as McGee had been to divulge that he'd allowed me to be sold as a spy to someone in her clan. Reluctantly, breathlessly almost, after a moment of thought, she sang, "Do you love me, rasid?"

"Do I what?" I spat.

"Do you love me." she repeated, flatly now. From which surprisingly simply posed question I couldn't help turning away in a wholly unsuccessful attempt to hide the spontaneous smile that sprung to my face at the thought of us together forever.

As my features lightened, she slithered into my grasp once more to better chide me, "So you do, my dear Acorn. My dear, sweet, innocent, Acorn. Well, I will say it aloud then. I love you too, rasid Whoever-you-care-to-be Allan-abadi. I love you more completely than I have ever loved before and fear I ever shall. Why, if I had been witness to your evening with that... bitch Cherry, well... I don't think I might have been held responsible for my actions. Since it is one thing to know that your lover embraces another on occasion, but something else entirely to see it with your own eyes. You I might forgive. But she; never. No; from her I would be sure to take a most terrible cost. Something more precious than life. Something she might do anything in the world to regain. With Cherry it might be a task to find such a thing - besides her sister, who I adore. But with others it might be far easier, and plain to see. Now, come, rasid. No more on this topic until the intermission. I insist." Therefore, no matter I had yet to learn a thing about my special service (or so I thought at the time), I let her caressingly lead me toward the second stairway at last.

Another throng of McGees awaited us at the top to demand our tickets, but all Murdochs were now conspicuously absent. I was alarmed to see that they had been replaced by none other than Yokai. Five lounged, unimpressed, against the woodwork between the large windows opposite the doors to the boxes, openly brandishing katanas and daggers whose handles and sheathes glinted now and then even in the dim of the candlelight. I tried to hide the sudden, intense fear their penetrating gazes sent shivering down my spine but was only able to stammer, "W-what, elves? Here?"

Rhodelia patted my hand to comfort me as she explained, "In a land as backward as your ꝛelia, they are the safest choice for our protection tonight. Now, come. My love. The King awaits us." We could make out Aedis from even a step past the stairway as he paced, hand on his sword, impatiently outside the door to the second to last box. I could guess his chief concern; she was then fondly attached to my

elbow. And no matter how he tried to hide his jealousy at my temporary reservation of her attention, the angle and speed with which he offered his own arm to her when we arrived told all. So Rhodi let herself be taken from me without complaint, in fact sparing for me only a last direction to be more conscientious in the performance of my responsibilities, that I was sure was more for the King's sake than mine. And to which high-handed comment I demurred with the kind of subservience I felt he expected, if with half a smile at the level of trust I had managed to achieve with her, that I was sure he had not. For no matter the restored height of his chin as he led her into their box, her gaze rested firmly on my own until the very moment she disappeared from sight.

It was there that I ended my tale, having honestly relayed everything about Aedis and Rhodelia's comportment that night that I cared to disclose.

Here, however, I will mention that Cherry was awaiting me in our box alone; my entrance therein was met with the comment, "She's gone to change her dress. Daddy's orders," along with the happily syncopated refrain from the violins to which our entrance to the building had been made, if now played a bit slower and above a cello that often dipped into melancholy. She was slouched as disinterestedly as any of the Yokai against the nearby wall, eye on the crowd, no matter the three empty seats in front of us from which the stage and its opening act, a band of heavily made-up fœlcir women heaving themselves this way and that with impressive athleticism in time to the music, could be seen. Even once I'd taken the middle seat, she made no move. Neither did she make a sound. I'd never seen her so pensive. It was clear she had quite a deal on her mind.

Finally, to get the slightest response from her, I had to demand, "So we're not going to talk at all then?" For she'd barely spared a word for me on the whole walk there.

She only turned to me with sudden surprise. And long seconds passed before she deigned sit beside me at last, laughing, "rasid. Wants to talk. Well, that's new. Fine. What do you want to talk about, then, little Acorn?"

"About how you're clearly an elf, for one thing," I hissed, as I reached for her ears, which thanks to that ribbon that rarely left her hair, I'd noticed long before had matching, faint but ragged scars on their top halves. I might not have thought much of the marks before, but seeing her battle the Yokai earlier had made her heritage all too plain to see, not to mention her attempt to hide it.

She only swatted me away, however, with an insistence that maybe we shouldn't talk after all. And so while the orchestra chirped away still, skipping from note to note, we turned away from one another, neither daring another word until she finally demanded, "Got that dagger ready?"

To which I shrugged, 'Of course.' It had been all too easy to recover from McGee. A single heartfelt hug of thanks for his constant wisdom and preparedness was all it had taken. He really should have known better than to try to reclaim it from me. It sat, as ready as it might ever be, round my neck once more. I in fact took the time then to inspect it lovingly. It still glistened from the blood I'd recently fed it; the pair of channels on its either side gleamed red throughout, but they were not yet full. Long moments I examined the blade, the whole of my being lost within its artistry. Only Thera's entrance as she barged in, once more embedded deep within pink frills, making straight for my lap no matter the empty chair beside me, would draw me back to reality. "Ooh, pret..." she declared; though

the excitement in her voice, indeed the sound itself, ceased abruptly rather than lingered on as the statement she'd attempted deserved. I might have wondered at the true cause of her sudden quiet - almost as if she'd recognized the blade from some book or story or both. But that matter would remain unresolved for many years.

In any case, I didn't mention a bit of this that sweltering night in the captain's quarters of the End. They hadn't asked. Not to mention the fact I wasn't entirely sure whether McGee was aware that I still had his dagger hiding under my shirt at the time.

It took a moment for them to digest the details. Sever was first to speak afterward, now suddenly my greatest friend, since he laughed, "So lemme get this straight. Aedis wants to screw this Rhodi bitch something bad. But can't have her. Because of you!? Maybe you're right, McGee. Maybe the kid's alright."

"It is as I suggested, no?" continued Ari to Diarmuid. "It is not the first time our captain has been led astray by a woman. So it *is* we who are to blame for our predicament. If any wished us harm it is surely the Malloys as McGee says. It was their forces we had to fight though to make our escape with Adoneus, after all. We should have known better than to take everything Aedis says at face value, if his thoughts were only of this Rhodelia. Quite a woman, she, it seems. She has clearly wound our young rasid round her finger as well. But was not McGee unfooled? Yet another black mark on Aedis' name, since he is no boy. But not deserving of taking his captaincy and his life, at great risk to our own. Unless there is more to this tale, I think we should continue as always; only perhaps more carefully when considering his promises."

"But that's just the thing, Ari," complained Bellio. "Captain makes his crew a promise, it should be the rutting truth. But where's all that loot they told us'd be there at the opera house, that this Adoneus was supposed to have stashed? Wasn't none. Trust me. We checked. And that's not the only thing! What really bothers me is all this crap Aedis's been spoutin' lately 'bout bein' a better man. Way I see it, best way to become a better man would be to cut us what remember what he's done in his past out of his life. Permanently, like. If that's how he feels, he'll try it again, even if he don't admit that's what he's doin' to himself. Mark my words; he'll do it again, woman or no, so we won't see it comin' necessarily."

At last McGee found a point on which to agree with those opposite the room: "That's the nail on the head, I say. Been sayin' it for years now. Now, I'm with Ari; we continue on as before. But that's exactly my worry: what Bellio's saying. We gotta find a way to remind Aedis that there ain't no going back, like. Some might forgive, but none forget. But that's all. And on the topic of funds... I'll let it slip to you gentlemen and you gentlemen alone: from what I hear, this Adoneus *is* worth a little bit of blood. So they lied about there bein' loot where there was none. Ain't the first time for that either. But there is this black castle, see. That sits on a certain cliff overlooking the Half-Straights. Pass it by every time we pass Caledonias by to the north. Impregnable, they say. Unless, of course, you happen to know where the footpath that winds up them cliffs starts and what tide it's gotta

be to get there. Which Adoneus does. And you wanna talk about loot? Well..."

"You don't mean..." spouted Sever at once.

To which eager demand McGee took his sweet time to respond, only bothering to croon, "I do," after lazily lighting a pipe and waving the match in broad, unrushed strokes to extinguish it into a plume of smoke that roiled in the heat of the night like the last puff of a dying forest fire.

"Well," spat Sever, lips smacking as if he'd just tasted liquor for the first time after a decade without it, "I suppose we can go on like before. For a little while longer."

But not all were so easily convinced. Diarmuid, I noted, was still furiously strumming on the table while his gaze rested firmly on me. And he spouted suddenly, "That's all well and good, boys. More ifs and maybes. I'd rather one in the hand. But this boy is leaving something out. And like I've said, he can be awfully chummy with Aedis, nevermind them fightin' over some dwarf bitch."

"I'm not chummy with Aedis," I was forced to insist. "He thinks I'm some great writer, so he tries to be nice to me so I'll write good things about him. It's annoying."

Though Diarmuid found no rebuttal beyond a dismissive swipe of his hand, after a moment of mulling it all over, Bellio hesitantly ventured, "It don't add up to me neither."

"What don't?" complained McGee. "We're all agreed, except for you. Aedis is an idiot but never tried to get rid of any of us. It was Rhodi that had us surrounded. On behalf of her clan, I'm sure. Most likely because without us what can hold a blade to do the dirty work, Allan's plan to switch the Horizon for the King Tide won't work. They got their spies too. Nothing wrong with Aedis 'cept his crooked penis."

"But it *still* don't add up," spouted Bellio again, now more confidently. "Malloys would've known we want Adoneus alive if they're so smart; while seems like they were just trying to put a blade in his back plain and simple. You're telling me they wanted us dead so bad they was willing to let him have fifty good, extra men that night? All on account of something months away? That don't barely affect them, far as I see. Weren't you there, helping us get in, all while 'working' for the Allans? Don't try to tell me they didn't see right through you! They *wanted* us there, nevermind who we were after. Which means Malloys wanted the opposite. So why would they let Aedis put us in the thick of it, if this Rhodelia can get him to do anything she wants? Unless it's as we been sayin' all along: we was there for one reason and one reason only: so Aedis'd finally be rid of us. She's got something else going on; I can tell when a woman's up to something. But it's got nothing to do with us. You ask me, sounds like it was one man and one man alone helping Aedis; this Gunter."

"Now you're just grasping at straws," cried McGee exasperatedly. "The two've never spoken far as I know."

But, "Hear me out," replied Bellio in equal earnest. "What did Gunter say, now, at the end? 'Something you haven't thought about, Adoneus...' What were his exact words, now?"

So McGee searched the ceiling to better recall, "'Something you haven't considered. Something more important than all your money and power: right and wrong.'"

"Who said that, now!?" spouted Whaker at once.

"What, you don't remember?" chided Sever.

In jumped Bellio, "No, he don't. Cause Whaker wasn't there. He was safe and sound right here on board same as Ari, nevermind Ari's got more skulls'n anyone 'cept Sever. Why? Cause Aedis don't want 'em dead is why. For now. But is that not something you'd expect Aedis to say lately, McGee? I tell you: the two of 'em're drinking from the same well. Somewhere out there, there's some ass preaching on 'bout right and wrong like there ain't nothin' but children in the world, and both these bastards are listening with both ears, like. It's this same old better-man nonsense. Good versus evil and all that. And I'm sure you all know just which side of the question *we* all fall on."

"What about Renault?" demanded McGee. "He was there with us. You're saying Aedis wants his own brother dead?"

Bellio's shrug clearly communicated just how little the fact might surprise him. He continued, "I'm telling you, Aedis wants us old crew dead and that's that. And if this Gunter's as brainwashed as he is, fucker might've tried help to him on his own, no matter what the rest of his clan thinks, seein' as he had so many bastards at his disposal that night. I say we don't quit this story just yet. Wasn't that new kid upstairs that night too? The one with the ears? I think what we need is a second opinion."

"You mean Lyus!?" laughed McGee. "Won't learn much from him, I don't think."

But the comment had already been uttered, and it only took a second for Whaker to volunteer to go get the boy.

Therefore, no matter McGee advising Lyus the moment he entered to forget about the theatrics, we were all privileged to the boy's surprising - if punctuated - eloquence during his account of the night, almost as if he'd been practicing it:

'Well you three remember; al alonostra eked itself into existence one note at a time, like the orchestra hoped to make the sound they was getting' pair for without waking a sleeping baby. But after a while, the notes connected and an intense theme, dripping with anticipation, surged from the black of the pit. I don't gen'rly like the opera any more'n the next fucker, but I'll admit... 'twas kinda like Perrin 'fore he gets sloppy drunk. But dignified, too, like. The melody was from a single violin, played so good it was like the darkness itself was the one holdin' the bow, with the rest of the instruments joining in or supporting 'im in turns. They crept louder, and louder, while al ɑpeɟa was slowly lit by the thousand'n one stupid rutting light bulbs, straight from Omni, Co, that bastard Maddox Malloy'd made half the fuɕiz - the half him'n his dogs'd managed to wrangle from the orphanage the month before - string up round the place. Until at last the lead violin let out a trill that echoed out to the mɷcsɟma and back, followed right after by the rest of 'em. And the stage was thrust into such a painful brightness that we were all forced to look away for a while to let our eyes adjust.

How'd I get upstairs? Well, first I had to get down to the main seating to do my job. See, the place has a bunch of sections, you never been there. You can see all of it from the lawn: stage at the eastern end, usually open to the sea beyond but that night closed in by some sets of boards, to the quarter mile a' floor seating under the hundred eight boxes, to the covered amphitheater, and finally to where we was, where the poor sit under the stars in the mud and are just able to make out what's going on down on stage if everybody holds perfectly still for hours. Which

never happens. Anyway, as my vision returned and the orchestra quieted, a single figure, some bastard named Orlande with a big, fake sword what looks just like Aedis's, strode out onto the stage and started belting away.

"Bunch of kvetches, all of 'em," 's what I say to Renault, as the rest of you pushed and shoved yer way to the front a' the lawn. Since not a single one of you bastdards'd gone more'n ten minutes since leaving the Whale without complaining about your damn outfit. Not me, of course. You ask Bellio. I looked rutting good. Everything fit just right, was shaved fresh as a baby's ass... And the prince looked alright too, I guess.

You all know how he is; Renault has to slick his hair back too 'fore reminding me, "They're not here for their fashion-sense, young man. Or their company. They're here for a reason: because they're the most vicious killers this end of the planet. Just like you're only here because you claim to know al ɑpeɾa 'like the back of your hand.' Now. Are you ready?"

"'Claim' to know it?" I say. "'Claim?' I *do* know it like the back of my hand. Why, before you knuckleheads locked Adoneus up, wasn't a single performance me'n my fuɔiz missed. Lotsa money sitting not so deep in those pockets down there. And it's all too easy to get in if you're nimble enough; that's the top half of Lago's card shop back there above us. Right off the ɢalifa. Downspout's as good a way in as the front door. Lose some weight, you might be able to slide down without breaking your stubby, little legs too. Make a small fortune in a single night. Might let you into the gang. If you wasn't so old, that is. And I wasn't retired on account a' joining the End."

So from there I spring into action, since it was round then that Earl and Diarmuid here attracted the attention of all the Murdochs in the area with their little fight. Earl... he needs acting lessons. Right? Or something. Diarmuid barely touched him! When he faints. Well, no one was looking my way for a while anyway. A shadow dancing in a sea of lights, I slip down the aisle in a matter of seconds while the audience was distracted by the beauty, Peach - and her fantastic tits - as she strode onto the stage to add a little life to Orlande's little song. Then once the stone of the amphitheater turned into the wood of the floor seating, I ducked to slide unnoticed behind the last row to reach one of the fuɔiz' secret trap doors, that lead to the cavern that lies under al ɑpeɾa.

The cavern's a massive thing, its ceiling the woodwork of seating and stage supported by the columns of stone that span it, its floor the shelf of rock that slopes into the dark on its way down to the sea. At its highest, it stretches fifty feet or more down into the black, until the eastern wall of al ɑpeɾa separates it from the open air of the docks beyond. That's where the service entrance is; it's always heavily guarded during a performance. Although the watch that once sat around useless there had that night been replaced by ruttin' Murdochs. In any case, the cavern itself was unguarded as usual, since few know it even exists. So I didn't have no trouble following the maintenance gangways that hang, swaying, under the seats, to the trap room under the stage, where someone was - as usual - complaining about something.

"Will ye nah help me!?" our noble captain McGee was crying. Seemed his helpers Peg, Pog and Pug were less than enthusiastic about helping him light the bonfire. The surly dwarf was insisting, "Dah thing's got to be dah size a' a house by the time dah volcano's tah blow or no one'll bah able tah see dah fuckin' flame!"

But I had no time for such theatrics. I was there on a mission. "Oi! McGee!" I say. "Where's that guy I'm supposed to meet?"

"Over there, yah ruttin' monkey," said McGee. And so I left to find the one they called fernjard.

The fɷlcirs'd been sleeping there under the stage for weeks, like a family of connies embedded behind your cupboards. Was bottles and bedrolls everywhere, so I was forced to tread carefully. But in the end I found this damn gypsy. And once we'd found another they called ɷlnɛɛar, we went back out to the gangways and back toward the western end of the cavern, and looked up as fernjard explained, "ʁo've taken out ninety pɘrɛɛntɷ ʒ'i mizmar. The rest is up to vu."

"ʒ'i what!?" said I.

"The nails," said ɷlnɛɛar. "A few more and the whole row crashes down. They won't die. I think. The rock is only a few feet below us here. And it should be safe for you. If you stay on this side of the beams. Although..."

"Although what!?" I said, seein' as ɷlnɛɛar's tone was far from comforting.

"Well, you should see for yourself," he said. And he pointed through one of the vents, that the fuɛiz might've used to grab their riches on a better night than this one. Through which a massive figure could be seen splayed over one of the seats. A figure I recognized at once: "But that's Froderik the Great!"

Everybody knows Froderik the Great. Food critic Froderik the Great. Froderik the Great, now, is so fat, he's got more rolls on him'n a bakery when they open up for the day. He's so fat, when he goes to the zoo, the kids say, "Mommy, can I ride the fenton?" I'm serious. He's so fucking fat, when he farts, tornadoes swirl in his wake for the next week. You understand, fellas? The guy is huge. And guess what. He's sitting in the very same row I'm supposed to hide under to "safely" take out the last of these damn nails. ɷlnɛɛar just shrugs, though, and hands me a hammer, then walks away.

Well, I ain't no chicken. So I get on up there. And I start pulling. I've got all night, I think, so I try to figure what's still connected to what before I take too much. But then that rutting violin starts going. And before you know it, the whole orchestra's going crazy: Badaladaladaladaladalum! Ladaladalum. Ladaladalum! Which is when I remember that the one thing Renault told me to make sure of was that I get this shit done before the first intermission. So I check through one of the vent holes to see how the thing's going. And I see Peach - and her fantastic tits - flying through the rutting air on ropes, while a dozen idiot gypsies are all trying to hit her with their fake swords. But they all just fall over moment she comes near. Well, that was as sure a sign as any that I better move my ass. This kind of stupid shit only happens at the end of an act. So I start pulling nails willy-nilly. And before you know it, down comes the whole row. But so much for me getting away to help the rest a' ya. Cause not only the row that was supposed to go, but all of Froderik's as well, comes crashing down. And as nimble a fucker as I am, I didn't stand a chance, seeing as this guy's so fucking fat, when he's goin' somewhere, his bellybutton gets there fifteen minutes 'fore his ass hole does.

So. Down we all go: Froderick, me, and a dozen others. Ladies dresses fly up round their faces. And we crash through the gangways and their seats all fall apart as they land ass-first on the cold stone below. Then the fun begins; they all start sliding down the rock face. While the orchestra's still going crazy: Badaladaladal-adaladalum! Ladaladalum! No one what couldn't see the hole next to them even

noticed the row fall, they was going so loud. But down below was a different matter entirely. The Murdochs were all on edge owin' to the fact they was on alert for that Adoneus, and they heard these poor bastards roll into the wall down there just fine, so all them respectable guests get roughed up even worse'n they already was on their way out the back door. Damn trouble-makers. But nevermind all that, cause I caught myself up top during all the commotion. And I hear something; something coming from deep in the dark of the cavern. What was that? Animal? Sneaky Murdoch takin' a piss? Don't know what it was, but I'm sure as shit it wasn't nothin. So I slip off into the dark, climbing down and around the rock face in the near black. Until I get to the source of the noise, which turns out is none other'n my former lieutenant, Lind, who was settin' there locked up in a big pit, crying like a little baby with half my fuckin' fuɕiz next to him! Best I knew, they were all supposed to still be givin' mm ɡedɘin and the rest of the aɾɾabia their usual shit. But they'd been wrangled from the orphanage the month before by the rutting Malloys, forced to transform al ɒpeɾa into something straight outta Caledonia, then thrown in a pit like animals to wait for the next ship to Whitehall so they could be loaded up and sold to the highest bidder there.

Well, once they tell me all this, I have to make a quick decision. I know I'm supposed to help you all get into the floor seating so you'll be ready to snatch Adoneus when he shows. But this shit can not stand. So I climb back up to the gangways and find McGee again, and say, "Oi! McGee! We got a ploughin' problem. Where's that Sido? I need his help."

"On earth yah need that dingbat fer?" said McGee.

So I tell 'im: half my fuɕiz been taken by the Malloys and thrown in a pit down below and rasid was the only one I knew who could pick the rutting lock.

"Of all the..." spat McGee. "Top floor. North side. One of the boxes. But yah won't make it up there, yah dingbat. There are a thousand rutting guards. Yah'll have tah wait till the third act. Yah'll have tah be patient."

But fat chance I was gonna wait around that long. McGee'd given me what I needed: a point in the right direction. See, the rest of the fuɕiz might've been content every night with what they could find down in the floor seating, but I'm the more industrious type, if you follow. So I slip back up above, to where the curtain hangs on the north side of the stage. And while the audience had their eyes on Peach still - and her fantastic tits - as she's finally taken down off her ropes by Orlande and laid there for him to get all hot 'n bothered about as he tries to kill her but lets her escape of course, I start to climb...'

"You had to've seen Aedis, then," interrupted Diarmuid. "He was in the box just in front of rasid's, right? So you had to cross in front of it if you swung over from the curtains. Rutting monkey is right. What was he doing? Was he, maybe, discussing how best to slaughter all of us with some Murdochs at the time?"

But to Diarmuid's dismay, Lyus simply shrugged, "No, best I could see he was doing his best to get into Rhodi's dress. You know the one. Orders the flowers around. Pretty dwarf girl. But with tits. Nice, hand-sized, little dwarf titties.

Yeah, Sido knows. Unsuccessfully, by the way, from what I could see. It was the fucker in the first box what was chattin' with some Murdochs."

McGee, of course, didn't fail to chime in: "See? Same story, I'm tellin' ye. She keeps him busy while her clan does the work."

"Not necessarily," piped in Bellio. "Don't pretend it's not just like Aedis to try to get some pussy while we was all about to get stabbed. He'd just left the details to Gunter. Why not? Owes the Allans a ship anyway, what's fifty little murders to a friend?"

"Yer graspin' at straws, I'm tellin' ye," was McGee's immediate reply.

So Diarmuid demanded, "Well, why don't you tell us how it happened from there, then? All I could see was that play; you was the one what could look the other way. Convince me that it was all just a big coincidence that I ended up face to face with a rutting..."

But he wouldn't be able to name the worst foe they'd had to face that night just yet; since before he finished, McGee made sure to cut him off with a, "Thought you'd never ask!"

Although the dwarf puffed away on his pipe for a good few seconds before he bothered begin,

'Surly, Lyus? Do you even... Nevermind. Well, our humble hero here might think he's sneaky. I saw him climbing that rutting curtain from my portal there under stage left clear as day. Can't believe nobody else did. S'pose if anyone did they just though it was... symbolism or whatever. Least he got his job done, anyway. Since what else can I see from my little peephole as the first intermission gets underway but every single Murdoch that was up there guardin' the lawn run down to that hole he'd made in the seats like Adoneus'd come poppin' out of it any second. Meantime us crew had free run of the place. And we was intentionally dressed like ushers, see, was the plan me'n Renault'd hatched. So. We picked fifty-three poor douchebags from the last row of the floor seating "under suspicion of causing a disturbance," gave em a little interrogation wherever we could. And kicked 'em out the back door - not a big problem seeing as I'd just finished helping the watch surround all the idiot Murdochs posted down there. So. While the watch was filin' in, and the Murdochs was bein' tied up, out went these other idiots. Minus their tickets. And by the time the second act started, us crew was sat comfortably in their seats to enjoy the rest of the show. Worked like a charm. Not me, mind you. Once the fighting was done, I had to go back under the stage to help light the damn bonfire. Which was not going well. I was a last minute clan replacement for Gil McGee, see; seein' as that drunk bastard'd mysteriously come down with a bad case of the just-got-paids the day before his big fireworks debut there at al ɑpeɲa. Even if no one'd thought to pay off his idiot assistants. So I was stuck with 'em. Ploughin' Pug.

Anycase, it was time for Adoneus and the Allans to make their first move. Which is to say his fœlcirs to a gune, woman and child, excepting those who was on stage soon, disappeared. Next anyone saw of 'em, they was poppin' out the woodwork, along with the watch, who'd recently been relieved of their pay by the Malloys, outside the second floor boxes, where these fools were seated. And these bastards shoot or stab every single Murdoch guarding the level dead to a man. Watch'd taken their crossbows with 'em when they'd been told to fuck off - as any working

man should with his tools - and the fɷlcirs didn't need no weapons, just used anything sharp they could get their filthy hands on. Both sides; north and south. Third floor, too, on the south side. Took 'em less than ten minutes. And not a single casualty their side; Murdochs was taken completely and utterly by surprise. Rutting bloodbath. All while the music'd started up again as some jolly little tune you might play at a rich folks' country estate as the leaves start to turn. And while up above me I could hear all the actors minus Peach - and her fantastic tits; they was settin' round bored like the rest of her next to me at the time - stompin' round on stage to try to make it seem like they knew how to dance proper, like, at a ball.

Meanwhile by then Lyus and rasid'd made it down the trap room. So I grab 'em and tell 'em, "You're not goin' anywhere without me. You'll end up skewered and then who'll save yer precious fuɕiz. I'm comin' with ye idiots."

So the three of us jog back out the gangways, making sure to give that hole a wide berth so we wasn't spotted by any Murdochs. We jump down where we could barely see the rock below us, but no injuries save this big ol' welt on my ass here. See the size of this thing? Anycase, then we stumble down the rock face to where half the illustrious Forty Fugitives - nevermind there ain't even thirty of 'em total; or that not a single soul on the planet is after 'em seein' as the worst they ever done is steal some trinkets from people in the aɾɟabia, who nobody gives a whit about - was locked up. And from there we wait for rasid to work his magic.

Which is when the music up above quits bein' so jolly. Gets real dark. Real quick. The music, I mean, although we couldn't see a thing either. Didn't wanna risk a light; Murdochs up there in the floor seating was still very much alive and keepin' an eye out down that hole, I was certain. Best I can do is a single match at a time so rasid can see what he's doing. Blame it on that. Or be like him and cry not only about that but the fact that he didn't have his lockpick set with him. But by the time I'm down to three matches left, he's still fumbling away at this damn thing. Till finally he clangs it against that cage with a last grunt and says fuck it. He can't get it.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say. All while these kids are gripin' away, "poor me..." like they was trying to be part a' the act up above.

But, "Wait a minute," Sido says then. "Thera's hairclip! If I could just get this pin..." So not a second later, Lyus is off for up above, while me'n our master thief are left settin' round in the dark, waitin...'

McGee made the mistake of stopping for dramatic effect here. So Lyus made sure to take over the narrative, no matter the scowl his interruption brought to the dwarf's face. The boy sang,

'Took me longer'n I wanted to to make it back above. Lesse, the music went dark like McGee said while I was down below and stayed that way until the end of Peach and Orlande's secret little reunion by moonlight, this single, giant, blue light with a million mirrors all round it my boys'd had a time and a half getting up there. Nevermind the *actual* moon was just starting to rise behind the boards 'bout then. Till finally, the rutting light gets turned off and the music went back to jolly again and there was a wedding on stage for Orlande and some fat, fɷlcir lady. And I was free to climb the curtain again.

"Oi! Thera!" I say. "Gimme your hair clip."

"No. It's mine," is all she says.

So, "No. It's mine," I say. And I swipe it from her just like that and make for the door. After telling Cherry she looked real nice, of course. Never seen a woman blush like that. Told you I looked good.

Anycase, figured nobody'd bother me on the way out of the boxes; nobody'd bothered me'n rasid on the way down the first time. But that was during the intermission; this time there wasn't a soul up there except me and five elves. Elves, now! Never seen a single one in my life, mind you. Seeing as I never did get the privilege of meeting my mother. Everybody knows my daddy's none other'n the infamous Beau Mellis; who sailed from Hank's Hold; who took on twenty arks with a single ship and survived - for a couple days anyway. Have I shown you all my medallion? Yes? Oh. Well, anycase, seeing as it was just me'n these elves now I thought I was good as buggered. But luckily - for me, that is - they were a bit distracted already. Seeing as down on the second floor was a scene straight outta one a' McGee's worst stories. Like he said: rutting bloodbath. Although by the time I got there, it was even worse, since not only'd the Murdochs been slaughtered to a man but every last fœlcir as well. Didn't take me long to put it all together: watch'd done 'em in the moment they'd let their guard down after taking out the dwarves. Malloys'd paid a little better that the Allans that time, seemed.

So. Seeing as everyone had their eyes clapped on all them bodies still, I try to tiptoe across the place without getting noticed; had all in hand till I was spotted by Maddox Malloy, the bastard. He was slappin' each and every watch on the shoulder on behalf of his boss Gunter at the time.

"Oi!" says he. "You there!"

And I know I'm busted at last. They'll figure me for one of the fœlcirs and put me outta my misery for good. But Maddox remembered me from round town. "What are *you* doing here!?" he says. He don't wait for me to figure some lie, though. He's got other ideas. Says, "You two! Over here!" And he points to two of the watch. "Come and take this boy down to the pit. Make yourselves useful! Bad luck for you, Lyus. Don't think anyone'll miss *you* much..." And he starts rubbing his hands like I was made of gold.

Which wasn't so bad, actually, I think, seeing as that was where I was headed anyway. Although now, no matter how jolly the music was, things don't look so good anywhere anymore. We head down to the trap room first, where I see the fœlcirs what wasn't laying on the floor covered in blood was now bein' held, knives to their throats, to convince those of 'em that had parts to keep singing, like. Then from there down to the service entrance we went, where all them Murdochs what'd been tied up had been just as surely untied up. Things don't look good at all, I think. This can't be the way things were supposed to go.

Till we get to the fuɕiz' cage again, that is. And our cap'n McGee here takes one look at the two what'd brought me there and says all simple, like, "John. John."

I get ready for the fight. But all they do is say, "McGee," right back. And for some reason they let me go then and there. So I give Sido Thera's hairclip and by the time the wedding above finished and the music stopped again, he's chucklin away, sayin' thing's good as open.'

"Wait a minute," complained Bellio. And he smeared the layer of sweat on the side of his face to help express his confusion as he reminded Lyus, "Wasn't the watch on the Malloy's side now?"

McGee gasped happily, "Ah-ha! Well, they *were*. For a little while. Truth of the matter was, though, they'd been on the Allan's side from the get-go. Not that it was gonna stay that way for long. Classic triple-cross, it was!"

Understandably, Bellio groaned, "This is making my head hurt."

So McGee made sure to admonish him, "Well, ye needn't've concerned yerselves with the details if ye'd just believed me from the start," before explaining,

'See, didn't take no fortune-teller to inform Allans that the Malloys'd try to outbid 'em when it came to the watch, the most obvious choice to use for fighting men, seein' as that's exactly what Adoneus'd been payin' 'em for fer the last who-knows-how-long. But watch knows better than anyone who butters bread the thickest. Moment the Malloys got 'em to divulge the Allan's plan - plan the Allans *wanted* the bastards to know about, anyway - and got 'em to agree to skewer the fœlcirs too at double the pay while they're at it; that's the moment Dunedin made 'em another visit and doubled *that* offer. So when all was said and done, even though Malloys was convinced they had the upper hand, that was not the case. Nevermind the pile of bodies waitin' for 'em outside their boxes once they came out for the second intermission. Or how hard I'm sure they all congratulated each other on having bested that damn Adoneus; he'd sent his gypsies but their bosses'd seen through his bullshit and gotten his own watch to take 'em out. Who cares about a couple dozen dead Murdochs after all; that's what they're there to be used for. Everything looked all fine and dandy. Even better'n fine'n dandy, in fact, since there was a whole act left in the play that they could now enjoy without having to worry. What they should've noticed - but clearly didn't - was that the watch was armed with crossbows but the fœlcirs'd all been done in by blade, seeing as not a single one of their bodies had a bolt stuck between their eyes. I would've noticed. But I doubt I would've pointed it out even had I been there instead of sittin' round on my hands down below, waitin' for Lyus still.

So. I was not much surprised to see our hero here dragged back down to the pit by the two Johns. Course these two were the ones what used to collect money from Rose to distribute it to the rest of the watch back before we put Adoneus away; so seeing as I'd played her part for a little while when I was helping the Malloys, we three knew each other real well, like.

Anycase, now we're on the same side again. So upon seeing me there, they drop their act and let Lyus go. And we all get to have a special moment there in the dark with all the fuc-iz freed. Course, not a single one of 'em can leave still, seein' as it was Murdochs and Malloys in charge of the whole place. For now. So, "stay," I tell 'em all, along with rasid. While off me, John and John go to make sure that ain't the case for long. They drag me back out there and throw me to the Murchochs, saying, "Look what *we* found down below."

Course I had a bottle on me, so I tell 'em, "What? Man can't slip off fer a little drink every now 'n then? I was just about to get back to it. Got a volcano to make sure explodes, if you don't mind. Won't be my fault if I don't make it back up there in time." And just then the music starts again for the third act, all intense and foreboding, like. So with an eye-roll at this drunk old dwarf, they give me a boot,

tellin' me to get back to work. I chuckle as I stumble up the stairs, since I can hear 'em clear as day, complainin' 'bout how seemed every damn McGee that'd been hired for the night'd all disappeared at the same damn time. And I pick up the pace moment I'm outta sight; while the violins above start sawin' away, as if they're cheering me on. With that one, lead violin goin' and goin' and goin.

So maybe it was the tune - probably I just like settin' things alight - I say fuck it. Toss the whole thing of oil onto the bonfire and send it my very last match. Up it goes. Nevermind kindling and birchbark and all that. Oil. Then I give my assistants their very simple instructions one last time when it came to the powder. "Yeah, yeah," they tell me; they'd been practicing with Gil for weeks: booms on the badabadabadabums. From there I'm off. I start my stumble again moment I leave the trap room. And so thirty seconds later I'm being dragged by some Murdochs up to the third level so I can get back to work checking tickets, while they're grumblin, "Rutting McGees," the whole way. I was the only one stupid enough to show his face after slipping' off for my peck a' booze: I'd go up above with the bigshots. What's the difference, after all? One McGee's the same as another. Ha! All a part of the plan, my friends. Since once I'm planted at my new post, I take one look at the Yokai back behind me, not paying a whit a'ttention to the second floor anymore; another down below at the fœlcirs what'd been left on the deck to rot. And I give the watch that was guarding the level now the signal. Which is when them fœlcirs start to come back to life, like. Covered in blood they were, sure. Goat's blood, that is. Same as they were using for the opera. Just like half the blades a' the swords sittin' round 'em'd slide right into the pommel you press 'em hard enough. But even there in a room full of doctors, no one'd thought to check if they was actually breathing during the intermission. A mistake that cost the every Malloy there their life. Watch, for some reason, did nothing. Stood at attention outside the boxes while the undead took out the odd Murdoch left hangin' around same as their bosses. And so most the Malloys in cælia got to depart this world to the tune of that single violin singin' away happy as could be. Course, these were the unimportant ones I'm talking about now. The real bosses were up on the third story, north side, still very much alive.

Which is where I came in. Booms on the badabadabadabums. Well, almost. Didn't expect too much from Pug. Peg and Pog must've been the ones to get it right. Anycase, whatever's going on on stage, it required a bunch of loud bangs. So hammers to a couple piles of powder on the anvils Gil'd hauled up to the trap room was the McGee sort of solution; while I pull out my hand-cannons to add my own little contribution to the sound effects. Four of the Yokai I take down - yes - on the badabadabadabums. But I'm out of shot after that and there was five of 'em total. So in the end if was me versus this one rutting elf.

But what's a single elf to someone like me? You've all seen what I can do with my axe. Bastard didn't stand a chance; and they say Yokai are tough! Didn't take me long, even. He slides left, I back off. He comes at me, I close the distance. He slides right and I take his head clean from his shoulders. Moment the violin hits his last note and the crowd erupts in applause...'

This, of course, was mostly lies. Though the tale might have started as truth - Lyus had been returned to us by two city watch and immediately freed - from there it quickly devolved into fantasy. The end, especially, I thought, was hard to believe.

Firstly, ever since our waking of Adoneus, McGee had completely eschewed the praise of hand-cannons, labeling them a woman's weapon as readily as daggers or bows or anything save axes. More importantly, having so recently seen Yokai in action myself, I knew that even armed with his imaginary guns, the feat of defeating five of them was far beyond my supervisor. But none contradicted him there in the End's captain's quarters, perhaps owing to his occasional former exhibition of great skill with the weapons; equally likely, I thought, because his exaggeration was as openly self-important and -motivated as ever and therefore hardly worthy of the breath necessary to disprove. For his audience's focus was still on Aedis and his potentially sinister intentions toward the crew. So, as I did my best to not eye McGee too directly in response to what I knew were half-truths at best - for I had witnessed, in a manner of speaking, the demise of the Yokai myself at the hands of another; the same, I realized, about whom we were both likely equally concerned, and which concern I was certain was the main reason for his meandering so far from reality - I recalled the truth of the matter to myself to better not contradict his yarn.

Which actuality was that the moment I managed to open the fuɕiz' cage, far from insisting that I "stay," McGee demanded instead that I follow him up above once more. His ascent to the third floor was much as he described, though he made the trip not alone but just ahead of me, purposefully stumbling and dragging down his Murdoch overseers with him to the ground should I, having to show my ticket to any that demanded it of me, ever fall too far behind. I was quite surprised by the many bodies littering the second floor of course. There was fernjard, even, who I hadn't seen for months, in a pool of red, staring, ostensibly unseeing, at the ceiling. But he could see just fine, and even gave me a wink as I passed. The moment McGee reached the third floor and his escort left him, in any case, the dwarf directed me with a gruff farewell back to my box, outside of which I saw Thera was pacing impatiently.

"Bout time. Thought I was gonna have to do your job myself," she made sure to complain when I returned from my extended absence, as the Yokai there eyed us suspiciously. But since to them we were still the most respected of their charges, they thankfully made no move to bother us as I explained where I had been. Neither did they advance to save me, sadly, from the rough handling with which she directed me into our box once more to witness the last of the supposed slaughter on stage of a dozen fœlcirs dressed like Peach all in black by Orlande's knights, and to enjoy the last of McGee's cheering violins before they paused to resume with a new serene, poignantly restrained, melody.

"She's waiting," was Thera's only comment, just as the music changed. And she pointed me toward the door at the side of our box, that connected to Rhodelia and Aedis's. Cherry ignored us; her concentration was bent wholly on the stage, where Peach was just then making her last entrance. So as the one twin flitted this way and that among the bodies of her fallen bird-comrades below with what I can only describe as a great emotion and ability to the delight of the other, I obliged to Thera's demand in the end, knowing already, somehow, what awaited me on the other side of the door.

Indeed, Aedis was already inside my love, and had begun his pumping just before. One may fail to wonder at my shock at the sight of it: it might as well have been me there, heaving away. This other self of mine was frantically undulating exactly

as I was sorry to realize I must, pants thrown carelessly aside just as I make sure to dispose of mine every time, while Rhodi's legs were open as wide as she'd ever splayed them out for me, her fine dress pressed carefully up and outward exactly as I'd seen her wrap her more disposable garments many times for me to allow him his open reign of her thighs without risking damage to the fabric. The chief difference from our love-making was the fact that she held him so tight. This, of all things, was what first stoked my jealousy into a frothing rage. Although I realized after a moment the true reason for their closeness. For her chin was propped firmly on his shoulder, her gaze directed toward the door through which I entered, and no matter her being so thoroughly engaged, she caught my eye at once. A single further glance to the floor between us, where Aedis's pants laid, sufficed to make plain what she had been so reluctant to explain before. At last, I understood my special service. For protruding from the garment was the pommel of the King's sword. 'From her, I would take a most terrible cost,' I heard her repeat in my head, in marked contrast to the serenity then being emitted from the pit, as Peach checked her fallen birds below for any sign of life. 'Something more precious than life. Something she might do anything in the world to regain. With Cherry it might be a task to find such a thing. But with others it might be far easier, and plain to see.' And there it was: this thing Aedis would surely do anything to regain. What was he without his fine sword, after all? Rhodi's mastery of me and my impulses was as thorough as ever, for the jealousy stoked inside me by seeing him inside her demanded only so perfect a retribution as bringing him to my level once and for all. What Rhodi and her clan did with the sword I was clearly to steal for them from there I cared not. I was sure it would mean the firm and absolute entrapment of the King and I will repeat: I did not care. The thought of it actually gave me great joy then. So I reached down toward the weapon with no more than a moment's hesitation, and without a sound.

But a last glance toward Rhodi gave me pause not a knuckle from the metal. For the glance revealed a new sort of expression spreading across her face. It started as that lopsided, ostensibly more honest smile, as she saw me begin toward the thing. But momentarily it evolved into something more. I finally realized that the lopsided smile was but another layer of paint to conceal her true feelings, a second coat expressly purposed for those who might be able to see through her first. It was this last expression, into which that smile evolved, that was the true mark of her happiness. She could not hide her heart in the position she had put herself to allow me my distraction and motivation in my task, nor the open, awe-faced joy that spread upon her features to destroy that carefully constructed deception she'd used on me those handful of times, forced from her face as it was, bit by bit, by the desperate thrusts of the mass of male above her. It was too much to attribute in any measure to myself. Though I remembered at once her opining about the agreeability and, indeed, necessary simultaneity of hope and arousal inside of people, and how this hope might best be measured in piled up metal like the lump I was then willingly obtaining for her, my own contribution to her stimulation was far too little to explain the obvious depths of her ecstasy. No matter what I did, I despaired, ever would I be unable to cause her joy equal to that the King was then stabbing into her. For it was Aedis, in truth, that she loved. At last, I admitted it to myself. With his title, his fine clothes and his polished shoes. It was he she loved; not I. Her every previous, vehement denial of the fact served only to further its

plainness. And so the knowledge that it was not I who roused such emotion in her came upon me like a tsunami to a peaceful lagoon. No matter it was a near twin to me that was on top of her; no matter my arms hung just as strangely or my face was so similarly drawn, it was he alone that could force such joy upon her soul. That same happiness she'd given me repeatedly I had only given her a single time; the night her story had allowed her to imagine me as him. And as this wave of realization overtook the calm waters of my previously secure self-assurances, I couldn't help reaching under my shirt to where my serpent dagger hung. Waiting.

Perhaps this animal anger welling in me would finally be enough to have me kill, I thought. I saw my dagger enter the back of his head, straight into the brainstem. As a cat knows just where to sink his fangs into his prey without being told; while in my mind's eye, Rhodi writhed in the further, unavoidable pleasure caused her by his death throws, never to be able to forget the terror of that night she chose to toy with me so. A long, long minute passed as these thoughts consumed me. But in the end, that same reluctance to so rudely spill human blood overcame my anger, and she and I both managed to control our more base instincts. I slid my hand from under my shirt while her ready smile forced its way back onto her features to stay. I in fact found myself wondering if I hadn't only imagined that sudden, intense twisting of her features, while in response to my hesitation, she managed to free herself just enough to be able to kick his pants my way, in open and obvious order, no matter the shaking her continuing ecstasy yet caused the limb.

So what choice did I have? Tell me, what else might a self-respecting man have done short of murder? Someone, at least, would regret the night more than me, was my sole comfort and way forward. And so I finally reached for the blade to take it for myself. Although Rhodi's kicking had aroused Aedis's suspicion. For a moment I was certain my hesitation had cost me all. But she saved me in the end. The moment his attention left her heaving breast to see what the fuss was all about with her leg, she grabbed him by his hair and pulled him back to her with a renewed, furious bucking beneath him and he lost all control. So after what seemed a great time there, I backed out slowly, sword in hand, to my own box and to Thera's waiting, knowing smile; no matter no more than a minute or two had passed, and Peach still danced slowly, exceedingly beautifully, alone on stage.

Cherry was still enraptured by the dance below and I doubt even noticed me leave. Thera had to clear her throat rudely to pull her attention for the slightest time from the stage. Twice the maid Malloy had to grunt, even, to do so; though she had no such trouble in taking Aedis's sword from my limp, uncaring grasp, so emotionally drained was I.

"A-*hem*," she had to repeat a third time, to get more of a response than the quickest flick of grey eyes.

"Is that it, then?" was Cherry's half-annoyed response at last; for the other half of her was still reserved for Peach below. And to the raised, fine sword in Thera's hand, she surmised sidelong, "That's how it's to be, then. I should've known. He wants me dead. And he'll have you do it. He's always been a bit possessive. Go ahead then, Anemone. Although I'll have you know you'll never land the blow," as her hand drifted down toward her boot.

I might have jumped to save one or the other had I not been understandably completely depleted of all willingness to interfere in women's affairs. But before I could act, Thera thankfully returned to her playful self. She dropped the point to

the ground with an exaggerated frown, insisting, "No wonder the others don't like you much, Cherry. You're so mean. He doesn't want you dead. He wants you back. Not a single word since he's been free, he complains every damn day, seems. He'd like to give you a chance to come back properly. I'm sure you noticed the guards outside. I had my father select them specially for tonight. Said I read about them in a book. The famous assassins Yokai. Known for countless deaths yet never brought to justice. Including, some say, the last King of Saerohan. Who better to protect us tonight on this most dangerous of nights? Course I didn't read about them at all, did I? Was Adoneus who told me about them and which of my uncles to talk to to get them here. Him who tells me what to do. And I do it, since I'm a nice, good girl. Unlike you."

Half a laugh escaped Cherry's lips as she finally understood the other. And another minute passed without a word as she watched Peach twirl away down below still. The girl sank into a split while Cherry still pondered. She rose again into an arcing handstand that flowed into a twisting, descending spiral that only brought her twirling to her feet once more, all in perfect time to the skipping scales from the solo violin below. Cherry still sat without a word. Finally, she ventured, "All this, then. This whole damn opera. Is for me. Even for Adoneus it's a bit much, isn't it?"

Thera's response was to sink into the chair she'd yet to fill for long with a heartfelt sigh that belied her thirty years, even if it did come from her still adolescent breast. And as she grew more wistful, she propped up her chin on the rail in front of us, eyes on the pit and the music coming from within, moaning, "Sa..." which is of course elven for many things, including, 'Who knows?' before continuing, "Sometimes I wonder if it's not all for you, Cherry," with a forlorn glance at the ground.

But her melancholy was fleeting. A mere shrug banished it to the winds as she picked up the sword again in order to knight the other as "Sir Cherry." And with such a flourish as she thought necessary for the ceremony, she tossed the blade into the other's reluctant grasp, pulling from her handbag two pairs of what I remembered Maddox Malloy calling sunglasses during my visit to his shack on the mœcsɟma, along with a third object I had never seen before, that looked somewhat like a candle.

Cherry, in the meantime, wondered aloud, "So that's to be my price, then. If I can best them, I'm welcome back?"

Thera donned her glasses. Cherry might have remained comfortably seated had the girl not then forced the second pair onto her face. Only once the two were thus equipped did Thera explain, "It's not a price, Cherry. It's a gift. From him to you. You're always welcome back."

And with that, Thera retrieved a pair of humorously large gloves from behind the curtain she then pulled in front of our box and, donning them, lit the strange candle, which began to emit such brightness that even before it reached its peak I was forced to look away; while Cherry complained she'd wanted to see the end of Peach's dance.

Therefore as Orlande emerged from stage left to battle his sometimes lover, the great bird Hrafn - or her deceptively enticing, human form, that is - below, in a last contest I knew quite well who would win, I gripped the rail and pointed my back to them, shielding my eyes so as to attempt to be able to witness the contest from which it seemed equally impossible for Cherry to emerge victorious. Five was too

many, I knew. Surprise or no, immersed in a blinding light or not, Durandal in hand or otherwise, they were Yokai; even one had been a match for her and Rose combined. But I couldn't see nor hear a thing, no matter how I tried. The light Thera held was simply too bright, the music and banging below too loud. In the end I had to turn to watch the battle on stage. A metal volcano worked into the last set of boards spouted flame almost to the height of the ceiling while a trio of fœlcirs dressed as wizards hit Peach with fireballs made of red cloth, sound effects courtesy of Peg, and Pog and Pug. Peach did her best but dætie's fake Durandal was too much for her. In the end she took the brunt of the false blade, and after a last painfully slow and spectacular dance to a solo from Adoneus, who Thera had all but pointed out to us as the lead violin moments before, fell to the floor, supposedly dead.

But Hrafn's fate was not to be repeated in real life. For as the music drew to a close, I was finally able to see well enough to make my way into the hallway, where I managed to overhear a single exchange. Long have I poured over what few books exist detailing the Dryad's language. I can't be certain of anything save the name at the end, but as best as I can remember, the elf then facing her spat angrily, "Llathe'mo dychlenai, Suiko.": 'Killing me won't bring him back, Suiko.'

Her response was crystal clear however: "Can't know unless I try."

And so on the very last note of al alonostra, it was Cherry who took the head of the last remaining Yokai no matter his ready katana, even cutting the weapon in two in the process. That bit - the timing of it, at least - McGee's tale got right.

"Sure, sure" Bellio interrupted, as I made certain to be firmly absorbed in not contradicting the dwarf's supposed triumph. "That's all very impressive, McGee. But we're talking about Gunter, here. I am, anyway. How do you go from all that to us being surrounded, him going on 'bout right and wrong, Aedis nowhere to be seen. That's what I meant: what happens *after* the music stops."

"Well, it's all pretty simple from there, isn't it?" said McGee.

"Indulge us," was Diarmuid's ready reply. "Pretend we don't have much a'n imagination."

So McGee surmised, "Well, seemed Gunter was fucked, didn't it? Bunch of his Murdochs were dead, all his Yokai, plus watch was back with the Allans while fœlcirs were all just fine. More'n that, even, since moment Adoneus puts down his violin and steps out onto the stage, the crowd just goes crazy. Was clear it was him they'd come to see, nevermind all the damn lights and this story outta Caledonia; and that if anyone laid a finger on 'im, there'd be a couple thousand pissed-off rich folks to contend with, nevermind everyone on the lawn. So. When he waves his 'producer and director,' Gunter'n Rhodelia, down onto the stage to join in the applause then bein' showered on him'n Peach, what could the two of 'em do but slink on down? As for Aedis, he was outta sight same reason we were, I'm sure. We was all of us just waiting for our time to strike."

I, of course, was sure that the King was nowhere to be found at the time not because of any elaborate plan against either Adoneus or his crew, but instead owing to a frantic and futile search for his fine sword.

But McGee paused not a second in his deception. He continued,

'You ask rasid; he'll confirm everything I say. Both of us was there on stage, listening to every word, him alongside his precious Rhodi, me axe ready to make sure they all did like Adoneus said; while the applause dies down so they can all try to hear this last and final act unfold.

They knew each other from somewhere, the two of 'em, was clear, although not as enemies, since, "*You*," Gunter says to Adoneus first thing, once he can make out his face, as if he was just then getting stabbed in the back.

"Yes, me," says Adoneus, obviously pretty pleased with himself. Says, "Was foolish to think you could buy my men."

Gunter just grunts.

"And yet you still smile. Are you acting for the crowd? Hope that if you pretend well enough to be my friend I might spare your life? What was it you said, now? Ah, yes. To the very root!" And somethin' bout some damn oak tree. Then Adoneus gives Thera half a glance. "Perhaps if you agreed to hand over your daughter," he says, "I might allow you, the root, to live to tell the rest of your clan how you fared here tonight in your attempt to secure my city for yourselves. What do you say, Gunter? Your daughter's life for yours. I'd think the answer obvious." Nevermind most of us there knew Thera'd be fine no matter what her daddy said.

But Gunter's a tough old nut. I tried to tell 'em. You can slaughter his clan, you can threaten his daughter, you can get 'im alone without a ploughin' pen to protect 'imself. He takes it all in stride. Part a' me thinks it only gets 'im going. He still had a trick or two up 'is sleeve, nevermind what it all looked like. He's still standing there, smiling, as he says, "I've no need to decide, you fool."

"No need, you say?" Adoneus says.

"I was quite aware I would need convince you of certain victory in order for you to reveal yourself, you see. But there is one thing you've failed to consider."

"What's that, Gunter?" says Adoneus, with a finger to get some air in his collar now. Couldn't've played the part of doomed villain any better'n he'd been paid.

"That's right," says Gunter, twirling to the audience so they can hear. This is your part, Bellio: "There's something you haven't considered, you devil. Something more important than all your money and power: right and wrong. You think that just because you've thrown more gold at your watch than I have that you've won their hearts? Gold they have already. What they don't have is a position the completion of which brings them satisfaction and joy in life. In short, they believe in something you will never understand: doing good."

That's when the scuffle started up above, as Gunter goes on, back to just us, "Of course not all of them are moral paragons. Some will have to be dealt with. But these will find themselves outnumbered, by my careful reckoning, not to mention taken completely by surprise. Seeing as you are so sure of yourself as to appear openly on stage, most of your gypsies will likely have abandoned their posts at their earliest convenience; those with any sense of duty will have congregated here around you, making them all too easy to surround, especially as my men now have the advantage of elevation and weapons that strike at a distance. You - and your base morality, which dares to equate a tree with man - must admit now that you've been outplayed, outmatched, and outthought."

Have to give it to him: Adoneus sure looked like he was about to piss his pants.

The end finally here for me, oh whatever shall I do... He waits like this, shifting around nervously down on stage, as all the watch what believe in "right and wrong," having just shot their comrades in the back, point their crossbows down at us from the boxes on the second floor. Still he waits, silently. Past when all the fœlcirs what hadn't already slipped off back to the woods are goaded there round us by Murdochs. Not a word. He takes a good long gander, even, at the boss Malloys up on the third level still stuffing their faces with food as they watch the drama going down below, and the rest of the audience what're biting their fingernails clear off as they wonder whether this's all scripted or not. Finally, though, not a moment before seems someone's got to loose a bolt at us, he sings, "And your clan, Gunter?"

Gunter's all but sauntered off to leave us to our doom at this point. But he can't very well ignore me'n the fœlcirs surrounding him, can he? So he's left with no choice but to say, "What about them?"

"It must bother you greatly the cost you've had to incur to convince me to reveal myself. Malloys, all. Respectable professionals to a man. Dead, all of them. And yet you still seem awfully pleased with yourself to have trapped me here in this manner. Tell me, what do the dead have to say about right and wrong, Gunter? Did you give them the option of sacrificing themselves for your ambitions? Or did you make that decision for them?"

Gunter's spin back to Adoneus was quick as lightning. "The good have no qualms about dying to make the world a better place, you devil. That is what you'll never understand!"

"Like yourself?" said Adoneus, with an eye on the crossbows above. And that was all. Not a word afterwards. The invitation to start firing was clear. Yet not a single bolt came. The bluff was up. More time passed in silence, more clear it got that the watch'd been ordered, on pain of not getting paid, not to fire so long as Gunter was down on stage. fœlcirs start to figure it out too, and they just smile down on the dumb, trapped fuck.

So, finally, seein' as now it's Gunter what's pulling at his collar, Adoneus asks me, "What do you think, Mr McGee?"

"Bout what, ye dingbat," says I.

"About such a thing as good and evil," says he.

"Well," says I, "I don't really worry about it too much." Which you all know is the truth.

"And your cousins?"

But Gunter don't let us finish. Somehow, he can't see where we're going, which bothers him just about as much as anything might. "What on earth do his cousins have to do with it!?" he says.

So, with a last fuck-you smile right back at 'im, Adoneus says, "Well... Depends how many cousins he's got," I didn't have to mention that not a single McGee what draws breath worries 'bout it much either for the bastard to realize just how fucked he was.

So there we were: me; Adoneus; Orlande 'n Peach; Rhodi, Gunter, rasid and Thera. Surrounded by Terrans. All of us surrounded by Murdochs and the most righteous of the city watch up above. And all of them, a' course, surrounded by McGees, back from their break at last. It wasn't even fair how bad we outnumbered 'em. You can say what you want about us; we don't much give a shit, since

the one thing there is is a lot of us. Might not be able to afford all them fancy swords and spears and all that, but we can still punch and kick, and hit 'em with a coat stand if you know where to find one. It was four on one; five on one. Like I said: completely unfair. And that's just the way we like it.

Anycase, as all these damn Murdochs start getting picked off and beat to a pulp one by one, Adoneus shouts, "My offer still stands, Gunter. Your daughter's life for yours. What say you?" And he leans in to whisper, "I will take her here and now and the audience will only applaud the louder, thinking it part of the night's drama. I am immortal. Do you believe this is the first time I've killed to the delight of thousands? A production of mine often has need of an encore, you see. Or have you a backbone after all? Will you sacrifice yourself so that she may live? I must say, it was she who thought such a thing impossible. I never ruled it out completely."

That, now, with a single glance at his dear Thera, was the moment Gunter finally admitted to himself just how thoroughly she'd been corrupted by this bastard; you could see it in 'is eyes. His own daughter! Fuuckng before her thirty-third birthday! And not just the help but the enemy! Doesn't say a word, now. No; this insult was too much for anything but immediate action. Didn't take 'im long to reach for that tiny, little bird neck Thera's got and start to squeeze...'

Here McGee, just as Gunter had, to the great surprise of all around, grabbed at my neck to demonstrate the technique. Which gesture I now realize had the primary aim of informing me that he did, in fact, know where his (my) dagger was; for its chain dug into my skin terribly as I wondered how far he would take his game. Before I suffocated, in any case, if with a careful reclamation of his knife, he let me go. And, returning the thing to his pocket, now directing his relation alternately toward Whaker and Ari, he continued,

'...but how long was that supposed to take? Too long is how. Moment he turns his back to the crowd, who but Rhodi slips a razor into his chest! Nobody else saw it from my angle, 'cept maybe them above; this bitch knows how to work a crowd. And that, understandably, was the end of Gunter. Crowd gasps all at once while she clutches him as he dies there, all the while singin' away, more'n loud enough for everybody to hear about his noble sacrifice, as if he'd decided to put that little thing into himself to save his precious daughter.'

Now to Bellio and Diarmuid in turns:

'And that, my friends, is the moment the tides changed for the last time. It's also, case you don't quite remember, the moment you all decided to jump into the fray. You could've stayed in your rutting seats, so don't complain to me about being surrounded, or try to blame it on Aedis when all you had to do was pay attention to the story to know the end hadn't come just yet. You acted too quick and that's that. If you'd a' stayed put, it would've been us that ended up doing the surrounding. But as it was, Rhodi's not one to worry about a stray bolt; she orders the watch to open fire soon as Gunter shuts his eyes for good, right same moment the doors round the stage open up to let all her damn boyfriends through. And *that* is the mess you all decided to jump straight into.

Now, in yer defense, for all his careful planning, I don't think Adoneus saw this last bit coming either. Moment he sees this new crew, he can't help but ask her, as she's still on her knees beside Gunter, fake tears a'flowing, "And who, my dear, might these be? More than casual acquaintances, I assume."

She just gives a last little sniffle with a, "Oh them? Just some guys me'n my girls met round town," And not a moment later, she's gone. Disappears into thin air with nothin' more'n a bump as Gunter's head hits the stage to mark 'er exit, while Sido grabs Peach 'n Thera to follow her, Orlande pissing his pants not a moment behind 'em.'

Back to Whaker and Ari:

'So. Finally all the girls gone. Was thirty of 'em in Rhodi's crew. Forty, maybe. Plus a couple dozen Murdochs not busy with my boys still. Even counting the fælcirs, who decided pretty quick they were either with us or dead men, we were outnumbered two to one.

Adoneus don't like his odds so much anymore, seems, since he says to no one in particular, "Well, gentleman... I, for one, have had a treme-endous evening..." as he tries to slip off like she does, like the audience finally realizes they should be doin, considering the real bolts'n blood what start flying.

But I grab 'im and wrangle 'im back into the circle as me'n Renault take command, cryin, "Defense, boys. Defense!" And those a' us with half a brain pick up them shields Orlande and his knights'd left around the stage. Was just enough to make a half circle toward the boxes, even if those a' us left behind it could feel the wind off the bolts as they flew by us.

But that's just how I like it, boys: odds stacked against me but a proper team a' killers to see me through. Watch quits wastin' their bolts on our shields after a couple a' minutes once they realize it's a battle a' attrition now; winner'd come out of it thanks to patience and smarts as much as strength and speed. Meanwhile Rhodi's boyfriends start to test us from behind. One thing was clear right away: they were warriors to a pair of hands. This one weighs two hundred easy, and every pound of it muscle. This other one's got silver armor and a ten-foot spear he obviously knows how to handle. And this other one's a rutting ogre! Where she found them all is 'bout as clear to me as how exactly she'd managed to convince 'em to risk their lives for her pint-sized pussy - well, I have my theories, but... Anycase, it was these forty bastards, plus all them Murdochs still and thirty watch, maybe, up above raining down bolts. Versus us, some gypsies and Adoneus. Bout even, I'd say.

So we stay put. With less bolts coming now, we can spread our shields front and back. Some of 'em rush in and try to break our wall, but it doesn't break a single time we don't want it to. "Hold," is all I have to say and these fuckers hold. "Break," Renault says, and in the bastards'd fall to get skewered by the gypsies. Till they quit bein' so dumb.

Sure be nice round about now to have those crossbows gone, wouldn't it!? But Murdochs'd picked up on that bit of strategy at least. They was defending the stairways from my boys harder than anywhere else. There's only so much we can do unarmed, after all. So, after a couple of minutes, Renault pulls me aside and tells me he's going.

"You're going, cap'n?" I say. "But we need ye here!"

"They've got you, McGee," is all he says. All he has to say. And off he goes toward stage right, followed by Comal and Undrik. And these three bust through Rhodi's boyfriends to take on the dozen rutting Murdochs in the south stairway by themselves without a lick a' help from anybody but the fucking fucciz, a throng a' children. Till before ye know it, there's just as many bolts going from the boxes on the south to the boxes on the north as down to the stage, and we can finally break our circle.

This, now, is the free-for-all at last. We were waiting for it; they were waiting for it. Was bound to happen eventually. But we can't let Adoneus escape either, can we? So that's a bunch of us outta the action to guard him. Not to mention mosta the fœlcirs scram right about then, so when's all said and done, it's only forty or so of us free to fight versus Rhodi's boyfriends and all them Murdochs still. Boys, if I've ever seen a fight we shouldn't a' seen the end of, it's this one. And truth be told, for a second there, I was a bit worried. Down went Edge, mace to the side, and we have to pull him to the center to safety. Reggie took a bolt to the chest and can't but barely breathe. fernjard, poor bastard, took a sword to the gut, then another through the temple. Vince and Zavier, still nobody knows. All while Diarmuid here had to go toe to toe with that rutting ogre and three Murdochs all at once; barely came out alive. They, case you're wondering, did not. But still these fuckers keep coming. Me, I'm swinging like I can take down the whole forest, though. One Murdoch down, two Murdochs down. Fuck this gune, down comes another. Timber! Timber! Timber! Till I'm finally surrounded, me'n Earl together.

Twenty on two, it was. But it wouldn't stay that way for long. Outta nowhere she appears: Rose. Takes her claw and shoves it in right here, right under the ribcage on this one fucker from behind, and reaches up, I am not exaggerating, to grab his heart and squeezes, like, till he falls for good. And that was the end of him! After that, we had a bit less to worry about, as you can imagine; and before you knew it those twenty cold bastards were twenty cold bodies.

Course now that I notice it's me'n mine who's got Adoneus surrounded and I'm face to face with Rose, of all people, I think that that's the end for me as well. But don't ask me why, she don't lift a finger against us. Not that anyone was about to bother 'er with all those guts hangin' from her claw. She does make right for Adoneus, though. Fuck, I think. I am not going to hear the end of this from Aedis if I let him get away. But again, don't ask me why, he don't run. Picks up a sword and helps us, fact; this curved little toothpick of a thing, but he gets a shield too and after that he's all but invincible. Not three seconds pass 'fore the first Murdoch falls without a head. It's simply unfair how quick he is. Can slice a fly in half 'fore you even drop the turd. Case in point: the worst of Rhodi's boyfriends was the one I mentioned with the spear. This one, now, was a ploughing problem. You ask anyone on board how they got gashed, two to one it was this bastard what gave 'im his wound. That spear was something else. And he'd spin in the air like a dolphin playin' in the waves if you had chain on under yer suit, all to hit you just hard enough in just the right spot to slip his point a knuckle into yer insides, then leave ye for the next one a' us he saw 'fore you even knew you was bleeding. But we wouldn't have to take 'im down in the end, since Adoneus did it for us, the idiot! Maybe he had us confused with someone what wasn't tryin' to abduct 'im. I dunno.

Probably wanted to do the most damage to the Malloys, hoping he might not even have to deal with us if things kept going the way seemed the way they had to. Anycase, couldn't help but keep an eye on these two as they went on. Like a pair of tornadoes duking it out. Spear, sword, spear, sword. Clang, clash! Till finally, with a parry turned ballerina spin, Adoneus takes out right here, the back of the fucker's calf right above the heel. Like I said, a fly 'fore the turd even gets laid. It is un-fucking-fair, how he swings a weapon. And the one with the spear don't very much wanna take another step after that. Throws up 'is hands and don't make another move. Adoneus lets 'im live. Although Cedrik, as you all know, wasn't so lucky. Thought it'd be a good idea to try to take Adoneus from behind while he was distracted after the duel, sword to Sir Lance-a-lot's face to convince 'im to stay down, and we all know how that turned out for Cedrik; ain't one Cedrik anymore so much as two roughly Cedrik-shaped pieces. Hope somebody picked up 'is skulls.

Anycase, even with Adoneus and Rose on our side, plus the ones what was guardin' 'im free to join in in the fray now, we wasn't doin' so good. Half of us by this point'd taken a hit and was outta the fight. We're down to thirty max still swingin' versus twenty gunes and who knows how many Murdochs still. What's worse, it's then I start to smell the smoke. It was Maddox Malloy, the bastard, had the bright idea to use my bonfire to burn down the south side of the stage, trappin' Renault, Comal, Undrik and the fuҽiz in the smoke. And don't get me wrong; it was a bright idea. Now, not only would we be forced to split our forces to try to save 'em, watch on the north side was free to hit us from above again, and we were too spread out to circle up like before. So. Shit is not looking good at this point, I think. Only way out was to keep on swingin'n blocking, though, so that's what I did. Until it's no one but me, Bellio 'n Sever, Earl a'course, Adoneus and Rose - Tilty 'n Vector were limpin' round still too, if I remember right - circled up round the rest of us. Lookin' fucked as a sailor on payday.'

And at last back, directly, to Bellio:

'So. Nevermind what Gunter said or the fact that Aedis never showed his face again that night; you can't sit there and tell me it was all their elaborate plan to have us surrounded. The one of 'em was long dead by this point! It was Rhodi and Rhodi all along. On behalf of the rest of the Malloys. Tell me: did any of them up on the third story give a start to see Gunter get what was coming to him? No they did not! Cause it was them what'd wanted that ending all along! Gunter dead means promotions all 'round for them. So. Don't ever misjudge these sneaky bastards again, and you'll be fine. And next time you go to the opera with a mind to snatch the star, best wait till the rutting thing's over!'

For all his careful, previous argument, Bellio, I saw, even if far from swayed by McGee's tale, had lost all patience to counter its plethora of detail. With a last dismissive wave at the dwarf but not another word, he departed to the night. Whaker and Ari both seemed pleased enough with this obviation of a vote on mutiny; while Sever had clearly long since ceased caring about any danger he might be forced to face from those who resided below the ships' collective quarterdeck so long as our bearing remained firmly in the direction of this black keep McGee had

mentioned. I had seen Sever in action at al opera from my hiding spot backstage; he was an absolute killing machine. No matter McGee's posturing, the compliments he'd made sure to heap upon Diarmuid and the countless stories told about Renault and Aedis, it was Sever who was the real warrior among them, I now understood; he who'd brought down a dozen more enemies than anyone else without major incident. He was so fluid with a blade, I was certain to him every battle was little more than an opportunity to outlast any opponents his demeanor earned him. I thought it likely he might actually welcome any future traps set for the crew more than fear them. Of those who remained in the captain's quarters, only Diarmuid fostered any visible reservations about still following Aedis, though now being so outnumbered, he voiced not a single one. He merely rose with a shrug - if one that did little to hide the last sidelong, openly suspicious glance he shot toward me - to make after Bellio. McGee made sure to forbid me from leaving as the others followed suit. And so, in short order, I was left alone in the swaying, sweltering suite with only him and Whaker.

"He has a point, you know," the first mate ventured once the door closed behind Lyus, as McGee quit his post on the bookshelf to make for the captain's chair behind the grand table in the center of the room at last, leaning back to happily puff on his pipe.

"Who does?" said the dwarf.

"Bellio, you idiot," said Whaker. "Do you really believe the Malloys knew we were coming? Whole thing was a trap for us?"

"Course not!" spat McGee. Then after a sudden return to standing as he remembered his barrel of ale, while he poured three 'pints' into whatever nearby vessel he could find, even if only the mug he reserved for himself was intended for this purpose, and handed me my cracked vase, he ventured in turn, "What do you think rasid? Who was it what set a trap for us, hmm? Aedis or the Malloys?"

"Neither," I declared. And, with an eye on the gently rocking waves behind us, I thought myself extremely clever for the metaphor, "We're all just like these ships, aren't we? Kings and clan leaders included. You can point the tiller and set the sails all you like, but in a storm it's the sea that ends you where it wants. Life's twists and turns are always better explained by mistake and chance than by sinister plots and all that. Although... in my experience sometimes people do happen to do what's good for themselves without really thinking about it too much. If Aedis *was* the one who chose who went and who stayed..."

No matter McGee's sudden declaration, "Experience!?" cut me short, my point had been made clear. Whaker quickly surmised that I was smarter than I looked.

"Yeah, well, I sure can pick 'em, can't I?" complained McGee as he returned to his chair. And leaning back once again, pipe smoldering and so both hands now happily occupied, eyes firmly placed on the ceiling, he continued, "But the others ain't so bright are they? Tell them we got our asses kicked cause that's just the way it goes sometimes 'n they won't believe it. Specially not with Aedis lookin' so damn... culpable. Frettin' round all day like a kid what got caught jerkin' it. No; they'll need a scapegoat for it all. Rhodi and the Malloys'll do nicely, considerin' the King Tide'n all. They'll need some convincin, of course. But no worries on that front now that Sever's on our side."

"Ain't you wonderin' what Aedis might pull next, though?" Whaker worried aloud. "I am. It's like a disease he has; and it's getting worse. It'll come to a head one day

soon, I'm sure of it."

McGee only scoffed, "Wouldn't worry 'bout Aedis!" And finally sparing an eye for us, as he settled his chair just a knuckle back toward level, he crooned, "Sido, why don't you reach behind those books there. Bring it out. That's right."

So I obliged, unsurprised as Durandal emerged from its hiding place, not a foot from where Bellio and Sever had just stood.

Whaker, however, was aghast. "How on earth?" he declared.

So McGee calmly explained with a wave toward me, "Seems the Malloys wanted a bit of leverage on Aedis, but they chose the wrong dingbat to steal 'is sword for 'em. Sido gave it right to Cherry. And Cherry gave it to me. For safekeeping. Like I said, don't worry 'bout Aedis. He's not about to try anything risky - not beyond what he's already committed us to, anyways - with a wooden spoon for a weapon!"

The chuckle that started in Whaker's throat soon spread to his belly, while McGee's self-satisfaction was demonstrated by the thickness with which his smoke now roiled to every corner of the cabin. "Is that it then?" Whaker finally laughed, turning to me once full control of his breath returned. "Diarmuid's been puttin' up all sorts of theories, seein' as they all saw you scamper off. Is that how you earned those holes in your shoulders, rasid? Stealing Aedis's sword? You're one surprise after another, boy!"

'Yup,' I attempted at once: 'Yup; that's just how it happened! Stealin' Aedis's sword...'

But McGee, the bastard, before I could even utter a sound, scoffed, "Ha! No, that's a whole nother story. It's a good one, though. You go ahead, rasid. Tell 'im. You'll like this one, Whaker."

To which demand I of course failed to comply, the matter still being one of some delicacy then, choosing instead to return to the forecastle while doing my best to ignore McGee's trailing explanation, "Seems he's still a bit prickly 'bout it..."

Prickly! Prickly!!! Would that were only the case! But far more: I was pricked. Twice! Prickly didn't approach the half of my attitude toward it then and the word still bothers me now, in case one hasn't noticed. But no matter. In the interest of completeness, not to mention to correct those of Diarmuid's conjectures I've heard that some still believe, I will here quit any thorny aversion to telling the tale.

I had two priorities upon making my rapid exit from the stage: first, to protect Peach from harm at any cost; and second, to somehow simultaneously oblige to Rhodi's demand that I forcibly drag Thera away from Adoneus. Scamper off is hardly the word for it. Regardless, I succeeded on both fronts. Peach was delivered to her waiting sister, who had thankfully had the foresight to hide Durandal somewhere before receiving us backstage, without incident; and Thera, no matter her shouting, squirming, clawing, biting or kicking, was delivered into the hands of one of her uncles to the tune of the Rhodi's repeated insistence that it was for her own good. In the end, I was left alone with my love as the struggle on stage began, hoping - not without a bit of justifiable expectation, I felt - for some affection as a reward for completing the many tasks she had recently demanded of me.

But her exclamation, "The sword!" was the only heed she paid me. Not a kiss, not even a stroke of the cheek. No; "The sword, where is it!?" she demanded impatiently instead.

So, "Upstairs!" I lied, as she eyed me suspiciously. "I hid it in the box! What should I have done!?"

It took a minute for the darkness to leave her expression, as she debated to herself what part in her drama I truly played. In the end, she must have decided I was only as ever her faithful hound, for, "Oh, rasid," she moaned as she stroked my cheek, once more my doting lover. "But I *must* have that blade! Have you not seen what I've just done? Damn that Gunter! You'll fetch it for me, won't you?" And as a body flew through the last set of boards between us and the stage, toppling an entire painted mountain range, she crooned, "I need make my exit, now. But I will await you in our grove. You know the one. I hope you remember that I love you most of all. Yes. I will await you there, my love. As long as it takes. With a bottle of mɒŋtsəɹɔn and two glasses." And she kissed me with such earnest that - no matter we were then surrounded by thirty men or more who probably thought they occupied that singular spot in her heart she'd just told me I claimed themselves; no matter her thighs were likely still wet thanks to the efforts of the one I'd recently realized truly did - I was left in a daze of blind adoration. "Let nature forgive us!" she crooned with her lopsided smile, once she finally released my lips. "For the poor flowers will never recover wherever it is we lay that day. Goodbye, my lover. For a short time, that is. I'll be waiting..." Her acting was phenomenal; she only dared quit me after being pulled from my extended grasp by another of Thera's uncles. So I writhed there in indecision once alone; one eye on the struggle on stage, the other still trailing her; one half of my imagination given over to the memory of her in Aedis's arms, the other consumed with a vision of how exactly I might best my competitor at the extreme expense of that meadow's verdure. As one can imagine, the decision was already made. I made off straightaway in the direction of Peach and Cherry's departure, back toward the main hall, in search of Rhodelia's prize.

But I knew my pursuit of the 'twins' would be a challenge: after an elf or two - I hadn't decided yet if Peach was in fact Cherry's sister as they claimed she was - in a melee. My hopes sank even further when I emerged into the main hall, for the place was utter chaos. The audience was a seething mass of panicked faces trampling itself to flee the crossbow bolts while Murdoch and McGee filled every remaining space with their brawling. And to add to the disarray, none other than the mɘʌiɹas were making their entrance then at last. Stoked into immediate action by samara's long-distance ride and revelation of what she'd understood of Aedis and Renault's plot to capture Adoneus, they had ridden the day away in order to return her to al ɑpeɹa surrounded by every man in camp old enough to bear arms. They were trotting down the aisle leading from the southern entrance single file, eyes firmly locked on their friend in his straits, the fleeing audience breaking on the breast of sadəʃ's horse, taitɲ, a handsome vœner mottled black and white of indeed uncommon proportions, like waves on the bow of a sturdy ship. I was so desperate to find Rhodi's sword, however, a moment was all I could spare to find samara poised atop her white stallion; though I did make sure to demand of myself that the moment I found the weapon, I would use it to protect my first love no matter the obstacle.

But my way was only further impeded before I even caught sight of Cherry or Peach by Aedis, as he grabbed me from the shadows to demand if I had seen his sword. "Was one of those damn elves, I'm sure of it," he spat. "A second only I take my eye off of it, and it's gone. Sneaky bastard took it while I was distracted, then turned on his own. Used my blade to betray his own brethren; makes me sick.

Hast seen it? Or an elf; any elf. Pray tell me you have."

So I of course told him that I had. Clear as day: an elf carrying what looked to be a blade, going from backstage down to the trap room. I'd wondered about it myself, but hadn't acted; if His Majesty was quick, he would be sure to catch the villain before he made the service entrance. For it was then that I finally caught sight of Peach, surrounded by a throng of volunteer audience members attempting to clear a path for her through the ruckus of the center aisle.

"Wait, wait!" she cried when she saw me clearing rows of seats at a time in my haste to accost her. And as her entourage resignedly allowed me through their circle into her presence, she sang, "What is it, rasid?"

"Peach; Cherry!" I panted. "I need your sister. Does she have a sword with her?"

"Yes, but..."

"Which way?" I demanded.

But no direction was forthcoming. Instead, tears welled up in the girl's eyes as she suddenly and forcibly pulled my face to her breast, nearly suffocating me in the process. And as those round us seethed with obvious jealousy, she cried, "You're so brave! You're going to help her! So I'll tell you, but only after a kiss, same as I made her give me before she went off for her man. Next one's for free, as well. I don't care what she says... That way; back to the stage and help my Cherry."

At this point, of course, I was feeling quite good about myself. Nevermind the one, I knew, was using me as a pawn in a chess game and the other had utterly misread my intentions as something noble; two sweetly passionate kisses from such beauties as Rhodi and Peach one after the other; I couldn't help making a quick tour of the room to see if perhaps Venus and Jasmine were there to dote on me for a spell before I got back to my business. I even briefly thought for a second to visit my dear Rose on stage, but was ultimately dissuaded by the innards then hanging from her claw. Please do not judge; one must strike while one's luck holds in this game of love! And luck was with me then it seemed. My prospects for the next day seemed extremely bright, in fact, for as I turned back toward the stage I finally took long note of samara in all her glory. Her weeks of hard trekking in cælia had more than shaved that problem knuckle from her belly without stealing an ounce from her other fullnesses. And so brave she was! So beautiful! She was perched on her white stallion like some Valkyrie of old. Why she was there, I had no idea. But fate! Yes, it must be fate! I would find Durandal, then be so gallant a defender of her that we would need put the rest of the day aside for each other's company. Perhaps after visiting Rhodi in the grove, we three might rest for a time at the Whale. All together. Or perhaps not, I thought. No, it would surely be safer in the long term to keep the two apart. In any case, such were my thoughts as I began to follow the trail of headless Murdoch bodies I was sure would lead me to Cherry.

After four or five, I came upon her, a mere step before she mounted the stage in her own gallant defense of Adoneus. "Cherry, wait!" I cried.

"You again," she complained.

"Yes, me," I said simply as I approached. And, perhaps only merely acting now out of a sort of habit, if still entirely aware that there would be no other easy way to take the sword from her, I grasped her at once in my arms and kissed her, to her great surprise, thus freeing the weapon for myself. I ran away at once toward samara, not waiting to see if she pursued. She did, of course, after collecting herself and wiping her lips with a groan; but the pair of Murdochs I slipped

through immediately upon leaving her kept her busy long enough for me to make my escape.

samara was then on stage, back to back with Rose, shield in hand, protecting the orcess from the crossbow bolts raining down from above. sadʑʃ and her brothers, mounted on their proud beasts, spears shining in the light of the moon now revealed by the broken boards like holy relics, had by then skewered or scared off most of the Malloy's thugs like so many boars. Therefore Adoneus was finally free to turn his attention from the remainder of their fleeing forces to confront McGee, Sever and the rest of the crew, then regrouping to claim him, their prize, as their captive. But the fight I expected never came. Instead McGee only stomped on the floor four times deliberately. A moment passed as all paused to wonder at what the idiot was doing; long enough, even, for him to angrily start to bang again. But we wouldn't have to wait past the maneuver's repetition to understand its purpose, for after only three stomps a trap door opened in the stage, swallowing him whole. Adoneus saw his doom before him plainly and made to run but was too slow. McGee could be heard shouting below, "No, no! Four means *that* one. Just pull them all! Pull them all, dammit!" And so, numerous holes opened in the stage at once, admitting not only Adoneus but the whole rest of the crew. I never saw any of them again that night.

I, of course, didn't care in the least; for samara was nearly before me and was fending off so continuous a volley that I was worried she might be injured. The Murdochs round them were encroaching on all sides. samara's mace, being claimed from the hand - or head, rather - of the chief guard of the orphanage, had earned her the ire of one of the elder Murdochs, surely the deceased's close relative. Therefore, no matter near every one of their allies was making their fleeing exit at the time, the ten or fifteen dwarves with him seemed determined to bring her down no matter the cost. Rose was swiping away to great effect but only had her one set of claws. I arrived at just the right moment to save them. I slashed the hand of one halfway through the upswing of his mace that if left unchecked would have crushed samara's ribs, amazed at the unnatural sharpness of Durandal as it cleaved through pommel and finger alike without the slightest resistance. Another fell less the pint of blood that spewed from the wound I gave him with my dagger; while Rose continued her deadly dance. And so, in short order, we three were left alone and unbothered, as the watch above were tossed from their perch by some fœlcirs at last. Victory! Triumph! And exactly as I'd hoped, the moment the last Murdoch fell, samara turned to me and flung her arms round me in soft and happy embrace.

Although my revelry was short-lived. For she had noted me there at al ɒpeɹa as surely as I had her. The moment she'd entered the building, in fact, she'd been confronted with my and Rhodi's passion on stage. Neither had she failed to note my embrace with Peach and Cherry each in turn. But not only that, sadly. Once she'd reached Rose's side and a break in the action had allowed a short exchange between the two, she being clearly distracted by my advance toward Cherry, Rose had, with a wink and a waving finger, conspiratorially ventured to her of me - I lie and exaggerate not; word for word! - "He is very small... But *very* big!" To which comment samara had only dared blush, with a cry of, "Rose!" Therefore her embrace had a dual purpose; I assume part of her, at least, was happy to see me. But the other part of her somehow managed to pull my dagger from my hand while I was enraptured by her scent and embrace, thereafter embedding it directly

into my right shoulder.

"cuanti!?" she demanded, eyes aflame, as she followed me to the ground and the last of our adversaries fled. "cuan. ti."

"H-how, many w-what," was all I managed to stammer, wincing.

She only twisted the dagger in its bloody holster, pressing clean through my arm almost. "cuanti," was her repeated demand. All there were now enthralled by this, the final, final act of my opera. Not a soul moved to save me. mɤʌiɾa, fɷlcir and McGee alike all watched on, at best nudging their neighbor with half a chuckle. "How many," spat samara, cold as ice.

So what's a man to do!? With my best attempt at a contrite shrug, I eked, "sane, samara. Two. But you've always..."

"sane?" she sang, twisting it now the other way.

"sane, samara. sane. maevɟmi!": 'Forgive me!'

And so at long last, with a sinister smile, she slid the blade from me. "OK, rasid. I believe you," she said calmly. Before sinking the dagger into my opposite shoulder, that is, there to stay, ruby eyes of the twin snakeheads dancing in the light of the fire then starting to consume half al ɒpeɾa, as she raged back to her family.

And so. Thus ended al alonostra, a production of one rasid Whoever-I-care-to-be Allan-abadi, fully at last.

8.

Not to mention thus did I make my firm resolution to join the crew of the Decade's End. Any man who has suffered the true wrath of a woman will understand. Even as Cherry dragged me, still bleeding (I might have felt worse about ruining her dress had she not made sure to commend samara's aim in so effectively maiming me before bothering to tend to my wounds), back to the Whale, I made this decision. Not only was I happy to flee ɕlia, I was perfectly content to leave the entirety of the continent to mml mʌiɟa until such time as she might cool down. I would have left her the whole planet were it only physically possible to depart it for a time, for I doubted very much I would survive her so carefully counted retribution were she ever to learn the two women I'd claimed to have slept with was actually more like seven or eight. The ships still weren't ready to depart, however, so I was unable to avoid her for long; she had yet *another* sudden change of heart on the way to the mountains with her family and fled them to make for the city once again. I hid myself in McGee's apartment the moment I caught sight of her wandering up the mœcsɟma toward the library, thinking myself safe from her there at least. But the woman made fast friends with Paudrik upon arriving and spent the entire rest of the day searching the basement for me. "ya mɟscɟn!" she cried when she finally found me, led by the smell my pipe sent wafting through the halls (no matter I'd waited more than long enough that any *sane* woman must have given up her search before daring to light it). She said she'd forgiven me completely and that she felt it was her responsibility to take care of me until I recovered from my "sfortunati" wounds. Insisting that I now call her Belle for some reason, she tended to me with such zeal that I was hesitant to look her in the eye a single time. She even went so far as to complete the every task I'd allowed to back up above in between her cooking for me, cleaning McGee's apartment and tending to the gaping holes in my shoulders that were also her recent handiwork. One may think me callous to escape what might seem such genuine commitment. But suffice to say that every now and then, generally after mounting me to change my bandages on Adoneus's massive bed, her eyes would lose their intensity and glaze over in daydream, and she would manipulate me with so sudden a force that I needed scream out in pain; not that anyone besides the cat was there to hear or help me. For which clearly intentional hurt she would barely bother to apologize; a forced smile then and some equally forced intimacy sometime later is all I would receive. One look at her so-called care when McGee finally returned from the End to save me, and he said plainly, "On earth you gotten yourself into? Think it's time to get you out of here!" I heartily agreed.

Therefore, one morning while she was busy among the shelves, he and I snuck out the front door, he bearing his chest alone, to make for Gordon's cart. We hid under some books, not daring a single breath as samara loaded more on top of us, then commandeered the vehicle some hundred yards down the mœcsɟma.

"Industrious as ever, Mr McGee," said Dunedin when we arrived at the Whale and transferred the chest to the care of two other, finely dressed Allans. They loaded it up on their own, recently emptied cart as McGee waved the air matter-of-factly in way of reply, which gesture extended fluidly for him to receive and peruse the list Dunedin was then holding, an inventory of the last supplies then being

ferried to the End.

It was a fine, fine day; the kind of pleasant one might well take for granted, the only difference from those preceding it being a sudden absence of overwhelming heat. The kind of pleasant that, having now completed the whole circuit of the maritime equator, I don't hesitate to name as the true nature of Earth's atmosphere, all others besides storm being aberrations; even if on land these days are all too fleeting, crammed in inconspicuously as they are among summer's sweltering excitement. Regardless, the sun shone strongly, if among the substantive clouds by which its fervor was now and then tempered, and the wind was steady, calm and warm, an ideal medium for the unhurried breath tasks like lazing about and doing little demand. My favorite. Having been until recently all but locked up below the library, I made sure to inhale deeply of the air of the day, by which calming and simple pleasure I managed to gracefully ignore the overbearing approach of Aedis, whose unhidden irritation marked him as one likely guilty of the kind of lack of gratefulness for nature's delivery of occasional perfection I have just mentioned. I also noticed quickly that his hand rested, as if attached by glue, on his ostensible sword; the same, I was sure, in truth, that deTie had wielded against Peach.

"I thought I made myself clear, Dunedin," the King demanded. "Not on my life will that bastard sail on my crew. He's received his papers and pay. We're done and square. Bad enough nobody told me who it was, really, came up with that hair-brained plan last week. I won't have it!"

No matter Aedis's preening posture, however, Dunedin barely looked up from his papers to croon, "A point you have made clear to my uncle time and time again, Your Majesty. But Mr McGee won't be sailing as part of your crew. He'll be sailing as a captain." And to the veins bulging on Aedis's forehead, the young Allan explained, "The Horizon is our ship, King Aedis. We have allowed you to pretend otherwise until now. But from here onward, you *will* be so kind as to defer to Mr McGee in all matters regarding distribution of supplies. As interim captain, only in charge until we receive the King Tide in proper working condition of course, he has been instructed to follow your every command in all other matters as per our contract; so long as to his estimation such command does not endanger the fulfillment of said agreement. Besides, it is necessary for our mission that all believe the Twin Horizon to in fact be its original for a time, as you are well aware; it is why she was constructed in the first place. Therefore we are in need of a suitable look-alike for our wayward captain Alevi Allan. Our Mr McGee will fit the part nicely, so long as none hear him speak. If you had a better candidate for the position in mind, you should have made your thoughts known. Or perhaps you thought we might allow the Horizon to fall under your command permanently without proper documentation?"

And that was that. Aedis dared not complain further, no matter the fervor with which he grabbed his 'sword.'

So pliant did the King in fact become, that some time later, once our skiff, the last to depart the dock, reached the Horizon to deposit him therein, he allowed McGee an unexpected ascent of the rigging without comment, only shaking his head resignedly to climb up afterwards. McGee had by then informed me that we would both be sailing on the End, so all I could do was look around in confusion. Although I might have guessed at his business. For after a time, there was a sudden commotion above, preceded by the great splash Douglas made as he met the sea

beside us. The skiff's oarsmen, far less surprised than me, made sure to pull their burdens out of the water, above the struggling dwarf's reach, only returning them to the waves in order to push the fool back toward land, pointing lazily to the dock as they did. And so, after this tear-laden goodbye, we quit Celia at last.

We made our way east on that pleasant, northwesterly wind for three days, sailing directly across the Sudden without incident or indeed any of the ships ever dropping below ten knots. Our path from there to the shifting, shallow Reiki and open ocean beyond laid through the treacherous Syrian Gap, a wide but rocky, island-filled passage through which the East Imperial's water flows backward into the Sudden, there to be burned off by the sun more than ever replenished by rain. Here was my first introduction to the dangers of seafaring, but our captains had all in hand. The wind was still strong and to our back, and the moon nearly new, so we waited on the open water until just before dawn, when the flow of the tide negates the current. Therefore the water sat still, if very shallow, when we made our run. We quit the well-traveled, meandering Juttel, the deepest route across the gap, in less than an hour. A rest off Rajat until noon and from there, we enjoyed the assistance of the ebb to continue southeast, anchoring that evening outside Cuira just as the tide began its flow back the way we had come.

As for my own contribution to our progress, I should have been thrown into permanent rotation with Lyus, Haeggar, Ledfetter and Frenge, the other new crew, on hull maintenance, and was in fact forced to push a swab around no matter the holes in my shoulders until we nearly made the Imperial; but was saved that fate for long by McGee's repeated insistence that it was I who should be the one to fill the recently vacated post of quartermaster of our little convoy, me being the only one there who "A: could count; and B: wasn't an unrepentant, filthy thief." I laughed at that last bit, of course. In any case, the matter wasn't up to McGee, really, he now spending his nights below the quarterdeck. The position was more one of assurance for those who occupied the other end of the vessels, a firm recognition that the ships' property was the crew's property far more than it was anyone else's, and therefore should be accounted for only by one of them, a label I was anything but guilty of at that point. But after we resumed our progress past Cuira with the next ebb after midnight, and we had that clandestine, potentially mutinous meeting I've already described, I earned a pair of important allies among the crew in the form of Sever and Ari. And once we reached Mazminat, where all those with a mind to have their voices heard regarding our business assembled in the galley of the End to better drink in excess together as a team, all while attempting to shout over one another for better or worse for the better part of an evening, I was selected to my new post in a hurried, last item of business before Den stabbed Petro (as, in all fairness, he said he'd do two or three times that night alone). It was a close vote. Diarmuid and Bellio both abstained, I noted, with an air of great generosity. Thus was I chosen to that supposed sinecure.

Regardless, McGee assured me, "It's easy," as he explained what was likely to be expected of me after the meeting. "You go around and make sure nothin's gettin' stolen. Things got *pret*-ty bad in my absence - Ari's too ruttin' nice for this shit -

but everything should be the way it's supposed to be again. Here's your list; I'll be glad to never have to look at it again. This here is how much we started with. I've already got notes on how much you can expect to see used per week or day or whatever. This minus that equals something that, hopefully, is round about what we actually got on hand. Piece of advice, don't start a row unless it's clear we might run out of something. Maybe mention it to me, but... Though that being said, you've got to start a row every now and then. Don't matter if we got two times what we're supposed to have of every last little nail. Well, *that'll* never happen! But if it does, you just take a little time one evening and dump some overboard, like, so you can complain about it. Everything goes too well for a while, they'll think you're taking a bit extra fer yerself, see. And you don't want that! Don't worry; you'll be fine. Anycase, we got all in hand here. Why don't you hop over to the Thresher for a spell 'fore you have to deal with the Horizon."

Being the smallest of the three vessels, indeed having not a designated hold so much as a single open area under the deck which supplies, cannon, oars, kitchen and the crew's hammocks all shared, the Thresher was stocked with only those things her crew might need for daily use: water, liquor and food mostly, with but a single crate given over to bandages, tools, etc. All else would have to be begged from the End if ever wanted and not only that, on long journeys, those little supplies she was able to carry would need be replenished regularly from those of the larger. Therefore my task of accounting for her every floating possession took all of two hours, at which point I was free to settle myself into the corner they showed me to to lay down and draw, until I grew bored and grabbed a swab if only for change's sake. This earned me, if not an appreciation from my fellow laborers per se, a conspicuous lack of detestation, as I had hoped.

It was a tighter-knit group of misfits that manned the Thresher; a more contented, certainly older crowd, who must have seen no need for the prestige of sailing the End or Horizon so long as they were allowed their lay and the freedom to perform their tasks in the relative peace and quiet that existed on board between our murderous rampages. Renault they admired to a man, and if ever a compromise was needed between captains and crew, its specifics were sure to come from the souls manning the Thresher. There was a creaking, wearily enduring immortality to the thing. None knew exactly how old she was, not even Renault. Her every plank was of the sturdiest of teak, her every line of toughest hemp, her mast, boom, yard and sail so oversized as to make a man wonder how the thing stayed upright at all; yet upright she stayed through calm and storm. She was reliable. Obstinately but effortlessly reliable. And such quality drew into her jumbled bowels similar souls.

Although they were no saints assembled within as one might imagine. I quickly decided that their service was far from unexpectantly given, it earning them a particular privilege while at sea that the others failed to enjoy. For here was where Adoneus was being held. The Horizon was no place for him, I would soon find out; and the End, with its captain McGee especially, I was sure Aedis trusted not a knuckle to guard the man. They called his cell "the dungeon" without a moment's pause, which forthcoming label I though a bit strange for the ad hoc container I assumed it must be at first. But the security of the place was a bit too permanent of a fixture for that. Its door sat heavy and secure at the end of the open hold, with a steel bar across the front and a bulky lock on the latch that I eyed with not a

little bit of frustration at lacking the privacy to try to open on my own without a key, if one follows. I was instantly curious about exactly what kind of prison awaited within. Although for a time my only clue would be the occasional grumble from the crew about the gender of its current occupant, an apparently unprecedented breach of their contracts. Not that any of them could be bothered to pull the things out to check the specifics.

Past Mazminat, we turned toward the slightly brighter haze that designated the late morning sun, directly into the encircling blue-grey of sea and sky, having to pull the sails in completely to catch enough of the threatening but dry, southwest wind to propel us forward. At times, I would look overboard and be hard-pressed to say definitively whether we were making way at all, waves and spray all considered. But even slow as we were going, we were doing far better than the others. And a few hours into our southbound struggle, I noticed that the Horizon was no longer even trying to follow our route; though they lagged us by some mile or two, I could clearly make out their every square sail set against the sky. The End would soon join them, transforming from a barely discernible slit of brown to a pair of tall beige triangles as they turned to parallel the ark. Though the schooner was as capable as us pointed into the wind, they were protection for the Horizon, which would be forced to tack again and again to keep even a few knots of speed. By the time the sun set, they were both far out of sight. As was any hint of land.

"Will we not wait?" I ventured nervously from the main deck up to Renault as the sun began its final, winking departure beneath the clouds.

"No, we'll slow past Baidoa," he cried. "Absynnian's tame. Wind'll be southeast. No fightin' the bitch then. It'll be to our back-quarters on an easy chop, and strong; they'll fly almost fast as we can. Meantime we'll keep an eye out ahead. Lots of little places to hide round the Zorous. You're stuck with us till then, anycase, young Mr Sido. Maybe we'll catch 'em at Dinnaecro, if we find trouble. Maybe Omomji."

No matter his boastfully reassuring tone, I couldn't help swallowing a lump in my throat as I looked around us at the endless water. Crossing the Sudden, we hadn't left sight of land for more than a few hours and the waves had barely seemed an obstacle to skipping stones. But here the chop was large and layered, and the ship rocked most terribly. Not only that; with three ships together, one can at least always remind oneself of the possibility of swimming for one's life if necessary, from one sinking vessel to the others less unlucky, should there be a catastrophe. But now, even if we were unmolested by other ships, should a monster, or rock, somehow rise suddenly from the depths to sink us, I was sure I would die. There was no hope. I didn't even know which way I might swim to reach the closest land, for none was visible.

Indeed, I made a careful, if fruitless, full circuit of our surroundings before eking, "And, uh, which way, would... you say... land be?"

Smiling a bit too complacently, if I do say so, Renault pointed off the starboard rail, crooning, "That way, young Mr Sido. West. Strong swimmer could make it in, oh, a couple hours."

It was then a voice that I recognized all too well interrupted us. "Don't fill his head with nonsense, Sir Renault," said Adoneus as he was led, chained hand and foot, from below the quarterdeck to the open air of the evening.

"And what lies would those be?" said our captain.

"Come now," said Adoneus, chains clinking. "A man, strong swimmer or no, would be eaten by sharks before making a thousand yards." And to me, as he passed toward a rickety table that had been set up for him some considerable distance from the helm, he elaborated, "They can be quite voracious in these waters," chomping twice, noisily, on the empty air between us to make his point understood.

I learned that this privilege had been specially ordered by Renault. Once a day, round sunset, Adoneus would be led to the open air to consume his supper. One must forgive me for considering this a great boon, for I was just as curious about the man as I was about his cell. But I thought it unwise to seem too interested in the villain in front of Renault - our captain was almost always at the helm at that time of day - and therefore beyond making sure to enjoy a smoke in the sunset daily myself, I remained separate from our prisoner for some time more.

We came back into sight of land within the week. The Zorous Gap is much wider than the Syrian; I could barely make out the green of the mangroves on her either side, but happily note the color I did. We soon met the thick wall of gray that extended from one side of the gap to the other, however, and all thought of foliage and solid footing fled from my mind as we turned west-southwest. For a span of some few hundred miles afterward, we were buffeted by what I thought must have been the strongest winds ever recorded (they were not), not to mention an ocean that rose and fell quite rudely. Every other wave sent spray up and over the rail as it crashed into our side. But the vessel and her captain remained unimpressed, no matter the driving rain that began to add to the chaos around us. The wind had shifted to come in from the south more or less, and was now so strong that we started to rise up on the waves, leaving a wake behind us just as angry as the ocean's thrashings. The lean is what scarred me the most. To get the best force from the air, the sail remained pulled in almost to the line from bow to stern, meaning the massive thing, pushed by the wind, started to tilt the vessel toward the shore noticeably. I will not attempt degrees here, but suffice to say a fair game of marbles was out; solitaire too, even below-deck out of the wind. Although kings remained a possibility; indeed, there was a holder for the deck with wide ridges clearly purposed for these occasions screwed into the table that was likewise screwed to the deck in the center of the hold/armory/crew's quarters. I was not interested in the game that continued there uninterrupted. Those fools might have seen no need for alarm, but I was ready for complete and utter panic. I refused to wait below-deck, needing to see the danger for myself, grabbing onto the higher of the two rails, the port, with a grip of iron, as if by my presence there I might tilt the boat back the way it was supposed to go. Remembering the look on McGee's face as he mocked Douglas those months before, however, I slowly forced myself to ease my grip on the rail and, hand over hand, one step at a time, made my way toward the stern, then carefully mounted the ladder to the quarterdeck. Renault was there. For a second I thought the bastard was singing.

Seeing my fitful, careful progress toward him, as I lunged from side rail to that separating the quarterdeck from the main, he called out, "Welcome to the East Imperial, young Mr Sido! You'll have to excuse the way we're going here. If the wind was a bit more to our back, like, we could let'r out'n the heel wouldn't be so bad. But no worries. Mr Rash's always good on the sail. And I'll keep us from taking a ship-killer to the broadside. Be through it in a moment."

"Mr Rash?" I spouted at once, quite alarmed, realizing he likely meant the over-sized barnacle seated comfortably cross-legged behind us, stay and bottle of whiskey in his left hand, sheet's tackle in his right."

"No, no," Renault boomed. "Not rash like that. He's very conservative. Trust me, he could pull it in another foot or two and we'd stay upright. Probably. Rash, like..." and he scratched his backside with a chuckle.

I nodded in my best attempt at pretending I shared his good humor. Then some seconds later, I ventured banally, "Quite the storm..."

"Storm!?" Renault laughed. "This be no storm, young Mr Sido. This's the monsoon! It's like this just about every hour... of every day... from July till October. Sometimes it's a little better; sometimes a little worse. But can't call a rain that never stops a storm, really, can you?"

S'pose not, I surely said, quickly acquiescing from there to his suggestion that I return below-decks to make sure none of the cargo had shifted to starboard. This I dutifully did, ignoring the snickers that came from the card table and swinging hammocks, even taking a whole hour to rearrange whatever might be securely transferred to the higher side of the ship; until I could find not even a wayward spoon that might help alleviate our lilting progress, at which point I snuck into my hammock to await the end of the madness. We broke out beyond the wall of rain a few days later in the early afternoon.

"What'd I tell you, Mr Sido?" Renault made sure to call down when I dared emerge to the open air again. Just as he'd predicted, the wind had shifted to come more from the east; the sail had been let out and reset on the mast so that the weight of its forward portion hanging off our port side happily offset any push from the wind toward the other. Land was once again nowhere to be seen, but I was wholly unbothered this time, for we were making exceptionally easy progress at this point. Only the slap, slap, slap coming from the bow as we bested every wave could be heard above the rustle of the steady wind; while the grey of the storm - I still insist on labeling it thus - faded into our past with welcome celerity. Even pockets of blue could be seen in our near future.

Turning from his own review of these happy omens, Renault cried, "That's the sea for you! Hates you one moment, loves ya the next. No wonder they call 'er a her. Absynnian's in the shadow of the islands, see. Clouds're spent by the time they get here. We'll be on this easy chop for a day and a half; go straight across the open water to Omomji 'thout touchin' the lines again. But I'm beat! And soaked through! Do me a favor: go get my mate Ghatsly - the one with the scar - and tell him his shift'll start early tonight. That's a good boy."

Therefore I was free to approach Adoneus at last. Dean was his guard that evening. In Renault's absence, the sailor was free to prod his prisoner to finish his meal most rudely, so I offered to take his place, hoping the gesture would only go down as another attempt to ingratiate myself with the crew. I needn't have worried, for complaining that any of us should have to be subject to the duty, Dean departed willingly and without an ounce of suspicion, indeed with no more than a happy slap of my shoulder.

Laying down his cutlery for a time to better savor his undercooked pork and whiskey-flavored water (they would use the same barrels for the two liquids for some time more; until I finally put a stop to this idiocy some year or two later), Adoneus gazed out at the emerging stars with what silence I understood to be his

happy thanks. Then, chains clinking as he attacked his spongy main course again, he said, "I suppose I owe you an apology, young man."

"For thinking me a snack?" I ventured at once.

"Indeed," said he, from the side of his mouth not occupied with the near-pointless mastication of his next bite. "My Rose can be quite thoughtful, you see. And surprisingly capable in myriad matters, of which she tells me you are well aware. An honest mistake."

"Apology accepted. I think," is all I could, indeed, think to reply. But not being able to help noting his noisy chains, I added, "Although I believe I owe you an apology as well; you see, it's partly because of me that..."

"What's more, I believe thanks are in order," he interrupted. "For I am quite glad you were observant enough to note the tickets I left for you in the parlor of our late associate's estate."

"You. Left those there?" I demanded.

"Yes," said he. "So enough with the sad eyes, my boy. Hate I can happily stomach; anger, distrust, detestation, abhorrence and all the others are but a selection of fine aperitifs before the main course of murder. Pity, on the other hand, for whatever reason, I cannot abide."

That he had perhaps had a hand in his own capture; that he had some game afoot, came as little surprise. Only the lengths he was apparently willing to go through to achieve his goals, whatever they might have been, gave me pause. As he returned to the pork, I wondered how long, exactly, he planned on remaining a prisoner. More importantly, I wondered what part I might be expected to play in his future vicissitudes. Needless to say, I didn't bother demand any of this information from the man. I sat in silence instead, as he chewed and clanked his way through his meal, handing him a stray piece of linen to use as a napkin once he was done.

We made Omomji right on Renault's schedule; we'd taken our sweet time crossing the Absynnian, so there were the End and Horizon already, the one anchored off the jungled coast, the other half hidden within the bustling port's traffic. They had reached the city an hour or two before us. Aedis had hoped to stop to be able to give a guided tour of the place, the first sign of civilization in some days, to his passengers, with a perhaps pleasant evening spent at the governor's estate for him and a select few. But by the time we arrived, this select few especially had grown extremely tired of that walled fortress, Utala's largest port and center of zebec construction, an entirely functional place if ever there's been one, and were ready to depart. We arrived just as the Horizon was pulling from the dock. I, for my part, made sure to hide in my hammock for the duration of our approach in the hopes that I might be forgotten and allowed to stay on the Thresher; for not only had I grown quite fond of her, I had by then thought of a hundred questions or more I wished to ask Adoneus the next evening.

But my plan was easily undone. "Where's the kid?" McGee shouted out to us the moment we pulled within earshot of the End.

"The who?" I heard Ghatsly spit from the helm.

"The kid, ye dingbat. rasid. Looks like a ruttin' monkey..."

I might have drawn this out as long as I liked, but bore Ghatsly no ill will. So I trudged to the deck the moment I heard my name, cringing as I met McGee's now full-volume demands once I poked my head out the stairway.

"There you are!" he shouted, clear as day to my dismay. "Vacation's over. Get yer shit." And so on that brash note, I went to collect my belongings, descending the rigging they threw down for me with my bag slung across my shoulder to be ready to stumble into the skiff when she made it there, from there to be ferried, along with McGee, across to the Horizon as it made its way toward us.

"To what do we owe this unexpected surprise?" sang Aedis, hand still pressed proudly on his sword, indeed as if the prop had never left his grasp, once we'd ascended the rigging of his ship.

McGee spat, "Stow it. You know why we're here."

The argument that ensued must have been quite long-lasting, though thankfully I would not be forced to endure its entirety. McGee had barely begun his complaint, "I've come to you as your friend, Aedis; come to you as your quartermaster. Now I come to you as..." etc, etc, when I was approached by the first mate, one Marcello, a Varioca from Monvitori.

"You can come this way," he said in his thick accent. "Aedis has told me to make sure you have everything you need while you stay with us." And he led me to a cabin some three back from the stern, leaving me with little more than a chuckle and nod toward the inside. This now, was what I had been missing! The place was almost as spacious as the apartment I had so briefly rented in the Aetnea, and easily twice as pleasantly appointed. My miserable sack of clothes and books sat entirely out of place on the knuckle-thick rug, the rich armoire, the finely dressed bed. Yes, a bed, even! As one may imagine, I decided very quickly to forget all about the Thresher and Adoneus; that I would do my utmost to remain there on the Horizon for the entirety of my maritime adventures. But I would just as quickly change my mind, for not five minutes passed in the ease and comfort of me sprawled across the bed, staring out the window, before McGee found me and, with a simple grunt of disgust at the decor, dragged me to the hallway and down a stairway marked, 'No admittance: crew's quarters.'

The ship was essentially a hollow toy box. Below the richly decorated first level was nothing but empty space. The crew, a handful of eager, young fools with not much more experience at sea than myself, slept on a makeshift platform nailed between two of the thick beams that spanned the hull where a second level might have begun, while the mates and guards shared a similar construction on the other side of the vessel. The 'cannon' were in actuality four-foot-long ceramic pipes hung from the deck of the first level so that they just poked out from their portals into the daylight. You might have stored five Threshers or two Ends in that gaping hole of a hold. The pile of supplies, petting-zoo included, laid lonely at the bottom.

"I need to know every last diamond that's gettin' used up here, boy," McGee demanded. And quite the task it would turn out to be! Here were all the odd and extravagant things he had been told to find in Celia, which he, Earl and I had spent the better part of a month hauling down to the Whale from the library. Yet even a mere week or two into our travels, the pile he showed me to was noticeably lighter. With a sigh, he directed my attention once more to my list. It was my job here, most importantly, he said, to *determine* the rate at which these goods were to be

consumed on the kind of voyage Aedis intended. He hadn't the slightest; neither did any of the Allans. And if I had the time, I was to do "a little multiplication" to estimate just how many pounds all that meant. Well, suffice to say I was forced to develop a branch of mathematics all my own to complete the task, involving carefully timed tabulations - sanitaries on one day; all food-related (one may not believe exactly how loose of a term this can be) items the next; decorative and activity-related the third; and finally all else, those things that might be among amateur seafarers considered necessary, including actual food, the fourth - two-pronged, differential approximations from these limited measurements to best determine actual rate of consumption, sliding average price approximations among different levels of quality in similar products to make the total cost a remotely attainable figure... It was awful. I started talking to myself, even, as I rummaged through the mini-mountain; until I realized with a start that I was slowly becoming my supervisor (of a sort). All while the crew would ruin my every attempt at organization with their own frequent excursions into the pile to fetch something for a passenger above. Worse yet, at (English) four-twenty on the dot, every day, Aedis would come personally to my cabin to insist that I join in the "evening's frivolities;" and by frivolities, I mean being tricked into consuming my supper among a gaggle of thirty- to fifty-something-year-old gune women with a sprinkle of seventy- to eighty-something men mixed in at an enormous table somehow fastened to the deck between the rich, flowing curtains, golden, candle-bearing sconces and seemingly likewise permanently affixed guards/waiters in the cabin directly below his quarters, forced to listen to the same alternating sounds of platitude and laughter to which Aedis at the head of the table would mechanically reply in perfect harmony, if with a regular complaint that "the lady in 4A couldn't be bothered to join us this evening," as I did my best to consume every last bottle of wine that passed within my reach. Well... maybe that last bit wasn't so bad.

"It's a budding enterprise," Aedis told me once my aversion to the ritual became apparent. "But you trust me, young rasid. The world is a changing place. One day, sooner than you think, things like this ship will seem commonplace, as they were in the First Age. And those who didn't have the foresight to take the risk now will likely have to work as part of my crew. Yes, a changing world; a better world." And indeed, no matter my personal opinions, his accounts, 'hidden' between 'Fall of the Male in Society,' and 'Fornication: Why it's Wrong,' on his bookshelf, actually showed a surprisingly modest loss for his budding enterprise. I could not believe the sum his passengers were willing to pay for the voyage I was happy to make in a hammock and peace and quiet, with even a swab to play with if I tired of reading.

McGee's opinion was different, of course. "Now you see why he's all but bankrupt," he complained to me once I managed to flee back to the End outside Kalana. "And doin' his best to drag us all right along with 'im. To say nothin' a' Valverde. Well... so long as he pays us for protection; of his beloved Horizon, his beloved Dreamcatcher. There was another ship before this one, case you didn't know, that he was forced to sell. Changing world! Ha! Changing in the sense that

these Allans're finally getting their act together and promoting from the crew; damn a 'captain' McGee what does their bidding for real!" Here he slapped an expanding balloon I'd borrowed from the Horizon out of my hands and lips to better elaborate, "Once upon a time, ye ijit, it was easy. You could take an Allan's ship with a knife, a fork, and a pair a' cannon. Even once they started building these... damn monstrosities, they'd put none other'n some... ruttin' watchmaker up at the helm. Candy'n babies'n all that. Well, we did the most to teach 'em better, I suppose. But that don't change the fact that we're losing this battle nowadays and Aedis don't even seem interested in fightin' back. To have to worry 'bout accounts and... penalties and... interest! Hah! If my father could see me now! There'd be some discussion, you better believe..." To be honest I don't remember much more. By this point he was barely talking to me in any case; more the opposite bookshelves of his quarters, alternately and animatedly. I started my exit as he was complaining, "I mean, it's either my gold, or it's the bank's gold. Which is it!?"

And as if driven mad by his clear frustration, the very next morning, as I prepared for an easy day of counting the supplies I assumed he had kept a tight watch over in my absence, he descended to my hammock in chain mail, dragging me most rudely to the deck and the drizzle of the day. There he tossed me an oversized hammer I never would have had the effrontery to try to wield for any purpose but carnival games and told me, "Hit me."

"I'm sorry?" I replied.

"What're you, daft?" said he. "Hit me." He had a helmet and shield and a hammer of his own and everything else, and felt the need to remind anyone watching of the fact by clanging one against the others time and again. "Go on, Sir Sido," he taunted me. "Sir Duncannon Allan-abadi! Hit me."

Now. I may be no expert, but by estimation, I assumed he had finally lost his mind, of course. Looking round me at the others strolling by on their tasks, however, I saw not a single indication of this being anything out of the ordinary. The only acknowledgment I received, in fact, came surprisingly from Diarmuid, who was ever on deck night and early morning, ready to manipulate the rigging. With nothing more than a chuckle, the man kicked a broken oar directly into my hands, for I had neglected to pick up the hammer. At first I wondered at the present's intended purpose. But the gesture was made plain the moment McGee grumbled, "Alright then, guess it's my turn," and lifted his weapon. The oar was made yet more broken by my use of it as a shield, then I scrambled away, complaining surely, though I don't remember the words. And my admonishments from there, no matter how justified, went equally unheeded. For McGee was having the time of his life. "Think you can run, hmm?" he chuckled, as he stalked me happily. But there was nowhere to go. A crate lid I found discarded by the door below the quarterdeck met its end in valiant defense of my person. Then the door itself. Finally I scrambled back outside and to the hammer he'd tossed me and raised it to whack his shield if for no other reason than to save me from his next onslaught for a few seconds at least. Thus began my training. An actual shield was provided me eventually and we spent the remainder of the morning trading blows. Bang after bang on my left arm, then smack after smack with my right, no matter the screaming pain from my still-sore shoulders. And my every morning after passed much the same.

Afternoons I spent hunched over my list at quartermaster's duties. Though I was

thankful to see the thing fit on a single sheet of paper, I was not so excited about the acrobatics I would be forced to perform to find it all, crammed down there without a knuckle to spare as it was. But a monkey I would transform into to "get the damn job done," as McGee insisted I start doing occasionally at least, if only to save me from more banging; for I knew the moment I arrived back on deck with a declaration of being done for the day, my training would resume. Only during the evenings was I free to behave like a human being. These I spent in the galley along with most of the crew and even some of Aedis's guards.

I was happy to discover that the place was like a floating version of my Beached Whale. The tales surrounding the ship, describing the adventures of those who manned her, seemed innumerable. Every sailor had at least one attached to his name; some misdeed for which he would always be remembered. The dwarven brothers Comal and Undrik (Murphy; *not* Duncannon; with not a single drop of artist's blood in their veins, they made sure to inform me), for instance, would ever be known as the scoundrels who'd managed to wrangle a dozen pigs from the barbarians that inhabit the northern portion of Archaea; *and* connive the beasts aboard without remembering how, exactly, for they'd been quite drunk at the time. There were various accounts, but all were at least part conjecture. Gugger had won the ship from Aedis in a game of cards, then lost it plus ten years service at a 666th lay the next. (Aedis they simply called Aedis; it was Gugger they called cap'n as a rule, even if the title could only have been accurately applied for a span of minutes.) And Tilty, as in "the opposite of stable," was always befriending the mice who shared our vessel with us. A pointless pastime surely; until they discovered that he'd made the rodents a series of passageways with a secret drill during his shifts at watch so they might more effectively steal and store the choicest foods from the kitchen in one of their many hidey-holes, of which stockpile he made sure to take the lion's share. This last story was my favorite to be sure. It was my kind of caper. And no matter he was clearly guilty of purposefully taking extra rations, a death sentence depending on the situation, when the verdict came down from Aedis, they were all happy to settle on the following: since allowance was always made for spoilage and pests, and since those extra rations he was clearly guilty of taking had in truth been in possession of a mouse at the time, his taking it back from animals did not, in fact, constitute a punishable offense. Although from then on, since he was such a clever bastard, half his own food ration was deemed unnecessary. And they took his drill. Not to mention for a time all aboard did their best to catch and eliminate every last rodent, which hundred or so corpses Ollio ground up, formed into a giant patty of an evening, and they all took the greatest pleasure in sharing right in front of Tilty. And Ollio, of course! Give that fat bastard a squid, three limes and some fresh water and everybody eats good that night! These stories went on and on.

Thus was my routine aboard Aedis's noble Mako, otherwise known as the Decade's End: warfare of a morning, contortion of an afternoon, entertainment of an evening. I felt quite useful for the first time in my life. Thankfully this continued for only a few days, until we made Filly-town, as they call Foluba, and I was gruffly ordered back to the Thresher.

And in this way passed the first leg of our journey. I would spend a few days on each vessel, relaxing on the Thresher, then laboring on the Horizon and End each in turn, only to repeat. We continued our path west, following mainland Archaea's southern shore from the Absynnian to the Atlantic, bending south then north again to keep safe sight of the land as it advanced upon, then retreated from the water, as jungle turned into savanna, then scrub. We stopped for a few days on city-sized Kusu Loba, a paradise for tourists of all types, where fights between various primates, man included, are held daily. I lost quite a bit of money; one should *never* underestimate a baboon. The wind remained solidly from the south-southwest for most of this stretch; a monsoon wind still, Renault said, but much weaker and a bit drier. We were forced to navigate a return to constant rain past Omomji for some hundred miles more, until it reluctantly receded. Drizzle was the norm afterwards, with an odd burst of sunshine or downpour here and there, until we reached the scrub, and the clear air blew in directly, if lazily, from the east. With the change in wind, we left the coast behind at last, sailing due west, straight for the Cardinal Gap.

I was able to converse with Adoneus less often than I liked, but on those evenings he was released after Renault turned in, I made sure to accost him with a bottle of red snuck off the Horizon at the ready. We talked of iacɒpɒ first, and of the inevitability of tragedy on a planet like ours. But very soon we turned to women of course. To elven girls and dwarven girls, pregnant girls and girls with little girls in tow already, southern girls and northern girls. Rose and Thera, Jasmine, Venus, Daisy and Lily. And Rhodelia of course. I never brought up Cherry and neither did he. But he would swirl his cup happily in the air at the mention of all his other flowers before, with a conspiratorial lean towards me, delving into their oddest inner desires; as I returned my own account of Rhodi's own sexual strangenesses, at which stories he giggled like a schoolboy at his first mɒnga. I talked of my dear samara; he listened with little more than an occasional nod, only commenting offhandedly that he was glad Rose had come to her senses when I laughed that she'd gone so crazy recently as to demand I call her Belle. The topics passed from there to whatever crossed our minds. I complimented his work on the violin; he said he was a hamfisted idiot compared to an old friend. I asked him how old he was really and he said one million, six hundred ninety-three thousand, two hundred and forty. I asked again a week later and with a smile he repeated every digit. Renault, I was sure, became aware of our talks, and probably of exactly what we were swirling in our cups in place of water as well, for Ghatsly would be sure to watch us intently. But he never forbade me from associating with the prisoner. Neither did Adoneus try to take me hostage with his chains as some of the others suggested he surely would. He ate, we talked and drank, and when the bottle was done, with the same half clearing of his throat, he'd say he might be persuaded to return to his dungeon.

Aedis, for his part, was another source of entertainment, if of a different sort. It tired me, even, to think of all the efforts he piled upon his female passengers. The communal dinner, the decor, the constant bravado; it was all too much for a simple miscreant like myself to understand. And as far as I knew, he didn't even take what might be considered his due, no matter the clear fact that he could have had any one of them. This bothered me greatly, for I remembered him inside my love all too well still, and to have to admit to being bested by a man too dense or lazy to

take these pearls thrown before him, each in turn, was an embarrassment if ever there's been one. But I eventually guessed his true game. These were no flowers after all, so he would likely only be able to have a single one without starting a row, and it was clear he fancied the one that never came to his dinners, this lady in 4A. I would occasionally catch him pacing outside her cabin, deep in thought, before he spun off to his own quarters again; for how many times can a captain check to make sure his passenger has all she requires before seeming a complete buffoon? In any case, this mystery beauty didn't seem interested. And not only that; she was equally indifferent to the other passengers as well. During the course of dinner, she would come up as a topic of conversation daily. She was quite cold, they said, and only seemed to ever leave her cabin at night; a very strange habit indeed. I always meant to accidentally run into her under a romantic, moonlit evening, but suffice to say the wine was free and plenteous, and I would without fail be asleep before the sun set, the better to rise to repeat my miserable duties the next morning.

It was McGee, however, who would be the strongest influence on me as one may imagine. My training was brutal and painful. I finally fully comprehended Paudrik's complaint at having to work under one of his clan. Smack, crash, smack, crash; over and over again until I collapsed in exhaustion. Though my body would be bruised and battered afterward of course, the simple tediousness of it was the least tolerable part. There was no sophistication to it; indeed a clearly purposeful lack thereof! But it's not like I had a choice. It was either hit back or get hit again, so I chose the former over and over; until finally, one day with a single grunt of satisfaction, my hammer and shield were stripped from me and I was given an axe instead, whereupon I was directed to fetch every last log from the hold and split it. Comal and Undrik were my mentors for this duty. I was taught to find and extend the cracks caused the wood by drying, and to outstubborn the logs still wet. I taught myself, meanwhile, to twist and turn my body in ways I never thought I might have to to get the damn things from the hold in the first place. Only Gib and Ledfetter would occasionally help.

McGee supervised all happily, between his regular beratement of the other crew. It was clear that his position had always been one that included such loud encouragement, but now, as captain, they would all imply he was perhaps a bit too emboldened with his every mention. Still, he would bludgeon and bluster his way into their backs and their brains to better "get the damn job done," the bastard. For which service he was hated and feared in equal measure of course. As we turned from the shore, he got even worse. Now they said openly that he was unhinged; as unhinged as I'd assumed him to be at the start of my training. He even found a whip stashed somewhere, that he began to use to motivate the less inspired of the crew. His most hated pastime, however, was - even though we were making way to the west easily, if slowly, on a simple run with the wind to our backs - to have us roll all the sails and row for a period of three hours or more daily! I had already gotten used to his abuse; this would simply be another leg of my training, I assumed, for by then I had finished with the logs. But the rest were less than humored by this unnecessary labor. I quickly decided the whole thing was purposed at teaching us some "discipline," of course, as he made sure to complain daily we had none. And my supposition had proof in the fact that it was the weakest of the crew - or those of us like myself most certain to try to avoid labor

at all cost - that he made work. Although no matter his earnest, thanks to this selection, there was a playful attitude to the whole thing. We would be sure to groan most seriously as our tormentor stalked by us, calling out strokes, but be equally certain to snicker to each other and lay off our burdens the moment he passed; until the third day of this exercise, that is, when McGee suddenly and without warning took the head of the rower directly in front of me, permanently ending, by the way, my use of the fine-fitting, now red-speckled, shirt I was then wearing anywhere off the ship. I can't remember the man's name no matter how hard I try, but do remember he was certainly the clown among us, ever ready for a pass at McGee. And pushing the still gushing torso into the walkway without so much as a fare-thee-well, as the severed head still gasped up to me in surprise from between my feet, McGee took the fool's place and began to pull himself, singing some damn song; some drawn out ditty about someplace called South Fomoria, interspersed throughout with many "heave away, haul aways." As one can imagine, our performance improved noticeably from there, though the song was not the direct cause. This treatment continued for some days, until land was visible again, on our port side now, and he allowed us a long rest at last.

Which is when Whaker finally bothered explain to me, "We've never tried this, y'see. Cardinal Gap's a ship-killer and that's a fact. And the deeper your draft, the worse off you are. It's the currents what're the problem. Thing bends around narrow, like a rutting snake, so when the water moves, man does it move round the far side a' them bends. Too long to make it when it's calm, as the tide changes; you'll end up doin' one a' the turns when the flow's strongest; or worse yet only make it halfway 'fore it starts pushin' you backwards. No; you've got to cross from just off the point in the west, the northern entrance now, diagonal like, to just off the point in the east, the southern one, on the current's downswing, or you'll be swept into the cliffs either side for certain. Can't go the other way at all; least never heard of anyone doing it. We usually avoid the place altogether. If we ever want to make the Sudden, we'll just come up on the monsoons from the south in the summer, back down in fall, then catch the westerlies back to Caledonia. Or pull up to North Caledonia off Bod and go like that. Never to the west. But that's the way we're going this time, on account a' the King Tide. So that's the way we'll go, then, I guess. Thesher'll be fine; she don't draw but six feet. And the Horizon don't draw much more'n us with three times the sails. But we'll have a hard time of it, that's for certain. And stocked up full as well. Sure be a shame to sink on account a' that! We'll need every last tug a' them oars. So you be sure to pull yer weight."

Perhaps the lateness of this lesson was on purpose, I suspected at once. For though I asked McGee immediately after if perhaps I was needed aboard the Thresher, he replied only, "No time," as he returned his gaze to the chart before him, showing clearly the torturously twisted, fifty-mile chasm that was our apparent destination.

We waited outside the entrance for four days and three nights, until the gibbous moon we arrived under shrunk to a halved, silver halo, before we finally dared attempt the gap. The Horizon left us on day two in the late afternoon on a strong wind. But the Thresher stayed, floating patiently beside us, for another day, until McGee finally called out to the other to go ahead. It wasn't as if they could hold our hand. Wind was good, sun was up still, tides weren't terrible; they should go. We'd make our run the next morning if the wind held and see them by breakfast.

Whaker was far less trusting than McGee. "You sure that was a good idea?" he complained that evening, once we three had returned from mess to the captain's quarters. "What's to keep Aedis from just... sailing away now? Might not even wait to see us crash against the rocks. It has occurred to you, I assume, that nevermind we're carrying mosta the supplies for our trip north, he'd be just as happy to see us all drown. Half a' me wonders if that's not the real reason we came this way."

An annoyed if clearly affirmative grunt was McGee's sole reply, before defending our forced patience aloud: "Renault'll wait." Although no matter his words, his tone was less than comforting. And even though the wind gusted in only fitfully when we started, another day was all he dared risk, whereupon in the early, early morning, he ordered us all to attention; for us to hoist them halyards and unfurl them topsails, and for all the rowers to be ready in our positions.

Comal and Undrik were proudly ensconced on either side in the exact middle of the vessel. In front of them were solid-hewn men and dwarves all, excepting the open spot for McGee at the stern. I was given the honor of sitting directly behind the brothers. Earl was to my right, Ari behind, and centenarian perhaps, but still solid, Humbert Maester McGee-Miner diagonally across from me. From there the rowers were all men, their size diminishing steadily until Sever and Tilty at the bow. Yet I knew these were the strongest we had to offer. Only Whaker and Diarmuid might have found a place within, but the two were above, at the helm and directing the rest of the crew's manipulation of the rigging respectively. Once assembled, we rowers sat tensely attached to our floating oars. The only motion was the rocking of the ship and the regular passing of the whiskey that would be our fuel. There was no sound; only the sea, and the occasional creak she demanded of the hull.

The glow of the coming dawn was just visible out my portal; it slowly illuminated the wild Adalantan shore out Earl's as we floated past. After a while, I could start to make out the jutting spires of the southwestern tip of Archaea in the distance to my left. I soon wished I might have missed the sight, however. For just as we started our bend toward the south and into the chasm, as the sun peeked timidly above the horizon behind us, what was illuminated there but a dozen wrecks or more perched up on the various outcrops.

"Just imagine how many got sunk what you *can't* see propped up there like play-houses!" opined Undrik, the bastard, as he passed me a bottle.

To which Ari replied as I passed him the thing in turn, "Don't you listen, rasid. Only fools try to use the current to enter the channel. These learned the cost of their impatience all too quickly, I'm afraid. But we will be fine; my gut tells me so. Here."

As one can imagine, I made sure to take another swig. And as I did, McGee finally descended from the galley above to grace us with his presence. Taking his place at our head, he began to row and sing. It was the same tune as before; that he'd happily belted out after decapitating that nameless rower. But the words were a bit different than they'd been before. This version, now, I remember:

In South Fomoria I was born,
Likes it, she likes it, she
In South Fomoria, round Cape Horn,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

As I walked out one morning fair,
Likes it, she likes it, she
'Twas there I met Miss Nancy Blair,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Thus he sang as we picked up his rhythm and pulled in time, as I watched the walls of the canyon begin to close in around us.

I shook her up, I shook her down,
Likes it, she likes it, she
I shook her round and round the town,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

When I sailed far across the sea,
Likes it, she likes it, she
My girl said she'd be true to me,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Now the song, easily extrapolated from the original, continued, as McGee began his furious demand, "Pull, damn it. Pull, you rutting swine. Likes it, she likes it. Pull you rutting cows, you rats, you vermin. Pull!"

Even a mere minute past our entering the chasm, I could feel the strength of the water below us. Out my portal, the Archaean shore started to pick up speed, while from somewhere behind me came the complaint, "We've entered too close to the point, lost the wind." Another: "It's too early. Should've gone in the afternoon. We'd have it then." And a third: "We'll never get off these damn rocks. Think we'll even make it a mile?" The view out Earl's portal was but a streak of red and green as we flew by Adalanta no more than a hundred yards from the cliff that was

her western shore, at five, then ten, then twenty knots. And by the time the channel was narrow enough for me to be able to distinguish individual trees out my own portal, they would linger in my view for no more than a minute before trailing behind out of sight. Still McGee's song continued. And still we pulled.

There's only one thing grieves my mind,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Is to leave Miss Nancy Blair behind,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

And now I'm on some foreign strand,
Likes it, she likes it, she
With a bottle of whiskey in my hand,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

After some twenty harrowing minutes, we finally gained a second hundred yards off the Adalantan shore. But as I understood it, our aim was to meet the Archaean at least as closely before being spit out the far end of the chasm, and she was still some few thousand off. The complaints coming from behind me gained in frequency until finally they were met in equal measure by opposing demands that the fools shut up and row. McGee only bellowed his song the louder, and I admit to joining the ruckus happily, the tune seeming to be the only hope for my continued existence, as I started to pull with my every fiber myself.

And as we wallop around Cape Horn,
Likes it, she likes it, she
You'll wish to God you'd never been born,
We're bound for South Fomoria.

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

I wish I was on Fomoria's strand
Likes it, she likes it, she
With a bottle of whiskey in my hand,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Heave away, you rolling king,
Likes it, she likes it, she
Haul away, oh hear me sing,
We're bound for South Fomoria

Our rowing was now a frantic, desperate plea to Miss Blair. She liked it. She liked it, she. With every return to the line, we were all in perfect harmony and the ship would lurch forward once, twice, from there to wallow three lines until next we were able to stab into her. Earl broke his oar on the second of the "likes" during a verse and was provided another before next we were allowed at her. Our progress across the channel finally seemed something that could be measured. And a quarter of the way across, after some forty minutes of rowing, the water round us lost its furor and we were free to go directly southwest for a spell. McGee even stopped his singing for a full verse to tell us that we'd made the bowl: halfway through. Here was our chance; the deep water would be our salvation. Pull, dammit. Pull for all that we were worth. So we did. And not five minutes later, a great commotion could be heard above.

"Hold! Hold the line, dammit," Diarmuid could be heard pleading. A few seconds later, there was a great and sudden shifting of the ship to starboard and the mast before me groaned as the mainsail filled at last. There was a snap of a line suddenly let loose from somewhere behind me, a shifting to port, then back to starboard as Diarmuid was forced to quit the mainsail to grab at the foresail's sheet that'd been let go. Undrik ahead of me chuckled, "Well, there's the wind back." Now our speed across the channel might even be called steady. My portal was turned fully back the way we'd come. I was amazed at the distance we'd gone so quickly; the start of the canyon was now but a prick of blue between the cliffs on its either side. Halfway across and still the water allowed us our near-straight crossing. More than halfway, even. Until finally a line of swirling eddies could be seen in the water behind me as I began my every stroke, after which we were forced to turn toward the current once more and row for our lives.

"On earth said you could quit pulling," boomed McGee: "Likes it, she likes it. Pull, you great bulls, you furious lions, pull you ploughing people! Likes it, she likes it."

Five hundred yards left at some hour of rowing. Four hundred at an hour and a half. Three-fifty, perhaps, when Point Bettermakeit came into view and sped by without a single nod of acknowledgment. Enough, I prayed. But not a moment later, I heard McGee curse, "Shit," and make to pull in his oar, only returning it to continue his labor once our course changed to point us nowhere other than southeast, giving me a clear view of our intended destination; as we were pushed toward it with a strength of water I hope I am never forced to experience again.

"That's it, then," said Comal. "Nice knowing ya, brother. Likes it, she likes it, she."

"We've a chance left," said Undrik.

"You name me a single ship bigger'n a canoe that's made it 'tween those islands, I'll lay down this oar and - Likes it, she likes it, she - go get my will and change it to 'give it all to my dead, idiot rutting brother.'"

"Likes it, she likes it," was Undrik's only response.

I could make out these Last Gate Islands clearly then; a pair of wide-walled spires

erupting from the water hundreds of feet into the air before they tapered a single knuckle. They must have been no more than a mile away. There was no hope to make it past them to the open water on their western side, it was clear. We were trying desperately instead for the minuscule gap of water between them, that I could see was the beginning of a treacherous, indeed seemingly impassable, canyon with but a thread of blue visible at her bottom. Its entrance was littered with wrecks. No hope, surely, I thought. But I pulled with all my might regardless. And soon the wall of the western island loomed above me far out of sight past the top of my portal, the swirling, grainy pattern of its mast- and sail-splattered, red rock face a sight I might have taken a moment to admire at any other time, but that day I failed to for long, for it was speeding towards me and the starboard side of my surely doomed, soon-to-be-no-longer-floating home as if propelled by a giant hand. But not a hundred feet from the thing, Whaker began his turn.

"Pull 'em in, ye ijits," McGee boomed ahead of me. I did not. I would row until I died if for no other reason than it was a distraction from my doom. Although I would regret that later. My oar caught on the rock face we somehow managed to just slide by as we spun to line up with the raging current, breaking not only it of course, but the front beam of my portal not to mention a rib or ten of mine before being sucked out to the morning. From there I remember little. There was a great crashing row from somewhere beneath me, then utter panic as the breach was battled. But still we made it through. Proof of the impossibility of our feat was given by the look of utter disbelief in the countenances of the fisherman's wives to be noted coming from the village on the western island, as the fisherman themselves fled from our complete destruction of their dock. Then blackness. I'd recover consciousness a few hours later on the West Imperial, to the most insipidly gleeful expression from McGee I've ever had the misfortune to engender.

"Well, it's all perfectly understandable, though, isn't it," said Adoneus when I told all this to him, with the general moral of my tale being that my seemingly unshakable supervisor was a monster. To my frowning confusion, the man had to explain, "I have always maintained, no matter Rose's complaints, that to my knowledge, our Mr McGee is a prime example of a good man, though of a rarer sort. And your story is but further proof."

"Do the ends justify the means, then?" I complained. "I'll admit: perhaps by the murder of one, he convinced us to row well enough so that we all made it through alive. Is that what you're saying?"

"Oh, no!" Adoneus insisted. "That is the argument of a very different type of 'goodness.' (Here he even clanked a pair of quotations into the air to show his opinion of the label.) An extremely silly thing."

I was lost, as one can imagine.

So he explained, "My young rasid. I understand all too well the tragedy of having little guidance in life but you simply must stop seeing the world the way many artists insist on painting it, with little more than an ability to easily pull at our heartstrings their sole motivation. This wondrous Earth of ours is a far more intricate place than that! Good and evil are *not* two mutually abhorrent forces, ever in

contention. Don't get me wrong; some of the most beautiful stories ever told rely heavily on this crutch. And neither are such tales without their purpose; there is nothing like an emotionally invested account of struggle between clearly defined heroes and villains for banding its audience together to oppose a real and ready threat. But to base one's understanding of the actual world on these dramas is a little... dangerous. The truth of the matter is that while there are opposing tendencies in man, there are few who might actually be labeled as purely this or purely that. Aren't the range of possible paths when faced with a difficult decision much more an open field than a simple choice between forward or back? To my estimation, there are three tendencies in man which are labeled as goodness. And a single one labeled as evil, thus making four cardinal trajectories for the soul altogether. It is not as simple a matter as children's stories present it to be. It is more a plain of possibilities, with a compass our only guide. If you would like examples, I, surely, most would consider as evil. And the three types of goodness can, quite conveniently, be found in our three captains. Take our Renault, for example..."

Here Adoneus leaned back to make sure the indicated heard him, for I had quit my attempts to converse with our prisoner surreptitiously after the Cardinal, and it was indeed Renault who was at the helm that evening. Upon hearing his name uttered so plainly, the captain braced the wheel, made for us without pause and, after forcing me to divulge my bottle of ɠraŋ cru, demanded, "What about me?"

With a wave to the dwarf, Adoneus explained to me, "Well, our noble captain of the Thresher here is a perfect example of the first and foremost type of goodness. It is the most honest, straightforward kind. One that springs forth from the mind at puberty like hair from the crotch, utterly unconcerned with all matters of reason. Let us call it an eastern goodness, since it is, like the sunrise, a process of changing dark into light for a time. In it, a pack or family is designated; and while outsiders may be slighted at leisure, insiders are always assisted. All those who trespass against the pack are retaliated against most strongly, of course. Vengeance, therefore, is its cornerstone; in man a measured, but stern, vengeance. It is not rare among other species. Most canines exercise it. Most primates as well. Whales, porpoises, even gavella and seals. Fentoni of course. Deer, maral, horses, soutibou, ten-horns, oxen, etcetera, though among these its virtues are quite forgotten when it comes to breeding. Among other species, however, humans and flocking birds included, we can start to see the idea of monogamy - at least on the surface of things - emerge, a further construct of pack of two. It is the same as the soul-consuming madness of captain Ahab, that might have been called greatness had he only been able to slay his white whale. All men have a trace of it in their hearts; but few are so overwhelmed by it as an Ahab or our Renault. Take Renault's treatment of me, for example. One must truly take these ideas to heart to be kind to a soul like myself. Indeed, it begs the question, are there *any* outsiders to our captain Renault's pack? I am surely not blood-related; not a part of his crew, even. All that can endear me to him is the fact that I am a fellow human. Nonetheless, for this most tenuous relation I receive the most basic of kindnesses: the freedom to sit in the open air once a day. I do not mean to complain, my good sir; quite the opposite. Neither McGee nor Aedis would dare treat me so well. Although one must be wary of idolizing this eastern goodness overmuch. For among man, war is its inevitable result. Slavery all but requisite..."

"Okay, okay. What about McGee, though," I demanded. For this was the one I

thought was slippery.

"Well, McGee's type of goodness is different. Let us call it a southern goodness, as in one that points to the tropics; to life, for those of us like myself born under Polaris's dominion, not in the sense that it points downward. Although many are those who would insist that it does. Far fewer men truly exhibit this sort of goodness than do the first type, as well as far fewer species besides man: felines, foxes, corvids at times, birds of prey perhaps. Orcas; occasionally. And serpents of course. Our Ishmael would have us believe that though the average sperm whale is as enthralled by an eastern goodness as his captain, Moby Dick is the supreme champion of the south. In any case, it is actually something quite selfish. In people, it starts as a simple exercise in planning for the future. It might be best demonstrated by a person when they speak of 'being good,' as opposed to 'being bad.' The distinction is simple. In being good, one makes sacrifices now for a future gain. In being bad, one does what one wants now no matter the potential consequences for the future. Goodness and badness, therefore, go hand and hand. They are but two sides of the same coin. One must sin occasionally to survive - ask any of my flowers - but given a suitable environment it is really no matter to spend far more time piling up good deeds for yet greater future ease and prosperity. So you see, even murder is no serious crime for a person convinced of these ideas; it only tips the scale of potential and often carries no consequences at all. Although revenge, the chief motive for murder of man, one may note, is now rarely necessary; for the feeling of need for retribution that comes directly from the testicles at ten is all too easy for the mind to subdue with practice, once the toll it takes on the spirit especially is noted. For it is truly as they say; that it profiteth a man not. Restraint, therefore is its cornerstone. Restraint in all things, with acceptance of the inevitable breaking of said strict laws. Nonviolence at all times. Except when killing. Asteya at all times. Except when taking what one wants. It is the type of goodness I have always tried to promote in my churches. Have you sinned? You are forgiven. Forgive yourself! Just as a wise man would forgive your every trespass against him. Say it aloud and your every misdeed seems trite, does it not? What is possession, after all, but a fast fish; an illusion. What is animal life but a means of death or damage for others? Does the life created in the womb share its mother's disdain of an intercourse taken more than begged for? Indeed, does the world not refuse to chastise our every acknowledged sin most obstinately; beyond, of course, the faculty of those people who have convinced themselves of the other types of goodnesses?"

"And you call that... good?" demanded Renault, almost as if to prove Adoneus's last opining. "Theft. Rape! Murder. Whatever you want; so long as you can rationalize it, admit it aloud." The thought was so repugnant to the captain, he was forced to wash it down with some more of my wine.

"Not I, Renault," demanded Adoneus in turn. "People in general. It is only the idea of 'being good' taken to its logical conclusion. That one allows oneself to possibly murder at will is no guarantee that one shall; in fact those of a true southern goodness murder far less often than, say, yourself, my good sir. McGee is simply well on his way to moving from an intellectual, careful kind of tabulation of sin to an instinctual, bolder one; a happy transformation indeed. In my youth, I was convinced of the superiority of this type of goodness, you see."

Renault spat, "But you are evil now. You even admit as much."

"Oh, to be sure," replied Adoneus at once, if with a sidelong glance at the water behind us, that I would have been hard-pressed to label concretely. For half a second, I was sure it was no more than a tell for the lie he'd so clearly just told; but the nostalgia that fueled his lingering 'r' demanded the opposite. In any case, the glance lasted an instant only. Turning back to Renault after that single moment of hesitation, he crooned, "Evil is quite easy to understand. I like to think of it as a kind of goodness all its own; for how can nearly every creature besides those I've mentioned thus far be abhorred for their decision-making, as the title of evil demands? Let us call it a western goodness, if only in the sense that it is opposite to the eastern; those who practice it are, like those who admire the sunset, utterly unbothered by the temporary changing of light to dark. See something that might fit in your mouth? Eat it. See a female? Fuck her. As for females beset by a male, fight him off with all the viciousness you can muster; if he can't survive and subdue you, he doesn't deserve to breed. Flee any danger. Lie to your heart's content; deception of others is but another pleasure. Dominance over them an end in itself as much as a means. Murder a mere pastime. Vengeance the sweetest of treats. Like your eastern goodness, all men have some of it; though very few in the degree *I* enjoy it..."

"And what of this northern goodness, then?" Renault demanded suddenly, spitting out the detested downward direction, by dwarven reckoning. "The type that my brother has, supposedly." And here it was, I saw at last: the reason our captain had bothered sit through all Adoneus's conjecture. For at that moment I realized that he, as surely as I, was unable to guess at a single one of his brother's true motivations; that he might easily be convinced to listen to even the most outlandish of theories on the subject.

Adoneus was all too happy to comply. "Well," he chirped. "This is a type of goodness that only people posses, in all our crazed desperation. Or perhaps it is like unto the kind practiced by social insects - bees and so on. Personally, I enjoy meditating on the subject about as much as I enjoy imagining being ripped limb from abdomen by my own family simply because I dared visit a fermenting flower before returning to the hive. No, wait! Here is a most apt metaphor! For there is a thorough lovelessness to the women in cultured society, is there not? Far beyond that of the worker bee, even. All as the drones grovel and scrape their way through their lives, and the queen looks down on all she has wrought in rapture, unashamedly evil despite the nature she forces on her children. Perhaps... I should start at the beginning.

Well. In the beginning, there was evil. And only evil. Only a western goodness. Such is the sea, the source of life. Feast, fertilize or flee: those are the choices. A beautiful simplicity. Then we crawled from the waters, and your eastern type of goodness emerged. This took man to cities, to society. Until at last our survival was so ensured that the leisure to meditate on our actions developed, and my southern goodness emerged in the form of religious musings; of wise counsel to the masses from great men of thought. But from there, a funny thing happened. Even the very day these religions developed, along with them came a hierarchy of followers. From this self-important clique comes our northern goodness. I use the word quite loosely, though for many it may only be accurately applied to this particular brand of insanity. In it, an ideal world is kept in mind at all times. That is its cornerstone. Think here north! What is more perfectly immovable than Polaris?

This world is an impossibility of course. It is always a place without sin, without suffering. No matter; all that tends toward the impossible ideal is promoted while anything that seems to be at odds with it is punished to such staggering degree that those unfortunate enough to be born into this society must obey the every and most minuscule whim of the majority. This ideal must by definition exclude all animals not willing to behave; beastliness is detested in all its forms. Sex in its entirety can be cast as sin, seeing as it is most beastly. No matter the people that detest it so are wholly sexually motivated in their madness! The wetness of the women's thighs as they dream of a safe, comfortable world free from beastly dangers and the need to secure male protection using their bodies; a *nice* world! To nest in. The swelling sausages as the men dream of being the only one among so many females able to abide so thorough a dementia. Breeding, in any case, is conducted as a matter of business. One wonders that the deed is even accomplished at all, and children are considered little more than possessions. Perhaps there is still a real benefit, I think every now and then. Perhaps the world must tend far closer to the ideal thanks to the efforts of these people: a *better* place. Think rolling hills covered in square fields dotted with gayly painted farmhouses surrounded my mindless, peaceful cows and sheep, the people, enveloped in fine clothes, strutting here and there most contentedly, every last predator fearing us to their very core thanks to men of that old-fashioned, eastern type of goodness - who, by the way, are now considered far less good than the most base, if loudest, champion of the enduring north. Or better yet, miles upon miles of peaceful, well-manicured lanes dotted with gracefully whimsical palaces for all, like an ætnea that goes on without interruption for towns, cities, and entire nations. But the cost of the lie is too much, clearly. Just as Polaris hasn't been the pole star for almost two million years and will soon fade to unimportance once again, this perfect world is in truth simply a random stabbing off away from reality; one generally very convenient for those pulling the strings. Talk to any who live in such an idyllic setting; one wonders how they can see the sky through their many layers of dishonesty to self. For it is the lie that is the sole tool of these fools, all violence against other people - save, of course, imprisonment, which is somehow considered humane; or execution, so long as it is performed with great fanfare, including, for example, the burning alive of precocious twelve-year-old girls labeled as witches - being regarded as sin. Indeed, all else may be considered crime, but a lie in itself must never be. And let us not forget the depth of pure evil that was necessary to create this utopia! Even the most obsessed with vengeance would never consider genocide or intentional extinction; here, at last, are those foul things' true cause. And even once established, never has a 'nice' neighborhood existed without ten permanently poverty-laden to fuel its appetites; until the inevitable occurs, that is, and the very children born to said neighborhood are used as slaves, and the number decreases to nine. Do not look at me so disbelievingly; this has happened before. Time and time again, in fact. The First Age of Man was very much an age of this nonsense spread across the whole of the planet. How do you think the orc came to be? How else but by the happy and wholesale slaughter and consumption of these fools, as they waddled through their better world; their sinless, impossible, never-sinking utopias. To the salvation of animals everywhere, by the way. So make no mistake: the end result of chasing this northern goodness, to idolize that singular star in the sky round which all the others dance - like that one fate we all share - is

death as surely as a worker bee in win..."

Here Renault, with an angry scoff, left us. He would not suffer another word, it was clear. But the words had been uttered regardless, and neither he nor I could unhear them, as will become apparent by the end.

Speeding northwest on the easterlies, we found ourselves approaching Dominica within the first week of leo. McGee was sure to have me aboard the Horizon at the time, for as I understood it, my duties on the island would include the supervision of the removal of everything of value from the ship. Everything that might fit on the End was to be safely stowed therein, in the very back of her hold, meaning not only did just about everything else have to be taken out to allow access, but also that the selection of what exactly was to be attempted must be made very carefully, for even a single barrel of liquor or crate of food being unable to fit in the end would surely cause us to have to do it all over again. McGee had his opinions on what should be sold, of course, but refused to share them with me. He said it should be my choice. It was all Aedis's shit anyway; I was to simply do my best and he wouldn't dare interfere. This I believed not at all, which is why I was entirely unsurprised when, after docking at Santo, he strolled into our last communal dinner accompanied by an elder dwarf he introduced as one Tybald Allan, Doubly-So, his... - here he cleared his throat so loudly it has hard to make out the word uncle, but still I did with a smiling start - from there settling happily into the seat that had sat empty for the whole of our voyage thus far, the one reserved for the lady in 4A, grabbing eagerly for any food or wine he might be able to reach.

Aedis was forced to ignore the affront of his presence at first, since this Tybald made straight for him and, gabbing his hand to pump it eagerly, insisted, "I was quite concerned when they said you were headed for ҁelia before here. But here you are! Right on schedule. And I have heard the news; that you and your men fought those foolish Malloys and their thugs most bravely. Thanks are in order. Thanks! To think I would happily shake the hand of the son of Aedeon the Odious. Oh, what a day. What a day! I hope you were able to accomplish all you intended there."

"Yes, yes," said Aedis, half to the gaggle of ladies clustered at his end of the table, the dozen or so who had remained for this last adventurous hurrah of a meal before being ushered back to mundane land, who were all now, thanks to the accolades, fawning over the King even more than usual. "Simply the retrieval of a last... member of the crew - one who might haunt me to my dying day, it seems (his own mumble; though much more intelligible) - and what he was guarding there for me."

"Good, goood," crooned Tybald, even as he cast a dubious eye over his shoulder at the rich, flowing curtains and golden sconces that had been for some reason added to his toy vessel. But with little more than a shrug, he added, "Well, at the end of this task you should be quite happy. Not only out of debt but with our deep, *deep* gratitude as well. Any endeavor you set out upon in the future will be made with our generous support. Assuming, of course, the King Tide is undamaged, along with the rest of the fleet."

"Of course; why of course," sang Aedis. And with that he and Tybald took a moment to review the charts the elder dwarf had brought with him. Some minutes of this ended in Tybald departing with a last handshake and happy nod, leaving the captain free to try to reign in McGee and his eager, noisy chomping and slurping at last. He complained, "John; John! That seat is reserved, I'm afraid,"

But McGee was unfazed. Surely relishing the start the comment drew from me, he crooned, "Oh, she's long gone if you're talking bout Cherry. Just don't want all this food go to waste. Am I right, or am I right?" Here he nudged the big blonde beside him. The woman, however, declined to return the sentiment. And the chins of the rest raised just the slightest bit as they attempted some other topic back in Aedis's direction.

But McGee would have none of that! "You know," he boomed. He had to near shout to cut off their chatter completely: "You know, our noble captain Aedis here wasn't always such a pansy." Had Aedis not been armed with a steak knife at best, I'm sure there would have been a problem, but as it was the comment drew little more than the same twitch I'd given at the name of Cherry. With a great smile at the reaction and continued conspiratorial barrages, now between unashamed, hungry glances at the every bulge of her flesh as it tried to burst from her tight dress, on the blonde next to him, McGee went on, "Once upon a time, he was a real man. Captain Aedis Stormbow! He made that up; even his daddy was just Aedeon. Aedeon Murphy, if you care to get technical. Aedeon the Odious to some, apparently. But it sounds good, don't it? Captain Aedis Stormbow. His Majesty Aedis Stormbow! The hero. The pirate king. The wyrmslayer! You've heard some of *those* stories now, haven't you?"

Well, the attitude of these ladies to our McGee changed quite quickly at that! "Oh, he won't share a single one," complained the brunette beside me; this one with a smile so permanently affixed to her face, it seemed she never opened her eyes.

"Not a single one!" echoed another.

"I don't think that now..." attempted Aedis.

But McGee barreled on, unheeding:

'Well... Once upon a time. On this very island no less, if I remember correctly, some... twenty-one years ago now. Well, we were sailing by and heard tell that a wicked, wicked wyrm had taken up residence in a cave not far from the sea out west on the island. Now, a wyrm in Caledonia is no strange thing. Silvern breed 'em, hatch 'em, and set 'em loose all over the place. Aztlan too. The meanest of 'em though, once they're a hundred years old, they send up the Muddle to make sure we men stay up south. Anycase a wyrm? Here!? Well the whole place was in an uproar as you can imagine. And we, being the good dwarf-folk that we are, felt it was our responsibility to get rid of said snake. Since over the course of the last few hundred thousand years, we've gotten *pret*-ty ruttin' good at it. Well... We were also getting paid, of course.

So. Was me - barely a year out the army, by the way; wee little tyke of thirty-five, six maybe - Lod, Pod, Fid n' Firi, Ben; Renault a'course; Comal 'n Undrik, Ari - this, by the way, rasid, is how we found that moron; he was our guide for the trip - Aedeon a'course; and last but not least, His Royal Highness Aedis. Now. Back then we might have a female passenger or two on the Thresher same as here on the

illustrious Twin Horizon tonight, but let's just say those women were... of a different sort than you fine ladies. The one I'm thinking of, now; she thought, for some reason, even though the whole of the crew'd had 'er a dozen times or more each; this one thought our noble captain Aedis Stormbow... fancied 'er, like. And I suppose he must've in a way. Was hard for me not to think of her every other thought, anyway. I mean, the whole thing! We gave that one anything she wanted; she was corn'n clam-fed from head to toe. The tits, the ass, my gods, even if she was destroyed down below. It was a beautiful sight. Anycase, for some reason, she wanted to come with us! Can you believe that.

"Oh, my prince will protect me," she said, swooning, like.

"Lady, he'll be busy with the rutting wyrm like the rest of us," is what we all said, course. But she wouldn't listen. She was bored on the ship and she wanted to come to see how brave we all were, and what a wyrm looked like, and that was the end of the story. We all assumed, of course, that Aedeon'd tell 'er how dumb she was being, tell 'er she couldn't, and that'd be the actual end of the story.

But! Before big daddy can shut 'er up, what does our Aedis do? Well, we all got together night before we set out and as you can imagine, sat down to a nice, big meal, much as we're all doing here, all nice'n happy, like. There was boar the townsfolk'd given us, there was ale; you name it, it was there. And we're all laughin' and eatin, laughin' and drinkin, when captain Stormbow here declares that Valn... Vald... Valeria - that was her name - would be at his side for the whole thing, to tend to the wounded, like. She knew the danger, but was as brave a soul as the rest of us. So please, gentlemen, please be kind to her tonight, since tomorrow is never promised and all that. Well, as you can imagine, we were as nice to her as we knew how.

"Here you go, Valeria," we'd say. "Here's some boar meat." And there some boar meat'd be.'

On the Horizon, there went a whole shoulder of recently slaughtered lamb from a nearby platter to the plate of the big blonde via McGee's arcing wave of a delivery. A spilling pile of creamed, pearl onions followed in the name of bread. Mashed potatoes were then truly represented. And wiping his hand on the table-cloth, then his tongue, then his pants, McGee happily continued,

"'Smere you lo, Valeria. Here's some a'lis. Here's some a that. Eat up, cause its going to be your last day on earth."

We all assumed we'd have a turn at 'er afterward, course, if only fer old-time's sake. These potatoes are good, by the way! Least those of us who'd be battling the beast did, anyway. But Aedis stopped us. And as he's takin 'er back to the dungeon, she's swoonin' and singin' away, 'bout how she'd do her best 'n she'd be by his side forever 'n all that. Drove a few of us to outright laughter it did.'

Here McGee produced his hated hammer, which made a satisfying clunk on the table as, standing to better explain, he declared,

'Now. Lessay this here is the wyrm. And lessay the salt shakers, and... all these things, and... whatever this ruttin' thing is: that's all us. The pepper can be Ari way over here, wonderin' what he's gotten 'imself into. Now. You've got to have... one

in front, at least - here - to keep the bastard busy. Meanwhile, the rest of us have to bang away on the scales, like, until a bunch come loose. That's the ploughing problem, of course. You can fuck up the face pretty bad, but you can't very well stab the bastard dead with all the scales there, can you? Harder'n ruttin' mithril, the ruttin' things, past the mane. Swords, spears, axes, maces, hand-cannons, shit: actual cannons. Doesn't matter. Well... Dynamite'll do the job. But. Other'n that... Hammers. Again and again and again; that's the only way.'

He'd started his demonstration by addressing Aedis, who grew increasingly busy trying to hide the smile that I could just start to see creeping from the corner of his mouth with his napkinned hand. But the ladies shrinking from McGee in fear each had a turn at his laughingly intense stare in short order. Here he finally returned his focus to the captain and, grabbing an oddly militantly shaped carafe, continued,

'Only then can Sir Stabs-a-lot come to finish the fucker off with his famous sword. Like this. Oh, so sorry, madam, didn't mean to hit you with that. Or however he wants to. But that's the idea anyway in a nutshell. Now, usually it's, as you might think, Renault up here, with some help from daddy if he's hungover. All us dummies with hammers, Aedeon gen'rly included, are these ruttin' things on the side. And Aedis's that pointy-ass thing rolling round on the floor over there - again, so sorry, madam; are you bleeding? Do feel free to take care of that. But this time, Aedis tells us it'll be different. He'll take the front and Renault can finish 'im off. We all think he's gone daffy, of course. Has this woman done it to him? It's happened before! What exactly did she *do* to him last night?

Now, it's the one who finishes the bastard what takes all the glory, of course, when the story gets told. Our Aedis loves that part. But among those who actually see the battle, it's clear: it's the one who takes the front who's the real hero. You've got to be one tough bastard, not to mention have some balls and some moves, lemme tell you, to take on a hundred-foot, poisonous, angry, feather-maned, pissed-off, hungry, evil rutting snake like these things are, one on one: mano a wyrmo, so to speak. And it's Renault who was that reckless bastard for us, Aedeon not really wanting to risk it anymore. But Aedis wanted to switch. As we all roll our eyes. What use trying to impress a dead woman, after all, like this Valeria was sure to be. She might have a shot if she was to stay off to the side, like. But by his side meant right there in front if he was going to take point. Well, it was their funeral, we all mumbled. We'd manage without 'em. And with that, we got to it.

This one was one big monster, lemme tell you. Maybe... takin' him on with only ten was a bad idea, we all think. But there wasn't much we could do then, seein' as moment we clapped eyes on him, he clapped eyes on us too. So. We spread out like yer supposed to and up comes Mr wyrm. We start to circle round and he's happy to slither on up between us to take the leader - Aedis, with his spinning, shining sword; the only one standing firm - on first, seein' as they have this terrible, sinister kind of intelligence, even if they ain't so smart as to guess what our hammers can do to 'em, with not a glance at the rest of us past the odd flip of 'is tail that can smash a fool he's not quick enough. Valeria steps back first thing, as you can imagine, only now fully understanding just how dumb she was being. She had a dress on, even; of this shimmering red, that she only brought out for special occasions. All those hips, all those tits; stuffed in there like hams in a sack when

you're robbin' the butcher. Anycase, all of this not a bit out of place so far, right? All exactly as you might have imagined? Our hero ready to show off for the damsel in distress and all that. Till Aedis grabs 'er, that is, and throws 'er right there in front of him, right there between him'n the monster. And her tits come popping out the top of the thing - I am not making this up - as she finally realizes just how fucked she is. Well, it was quick at least. Wyrm rises up. Jaw unhinges, hanging on by nothing more'n a flap of scaly skin, and down he goes, right onto poor old Valeria. And down the hatch she goes, head to toe, dress'n all.

Now. I've heard tell that there was a band that fought a wyrm not a minute less than forty days and forty nights till the fucker finally fell. That might be an exaggeration. Although I personally have done battle in shifts for three days straight - count 'em; three days - against a single beast. They don't like to die, generally. But this one! Nevermind it was bigger'n any I'd ever seen before. This one fell in the span of a couple hours. There was this bulge, see, that was right there beneath his head, where big ol' Valeria was slowly being suffocated. Poor bastard'd bitten off way more'n he could chew - swallow, whatever! Not a thousand blows had we given the fat, slow, sated snake when Firi smacked a whole fistful of skin right off his belly. From there it was all over. Renault put 'im out of misery not a second later. And as the fucker's dying, right as our noble captain Stormbow slips a spear into the back of 'is skull while I'm standing there pulling apart the feather scales, sun setting behind 'im, what does he shout to us all but, "We all deserve a nice, big last supper, don't we!?"'

Silence, as one can imagine, reigned over McGee's subsequent departure; minus, that is, his assurance, "That's a true story," that he made, shaking his finger at the no-longer-smiling brunette beside me, as he grabbed his hammer and a bottle of wine to take with us. I say us because he called me rudely after him, as one does a dog, from even a few steps up the stairway to the deck. He was in great spirits for the rest of the day and the whole of the next. We found Ari, then the cave. Then spent an hour or two looking for one of the monster's brood, since she had already hatched her eggs by the time they'd slain her. And grabbing the first that we found - nearly fifteen feet long by then, and easily six knuckles thick, but still little more than a toy to the dwarf - by his feathered neck, he divulged my dagger from its chain round his own. He dumped the dagger itself on the ground, however, keeping only the sheath in his hand. The serpent happily bared his dripping fangs, one of which McGee then inserted directly into the thing. It was a perfect fit. The beast writhed in his impotent, ejaculatory rage, then was tossed over McGee's shoulder, from there to make a rapid exit.

"Shouldn't we kill that?" I demanded, as he placed the dagger back in its holster, then handed it to me with the species of grunt I had by then come to understand accompanied gifts.

"Nah," is all he said. "Maybe some good ol' boys from the island'll round 'em all up one day. We got better shit to do." And we made off for Santo to start emptying the hold.

9.

From here the paths of our many humble heroes must diverge for a time, for so would those of our respective vessels. Renault and a skeleton crew comprised of Ghatsly, Rash and Jiorney, who could cook, would take the Thresher, Adoneus still held within. Their destination; Carolina Cove, to make known our coming to the captains that ruled Hank's Hold, perhaps smooth over an old grievance or two, and if lucky find any help for our continuing voyage as might be offered among them. As for the End, we were told to remain firmly out of sight in order to remove any temptation from said captains to seize the contents of our own hold for themselves, but not so far as to be unavailable to Renault should he need find us. An uninhabited, twisted mess of an island some thirty miles south-west called Wayah's Rock was our destination. Ari was our newest captain, McGee having been transferred to the Horizon along with the entirety of the regular crew besides the southerner, Ollio, Hum Maester and myself. We were joined by a handful of the young boys that had sailed under Aedis previously; the End's two most domineering, dictatorial guards, Kineid and Powell, who made no attempt to hide their continued suspicious watch of us four between their habitual bowing of these others, would remain as well. Whaker and Diarmuid, meanwhile, were given command of the Hammerhead, a twenty-four-foot cat with a single sail and jib, and a cabin like a coffin, that had been bought in Dominica for the price of one of the Horizon's sofas. They were to follow the Horizon. And this last, now much more functional thanks to my efforts, if yet more hollow, captained still by Aedis and manned by everyone not mentioned already, was to depart Dominica with the aim of taking the King Tide, which magnificent ship sat at the head of a fleet of perhaps a hundred or so other arks then being sailed towards the island from the north.

Many years previous, this fleet had been lent by the Allans to the now-disbanded Hegalden Alliance, a joining of some fifty thousand warriors from Lusitania, Sonosalia, the Anda and Empire, to serve as artillery against and armed troop transports around the Archaean goblins' firm defenses, which had stretched in an unbroken line across the continent's large, northern peninsula, from Mendibaldi Bay in the west clear through to the outskirts of Ekaldia in the east. Suffice to say this worked very well. The battle, which up until then had been waged fruitlessly on and off for the better part of forever, was brought to a close within a few years. With the instrumental tactical aid of a few of the Atlas tribes - including Rose's, before they returned to their home after the struggle only to meet their end at the claws of a less adventurous, neighboring band of orcs that had taken their lands and multiplied quickly in their absence, leaving her orphaned - and a few traitorous northern orcs, who were promised lands of their own in return for description of the terrain behind the line and then slaughtered summarily, one-by-one, by the Order of One Truth, the Alliance defeated their enemies. And the entirety of north Archaea's 'logerdak' population was sent running to the remote wilds of Iceland, hopefully to kill each other there and never attempt to return to the fine, forested slopes of the Iralden Range. After the battle was won, the Allans expected their ships to be returned of course, but this Order had other ideas. A radical movement which had boasted at best five hundred followers before the lending of

the ships, their numbers swelled to ten thousand or more over the course of the struggle that ensued; which sudden rise was thanks in its near entirety, I was told, to the woman at their supposed head, who had arrived there from somewhere in Caledonia around that time, who they claimed to be an oracle, and who had the ability to hold men in such a state of enthrallment that most would lay down their lives willingly for any cause she adopted. Though with the conquering of such a large territory and distribution of it among themselves, the Anda, Allans and various southern kings viewed their work as done, the Order saw the claiming of the north as only the beginning of their glory. They vowed to send the orc and all their degenerate, hybrid offspring to the annals of extinct species via the sword. And thanks to their oracle, they now had the manpower to attempt their cleansing on a grand scale. The years after the end of the war saw them consolidate their hold over a large swath of northern territory ostensibly claimed by the Empire and, most importantly, the ships that would take them from there to the orcish strongholds across the sea. Some captains were willing converts. Those who failed to conform to the Order's plans were found guilty of any number of 'crimes against the good society of the north,' for which the punishment could be anything from deportation to forced labor to death. So long as timber flowed southward, the Emperor made no demands of those clearing the way for civilization. The Allans, on the other hand, had serious problems with what was happening there, as one can imagine. They tried every avenue available to them to regain their property and missing captains. Diplomacy faltered at its onset; the Order was surprisingly well-managed and quickly amassed a sizable fortune all their own. And to wage war on them would only ensure the fleet's end. Finally, after some fifteen years, the Order thought themselves prepared to risk their adventure against the Aztlan orcs; while the Allans had all but given up on their clansmen, not to mention their sizeable investment, as lost. We were, ironically enough, their last hope.

For the technique of switching an Allan ship for a replica was one that had been mastered long ago, under Aedeon. Before the age of the ark, the Allans would pump out hundreds upon hundreds of perfectly identical, singly-square-rigged, unwieldy tubs called jugs per annum for all their shipping needs. Aedeon would take one, strip it of everything of value, then use the empty shell to snatch another from their convoys without any of the other ships noticing, thus avoiding a fight. Apparently, they got quite good at it. They would work under a crescent moon or not at all, and in complete silence. The convoy ships would all be lit bow and stern in order to keep each other near without collision, so the navigation of the approach in small craft was a simple matter. And once they scaled the sides with grappling hooks and subdued their prey, they would simply sail off with their prize, leaving her former crew, or their corpses depending, in the nearest port or body of deep water respectively. The shell of a ship that had gotten them there would be carefully lit front and back once the new vessel's torches were snuffed out, and a skeleton crew would sail her for a few days along with the convoy to ensure the bulk of the crew's safe escape, until, bracing the wheel and making fast the sails one night, these last would - hopefully - be able to slip off in a final small rig to meet up with the Thresher either at some predetermined, hidden cove or a few miles behind the convoy if they were in open water. The process repeated had earned them a small fortune, not to mention the apparent reluctant admiration of the Allans. And now here we were to attempt the process one last time at the clan's behest. The

Horizon, hastily constructed in Whitehall the year before for this very purpose, would be switched for the King Tide, which bore this oracle without whom the Order had little hope of completing its conquest of the Aztlan, and everybody - except the Order, of course - would be happy.

I, however, was not to be witness to any such excitement. My job would be far simpler. I would learn its details while still in Dominica, as I was returning from a most relaxing evening spent with a certain caramel-colored, wayward Terran caretaker named [illegible]ta who'd been recommended to me by Ari as one quite considerate of a sailor's convalescence. McGee called me over just outside the ship.

"Pick up the other end of this, will ye, rasid," said he. He was sitting on one side of a rough-hewn pine box, ostensibly taking a breather; there was a long track of deeply disturbed dirt leading from the other end of it back into town to suggest his struggle. All the other crew made sure to give him a wide berth in their comings and goings. Why he wanted me, of all people, to help him is what I made sure to ask, along with what was in the crate, exactly.

"Replacement oars, ye ijit," he said.

"And what oars can fit in a five-foot crate, McGee?" I returned, refusing to take a single step toward the thing. I'd been worked half to death repacking all our supplies, after all, considering the state of my ribs, and was not about to concern myself with a single other burden without complaint at least.

"What'd'you care," he said. "It's cannonballs. It's feathers for my pillow. Maybe it's a whole fistfull a' that disgusting, red swill you like so much, ye daft bastard. Now quit bein' such a ninny and grab the other end there."

Don't ask me why; I'm helpless against the bastard's every command to this day. So I picked the box up reluctantly in the end, only to be pleasantly surprised, for it was indeed very light.

"Is it feathers for your pillow," I asked.

"No," he replied. "But it's real, real fragile, like. So you make sure to be real ginger with it, ye hear."

Here I took a moment to look back at the track he'd made by dragging the thing over cobblestone and ditch alike some hundreds of yards at least; until my attention was brought back to front and center when he suddenly banged his end against the rail of the gangway with a loud thud.

"Dammit, rasid," he shouted. "I said to be careful!" I protested, of course. But from then on, he would refuse to admit a single mishandling, being sure to blame it all quite loudly on me instead; no matter it was he who gave every third post of the gangway rail a good knock with his end, likewise the frame of the door beneath the quarterdeck, just as every corner we turned from there in our downward spiral in search of Diarmuid's cabin was made a bit rounder by his efforts. By the end, I was finally able to guess at the contents of the crate by the increasingly audible grunts of pain and frustration coming from within. Therefore I was hardly surprised when none other than Cherry emerged to berate her chief handler.

"You!" was all she said, if with a fuming anger that more than made up for her brevity, when the lid was removed at last. She'd had to scrunch fetal position to fit in the thing, with her head, knees and lower back all pressed against the sides. Her handful of personal effects strewn in the empty spaces had done little to soften the repeated barrages of her container on her.

But McGee was already pacing the room unapologetically, complaining, "Well,

you want first-class handling, maybe you could toss me some money every now and then. I know you've got plenty." Indeed, one of those wonderful, knee-high, leather boots of hers made a pleasant jingle as it emerged from a different crate, one of many in the cramped cabin, for her to inspect.

Although she was ready for this. "I *do* toss you money, McGee. Plenty of money. Since when, for example, is a pearl worth ten pounds even?"

"That's a *service* charge, Cherry," insisted the dwarf. "Do I look like a bank? Better'n trying to buy some food with the thing and hoping they have change, am I right? rasid! Am I right?"

My response was only to ask what on earth she was doing there, of course. "Don't get me wrong," I said. "But we're a long way from the Whale!"

She was likely about to inform me that she belonged at the tavern about as much as she did in a palace surrounded my maids, had McGee not been happy to interrupt, "What; you didn't know? That our Cherry here has a heart after all? That she wuvs our poor prisoner Adoneus and will fowever and ever?"

Cherry's retribution was swift and terrible and involved some lesser-known manipulations of the human hand. Although once completed, after a minute of quietly arranging her many possessions on the rail next to the cabin's lone hammock, now being safely turned away from him, she added, "You really can't think of any other reason why I'm here, McGee? Not one!?"

A single shrug communicated this inability to me clearly, though she couldn't see it, so he said, "On earth else could you be doing here sides tryin' to help that moron? Boredom, maybe? That's why rasid's here."

I saw that she inhaled sharply, as if to twirl in a long, complaining tirade, but stopped herself a moment before the deed was done, instead merely fidgeting with her clothes again in silent complaint.

Therefore McGee was free to sing, as he'd begun to do almost daily recently, "Which reminds me; things ain't gonna be so boring round here no more, Sir Sido."

"You call so far boring?" I demanded as always. "I only have half my ribs left!"

"Aw, stow it," was the expected extent of his commiseration. "Yer ribs're fine. Listen to you winge away. But don't worry; I understand. Yer a fragile, sensitive gune-boy. Which is why I'm letting you sit out the King Tide. Nevermind I think it'd do you a world of good to kill something for once. Anycase, this'll be your job, then: to make sure nobody finds our little stowaway while I'm gone."

And so I did. It was no difficult task; Kineid and Powell were idiots. It was no problem to see that she was fed as well, seeing as I'd finally managed to make friends with the three hundred pounds of sunshine that is Ollio. (I'd neglected to sell the Horizon's wine as instructed, of course, and he absolutely loved ꝺome for anything involving pork, which was most meals; even if it pained me to see the delicate red burned off round a simple slab of late pig.) Although as one may suspect, my intent was not wholly altruistic. I admit to enjoying myself a little. For once we reached Wayah's Rock, it was my and Rema's duty to sail the distance between the End and Thresher regularly to ensure communication. Therefore, seeing as it was such a pain for me while everybody else was free to just lounge about playing cards, I took the opportunity to entertain myself by finding out exactly how truthful McGee had been about our two somewhat willing prisoners. Adoneus was the harder to get to, since with so small a crew as the Thresher now had, Renault had suspended his outdoor dining privilege, fearing an easy escape to

shore and the chaos of the Hold. Since the duty seemed somewhat debasing for him and Ghatsly, however, I volunteered to deliver the prisoner's food upon my first visit to the Thresher. I told him that Cherry sent her regards and wished him to know she was with him and ready to save him at the first opportunity.

"Who, now?" was Adoneus's terse reply, single eyebrow raising my way a bit more energetically than I'd seen him wield it before, as he wound his way between the various devices, straps open and ready for the dungeon's next occupant, to approach me. "Did you say...?"

"Yes. Cherry." I said. "She's stowed away and would like you to know she has a plan to free you." Lies, of course. I thought for a second to make sure to add 'ability to fool gods,' to my next resume, somewhere near the top, if McGee should ever come to his senses and get rid of me.

I'd never heard Adoneus stutter before. "W-w-what?" is precisely how it came out; three separate w's. And moments of silence followed, only broken by the angry smack of his palm against the doorframe as he got right up to the slot to declare, "Was everything not perfect enough for her? I left her a mansion!"

A mansion! I thought. So it wasn't just me that had problems sweeping Cherry off her feet. "Well, sir," said I, inwardly smiling. "I can't read her mind, but I got the impression that she wasn't all that... impressed. Would you like me to tell her something?"

Yes he would. He would like me to *tell* her that he was very fond of her, and grateful for her concern, but that she should swim to shore at once and return to the wonderful, *more*-than-adequate estate he'd made very sure to have prepared for her and her daughter. No, scratch that: he hated her and wanted nothing to do with her. Good luck making it on her own. End message. I, of course, deciding that this would be great fun after realizing who her daughter likely was, made sure to give Cherry a message of my own.

"Adoneus wants you to know that he knows you've stowed away already; he has spies everywhere. (Whispering:) maybe it was McGee. And he wants to know why you thought it polite to leave the fine, more-than-adequate estate he made sure to prepare for you and Peach," I said. My performance was phenomenal; not the slightest smirk broke my delivery.

Cherry's stutter was equally as unprecedented as her apparent lover's. "Ad-doneus," she attempted. "Knows I'm here? Don't lie, rasid! Wait! Did *you* tell him!?"

I posted myself against the wall, head shaking, arms up; may she strike me dead. Would... she like me to deliver a message?

Yes she would. She would like me to re-*mind* him that his es-*tate* was situated directly next to one of his many relax-*ation* inns (spread throughout the mɑcsɹma, with one opening in the ɹtnea soon, I'm told. Wonderful establishments; I highly recommend them.) Was that a coincidence? That it was as boring as boring could be there. And too hot. She didn't know how Peach thought it was so wonderful. And that she wasn't here for him anyway. End message.

Great, great fun indeed.

Meanwhile, the Horizon and Hammerhead were making steady progress toward the Order's borrowed fleet. We had arrived in Dominica under leo's waning crescent and the waxing had come and gone as we'd dealt with the supplies. Therefore, the next opportunity to make the switch was still a ways off. But Aedis and McGee

wanted to find their target, at least, before then to be able to plan out an appropriate escape route for those that would sail the Horizon along with the fleet for a time. A handful of days into the westerlies took them into northern waters, where Whaker and Diarmuid, sailing ahead, caught sight of their quarry at last. The fleet was making pitifully slow progress, the ark's normal lack of haste only exacerbated by exceptionally bad handling. Another two weeks at least to Dominica, they guessed.

"It's perfect!" McGee declared as he, Whaker and Aedis reviewed the charts under the light of the full moon. "We can do it anywhere we want. There's all sorts of nooks for us to hide in off Sonosalia. We can say here, this cove, to meet up after we slip off. I know it well. Hundred pounds says I can put the Horizon right into the big beach at Playa! Idiots won't know what happened. They'll be stranded without their precious oracle; two thirds of 'em'll give up then and there. Right on Tybald's doorstep. He'll get his damn ships back for sure. He can keep 'em warm for us, anyway. Might be so happy they don't even look for us. All while we..." And he pointed to the very end of Iralden Range on the map, where it crashes into the sea after its last towering triumph of altitude called Iceland. For they of course had no intention of returning either the King Tide or the oracle to anyone, having plans for both.

So they sailed back to Sonosalia and waited. But a summer fog crept upon them as they did. Assuming the fleet would know, as any sailor does, that all that was necessary to emerge into clear skies again was to float ten miles at most out to sea, and that it was a simple matter - more direct, even - to arrive at Dominica navigating by the stars rather than insisting on hugging the coast the whole way, they sailed to the boundary of the mist themselves, waiting just within the fog as it roiled up from the cold, upwelling coast waters where they mix with the warm, open Amician. But the Order were no sailors to be sure! Once the mist came upon them, they must have only tried to pray it away, instead of realizing its limited extent. They skirted the coast so closely to keep land visible, it was a miracle they lost only a single ship. When the grey lifted, Aedis and McGee found the wreck immediately. And when Whaker and Diarmuid made for Santo once more, what did they find but the King Tide happily and safely docked there among all the rest, making their last preparations before striking out to the west and the wilds. What's more, it was as if they were in fact subject to the sort of divine protection they surely thought they enjoyed, for they wouldn't quit the port until well into sȷmia, once the moon was half full again, and would illuminate the every detail of an approaching marauder as clearly as the sun at noon.

"Shit," Aedis cursed as they bent over the charts again. "They're so dumb they're clever. Tybald must be furious."

"Fuck Tybald," was McGee's instant reply. "We're taking the King Tide, so what does it matter!? Remember. You're not the only one who's taking a risk with all this. I gave those bastards almost three hundred pounds back in cælia to keep up pretenses. This is all your plan, I'll remind you. Well. Everything 'cept me bein' here, a'course."

Aedis's only reply was a dismissive, regretfully acknowledging, swipe of his hand.

This bothered our McGee not at all. "Don't you worry, cap'n Stormbow," said he. "We'll have another chance at it. Here. They'll stop for their last water here, off Anza. We'll catch sight of 'em there and hit 'em a little ways west. Look. We

won't be any farther west'n Hank's Hold. Have to pick up your brother anyway, don't we? It's barely even out of our way."

And so off they sailed ahead of the fleet again. Although this time the Hammerhead made sure to keep their quarry within their sights at all times. Having had the forethought to make acquaintances in Dominica with some of the wide-eyed, awestruck captains that were sailing their own rag-tag vessels at the oracle's behest, Whaker and Diarmuid were able join this rear-guard easily. A simple repeated Lusitani declaration of "Logerdak ki maut,": 'Death to demi-humans,' over the open water, just as they had across the bar after a few pints at a local tavern, was the only requirement for entry. From there, they bided their time, sailing along with the fleet as it made its agonizingly slow progress westward, ever ready to slip off to warn Aedis and McGee should it veer from its expected course. But now the fleet followed the exact path our captains wanted. The moment the first arks could be seen turning into Anza's westernmost bay to fill their water casks, the Horizon, laid in wait not far away, slipped off ahead of them again. From there they made sure to snuff their every last lantern at all times, daring another mile or two closer to the fleet nightly to keep it in their sights before speeding ahead to wait out the daylight. All as the moon waned from gibbous, to half, to ardea's first sliver at last; just where McGee had wanted them, on the open Amician some thousand miles south of Hank's Hold.

The rowboats were lowered two hours before the dawn's first rays under a sparkling, star-lit sky, just as the moon began to peek above the horizon before them. They were a mile or so ahead of the King Tide as it made its way west at a lazy four knots. The crew, occasional glint from their weapons barely distinguishable from the silver edges of the swells around them as they pulled quietly toward the fleet's lead vessel, were all ready with a heavy breakfast in their bellies and a barrel of strong coffee - at the least - in constant rotation round every craft. When they arrived at the King Tide, they were even happily surprised, for the fools had left the rigging hanging over the sides, trailing in the water, perhaps not even knowing that it might be rolled up and stowed safely on deck. It'd likely been that way the whole voyage, the idiots, they thought. Therefore, the grappling hooks remained silently slung over their shoulders as they crept up the rope ladders so considerately provided them, with smiles all round at the easy prey sure to await them above.

Indeed, the whole process took less than an hour. Sever and Bellio went first, taking the watchmen completely by surprise. Bellio, they say, managed to subdue three, including the one in the crow's nest, with little more than the rope of his grappling hook and a trio of linen strips he ripped from the sails that he used as gags. Sever wasn't so conscientious. Six fell to his blade without a sound while his companion struggled above. And with the laying of the last quietly to the deck, the rest of the crew clambered over the rail. Barely a gasp of surprise escaped the ship's bowels as they made their way, for the soldiers had been encouraged to erect partitions for privacy; they were able to stalk from hammock to hammock, subduing their prey five or ten at a time. The ship had five levels. The first three were reserved for the soldiers and cannon. Young fools sound asleep to a pair of hands, they fell with little trouble. The crew, ensconced in their bunks on the fourth level in various states of drunken sleep, including, unfortunately, that one where after laying like a log for exactly five hours, one spends the rest of the night

staring at the ceiling in painful alertness and complete boredom, was the real problem, of course. But Sever, Earl and Tilty let them know the punishment for resisting them by sacrifice of the three poor fools first to approach them and the rest laid down their makeshift weapons and unmanned their barricades with little more than a raising of hands and grumble at us as we made our way to the last level. There we found a prison crammed with two hundred souls at least, guarded by soldiers no more experienced or ready than the ones then fuming within their bonds above. With one look at the starving, sickly lot locked away, Aedis demanded that they be left in their cells at least until we cleared the rest of the ship. But the prisoners began to raise a ruckus and in the end our noble captain Stormbow acquiesced to the suggestively poised, ready bar Bellio held jammed within the lock of the first cage. Some of the prisoners understood the need for quiet as they happily slipped from their prison to finish the takeover of the ship. Others not so much. But it was too late for the judges who guarded the captain, mates and priests in any case. They would be dealt with much less gingerly than the rest of the soldiers had been. And with a start as the two simultaneously realized what they had just done; what likely would happen to the most notable of the protected, at least, if the prisoners were allowed free reign, Aedis and Bellio gave each other a knowing glance before turning to make a last run to find the oracle before these ruffians did.

"Earl, to me," hissed Aedis as he hefted up his mace (he didn't want to waste Durandal's blade on these fools, he'd said, so the prop hung far from use at his side). And the two, followed by Lyus, who had stayed by the big man for the whole of the struggle, made at once for the stairs behind them in hopes of making the deck as quickly as possible. This while Bellio hissed, "Sever!" in turn, and departed in the other direction, racing between the cells then being pried open like the first to hopefully come up to wherever the oracle was sleeping from below.

What exactly these two did from there I don't know, for neither ever spares me much more breath than is required for a passing insult. But Lyus, as always, would be happy to share all. Aedis, he and Earl barreled up the stairways and ladders immersed within a throng of prisoners, Earl doing his best to push any who got in their way to the side. They made the deck just as the most lively of the escapees did, and, now tossing all caution to the wind, they barreled through one of the doors leading to under the quarterdeck without pause. This kind of intrusion the pair of guards bearing swords the size of signposts they found awaiting within was all too ready for. And these were no children on on their first adventure. They were serious, highly paid warriors both. Judges, they call them. The battle was fierce. Though Lyus insists the work of crushing them was accomplished mostly by Earl, he admits that Aedis did his own fair share, pound-for-pound. The story gets more detailed with every telling. Although from the first, the boy made sure to expound at great length about his own contribution to the struggle, which was to stab to death with repeated blows the boy with "fierce, wild eyes" who, knife in hand, attempted to sneak up on Earl as he battled the pair of judges.

But there was no oracle to be found on this level; only Alevi Allan and his mates. Aedis left Earl to shield the other captain from the chaos while he and Lyus forged downward. The first to fourth levels of the vessel's stern held the oracle's priests. These threw themselves at Aedis's feet with prayers and supplications their only weapons, since the judges guarding them had by then been dealt with and they

guessed correctly the intentions of the rabble surrounding them. Or at least that's how Lyus's story started. By its third or fourth telling there were that many guards per level still fighting for him and Aedis to deal with. In any case, Aedis left the priests for the prisoners to do with as they saw fit. But still no oracle could be found. No; they found her in a cell of her own instead! On the last level, separated from the rest of the cages by only the pair of doors, now smashed open, that had bounded the small chamber into which the last stairway emerged, where they found four judges, three with their broadswords still sheathed, laying in a pool of blood among the bodies of a dozen or more prisoners. Sever's work, surely. Indeed, there was the villain when Aedis and Lyus arrived, busy checking the bodies for signs of life or anything of value; while Bellio, the handsome devil, was knelt in front the oracle as she raised herself hesitantly from her spartan bunk, stroking her hand to calm her and assure her of our, on the whole, noble intentions. Much to Aedis's visible displeasure.

I wonder if things might have turned out differently if the two had focused more intently on the task at hand instead of spending the remainder of the night and much of the next day fawning competitively over the woman. Perhaps nothing would have been noticed then either. But as it was, none were looking for the single shadow that slipped over the side during the commotion, dressed now as he was in prisoner's rags, his clothing having been taken from him, bonds loosened just enough to make the theft possible, that dove into the water to free the single discarded rowboat that'd tangled itself in the rigging, slipping off to the east and the rest of the fleet just as the dawn sent its first rays to swallow the moon.

I, meanwhile, was starting to get a bit tired of being Adoneus and Cherry's sole entertainment. It might have started out as great fun, but the whole thing quickly devolved into a sad process of faithfully relating exactly what odd violence they might attempt at their next private meeting in turns. It was awful. It wasn't even as if I could skip a bit every now and then to save myself having to picture whatever heinous act it was twice - once listening and again faithfully repeating. For if there wasn't some hidden remembrance of past intimate indecency for my audience in each and every exchange, neither the one nor the other would allow me to escape until I had related it all again; "fully this time." I think they thought they were enlightening me. Some week or two into this nonsense and I realized their near-identical smirks while relating any message were likely engendered as much by this attempt at education as by joy of contributing whatever mental substance their words might lend to the other's next physical exercise. But no matter what one thinks of me at this point in my tale, I will insist here that not one in ten things these two mentioned would I ever think to do to a female. Or would ever allow to be done to me much less! In any case, such was the sad state of my affairs while the rest of the crew was playing hero. I might have simply started to ignore them. But on some level I knew, even then, that they would both escape from their cells sooner or later. At which time it would be far better to only have to explain away any more recent, necessary betrayals to the pair, than have to do all that plus remind them that I'd also tried to act like I was too busy to help them through their

perhaps self-imposed, though I'm sure still extremely lonely, confinements.

Well... confinement might be a bit harsh of a term for their conditions. Cherry, for one, would often slip out to Wayah's Rock in Rema after dark, returning with a smirk in her eye, laden with forest vegetables, herbs and small game that I would be instructed to present to Ollio as my own handiwork. And as for the other, one night while Renault was ashore, Jiorney on deck and Ghatsly asleep, once I'd undone the lock to his cell (in extremely good time, by the way) and triumphantly slammed down his dinner on the rickety table, I invited him to escape. With a shrug, he assured me, as I was sure he would, "Tempting. But the time is not yet right, my friend," explaining, "I would have been hard-pressed to find a ship to sail straight from Cælia to Ty Gwydir, of all places, without Aedis so considerately introducing himself to me last year, you see. And look at the comfort of my quarters! Venus wasn't lying at all! She enjoyed her own time here *greatly*. Aedeon the Odious! Quite the insult; the man was a genius. Although I simply can't imagine what possible purpose that piece there might have. (He could. Trust me; he could. It was a five-foot-tall partition with two straps on the floor before it, one larger in the middle of it, and three holes; one large below the strap and two smaller on either side.) All while I'm waited on hand and foot by such esteemed gentlemen as yourself and our dear Mr Rash." Ghatsly had yet to take a liking to the man, but our dear Mr Rash certainly had. He would grovel openly, in fact, as he delivered his plate of food when allowed the task, calling him sir and good sir and respectable, good sir and whatever else he could think of.

With a shrug of my own, I asked, "Why are you heading to this Ty Gwydir? If you don't mind me asking. It doesn't sound very pleasant."

It was an honest question. But Adoneus snapped his head from it as if it were an unexpected blow. And, now turned toward the open sea, plainly visible between the two, long arms of land bounding Carolina Cove to the east and the forts they boasted on their last promontories, he sighed, "Sa..."

That was all for a time, until with a smile he grabbed the bottle of gœme I'd brought. And, once I'd provided him the opener, as the pop came from the neck and he extended it back to me for sampling, he said,

'Have you ever considered how large the waters of this planet really are, young sir? Take this heady mix of pure soul for comparison. Here is a sum of liquid anyone can fathom the size of. Indeed, it is just enough to fill your hand; what can be more real than that? Let us compare it to the ocean. I've done the math once. If I remember correctly, it is on the order of septillionths of the ocean: that's one divided by ten twenty-four times.

Allow me to put in another way. Take every person you have ever cared about, every one with which you have done business, every one with whom you've enjoyed a pleasant conversation in a park on a sunny day, every one you've named aloud and likewise those who have named you. Such, one might say, is about the collective weight of one's existence, as measured in pure humanity. Well, take those few thousand souls, chop them up and dump them in the Sudden Sea; you would need find another bridge to make it past the dock at your Whale, for the water is quite deep there. Although we're moving in the right direction at least; the quantity now in question is perhaps on the order of a pentillionth of the ocean. Much, much larger than before.

Continue in this way for as long as you like. Consider, perhaps, all the works of man in existence: trillionths, only, of the ocean. Dump them in the Sudden Sea, you wouldn't even make it to cJʃ. Every living organism: millionths. You've made it to Andria and no farther.

What more can we possibly consider? Mountains, of course! What thing on this planet towers so obstinately above the waters? What brings a man to sudden silence more effectively than sight of so large a thing? One's breath stops the instant one turns that last corner before the view, does it not? And even though the secrets of the every intricate working of the universe were ready on ones lips, there is not a hiking partner in the world who would excuse the offense of attempting speech at such a time. That is the size of a single one of them. A single one! But there are many more than one, are there not? The world is littered with them, in fact. Well, take all these immemorial, silent stones, break them up and toss them in the Sudden Sea. Congratulations: you've made it to the ocean at last. The Sudden is no more, in fact; you've turned it into a wide plain of boulders instead, and have even extended a platform far past the Reiki into the open water. Although I hope your destination in so doing lies on Archaea still, for said platform would extend likely a few hundred miles past the Zorous. A mere thousandth still, of the ocean is that thing which is larger than all others we might consider in our attempt to rationalize its actual size. A fly to be slapped by the water's angry whim.

In fact, take every bit of non-fluid stuff you could ever hope to hold in your hands on the planet and it is still a paltry thing compared with the collective waters. We are all too used to considering, as, understandably perhaps, a landed animal must by experience, a liquid only ever as a thing to be contained in a solid bowl; but the truth of the matter is far different. The truth is that even if every last rock on the planet was made into a bowl, and each and every one filled to the brim, there would still be liquid left over. Our containers would only float complacently somewhere within the endless sea, certainly never define it! Above, sky. Below, magma. Fluid all around. Even the solidest, wholest, entirest mountain is but a large grain of sand compared to the flowing, seething ocean. And what is sand but another fluid? Does it not form waves when left in the desert's wind, with ripples and eddies etched out upon the dunes exactly as on these swells round us? Does it not flow through the hourglass?

How the "scientists" (hands, again) of the First Age would cringe at the thought! Did you know that in that time they believed in something called continental drift? Yes, that the continents drift by, as if on a magic cloud, never to sink below the waves. It was absurd! Layer upon layer of rock formed beneath the waves over every knuckle of the land and yet they would twirl cut-outs of the crust as it was arrayed above sea level then into various patterns as infants with toys. And they would write great musings of their tinkerings for all the others to "goo" and "gaa" over. According to them, regularly, for hundreds of millions of years at a time, these magically permanent continents would congregate like party-goers all along one thin meridian while the waters of the planet congregated equally impossibly across the entirety of the other hemisphere. Were there no tides? Did water forget how to pour equally around the Earth's center of mass? Yet they all believed it, for it was taught to them at a young age, indeed so early in life as to accompany the most basic of puzzles that were surely the theory's true inspiration. I hear the lie has even gained a new following, and is taught in my own universities. When we

return to ꝛælia we will have to see this remedied, my friend.

Only fools call our planet a rocky one. It is a liquid planet through and through, with hardly an interruption in the infernal oozing anywhere to be found. But the fools still stamp the molehills under them and say, "Here! This is solid. What is as solid as our rocky Earth?" And they thump on the plate of bone over their beating heart as they declare, "Here! This is solid. I am solid! I *must* be solid!" All while their works no matter how numerous sink another day, and they age likewise; that much closer to the inevitable return to truth.

I wonder. Am I going to Ty Gwydir because I am just like them? Or because, as I sometimes flatter myself, I am different?'

That evening the sunset was an amazing patchwork of scarlet that covered two thirds of the sky whose magnificence I have yet to see rivaled. After locking Adoneus back in and taking a moment to enjoy the effect, I settled into my hammock to dream, in an image that still clings to the back of my eyes at times, of fernȷard, covered in blood, laughing; and ıacɒpɒ demanding to know what he was doing.

Her name was Gwyneira, she said. This at the Foggy Reflection, Hank's Hold's sole tavern. I'd been entrenched there half the day; Adoneus had told me that it was an excellent spot to hear a story and that I should visit it daily, pen in hand, the very same evening the King Tide made her entrance to Carolina Cove, bringing the first raindrops of an approaching storm with her. No matter the wet weather, there was celebration that night at the place, to be sure! The crew and Order's prisoners had stripped everything of value from the ship during the takeover and a large portion of this was slapped down on the bar in the span of a few hours in return for nothing more than copious amounts of food and ale. But the frivolity was brief. For only a single, soggy day separated the King Tide's arrival from that of the Hammerhead, whereupon Whaker let everyone know that the Horizon and its captain McGee had been surrounded by the rest of the fleet, her skeleton crew was surely captured, and it would likely be only a few days until someone ratted and the Order decided to postpone their conquest of the Aztlan in order to eradicate the English who call Hank's Hold home instead in search of their missing oracle. Enoli, captain of the Seahorse and reluctant leader of the island (also possessed of the finest mustache I've ever seen), no matter a long-standing feud with Aedis, had been happy to allow us our use of his harbor to better make off with the King Tide, knowing that we would be willing to sell off much of her cargo at a good price, wayward soldiers and their weapons included. But that had been before it seemed the complete and utter destruction of his small nation was imminent thanks to our blunder; over a hundred arks, even manned by fools, was no force he wished to see descending on his shores. Some captains were eager to fight. Most said that every one of us on the island should set sail at once and return only after the Order was gone. Before he made his own decision, Enoli insisted on hearing straight from this oracle's lips what her role in the Order of One Truth truly was, and why she was so damn important.

As is common among the English, such an important meeting was to be held publicly; though Enoli did his best to limit the audience by barricading the Reflection's doors against any who tried to enter after he, Aedis and Renault arrived suddenly, Gwyneira in tow. Still, once word spread, the steady rain outside the tavern's windows was continuously obstructed by a procession of sailor's faces, as they all did their best to get a good look at her. And rightfully so, I thought, for she seemed to me to be the most perfectly formed female I'd ever seen - and I do believe I have been careful thus far to point out the many merits of a number of others. Her blonde hair so pale it was almost silver flowed like a soft, summer sunshine round her flawless features, while her fierce, blue eyes shone round the tavern stealing men's breath away as surely as a frigid wind gusting over a frozen lake perched high in the mountains in winter. Her white and gold, form-fitting robes did little to hide her athleticism; far less the graceful curves that contained such ability within their almost exaggerated femininity. But her beauty was a thing more ethereal than any of this could explain, for there was a calm fluidity to her every gesture that could only be attributed to her half-elven blood. The contrast between her full, blushing cheeks and angular profile only heightened her mystique. Even Lyus sipping his ale beside me, who might have thought the contrast mundane, having seen it in the mirror his whole life, couldn't keep his eyes off her, the occasional smile she directed at him and his own mixed features not helping matters a bit. All as I noted now and then the cowled figure ensconced in the corner of the tavern that was equally unable to direct the shadow under its hood in any direction other than Lyus's for long; whose mud-stained, black robes were only slightly more effective than Gwyneira's in hiding the pleasant curves that laid within, or, for that matter, the heels of those leather boots Cherry so adored.

Her name was Gwyneira, she said:

'Just Gwyneira. The high elves are a people of houses, and those born without one are allowed no name besides their first. I might have taken my husband's house, but... no. As I will explain. Perhaps if my father's house were different. But you can hardly expect a half-human to be named as one of Ty Solis. I was born in Annwyn, in any case, in the Regia Heulwen. And there I lived for most of my childhood. My mother was from Valverde. She was sick. She'd heard the elves had medicine humans had long since lost. She was right. But King or no, endlessly wise or not, my father couldn't save her. She died before I was five. I... barely remember her face.

I was... given to a man named Kaliya Anguis, 'U Votan' as a bride when I was eight. I suppose I loved him in a child's bold, hopeful way; he was always very patient with me. And very gentle. At first. He took me to Ty Gwydir; his Obsidian Palace. I'd learned much in the elven capital as a child, my teachers' only complaint my foolish curiosity, true elves having need of little: "We learn all in time. In time, arvela Gwyneira." But I was in a hurry, I guess. As a half-breed, my lifespan will likely be little longer than any human's - especially if what they say about this fleet is true. In any case, I learned a lot there. To sing. To write Tenji and Tengawar. To play the harp. To act like royalty no matter who my mother was. But once in the north, at his keep, Kaliya started me on a very different program. I learned the sword; he taught me the sword, that is. I learned the languages of Archaea: Lusitani, English, Sebernye, Suaja, Terran. I learned about my... abilities.

He taught me to meditate until I could remember my dreams, and to distinguish those that hold memory of the future from those that hold only the chaos of imagination. To recognize the memory of the future, experienced in the waking present, for what it truly is. Or at least that's what I thought then. These days my dreams are less and less clear; more and more chaotic, random. As if my future is still... uncertain. Or perhaps... Well, I am forced to consider that perhaps my gift is only a lie; like all the rest Kaliya told me. Even though, sometimes I've been so... sure. All I can say for certain today is that my premonitions, once told to people, are rarely used to justify anything other than what they already desire; sometimes causing what I thought uncertain to pass, often just the opposite.

Kaliya never... Except one time. He always said that there was nothing more important than me retaining my purity. But as time wore on, he grew more and more controlling in other ways. My training took my every waking moment. I was allowed some rewards: pets, if I did well; a maid my age. And if I did badly... Well, he'd... take them away. Before I knew it, this life was all I knew. I mastered weapon after weapon, language after language. Until one day, he said I had accomplished all he wanted of me, and he took me to his bath house...

But he refused to see me afterwards! To bring such an experience to a young girl, then disappear. I was crushed. I hated him with all my soul. But I'd never see him again, since I was... rescued... not long after.

They came in the dark of an early spring morning; the Order's judges. They stole me from Ty Gwydir and smuggled me, still kicking, aboard a ship. There they fed me all sorts of lies about who they were and what they wanted with me. They'd heard about me from this or that elven lord, who saw U Votan as a threat to peace, and they thought the biggest tragedy of all of Kaliya's wickedness was his transformation of me - little old me - from fair princess to what I had become; to what I am today: an instrument of war. They said I had a choice. Now that I was so powerful and wise, I could use my abilities to fight against my former captor. To fight evil instead of being willingly controlled by one who allies with it. I could help them in their crusade against the orcs in Archaea. I would be their beacon of hope. And my premonitions would surely be decisive in granting them victory.

I was young. Fourteen and I'd never stepped out of a palace a single time except to move from one to another. I bought it all hook, line and sinker. What I didn't realize, of course, was that they were in fact in league with my husband. That the Order of one Truth serves Kaliya and Kaliya alone. Their rescue of me had been little more than a scripted play. And these orcs they wanted help in destroying were simply the rivals of those who'd fought with him and my father against the dwarves. None of this I suspected. I fought for them instead. I dreamt. I told them my dreams and they took it from there. I happily played the part they wanted of me. They started calling me the oracle and their ranks doubled every month, it seemed. Until we were the hammer to the Alliance's anvil, and we crushed the Archaean orcs once and for all, and I was paraded from here to there to wherever you wanted as a hero. These robes are just the start of it. They'd put me in 'armor' that barely covered a single vital organ for my every outing. I... certainly didn't hate it. It's quite the feeling being loved by thousands, after all, especially if it's all for that elusive thing called good; that odd thing called justice.

But after a time, the crowds I drew dwindled; all shows lose their luster in time. And when, some years later, I began to show, they hid me away as if I were

diseased. I gave birth to my verna in a room that was little better than a cell. Though I'm ashamed to admit it, I only wanted to get back to my troops. There were still orcs to be dealt with in Archaea, after all; the Atlas Tribes still thrived. The Emperor may call them subjects, Terrans and Anda some of them friends; they may hunt ten-horns and rabbits alone until insulted or starving, but no orc could ever be anything but a target for the Order of One Truth! How young! How foolish I was! But I was not alone. There were many other fools just like me. I'd drawn them to me happily. I enjoyed their every flattery. I relished their every lustful stare. But I didn't forget my training, the cool-headed rationality Kaliya had pumped into me over the years of my molding. For this campaign I selected only the best. True warriors all, and at their head... at their foremost was Aurus.

Aurus wielded his sword, a wicked katana, with... awe-inspiring ability. He said he was taught by his uncle. I asked him what about his father? He laughed for what seemed days. He had long, raven hair, that he wore to almost his waist, as the young do in Annwyn. But he was no elf. He was a complete mystery. He'd enlisted in the war right at the end and in his first battle had taken on a dozen orcs by himself and left them... less than whole. He said he was from Ekaldia and had tired of seeing his neighbors and friends eaten by monsters. This was a lie, surely. He barely even spoke Lusitani. But it didn't matter; I loved Aurus. He was tall. Handsome. Strong. Here he was, I thought; the man who would finally push my husband from my heart - for still then, Kaliya's knowing smile would visit me in the night before any of my premonitions dared. But we had barely begun our romance when fate turned on us.

The town was called qima-salꝛm. We'd been chasing the Yecti Tribe for weeks but they remained, as ever, ten steps ahead. We came to qima half-starved and half-crazed in our bloodlust. I can only imagine now how we must have looked to ɜn-mari when we stumbled up the path to the village, trampling the gently fading flowers they'd so carefully planted that spring into dust, accidentally knocking the town's wooden archway into the year's first snow. But the townsfolk were generous with what they could offer anyway. And while my troops were directed to pitch their tents in the sheltered field of flowers at the village's center without a word of complaint, I was ushered to her house: ɜn-mari's house. Her son had left for adventure some years previous, they said, and she'd never had a husband. She had an extra room and a warm hearth; whether our visit be for a day or a year, I should make sure to call on her, for she was half an angel and treated travelers better than she treated them. I say she was an actual angel. One look at my trail-worn, skimpy getup and she put a cloak around me and began her clucking. Two days I healed my frost-bitten digits and happily downed her soups and spirits while doing little more than listening to her stories about her son before, suddenly, as if it'd only just occurred to him to dare visit, this same came stumbling through the front door with a simple cry of, "ɔaba, uma." He'd been in my company the whole time. He was a porter. His name was gejn.

He said he'd wanted to visit her but no one'd said he could. He didn't want to impose. Just thought his mom should know he was still alive and not fodder for orcs yet. Things took a turn for the awkward, as you can imagine, for by then his bed smelled much like my perfumes and I'd absentmindedly rummaged through his childhood possessions not once but twice. But ɜn-mari smoothed all over. The clucking began again as she insisted that his tent would have to wait; that he should

sleep with her in her room - was that so strange? he'd done so for nine months at least already - while I enjoyed the privacy of his. "And," she said, "we can be like a little family for a little while."

That, of all things, gentlemen, is what did me in. Four long years of struggle; of open battle for a cause I had started to doubt deeply. But I'd persevered regardless, even allowing my own daughter to be raised by strangers. That one single sentence brought me to my knees. I wouldn't move from that house even if every demi-human in existence were laid down in surrender not a mile away. We would winter there in qima-salɘm, I told my troops. And there would be no orc attacks that year, at least, on ɜn-mari and her neighbors.

I can't help but remember my time there with a smile. ɜn-mari's implication about a little family was not lost on either her son or myself. I began to see a kind of quiet strength in him I'd never noticed before. He was handsome, in his own way. Very nearly my age. And the fact that he simply idolized me didn't hurt. But I loved Aurus with that last, deepest part of myself. And no matter how pleasant a fantasy it was, given my position, I knew that to be able to actually stay there with ɜn-mari and raise the kind of family she so clearly wanted - the one I began to dream of as well - was an impossibility. Such an impossibility! But still I dreamt. And so often, I started to doubt my gift. To this day I wonder how I ever, gift or no, dreamt of anything so far from what actually occurred. But... Our web of love was amicable in any case. Sometimes I thought that gejn loved Aurus more than me, even, he looked up to him so! He would dote on the both of us equally while ɜn-mari doted on me and him in turns, and Aurus would make sure to only visit me with that look in his eyes when the both of them were out. So passed the fall and early winter. I was... happy. For the first time in my adult life.

But in the spring, we could continue with our campaign, I said; for a worthwhile one it was! Still my soul was Kaliya's plaything! Somehow I managed to square my two sides without bending them too far to fit. The moment I stepped out ɜn-mari's door I was captain again. My troops were permitted to construct more permanent housing given they used trees from no less than a mile from the village, and that for every two logs they brought they brought one for the villagers to use as they saw fit. The houses must be so and so and must be deconstructed when we left - unless the village said otherwise, of course. They must go so far to relieve themselves. The rules went on and on, and I was quite pleased with myself. But I all but forgot about food, of course.

By libɘla, we were in dire straits. The spring was so close, but the village's stores had run out; the runners I'd sent before the heavy snows came... never came back. We lived, for better or worse, off the meat that Aurus and gejn brought in from their excursions. The valley in which qima-salɘm is settled is a holy place, Aurus told me. The winters of the High Atlas are harsh, and all creatures who call it home deserve the respite those rare, gentle slopes round the village provide. Even the Yecti won't dare hunt there, he said. Wolves winter in dens trampled all about by unworried ten-horns' hooves, for all know that the cold will bring down more than enough to feed them. Leopards sigh absentmindedly from the ridges at the goats huddled in their troops, likewise too wise to bother to make a kill themselves. He simply forbade me from hunting within so many miles of the village. And I listened, so enamored of him was I. Perhaps I wouldn't have obeyed had he and gejn not been so able. They would find a buck or a bear in the wilds every couple

of days at the least. Sometimes gejn would come bearing a dozen small animals or more on a line. But they would stay no more than was necessary to down the remnants of their last hunt, that ɜn-mari and I prepared and cooked for them, before setting out once again, bows in hand, wild provider's joy in their eyes. Others tried to join them but came back empty-handed and helpless - snowshoes tangled, clothes sopping wet - after mere hours. Yet week after week, every so often the two would emerge from the white like ghosts, but laboring tirelessly under the weight of a giant, slain animal that would feed us until their next return. And so we survived.

But the start of that panθeɹa was the harshest that any could remember. Not only were we down to crumbs of stale bread by then, the snows outside raged so furiously not even my pair of heroes dared venture more than a hundred yards from the village. Until one day the storms quit and a warm, spring sun beat down on the mountains at last; and, desperate, Aurus and gejn set out one final time. They would drag back a ragged, perhaps life-saving bear some five days later. But not before my troops tired of Aurus's rules and brought down the magnificent ten-horn buck that had, along with his herd, enjoyed the protection of the valley for our entire stay.

So. He slaughtered them. Aurus. And his wolves. Slaughtered them all. Not just my soldiers, the townsfolk as well. Anyone who'd taken a single bite of that animal, which was every last one of us. He removed every last trace of humanity in his... holy valley. One after the other, while the huts burned and the melting snow turned crimson, they clawed and bit... as he swung that massive sword without an ounce of remorse until they were all dead, then walked away, I assume, never to be seen again.

I was lucky. I don't know how I survived. Perhaps he couldn't do it. Perhaps, he... But... I remember him standing over me. I was wounded already; he'd cut me across the temple but I'd just managed to block the worst of the strike. I fell. Then he was coming toward me again. I could barely see for the blood. Then... nothing. I woke to find myself propped up against the well outside the charred remains of ɜn-mari's house, her skewered corpse screaming silently up to the sky beside me. Someone had bandaged me and hidden me under some bales of hay, then bled beside me for what might have been days, so large was the stain. But they were gone by the time I came to. There was a trail of blood where something... or someone... had dragged whoever'd helped me off. There were other spots where there should have been a body but there wasn't. None left there were alive. I... tried to bury them, but the ground... And I was still so hungry. I'd barely managed to get ɜn-mari in her grave when the mʌɹas finally found me.'

One can imagine my surprise at that! And as my head snapped up from the page, my pen seized still halfway through the 'ב,' I looked around at the rest of the tavern. No one had noticed my start, for not a single soul assembled therein was paying the slightest heed to anything save Gwyneira at that point. All conversation had stopped. I looked at her myself and for the briefest second, I was sure that she was waiting for me. She'd broken her narration at exactly the same time I'd stalled my script. Was her own pause then not purposed at allowing me to continue my recording? The timing was quite a coincidence otherwise. Was that half a smile she gave then not for my benefit? It seemed it must have been; she was pointing

her gaze right at me. Oracle indeed, I thought. There was no way for her to know that I was acquainted with her apparent rescuers. But for that second, it seemed that she must. Or perhaps her eyes were fixed only on a place far in the past, and memory was the sole cause of her wistful expression. In any case, she soon continued,

'Terrans outside the Atlas live... differently than most people do. They don't build houses. They don't need one. Why spend an entire year building a big house to spend all your time in when the world is a far bigger one? A far better one? I lived with the mʌiɹas through that summer and the next; sadəʃ brought me back from a very dark place. But by the end of the year I'd forced myself to admit that no matter how sadly it had come to be, I was, for the first time in my life, free. And to waste that freedom mourning the past would be the biggest tragedy of all. My dreams came back to me in full force, and if they'd been filled with thoughts of family before, now they were nothing but! I met my arianwɘn, my dencɲn, my ɜn long before they came out of me, crying. And euastir; when sadəʃ introduced me to him, it was if we'd known each other for years. He was not perfect. But he was wise, and always courteous, and how he loved our children something fierce. We rescued my verna and we lived together happily. Five years passed in the blink of an eye.

Until one day the Order found me again. euastir tried to protect us but he was only one man; they came for me with fifty judges. All their pretenses were forgotten now; they knew I would never come back to them willingly. I'd started to suspect their lies by then but now they told me straight to my face that I would be their oracle forever; Kaliya's plaything... forever, whether I liked it or not. I was paraded here and there and everywhere once again, in that same 'armor.' Or these... damn robes. I wanted to scream out: don't listen you fools. Whatever you do, don't listen. Don't believe. There's nothing behind it all but lies. But... I wasn't the only one they grabbed that night...

Then this spring they said they had everything they needed to set sail for the Aztlan and here I am. They would take me once a day, out to pace the deck. I was to look serious. The rest of the time I spent in that cell. Until Aedis...'

Here she reached out and grabbed our captain's hand as it rested on his knee with a smile as warm as sudden sunshine spilling through a break in the clouds - if accompanied by a lingering shower to match the one still beating against the windows, perhaps; for the tears were simply pouring from her eyes by that point. To which gesture Aedis could only blush and stammer unintelligibly. Enoli, meanwhile, leaned back against his table with little more than a whistle toward the ceiling. All who knew him knew his decision had already been made; that this whistle meant one thing only: that he was about to do something reckless. Indeed, the sound seemed to release the rest of the tavern from Gwyneira's spell as effectively as a call to arms. An eager, murmuring mass-conjecture passing round the room found its natural culmination in his simple statement, "That's... quite a story, my dear," and all knew that Hank's Hold was going to war. There was a moment of thought and adjustment, then a raucous cheer crescendoed up round the tavern. Mugs banged against tables. Fists the every joint of the woodwork. Strangers traded hearty handshakes as if they'd known each other for years, while the taps on

the barrels of ale behind the bar were opened to stay. Two figures and two figures alone remained unimpressed. As for Cherry, her gaze rested firmly on Lyus still, as if waiting expectantly - hopefully, perhaps - for him to break out in frivolity like the rest. But the boy was ignoring everybody, lost deep in some inner argument, hand on his breast, specifically grabbing the medallion he wore round his neck through his shirt. At last, without warning, he rose and strode purposefully out of the tavern, I to follow.

"Well, that's all fine and dandy," he complained, twirling to me some distance from the door. "But what about McGee? What about Ledfetter? Dredge. Gib. Right now they're probably being tortured while we sit around and cheer. And it's not like anyone'll do a thing about them! That's what happens when no one in the world gives a damn 'bout you. Makes me sick! You know, I've half a mind to..."

"Best leave that thought unsaid," cautioned a voice from the shadows, and we turned to note the approach of those mud-stained, black robes.

Surprised as surprised could be, as the figure's features were illuminated in the light coming from the tavern, Lyus gasped, "Cherry! What are *you* doing here?" Then, "rasid. What is Cherry doing here?"

"Boredom?" I shrugged. Even though I'd just figured it out. How the two of them had always struck me as oddly similar. Why Cherry had told him to "go to sea already!" that night back in ᴄ৸lia, which comment had begged the follow-up, 'just like your father!' Why she'd had such a problem with he and Peach dancing so closely in the first place. Why she'd told me one night after too much smoke and ale, with a sigh and a blush that could have come from a teenage girl - might well have, seeing as elves go through a hundred-year adolescence - that, "Most sailors are... more than meets the eye. Some are that and... very handsome to start with." What matter besides her Adoneus was so pressing here at sea that she would stow away on a ship headed round the world. Watching her keep so close an eye on Lyus that night had all but spelled it out.

As if to confirm my revelation, she replied, "For one thing, I'm here to make sure you don't to anything that's going to get you killed." And, cutting him off before he could guess anything about her intentions toward him aloud that might be inappropriate for a boy to say to his mother, she lied, "McGee asked me to while he's gone. And taking a ship and going after him is definitely one such thing. Pirates, in case you haven't heard, don't like being stolen from. rasid, tell him he's being stupid."

Dutifully, I did. But we were not alone there outside the tavern.

"Although..." a voice ventured from nearby. We three turned to watch Ari and another we had never met emerge from the dark of the path leading up to the tavern. It was this other who had spoken. Later, he would tell me that his name was Langdon. He'd been a ranger in service of the Emperor. He had fought bravely against the orcs in the war and hoped to be one of the first to settle the north, but had run afoul of the Order and been imprisoned. They'd had no qualms informing him that his fate would most likely be to be presented to the first tribe they came across in the Aztlan as a peace offering to help turn the fiends of the islands against each other. He would be eaten. Eventually. But he should be proud; he was doing the planet a service. For even if those who consumed him were spared temporarily so that they might help the Order fight others, they would surely be slaughtered as well in time. But we had freed him from the King Tide

and that very night, he'd happened upon Ari, an old acquaintance, whom he'd convinced to assist him in finding ships and crew to rescue the many other prisoners still being held by the Order, also slated to be fed to orcs. Then he ran into Lyus the Lucky.

"Although..." he said, "Stupidity and bravery are often hard to tell apart."

We would never have the chance to find out exactly which of the two the path we intended to follow was, however. For by the time the fleet was spotted approaching Wayah's Rock from the south, the steady wind and rain of the past few days had turned into something obviously beyond a simple passing warm front.

"Winds're southeasterly, thirty knots; it comes up on us from the southwest," said Enoli. "Told you all we were overdue for a hurricane. Serves 'em right. If they'd just left us alone, they wouldn't've had to deal with it. Well, I'm sure they'll ride it out in Wayah's coves. Gives us another day or two to prepare. We'll just blast 'em when they get here"

But Aedis was of a different mind. "I wouldn't let your guard down yet," he said. "Ten to one they don't even know the danger. This wind; they'll take it as an omen, aim straight for the Hold. Course, if the storm does turn east, it might just do our work for us." And he related the tale of how they'd lost an entire ship off Sonosalia thanks to an extremely rookie maritime mistake.

At which point Alevi Allan, who'd been put up at the Reflection until Enoli could figure out what to do with him, felt obliged to inform them, as he nearly twisted his hair off his head thinking of such a sad fate, "Well, that'd be fine if it wasn't for all the silver."

"What silver!?" said Aedis and Enoli in unison.

So with a sigh to accompany his last betrayal of the Order, the dwarf related how each and every ship, besides his King Tide which had been, ironically much like the Horizon we'd replaced it with, mainly for show, contained a chest of silver ornamentation of the kind orcesses enjoy; and for which orcish men will risk all. Too late, Enoli thought to keep the information a secret, but a handful of patrons had already bounded out the door.

Therefore Aedis had little choice but to give us his blessing. He and Enoli agreed to spare the Penta and the Siren, the fleet's two remaining prison ships, from cannonfire if they could at all help it. But that was not all. No matter the storm, fully half the Hold's captains, including Renault, were now of a similar mind as us; one to take rather than sink. We would be joined on all sides as we made our preparations by buccaneers of every description. There were Lusitani merchant naos gone rogue, ambitiously modified jugs manned by mutinous McGees, imperial zebecs long lost to any noble use save the regular satisfaction of the appetites of those who sailed them. Even elves were represented. The Theilen, a handsome dhow, was crewed by none other than Lleuanashi, who I have it on good authority are crazy and love a fight. Indeed, McGee's description was spot on. They were extensively tattooed in blue and green all, went shoeless to a pair of feet, and seemed extremely excited to be setting out in the name of simple, straightforward violence. McGee would be happy to hear that I sold them some of the Horizon's

wine at a hefty markup, if not so happy to learn I'd not sold it at Dominica already as he and Aedis had instructed me to.

Our fleet of raiders even had a commodore all its own in the form of none other than Ari. Ever since the King Tide had arrived, laden with many freed prisoners hailing from the Empire, I'd noticed whispers seemed to follow the man wherever he went. It wasn't until these were accompanied by open pointing and exclamation that I bothered to ask Langdon what it was all about.

"You didn't know!" was the man's laughing response. "Of course not. He was never one for bragging. That there; the one you've been sailing with for so long, is Eso Omari. And you all didn't even know..."

Though it was a name that might have easily passed the notice of the rest of the crew, to me the word dove into my memory like a lead sinker; for my step-father, upon beginning his every story about his old soldier days in the service of Emperor Orula, would be sure to mention the same. "A wakat'emi rouler pelu Eso Omari.": 'Back when I rode with Eso Omari.' Or, "A wakat'emi kwa Eso Omari won amies ore.": 'Back when me and Eso Omari were friends.' "That there;" the one I'd been sailing with for three full months, was the best sword in the whole of the Empire; would be still, more than likely, had the former Empress not taking an extreme liking to him. Nowadays, understandably, there was a new Empress; one from North Caledonia if the stories were to be believed, who had been brought from there to Kusu Vert by none other than Aedis and the End six years prior at the behest of the Emperor, who'd sailed with them for the journey. Ari had declined, for pride's sake surely, to return to Orula's service afterwards. But now things were very different. To have the opportunity to return to Kusu Vert a veritable hero, with hundreds of imperial subjects saved from a foreign enemy - and not just any enemy; one that had played at service to Onii Utala even as they abused its sovereign's trust - thanks to his actions; there could be no happier reunion than that! But that is a story for another time. For our path in the present, though having been spared the bravery of stealing a ship from pirates, had been considerately provided by fate the stupidity of sailing into a cyclone in search of nothing more important than some human lives and a few chests of silver.

Thankfully, the storm seemed to stay far off. A full twelve hours past realizing it was likely a hurricane, the waters of the cove were still relatively calm, while those outside the forts swelled no more than ten feet. I even hoped for a time that they might have been mistaken, for it seemed to me that the monsoons of the East Imperial, which Renault had laughed off as not even worthy of the label of storm, were little less a threat to a ship than this.

"Looks like it hasn't decided to smash us just yet," Ari sighed as he noted our windvane ease from south toward southwest. "We might be spared the worst of it if she keeps going north, but who knows which way she'll turn next. She still might come straight for us. Best to get to the business at hand sooner rather than later." And indeed, by the time we could make out the Order's fleet, the winds had increased noticeably, causing even the waters of the cove to shift chaotically. So we unfurled the sails onto struck masts and set out to the east, making straight for the gap between the Hold's forts, the Thresher sailing behind us on our right, the Theilen our left.

What might have been a fierce battle was over essentially before it began. Though the Order's two lead ships turned north and south to send a volley at us as we

approached, they hit mostly water. Our two forts, on the other hand, leveled a hundred cannon based on solid ground manned by experienced gunmen at them apiece, making short work of the fools. From there, as one can imagine, the vast majority of other ships were less than willing to follow suit as they'd surely been ordered. We were actually hailed with pleas for aid more than anything else as we passed them by, for the job of traversing the wind and waves of a hurricane to the only safe waters nearby, those provided by the cove, was not one for amateurs. Therefore the takeover of the fleet was accomplished in its near entirety no more than an hour later. Though detachments of sailors arrived on deck of the arks the traditional English way, via grappling hooks tossed over the rail, swords strapped at the ready, they met not so much resistance as hordes of willing laborers begging to be told what to do. The actual delivery of the fleet was a matter of more difficulty, for the winds were nearly fifty knots at that point, I'm told. Thankfully, though it was a slow process, in the end every last ship was saved, both Order and private. All, that is, except the Siren, Madder and Penta, and those of us dense enough to chase them.

"Still she flounders!" declared Tilty of the Siren, the man somehow still attached to the main top despite the wind.

"Flounders?" cried Ari. "She's pointed north! She skirts the storm's path purposefully. She'd rather sink, prisoners and all, than be taken by honest men. There's little to be done, friends..."

But just then, Sever approached the helm. "No cry for the dead then?" he hissed. "Well, I'll cry. That ship, I tell you, is where the true believers are." This peaked the attention of Diarmuid and Whaker both, as they struggled with the mainsail's sheet nearby. Not failing to note, Sever continued, "True believers, who'd rather die than give us their silver. Tell me, how many chests do you think that means, hmm? Two ships sacrifice themselves. A hundred manned by cowards. Only one sails away. How many chests do you think they hold on to for the rest?"

Our captain might have been able to point the ship back to safety had Lyus not pled plainly, "McGee's aboard, Ari. That's where they have him, the bastards. I'm sure of it." So, in the end, our Omari's only response was to tell Tilty to come down to help reef the sails another point.

The island was already far, and it was getting farther with every minute. We were now flying, both mainsail and foresail tight in on the starboard as close as we dared to not risk a sudden change of wind ripping them to port. Before I knew what was happening, I could barely make out the land behind us. Still the Siren forged ahead. The bulk of the opposing fleets were long gone by then, safe behind the cove's long arms. The Thresher as well was nowhere to be seen; struggling, we would find out later, with the Penta not a hundred yards from certain destruction off the island's southern shore. We and the Theilen were alone with the Siren and Madder in the infinite grey. And as I looked over at our elven conspirators, I saw they were as haggard and desperate in countenance as us, if far more bold, for they still sported their full cloth.

As we approached the Madder battling unsuccessfully against the wind, we were met with the now familiar pleas for aid. Ari demanded of Tilty, "Take Bertha and bring that ship into the cove, man. Go now."

"Are you crazy?" demanded Tilty. "I'm not getting into a rutting rowboat in a hurricane!" But just then a pair of skiffs fell from the side of the Theilen to make

for the Madder and, not a pair to be outdone, Comal and Undrik dragged Tilty to the rail with them. A moment later they were gone, somehow managing to safely crest wave after wave in the sturdy rowboat, the brothers at the first set of oars, Tilty and Langdon at the second.

Though on setting out our numbers had been bolstered by the addition of many of the King Tide's former prisoners to our ranks, we were down to almost a skeleton crew by this point, having sent forty men or more swinging over the rails to save many of the Order's ships already. As I looked around deck for anyone with a hint of a plan, I could in fact only count a handful of figures at all. Ari was at the helm. Sever stood no more than a few feet from me, likewise surveying the scene. Diarmuid, Whaker, and another were holding fast the mainsail; Earl managed the foresail alone. And I could just make out Lyus leaning over the rail in the direction of the Siren while Cherry, who had slipped back aboard unnoticed with the prisoners, stood nearby, eye on the elven skiffs as they flitted between the waves toward the Madder behind us. As I also turned my attention to this crossing, so skillfully made it was almost playful, I wondered how we mere mortals intended to get anyone aboard the Siren, even if we did manage to catch it. For past the Madder we lost the island's protection completely; the wind howled incessantly and the waves now swelled to a stomach-churning twenty feet with regularity. I would not want to make the jump between ships, to be certain; though I decided, swallowing a lump in my throat, that it should be I more than anyone else to attempt the deed, my hands not being necessary to hold our course.

We were gaining on the Siren but only slowly. Minute after minute flying farther from land and we and the Theilen both still lagged behind; until finally a blast of lightning struck the Siren's main, sending sparks flying out into the rain. And as the thing burned along with all its stays, their other masts, likewise unstruck and full-rigged, now with even less support, splintered and toppled one by one. We swerved to come alongside her port side, following in the wake of the Theilen. Though the dhow passed safely under the ark's guns, we weren't so lucky. We might have been spared the full wrath of the upper decks, but as we came up on her, the Siren's lowest cannon, the 32-pounders, were aimed straight at us; I could make out the eager faces of the soldiers behind them as they lit the fuses and braced themselves for the blasts.

No matter the chaos, Lyus was gone not a second past coming even. I watched him land solidly and safely against the ship's hull and start to climb. Cherry followed at once, lighting no less gracefully at his side. I, meanwhile, grabbed my hammer and shield and a grappling hook of my own, slipping and sliding to Sever's side at the rail. But the man nearly broke out in laughter at the sight of me.

"No space for tourists, dwarf," he yelled over the din of gun, wind and rain. And he pointed me back with urgency to Diarmuid as the man now struggled with the mainsail with the aid of only one other; for Whaker was forced to leave them to take the helm, Ari having seen need to grab his sword and a grappling hook himself. I suppose I should have been thankful. But I had prepared myself by then and wanted desperately to fight and kill, especially as I assumed this would surely be my only opportunity to do so in the name of saving lives overall. The sentiment was largely Sever's fault, in fact, the villain. For as I'd made my resolve watching the Siren come slowly closer, I'd been greatly assisted by a memory of him one evening in the End's galley saying to Ledfetter, Frenge and Lyus - with a

slightly suspicious, sidelong glance my way - of those who dared come on board our fine ship who didn't take a life at their first opportunity: "not once have they made it back to where they started off." But there was no time to argue. By the time I looked back to him to protest, he was gone.

"Do not be so hasty, young rasid," said Ari, failing to flinch at the continuing barrage of cannonfire raking our hull and deck as he flung his grappling hook to the Siren's rail above us. "We have more need of you here!" With that and another nod back to Diarmuid, our captain was gone as well; so, stashing my armaments, I dutifully went to Diarmuid's aid, grabbing hold of the sheet just as it seemed the thing was about to slip from their hands to begin our certain doom. We managed to pull the sail in just far enough with my fresh muscles to make the task a manageable affair in the long term, leaving Diarmuid, once we passed the Siren, free to release his charge to slump in exhaustion against the nearest support for a time, before making off to drag the more timid than us from below-decks. We two on the line were now completely alone. The task left to me seemed far too important to be left in my hands; the other was one of the prisoners and looked to me for guidance on positioning the sail.

Luckily, Whaker was there beside me. "Steady in, Sido," he called, as he spun the wheel, directing us cautiously to port. The task was easier than I expected, for after enduring a brief increase, the blast of the wind against the canvas lessened with every degree of tack. Once we crossed the wind was another matter entirely, but I saw what we were after quickly, and was able to enlist the assistance of every cleat I was able to reach to help hold her steady as we continued our turn. Sadly, however, we just kept *on* turning, until we were pointed east as best as I could tell.

With a wistful glance to the south, I shouted, "We're not going back!?"

"Too late now!" he called. "We're on our own." Although this was only half true, for the Theilen had turned to the east - though directly for their sail was on the good tack out to port - and still paralleled us. I could make them out off our starboard rail as they surged ahead of us, dodging waves as if they had a map of the things to reference. I was greatly gladdened by this, for to have their continued company affirmed the wisdom of our course. And after a minute or two of struggling nearly alone with the mainsail, Diarmuid finally returned with help. Therefore I was free to imagine a long and difficult path forward perhaps; but one that would surely lead us to calm, blue skies at last.

Although our job would not be so easy as that! For we'd had to meander to the west, ahead of the Siren, to avoid a suicide jibe, and would need pass her once more to escape to the east; at a good distance for her bow guns. And these must have been the ship's true marksmen. The first shot nicked the heights of our mainmast, snapping fully half her shrouds in the process. The second crashed into the boom of the foresail at the tack, obliterating every forward reef tie as well. The cloth whipped out into the wind, ripping the sheet from Earl's hands and slapping to port with enough force to tear the halyard's cleat directly from the deck. Which would have been fine if the thing didn't catch on the sheave at the masthead, leaving the sail fluttering in the wind, threatening to pull the mast over with our every pitch and roll.

"We need cut the mast free!" yelled Diarmuid.

But Whaker only shook his head vehemently. As those around us struggled to resecure the main, he shouted, "Boom'll hit the hull! Sail's gotta go fore the mast

does!" I having earned myself a reputation for handily going aloft by then, Diarmuid's only command was to hand me a blade and nod toward the fore.

The shroud was slick with rain, and only seemed to lengthen with my every graceless grasping above. I don't attempt to quantify the sea's wrath at this point; neither that of the sky. Though the tempest was supposedly lessening as we fled it, suffice to say I was quite sure I would die before I managed to cut the halyard free. But still, one hand over another, doing my best to not think about the sparks and fire I'd witnessed consume the Siren's mast minutes beforehand, I climbed. Somehow I reached the top, so one leg wrapped round the line below, one hand gripping fast the futtock shrouds above, I slid the blade from between my teeth and started to swing. Cord by cord, the halyard started to give way. But not before the line I'd used to get there reached its own breaking point. With the next violent pitch of the ship, the shroud on my one side snapped suddenly. The next wave claimed one of the leeward. Mine was the only windward left whole. So, with a final, frantic but futile strike, I tried the halyard one last time, dropping the blade into the gale after, all the better to clutch desperately at my line as I felt it snap below.

In the abridged parlance of McGee, things were not looking good at this point. I could hear the mast creak and groan as it tested the strength of its stays. There was a desperate flurry of motion below to try to reclaim the broken lines but most, mine included, flew too high for even Earl to reach. And when I slid down the shroud to its lowest remnant, I felt a pit open in my stomach. For I doubted very much that I would enjoy the fall to the deck from that height; if I even made it there at all, that is, instead of being blown out to the waves. I frankly don't recall any plan coming to mind. But thankfully, I wouldn't have to hang for long. For out of the corner of my eye, I could just make it out: a single skiff coming toward us. Thinking myself doomed, I satisfied myself with watching their bold approach as my last entertainment. They were coming from the Theilen, I decided; the elven ship had flown past us and the skiff's path back to us was on a strong but simple crosswind. Wave after wave I watched them crest; until I could make out two frames within, and what, exactly, the one in front was working at.

"Whoa! Whoa!" I cried uselessly as an arrow flew by me. But the figure kept firing regardless. I finally saw where it was aiming, as the last bit of halyard was cut by the next arrow. Not that this made my situation much better, for even without the sail to tug on it, the mast had long since ceased being structurally sound; it began to lurch and buck as its remaining supports stretched and sagged, swinging me terribly from port to starboard, until my every extreme passed far out over the roiling, grey water and my handhold became less secure with every sudden jolt. The figure made another three shots toward the line holding me aloft, hopefully at whatever exact moment might have been opportune given our swaying to drop me safely onto the deck. But it was three misses regardless, and in the meantime, I was slipping further and further toward my doom.

Now. I will describe what happened next as best as I can. But given the circumstances, I will not fail to make note here that had I the paper, I might spend a further twenty pages delving into the exact physics of Aoiffelyn's greatness. And one is certainly welcome to trace the maneuver she made in one's mind at whatever length one chooses. But suffice to say from there she - for it was a she who had been shooting - and the other figure in the skiff seemed to be of a single mind for a few seconds. Their craft climbed an approaching wave so steeply, they caught

many feet of air as they crested it. While the other leaned out to the side, almost prone over the water to balance the fluttering of the loose sail against the tearing wind, she did the opposite, flinging her body high into the air to pass - impossibly - no more than ten feet from me as I swung and the End met the next trough. Her bow was nocked and tensed the whole of her flight. Second after second passed as she considered her options. Then she fired at last and I was freed to fly - I lie and exaggerate not - directly and softly into the skiff below as it started its own descent of our wave not more than five feet from our windward side. She was fine, of course. She landed like a bird deftly on deck a knuckle or two from our leeward rail, from there needing only to make a leisurely stroll to the stern, from which she leaped shortly after to land - where else? - exactly where she'd started, perched on the very bow of the skiff as it meandered past the End, curving to the north to catch her before straightening back out to speed to the west once again. I will second McGee's opinion here for good measure: Lleuanashi are entirely insane.

In any case, thus I was allowed to fight and kill after all. We arrived on deck of the Siren no less absurdly than I was rescued; Ementhygar - for it was none other than McGee's old acquaintance sailing the skiff so adeptly - managed somehow to catch enough air to place the whole thing directly onto our destination, smashing a single judge beneath the breaking boards. Though Aoiffelyn and he were prepared for this, I was not, of course. In the time it took for them to skip to solid footing and fire the last of their arrows, ending a further dozen enemies, from there slipping their bows across their torsos in near unison to bring an eket and pelek, elven short sword and hatchet, to bear respectively in one hand, balanced on the other by identical cirmae, daggers, I managed only to get cringingly to my feet. The deck was complete chaos; there was battle everywhere. True believers indeed; the Siren must have been filled with nothing but judges. Fifty or more were visible still fighting against the mix of freed prisoners and mutinous crew spurred into action by us and the elves. I saw Lyus, Cherry and Sever grouped up together, taking judges down with little less efficiency than my escort, no matter Cherry's lilting, wounded progress. For a second, I thought to rush to her aid, but upon checking the other direction, I was confronted with a far more pressing situation. McGee and Ari alone faced six at least defending the helm. I could see McGee had been forced to his knees by most of them, and was trying to rise but kept slipping, while Ari was battling with the largest, a man no smaller than Earl, dressed head to toe in what I knew at once was wyrm-scale mail. So I sprung up to speed toward them. My hammer and shield were long gone, as was Diarmuid's blade. But my serpent dagger hung at the ready still. There was hope with Ari free to save McGee, was my sole thought. What were a few fools to Eso Omari, after all. And as I sprung to make my strike on the behemoth in armor, I remembered distinctly my supervisor declaring to me and Aedis's admirers on the Horizon, 'Hammers. That's the only way. Only then can Sir Stabs-a-lot come to finish the fucker off with his famous sword.' Therefore, I was looking for it from the first: the hole in the armor he'd been sure to tear, for indeed the dwarf was armed with the first hammer he could find. My dagger slid happily into the giant man's thigh with a satisfying squirt of red. And before he'd even winced against my attack or the shattering blow Ari gave his sword hand right after, I was twisting and wrenching the thing in its temporary sheath with glee to better mix the man's blood with the wyrm venom held in the blade's twin etchings.

10.

Though victorious in the end, we sadly lost Ari to the day. He fought bravely to the last, the pinnacle of knighthood, turning the tables on the judges almost single-handedly once freed from battling the giant of a man, none other than Dal Omore, high priest and founder of the Order. He managed to stand firm until the last few soldiers threw down their weapons to surrender but not much longer, for he'd allowed a single but sure strike to his side to bring down those around the helm before they were able to deliver McGee's end. I noted the sword slide into him as Omore grabbed me round the neck with the one, unbroken hand Ari'd left him as clearly as I did the resigned but still determined expression on our Eso's face as he cut the half dozen men down with surgical skill. Another thirty fell to what was left of his blade soon after. But by the time the battle was won, he was spouting a torrent of blood and he passed away then and there. Once we quit the storm, we held a short service for him and the other casualties, then dumped them in the ocean with little more than a song. Lyus and I cried like babies; not only for this so brave of a man who'd come to mean much to us, such a reliable and constant force for good so straightforwardly true he was somehow not entirely out of place rolling with the us on the wicked waves, but also for a certain something that'd been lost within us recently as well. Just as I'm sure Lyus will remember the fierce, wild eyes of his first kill, a boy so like himself, until his own dying day, I will never forget the unmasked terror in the countenance of my own first victim once he realized what was happening within him, as I desperately returned his stranglehold, surely reflecting his distress back to him exactly - for even with him having only a single hand to bring to bear, I was certain he would crush the life from me long before the venom saved me. The expression on Ari's face, on the other hand, when we tilted the board that delivered him to the deep over the rail, was completely devoid of panic or fear. If it weren't for all the blood, I might have thought him only asleep with his broken sword clutched proudly to his chest. I cannot overestimate the emotion that overcame me when he started to slide, stiff, to the waves below. I even jumped forward involuntarily, reaching for him as if I might be able to bring him back by stopping only this descent. But he was gone already, and lives on today only though his many great deeds, which stories we who knew of them spent the rest of the day and night recounting to each other not to mention any who might listen.

The Siren lost all her masts save the mizzen to the storm. The Theilen, also, was made little better than a large rowboat by the tempest; the elves were forced to cut their mainsail upon skirting a savage waterspout spawned by the larger cyclone and had escaped on the power of their jibs alone. Only the End remained mobile - they had somehow managed to save the main mast - once we came into blue skies, even if we dared not stray far from the Siren's side, for Sever's intuition had proven spot on; within was held no less than seven chests of pure gold. Therefore we three vessels, once they on the End provided the Theilen with fresh canvas and guided them back to the Siren, could do little other than float along with the calm that set over the Amician in the hurricane's wake. Thankfully, the Thresher, bearing Iorath, Milain, Cadairn and Darathi back to their brethren, came upon us a day into our drifting. Renault recounted the details of their struggle with the Penta and the

delivery of the rest of the fleet. I was glad to hear Enoli had demanded complete forgiveness be shown to the Order's soldiers and sailors; happier still to hear that the judges and priests were not so lucky. Meanwhile, Aedis, Langdon and those of us crew not stranded in the middle of the Amician had set the King Tide, ten chests of silver stashed in her hold, northeast. They were sailing to Parthenia, the Order's stronghold, in order to find and reclaim Gwyneira's verna, dencjn and ɜn, then being held as hostages, before news of her own rescue from them could be relayed.

The Siren's crew had not been privileged enough to be informed by her now slain owners about their vast treasure; neither, of course, had her prisoners. In fact, for a time only McGee, Sever, Cherry and I, who made sure to search the every depth of the hold together at our first opportunity (Cherry was fine; she'd taken a deep cut to the inside of her thigh but I cleaned and stitched it and it healed well) knew of it. We were forced to tell Ementhygar and Whaker so that the Siren was not simply abandoned. Whaker told Diarmuid. And in the end we all decided Renault should not be denied the information either, since not only did even Sever afford him a reluctant trust, in the absence of his brother anyway, we also saw no way to move the stuff ourselves. But past that, as far as I'm aware, none knew of it then. Therefore the gold's presence was a carefully guarded secret for some time more. And to ensure it remained that way, under pretense of increasing their comfort, the Siren's surviving crew and prisoners were welcomed aboard the End and Thresher respectively, with the true aim being that the crippled vessel be manned by only one or two of we eight until so large a treasure might be better secured. But even though we were more than adequately supplied with food, liquor and water, the inaction required of our vigil proved to be too much for many to bear. Understandably so, perhaps; for many from the Siren had not walked on land for months. In any case, the grumbling started no more than a few hours past the arrival of the Thresher. Fortunately, not long after, the Theilen, Ementhygar having convinced the Lleuanashi to assign themselves the search for our chart's nearest land, reported its sighting not far to the northwest: a handful of rocky but forested islands poking up rudely from the Amician, where we hoped we might fashion new spars for the Siren and End. So the latter, the only mobile of our little, drifting fleet big enough to safely hold our hopeful handiwork and deliver it to the ark, set out at once. I still remember the sudden pause Adoneus gave when I made my rushed trip to tell him the recent events, and that Cherry was fine; and which islands, exactly, we were heading towards.

But at the time I was much more consumed with my newfound popularity among the crew - or more precisely what was left of the Siren's plus those few of us who hadn't left the End - than any hints Adoneus might have revealed about future troubles. Even if our captain (of a sort)'s opinion of me was much the same as always. "Yeah. Big, strong rasid," I remember him declaring sarcastically in the End's captain's quarters to Ementhygar, who along with Aoiffelyn had decided to ride along with us, just before we sighted the green of the islands at last. "Big strong rasid. First time in his life he's managed to stick it in something other than a pussy and they all love 'im for it! Bet you he couldn't do it again!" I ignored him. I was busy. Thanks to Cherry's description of it back in ɶlia, ever since my first fatal use of my dagger, I had become profoundly pensive on the subject of life and my respect for its many forms. I was playing with a spider at the time, twisting my

hand in the air then flipping it back suddenly so that the poor creature struggled continuously to achieve the underside. He was having quite the adventure, I remember musing to myself.

"Perhaps you only let your crew believe he brought down such a large man with his bare hands because it reminds you of a certain fight *you* once had," replied Ementhygar. That peaked my attention.

"What fight?" I demanded.

Over McGee's attempt at shushing him, Ementhygar laughed, "What fight? I would have thought he'd told the whole world by now. His fight against Gunuaza."

"The one in the tower!?" I spat. "Was that *true!?*"

It was. And it wasn't. "Tower!?" Ementhygar returned. After which, to McGee, as a father to a child, the elf demanded, "What have you been telling the boy?" Then back to me, "No; our Mr McGee defeated Gunuaza in the mud below the Onumei's vineyard prison. Although perhaps defeated is the wrong word. He was soundly beaten. But at some point, he cut his opponent with Merylanialazi's dagger and so it was only he who survived the battle in the end."

"So I lied a little," was McGee's complete lack of an attempt at denial to myself and Cherry, who was leaning, aloof as ever if with a now forming smile, against one of the bookshelves.

With a much warmer smile of her own directed at me, the intricately decorated, elegantly athletic brunette Aoiffelyn then spouted something in Lleuanashi, which Ementhygar, a bit more roughly drawn in both senses of the word and wooden in color beneath his tattoos, translated for us as, "We laughed at great length when this boy came to sell us wine, with even some of your mannerisms as he haggled. 'Perhaps McGee has been very busy abroad,' we said. But to find you in the flesh at the end of the tale was an even bigger surprise! *Is* he your son? Or just an apprentice."

Cherry's mirth was palpable at this. But before McGee got the chance to declare angrily, 'Neither!' or that he only hadn't found a good way to rid himself of me yet, a cry of "Land ho!" from above silenced us all.

The place was not uninhabited, as one might have guessed already from Adoneus's tell. The islands were in fact home to a massive summer colony of Kanakai. Once we came within a few hundred yards, I saw that they littered the whole of the shore like driftwood after a storm. But they wouldn't stay put for long. The moment we drew close enough to make them out with any clarity, they dove into the water in a great swarm. The females fled our approach with their pups in tow, sadly, no matter how desperately I tried to get a good view of one. I would be privileged to the awe-inspiring sight of the countless aqua shimmers approaching us below the waves that designated the colony's many males. But the veteran sailors were far less moved than me; their only response to the spectacle was to make a furious attempt to arm themselves. Not that it did us any good.

Springing from the water like dolphins at play, not a single one missed the hand-hold of his target portal, from there either climbing up and over the rail to accost those of us at duties or sliding through the openings to menace those below-decks. Before anyone had the slightest idea what was happening, there were hundreds of them sharing our vessel. Thankfully, they'd left their spears on land; which McGee would later inform me meant they'd already decided to let us go. But they did come bearing large sacks, which they filled with every single item on the ship ready

for consumption, only diving back into the water once their arms were full with the whole of our fruits, vegetables and meats alike.

"He knew," I insisted to McGee and Renault of Adoneus once we made it back to the others. "Knew they'd take everything from us too, I bet; if they didn't kill us for the fun of it, that is." The man was back to complete villain in my mind, since we found ourselves in quite a spot then; the Siren's rations were all spoiled by seawater, ours and therefore the Thresher's stolen except for the grains, and the Theilen's slim. With the fitful winds in that part of the Amician, scurvy was all but a certainty unless we abandoned the Siren soon. And none were happy about the lack of meat of course. "Can't we just... move it quietly?" I eked regarding the gold.

"Do you know how much those rutting chests weigh?" demanded McGee angrily.

It was up to Renault to educate me without insult. "No, young rasid," he crooned. "The Siren's deck is twenty feet above even the Mako's. We could not manage it among ourselves. And seven chests of pure gold not under guard! If we told the others, we would have no crew the moment we made port. I see no way. It's a shame; she's a fine ship."

"Can't *you* talk to them?" McGee demanded. "If anyone can..."

"We don't... really talk, if you mean my acquaintance from the Endara," spat Renault matter-of-factly, while McGee glanced knowingly at me. "Like I said, a shame," repeated the other to better reign in any coming comment; "A fine ship. But we should let her go."

McGee would have none of that, though! Even if a full minute of inner debate was necessary before he spurted, "Let'm out."

"Let who out, sir?" Renault was forced to venture.

"Adoneus. Let'm out. He knew about the fuckers. Maybe he can talk to 'em."

Renault's doubt was echoed by the prisoner, however, when we descended to the dungeon and he admitted, "Sea-Elven? No, my friends. That I cannot help you with. No one can." For a moment, it seemed all was lost. I mean, all that money! But the second our dismay was fully internalized, the villain sang, "Although I have heard a story..." thereafter relating a tale about a ship that had had to wait almost three days when one of their female passengers had fallen overboard, then been abducted/rescued by Kanakai females, only to be returned well-fed and incredibly well-groomed, even sporting myriad, new sea-shell jewelries that she surely treasures still to this day. The whole colony had apparently eagerly joined in on the makeover/assault.

"Forget it," was Cherry's immediate refusal. "How's this supposed to work exactly? You dump me in the water, then I have to hope they come get me before I drown; and *that* is supposed to distract them long enough for you to cut down some trees and haul them to the End? They're more likely to eat me. Sea elves are animals!"

McGee scoffed, "Sea elves don't eat people!" Although he added softly afterwards, "I think." No matter. The moment Cherry heard whose plan it originally was for her to be made up so, her refusal doubled in obstinacy. In the end we were forced to throw poor Nora, the only female crew-member of the Siren, who would some year or two later during a particularly long time at sea on the End earn herself the epithet, "Or-nothin," into the Amician to bait the sea elves. Believe me or don't; the plan went off perfectly. There was such commotion on the largest of

the islands, one of the smaller was completely drained of its usual denizens for a time. Therefore, thus provided with new masts and a slightly prettier crew on average than before, after a week or so of labor, we were mobile once more; so we four vessels set out to the east and the cove a few dozen miles north of Parthenia at which Renault and Aedis had agreed to meet once the younger found us.

We were greeted happily by the rest of the crew; even Aedis seemed excited to receive us. The question on everybody's mind, of course, was whether we had perhaps managed to secure an eleventh chest of silver to add to the ten they'd left the Hold bearing. We who knew the true extent of the Siren's riches were prepared for this. One of the seven of gold stashed below had already been produced to satiate the curiosity of everybody else; and this, minus the small portion which had found its way into various pockets of course, was hauled forth to be transferred to the King Tide with great ceremony and pomp. And rightfully so; even doubling our normal weekly distribution from this stockpile, we now might go half a year without straining our funds. As quartermaster, it was in fact my job to determine this figure. Upon arriving once more to the Archaean coast, I was made very busy counting the riches found within the King Tide and Siren - or at least those that were common knowledge; our secret treasure I had already extensively surveyed. The task took me three full days, after which labor Aedis and McGee paraded me before an assembly of nearly the whole of the crew to inform them that not only had we secured such a vast quantity of bullion, our weapon and other supplies (save food of course) were roughly quadrupled, and that a full nother chest of silver might be readily obtained from selling that which we couldn't possibly need. A vote called for by Whaker allowed for a substantial increase in crew members and future lay redistribution. All of the Siren's crew, those of the various prisoners still with us most experienced at sea or in battle plus a handful of seemingly trustworthy former Order soldiers - plus Cherry, nominated by McGee and quickly seconded by Sever, no matter Aedis's astonishment at seeing the lady from 4A there sporting a sword at her side - were added to our collective ranks. The rest were sent off with full bellies at least; and a firm recommendation to make their way south, past the Order's dominion and into Lusitania proper, as soon as possible. Thereafter, though it was a debate conducted beyond my witness, Aedis, Renault and McGee began the process of selecting captain and mates for the Siren. All while six chests of gold sat deep within the vessel, known only to we eight who had discovered and delivered them: Renault, McGee, Cherry, Sever, Whaker, Diarmuid, Ementhygar and myself.

Gwyneira was still on the King Tide. Though she had hoped to participate herself in the rescue of her children, she knew she would surely have been recognized at once in Parthenia. Thinking the task best suited to a small party, she and Aedis had trusted Bellio, Tilty and Langdon with the task of securing the hostages' release alone. As we counted our treasure and carefully measured our recent successes there in our forested cove, we were in fact merely awaiting their safe return. Aedis had demanded that Gwyneira take the ship's grandest cabin, Alevi Allan's former quarters, moving himself to one far less spacious. As I made my accounts, I noted with little surprise that he made sure to visit her very often. They were conversing familiarly by this point, with occasional locking gazes and glad grasping of the hands initiated no less often by her than him. But this was all done in public; never did they descend to the privacy of one of their cabins together.

And though they seemed in perfect happiness in each other's company, even firmly on their way to a more permanent joining, perhaps not only purposeful but partially personal as well, never would Aedis dare disrupt her when she took her post daily on the most southern point of the ship near sunset, gaze locked on the point around which her children, in Bellio's company, must be delivered to her.

After a day of debate, the Siren was properly staffed. Seppio, one of Aedis's bodyguards, was to be captain, with mates Marcello, Comal and Undrik. This was a blunt spurning to Whaker, who most of the crew assumed would take command. But Aedis made a great show of declaring that he was in need of that sailor's vast experience to train the still green crew aboard the King Tide, now an even thinner collection of hands than had staffed the Horizon, seeing as they'd lost a full ten sailors, including their former second mate, in their push to take one of the Order's ships. (No experienced sailors could be convinced to man Aedis's ship without substantial increase in lay.) Therefore, Whaker and Diarmuid were installed as first and second mates of that, our finest, ship, Rash her third, in order to develop the fundamentals of seamanship in her crew; while her former third, Gaff, was transferred to the End to continue that post therein. Spy or retribution for some slight against Aedis, I dared not guess. Ghatsly and Digger remained first and second mates of the Thresher while Rash's place as third was taken by Midger. Bellio, meanwhile, was, to everyone's great delight - if also, notably, privileged to a placement as far from Gwyneira as possible - to be the End's new first mate, Earl the second. Some of the regular crew, lays increased to as much as a full point, were necessarily spread to the Siren and King Tide to help fill in the many gaps. An equal number of openings on the former were taken by Aedis's bodyguards; his Mako he apparently finally gave up on as not worthy of his henchman's oversight. And so, all people having a spot, after distribution of supplies where they were needed most and collection of those we intended to sell safely aboard the Siren, heaped in cascading piles over her true treasure, it seemed we were finally ready to depart.

But even days past our arriving, almost a week after their departure to Parthenia, there was no sign of Bellio. The Lleuanashi, no matter their thousand-year lifespans, were the most impatient with this state of affairs. Ementhygar would need explain it all to me. He told me that even though the Gwyneira's position was perhaps an uncertain one, it was one of great importance regardless; that even though there was a Queen of Annwyn and the Ancients currently quite at home in the Regia Heulwen, a Lleuanashi one what's more, to whom all the moon elves owed their love and allegiance, he, at least, was not entirely convinced of this Athawyd's ability to rule for long, so coveted was her title. Therefore, to our compatriots on the Theilen, even if she was half human and had never taken a house, matters, in the end, of importance only to the Silvern who had abandoned Annwyn, Gwyneira's claim to the elven throne was a potentially valid one. To obtain her support for Athawyd would be a matter of great honor; and to obtain her friendship, should the Lleuanashi Queen meet with misfortune, would prove at least equally as practical. But adventure aside, there was another reason the Theilen stayed with us, I decided quickly. Even if it was clear Aoiffelyn and Ementhygar were life partners and all but tied at the hip, there was an extra second of stare given by both of them toward the half-elven warrior princess. It was subtle but still there: admiration mixed equally with a parent's desire to soothe a child. I noticed it

if no one else did. Even as Ementhygar delved into his description of the exigencies of elven royalty to me there on one of their many visits to the King Tide, his eyes were lingering on his lover as she insistently but wordlessly guided Gwyneira back to Alevi Allan's grand cabin to retire for a time, from which privacy the two would only emerge many hours later, the blonde's hair carefully braided in Lleuanashi fashion. One may not be surprised that I wondered how long, exactly, that had really taken, and what the two had done with the rest of their time alone.

In any case, the elves all seemed extremely concerned with the fate of Gwyneira's verna, dencɲ and ɜn, and insisted that they be allowed to make inquiry as to Bellio's party's fate once enough time had elapsed that it was clear the three men had failed in their task. Therefore another party was decided on consisting of Ementhygar, Aoiffelyn, Iorath, Sora and Maithellen, Sever, who all knew would go to the ends of the Earth to save Bellio even if he'd absolutely never admit it, Cherry, who had her own reasons as always that she kept carefully guarded, and Lyus, who said he was going no matter what McGee or Cherry or anybody said. The Theilen deposited these eight in Parthenia under a waxing gibbous and returned them plus Bellio, Langdon, the three children and most of Tilty on the night of ɑrdea's full moon. We were finally regaled with the full story of the rescue. It seemed that all had gone according to plan until Tilty, their task seemingly all but completed, convinced Bellio to drink a bit more than was his wont, at which point the two were rounded up by judges on a charge of public intoxication, as poorly defined an offense as ever imagined by tyrants but still one routinely leveled at those foolish enough to choose to call Parthenia home. Langdon had managed to determine their location but lacked means to free them, which is when Ementhygar's party found the ranger. Together, they all managed the original task plus the release of Bellio and Tilty, then they fought their way out of the city, setting fire to the few ships docked there that might be able to catch the Theilen. Tilty paid for his indiscretion dearly in the end; he lost two toes and a portion of his "favorite" boots to a sloppily made axe swing from one of the judges bold enough to challenge them during their flight. One has never heard a man complain so. Indeed, the sound he made as they cleaned and seared the flesh to prevent infection was as if he'd lost his whole leg.

Only thus, in any case, were we freed to continue to the north, toward the destination Aedis and McGee were finally forced to declare openly. The very hour of the Theilen's return, another assembly of all the crew that might be gathered aboard the King Tide without leaving the other vessels to drift unmanned was made, with the two sometimes allies joined in happy explanation of purpose. I had mostly guessed their intentions by then; for me, their speech did little more than fully elucidate their willingness to lie to achieve their aims. They said all had gone according to the plan they'd laid down together so long ago - meaning last September, I assume. First of all, we'd made complete fools of the Allans. The bastards'd get their ships back alright: at a price. Although we'd never give so many back that we were ever even close to outgunned on the open water again, our captains declared to open applause. No less rowdy of a cheer accompanied their official introduction of Gwyneira, who, they said, would be our guide to even greater riches than we'd already taken. Three of her children we had already saved, said McGee, but her middle daughter arianwɘn still remained captive. This poor girl, the fairest, most innocent of princesses, was prisoner, spat Aedis, of the most despicable, repugnant villain to ever live: the center of evil in the world and master

of Ty Gwydir, who all knew to be the devil. Kaliya Anguis, U Votan. And we, said McGee, thanks to Gwyneira's "in-depth knowledge" of the deadly north Caledonian coast round that terrible, black keep - with the help of our elven friends! - would take arianwen for immediate transport to more friendly waters, not to mention any plunder we happened to find sitting around of course.

Some of this was not complete untruth. Our company had indeed evolved greatly from Aedis's two ships and an empty shell of a third, sailed only with Allan permission. Now not only were we five, well-supplied with money and cannon and therefore by even the most conservative of estimates beyond the clan's power; but I doubted the English at Hank's Hold would allow a fate for the Allans' arks much disparate from that our captains described. One part, however, I already knew was a stretch. Gwyneira did her best, but it seemed clear to me that she knew not a thing about the sea round Ty Gwydir. As McGee shouted away, no matter her waving assurance to us, her sudden lack of beaming smile showed how she assumed the matter of actually finding a safe way to get to land there was a matter still to be attended to. Thanks to that summer's evening meeting on the Reiki a few days after my opera, I knew another was intended for that purpose: Adoneus. They've likely fed her some tale about the man, I thought, preferring not to divulge the true source of that critical information to all the others, to which ruse she had agreed if only to assure our assistance in so dangerous an undertaking as would be necessary to find her last child. I would very soon discover how wrong I was; how closely these two's fates were intertwined, and the apparent depth of our captains' cunning.

After the assembly, having finished my inventory of the King Tide and Siren, I happily slunk back aboard the Thresher, completing my count of her possessions within a few hours as usual with not a single item missing, at which point I took my favorite hammock and started in on the bottles of wine I no longer bothered to try to keep hidden as being my own choice of beverage to replace my liquor ration. The weather remained warm and pleasant, with not a single drop of rain having bothered us past the hurricane's dissolution. Every soft sunset seemed the same tone of faint, peaceful yellow. Even once her children were delivered to her, Gwyneira's habit of staring off into the horizon at that time continued uninterrupted, its only change being that she now did so in the company of the three rascals, dencjn and ɜn permanently bodily attached to her, even verna, the eldest, only daring let go of her for a minute or two at a time. Adoneus's daily release to consume his dinner, meanwhile, had long since been restored to him once the Thresher was fully staffed upon the King Tide's arrival at Hank's Hold. The first night of our northward journey, Renault requested politely of me to please take his spyglass and, once he'd finished his meal, demand that Adoneus take a good, long look at the King Tide; specifically who might be seen leaning over her rail, staring directly toward us and the sunset behind. I couldn't help taking a look myself, already knowing that it would be Gwyneira, as beautiful as ever - moreso, even, her hair done up so intricately by Aoiffelyn - revealed illuminated softly by the departing sun. And a long sigh was Adoneus's only response once he took the glass, as he might have released in mere pleasant admiration of the woman, though its despairing tone would need be explained to me more fully.

Renault was happy to do so. "Now you see, *euastir*," he hissed. "One of your sluts - I won't tell you which - has a big mouth, if you take my meaning. Look who

we've picked up on our way to Ty Gwydir. Consider their rescue a gesture of good faith between friends; friends who keep no secrets from one another. You... did see your children there by her side, did you not?"

"Yes," was Adoneus's only reply, through teeth clenched in an anger so thorough it made even the pure hate that had overcome him as he'd emerged from his long sleep look like a nervous twitch. At last I understood. It was none other than he who sadʚʃ had introduced Gwyneira to after finding her in qima-salʚm, who was her imperfect if passionate lover. It was none other than he who had fought against the Order when they came to reclaim her, failing in the end to save not only her but his own children. And it was now none other than he who, by his heirs' apparent lingering state as hostages, would be forced to do the bidding of Aedis and Renault, guiding them safely, as I understood their demand of him, to Ty Gwydir. I thought for a second about my opera and his patient and perceptive control over the power struggle that had taken place over its duration. I thought for a further moment about offering to free him back at the Hold and him declining. Surely, he had foreseen even this turn, I thought. That Aedis had been a step ahead of him all this time, moreso that our rescue of both his children and their mother had been Aedis's intention more than his own, seemed an impossibility. But only for those pair of seconds did I dare imagine so. For the anger then flooding over him was clearly unfeigned. I was left to ponder the matter with little hope for the man as I returned him to his cell; even if, once he calmed down upon his reinternment, I might have noted more carefully a boyish sort of smirk spread across his face for the briefest of seconds.

Meanwhile, we were making steady way north. Rema and I made the switch to the End when we stopped for water a few days south of the Izozky Gap, where I was immediately subjected to McGee's account to the crew of my strangling Dal Omore to death with my "bare rutting hands." At least I was treated to far more than my own liquor ration that night! In any case, by the time I recovered my full mental capacity some days later, I had somehow managed an inventory of the ship with only a few, entirely expected, matters demanding attention. In the meantime, my training was restarted. Sever and a carcass - I don't know from where this body came and I did not ask - were produced on day one no matter my hangover in order to train Lyus, Ledfetter's and my hand in finding a fatal blade strike; which instruction was superseded by Cherry's as she added to this list of battle-ending techniques various pressure points and methods of permanently crippling a man. Eventually, we turned to the bare-handed style she had brought to bear against the Yokai before my opera. Though Ledfetter and I were slow learners, Lyus and Sever proved to be incredibly apt pupils. My time was more often than not spent watching the three spar and practice throws and maneuvers alone, quite happy to be spared the pain of receiving Cherry's demonstrations; if still a bit impatient for my try, generally, seeing as the average handhold involved was, let us say, often less reserved in placement than might be considered urbane. Not to mention the closeness to our somehow still sweet-smelling - nevermind we hadn't walked on land for weeks by then - instructor necessary to take advantage of what she carefully demonstrated time and again as "overextension" was little less suggestive. But I digress...

I was happy to note that she was readily accepted by the rest of the crew. She slept in the same quarters in which she had stowed away before, in fact, Diarmuid's

former, Earl now happy to provide her the privacy, he being a bigger sucker for her than anyone. She was no female passenger as the Thresher once boasted, however. She was so feared among the rest that none save our gentle giant and Sever risked more than the briefest stare at the tight curves of her ever-exposed legs; her normal garb until our eastward gazes revealed more glacier-capped peaks than foggy woodland was little more than a pair of strips of cloth so insubstantive I would have been hard-pressed to start a fire with them. And it didn't get much more reserved thereafter. The cut-offs and tiny tit-tube combo expanded in the chill air into only a tight-fitting suit of black leather 'armor' whose creator had seen no need to protect a woman's cleavage or the heart beneath from harm past forcing the mounds on either side together to deepen the crevice. Or at least the top half of one, that is; her bottom became a skirt scarcely more able to cover the whole of her backside than what it replaced. Only once we delved into the Izozky itself, with glaciers towering hundreds of feet into the air on our either side, and our breath rose from us in a thick mist with every exhale, did the skirt disappear to be replaced in turn by pants. Not that these left much more to the imagination; I have no idea how she managed to walk, much less bend over, they were so tight. As one can imagine, I remember little other than her during this phase of my voyage, some four months trek from my flower-filled Celia and two past Enrieta's tender care in Dominica. It got to the point that I was eager to be quit of the vessel if only to be quit of her presence. Part of me was therefore quite disappointed when, as I was preparing Rema to make for the King Tide upon emerging once more into calm open waters past the Izozky, she swayed up to me and declared simply that she was coming with me; also that I should go get her bag.

The standoff that ensued upon our arrival on our flagship was immediate, for Gwyneira and Aedis were both on deck at the time. I noted without surprise the sudden and complete stop to their discussion once Cherry was revealed behind me, dressed head to toe in black; indeed almost as if she had planned her wardrobe for the greatest contrast to that of the princess, wrapped within her suit of unblemished, white leather and fur under a no less blinding mantle. I tried to initiate a polite exchange between the two, but when I stuttered involuntarily a "ch" sound in my attempt to introduce my companion, the same made sure to cut me off at once, declaring definitively, "Suiko. Pleased," if with a limp-wristed, uncaring demand of the other's hand to show just how untrue this last part was.

Gwyneira was little less curt. "Gwyneira," she said simply, squeezing Cherry's fingers tightly with an undisguised pout of her own. And she ventured with a less than playful air after, "You know, you look like someone I knew a long time ago, Suiko. A Cherry - if you can believe that's actually someone's name. The resemblance is remarkable. But you couldn't be her; she was such an unashamed slut."

My immediate defense of Cherry surprised none more than myself. "Just a mean member of the crew, my lady," I insisted. "I would defend her honor to my last."

Aedis, of course, took it all wrong. "Ladies, ladies," he sang. "There's no need to fight. Miss Suiko, I am very pleased to see you again. It is miss still, isn't it? How quickly things change nowadays! This is our - what; third? - meeting? rasid, you devil! Although I understand completely. I would try to keep her all to myself as well. I am ashamed to admit that I didn't recognize you before. (He only embarrassed himself further, since it was in fact their fourth meeting; he would never notice that his lady in 4A and the stunning slut on my arm at al alonostra were one

in the same as the Whale's wench. No matter; he kept talking anyway:) Miss Suiko, had I only known you were such a capable fighter before, I would have been honored to offer you a place on my crew. You must forgive me for insisting you debark along with the other passengers at Dominica. But now! They speak very highly of you. I hear it is much to your credit - and our young rasid's, of course - that we were able to secure the Siren. I am so very glad you've decided to come once more aboard my ship..." And, leaving Gwyneira forgotten, the two walked away to the tune of Aedis's comparison of the cabin he had recently deprived Rash of for her sake to the Horizon's 4A: "certainly not as elegant, but with a functional comfort all its own," as the ionna accepted his arm with an eager entwining that ended firmly on his thigh, much farther to center than might be considered appropriate. All as I strove to find something to say to Gwyneira. Nothing came, of course. I settled in the end for my best attempt at an understanding pat on her shoulder as she watched, daggers still shooting from her eyes, the two disappear below-decks. This came off as far more sincere than I planned; since oddly enough, for the half a second after I noticed Cherry's hand drift toward Aedis's center, far closer than she'd ever come to mine no matter her declaration of never fooling around with half-dwarves, I felt a rage rise within me that I would be hard-pressed to match in my memory even today.

The Ocean Orca is unlike any other. Bounded as it is so narrowly by Archaea above the fiftieth parallel for much of its run and Arctica below the seventieth, though ice free for most of the year, it never warms to much more than a few degrees above freezing. We started our way back south along the coast well before the northern monsoon ends in ɑsən, meaning though the sky was generally gray and sometimes stormy, the wind, at least, remained firmly in our direction every day. But it was very cold. Long gone were pleasant days and strutting about shirtless, quite pleased at myself for my renewed tan and the strength I'd gained with near equal ease. Now the few times the sun dared appear, it seemed the air took not the slightest notice; the temperature would dip into the teens every night without remorse and it was far worse when clear. Our journey would continue much in this way for its duration, Whaker told me happily - in Terran to my surprise, finally revealing to me that before succumbing to the call of the sea, he had been born among none other than the comptȣ, who settle on the far side of ɐɛɹl tɹiɘni in winter and bravely range into the north in summer - with only a brief respite off western Caledonia if we chose the southern route round Saerohan. We would see snow soon for sure! Imagine that, I said to myself: a Terran who loves the snow. I, of course, am of the same mind as the vast, vast majority of us regarding the cold, and suddenly decided I had tired of a mariner's life. I spent my evenings pondering maps of Archaea and estimating the time in might take me to return to Terra on foot. Indeed, I might have left the journey on simple account of the weather had fate not intervened to keep me at sea.

We planned to sell off our surplus in Reedsport, a booming English settlement growing quickly at the mouth of the Near River, which cascades down the Iralden through what was once orcish wilds; or, that failing, to the Anda we routinely visit when our path lies so far north. Therefore, shortly after the Izozky, I made the transfer to the Siren to assure myself that our cargo hadn't mysteriously disappeared as can often happen on English ships. I needn't have worried; it was all exactly where I'd left it, with my six chests of gold crammed safely beneath the

surplus supplies. The weapons especially went for a great price there at Reedsport. I supervised the laborers carefully, being sure to remove each and every bundle and crate myself to a space far from the gold for them to take from there. In the end, I was satisfied with my protection of the treasure; it seemed none suspected its presence.

McGee'd told me to be to be wary of Seppio and to bring any noteworthy matters between the man and the ship's crew to his attention at my first opportunity. It didn't take long to realize we would need have a lengthy chat. Aedis's gang of bodyguards, now freed from his supervision, were far more domineering than even the King could be. Not only were they never subjected to even the lightest of duties, the rest of the crew were expected to perform all sorts of demeaning, unnecessary tasks in the interest of furthering their comfort and ease; emptying chamber pots, laundry, furnishing meal-service, even polishing boots. While those who had been transferred there from the End refused these duties with little more than a scoff, the Siren's old crew were clearly used to an overbearing hand and easily bowed to Seppio and friends, acquiescing to the bodyguards' demands with surprising passivity. Only Comal and Undrik seemed interested in bridging the gap that quickly spread between the three sides. Everybody else, Marcello included, spent their time strictly removed from the captain and his gang of thugs, sparing little less disdain for those who would appease them. The dwarven brothers assured me that this state of affairs was not overly strange on a newly staffed ship. They were doing their best to bring all together into joined purpose; it was simply a matter of time before a sort of camaraderie formed. But even though their words were reasonable, it seemed to me they repeated them too often, as if their assurances were uttered more for their own peace of mind than mine. I decided very quickly that the situation was a hopeless one; the moment, in fact, that Seppio descended to the hold to introduce himself as I made my tallies. He told me bluntly that not only did he consider my intrusion onto his vessel an unnecessary one, he would make sure it would be my last; for in his words, "Aedis does what we tell him; not the other way around. We want money, he goes to fetch it. You can count it for us. But don't expect a single pound. You've gotten one kill - one - so far. Do you know how many I've taken out?" All as I wondered how, exactly, the man had survived a single struggle against a conscious opponent, for he was quite fat and generally useless in all those things I had witnessed him attempt. Perhaps it wasn't always so, I mused; he was still possessed of a solid frame under the rolls, after all. Perhaps there is yet great strength under all the added baggage. Although neither his menacing stance nor the extra protection his outer layers might have provided him prevented me from visualizing the precise entry-points for my dagger I'd recently learned should I decide to end him at once. Maybe I would have been better off if I had struck then out of mere anger. But I did no such thing, allowing him to strut away from me in peace with little more than a sadly shaking head at his effrontery; for it would have been even easier than killing him for me to inform on him to Aedis were I that sort of man.

Comal and Undrik were, to my surprise, largely unconcerned by this near-open declaration of mutiny. Just talk, they insisted. Had they known the true extent of the riches then under Seppio's domineering care, things might have been different, but as it was they had their hands full with other matters, for added to their morale troubles was the problem of sickness. Two of the new crew, former prisoners

from the King Tide both, had come down with some mystery illness that left them bedridden and delirious, beset with an unabating fever. Remembering my fight against the sims and the medicine that had so easily cured me of it before the insanity and liver-failure set in, provided me nightly by Dervi, I made the brothers a promise to find its recipe as soon as possible. Although I knew not how to accomplish this. Perhaps in Reedsport I might have found a Malloy to enlighten me but we'd long since passed it by when I made the promise. In any case, I made sure to quit the Siren and report my opinions about the vessel to McGee at my first opportunity. He was as unconcerned about the situation as Comal and Undrik, unfortunately. His only response to my description of events there mirrored what the brothers had surely not felt polite to utter to me openly. "Gunes," he shrugged simply; 'what can a man do?' And the extent of his dealing with the problem was, after listing the number of things for which he was responsible nowadays in a long, complaining tirade, to suggest that perhaps *I* do something about Seppio and his lackeys.

We left Langdon shortly after, bearing not only a hefty bag of silver personally given him by Aedis but an exceptionally fine fuku bow, a gift from one of the Lleuanashi. From there, we turned east. Only three days puffing along the coast saw us off the lands of the Anda. No matter Whaker's happily uttered pessimism, the weather now was far better than round the Izozky. Though still crisp, I was glad to note that we had left the glaciers and snow-capped peaks behind for a time. The shoreline, as ever in the north in scorpio, was now a beautiful palette of reds and yellows; of maple, beech, walnut and oak, with only the occasional pine or cypress to remind one of the far northern forests' near complete reliance on that more common hue. The world seemed a much happier, brighter place. And not only was the shore a more exciting place to view, one morning the water round us filled with the sleek, black forms of the Ocean Orca's namesakes and it would stay that way for days. The whales swam by us so closely, it was almost as if we were honorary members of the pod. There was clearly some sort of personal connection between the older members of the crew and the creatures. One day, in fact, to my great surprise, McGee, suddenly grasping the portside rail with nothing more than a cry of, "Can't be!" jumped directly into the frigid water. I prepared to shout man overboard, but Tilty put an arm on my shoulder to insist that I wait a bit. All was fine in the end. Our captain (of a sort) disappeared below the waves for only a few seconds, then reappeared quite suddenly, propelled into the air by a giant pair of flukes. The whale tossed the dwarf back onto the ship with such ability, he landed exactly in the middle of our deck again. "That'll wake you up in the morning!" he spat happily - after complaining about the force of his landing, that is. "That's my pet fish. Fred," said McGee to my open-mouthed confusion, in lieu of actual explanation of what, exactly, had just happened.

All civilization was hundreds of miles away by then; the only indication of the presence of man on land could be seen in the solitary shacks of voluntarily stranded English, occasional pillars of campfire smoke, and the yet more rare, barely discernible flitting of skin tones or furs among the trees. Though during my time with them, the fœlcirs never made the trip round the alpi, they had made sure to describe the barbarians that inhabit the north to me clearly. They live much like Terrans but in reverse, congregating in winter rather than summer; and instead of cœrevɜns they rely on slightly more permanent structures for shelter; round,

wooden frames with hide sides and thatch rooves called palakti. There are great congregations of palakti close to the coast, thousands or tens of thousands strong, while the northern slopes of the mountains are dotted with their summer villages. At the time of our passing, they were in the process of abandoning the latter for the former. It is a time of great celebrations and even greater brawls. Of reunions both joyous and tense. Of weddings and of births. A fateful time, when the events of an evening can change the course of a lifetime.

The End and Theilen made Elendsall far ahead of the others; the Siren would arrive alone some few hours later while the King Tide and Thresher would not be seen that day. I was lucky enough to be among the first to have time ashore. I spent my time assisting Comal and Undrik with the thirteen hogs they'd insisted we reserve from the supplies we'd picked up in Reedsport to be given to the Anda then filling the massive palakti settlement. They'd already gotten the squealing animals into rowboats and delivered them to land somehow by the time I found them. But from there was no easy task either. It's not as if we had leashes. Undrik walked ahead with repeated calls of, "Here, piggy, piggy, piggy," tossing the occasional half-rotted pear or apple, while Comal and I trailed behind, whacking any that strayed more than a few dozen feet from the rest of the herd with sticks. To go the half a mile from the beach to town took three hours; pigs, in case one does not already know, do not speak English. But we got there in the end, and after another hour asking after a Garellison family, delivered the animals to their forever home at last, to the barbarians' - the same, I assume, from whom the brothers had stolen twelve pigs some years before - great surprise and amusement. We were treated to more than our share of the hearty, black ale the Anda drink in return. I felt quite at home in the empty palakti they provided us and decided to postpone my southward journey back to Œlia a few days; at least until I had found the recipe for the Malloy's magic potion to give to my fellow pig-wranglers.

Anda women are quite beautiful, if one doesn't mind a bit of dirt under fingernails. Simply put, there's something to like about all of them: tall or taller; wide-eyed or wide-faced; blonde, brunette, redhead or raven. I thought each and every one an individual work of art. The only generalization one can make about these northern beauties is that they do indeed sport great mountains for mammary glands as a general rule, I am happy to confirm to those who have heard the rumors. I spent much of the next morning doing my best to woo one of them, of course, despite not speaking a word of Sebernye beyond 'Da' and 'Nay.' My efforts were rewarded, unfortunately, mostly only by my every intended afternoon's companion's blushing smile as they took my bursting hibiscus blooms from me before fleeing to their nearest friend or relative. Although I did get a giggling kiss or two, I am also happy to report. In any case, eventually I succeeded in my secondary objective; finding a translator. His name was Gunter, funnily enough, and he understood both Terran and Sebernye. After I explained the situation onboard the Siren and my intention to find a certain kind of dwarf, most likely a well-dressed and slightly pompous one, he happily joined me in my search. He said that he was certain Elendsall received regular visits from a single dwarf of this

kind, who came bearing medicines he would trade for gold and only gold. "Da! le!" I declared. So we set off to the south; toward the O-posten, a small collection of log cabins constructed Murphy-style from the surrounding forest, where men and dwarves collect year-long for much of their business needs when passing through the region.

But it seemed I was out of luck. "A Malloy!" spat the McGee manning the desk at the most grand of the cabins. "Won't find any'v those ass-holes down here." And, laughing at my explanation of my path there, he assured me, "Well, Willis's a pompous ass too, I guess. Well-dressed's a stretch... But he's even more McGee'n me; won't learn a thing from him. We don't have cillin here. Sorry I can't help, lad. That shit don't sell. Cept for a couple broken bones every day, the pansies, and the flu, which everybody knows the only medicine for is ale, Anda don't really *get* sick. Sure you don't want some of what we do have? It'll make you feel goood..."

Fortunately, however, a Boddhi there to trade wyvern teeth overheard our conversation and told me in his broken English that he was positive a Malloy was in town; a Malloy woman no less. That peaked my attention twice-over, as one can imagine. So, bidding Gunter farewell, I set out to the north and Elendsall proper again to find the Nowaks, the family the Boddhi had spent his last week lodging with. On the way, the man told me what he knew of this mystery maid. She was a very powerful woman as he understood it, who'd been sent to contract the services of northmen in securing her clan's recent, impressive military gains in some great, southern city or other. She was very beautiful, he said, if far too small for his liking. But his tone as he told me this was more of a warning than anything. He told me to be wary of her, in fact, for he suspected that her true aim was different than what she declared; that it might have more to do with the handful of young girls she'd convinced to return with her to the south with stories of plenteous gold and food, translated for her from English by her companion, a serious-faced Anda man bearing a spear and a limp. Although he wouldn't be surprised to find that she was actually waiting for someone; she'd been there for a month or more, far longer than him. I was hardly surprised, therefore, when I entered the Nowak's grand palakti to come face to face, across the central aisle of the wedding then taking place, with none other than my dear Rhodelia, who had managed to ingratiate herself with the family to such a degree that she'd been named as a maid of honor for the ceremony, and was regaled as beautifully as ever. All as the Boddhi beside me pointed her out, explaining to me how the blooms in her flowing, grain-blonde hair were then so full and fresh; that the local tuyanme, as they do in his homeland of Bod, after a particularly hot and dry summer, will often bloom twice in a year, with the second coming even more impressive than the first. Rhodi only smiled her ready smile when she caught sight of me at last.

Durandal, I knew, would be stashed somewhere beneath the floorboards of the End's captain's quarters. Finding it was no problem; McGee'd not bothered to fully renail the half a board he'd pried up to make his hiding spot, surely preferring to be able to check on the blade easily, and the wood had since warped to rest a quarter knuckle above the rest of the deck. I thought for a moment to lay his

dagger back in the sword's place in way of farewell, but the twin snakeheads, ruby eyes dancing, almost laughed at this sentiment the moment I brought them forth, so I took both the immortal blades in the end, the one stashed back under my shirt, the other slipped down the left leg of my pants, and quit the cabin with a half-filled bottle of wine under my right arm and a book under my left, hands in my pockets and whistling a tune. None gave me a second glance. True thievery is the simplest of tasks.

I peg-legged my way back to the forecastle, grabbing my stuff and making for Rema as I had a dozen times before. The only hole in my plan was the fact that my normal rotation would demand I visit the Thresher, which had yet to arrive at Elendsall, next, having skipped it already to make my report to McGee regarding the Siren. Once safely ensconced behind Rema's sail, I figured none would notice me make for shore instead of one of the other ships until it was too late; only my approach to the skiff might be effectively prevented by a curious interloper. But luck was with me as always, it seemed, for what did I see the moment I emerged back on deck but the Thresher speeding toward us with great haste. So, whistle continuing happily, I swung my left leg, forced to straight by the blade, over the rail with a grimace and the assistance of both my hands to suggest some recent injury just in case someone was watching, and was not thirty seconds from releasing my chariot to the waves when my escape and glory was arrested by McGee at the helm, as he squinted one eye into his glass in the direction of the approaching vessel.

"On earth you think you're going?" he shouted down to me, the other eye fluttering my direction to my dismay.

I merely shrugged toward the Thresher in way of reply; 'where else?'

But he said simply, "Not yet. Something's up. Why don't you go get me my mates instead?" Noting my hesitation, he added definitively, "Now, please."

"Can I put my shit back at least?" I quipped.

"Captain's quarters," said he. "Ten minutes."

There certainly was something up. Had I been able to look into his glass as well, I would have been privileged to the sight of our noble captain Aedis on the bow of the Thresher, waving his hands in the air in a desperate attempt to get our attention. Although as it was, I could only wonder what it was all about as I went in search of Bellio, Earl and Gaff. I tracked down only the last two in the end; our first mate was nowhere to be found. Not having any other option, I stashed Durandal within Cherry's largest crate, the one with all her black clothes, after Earl rose from his hammock with a start upon being summoned so directly. Regardless of such an impromptu hiding spot, I was fairly certain that my most recent misdeed was still undiscovered when I entered once more to the captain's quarters; even if the immediate, suspicious stare McGee leveled at me upon my entry might have made me reconsider my sense of security had I been wiser.

"Well?" he demanded, while I couldn't help the briefest of glances to the warped board between us, as if I might have been able to ascertain whether he had just checked on the blade by noting the most minuscule discrepancy of the plank's height against the rest.

"Well what?" I returned.

"Where's. Bellio," our captain said. It was not a question.

Nonetheless, I shrugged and shook my head.

"Fuck," said he. It was only then I realized that I hadn't seen our first mate a

single time since Reedsport. Neither Sever, for that matter. Indeed, McGee repeated his curse, now twice as definitely, at exactly the time I realized this latter absence, to show that likely his train of thought was the same as mine.

"What happened?" was McGee's simple demand upon Aedis and Renault's hurried entry some time later.

The meat of Aedis's response was to throw the hilt of his prop sword onto the table. Someone had broken it, sheath included, directly in half; the splintered wood of the 'blade' could be seen clearly at last. Finally, after we all had a good gander at it, he declared, "Bellio. Is what happened."

We might have seen it coming: a mutiny, executed with careful planning and near complete lack of remorse. They had left him alive at least, but the King Tide was theirs not to mention all its gold, silver and supplies. They had somehow known that Aedis went every day unarmed no matter his ever-equipped ruse of a weapon, and Bellio, emerging surprisingly from out of nowhere the previous evening, had challenged him to a duel after some seemingly unimportant standoff regarding the disciplining of one of the new sailors. Gwyneira, to Aedis's dismay, had been in on it. He blamed "that despicable worm," Rash, for telling her about Adoneus and his plan to use her and her children as hostages. The entirety of the ship's crew were no more surprised by the mutiny than she was; the ringleaders, Whaker, Diarmuid, Bellio and Sever had turned them all long before. His bodyguards were either dead, prisoner or hypothermic from the time they'd had to spend in the ocean before the Thresher managed to rescue them. Aedis as well was only recently dried, it was clear from his occasional chattering teeth. Of those on board, only Cherry had seemed unaware of the plot. She was now imprisoned to her cabin, likely soon to be, willingly or otherwise, subjected to Sever's whim if she hadn't been already. A return offensive should be mounted at once, Aedis demanded, which intention Renault happily seconded.

McGee's performance was perfect. The slightest flutter of one of his eyebrows to show his exasperation at this supposedly unexpected turn was almost hidden by his hand as he worked the skin of his temples between his thumb and fingers. Finally, he sang, "You might have told me about this," waving a hand toward the prop we'd both long since known Aedis kept at his side in place of a real weapon. "How did this happen?" he demanded. "And where... on earth... is your sword?"

Long discussion followed. Description of Durandal's supposed theft by the Yokai at al alonostra was met wordlessly by McGee. In the end, he managed to calm the brothers and admit their lack of leverage; the King Tide, he declared, being well-supplied with money, cannon and now happy crew, surely feeling themselves liberated from an overbearing hand, was beyond recapture by straightforward means. Only by being clever might they succeed in regaining full control of their flagship. Not all was lost, however. Sever, at least, he was certain, would still be interested in making for Ty Gwydir. And we all knew who the real captain of the ship now was. The mutineers would not flee with their riches quite yet; we should expect their arrival, white flags flying, within a few hours. In the meantime, a different sort of plan might be attempted; what this scheme might entail McGee said not a word about then. Although I was barely listening in any case. This recent development only strengthened my resolve to leave them all behind. And when my supervisor (of a sort) suggested I go find Comal and Undrik, wherever they were, though I was sad to resign my personal effects to being left behind, I

made happily for Rema at once if not directly, for I did make sure to visit Earl's cabin and grab Durandal again of course.

"My love," said Rhodelia when I made it back to her palakti. Her spear-wielding companion was nowhere to be seen; she'd dismissed him for my sake. And she resisted not an ounce when I turned my head to consume the kiss she planted on my cheek. Only that lopsided smile of hers interrupted the intertwining of our tongues that ensued. I might have laid her down then and there had she not reached for the sword to raise it as it sat still in my hand, admiring it in the light of the fire burning in the middle of the structure.

I was prepared for this by then, however. For though I was far from wise, I was no longer her child plaything, convinced of an impossible world, a perfect word, somehow magically devoid of serpents that can kill a man on their whim. That innocence of mine, that she had claimed - falsely - she so adored while sitting in our verdant field of clover and daisy, that the rest of crew lacked, was gone. I had killed man once and I had killed pheasant twice and the deeds, to my estimation, tasted much the same. Not to mention I remembered all too clearly the expression that had spread across her face as Aedis had ravaged her; that so much more profoundly honest of a smile than the one she was then leveling at me. She loved another more than me, I knew, even as she used me to entrap him. But such would not be the case for long. My demand as I snatched the blade back from her was simple. "Ah, ah. Qui ni quo, my love," I returned, sure she understood at least that, the most basic of High-Elven. And, embedding the blade into the dirt floor with a downstroke so firm I was sure she would never be able to extract it herself, I took her in my arms with little less strength than would have been required to force her violently onto her back and the thatch bed that she'd made sure to prepare, beckoningly, with its single, half-turned-down blanket, directly behind her. Slowly, instead, I began to bend her to this end. And as I lowered her down, just as the coals had illuminated our faces so sinisterly that night round the mʌiɾa campfire as sadʂ had shared his stories of uaza and oraion, the fire there in the palakti lit the underside of my Rhodi's sweet countenance, darkening the hollows round her smile to such an extent that even the most genial of expressions she might have adopted would have turned disquieting. But it was no light expression that forced its way onto her face then. At last, I managed to rouse that most honest of her expressions, which was only complemented by the lighting. For the briefest of seconds, she was presented as the succubus I knew she was; eyes hollow, intentions revealed, nothing more than a fiend peculiarly adapted to using men for her every desire. And I loved this vision of her all the more for its wickedness! Just as she fell for this beast of a man manipulating her as if she was a toy. She resisted my machinations for only the shortest time. True thievery, even of so elusive a treasure as a female's heart, is the simplest of tasks. So, finally unclothed of our sad webs of words, she gripped me tightly, desperately almost, as I took full control of her body.

I mention this success with little joy, however. For no matter the sweetness of it, it was all too brief. I hadn't spared a single glance behind me as I made from Rema to her palakti; not a quarter knuckle was I from entering her when, of a sudden, McGee and Aedis entered through the flap behind me, the devils.

The slaughter that resulted was wanton, Comal would inform me through the bars of my cage. McGee's surprise assault, sprung just after the parlay where he and Renault supposedly acquiesced to many of Bellio and Sever's demands, went off exactly as planned; not a single member of the King Tide's crew was spared. Aedis produced ninety-five skulls - single-pound platinum pieces his father, Aedeon, had had minted somewhere, embossed with a grinning skull on one side and two sharks on the other, they can not only be used for purchasing whatever wants off-ship of course, but can also be exchanged for *any* peculiar (reasonable) request from the captain one wants - from some hidden stash for each of the ninety-five men and boys who had been convinced to refuse his leadership. Although he would need pay out far less in the end, seeing as no less than twenty souls would fall to Durandal. Bellio's death was also Aedis's handiwork; that privilege he made sure to communicate to all in the raiding party to reserve for himself. Diarmuid was somehow released from the mortal coil by Seppio. Of all the mutineers, only Whaker and Sever survived. As for the first mate, there was a tense standoff between Aedis and Renault regarding his fate, seeing as Renault had favored him for captain of the Siren, and therefore felt that death for his crimes, which never would have happened had he only received what should have been his due, too steep a price to pay. The younger of the Stormbows made it clear by simple positioning of his body between Aedis and his intended last victim that the Terran's death might only be achieved after his own. Whaker would be confined in the cell adjacent to mine. And as for Sever, it was McGee who would demand that that one be left alone the loudest; even though it was none other than he, I was sure, who convinced Aedis and Renault to release Adoneus to take the villain on. Which plan worked perfectly. One look at his intended opponent, once the immortal clambered over the rail, and Sever thew down his swords into the deck and up his hands, then, with a sinister smile, produced a sack of exactly one hundred skulls of his own that he heaved at Aedis's feet. There was nothing our captain could do; everybody saw it. So in the end, Sever would be returned, head held high, to the End to resume his usual duties of sitting around and waiting for the next fight. Gwyneira, meanwhile, was imprisoned to her quarters along with her son dencjn. Their stay would be comfortable at least, even if the bedding of Alevi Allan's canopy bed was now turned permanently and disquietingly red, the last contribution of Bellio to the decor of the ship he so briefly commanded, which stain was happily made by Aedis when he found the sailor and princess there, quite busy despite their parlay being ended no more recently than five minutes beforehand. Adoneus had apparently agreed to this confinement; indeed, he made no move to save the mother of his children after the fight. I didn't need to wonder at his apparent uncaring, for by the time all this was communicated to me, those on the Theilen had already demanded that Gwyneira be turned over to them, allowing only the boy to be held by Aedis in the end. Adoneus had been content to hand over the short sword and shield that'd been provided him with little more than a shrug once verna, 3n and Cherry were produced by McGee. He was due a single skull for the dispatch of Reginald; which aged sailor had tried to defend the King Tide's treasure alone long after the rest of the mutineers were slaughtered, a curse directed at Aedis ever on his lips as he swung his axe in one hand and mace in the other, taking down seven of the raiding party before Adoneus put him out of his misery. The actual coin was withheld, though; in

return for his dealing with Sever and Reginald so neatly, Adoneus's imprisonment was now extended to the whole of the Thresher. The door to his dungeon would remain ajar, the better for he, verna, ɜn and their aunt Cherry to pass through at their convenience. All this, my entrapment and internment included, I assumed to be masterminded by none other than McGee. It would turn out that I was half right; though not a single detail of recent events, especially my own fate, was free from the influence of the dwarf's hand as I suspected, there was another who anticipated or suggested its every gesture.

I, however, cared little for the details of the power struggle then coming to a head. For my situation was worsening by the day. After the raiding party was returned to their normal posts, the Siren was once again home to no less than ten of Aedis's bodyguards - down from fourteen thanks to Reginald perhaps, but still a force to be reckoned with - and the delivery of my food was more often then not assigned to one of them. I ceased to be surprised no more than a few days after receiving at best a single piece of bread and half a cup of water as my daily ration; sometimes nothing at all. By the time Undrik was decided on to be my server for the day, I was a knuckle away from starving.

"Why do we stay?" I demanded, as if my predicament's end hinged on so flimsy a hope as our continued eastward march. "A week and we haven't gone anywhere. What's the holdup?"

Undrik snorted as old men sometimes do before bothering explain, "Can't sail a ship without a crew! Anda don't wanna go to sea. We won't go anywhere near the King Tide after what's happened; those on the End neither. This one's gonna cost our 'King' somethin' dear."

And cost our Aedis dearly it would. Not only was it now next to impossible for him to staff his flagship, he soon found himself unable to support his claim to the Siren, End and Thresher as well. As for the Thresher and End, not a single soul of the crew from either would accept silver or gold from the King Tide as a distribution any longer, covered as it now was in blood, any quantity of which might have once belonged to Reginald, who'd been well-respected by all; had only acquiesced to being transferred to the ark outside Parthenia, in fact, as one of his regular acts of selflessness. Aedis could rinse it; he could scrub it. I'm convinced he could have melted it down and reminted it; in terms of pay, nothing would earn the stuff a bit of value past that of so much sand. A rumor started, however, that the Siren was in fact home to something substantially more precious than cannon and empty cells. At last, our secret treasure was revealed to the rest. McGee and Renault could deny it no longer. Distributions to the crew were thereafter to be made from that, uncursed, stash, while every single pound on the King Tide was necessarily dumped in the Ocean Orca in order to realize Reginald's full farewell to the afterlife. This replacement of funds saved Aedis not a bit of responsibility in the minds of the crew as to his culpability in causing its loss; if anything, it only deepened the rift between him and the crew, seeing as none believed, regardless it was the complete truth, that he had been as unaware of the added gold's presence as them. The moment the chests sank below the waves, a meeting was called for in the End's galley, at which every piece of lost bullion was tabulated, meaning that even after allowing Aedis his captainly claim to ten percent of both the Siren's treasure and that now littering the deep, he found himself in debt to the crew for over fourteen chests of silver, coincidentally about the total value of the End; they would accept

full ownership of the vessel and call it even, then talks may begin about staffing of the King Tide and lays. As for those on the Siren, at the meeting they held, they declared in writing that they also saw no reason to burden themselves with Aedis's claim to ownership of their vessel any longer; it was they, the Lleuanashi and a handful of members of his now-estranged crew who had bled to secure the thing from the Order, after all. Every last one of Aedis's bodyguards were politely asked to return to the King Tide including Seppio; if with a laughing suggestion that they might have the opportunity therein to learn how to actually sail a ship. And as a final insult, Marcello suddenly nominated none other than Adoneus to be the Siren's new commander. Seconding was immediate and numerous among the rest, finally revealing the true architect of recent events to all. The Theilen was then the location of a last meeting, mediated by Gwyneira and attended by all four of our disputing captains - Aedis, Renault, McGee and Adoneus alike - where she forced much to be forgiven by all sides and a new contract was drawn up, giving equal claim to the Siren's gold to each of the five ships, full ownership of the ship once called the Mako, at last sporting a nameplate of Decade's End both bow and stern, to her crew, that of the Siren to hers and, for good measure, that of the Thresher permanently to Renault alone. Aedis wasn't entirely at their mercy, for he had managed to turn dencjn thoroughly against his parents by then, cleverly naming the impressionable boy as his new quartermaster. Any profits from Ty Gwydir were still to be split ten percent his way, protection and delivery of distributions for all on the End, Thresher, Siren and King Tide were yet his well-compensated responsibility, and his supposed debt to the crew forgiven. Bur his lordship over any save dencjn and his guards was at an end. The loss to his pride must have been great; justified, perhaps, considering not only the cost of blood he had incurred in taking back his flagship, but also how eager he had been to, as Cherry would often observe of me during one of my attempts to perform a technique on her just before she flipped me unceremoniously to the ground, overextend himself in doing so; but surely great still. All well and good, I thought, once Marcello explained everything, assuring me I would be freed the moment our new captain arrived and forced Seppio to hand over the keys. All neatly tied up and squared off, it seemed. Assuming, of course, Seppio did as he was told and relinquished command of not only the Siren, but also the entirety of the gold under his charge, no more than a day after learning that it in fact existed, to hands other than his own.

Fat chance, I thought, before picking the sad, little lock to my cell shortly before dawn with no more than my dagger and two nails pried from the woodwork. My fellow prisoner's lock came undone with equal ease and we snuck toward the stern, slipping up two levels and making at once for the door to the captain's quarters, from under which a light still shone no matter the depth of night. A voice could be heard coming from within, though it took a moment of patient listening to confirm that it came from our intended target.

"Sta tiuganɘn lam'amiz?": 'Is he singing to himself?' demanded Whaker incredulously in a harsh whisper.

To which comment I barely bothered reply, seeing as, thanks to a sudden remembrance of the numerous stories about the man and his many skulls, my concentration was bent wholly on the task before us. I say 'us' still, as it should have been were there any justice in the world; but of course there is none. As I mused, Whaker bid me farewell with little more than a, "Well, good luck," and an awkward

pat on my shoulder.

"What do you mean; good luck?" I demanded in a harsh whisper of my own.

He spat, "Look. io sail the damn ship. vu... You'll be fine. And I'll be here ala facra."

"Ala facra cua?": 'Just in case what?"

"Ala facra one of the other ass holes comes along."

I chose to ignore him again, and was only a few knuckles from the handle to the door when my imagination got the better of me. Seppio had, according to McGee, taken down an orc with nothing more than a dagger once, after all. I hid my trepidation by admonishing my conspirator (of a sort), "And what, exactly, are you going to do if one of the others shows up, hmm?"

He was forced to pause to consider this dilemma himself, sadly. And his solution was no more complex than to grab the discarded swab behind him to insist, "I'll whack 'em is what. Don't worry. I've got your back. Go on, now, 'fore the moron quits singing to himself."

One may not be overly surprised to learn that his assurance did little to calm me. I was forced to withdraw my hand again, in fact, before beginning my apparent task, even if I did manage to touch finger to metal for the briefest of seconds.

"Is that how you got your name, then?" I spat to better pass the time until my nerves allowed me my third attempt at the portal.

"dacoɾ,": 'sure,' is all he replied distantly, with another forcibly friendly pat of my shoulder. At last, some moments later, I gathered myself enough to try the handle fully.

Seppio was indeed the one revealed seated on the far side of the portal, surrounded by candles as he bent over a pot perched on a device spouting flame marked, 'Omni, co.' Any inner debate I had fostered about the break-in was scattered to the winds as I heard the last word of the man's song: "Done; all done, you little bastard. Kaliya... Ah! Hello there, quartermaster. And here's just what we wanted: a test subject. Nice of you to drop by."

"Drop the pot, captain. And the spoon," said I for some reason, glad to see his hands apparently free of a weapon. But upon further inspection, I reconsidered my relief. Being now a part-time purveyor of poison myself, I suspected at once that there was nothing in the world more deadly than what he was then holding. Therefore I produced my dagger as he, still humming, strained the contents of his burden into a vial, into which he dipped the bronze ring I'd noted he sometimes wore on his right middle-finger. There was the slightest glint of retained moisture that came from the needle I noticed pointed downward from the terrible thing.

I failed to take the hand he extended to me as one may suspect, no matter he finished his song on a high note, demanding, "Friends?" I circled around him to get a better view of the dozen tanks with firmly secured lids lining the wall of his cabin instead, specifically the individual octopus in each then fleeing from my advance, many of them producing a flash of blue rings before changing their camouflage as best they could to match their nearly bare prisons. Only one failed to hide; he charged at the glass of his tank the moment I came into view as if in alien greeting. "Disgusting things," demanded Seppio as I inspected this tiny creature, no bigger than my fist. "Useful. But disgusting. And a pain in the ass. 'Seventy-five degre-es,' says Lotho. 'Or they'll di-ie.' As if I care; world'd be better off without 'em." Indeed, the slurry at the bottom of his discarded strainer I could

see was composed of blue-ringed tentacles separated brutally from a mashed head to show his apparent opinion of his pets. I only raised my weapon at him more decidedly, hoping that he might recognize it, to remind him that he wasn't the only one who needs be regarded with caution.

But not only did he appreciate the true nature of my blade, he was apparently more familiar with it than me. He only laughed, "Come now, rasid. We both know your knife has lost its... umph, shall we say. I've heard the story of how you brought down Omore."

All as I silently inspected the machinery filling the place, especially the large cask from which many pipes ran to devices like the one that had held his pot, from some of which flame were then spurting as well. I don't know how he failed to divine my intentions.

"Did you really think you were the only one with a trick up his sleeve?" he spouted thickly instead, as he rose to confront me, needled ring in his one hand, a wicked, curved blade I was sure had at some point been likewise anointed - how else had so useless a bastard managed Diarmuid? - soon appearing in his other. "There are many, many different poisons in this world, after all," he sang, the idiot.

But I had checked the level of fluid in his cask by then - it was nearly full - so with little more than a, "Yes. There are," I punctured the side of the thing with my dagger, grabbed fred (as I would soon name him), as the little alien, staring at me unblinkingly, clung to the side of his tank, knocked over a pair of candles into the puddle then spreading from the cask and retreated as fast as I could with Whaker down the corridor toward the open deck. And that, in case one is wondering, is how a large portion of the Siren was blown out to sea.

The early morning saw the arrival of Whaker's long-expected snow at last, not to mention that of every skiff able to float from our other vessels of course. I would awake to the soothing sensation of the sticky crystals of white as they lit on my face, cooling my burns, and the clamor of McGee's happy declaration to some of the other crew, "And who had blew 'em all to rutting bits? Anybody?"

"I had blade to the leg," admitted Tilty, with a kick to what was left of Seppio.

"Hammer to the temple; takes out two more, then..." ventured Gib, as he demonstrated the fate he'd apparently reserved for me with a hand across his throat.

"I had Seppio," cursed Sever.

"Anybody?" continued McGee happily. "No? Nobody? That's right! Nobody. Guess no payout this time!" Of course they had taken bets. McGee, having already turned me into some sort of master thief with his stories, had also made no secret of the fact that he'd left me my dagger after pulling me off of Rhodi back in Elendsall, and none on the End had had any more faith in Seppio's acquiescence to Adoneus and Aedis than I'd had. As I tried my various extremities with equally various levels of success, releasing my death grip on fred's tank last of all, glad to see him still attached firmly to the glass, staring directly at me (happily I think, even if I had lost all his water), I was mostly wondering how much money I'd just made the awful man.

Finally, still chuckling, the same bothered take note of me. "You look terrible," was all he said; in lieu, perhaps, of more explicit forgiveness for having stolen Durandal from him, but still not very polite. I managed, meanwhile, to sit upright to view the extent of my recent handiwork; the massive hole extending twenty feet or more in front of me, blown directly through the Siren's quarterdeck and first

level and out to the sea beyond.

"Adventures," I managed to croak, with my best attempt at a contrite shrug, as I brushed myself free of splinters and soot. "Are a dirty business."

He merely grunted knowingly in way of reply, so I extended my free hand to him to allow him to repent his recent coldness. But as I did, a single spider fleeing from under my singed sleeve convinced him to leave me on my backside and he left me to my own devices. All as I wondered how long it'd been, exactly, since I'd had a bath.

11.

Thankfully I wouldn't need wait for long, for the Island Yaku, a small-nation-sized boulder covered in cold-blasted grasses which bursts up from the Ocean Orca's near middle, would be Adoneus's next planned stop, even if no one tried communicate his intended itinerary to any of the other vessels save the Theilen. He, Cherry, Gwyneira, verna, and I had been to varying degrees immersed in the largest pool the hot springs there boasted for an hour before the arrival of the other captains, guided from the beach by Lyus. The second half of the Lleuanashi, the first content and clean by then back on their ship, were making use of the other pools while fred, overjoyed with the temperature I'd managed to get his tank to with occasional careful partial submersions, was eyeing us from nearby. I will make sure to note here that out of habit, I'd been careful not to reveal the presence of my dagger while undressing; one will shortly understand why I make so certain to mention this.

The topic of conversation at that point, if I remember correctly, had something to do with verna and what Adoneus should do with the girl. He had already tried on multiple occasions to send her my way, but the chubby thirteen year old had barely begun the process of bolting past her baby fat and it was clear she fancied me no more than I her. Despite this obvious and mutually agreed-upon aversion, he had only minutes beforehand tried to get her to shave me as he was then allowing her mother to do to him, with repeated comments about how the deed breeds the kind of trust that heals all minor transgressions; Gwyneira was then scraping her razor carefully across his chest and neck and indeed the slightest misstep might have cost the man his life. I, of course, was firmly in the camp involving less trust and being quite content with continued transgressions, minor or otherwise so long as they didn't involve a razor; for it was clear the child had never done anything of the sort before, even to herself. My suspicion was confirmed the moment Lyus appeared and she stripped at last, if after a final moment of indecision, there to arc her back at the edge of the pool in a futile attempt to push her forming maternity out, before noting that the boy paid her little mind past a single smiling glance on its way to her mother's revealed chest and she slipped quietly into the steaming spring up to her eyes; otherwise how could she keep the little devil in her sights. Meanwhile, Adoneus greeted the newcomers as if they were his honored guests as was his wont by cooing simply, "Cherry, my love. If you would be so kind." Dutifully, if high-handedly as was her wont, my beauty rose from her perch by the pool to sway, legs below the knee still steaming freely in the frigid air, the rest dripping sweat that misted off her little less readily, as if she were enveloped in a sort of layered halo, up to Aedis in order to smirkingly assist him in removing his heavy mantle. While Renault and the King were thus thoroughly distracted, McGee stripped to nothing in the blink of an eye on his own. He was in the pool in seconds, happily releasing a stream of bubbles that would need dissipate before anyone braved a deep enough breath to continue the conversation.

As the brothers undressed, Adoneus resumed his complaining to what was left of his step-daughter above the surface: "Well, far be it for me to demand anything of a woman as beautiful as you, my dear. I only meant to communicate that tis no shame to be comfortable with the male form. Or how to use a razor for that

matter. Without fear of mistake no less, for I am sure rasid is very sturdy. But we have only just met again after so long, and I am also sure you are smart enough to know that I would allow you your every desire for ever and always to make up for the time lost." This allowed the blond mound remaining of the girl to reemerge to show off her dimpled smile before embedding herself under Gwyneira's razor arm. Thankfully, the woman was as able with the blade as she apparently was with every other weapon, and disaster was averted by her quick release of the thing to the stone behind her. With half a glance down to the odd patch of hair remaining on his chest, Adoneus continued to his now-distracted partner, "And what of dencjn, my dear? I fail to see why my suggestion should be turned down so rudely. Why should our son not learn from the best?" The boy's inevitable tiring of quarter-master duties was long since foretold; Adoneus apparently hoped to reclaim his favor by other means.

It was up to Cherry to save Gwyneira the many rebuttals that might have been leveled at this comment; the two had quit any attempt at pretending anything more than the most casual of disinclination by then (in front of Adoneus, anyway), and the threesome presented to my view as Cherry descended to her spot on his other side after depositing Aedis and Renault's clothing on the pile was one clearly composed of three coequal parts. I reserved little wonder for their ability to so effectively best the dwarves at their own piratical game. "I've told you no as well, you fool," she said, continuing with the briefest of glances to Lyus as the boy lingered, unsure of himself for once, opposite her across the pool, "*Someone* would get jealous, whether he knows why or not." What was clear insinuation to me was lost on its target thanks not only to the retrained volume of the second half of the comment but the distraction provided by Aedis as he, hand over his center, tested the temperature of the pool with his toes, all the while blocking line of sight between mother and child.

Not being able to politely ignore Lyus any longer, Adoneus crooned, "No need to wait on ceremony, boy. The rest of our friends will be here shortly, I'm sure. Best hop in while its still... (this with half a glance at McGee) somewhat fresh." The comment was not overly familiar as one may suspect, for indeed Lyus was one of the five or six transferred to the Siren from the End to bolster our ranks after the loss of Seppio and cohort. The process had been simple: McGee'd made them all count off numbers one to ten, then, with a conspiratorial, "Sevens, lucky sevens," Lyus's number funnily enough, sent them to their new post. This same mastermind released a second groaning barrage of bubbles there in the pool round about the time I was remembering this, as if to second his own recollection of such great cleverness. All were silenced once more. Therefore as the boy stripped with a forming grin, gaze still unflinching from the area roundabout the line of the water below Gwyneira's chin, Adoneus was free to busy himself with an all-encompassing survey of those around him that ended firmly on Cherry as she, once again revealed to her son after Aedis finally spilt himself gingerly into the pool, wrapped herself in a nearby cloth. With little more than half a slap of the water once the breeze finally did its job, the man spat, "Fine. Nora it is... But all of it lies and deceits I declare. Lies and deceits. From all sides! For a man such as myself to be surrounded by such politeness; such goodness. An honest man might say it's unfair!" The comment, no matter its wide-ranging start, ended firmly on Renault as he slithered in gingerly himself.

"Why are we here?" was the dwarf's unimpressed counter.

"Why, is it not a perfectly wonderful place to rest? Nothing revives the spirit more than..."

"Listen," spat McGee. "I'm sure what he meant to say was, just because you three bitches can get one up on us every now and then, don't go thinkin' you can call all the shots, like. Member; you need us just as much as we need you. Push your luck and me'n the boys'll point our ships straight for Siti-Sorong and you can try to take on your boyfriend all by your lonesome. Stand?"

"Straight to the point as always, Mr McGee," said Adoneus. "I assure you I am perfectly content to allow others to, 'call the shots,' as you say. But I do have a secondary motive for our respite. I though it prudent to inform you all in a private setting that our enemy likely knows of our coming, you see."

The alarm that filled Aedis's face was immediate and intense. "And how might you have come to that conclusion?" he demanded.

"It was all rasid's good intuition..." began Adoneus.

But he was cut off by Renault's curse, "The *thief*," as the dwarf spit on the shelf beside him to show his recently radically changed opinion of me.

It was Aedis of all people that came to my defense. "Enough, brother," he demanded. Then to me, "I've wanted nothing more than to apologize to our young rasid. How they get their claws in you, am I right!? The beasts! A gentleman may forgive another, I feel, if they be guilty of the same offense; loving a wicked woman. I've got my sword back and that's all that matters. I should never have acted so callously that night..."

"Lovely," said McGee. "Can we get back to the part where Kaliya knows we're coming?" Thus it was that I related the details of my duel - or obviation of one more precisely - with Seppio, especially his accidentally overheard mention of the same.

McGee was more interested in the part about the water temperature, though. "Lotho!" he spat the moment I got there. "How on earth...?"

"How on earth indeed," said Adoneus. "Much of the machinework in the captain's quarters survived the blast, albeit in quite altered form It is most certainly his work, which begs not only the question how, but when, where and why as well. I find no other explanation than to assume Seppio was a servant of our enemy; that every known detail of our coming has long since been related to him, who sent Lotho - for Omni is as thoroughly his property as the Order - from ꝺelia to Reedsport to better..."

"Why on earth'd you let those morons live, then?" from McGee.

"Better the fools you know," shrugged Adoneus. "...to better provide Seppio his living tools for the dispatch of myself at least, perhaps yourselves next. It is likely that our enemy was in Parthenia no less recently than the time of our passing. We might even have passed him by personally. Certainly either Favaris or Helene if not him. Seen their ship, I mean; for whoever it was in Parthenia, I am sure they sail now for Ty Gwydir just as we do. Bad luck for us, surely."

"I knew that worm was a rutting snake," said McGee, somehow making perfect sense whether one assumes he was talking of Lotho or Seppio. "Course, what they didn't count on was Sido here blowing the bastard sky high fore he got to use his little pets." Here McGee spared a glance for fred, who instantly produced his blue rings. fred did not like McGee.

"But not all is lost," continued Adoneus. "Seppio could not communicate any part of our plan that he did not know. The manner and timing of our approach to Ty Gwydir I am confident are still a secret."

"Yeah. We know," spat McGee.

"So it seems my choice to keep the information to myself was a wise one, if I do say so," indeed sang Adoneus. "Although I admit my primary motivation was to make sure you brought me along. And that you were so considerate as to save my sweet Gwen and our minions, of course. Anemone is quite a good actress, isn't she. One day, the stage for that one I am certain. She says you were a well-mannered and considerate lover, by the way. Unlike rasid. I must thank you, in fact, Sir Aedis, for your efforts on my behalf. My sweet Gwen never fails to remind me whose hands it was, in actuality, that liberated her. No matter how indisposed I was at the time. Or whose hands did the indisposing..." Here Adoneus's speech was paused for a moment by the sharp inhale that accompanied his sweet Gwen's, who had returned to her pruning, surely unintentional sideswipe a few knuckles across his abs. As she tasted her handiwork with her finger, he explained, "I do not know if she quite believes me when I claim that, short of outright war and the sacrifice of many, many lives, our... joint, let us say, efforts on her behalf were the surest and earliest chance to free her."

"I believe you," sang Gwyneira, lips still red with his blood. "Just slipped is all."

"You two are gross," croaked McGee in turn. "So that's it then? Kaliya knows we're coming... sometime. Somehow. You could've sent a note and we'd be halfway to Saerohan by now."

"Well, there is an additional reason for stopping here: we are waiting."

"What do you mean, waiting?" spat Renault. "As it is we're cutting it close. It's two weeks still to Ty Gwydir at least; we'll have no more than four or five hours of sunlight a day to work with..."

"We're not going during the day," said Adoneus matter-of-factly. "We're going during the night. The long night."

"That's it. I'm going back to Elendsall," spat McGee at once, as he rose from the pool with a start.

I had to demand, "What's the long night?"

To which, as McGee shook himself and stole Cherry's wrap to dry himself, Renault explained, "It's just winter near the poles: a month, nearly, of nighttime. Sun barely peeks above the horizon; can't even see the whole thing for more'n an hour or two. Not enough to call it day, really. Goes on and on; enough to drive a man mad, they say."

All as McGee, still rubbing himself to Cherry's dismay, spun to better complain, "You're telling me you wanna take down the most serious castle ever built, manned by orcs! you idiot, in the middle of the rutting night. I'm going back to Whitehall. Where are my pants?"

"It's not *manned* by orcs precisely..." tried Adoneus.

"You must admit," meanwhile, tried Aedis.

But Adoneus doubled down with a, "I'm sorry that is all I can say for now, my friends. But our safe arrival there is dependent on the long night, so it will have to be then or not at all. With careful planning..."

"I'm with McGee," interrupted Renault with an eye to his brother. "We can find another way. We've four ships..."

"Three," corrected Adoneus; "The Theilen won't sail without Gwen. And Gwen sails with me."

"Three ships," dutifully repeated Renault. "Manned by solid sailors, who've, except for Sever of course, stood by us through thick and thin for decades. Why should we throw half of them away with something so risky? We've a whole nation to use if we can stand to wait, and work *with* your wife and the nobles for once... I'm not dismissing your plan altogether. Of course we should sail. The Serenashi..."

But Adoneus lectured, "The Serenashi won't let you through their lands no matter what you promise them. He has their Queen, you fools. Ever since she was taken as a babe and he assassinated her every close relative shortly thereafter, some three hundred years ago. She is today a pretty doll for his newest Kikuaza to play with, I hear. Quite happy to do their bidding. He hides his tendrils well, in any case; many lords would lose their heads if the truth became common knowledge. And a few of them simply idolize him. Therefore, as surely as the Order and as surely as Omni, the star elves are his puppets. If you tried to breach Ty Gwydir during the daylight, in fact, it is their proudest archers who would be at the ready in place of orcs. Better an enemy unable to shoot you dead from a hundred yards, no?"

Renault was halfway through the breath required to resume his rationality when Aedis cut him off with a cry of, "Solid sailors! Ha! Villains! All of them. I for one would not shed a single tear if they all fell in the dark!" And there it was at last: open confirmation of the fears we had discussed those months ago, sweating and swaying our way along the Reiki. Our noble King and captain, sword in hand once more, had returned fully to that changing-world, better-world morality; the same kind eschewed, notably, by the very list of our enemies - minus orcs, that is - elaborated mere seconds before. Of his crew, only I, who might be convinced to write of his exploits, was conveniently free of his scorn, no matter I'd proven myself more an antagonist to his efforts in this regard than any. Renault could only shrink from the comment in thinly disguised disgust and reproach, not daring to meet the knowing glance Adoneus leveled at him; while McGee must have busied himself with lamenting the fruitlessness of all his efforts on Aedis's behalf. The twitch that crossed his face then was the same that preceded his every losing hand at kings. He would never learn to conceal the tell. Aedis noted none of this. He was busy berating the naysayer, "And that includes you, McGee. You're going. All of you. Or it'll mean breach of contract and you can kiss all your gold good bye. Am I understood?"

"There. The aye's have it, then. I think," sang Adoneus, preparing for some comment to Cherry.

But the comment would never come, seeing as McGee, suddenly twirling, demanded, "Why, Aedis?"

"Why?"

"Why. I know why I'm going. I'm gonna find that damn sunrise stone, and I'm gonna retire..."

I turned to Cherry as she reclaimed her wrap to demand what this was. "A ruby," she said. "A big one."

"You're going for a single stone?" I spat.

"It's the size of my rutting sack," replied McGee, demonstrating of course. "I'm gonna find that damn stone, I'm gonna retire, and Poppy too, and I'm gonna fuck

her every day till I die. I know why rasid's going. Cause he's scared that if he goes back to ꞇelia his girlfriend'll stab 'im again. I know why Renault's going; because he's an idiot. For you. I know why Adoneus's going, I know why Lyus is going; shit, I know why Cherry's going. I think. You, though. You're not telling me something. And it's starting to piss me off."

"I've told you before. My reasons are my own."

"No; they *were* your own. Till they involved storming Ty Gwydir at night. Trust me, I'm sure the rest of the crew'll agree. So go ahead. We got time. Apparently."

Therefore as McGee returned to the pool, Aedis cleared his throat to begin, "I... lied."

"You don't say," spat McGee.

"I lied," repeated the King, turning the slightest bit red as he glanced at who he indicated next. "Besides how to get to shore at Ty Gwydir, Adoneus told me everything I asked of him. We didn't put him to sleep to get him to tell us more. We put him to sleep so he couldn't tell anyone else what he told me; specifically how my house came to be. It was a gut reaction..." Aedis's sideways glance to nowhere was what finished his part of the story.

Adoneus would need continue for him. Rising above the opportunity to relish the King's admission admirably, he began, "At all times, it seems, there is one of us a blacksmith. Always among we immortals is a metalworker for whatever reason..."

"Here we go," sang McGee, and over Adoneus's attempt to restart his tale, the dwarf demanded, "You don't believe this idiot, do you Aedis? He's not a god!"

"It's all... perfectly referenced. You haven't read what I've read, McGee. Or met who I've met!" spat Aedis.

"He lives. In a rutting library!" returned the other.

"All in books from Whitehall. None of them ꞇelia. I've looked! Aedis son of Aedeon. Aedeon son of Aethelwald... All the way back to Eber son of Edric. Edric... Son of Uaza. Every single one, apart from myself - over seven thousand of us; every single one of my ancestors, and Renault's too - killed by their own child's hand with help from a mysterious stranger. Generation after generation after generation. I needed to know why!"

"You are correct, sir," spat Adoneus in turn to McGee. "I am not a god. I am a man. An extremely long-lived man. How is it so hard for you to believe? Immortality is no special feat of evolution. There are trees that live for tens of thousands of years. Is that not immortal compared to even our elven friends here? who in turn are immortal compared to you, who are essentially immortal compared to a fly? To say nothing of amoebas and bacteria. Aging and generational death are traits worked into a physiology with no more fanfare than a widow's peak or freckles. Nature simply neglected to add it to mine. As of yet. I am not alone..."

"Listen to him, McGee," was the end to the debate, from none other than Cherry.

Therefore Adoneus was free to croon, "Thank you, my love." Then, with waving arms to include all in his audience, he declared, "Gentlemen... Ladies... frɘd... As I was saying, there is always a blacksmith among us. And during the height of our Empire - the million-year, that is - that blacksmith was Edric. Though he was no Oggun. No Efaestus, even. Edric we called the brittle. Edric the self-born. He might have been immortal, but he was a cowardly fool, quite different from his father, Uaza, also known today as Kaliya Anguis. The why of it is a mystery still, for he does this to most of his children. I suspect it is equal parts fear of his

progeny and desire to better them for a time with bloodletting. Perhaps in this case, it had much to do with the fact that Edric had kidnapped, with less than honorable intentions, his own mother. But know that it was Kaliya who provided Eber the means to murder his father, as he provided Aedeon the resolve to murder Aethelwald and every one in between. And Aedis, of course, the sword he needed to best someone so renowned a warrior as Aedeon the Odious. Just as one day our dear Aedis will surely - as surely as if the deed is already done - meet his end at the hands of his own boy given some great power by the same. Our. Common. Enemy."

"So. We must go," finished Renault as McGee leaned back against the lip of the pool to better absorb such a turn, perhaps with the same reminiscing as me, of his most famous story and the introduction he'd given of his final opponent: 'Gunuaza, son and end of Kikuaza, who was son of this Kaliya, U Votan.'

"On earth'd you wanna do that to your own kid?" was the extent of his further argument. Although that was not all. "Course, that only raises more questions," he ventured afterward, as verna, spotting a nearby pool empty, pulled Lyus to it forcibly, raising her razor in unspoken question, to which the boy shrugged.

"Why?" I ventured myself.

"Well, this one," he spat, waving a hand at Adoneus. "Thought I knew what his deal was, but now... are you really a god?"

"I told you I'm not," warned the apparent immortal.

"Some freak of nature, though."

"What did you think 'the deal' with him was?" I was forced to demand to receive any more than that.

"What else?" shrugged McGee. "Sunrise stone. He's a dumb con-artist, thinks I; stone's what he's after for sure. I had a whole plan worked out to take 'im out he tries anything. Good one too."

"Well," sang Adoneus. "I won't deny the stone might come in handy. Considering my expenses."

For which McGee was ready with a, "That thing's mine; you just try it." But he then rubbed his bearded chin to better muse, "No; you're not in it for the stone. I know you well enough by now. This shit's personal. Out with it. They fessed up. Now its your turn. Kiss my gold goodbye or not, I won't go into battle with someone what won't spill their 'tentions. Still can't believe you're a rutting god..."

The pause Adoneus gave then was far longer than what would have preceded only his renewed denial of claim to divinity. There was an instinctual avoidance of the topic McGee'd demanded altogether, I could see. So thoroughly did he need to prepare himself to begin, in fact, that ample time was given to Gwyneira to do it for him. "He wasn't always such a terrible man," she quipped, half a smile on her lips as she pressed herself against him to level her gaze up to his, manipulating her razor somewhere far below the water's surface.

"He *used* to be able to love," laughed Cherry, happily freed from her wrap again seeing as Lyus was now busy regretting allowing verna to mar him.

Adoneus did his best to make the rebuttal, clearly well-practiced, that he loved them both with the whole of his heart, but Gwyneira's insistence, "That makes no sense!" cut him off on the "heart," bit. Therefore it was she who was then free to continue, repeating after Cherry matter-of-factly, as if to show how the statement was no less repeated in her mind than her subject's recent insistence that a man can

love two women equally, "He *used* to love. Astrid."

"She was my wife, yes," the man admitted at last. "And I did love her. As deeply and thoroughly as I love both these two terrible fiends today." Long silence followed as he let the past overwhelm him. Finally, with what I could see was great effort, he continued, "We are all related of course, we immortals. To breed we must be very careful in choice of partner. I was lucky, for I was the best match for her. For Astrid. She was... very beautiful. All loved her. Atli, Orion, Ennosigaeus, Osus, Orula, even Uaza. Especially Uaza. We all loved Astrid yet she loved only me. For a time. I was very, very lucky. The Empire was largely our doing. Oh, to be immortal in those days was a thrill. We knew all. We foresaw all. We wrought the world into whatever we wanted. We bred angels and devils alike; monsters you can only imagine. I make no claim to being a god here and now. Today I know the divine to be above all no matter how long they live. But then I was different. For I was good then. And there is such power in knowledge! With the knowledge of the First Age at our fingertips, among subjects who called it all simply magic. I called myself a god then! Perhaps... that is why. No matter.

We twelve ruled with wisdom and cunning. There was no end in sight. A thousand years. Ten thousand. A hundred thousand years, gone in the blink of an eye. Our subjects bred themselves into different forms and still they called us lord and master. The continents sank and rose again under our feet and still the pillars of our Empire remained. Our greatest achievement, like our love, lasted almost a million years. Quite a time. But not forever. No matter what they say, love is not eternal. It can be deep. It can be life-changing... world-changing, even. It is never eternal. No matter the insistence of those freshly claimed by its madness.

We had Elena in the one thousand seventh millennium AD, year four hundred thirty. We'd had other children, of course, but none of them had the spark of immortality. Elena was our first. And only. She married Atli and they bore us three immortal grandchildren, however: Eon, Aine and Iuri. All was perfect. Elena was even more beautiful than her mother. A songbird to Astrid's morani. How can a man love two women at once, you ask? It is simple: one for each eye; one for each side of the heart. A man cannot see depth without both his eyes. And he cannot live without the two sides of his heart working in harmony. Elena and Astrid were... everything to me.

And it was Kaliya who took them from me. The deceiver. He was older; he was wiser. He was her uncle. But still he stole her heart from me; Astrid. How I know not. But when 'our' baby Iffaj came out in the thousand, five hundred forty-third millennium, she had his flat face, his raven hair. She... couldn't look me in the eye. I only wanted to take him to account. But...

There is a theory, according to some, borne, for what it's worth, by what we know of ourselves, that there will only ever be twelve immortals. That our souls transfer, in a manner of speaking, after we die, to the next of our offspring, and so we continue. Then I believed it not at all. For the Earth to so strictly encumber the multiplication of those she'd given essential eternity to seemed... It was chance, I would say. Mere chance that we were all born at the moment of the passing of another immortal. All that was required to make more of us was more vigorous procreation, perhaps. That day changed everything. After that day, I believed. Those of us who did then were gathered for Iffaj's birth, for down the hall was struggling ancient Oshun with a terrible fever. Surely, this child would be the next

immortal, they thought. And they were right. We all knew it at once, so radiantly did this babe shine. But Astrid continued her own labors even after beautiful Inuaria breathed her last. All as I recognized the father as not myself. Appropriate, I thought, that a second death should occur that day to allow for Iffaj's twin to ascend to immortality as well. And I, at least, knew whose it would be.

I made for the tower where I thought I would find him; he had not bothered to attend the birth of his own children. He was not there. But what I saw laid plainly beside his bed confirmed all. It was the dagger I had given to my wife, a wicked blade, in the hope that she would never need fear another. She had lent it... to him. And so I took it back. I was quick. I was strong. But I was blind. For my sweet Elena... My sweet daughter, could not abide violence. She took the blade I meant for his heart with her own. And I died that day just as surely as she. I... returned to Archaea, hated by all of them, Astrid most of all."

It would take another long pause for him to regain his composure, as one can imagine. "So," he finally sang, "Will that do, Mr McGee?" I don't think I've ever seen my supervisor silenced so effectively.

"That's terrible," was all I could manage.

Adoneus was quick to reply, "Yes, well; rest assured that I will do anything to see Kaliya's head mounted on my sword. I've hidden away long enough. He has the gall, even, to try to take Gwen away from me, as if she were a trinket I'd stolen. I will hunt him down. I will forgive trespasses against me of even such magnitude as yours, Stormbow; setting me to sleep for months against my will with my own handiwork my prison, if it makes his demise the surer. For he has overdone it this time. His forces are bent wholly on his cleansing of the Aztlan; his Order captured by our hand, the bulk of his Serenashi scattered on the other side of the Amician. He has left himself too little protection while he renews his leadership over the north with his annual, bloody winter games. We will strike in the meantime and end his villainy once and for all. But make no mistake, my friends. Aedis does not exaggerate. The man is the center of evil in the world and has been since the original sin. It was no snake that suggested we eat from the tree of knowledge; it was him! He and his minions that poured the self-satisfaction of science, pseudo- or otherwise, into our ears as children whether we would hear the words or not. Help me slay him, and we may go forward into a world of brightness and honesty. Why should man be so far removed from truth, after all? Lies and deceit, even to ourselves. The more knowledge we acquire, it seems, the less we choose to see the true workings of the beautiful planet around us. It is a situation most dire, and most unnecessary, no matter it has persisted for all of history. Kaliya is the root of it all. If we slay him, not only will sons cease to murder fathers, we may perhaps be able to live as God - the true God - intended once again, as it was before we began to imagine so ridiculous a thing as that we are anything but animals. That is my hope. That; and to see the fool hurt, of course. You will excuse me, sirs, please. I suddenly find myself in a less than gentlemanly state of mind, and, being now a completed masterpiece I hope, would undo my unease with some sex and drink. Ladies, shall we depart?"

And that was that. They both made sure to complain at his frankness but I would see neither Cherry nor Gwyneira for hours. I would return the princess, however, in the company of her daughters, to the Theilen later that evening, then deliver Adoneus's message to the other ships that the Siren would be making a short

detour and he would meet them all again at Weiseong; Gwyneira and the Theilen would stay with them if they suspected his intention to return. Two days of easy sailing cross a strong trade wind brought us back to the Archaean shore for the last time, and it was once again none other than Rema and I who delivered our captain to the beach, there to ascend a nearby hill and help him start a massive fire. Suddenly, who should appear but my own mother's cousin manuel, atop his fine steed safiya, both snorting little more than a single blast of air in response to my presence there so far from home. Sitting in his one hand was a shield so polished even in the relative darkness I could make out my reflection in the firelight. And in the other were the two wickedest blades I'd ever seen. One was at least eight feet long. This oversized katana, his longsword, I examined first, with great wonder at any man's ability to manipulate it effectively. But my heart stopped in my throat as I inspected the other; half sword, half sickle, as thick as a man's forearm and little longer - carpe, Adoneus called it. For as he caressed the weapon with obvious familiarity and longing, of such a fervor that it reminded me greatly of what I was then doing to the blade then hanging around my neck, admitting sadly that carpe was, "the lesser half of a pair once," I saw that its pommel ended in two inter-twined snakes, four little rubies for eyes, glittering in the light of the fire.

We made the Caledonias sixteen days later, but Whaker put us too far north and another half day of sailing was necessary to bring us to Weiseong, where the others awaited us. Too bad for him; the cold disappeared almost as suddenly as the eastern horizon. The wind started to blow in warm and muggy even a few hours before we came within sight of land, a southwesterly, East Imperial wind, that carries soft mist of a morning, sunshine of an afternoon, day after day to southern Saerohan for most of the year, osen included. The capital, largest city on the massive, forested island, is a sight to behold. Fortified from all directions, the towers of the walls can be made out clearly little later than the mountains behind, and the palace at the middle sometimes long before; if one comes in like we should have from the west, the spire of the central keep is in fact generally the first discernible indication of the end of the Ocean Orca, so equally 'pureun' are the sky, hills and water in that country. Yet no matter the extent and grand scale of the defenses, few are the residents who pay them much heed beyond a daily glance, for the nation is one of peace and prosperity today. The battlements sit unmanned and largely ignored; if, that is, one fails to count the birds.

Cherry was excitedly explaining the main distinction to be made between the giant creatures to Lyus as we made our way under the sea gates and into the harbor proper. Pointing suddenly to one of the two then swooping down close to us, she cried, "There. That one's a roc. See the purple?" I followed the direction of her outstretched hand myself as well, taking note of the bird she was indicating even as I flinched involuntarily from the powerful beasts' - both with wingspans of twenty feet or more - frightful show of play violence above us. There was indeed a splash of iridescence on the roc's proud breast, as opposed to that of his partner in their screeching, aerial dance, which shone only pure black in the warm, midday sun as she turned to face her harasser's advance, talons extended.

"Which makes the one he's chasing a raven," chirped Lyus proudly, if a bit complicitly, as he slipped his arm round Cherry's shapely shoulder, revealed as it was above the headband-sized top that'd to my delight recently found its way out from her baggage once again. With such lack of obstacle, it didn't take long for the boy's hand to start to wander south. Would he be so eager to achieve them if he knew just how close he had been to those hips once before, I wondered. That he'd come from within them in fact! Not that anyone would have believed it; Cherry looked barely older than him. She had no more than a knuckle on the boy still, and as far as I could tell hadn't passed down much to her son in the way of features past his ears and a general softening of what I understand were his father's pronounced brow, anvil jaw and bright red hair. Brave boy regardless, I thought, given what we both knew about the ionna's ability to hurt, as I waited for the pain to be delivered to him. But to both of our surprise, Cherry gripped his hand firmly in her own the moment it descended past her breast and pulled him close, the better to beat him to the prize on him he'd intended on her, which handhold made him jump forward so suddenly, I thought he must have strained his back in the process. No matter his insistence that he knew she'd warm to him eventually, his departure was immediate and accompanied by a deep blush and slight stammer, to which she laughed, "You can run, handsome..." I took the opportunity her trailing call provided to attempt to accost her myself, of course, given the apparent lack of consequences. Therefore it was I who got the twisting of my wrist so severe I thought she might snap it off that Lyus deserved.

Cherry and Lyus weren't alone in their newfound handsiness. There had been a marked change in all of our composure by then; and it wasn't just the change in weather. I personally blame most of it on Nora. It'd taken a day or two of practice not to mention a bit of advice passed through Cherry and Adoneus, but eventually dencjn truly found the mark and the girl changed drastically overnight. One morning she was hunched over at labor in her salty breeches and tunic as usual, complaining about her "extra duty;" the next she was the proud bearer of seashells in her hair once again and squeezed into one of Cherry's skirts so tightly, I'm amazed the garment survived the day much less the week or so it took to get to land again. Suddenly, she was a whole different person. A criminal's orphan, she'd been raised by the Order, after all, before being ushered aboard the Siren; and even though she was well into her twenties, had no idea the pleasure involved with being female. Well, no matter being little more than half her age, dencjn saw that changed! Though she reserved time for him alone over the course of our travel from Yaku to Saerohan, the rest of us were not exempt from the benefits of her transformation. For she quickly settled into a habit of slowly and intentionally bending over at the slightest provocation - often for absolutely no reason at all, so long as one of us was looking. Thus the inevitability of undoing the Order's hard work taming the rest of the Siren's crew was cemented. Her full corruption of them would follow mere minutes and hours after dencjn left us for land and other women. She wasn't the prettiest, but the fun's not in the face, as they say; and the fullness of her hips combined with the enthusiasm she mustered for each and every one of us more than made up for her occasional imperfection. What's more, she approached the deed with her usual stoic endurance, often managing five or more of us in a day. Even Cherry was made to look like a monk in comparison.

Indeed, "Look at 'im," this prude spat as I checked my wrist for full function,

nodding to Adoneus, who was then leaning off the rail in front of us. "Any farther'n he'd fall off." She seemed very displeased about this.

"Where should he be leaning, then?" I quipped, not quite following.

"You wait right there, rasid," was her dodging reply. "You just wait. Give him a minute more at the most. He'll come right up to us; say he'll be gone for a while. Won't say where he's going. Or who he'll be with; that's for certain! Just that he'll be gone for a while. But he'll want to meet for dinner; at the best - no, the second best - place he knows - as if he knows anything about Weiseong - and he'll get us a room. But he won't stay the night, will he? No; never when 'his sweet' Gwen's around. And after what I did to him this morning... See? Here he comes. You just watch." She knew her lover all too well, it seemed; I needn't have listened to a single word he said. And so it was in such a way that I learned about the city's most extravagant lodgings, the Wang-jeo, for it was I that Adoneus sent with her to reserve the room, and carry her bag of course.

Although I stayed there not a second longer than was necessary to hand over the money he gave me and deposit my cargo. For not only did my companion's complaint continue the whole of the way there, indeed rising to a fevered pitch once she realized, thanks to our destination's undisputed claim to top spot in terms of comfort to be bought there in Saerohan's capital, that Gwyneira, far from meeting Adoneus at some other, slightly better inn for the afternoon, would likely be accompanying him and the other captains to visit the palace of all places; but also because I made immediate note of the construction that I would come to believe was the most wonderful there in the walled city, the Hua-lei, atop the balcony of which three heavily made-up, full-bodied beauties were poised at the time of our passing, staring boredly across the street at the Wang. I therefore made a direct line back to the Siren the moment Cherry frustratedly waved me off, convincing Undrik on guard to allow me access to the pile of fresh clothes among the Siren's cargo by drawing a map to where I intended to remove the whole of what I borrowed; and, passing the Happy House not without pause, which establishment situated across the street from our dock a gaggle of young and pretty, but far less endowed, women was then doing their very best to convince the every nearby sailor to solicit, returned to the Hua-lei at a near sprint. I would become a regular happily, and would spend not only the majority of four weekly distributions there, but also eight of my nine skulls. (Two of Seppio's bodyguards had been lucky enough to evade the worst of my blast, even if it had landed them directly in the Ocean Orca to be rescued at our convenience; this, apparently, was unworthy of the mystery that is a skull.)

In any case, I would make pretense to visit Cherry most days beforehand; mostly for reason I prefer to wait to divulge, but also because her room had a bath. I learned very quickly to not visit anytime before noon, when Adoneus would generally be there. Which schedule was fine with me. I would be out like a campfire in a surprise storm after my afternoon ritual with Chan-Mi, the trek back to the Siren and a bottle of soju, therefore had little trouble waking up for an early watch. Half another glass at the Happy House, and I'd be back on Cherry's doorsill, asking if there was anything from the market she needed for the next day (even Peach was justified in mocking her utter inability to resist shopping regularly, but there in Weiseong it seemed she absolutely never wanted to leave her room), and, by the way, could I get a quick bath again. Everybody was happy. Except for Cherry one

day, that is, when I arrived at my normal time to find Adoneus still there, busy getting berated by his flower.

"Brunello!" he cried the moment of my entrance. "My loyal, faithful Brunello. Come. Save me from Angelica. My ring of invisibility is gone; I would have you steal it back for me." He was, as one may suspect, no matter the hour, extremely drunk.

"Don't listen to him," spat Cherry. "He's been like this all day. I'm Angelica, nice to meet you. He's At..."

"Atlante!"

"Atlante. Aedis is someone named Orlando. Renault is Rinaldo, of course. Gwen is Brada-something. And you're, apparently, Brunello. Your bath is ready, Brunello." My dear Angelica had by then begun to have the thing prepared for me whenever she remembered. I handed her the candles she'd asked me for the day before.

"Yes, but what we lack is the most important part!" declared Adoneus as he tried unsuccessfully to don his pants. No matter; the task was forgotten with the cry, "We lack a Ruggiero! Perhaps... that Sever? No; no hero, that one..."

And this continued for the whole of my bath. I only mention the episode because it was on that day that McGee - or Agramante, if one prefers - chose to visit Cherry's room as well; even if it was me he was after in truth. Indeed, a grunt of, "There you are," directed firmly at the tub was the extent of his attempt at conversation as he barged in; an unsurprised glance was all he spared for Adoneus and Cherry as they struggled still with his tunic. And from there the dwarf descended upon me, no matter my own complete lack of clothing at the time.

"Flee! Flee, Brunello. Agramante comes!" cried Adoneus, but it was no use. I was happily trapped in the bubbles.

After raising a somewhat sympathetic eyebrow to Cherry's shaking head, McGee demanded of me, "Thought you could just slip away, hmm? Well... you can't. Put your ploughing pants on. There's work to be done." I tried to protest - I was nearly ready for Chan-Mi, after all - but he cut me off, "It's you who's quarter-master, right? Or... at least no one else is for the moment. And I'll be damned if I'm doin' your job for you like everybody thinks I'm supposed to for some reason. So get dressed, you overgrown thief. And take this." With that he threw me a backpack, the same, in fact, that I'd used to carry shot from Omni to the library back in Celia so long ago. And as if in recognition of the fact, suddenly appearing behind him on the doorsill were none other than Lyus, still bearing, to Adoneus's delight, the library's antique saber, and Earl - or Ruggiero ("perfect! A bit young, but...") and Ferrau, if one prefers.

"*Now* he tells us what we're gonna need, the rutting drunk," complained McGee once we were outside. "They all think stuff just falls from the sky. Him, Aedis, Renault, they're all the same. Somebody has to find the shit. And buy it, for a good price. And pick it up! Let's go you morons. I know a shortcut, least." And off we went.

The day was fine as usual, even notwithstanding the fact that I was still the owner of so many skulls burning a hole in my pocket thanks to the bastard then dragging me down alley and avenue alike. Earl, especially, seemed of a light heart. He chuckled away as he swooped his head back and forth to follow the birds above with variously voiced exclamations of wonder at their every sudden maneuver, as if

he were narrator for their aerial acrobatics. Lyus, meanwhile, seemed a bit distant. No matter the building heat of the day, he was wearing a hooded tunic, one of Cherry's I noted with a bit of surprise, that he kept drawn tight round his features and he said not a single word to anyone. It was up to our brave leader to keep intelligible conversation going; which task he managed happily of course, no matter the majority of his comments and questions were directed at himself as he picked and/or guessed his way through the complex city. Finally, some hour into our trek, we came to a wide-open square centered round a grand statue of a single man and ionna and McGee came to a sudden halt.

"Well, that's new," he complained as he made reference to his map again and again. But no matter how many times he checked it, neither how he twisted and turned the thing in front of him, he still seemed quite lost.

"What's wrong?" I demanded. I had hoped to get this over with and return to Chan-Mi before the evening, when she was generally very busy, and, notably, more expensive.

"Thought I knew where we were, but... that statue was not here last time I was, I'm sure of it. Now lesse..." And from there he was busy verbally retracing our every step thus far, with the occasional grunt as his listening half confirmed to his speaking one that we had, indeed, passed said intersection; so, not having much else to do, I approached this statue to inspect it. The man, labeled 환웅, was standing proud and tall as they generally do when set in stone, with a sword resting on the ground in one hand and some sort of staff in the other, while the ionna, 릴릿, was pointed the other direction, back to back with him, poised as if to catch a very heavy ball: one leg placed far ahead of the other, hands even a bit further forward than this. On her hands, wrapping them up extensively and extending even past her elbows was a kind of chiseled lattice; its purpose beyond decoration eluded me. Then. She was very beautiful, of course, as they generally are when set in stone, with long ridges of furrowed marble flowing backward over pointed ears from her angular features above a savage sort of voluptuousness I couldn't decide if the sculptor had tried to hide by her getup or reveal to better effect. Although her beauty was marred by a bit of graffiti; someone had painted fangs descending from her lips, giving the impression that the ball she was about to catch must be quite an evil one. I admit to studying her for far longer than the man, but in the end I was drawn to the details of his face alone, for I was sure that he reminded me of someone; it was something in the way he smiled effortlessly, even for stone, permanently on the square. My examination would be interrupted before I managed to figure out which of my acquaintances he resembled.

"We got him right all told, I think," an elderly dwarf carrying a basket of vegetables and bread, appearing suddenly at my side, commented reminiscently. My surprise at hearing English there so far from the docks was only outdone by that springing from how easily the wizened figure had snuck up on me. I prepared to ask more about the statue and his implied role in creating it, but was cut off by McGee.

"There you are!" said our guide. It was apparently this same elderly dwarf, one Emery Mason Allan-Malloy, that we were searching for in the first place, so our journey's halted progress resumed. A few minutes later we were assembled in Emery's shop, the ground floor of a half-house shoved within a long line of them,

some few blocks from the statue and its courtyard. The place was organized chaos. Herbs and vials lined one wall while little metallic parts and their molds littered the other; the table in the middle was, except for a small workspace, covered with both not to mention stacks of chisels, trowels, papers and books.

"You'll find your order there," said Emery, pointing to a pile of crates stacked neatly in the corner, as he stroked his long, grey beard and settled into the wide chair before his workspace.

"*More* flashlights?" complained Lyus, receiving as reward for his winging the first handful of them to put into his pack. Meanwhile, I was surveying the shop as thoroughly as I had the statue in the square. It reminded me greatly of Omni, Co; but without the stench and sales pitches. Such mysteries held by the dwarven race, which were to me all but magic! I dared not finger the herbs; not only in the interest of preserving those fragile but more importantly to save myself the effects of those potent to touch. Perhaps it was my claim to clan through my father that drew me to the other side of the place. I picked up and examined whatever would fit in my hand; springs, barrels, hooks, clasps, clockhands and spools of copper thread alike. There was a hearth that stretched across half of the back wall, clearly what Emery used to melt his ore and ingots for delivery to the innumerable molds spread across the table and shelves. As Earl and McGee delved into the pile that was our apparent order, I turned to the aged dwarf to ask about the furnace; how hot it could get, how long before the metal cooled; these kinds of things. But my voice caught in my throat when I found myself staring through a doorway I hadn't noticed before, hidden as it was by the shelves of herbs and extension of the hearth into the room, behind which a figure was sprawled across a makeshift bed. The figure was so thoroughly covered in bandages I couldn't even tell if it was male or female, and its breath came through as more of an excruciating wheeze than anything else. Quickly, I turned away, lest I disrupt what little this figure could enjoy; its privacy.

"What on earth are we gonna need nails for! And they're huge!" declared Lyus meanwhile.

"Those are for rasid," was McGee's only reply, with the species of chuckle I had by then learned to recognize as one verymuch laced with promise of trouble.

The nails were shortly forgotten, however, for the contents of the last crate, Earl's burden, stole the breath from all three of them at the same exact time. So distracted did Lyus become, in fact, that he barely realized that his hood fell from his face. I noted the sudden turn Emery spared for his briefly revealed features as surely as I did the boy's almost instinctive insistence that he cover himself once again. I could only guess at the reason for both phenomena as I obeyed McGee's ensuing demand that I hurry and take my share to help quiet Lyus's complaining. I wouldn't need wonder for long, however. For once everything was loaded up, the matter of payment was broached.

"So. That'll be five hundred pounds as agreed, then? Will gold do?" sang McGee as he started to count the coins.

But Emery only started to stroke his beard once more, and after a moment of thought, crooned himself, "Perhaps a trade, in fact."

The gold disappeared as if it had never been, of course, as McGee wondered aloud, "Trade, hmm?"

Many long strokes of that magnificent beard were necessary to preface Emery's

explanation, delivered, surprisingly, to none other than Lyus: "You are wise to cover your ears here, boy. There is much more than a casual dislike of elves in Saerohan, no matter how much this bothers me. Anywhere else you might get little more than an extra second of stare, but here it can be quite dangerous to be an elf in a city of man. There's no need to cover up in my shop, though. All are welcome here."

Lyus dutifully removed his hood, so Emery was free to venture, "Handsome boy; you're lucky. Twiceover, is seems, for most English wouldn't know about how elves are dealt with here. Must be someone watching out for you. I've decided. Mr McGee, if you'd save yourself your five hundred pounds, you'll entrust this medicine here to your young associate for delivery to a certain patient of mine who lives in the mountains that rise in the middle of Saerohan, in the country known as Fusang."

"That's all?" blurted McGee, but with suspicion ringing in his voice far more than haggler's relief.

"It is no small journey," said Emery as he produced a small pouch that he tossed Lyus's way.

"Why him?" demanded McGee.

"Well. Just as elves are less than safe here in Weiseong, you see, most men are unable to pass through the Mori if they intend to live to tell the tale. The way round to Fusang is too long, unfortunately; she will suffer greatly if she does not receive this medicine in the next few days."

"How'd you manage it before, then, you don't mind my asking?" asked McGee.

With a wave to the room behind him, the old dwarf plodded on, "My daughter would make the trip. She's loved those woods since long before the fire, long before the unification. Perhaps the Dryads remember her from then. She was always such a soft heart regardless; as kind to animals as any person. But sometime on the return journey... Our island has always been home to many a steep, lonely ravine and dark corner, even before one reaches wild Fusang. Orcs prowl the night in the mountains; I would advise against sleeping out of doors anywhere past Umel-amar. Although it was no orc that beset my dear Nae-Yeon. Peace brings its own dangers, you see. Banditry pays quite well these days, both sanctioned by the powerful and otherwise. Say what you like, but at least in the old country, all types of thievery would be dealt with swiftly; its perpetrator tracked down by its victim or the jeondarm and made to repent his actions. Now the prime minister says both vengeance and the jeondarm are a thing of the past, not necessary on our island any longer. He has his own forces, who do little. Some have taken this as an invitation. A farmer found her like this not ten steps from the road, bound and beaten, money stolen. I'd started to lose hope of her every marrying. Such a shame. Her mother and mine were both so beautiful; I can blame none other than myself. But there was a man, a kind man, who'd started to come. Well, no more, I'm afraid. She has yet to talk since it happened, but I'm sure she will refuse what he's demanded I do for her. But... Life goes on, as they say. She'll always have her father, at least..."

"We'll do it," said I suddenly, to the immense surprise of all, myself included. One further brief inspection of the bandaged figure still wheezing in the nearby room, however, and a portion of mine, at least, faded. She was a half-breed, I could see; much too stocky for a human, far too tall for a dwarf. It is no small

thing to be an outsider to all. I know this far too well. I cared not a bit for the medicine or patient; I wanted only to retrace this Nae-Yeon's steps, find her attacker and make him pay. Who else but me would care to?

McGee was of a different mind, though. Lack of trust, concern for Lyus, laziness or our recent non-scarcity of funds; who knows? He said flatly, "Don't listen to rasid. No one does, really. Can't go off one some adventure now, sorry. Time's a tight'n all. I'll just pay ye."

But Lyus had already picked up the medicine. "What's she got?" he sang as he opened the pouch to smell the contents.

"She has many health problems, I'm afraid," said Emery. "You may not even recognize her as the woman from my statue, but it is she still. A leader of men once feared and respected; now she pays the price for her power in youth."

"That statue we passed?" I demanded. "The ionna?"

"Yes, the same. Although she is no elf. The people call her the fire sorceress. I call her Lilette, my little creature of the night. It is thanks to her and Huanung that our nation is now one; that armies no longer ravage the countryside carrying one banner one day, another the next. She was born to a Dryad mother. Her father was an orc. Her mother did not survive her birth, though I tried. When all was done, there was nothing for it but to raise the babe myself as best I could there in my house on the edge of the Mori, where I lived then with my wife. She was a younger sister to my Nae-Yeon; four months her junior. Trouble followed her wherever she went, but we lived too far from the plains for fear. When the prince met her, she was no older than you, young man. He fell instantly and completely in love, and even if their marriage was forbidden, her employment by him was not; so Nae-Yeon lost her sister to the palace and I my adopted child, though we all came here so we might not grow to be strangers. Wars, as I said, ravaged the land then. Constant war between north and south, Saerohan and Jin, with Fusang caught in the middle. Huanung managed to end it with one final victory, but there was a price. He planned to lead his army through the Mori, you see, and the mountains of Fusang, straight through the island, taking the Jin capital by surprise while their armies waited on the plains east and west. But few are they who dare enter the wood; it is a barrier as effective against invasion as the most ambitious of fortifications. Lilit, therefore, with Huanung's blessing or otherwise, burned a path so they could pass. Who knows how many Dryads perished in the flames. I only wanted for her to be safe here in Weiseong; feared. If I had known what she would do, I never would have given her the bracelets. I told her never to use them except in emergency. But she came to rely on them very deeply. Once activated with an offering of blood, they *must* spit fire, you see; there is no other way to cool them to inactivity again. Someone knew this; led her into a cave. There she almost died from the smoke, lost her right arm regardless, and she battles the effects of the bracelets' meltdown still to this day. You will please tell her that as soon as Nae-Yeon is well enough to travel, we will leave this place for home once again, so she should keep her hearth warm. I was a fool to wait this long. In the meantime, this medicine is her only hope. You... are her only hope. Come. I will find you a map."

We would leave as soon as possible the next day, but not before our company of two multiplied in size greatly. Cherry was the first to insist she come along, with a mix of facial expressions battling for control of her features that I would spend much of the trip attempting to categorize, to no avail. The only thing that was clear about her intentions then was that she had decided to no longer attempt to hide her relationship with Lyus beyond continued silence on the matter. She even stroked his hair in an unashamedly maternal manner upon his insistence that he and I should go alone, when we paused for a rest at the Wang on our return to the ships. On some level, he must have guessed even then that she was much more than a casual bystander to his adventures, but neither would dare brave the subject aloud for some days still. Adoneus would be sober by the time of our departure and would insist he come along to assist me in playing my intended, darker part in the quest at least, with fervor equal to Cherry's. Gwyneira's business at the palace, meanwhile, had long since finished. She'd only accompanied the captains in order to make known our destination and purpose and beg the prime minister's blessing; all ships sailing the Crescent Sea who intend to avoid violence, as we did then (for once), are wise to fly flags of one of the nations of man on which it laps, be it Saerohan, Sani, Velai, Ahran or the Dao; Aedis had also wanted a trustworthy translator to have any hope of securing more crew. She had learned the hard way the opinion with which elves were regarded there in Weiseong, only avoiding bloodshed on her first day there by hasty retreat from the crowd that waylaid her and Rhosyn at the market; thus was eager to be quit the city, even if only temporarily. Her shipmates Maithellen, Cadairn and Flynn assigned themselves as her protectors for our journey. Sever, too, somehow caught wind of our plans and would be waiting for us on the Siren's dock the moment Lyus and I left the vessel. And lastly, Ementhygar apparently owed Sever his life thanks to some incident during the retreat from Parthenia; he and Aoiffelyn, no matter her unhidden reluctance to participate upon learning the destination of our quest, the home of a keres, would round out our party to an even eleven. We would pass through the northernmost gate of Weiseong before the sun rose, most of our members, Cherry included, cloaked from head to toe; only Sever, Adoneus and myself daring to expose the least of our features to the rays of the coming dawn.

Horses were obtained at a run-down inn just outside the gate, and a pony for Lyus. The road was very busy for the whole of the first morning. Farmers' wives were the first to appear; the passage was thick with them from the moment of our departure, for the harvest was still in full swing. These would need make a trip to the city with maximum load every day without fail for still another month or two before the totality of what their husbands drew from the earth found its way into the shops and homes of Weiseong. Most needed not struggle beyond keeping their oxen in line and resecuring what gourds and greenery might fall off the back of their carts, but some eschewed this process entirely, and could be seen hunched under many feet of grain, somehow managing step after step to relinquish their burden in the city for likely no more than might fetch a comb or ream of paper. But still they all continued, whatever their produce and whatever their method. Their rags were all equally dirty and their faces to a pair of wide, wrinkled cheeks stained by sun and sweat; but they likewise all had a healthy, if measured, spring in their step and a smile that insisted on emerging at the slightest provocation. Gaggles of them formed, of course. The road was filled with their constant

obstruction and chatter; we needed choose our path carefully to make way at all. Once the sun was high in the sky, however, merchants started their takeover of the dusty avenue and we could travel with bit more freedom. These all had magnificent vehicles, two oxen apiece at least, laden with all sorts of conceivable good; potteries, clothing, cookwares, etc. The prime minister's men, most armed with clubs, a few short blades, started to appear around this time as well. Though they kept a close eye on the merchants and their wares, thankfully they paid little attention to our band. Inspections were only as frequent and thorough as the shipment in question was large, after all. I saw many coins passing hands. But for this part of the journey, I felt very secure; beyond keeping a hand on my own money pouch of course, for we were not the only ones with features carefully concealed who'd started to round out the milling crowd by then.

After noon passed, our company on the road would steadily decline in quantity. Emery had, after a moment of inner debate, revealed to me the name of the town in which Nae-Yeon'd been found; Senna, which we passed shortly before nightfall. Here, therefore, our party would split. Adoneus, who spoke perfect Saeromal, and I would spend our time tracking down her attacker while the rest of them would continue on to the north. I will only say that we were unsuccessful in the end. No matter the peace and prosperity to be found in Saerohan, the country there is thick with thieves, both acknowledged and otherwise. Most, like the prime minister's men, former foot-soldiers in the old country's ceaseless wars (at best), had learned after the unification to adjust their tactics to take what they liked without violence beyond the implied kind; but thievery is thievery any way you look at it, the way I see it. Some were even offended that we would dare attempt to find and punish someone accused of only rape of a half-breed and theft of a few coins. I'd been happy at the start to note that Adoneus left his swords behind for the trip, but after being called names that needed no translation by a particularly terrible old shrew, I wished he'd brought the things after all. In any case, Nae-Yeon's attacker likely lives free from any punishment for his crime to this very day. We would look for witnesses for almost a week, but turn up empty-handed.

It is the journey of the others that is of more pressing note in any case, and of the two the only that was a success, even if I held far less hope for the completion of their task than I did for that of mine at the time of our split. I remember their departure well, and the impression it gave me. I could see the beginnings of conflict forming already then. Gwyneira and Cherry's on-again-off-again rivalry had been fully replaced by one between Cherry and Aoiffelyn, who made no secret of the fact that she thought the whole journey foolishness; she was only there to see that Ementhygar came to no harm. Gwyneira was in fact thrown into a closer acquaintance with Cherry than ever their mutual pairing with Adoneous demanded, since she clearly had as soft a spot for Lyus as I for Nae-Yeon. And so the two beauties, blonde and raven both, would fret about their little leader most of the day, complicit as they liked in his every self-flattery, for being the head of such a host, the boy couldn't help thinking quite a bit of himself. All while Aoiffelyn looked on in exasperation and the males of the party did their best to avoid the confrontation clearly approaching.

It would come to a head before they even reached the Mori; the night after they left us, in fact. An inn with a supposedly discreet proprietor had been necessary in Senna but by the end of the second day, the land had become a bit more wild, with

nearly as much forest interrupting field as house or road. Therefore, they made quiet camp deep in a lonely thicket. Certain the nearby farmers would fail to miss a single wild hog, Ementhygar and Maithellen brought one down; their dinner was a rich one of boar and forest greens. All seemed very peaceful and idyllic until Cherry gave the slightest start at Aoiffelyn's offhanded comment in Lleuanashi that only the elves should be privileged to the meat; Lyus, Cherry and Sever should beg some food from the local farmers or bring down another themselves, if they were able. One should not judge Aoiffelyn too harshly. Our elven friends had by that point been the target of two separate attacks in Weiseong, one involving little more than children and vegetative projectiles perhaps but just as insulting as a full-fledged brawl to the headstrong Lleuanashi. What's more the innkeeper from the night before had demanded no less of a fortune than ten pounds a pair of pointed ears for their lodging and his silence to his neighbors and other patrons as to their race. In any case, Cherry's start, no matter how slight, to the elven tongue, surely in addition to her display of ability on deck of the Siren when we'd taken it, was finally enough to make clear her heritage to the other ionna. With a visage of pure disgust marring her usual poise, Aoiffelyn approached Cherry at once upon realizing that the other likely understood her every word, flipping her hair off her ears - she always wore it down around elves - to reveal the scars at the top of them with a cry of "Urgadyr.": 'traitor.' That was the moment Lyus finally admitted to himself the truth of his ancestry thanks to this forced revelation of his mother's; he could do little thanks to the realization but sit dumb witness to the coming affair as if a lump on his log, as Cherry raised a fast fist to convince Aoiffelyn of her rudeness. Gwyneira was unable to break apart the scuffle that ensued. Only Sever and Ementhygar were able to, in fact, at great expenditure of strength and needing to quite literally drag to two apart from each other.

Cherry would exhort Lyus time and again later that night to give up his trek and return with her to Weiseong but the boy had made a promise and would not budge. So, seeing as she knew that wherever he went, she would follow, and that wherever she went, Sever would follow, and that wherever Sever went, apparently, Ementhygar and hence Aoiffelyn would follow, there seemed no remedy for their woes until Gwyneira, knowing most of Cherry's sad tale through Adoneus, related what she knew of it to Aoiffelyn, calming the Lleuanashi and convincing her to avoid outright violence at the very least. Therefore they were able to continue their journey without too much resentment. Although it was ironic; for had Aoiffelyn not been so demeaning of man, likewise any elf who would pretend as one, Sever would perhaps have turned back at the edge of the Mori. But as it was, he would not stray a knuckle from Cherry's side after Aoiffelyn's outburst, even when faced with the many stories Cherry leveled at them about the dangers of those deep, well-peopled woods.

She would be sure to advise him and Lyus - and all the rest for good measure - at the entrance she showed them to, "Don't touch anything. Not a twig. Not a leaf. Not a single piece of moss. Walk only on the path." More and more was being revealed to Lyus about his mother with every passing minute. The way she spoke made no attempt at pretending she didn't know those woods intimately already. He admits wanting desperately to demand that she relate the whole of her history then and there, especially how exactly she'd gotten from those woods to carrying him as a toddler to an orphanage half the world away, but the topic was obviously one of

some delicacy not to mention demanding of a long time in the telling.

"How long to get through?" is all he asked instead as he peered into the thick tangle of branches blocking their way, that formed what might as well have been a solid wall hewn by carpenters at the edge of the wood.

"Three days. Assuming all goes well," said Cherry. And with that she turned out her horse to the last fields of Saerohan and slipped through the tiniest crack in the vegetation, as if she'd been the one to create it for that exact purpose. Perhaps she was, thought Lyus. All the others followed her lead.

The interior of the Mori was much more open than its borders; the hand of the Dryads could be seen almost at once. The trees were spaced dozens of feet apart at least, with ample room for each to grow and spread its limbs without infringing on its neighbor beyond an occasional slapping leaf. Only at the very edges of the wood, such a different place from the interior that it seemed not part of the same forest at all, was the chaos Lyus expected, thick with brambles, deadwood and dark. Farther inside was a testament to the constant care of the western wood elves, who could just be discerned flitting among the branches above every now and then, he says, and slipping off into the shadow of some far-off hollow. The canopy above was more often than not a blanket of nutmeats, fruit trees filled the spaces below that, and the shrubs between the trunks arched under heavy loads of berries of every type and description; while a carpet of lush greenery happily bore the dappled sunlight remaining. Had there been no path they would have been unable to take ten steps without destroying enough food to fill their bellies for the whole of the day, much less the occasional critter. Squirrels, rabbits, salamanders, songbirds, centipedes, pheasants with wide-ranging tails like morae but of an an iridescent blue and tiny, chubby monkeys with a disturbingly wide-eyed stare abounded, and showed no fear of them as they passed. These were not the only faces to be seen, however. Fat, smiling, bald little statues presented themselves for trading aspects every few hundred yards of trail. But except for Lyus, who couldn't help emulating each and every one, the party's features showed only attention and alertness. They proceeded single file, keeping tight on the footsteps of the one in front of them. Cherry went first followed by Lyus and Sever, Cadairn and Flynn went next, then Ementhygar and Aoiffelyn, Gwyneira and Maithellen last. They made not a sound as they went beyond the occasional creak of their bows as they tested their arrows' hold on the strings.

Hours later they came to a clearing, where Cherry said they should rest for the night. There was a small brook that babbled between moss-covered stones bounding the clearing at one end. A field of wildflowers bearing so many bees that they bent and swayed in the still air covered most of the place. The single path they came in on turned into hundreds running between the flowers the moment it met the field and in the middle was a wide open area where they could spread their bedrolls. The sun was still high in the sky, but none complained. For it was then that the singing started. Although it was barely like human singing at all, says Lyus. Almost more like bird call. It would come and then pass like birdsong in any case; other than insisting that it was the most wonderful sound to ever meet his ears, that is the extent of his attempt to describe it. That evening, between the Dryad's songs, Cherry explained to her son the ways of the Mori. How each singer had a single oak to which they were bound heart and soul, though an ancient hollowed cypress makes a better nest. How births precede a seed-selection by twenty-five

years. And how the unexpected death of an oak generally means the near immediate death of its caretaker. Some, however, do not die; no one knows why. These live on, though they call themselves Dryads no longer. They made no fire that night, they ate only bread dipped in oil, and besides occasional reference to the clarity of their dreams and the staggering thickness of the dance of the fireflies, none say any more about what, if anything, transpired in the darkness.

The next morning they awoke and were on their way with the first peeking of the sun through the trees. The first few hours went by much as the day before. Only by the appearance of a herd of meimaral meandering lazily through the trunks and that of a solitary tiger lounging on a great boulder could the morning be differentiated from the previous. Suddenly, however, in the early afternoon, they came to a very different kind of scenery. Gone was the arching canopy two hundred feet above; here was Lilette's burnout at last, the path she and Huanung had cleared through the Mori at the head of their army. Rotting trunks covered in layers of moss and fungi littered the ground among saplings quickly becoming behemoth trees of their own; while bee-laden wildflowers bordered the path once more as they stepped out into the bright sun. Lyus admits to a tear or two shed for what must have been so beautiful, and he says that Cherry was more affected than ever he'd seen her before. The Lleuanashi, who are unapologetic slash and burn farmers, found little shame in the rapid profusion of new life caused by the fire, however, while Sever made no comment at the sight beyond a twitching intake of air and adjustment of his swords on his belt. Their way forward, in any case, wound chaotically between the many fallen trunks regardless of their opinion of them. Cherry would often be forced to sit and ponder their progress at the path's many diverging junctions, but despite her warning to be on guard at the edge of the burnout, they made it through without incident. A few hours in the sun and they were back under magnificent, ancient trees again. And by the time the moon was shining, they had emerged from the wood into a bamboo forest all its own, though here the path was just as often the result of machete as footstep, so they began to feel relaxed once more.

They would not emerge from the bamboo until well into the next day. The clearing for a handful of huts clustered round a creaking waterwheel named Umelamar ended the swaying greenery for good; beyond the little village was revealed only a stunning panorama of snow-capped peaks. The lateness of the season could finally be felt there in the foothills of Fusang. The cold sank down from the peaks as if from a block of ice directly into one's hand. They were forced to beg extra layers from the villagers, who, showing none of the prejudice against elves to be found in the low country, were happy to oblige them not only this but the lending of three somewhat tame meimarals for the final leg of the journey. The Lleuanashi were content to stay there until Cherry, Lyus and Sever's return; they would spend their time there well, expanding the villager's understanding of bowmaking in way of trade for their generosity, for birch dominated the slopes above the village as it does the tallest of the mountains of the Lleuanashi homeland, and only of that most supple of woods, trained while still alive, can the moon elves' fuku bows, recurved to such an extent that a polished marble disk sits perfectly within the forked spiral at either end, around which stones the string is tangled in a crisscross fashion, be made. Gwyneira especially fell in extremely deep adoration of the place. She would gaze off at the mountains, blanketed deep green in their

valleys, turning a breath-stealing, bright yellow midway, painted thus right up to the patchwork of cold, grey stone and pure white snow, for hours at a time with grateful tears in her eyes at the simple, awe-inspiring scope of it; in fact not allowing Cherry and Lyus to leave her the first evening before insisting that once their quest was over - truly over, with Kaliya dead and her last daughter rescued - they should all three of them return there with Adoneus, verna, arianwen, dencjn and an to "live simply for a while." Her emotion was all but contagious. Aoiffelyn finally made direct apology to Cherry for her choice of words down on the plains. The mountain air cleared their hearts and consciences of any pall as effectively as it might have stale air from a jar sealed tight for too long and they all settled down to a dinner of thick, Fusang bread, hearty soup, and cheese made from meimaral milk.

As for the last leg of the journey to Lilit's valley, Lyus only says that he is very happy he made the trip. Though once the leader of a great army, indeed a forger of history itself, the keres was then in charge, and only in a constantly compromising way, as any mother will tell you is the true way of things, of nothing more than a pack of five children with the slightest points on their fingernails and ears and her husband, Shi, a hunter. Regardless, she was happy, Lyus says. And very beautiful, he makes sure to add. Her missing arm could not diminish the grace nor vibrancy of the rest of her; to Emery's statue's poorly concealed voluptuousness was added her oddly enchanting coloration: full, blood-red lips and jade-green eyes set in a face as perfectly pale as the moon, framed by a mess of shining, raven hair. She said she didn't even need any medicine; hadn't for years. She couldn't believe that Emery had forgotten, even if it was just like him. In any case, the medicine wouldn't go to waste. There was always need of healing there in the wilds. And she was incredibly grateful to them for passing on the sad news regarding her sister. They should tell Emery that she and her husband would most certainly keep their hearth warm; might just build another if he and Nae-Yeon truly intended to live there with them come springtime. And that was that. The three adventurers stayed the night and would start their trek back to Weiseong in the morning.

Adoneus and I, meanwhile, were still searching for Nae-Yeon's attacker without any sort of luck. Finally, I admitted aloud the seeming senselessness of our efforts and my desire to return to Chan-Mi, so, with a wicked grin of his own to match my ashamed smirk, he agreed and we set off back toward the city at once. We couldn't hope to make Weiseong that day, however, and were forced to find an inn just outside Senna again (though a different one, we quickly decided, for neither of us wished to pay ten pounds for a night on the proprietor of the first's whim), where we drank far more than appropriate for even us. I would awake at the crack of dawn to one of the worst hangovers I've ever had, not to mention an awful cawing ruckus from a nearby flock of rocs and ravens; but no Adoneus. He was missing and wouldn't return until after I managed to protrude my throbbing head from under my blankets for good like a tortoise daring a whole step after being harassed by wolves for a day and a half. We made haste back to the city once I'd put down a king's breakfast. Picking his teeth, he said he wasn't hungry; he'd had something heavy to eat the night before. I didn't remember anything of the sort,

but there was much about the previous evening that I couldn't recall, so I made no complaint. A day of recovery on board the Siren and I was back at the Hua-lei, certain I would never bother to leave the walls of the city again until we set out to sea.

But days began accumulating all too rapidly with no sign of Sever and the elves, so one morning, having spent all my money anyways excepting the single skull I intended to keep to save myself ever having to sand the deck - swabbing, no matter the tone in which people generally demand the task of their friends in imitation of the English, is much, much better - in case Aedis decided, as I'd assumed he had already before McGee's assault of me in Cherry's room, that I wasn't fit to be quartermaster any longer, I set out for the northern gate once more, posting myself a few feet from the portcullis as if my companions were in fact only hiding and by my simple presence there might they be convinced to show themselves. But none came forth, so, feeling a bit hungry, I turned back to the city to reenter; whereupon my progress was checked by one of the prime minister's men suddenly and completely.

"Lesse yer face," spat the guard in a well-practiced, if slightly accented, English as his spear blocked my way. I had no choice but to comply, tilting my visage out from under the brim of my hat for him to observe.

"This is new," I complained. "I came through this gate not four days ago and nobody bothered me. Has something happened?"

"Orc attack," said the guard. "Innkeep up the road lost his head. Literally. Hundreds a' pounds on 'im too. Gold, no less. But not a single one taken. Birds finish they say... kuna (here he made a slash before him with a bent hand, as if reaping grain, in way of explanation) start long before they find 'im. I'm to check everyone tries to enter the city. Lesse. Bout four days ago it was. Where you say you was goin' again?"

"I didn't" said I darkly. But my alarm was raised for more than just myself, of course. "Are there any... suspects?" I demanded.

"Suspects?" he laughed, as if to confirm my fears. "How 'ard's it to round up first orc you see? Or elf. All the same you ask me. Don't you worry; we got people all up and down road. We'll get 'im soon. Maybe they caught already..."

I therefore made a straight line for the Siren and the captain's quarters, recently reconstructed after my own last hasty decision, demanding little later than in concert with the doors banging against the bulkhead on either side of me, "We've got a problem."

"Now, I'm not pointing fingers," I said once I'd explained the situation. "But they're checking everyone at the gate and on the road. It's only a matter of time before they're caught." I thought for a second to make sure to add 'ability reason with cannibals,' to my next resume, somewhere near the top, if McGee should ever come to his senses and get rid of me for good.

Now. In case one has heard differently from a certain other account of this event authored by certain supervisor (of a sort) of mine, there was no dwarven charge to save the day and the fair elves in distress. Neither did McGee rescue a passing farmer's daughter from the birds. He was, in truth, not even there for the fight. More importantly, the birds, while extremely interested in what looked to be a developing showdown of scavenger's epic delight, would not swoop down to try to "pick off" people. Though any one of them would likely have found the task a

simple one, indeed being known to carry off creatures not much smaller than man with ease when other pickings are slim, they are intelligent creatures. They are afraid of us, you see, and our powers of retribution. I make no guarantees for the future, but the great birds of Caledonia have not dared, according to my books, prey on man for almost a hundred thousand years; ever since the roc riders of Fusang and Monvitori brought down the Nehemeans and the ancient dwarven kingdoms struggled for their independence against these in turn. In any case, in reality it was Adoneus and I who saved the day, arriving in Senna as fast as our mounts would allow. Although it was up to me to try to calm everybody alone; Adoneus said not a single word. He'd brought his swords this time, which did all the talking necessary for him when he dismounted without even waiting for his horse to slow exactly halfway between Gwyneira and Cherry and bared the larger at any brave enough to approach either of the women. As for myself, I had little more vocabulary to hurl at the prime minister's men than a likely unintelligible "jasimaneyo!": 'wait!' but I had made sure to bring a weapon of my own: a badge given Adoneus when he'd visited the castle with the other captains, for the prime minister had thought our quest to strike U Votan from the world one of potentially great benefit to his country, and had declared us all, elves included, allies of Saerohan. Even if word had clearly failed to spread. Indeed, my efforts were rewarded by little more than a wary slowing of the impending violence. Thankfully, Aedis was not far behind us riding along with a whole squadron of crew. They arrived just in time to prevent the great bloodshed Sever and the Lleuanashi would surely have demanded of those attempting to detain them. Although their arrival was not quick enough to save the two Aoiffelyn dispatched with ease, one of whom I noted was keeping far too careful an eye on the females of the party, and who had apparently assumed her, quite wrongly, the weakest of the three. The moment her eket quit his heart and the rocs and ravens began their cawing cheer above, she was beset by every club and blade within twenty feet, no matter the cry of despair from those who could manage to view the scene with a bit more perspective, myself included. She would fall in the end, little more than a battered pincushion, if only after doing still more damage to the soldiers' number and rousing the birds above into a complete frenzy. I cannot help recalling that evening with a shudder. All that comes to mind is the blood; so much of it staining the sand, pouring from her many wounds as we tried to save her, covering my hands, Ementhygar's face, and spitting from her mouth as she gasped for air. At least during the struggle onboard the Siren, the storm had washed all the stuff away save where it turned fabric crimson. That day was quite different; its stain would remain exactly where it fell, thanks to the fine weather, for some time. All while Aedis looked on, mumbling time and again, as if to drive home his point, "It's the same story, over and over again." I will admit McGee was a hero in the end like he claims, though only in the sense that he'd thought to fetch Emery before setting out behind us and Aedis, which forethought would save Aoiffelyn, even if just barely. She turned a kind of pale I thought reserved only for corpses, but would still be breathing by the time the sun rose the next day. Four of the prime minister's men, on the other hand, would not.

Fantasy or not, however, McGee's record would be the one most referred to regarding the event, since it would have its first recital of many soon after, the last night of our stay in Weiseong, in fact, before we set off for Ty Gwydir at last. It

was happily and excitedly belted out at the Happy House to a collection of all of us; King Tide, Thresher, End, Siren and Theilen alike. All except Aoiffelyn of course, who was still far too unwell to move from the second makeshift bed now crammed beside Emery's workspace, and Ementhygar and Cadairn watching over her. The elves, Aoiffelyn especially, were presented as great warriors for that telling; they'd saved the prime minister's men harassing them from the birds at great risk to their own lives. Although McGee and Aeids's ostensible feats of heroism, as one can imagine, were little less grand than the elves' - not to mention would multiply with the story's every subsequent telling. If one would like to read its full evolution to fable in its entirety, McGee-Kilkenny sells the thing for five diamonds, and it can be found, with the others, behind the porn sign. But no matter its near complete fiction, the story did exactly what it was intended to do; we were all of us roused by it into a great sense of camaraderie and confidence, in not only our abilities as a whole but the righteousness of our convictions. And as if waiting for such celebration as the thing caused to most efficiently magnify the impact of his message, not ten minutes after the end of the story and first round of free drinks, who should arrive but a man sped there from Valverde, who'd ridden across all of Caledonia and searched through three different cities of the west to find us.

"My brothers," cried Renault at once upon the messenger's conclusion, as he mounted his table to be seen. Tears were flowing down his face. He cried, "My brothers! My friends. News from home! Our King and I, and our brothers, are no longer the last of our line! This past month, a child was born to us both!" The cheer that began with the oldest of the crew spread to all shortly, and would only be quieted with the even greater cry, "Two princes! Born the very same day! Or... delivered from the sea by his mother in the case of mine... Twins, we will call them!" And with so grand an extension of his mug of ale into the air that half of it spilled on the table, Renault toasted Aedis with a, "Long live the King!" Which cry the whole of the place happily seconded time and time again, until the customers upstairs started complaining. Aedis would do his best, but there was no hiding from some of us the darkness of his visage as we cheered him on.

12.

In every lifetime are a few moments that somehow defy the seeming certainty of forgetfulness. As for myself, I remember quite clearly reminding samara on a warm spring afternoon just between sadəʃ's cœrevɜn and ʒeaŋ's that it was she who was four years old and I who was five. Also the crisp autumn morning some years later that she chose to visit our camp unannounced to see if I wanted to play and I, so thoroughly excited by the prospect, fled her at once, pulling down my pajamas far enough as I ran in my haste to prepare for our adventures with a sturdier getup that I tripped over them in the process, which event for some reason immediately preceded our young acquaintance coming to a sudden end. But as for clear recollection beyond sweet snippets like these, of my life before I left for tælia, I am forced to rely essentially on a single episode; an early summer bonfire commemorating the marriage of larʃsa ʒende, my mother's second cousin, to ɣinuard mɐʌiɹa, samara's brother. Which memory for whatever reason floods my mind without fail the moment I try to talk about Ty Gwydir.

I spent the near entirety of the celebration in samara's company, for no more than a week previous I had managed to split her open for the first time and I'd made her spirit sing that time and every time thereafter. Therefore, between noting the chuckling nudges our relatives directed to our eager closeness, we danced and drank, laughed and lassoed each other if ever we strayed too far for comfort; until at last some time into the festivities, sadəʃ stole her from me and I was forced to find other entertainment. Thankfully, I saw my step-father not far away fending off his children's play and I made directly for them.

I sank onto the log beside him as a newly anointed king does his long-awaited throne, with even an exaggerated groan of exertion to commemorate the event. My half-siblings must have though this quite official and moved their game of tag/wrestling/competitive-rule-clarification-of-both a few feet away. Etro just laughed.

"What's so funny?" I said. Of our various forms of potential communication, English was our favorite. He was far better with it than I Suaja, but it was still for the most part our little secret.

"Nothing, nothing; hakuna a thing," said he as his laughter quieted. And we both turned toward the nearest fire, around which my mother was dancing with a thirty-something ʒende in a manner she generally reserved for him, hips gyrating so fiercely to the fiddle's furor that the rest of her couldn't help wiggling along with the music as well. It was quite the sight, though not one I enjoyed witnessing too often as one can imagine. Etro was unable to turn his eyes away.

"You get some tortoise yet?" he asked sideways, to which I hummed not yet. "Better get some. It's going quick," he said, with the kind of smirk only a father can manage. He then lamented, "We don't get nothin' today. ʒeaŋ's the one who got it. Wasn't for the wedding only thing we having is mala (a hearty but not very exciting dish of beans, onion and herbs) and rice. Just like last night."

"Wait! ʒeaŋ? Don't tell me..." I cried.

"oui," said he. "suɐ moɳsjuɡ mega." moɳsjuɡ mega was a hundred year old (at least) tortoise that sadəʃ himself had introduced me to in childhood. I remember distinctly how the legendarily laid-back quadruped hadn't even bothered to stop

chewing as samara and I had pet him so log ago.

"No wonder there's no meat on the poor thing!" I complained. And I gave a little shudder as I recalled the sight of the now empty shell I'd so loved examining as a child. "ɐŋ ɕe fada pa bi salɔafa, cran!" I declared: 'I'm OK without tortoise, thanks!' Indeed, so long as it came with a well-portioned side of brandy and sex afterwards, I was fine with mala and rice. He hummed in way of reply, as my mother drew closer and closer to her target.

"Nothing today. Nothing yesterday neither. Nothing this whole week in fact. Where are all the deer?" I wondered in my best imitation of an experienced hunter, as I turned my attention to the next fire, by which samara was prancing around her brothers as joyfully as a fawn in the summer sun.

"Took too much last year," he said. "Ten does. Twelve, maybe. Too much." My mother was then bowing out and motioning in our direction, doing her best to return to us it seemed. He went on, "It'll be lean winter. Next year too, I bet. But we'll have plenty of beans, that's for sure." Here he rubbed his shoulders and back to drive home his point, laughing, "No thanks to you, fɷlcir boy. But we'll be fine."

The tussle he managed to give my hair, while brief thanks to my reflexes, was a clear invitation to my siblings to do the same in a far less temporary manner. By the time I'd reclaimed full control of my cranium, my mother and her partner had disappeared. I made a brief search, but a repeated reminder of, "We'll be fine," from ɑmari, the eldest of the rascals, brought me back to my environs before I found her.

"I brought useful stuff!" I demanded. And I had! Some tops with drawstrings and dolls for the children, not only a trio of brand new hammer handles but something like twenty pounds of nails for him, and a bottle of albarinjo for guess who, if I remember correctly. I'd gotten a nice knife on my travels too but that I'd kept for myself; pulled it out then, in fact, in order to whittle the stick I intended to use to defend myself from my sibling's next assault.

"You did, you did," Etro chuckled. And we returned to silence; or at least as close to it as the miniature monsters would allow, for the stick proved to be little more than a dare to them of course, and I would need grunt and "ah-ha" with my strikes to have the slightest chance of skewering the lithe little monkeys.

Some seconds of this was all that was necessary, however, for my mother soon returned bearing half a pheasant, most of which disappeared down their eager gobs at once. She then smilingly presented Etro with his leg - they'd known not to take the leg. Afterwards on the plate was left only the two meager slices of breast she'd hidden under her hand.

"ɐŋ ɕe fada, cran," I said when she offered, as I took a swig of brandy. She only grabbed my chin, sniffling that I was getting so handsome. And that was all. samara found me again at some point. As best I can recall, beyond his insistence that I make sure to have a jug of water ready for the next morning, Etro and I said not another word that night. What need to speak after this scene, after all? All that needed be said already had. Never has such an adequate description been given of the human condition within my earshot, in fact. For summarized all too completely no matter how short the exchange was the simple truth that under, above, beside and between all the pleasantries, niceties and names involved with human interaction is another game. A far more important game. One of fang and scale, claw and hide, bone and breath. Of empty stomachs and full ones. Of survival, sweat,

sex and 'sabɔɾ,' as we say back home. One on which the entirety of society is propped like a toy house on the back of a giant tortoise. Children might be free to imagine the ride and gasp at the swaying excitement. But at some point you have to see the thing for what it is and join the clunky creature on the ground.

Ty Gwydir, the Obsidian Palace (lit. the glass house) sits high atop North Caledonia's final defiance against the sea, Cape Olethe, on a cliff-faced promontory overlooking the Half-Straits; that stormy, turbulent, iceberg-studded terror of water that forms the only somewhat navigable passage from the Ocean Orca to the Amician. It consists of three parts. First and most important are the forges, worked into what remains of the volcano that spewed forth the boulders from which the rest is constructed as thoroughly as an ant colony into a patch of sand. In its last and final eruption, Mount Olethe donated to the sky and its surroundings nearly half its former bulk, leaving only a cratered mound of granite interspersed with rhyolite that Kaliya and his minions filled over the millennia with tunnels to smithing chambers, most abandoned but a few still active, where massive machinery at the shaft mouths is capable of keeping air flowing at just the right rate to allow for temperatures cool enough for temporary occupancy by people, but whose flows of lava between the bending walls provide the extreme heat necessary for the working of the most obscure and durable of alloys. It is from the grandest of these chambers, by the hand of a Silvern named Favaris, that Durandal was born. The second part is the town, Adak, where men, goblins, orcs and ogres vie for the favor of the castle's master in an unending cycle of violence and treachery. The rough-hewn, razor-sharp wall that protects the town from the icy, formerly forested wilds, now clear cut for as far as the eye can see, beyond speaks to Kaliya's hand in creating this villain's paradise; but other than that construction, their eager participation in the winter games and the enslavement of some for work in the forges, Adak and its peoples are left to their own devices and the palace's defenses are thickest where it abuts the town. Last of all is the keep itself. The label of palace, I suspect, is a mostly sarcastic one, foisted upon it by those lucky enough to be freed from its bowels - or those who've heard their tales. For it is there that Kaliya holds his most precious prisoners. Malloys turned pious, bold, young Serenashi who make the mistake of not paying him any heed, English captains who dare steal from him, knowingly or otherwise, fallen enemies and countless pet women; all are to be found within in varying degrees of servitude, confinement, regret and pain. Constructed from carefully cut obsidian blocks approaching the size of a cœrevɜn, it sits proudly atop its cliff like an oversized beacon of blackness, for here and there the otherwise dusty grey surfaces of the stone are cut along its layers, and shine as perfectly as if polished.

The King Tide and Siren, drawing over twenty feet both, were to stay out on the open water while the End, Thresher and Theilen, drawing fifteen, six and five respectfully, would make the dangerous, meandering trek toward shore. Ship assignments had long since been chosen and enacted. Adoneus, Cherry and Marcello had transferred to the End while Comal, Undrik and I had joined the Theilen. Aedis and all his remaining bodyguards save two had made the switch to

the Thresher, as had Sever, Earl and Lyus to bolster their ranks; for theirs was the most immediately important objective: the forges and the many subterranean entrances from them to Adak. Those on the End would make an assault up the narrow ravine that led to the town's rear gate. We on the Theilen, meanwhile, would scale the cliff directly; firstly to rain down arrows upon any enemies harassing those ascending the ravine, and secondly - well... I will be sure to detail my own contribution to our assault in due time.

In any case, none of that would come to pass if we were unable to reach land. But beyond the cape, littering the Half-Straits for a mile or more, was a maze of arches and razor-sharp spires of rock jutting forth from the foam I held not the slightest hope for being able to traverse in safety, for no matter the prescience our captains had displayed in navigating the icebergs to make our approach on a clear day - or clear brief pause in the month-long night more precisely - with moderate, if wholly bone-chilling, wind, the waves of the passage rose with regularity to ten feet, as if the sea itself had turned against us. At their heights, they kissed the bottom of many of the arches, while in between the crests were revealed yet more clam-covered traps frothing deep in the troughs. Nonetheless, we three turned toward the largest of the spires as if it were a marker specially placed there for ships, only stopping to wait just beyond. For hours we waited. Until long after the sun set and the night resumed, almost bright enough for reading despite the label, with not only a full moon that rose shortly after the sun left us but eerie, waving curtains of light spread across the whole of the sky, of green fading to purple in the southwest, to yellow closer to the shining, silver globe. At long last, songs that seemed inspired by the waving light above, that rose from barely perceptible to persistently undulating and back - not sorrowful precisely, not joyous; somehow both at the same time - could be heard coming from the waves around us. And once the songs increased to a near constant wailing, over the Theilen's rail, I could just start to make out flickering lights coming from the deep as alien and strange as all the rest that surrounded us.

Suddenly, however, we were surrounded by the familiar, sleek-black form of orcas. Had I been there, I would have heard McGee gasp in surprise to see none other than his Fred dancing in the water beside the End. But I was on the Theilen, therefore heard little besides the sea's song, the crashing of the waves and the whistle of the wind, for Gwyneira, the Lleuanashi, Comal and Undrik alike were all stoically silent in the face of all the noise. A few minutes of watching the orcas play round us and the End finally unfurled her sails to direct herself through the first arch, we and the Thresher to follow as exactly as possible; for we all knew that to deviate even a few feet from her path would mean our certain doom.

We sailed slowly behind the beasts, the whole thing reminding me a bit too much of trailing a certain cat down into the dark. Now and then they would slap the water ahead of us with their tails, which we took to be warning, and we would be sure to furl our sails to await the resumption of their tour. We spent upwards of an hour mere yards away from rock faces on our either side, oars out to keep us in place among the roiling, shifting water, awaiting a lull in the waves to make it into another, thankfully larger, cove where we were forced to wait hours for a change in the tide to be able to make it to the next. Our progress was agonizingly slow, but still we moved forward. All as the strange lights below became clearer and more numerous, the song grew louder, and Ty Gwydir looked down upon us silently

from above.

At last, we came to the end; to a large and quiet cove protected from the fury of the Half-Straits by the maze we had somehow managed to traverse. Here the lights in the deep would rise even to the surface. They were fish, I could now say with certainty. Strange fish, however, that I had never seen before or even imagined might exist. Some were bulbous, some sleek; some hideous, some comical. Their only similarity was that they all glowed. Some this color, some that; some their entire bodies shimmered dully, some bore specialized appendages that beamed like fireless lanterns. Creatures of the deep, I decided, drawn to the surface by the unfailing dark. They filled the seemingly bottomless cove to brimming, darting this way or that as they consumed whatever they might manage. And it was a feast all around. For not only these strange fish were in a frenzy of feeding, but the sharks, squid and whales I could then start to make out as well, who were busy not only seizing the smaller creatures but threatening each other alike. And here was our purpose, I realized; why the orcas had led us through the maze of arches. For they are quite fond of the English, just as the English are fond of them when there is a hunt in order. Ramming is only so effective, after all. Harpoons and ramming together, however; a kill of even the most fearsome competitor is a near certainty. Though I knew they only had so much time to treat the orcas to their assistance, I could see Wilma being lowered from the End, Marcello at the rudder, Tilty, Ledfetter, Hemsal and Gib at the oars, Drake with harpoon at the ready. Hopefully a hefty reward for McGee's pet fish was coming, I thought as I watched the Thresher lower her own boats to send a crowd toward the forges, and Maithellen turned us the other way, straight toward the towering cliff that bounded the cove for half its shoreline and miles and miles beyond.

Flynn was the first to make the jump. The young (if almost a century old can be called young) elf seemed to grow wings for a second as he sprung from a bounce of the ship. Although no matter how surely he flew, he missed his intended hand-hold and was only able to secure himself to the rock mere knuckles from the water. Gwyneira leapt after him, likewise only managing to avoid disaster with a bit of luck. The rest more ably followed suit. Before I could spit, six elves and a wayward, half-elven princess returning to her husband at last were arrayed before me on the wall. Within a matter of seconds, they were all gone, dozens of feet above. It was my turn next, I knew, but my efforts culminated for a time only in my gripping the strap of my pack firmly in one hand and dagger fervently though my shirt in the other; while Comal shifted likewise nervously behind me and Undrik took the helm from Maithellen.

"Do not fear," said the elder elf to me as he secured his llang, elven scimitars, and his own pack to his back. "We all die." And with that, he was gone, attaching to the rock like a leech with hands and speeding after the others.

Comal made sure to insist, "It's not like you have to *try* to die, though!" Therefore, with those gems for encouragement, I tested my balance on the rail. I could see a handhold not four feet from me, almost close enough to grab it simply by reaching out but still too far. As I imagined the task, I couldn't help leaning a bit too far out and almost fell.

"Closer!" I had to demand. If I'd expected argument, I would have been disappointed. For as it was, Undrik had no attachment to the Theilen beyond needing it to stay afloat for a few minutes more at the most. I soon found myself literally

face to face with the rock, as the rail beneath me splintered and cracked and I grabbed at whatever I could to fasten myself. "That close enough?" the bastard called out upon my departure. To which I failed to reply.

The cliff towered above me a hundred feet or more. I could see Maithellen ahead making steady progress, so I started after him. No matter the frigid cold and substantial weight of my pack, I found the going easy. Indeed, it was as if I'd been born for the task. My fingers gripped the tiniest crevasse with a strength I never knew I'd possessed, and my weight was little more than a toy to the now well-trained muscles of my arms. Some few minutes of climbing brought me to Maithellen's side once more; to the keep's drain, a crack in the rock face barely wide enough to squeeze into located just below the first row of obsidian blocks. He had already lowered his rope to the ship below and was straining his own considerable strength, that his body over the millennia had somehow managed to pack into a hundred sixty pounds at most, to drag Comal up the face. I thought to help, but he waved me off, so after a short rest I deposited Emery's nails - actually they are called pitons among rock climbers - where they might be found by the other Lleuanashi later and began to unload my own rope.

As I did, I could see that the skiffs from the Thresher had made their destination; the boreholes excavated to the sea from the forges, where the frigid water steams off the rock nearly as much as laps upon it. The boats had been turned out to the cove with no more caring than Undrik had shown for the Theilen, for we were all of us all in; we would flee victorious in our goals to the End or not at all. From there, they'd started up. They were sixteen: Aedis, five bodyguards, Renault, Sever, Earl, Lyus and the younger half of the crew of the Thresher. This maze Adoneus had been unable to describe with much certainty, for it was an ever-changing one; as one chamber cooled upon exposure and use, another somewhere else would be excavated. But thankfully, the place was not intended to lose people within it. All paths that ascended eventually converged to approach Adak from below. Therefore, their progress was steady and, for a time, uneventful. The section they entered into must have been long abandoned, for they felt not the slightest breath of air moving through the tunnel. Every now and then, they would come upon chambers dug out some distance down a reconnecting spur, many still hot enough to draw sweat from them as they walked even so far up the main vent. The path twisted and turned but continued ever-upwards. Perhaps they thought they would be able to make Adak without incident. But at a particularly large convergence of paths, they were brought to a complete stop. A gate stood before them. And before the gate, a single twenty-foot-tall man dressed head to toe in plate mail.

"It can't be," they all whispered to each other. The titans are extinct, after all, over a hundred thousand years. A statue, they said. Must be. But as they looked on in amazement, every now and then, the thing shifted suddenly, as if startled. Whatever it was, it would have to be defeated, or at least distracted, for their ascent to continue. All the other paths that they could see went back down into the dark. Therefore they made a plan: Sever, Earl and Renault would bring the thing down while the others forced open the gate. And so the fighting began at last.

Earl rushed the big bastard head on as Renault and Sever brought their weapons to bear against the protection of either leg. The thing was pitifully slow, at least. Earl's hammer connected just where he wanted; to that spot one might go for first when assaulting a man twice one's size, that might end the fight quickly. And the

whole of the chamber filled with the ringing of the strike as they all winced at the size of the dent our cook's assistant made in the other's defenses. But the titan was somehow wholly unfazed. As Earl lifted his gaze to the descending one hidden behind that cauldron-sized helm, he must have prepared for the worst. And the blow he received was an awful one indeed. A single punch from an armored right and our poor giant was made even dumber, perhaps; for he crumpled at once, barely able to remain conscious much less see straight.

Therefore, while the others started on the gate, Renault and Sever were forced to do battle alone for a time. Though they were both far too nimble to be hit, they seemed utterly unable to do any damage to the behemoth either. Renault was first to land a strike, with the foot-long barb on the back side of his axe, straight through the armor covering the thing's left foot. Sever followed suit shortly after, sliding one of his swords happily through the crack in its armor that opened every now and then behind its right knee. They both drew a squirt of red for their efforts, but the titan seemed not to even notice. It kept on swinging and kicking without pause and it was all the pair could do to keep it occupied and away from the horde banging on the gate. Finally, the obstruction was forced open and the main party rushed forward. Lyus, meanwhile, rushed back to guide Earl to his feet, as they all called for Renault and Sever to withdraw; they would close the gate and bar it against the titan the moment all were safe behind it. But this plan backfired most horribly, for not only did the armored giant smash the doors open once more with ease, when they turned to examine the chamber into which they'd entered, it was revealed to be filled with people; some laboring to push cartloads of stone, some whipping these with glee.

From there was chaos. The slaves all fled at once, forcing their overseers to split their efforts between increased chastisement of them and approaching these intruders. Three of the party fell in a matter of seconds, before Aedis and Renault managed to join their shields to begin a wall. Even then, Dean was dragged off from what he must have thought to be safety by means of a whip wrapped thoroughly round his face. And so they were now only twelve and surrounded; but firm and fresh, while the slavedrivers dragged their feet in weariness and the titan still flailed as if drunk. What's more, Sever was not to be underestimated. He took only a moment to prepare himself behind the wall before he slid through the narrow opening provided between two of the bodyguards, to the extreme surprise of the orc he ended then and there. Another five enemies, according to Lyus, would fall within seconds. So the future foretold was an obvious one at least; one could count the inevitable decay of the enemy forces easily if it weren't for the rapidity of the process. Those overseers in the rear found themselves suddenly compelled to turn their thoughts once more to the fleeing slaves while those in front found themselves, equally suddenly, without backup. Lyus, meanwhile, made good use of himself by climbing the titan to cling to its back, thus occupying the thing in a futile attempt to rid itself of this pest. Finally the boy wrapped his legs round its neck, freeing his hands for long enough to be able to remove his shirt, which he secured firmly within the single slit in the giant's helm, from there flipping nimbly behind the shield wall again. (Or so he claims...)

In any case, in such a way did they learn the true nature of their foe at last, for even if it took a moment for the thing to realize the solution to its woes, in the end it managed the thought process. With an exaggerated groan, it hurled the helm

away from itself, crushing a gang of too-slow slaves in the process. What was revealed was a monstrosity of the greatest order. Who knows how long that metal had been attached to that face. A whole section of flesh was striped from its skull to enable the separation fully; an eye, even, only remaining by the thinnest attachment. Still the thing barely noticed. It was dead, clearly. Had been for millennia. It had no hair, no teeth, and no reaction to pain. It was only its armor that had held its refrigerated flesh in place at its post for so long, for revealed here and there on the expressionless, frost-covered half-face they all now had the displeasure to look upon were broken studs that had surely helped support the corpse, through which I suspect, having now studied a bit of the more obscure sciences of the tail end of the First Age of Man, shocks were sent to regularly revive the thing into unending animation; a death lasting for hundreds of times longer than even the centuries of life that had culminated in it. Such, one should note, was the capability, not to mention mindset, of our foe, to enable this and worse.

But my speculations are my own, of course, and far removed from the story in any case. Thankfully, our marauders would be burdened by sight of the undead for only a short time longer, for Earl proved his worth twice over. Our own giant, having finally regained his senses, enacted a surprisingly devious and effective retribution for his battering. A great stone from one of the cartloads was sent straight into the former titan's chest, starting the process, a hammer to a leg ensured its completion and another to the breastplate now tottering toward a molten flow finished it for good. They could all smell the searing flesh as they turned to follow the fleeing slaves.

The assault up the ravine, meanwhile, had just begun. Once Gwyneira sent a single, flaming arrow out into the night from the perch below the keep she and the Lleuanashi had achieved, the End began its approach. Considering the rising moon and tide, they had no qualms driving the bow directly into the black-sand beach beneath the cliff's turn inland. And from there they poured ashore; seventy more or less, collected from all the vessels. They were unobstructed for the majority of the ascent, but a few hundred feet from the gate, a force assembled to meet them. The battle was fierce. Adoneus led the charge with his longsword finally utilized to its full. Some say it took the heads of no more than a few dozen; some say about a hundred. Some - and I don't dismiss the claim outright - closer to a thousand, even if I doubt such feat was accomplished without the assistance of Cherry at his side. In any case, thanks to the combined ability of all, and the help of the elves above raining down arrows, the defenses soon crumbled, and those residents of Adak foolish enough to postpone their retreat found themselves skewered and pushed to the side as our main force broke upon the town's rear gate like the sea against the shore.

Here was our forge party's main purpose: to open said barrier. But by the time Adoneus and others found themselves pinned between a mound of corpses rolling back down the ravine and a solid, obsidian wall, with only a single unimpressive, if well-barricaded, door their only hope of advance, Aedis and party were still lost deep within the forges. Thankfully, they met little resistance after their initial battle, as the whole place was ready to turn on itself at the slightest of provocations. Slave turned against driver as surely as the overseers turned against each other. All that was necessary to achieve the surface was patience and the occasional cut against an unprepared foe. But still time was their enemy. Time enough, unfortu-

nately, for the collection of a force of Serenashi above the town's rear gate. The moment they emerged from the tunnels into Adak, they were beset by a shower of arrows so thick that it halted their advance in its tracks, also further whittling their number to nine. The elves were by then well-entrenched on the town wall in a double-sided formation free to reign down death not only upon Aedis and company, but those of our main force too slow or distracted climbing the final stair to hide under their shield, not to mention harass their eastern forest rivals, our Lleuanashi brethren, into hiding. For a moment, it seemed as if the tide had shifted for the last time; that thanks to the supremacy the Serenashi numbers had achieved over the sky, a force from Adak would soon be able to push us back down the ravine. Had the star elves been armed with fuku bows as well, perhaps that would indeed have been our fate, but they eschew the weapons as 'inelegant.' No such restraint from our friends! Flynn and Iorath together, all of a sudden and without warning, sprung from their rocky hiding spots, dancing along the narrow ledge extending past the keep's base. A few bold, leaping bounds brought them to the last footholds before the nearly vertical head of the ravine meets the obsidian directly, mere feet from the drawbridge that spans the cleft from palace to town wall. Here, they were protected enough by the angle of the wall's parapets to risk staying perfectly still as they waited patiently for a target to present itself. The Serenashi leader was the first to fall, arrow clear through his skull. Sever, Renault, Aedis and Earl, meanwhile, took the opportunity to ascend the wall's stairway and begin their own dance of death against the now well-distracted elves. The rear gate was soon open, and we were free to pour into the milling bloodbath that had already become of Adak.

I cannot proceed in my narrative of our assault on Ty Gwydir without being forced to recall another separate scene, though this of far more direct relation to the attack than the harvesting of poor monsjuɡ mega: a short conversation I had with Gwyneira the night before we made landfall. We'd just had our meeting on the Siren to review the plans. It began well; all were straightforward and businesslike, and it seemed any former trespasses had been forgiven by then, or at least pushed aside for the moment. But no matter the smooth start to the talks, there was only occasional certainty attempted by anyone regarding events past gaining admittance to the town, and even less agreement about what steps we should follow to survive the unknown awaiting us thereafter. The arguing reached its loudest as they deliberated over a scheme to open Ty Gwydir's gate. Especially my proposed part in it.

No matter the volume of the episode, however, the debate culminated in agreement eventually, at which point we dispersed to get back to our ships to prepare. My belongings Nora said she would guard for me with her life after the lengthy sendoff she gave me under her blankets. I thought it odd that no one came to get me, but should have guessed, for Gwyneira was still busy with her own goodbyes; ɜn and dencɔn both were bawling when I finally emerged, grabbing at her as if they might be able to bodily force her to stay, while verna was little more able to keep her composure, the tears running down her face in a torrent. But they all sniffled

up their fears and relinquished their hold of her in the end, so she and Maithellen were free to show Comal, Undrik and me to the Theilen's skiff at last. One may not be surprised to learn that the first duty I assigned myself upon arriving on my new vessel was to open one of the many bottles of wine I'd brought with me and down it as soon as possible to help me sleep. But the potion failed to work its magic that night, and I was forced to attempt a walk in the swaying the Half-Straits forced on the sky to tire my racing mind somewhere around opening a second.

"ɛŋ puʁ ʌoɟmam?" 'Can't sleep?" was the call that made me realize, once I'd stumbled to my seat against the mast, that I was not the only restless one aboard. Only then, as I looked around for the speaker, did I take more than passing note of my surroundings. Rhosyn was above the cabin at the helm while Iorath and Sora were pacing the deck, the couple at the moment of my inspection staring off port and starboard into the night's grey, which bleak was interrupted only by the four nearby beacons that designated our companions and the slightly brighter haze above us suggesting that the moon might still hang in the sky as it should. But the elves didn't speak Terran of course, so my search continued. A rustle of movement from the rail finally revealed Gwyneira. She was no more than ten feet from me, but blended in quite well with the ship, for long gone were her blinding white mantle and armor. That night she was dressed as the Lleuanashi, in layers of a dun fabric called kyolan - so durable it can halt a sword strike, according to McGee, that only the moon elves know how to weave - and the heavy, brown blanket slung round her shoulders that had made her look like part of the woodwork.

"ɛŋ," I said. Of course not. Renault had said some things of me - straight to my face, by the way - that I do not wish to repeat.

"You will do fine," was all she said.

"Yeah, well... It's... a lot to think about," I complained.

She was forced to quiet me with another, more insistent, "You will do fine."

Was that a premonition? I couldn't help thinking, as I lunged toward the reassurance-spouting brown mound to deliver a sample of red to the face hidden within. As she took the gift, I was reminded of the first time she'd impressed on me her potential powers of prediction.

"Did you... know who I was back then?" I asked once she'd given back the bottle.

"Know who you were when?"

"At the Hold. That tavern. The night you told your story. I could've sworn..."

Her laughter cut me off. "I am not a mind reader, rasid," she chuckled. "Adoneus had already contacted me. Informed me that you would likely be there to take down what I said, that you were sadəʃ's son, of a sort. That man... Rash... was his messenger."

"aramaʒa Allaɔ,": 'Rest in peace,' I muttered instinctively, which she seconded.

"He's had this all planned out," I marveled aloud after a time. "For months."

"Years more likely," she said. "But who knows?"

"I suppose he expects me to put it all to paper the moment we get back to ɕelia," I snorted.

"It would not surprise me," she chuckled.

"*If* we get back to ɕelia," I corrected myself.

"You will do fine..."

It took her a few moments to gather her thoughts past that. But eventually, after a "wəɾmisi?" and glance toward the goods, which she sampled fully that time, half

to the grey around us, she sang with a smirk, "It was just the three of us, you know. When we took back my verna. They had no idea I still lived; they were raising her there in Parthenia to be my replacement. So. They had no idea we were coming. Adoneus, myself... and Suiko. Versus every judge they had. But we were too quick for them. Before they'd even raised the alarm, I was holding my child in my arms and we were on our way back to Terra. But. We were no more than a hundred yards from the wall when I slipped. It was just like tonight; didn't even have the decency to rain, but everything was slick, cold. The judge's sword rose. I remember staring at it, helpless. But then she was there. Cherry. Might as well have been nothing but blade. They had no chance. That time, even though I had, she did not slip. She'd never said more than a word at a time to me. Hasn't said much more than that since! I've always been... so damn... jealous of her. Adoneus might treat me like a queen and her like the rest of his flowers, but... We all know. None of that mattered than. In that moment, she did what had to be done without a second's hesitation. And afterwards... we went back to normal."

She even grabbed my shoulder, pulling me toward her and roughing my hair lake a sister, to continue, "You're not alone, rasid. You're too much like him. Like Adoneus. Cynics, both of you. Plain and simple. Yes, there are terrible people in the world. Liars, even to themselves; yes. Who cannot stand to see something natural and honest thrive. A petty fool in every corner sometimes, it seems. But there are good people everywhere as well. Who realize the truth without even thinking about it. It's right there to be seen, after all. And we're all working toward the same thing, the obvious, no matter our differences. Meaning that every now and then, even when confronted with the impossible, there are happy endings. Days where everybody gets exactly what they deserve. Happy endings all the time, in fact. Little victories and big ones, each piling up until the whole world is one of peace and happiness for all, man and creature alike. It is *not* a fantasy. Not a temporary affair until the world rips itself apart into wilderness again. Not a misguided aside. It is real. As real as the wilds themselves; an essential part of the wilds, some might say. My father believed this, even if Adoneus... You will do fine... Ah, look, the moon."

And there it was at last. It hadn't bothered to show for days, but there it was right where it was supposed to be; directly and perfectly above us, revealed by a sudden break in the clouds.

"Holds for a couple of hours, we'll be off again, McGee says," I ventured, the lump in my throat still present and accounted for, but shrinking, thanks very much to her; also the healthy portion of wine that followed the statement.

"Perhaps... you should..." she tried. But on my offer, she couldn't resist a last sip herself, of course.

What's more any further good advice she might have had for me was to be preempted by Undrik as he emerged from below the canopy to declare, "You know, this shit ain't half bad!" to Iorath, as he deposited an empty bottle in the Half-Straits, thereafter extending an unopened one to the elf and the opener, with a 'go on' gesture and a mumbled, "I can't... ruttin..." And Iorath, even not understanding a single word, smiled and did the deed.

Impressive as it may have been, our entrance into the town was little more than might have been achieved by individual treachery; the main keep was still beyond us. Thankfully, Maithellen, Comal, Undrik and I were on the job. We ascended the drain with one hand on our weapons, the other firmly pressing our nostrils closed; I will here omit detailed description of the sludge through which we were forced to trudge. Eventually we came to a wide chamber, if still one barely tall enough for Maithellen to stand in without ducking, from the perimeter of which dozens of other tunnels ascended out into the dark beyond his torch. Directly in the middle of this chamber was a pile of bodies and bones. Orcs, men and bears mostly, I could see, though there was something much larger beneath. I would need wonder at the origin of this pile for no more than a few seconds, for even so soon after having arrived there, the grate above it, through which a crowd could be heard roaring, opened to admit another fallen warrior. It was directly above us, I realized, that the bloody winter games of which Adoneus had spoken at Yaku were being held. Although Maithellen would be more immediately concerned with a secondary contest; that of the goblins feeding with glee on this pile of fresh meat that the other produced. The moment the newest body was added to the top, there was a flurry of motion and struggle to claim it from the slime-covered creatures crowding round it. Our elder elf was more than happy to deal with these alone. They had no hope against the accuracy with which he wielded his dual llang. Soon what had been a dozen whole creatures were made extremely headless. All while Comal, Undrik and I hid far back in the darkness of the entrance, as per the plan.

We were wise to do so. For just as Adoneus had suggested he would, Kaliya had long since guessed at how we would come at him, and a careful watch had been posted at this cavern. The moment the last goblin fell, the shining silhouettes of an equal number of orcs emerged from the darkness round its edges. Maithellen had no choice but to sheathe his weapons and throw up his hands. Perhaps it had something to do with those terribly bitter leaves Flynn'd had me chew before starting the cliff ascent, but no matter I'd never set eyes on a male orc determined so clearly to be my company's adversary, much less ten or more of them, and could feel my heart palpitating in intense fear, I had to consciously hold myself back from rushing forward to Maithellen's aid, for I could feel the blood pumping through my body with equal amount anticipation of violence as well. In any case, Undrik pulled me back before I managed to reveal us and a few seconds later Maithellen was gone, coerced up a ladder thrown unceremoniously down the grate from above. Only then did the brothers finally allow me to quit our hiding spot.

While they busied themselves with unloading the more interesting portions of the packs, I found myself unable to do anything other than keep as close an eye on our elven friend as possible. Now that the chamber was empty of all save us and the corpses, a shadowed corner off to the side allowed me a passable view of the arena. Surrounding the grate for some distance was the battleground, encircled by thirty or more vertical feet of obsidian. Above the wall was the crowd. I couldn't make out much detail of those cheering from the heights, but those seated in the closest rows were clearly visible in the hall's bright firelight. These were organized into well-defined and -barricaded boxes; in each of which a single, central figure was surrounded by an armed entourage of size surely corresponding to their leader's power and influence on the continent. I counted more than a few Silvern

among the dignitaries, and even more - equally self-important, to my estimation - golden-haired elves I took for Serenashi lords. Also three likely English captains, considering their thick tans and extremely well-armed company. There was no lack of dwarves either; Malloys all, I gathered from their fine, flamboyant getups. Not to mention the King of Sani himself, if the many standards surrounding him were any indication. Maithellen, I could see, had been forced to his knees not far from the grate. Two fearsome, horn-ornamented orcs towered above him, but they had for some reason left him his swords. Kaliya would need explain it to me directly.

"A guest!" boomed the villain's voice from somewhere deep within the patchwork scale mail I could just make out high up in the grandest box, which protruded far out into the air above all the others. "A guest who would like to join our games! Shall we allow him the pleasure?" To which the crowd of the heights roared louder than ever, while the powerful below eagerly pushed forward their bets, piles of bronze, silver and gold statues that represented equal numbers of slaves of various worth. Finally, after some minute or more of waving for them all to quiet, the armor shouted with obvious joy, "Release... last year's victor, then!" Here I will admit my bravery, leaf-imparted or otherwise, failed me completely, for the volume and duration of the screeching racket that followed belied the extensive size of the previous year's champion if the moving of such a large gate was necessary to admit him to the battleground. As did the rapidity with which Maithellen's guards flee him provide another heart-pausing clue to the beast's nature. Therefore I was not entirely surprised when, as the crowd began its cheering again and Maithellen drew the hatal, elven spear, that suddenly descended from somewhere high in the crowd's upper reaches, from the sand beside him with a rare trepidation of his own, a great scraping sound began to rise, which crescendo culminated eventually in the complete blocking of the light coming through the grate by what must have been a snake of sorts, though of a diameter of ten feet or more. The gems and gold pieces that started to rain down into our chamber, scraped off the creature's underside as he made his way past the grate, suggested that he'd been well-compensated victor for much longer than a single year.

My distraction would not last all night, however. Once the wyrm slithered past the grate and revealed its sinisterly functional head to my eyeshot at last, flaring his mane of massive, protective feather-scales to better make his intentions toward Maithellen known, Comal drew me back to my senses. "rasid," he cried as his brother for some reason started chuckling happily behind him. But the wyrm's gaze still held me transfixed and a second call would be necessary to free me fully. "rasid! It's time," he spat, tossing me my single stick of dynamite. "Get lost." My departure would be to the tune of their happy hammering. Though the noise from the crowd almost drowned it out, I was sure there were some above who were able to discern it well enough to wonder at its purpose. But these, even if they recognized the danger, would be unable to do anything about it now that the wyrm was free. If Kaliya had any sense at all, he was already fleeing the arena.

This while the fighting outside the main gate was intensifying. We had formed a defensive position a few hundred yards from the portcullis; close enough to be able to make a continuous ring set against the chaos of the rest of Adak but far enough to not risk the worst of the danger from above. The Serenashi remaining from their first attempt at defense had since fled back across the drawbridge spanning the ravine, now raised, to the keep's outer wall. Here they were greatly reinforced

by Silvern archers. Though the swarm of arrows was a constant threat, the combination of distance, ready shields and relative darkness kept our forces safe from even these marksmen, so eventually a stalemate solidified. Which standstill was summarized by none other than Favaris when he emerged to taunt us.

"If you'd like to join the games you'll have to wait, humans. There is a very long line," the Silvern shouted down to them.

Aedis saw fit to yell back, "Tough talk, Favaris. As always. Are you ready to meet your work once more? My sword longs for the blood of its maker!"

But Favaris just laughed, shouting down once more, "A gift... repayed by threats. Like father... like son."

This threw Aedis into a complete rage. He charged at the gate shieldless and alone, only managing to evade the bulk of the arrows that flew at him thanks to a hefty dose of disbelief from the archers that any would be so foolish. Here Durandal revealed its true strength. No matter the metal of the obstacle was six knuckles thick, the fine blade sliced though the portcullis with ease, sending whole portions flying off into the night with every swing. If it weren't for the massive, oaken doors behind the thing, we would have made our entrance to the keep then and there. But as it was, no matter its strength and sharpness, the sword could do little to the wood. It only embedded itself the moment Aedis attempted this second barrier so deeply that Earl would be the only one able to free it later on, leaving our King able to do little at the time other than catch his breath and busy himself with breaking off the shafts now protruding from his shoulders and arms. His rest would be short, however - or perhaps eternal is a better way to put it. For Sever and Renault followed his charge after an exchange of glances heavy-laden with unaffected agreement and decision. Aedis would last seconds more only, while his remaining bodyguards were taken down from behind by the Thresher's crew. McGee could only shake his head sadly at the all-too-expected betrayal.

In any case, here was my purpose: to open this barrier, regicide easily committed thanks to it or no. One may wonder at the size of the responsibility entrusted to me as thoroughly as I did when Adoneus and McGee informed me of their intentions. Had I really proven myself so capable? I thought not. Apparently, however, they held me in high enough regard to risk resting this task on my shoulders; even if I doubt they'd failed to secure enough dynamite to simply blow the thing open at their convenience, should any brave enough to carry the stuff up the ravine and light it in all the chaos be found. My path was simply laid out, in any case. It was no feat to find my way to the main gate's guardhouse's restroom by following the trail of children's toys named jacks, that have the habit of getting caught in every crack they come across, that two former sentries, both named John, had for some reason thrown down the toilet with their every use. And besides the few goblins that fell with little effort to my hammer, my way was unobstructed. My sole injury, in fact, was to my pride, received only at the end, when I made the mistake of looking up once I could go forward no farther, to examine whether that tiny sliver of light above, bounded on one side by flesh and the other seat, truly marked the end of my trek. But my revenge would be sweet, for there was an all-too-convenient ledge not a few feet climb up into the hole on which I was free to place my stick of dynamite before lighting it. They'd told me to wait until I heard the result of Comal and Undrik's labors, but I did not, so eager was I to strike before the throne above was vacated. Everything worked out perfectly in the end, though.

Our two blasts were nearly perfectly synchronized, and excepting those who took the brunt of mine (my assailant, unintentional or otherwise, most directly, I'm happy to say), no one suspected that the guardhouse was under attack, the rest of the keep shook so. I sprang up through the now greatly expanded latrine to end the dazed trio beyond it with my dagger, then peeked out the door to the back of the gate. By then, Earl had been summoned to the other side and I could see the results of his barrage on it; the bracer shook with his every battering. With all the smoke and confusion, a few seconds was all I needed to take out the handful of guards lingering in the area and remove the support.

Even if my haste perhaps saved some time and therefore lives, I regret now not checking first to make sure the way was truly clear. For as Earl splintered the great door inward, I finally turned to the courtyard, only to face a most disheartening sight revealed past the thinning smoke: no less than twenty men bearing no less than twenty hand-cannons, most of which were turning directly toward me and Earl. But we were ready for even this! A grumbling complaint of, "Move it." was the extent of McGee's belated self-introduction. I turned to warn him of the danger within, but my efforts were moot, for the figure that then emerged to stand beside me was protected head to toe in shining mail. As for myself, it was all I could do to slither back into the relative safety of the ruined guardhouse before they opened fire. But McGee was wholly unfazed by the volley; each and every shot bounced off him with little more than a loud ping to mark its fury. Though his charge was a leaden one, in the end he broke the gunner's line easily and we poured through the gate to the keep's courtyard in a flood.

Here was the free-for-all at last. Sever, now armed with Durandal, and Renault led the charge side by side, slashing and battering and skewering any who came close. Thankfully, the elves above had quit their rain of arrows by then, for they'd recently found themselves thoroughly surprised and outflanked by our Lleuanashi, wall-scaling friends. A glance upwards saw Gwyneira in furious battle with Favaris at the time of our entrance, as her companions, having left their bows behind to make better use of their melee weapons, slipped through the ad hoc attempts at defense to great effect. The greatest danger we on the ground faced, in fact, was that of falling bodies. And as I stared upwards in awe at the fluidity and grace with which Gwyneira especially bore her weapon, I saw Favaris's end coming as surely as if I had been the one to write it. Though his wicked halberd - half spear, half oversized scimitar, with a claymore's guard-straddling grip - of quality surely equal to Durandal saw little obstacle to direct clashing with Gwyneira's armaments, she had no need for the things to stay whole, being nearly as well-prepared in offense as McGee was in defense. A glancing blow off her shield and Favaris saw the opening she'd left for him above her head, which he swung for with a sudden leap, forcing her to defend this assault directly and at great speed. What seemed at first desperation, however, was soon revealed to be careful entrapment, for the spot to which she twirled to meet his weapon allowed the exact trajectory necessary to send the broken half of her sword, once he happily split it in two, directly, end over end, into his chest. And so, the completion of his many thousand years was achieved in less than a second. He had enough life left in him to grasp in complete surprise at the barb protruding from his heart but no more. He crumpled before her as she tossed aside the broken hilt in favor of her morning-star, which weapon soon ended the last few Silvern foolish enough to yet attempt to block their way.

My last turn upwards revealed six Lleuanashi still and she unscathed, Favaris's halberd now in hand, chasing the remnants of the wall's defenses to the palace.

Though enchanted by her dance of death, however, my attention at the time was mostly concentrated on the gate, through which Adoneus and Cherry finally emerged at the rear of the train of marauders. And so my own excursion into the courtyard would be brief, for I at once made for their side, as did Lyus, as they slipped from there into a nearby portal. Our path twisted and wound through the wall's interior. Adoneus led the way, Cherry was directly behind, then Lyus and last myself. Most defenders in this area had fled from our assault to the central keep by then; the few we met fell to Adoneus's serpent-pommeled carpe before they even had a chance to draw their weapons. After a flight or two of stairs, however, we came to the backside of the drawbridge to the town's wall, which was still defended by two ogres, both of whom seemed ready and eager to survive any calamity. But their ardor for violence would not save them. One fell to the serpent's dance as surely as the other met his end thanks to the dagger Cherry embedded in his kidney just as quickly. A single pat on my shoulder and "Good luck," was all I received from the lovebirds before they turned up the nearby stairway. It would be up to me and Lyus alone to figure how to lower the bridge.

We managed quickly, however; I'll admit thanks more to Lyus's hand-cannon than to any knack I might have shown for manipulating machinery. Two blasts to the chainwork on either side and the thing crashed down to span the gap for good. Comal and Undrik, who'd fled back down the drain long before their blast, were revealed in the moonlight plastered to the obsidian some distance away, trembling at their height above the bottom of the ravine perhaps but still whole, to my relief; as was I equally overjoyed to note Maithellen, who'd successfully maneuvered himself to the arena's perimeter behind the wyrm (who was not so lucky) for the explosion, safe directly below me. He was ready with his pack securely affixed to the end of his rope by the time I emerged, which he tossed up to me. A few minutes, therefore, of us hauling dwarf once again while Lyus, saber in one hand, hand-cannon in the other, defended the bridge from the occasional man or goblin attempting to use it to achieve the keep uninvited, and my party of two, dwindled from four, was now made five. We had only to follow the trail of bodies to make the top of the keep's outer wall, from there running directly, like the others before us, the quarter mile along it to where it met the palace.

It wouldn't take much longer to secure the whole place, for the sentries were badly beaten and the arena complete chaos. Hundreds in the crowd, the dignitaries and their guards most of all, had taken a lethal dose of obsidian shards from the blast, and the survivors had fallen into quick disagreement over who should claim the prizes of the deceased, that portion of the wyrm's treasure he'd dragged with him into the battleground included. The various English captains were the first to join us outright, and all but completed our takeover of the keep for us. Maithellen, Comal and Undrik, they say, managed to take one of the Serenashi lords prisoner. The others would throw down their weapons to ensure her safety. And at some point, a whole hundred orcs pledged their lives to Sever. The rest knelt in short order, for Kaliya had fled and those few truly loyal to him were long since slaughtered. Some of the Silvern would resist for a few hours more, but would beg our mercy in the end. Not that Lyus and I would be there to see it.

The memory most certain to interrupt any recollection I attempt to make of that otherworldly night, however, is one of Cherry and only Cherry. Of the evening I finally admitted to myself that I loved her. And I do mean love: as thorough and true a thing as ever described by verse, song, or prose alike, no matter what the less forgiving might assume to be my incapability of such sentiment. What I feel for Cherry - still feel today, until the very moment I write this - is something far purer than what I ever felt for Rhodelia. Far more thorough than what I feel for Peach. Far more automatic than what I feel for samara. It is an aching, gut-wrenching sort of thing I have for Cherry, as if for half a second, whenever she crosses my mind, everything from heart to hip was hollow. Like I was part made of air. A painful longing so deep and sweet, every time it consumes me, I hope it never subsides. That horrible sort of thing.

Well... I say Cherry and only Cherry, but I would be remiss to not start with Comal. It is he who generally tugs the first strings of remembrance of that evening upon a moment's consideration in any case, with his own summation of how he felt about the topic. It was the first time I found my way to the Hua-lei, shortly after he'd heard from his brother where I was intending on spending some of my recently acquired money. I was seated at one of the many tables the house's jihasil, 'recital room,' boasted, doing my best to figure how the whole thing worked; who exactly I was supposed to pay to secure the services of one of the girls, that is, for at the sight of a skull, I'd been ushered down into the elaborate, echoing hall without a word of explanation.

"There you are," he declared when he caught sight of me after forcing his own way inside. I recall how he pumped his arms to better turn to accost me. The madam was directly behind him, spouting what I assume was a somewhat justified complaint at his unsolicited, sure to be uncompensated, presence there at so fine an establishment.

"Comal?" I wondered aloud.

"I won't let you do it," was the extent of his explanation until he stole a chair from a nearby table. "Won't let you do it. Do you know how much these women cost?"

No matter the excited, knowing tone I attempted, he didn't even let me confirm their obvious quality aloud.

"Too much," he demanded. "Look. One day, you'll thank me. You'll say, 'Comal. Thank you. Thank you for dragging me from that place and setting me straight. Because if it wasn't for you, I would've spent every diamond I ever made there.' Come with me now, and I'll show you everything I know. It's simple. You take the money I'm gonna save you here today. And you buy yourself enough rice and beans and shit to survive a summer. And you find a nice little stretch of forest. Then you cut down all the trees. Maybe not *all* the trees, 'fore you stab me with those daggers in your eyes. I know you're a sensitive gune boy. But a bunch of 'em anyway. Then you stack 'em, one on another, like this, till you got yourself a shack. That'll take you a week. Then you start on the real house. Like I said, I'll show you everything I know. It's not even that hard; just takes some time. All you need's an axe, a saw, hammer, chisel and pencil. And a shitload of nails. After that, you wait. And just like that, lo and behold, like magic, one day, some pretty little thing'll 'happen,' on your little clearing. Works every time. Fore you know it, you'll have a garden, and goats, and flowers rutting everywhere, not to mention twenty thieving

little bastards to try to feed. Money I save you here tonight, and a little work gettin' it all there, you'll even have glass for yer house. 'Magine that! Shit, they'll be lining up you got windows! But only if you... fuck me dead, is that a *person* singing?"

'Fuck me dead' indeed. It was an impossible sound that was emanating from Cherry's lips. She was still in her tiny shorts and top; hadn't even bothered to change beyond slathering her eyelids with that pastel purple of hers and wrapping herself in one of the all-but-translucent slips the rest of the girls had on as well. Chan-Mi was beside her on a cello; this was the first I saw of the beauty and the last I thought of my money forevermore. She had started playing sometime before; a softly insistent, pausing refrain that barely bothered change tone, as if she were measuring out the steps of a wounded man wholly bent on an impossible destination. Thus Comal's opinions had been accompanied. But once Cherry opened her lips to sing, there was not a sound in the world that could compare. We were not the only ones silenced. The madam, still there doing her best to berate my advisor, stopped her complaint at once. Her face grew pale and her knees buckled, in fact, as if seeing a ghost, and she was forced to take the seat Comal had declined in favor of another table's. Cherry sang on. The notes came perfect and unwavering, as if she were immune to the need for breath for her own sustenance. Only her song needed live, and a beautiful creature it was. It filled every space with its reverberation, of substance somehow simultaneously staggering and suave. Comal disappeared at some point. I don't remember seeing him go; only a "What, me?" and complete lack of further suggestion later that the Hua-lei wasn't worth the money. Thereafter the madam and I sat and listened alone, mouth agape in equal measure, until Comal's chair was taken by a shadow that drew what seemed an unsurprised grunt from the woman and immediate, almost angry departure, no matter the serene song continued uninterrupted.

When the music finished, with the slightest upturn of her lips, Cherry bowed and departed. At last, Adoneus admitted sideways, "I had only the slightest hope she might come. It may not surprise you that she does not sing upon request."

I must have demanded the name of the song, for I remember distinctly how the jihasil's lighting created a sort of halo behind him as he said simply, "Without God."

The little halo didn't last long, though! "Are you blushing, rasid?" sang the devil as he leaned forward with a rare, face-consuming smile. I was much more than that! "I wouldn't put it past you, you know," he crooned with a raised eyebrow.

I barely managed to croak, "Put what past me?"

"I'm sure you can guess," he chuckled. "She doesn't dislike you, you know..."

"What, Cherry?" I spat; 'Please; spare me. Not interested.' An inordinately thin disguise.

"Well, that's good," said he as his smile evolved into a smirk. "Because that woman is mine. Mine all mine. She and I are the start of something, young man. If only you were second witness to my dreams as of late. Before I met her... they might as well have been in black and white. Perhaps... there is a wonderful, world-wide woodland empire in our near future. With queens and kings of the greatest beauty, if not wisdom. Perhaps. It is quite surprising the power fate wields through us on account of our fondness, is it not? Before her, I would have been content to sit in ꞓelia the whole next hundred years. Now, though... But we can only see how it all unfolds, of course."

With that, he extended a single sapphire into the air between two fingers, which the madam was all too happy to sweep up. As he departed, I ventured, "Is *that* her price, then?" I hoped to conceal my true intent by my incredulous tone; he saw right through me of course.

"Yes, for a few hours of her time," he said, adding definitively, "Clothed. She's quite good at go, in case you would like a challenge. For any more than that, it'll be rubies or nothing."

"Rubies!?" I spat; 'Might as well be a small nation.' He merely raised his eyebrows in way of reply. Thankfully, a go board at the market was only three diamonds, asking price. I managed to talk the man down to two.

One might forgive me my omission of this detail, I hope. For up until this point in my tale, it bore little importance. What matter, after all, the sweetness with which she told me that I'd changed since ᴄ͡lia, as she adjusted her strategy against a particularly devious move I made against her some days later. What matter it was my love for her that filled me with such surprising gallantry on account of Nae-Yeon; that even as I dreamed of wreaking my revenge for the poor girl, I was concerned mostly with how the deed might endear me to her, my love, my black angel Suiko. What matter the outright terror at the thought of her being hurt in a fight against the prime minister's men, the utter remorselessness with which I drove my horse back to Senna, matched only by the darkness in Adoneus's gaze beside me. What matter that extra second of farewell I made sure to give her before she quit the Siren with Adoneus and Marcello after our meeting, and the weightlessness of my heart when she bothered clasp my hand in both of hers. What matter the desperation in my trailing her up and through Ty Gwydir's walls after retrieving our companions from the ledge, dreading that every body we passed might be hers. What matter the soul-racking relief when we finally caught up to her there in the arena, and I watched her, perfect in every way, dance deftly along the line separating life and death. Or the equally consuming despair when she turned and disappeared after Adoneus into the dark, perhaps never to be seen again. Up until now, those terrible twins love and hate simply weren't very important. But shortly, they would be the only things that were.

Kaliya's box had many exits, but I was certain of which shadow I'd seen Cherry slip into. The pile of bodies in front of it was another clue of course. The tunnel beyond led after a short descent to a wide chamber, at the far end of which was a single door. Here was the black keep's first line of defense against its master's game-goers, not that it had done the man much good. The door was long since forced open and the chamber before it filled with dead. Fifty or more; men, orcs and elves. Some had slaughtered each other, it was clear, but our companions ahead of us had made their own mark. The corpse that most demanded notice by the story it told, for example, upon our entrance was that of an almost unnaturally muscle-bound, dual-karkadan-horn-ornamented orc impaled on Favaris's halberd so thoroughly, the weapon's guard was embedded deep within his broken breast-bone, likely the fractured obsidian behind. It was these remains the sole still-breathing being in the chamber was examining. Perhaps it was his father, I

remember thinking. For this lone living orc was certainly young; he'd yet to obtain any horns and was marred only by the occasional scar. A colt, I thought, would be the term were he a horse. Too mature for a yearling; far too freshly hatched to be called stallion. Regardless of label, however, he tuned at our approach so immediately and angrily, I had no doubt as to what exercise my mind would be consumed with next: a desperate struggle for survival.

He snarled, bearing his knuckle-long fangs. He flexed his wicked claws open and closed once, twice, then three times, synchronized with the slow start of his advance. Then suddenly he was coming. I tried to swing my hammer, but was far too slow. With one hand he slashed my face. The other he wrapped around my neck and started to squeeze. I was blinded by the blood; had no leverage to use my weapon even had I been able to see. My shield he tore away as if it were a toy. Therefore I was free to grab desperately at my neck, slipping my dagger free from its sheath. But before I could land the strike, he'd stopped me. I felt the bones of my hand break one by one as he wrapped them round the intertwined serpents with a strength borne of something far more than sinew alone. I can barely remember the pain, however. All I can really remember was the sound he made. I suppose it was more civilized than the roar of a bear as he defends a stretch of river, certainly more urbane than the snarling of a starving wolf as he sinks his maw into a rival pack member; but far more beastly than a curse spat at a detested foe. The combination was somehow more sinister than all; a wordless, hateful, gut-vibrating growl all too laden with meaning, that he made as he sank his fangs into my shoulder, just where samara had stabbed me, and started to rip at the flesh. la follia is what we call it in Terra; loosely translated, madness. Especially when caused by too much brandy, therefore drunkenness as well. Although it is much more than that! For we have no word for love, neither one for hate. We may affectionately call our lover ma or pet. And there is no lack of terms to refer to someone one doesn't much like. But as for the concepts themselves, it is only the one word we ever use aloud.

The blood came in a torrent now. I marvel that the connection between bones remained after he released me to take a breath. Lyus, meanwhile, being out of shot, tried to stab him with his saber but the antique blade broke on sturdy ribs. The colt barely seemed to notice in any case, showing only enough regard to snatch the remaining metal from Lyus's dumbfounded, dismayed grasp, not even bothering to let go of the sharp end to whack the boy with it, sending him flying. The next second he was back around my neck with both claws, fangs tearing into me again as I returned to gasping for air. He'd let go of my hand as he'd attacked Lyus, however, and the dagger had fallen to the floor. I desperately tried to reach for it with my one functional hand, but it was more than I could twist. I was left with little to do but count the seconds until I ran out of air or he chose to separate my more vital parts or both.

But the orc chose instead to prolong my agony. He gripped me round the skull and squeezed, as if he could crush my soul's container with one hand, blocking for a time the blood's flow down my face. I found Lyus first. The boy was struggling to his feet, doing his best to find a new weapon. But the few there in the chamber small enough for him to wield to any effect were sunk into a corpse too deeply for him to be able to extract; he was furiously trying to yank a short sword from an elven breastbone for most of my eyes' bloodless interval. I saw my dagger there

between us, however, jostled by the struggle to just a few knuckles from my foot. I did my best to wheeze Lyus's name and kicked the weapon toward him. The blood covered my sight once more just as I saw his head snap my direction. Long seconds, therefore, I was forced to wonder if my message had been conveyed. But seconds only, thankfully. I was released suddenly afterwards and I pawed furiously at my eyes to regain my sight. Occasionally I succeeded. Enough to watch the orc, now grabbing at his neck, snarl furiously toward Lyus, the boy unshrinking. Enough to witness the sure strike my little hero made to the inside of the orc's leg the moment of the beast's first step toward him. Enough to infer the kidney strike that followed by the now dual-sided desperation with which my former assailant attempted to retain his lifeblood. And finally, as I covered the worst of my facial wound with a fallen Serenashi's silken shirt, and won myself sufficiently enduring sight to confirm that I wasn't blind, enough to watch my serpent dagger embed itself deep into the villain's heart.

Neither of us spared much time for celebration. A second stray cloth made an adequate dressing for my shoulder. When I hefted my hammer again, the pain of the gesture was almost like greeting an old friend; it was the exact same I'd borne for hours at a time during my training. A few swings there in the bloody chamber and I could only laugh - though wincingly perhaps - at the familiarity of it. My thoroughly broken hand was another matter, of course, but shoved into the shield's second strap, I didn't need its function beyond staying put there. Lyus tried to return my dagger, but I only shook my head, as Cherry's shade opined beside me, 'That if you hold it and your heart is pure, that you love all creatures of this planet equally, down to every last slithering serpent; that when you hold it with that kind of heart, you're invincible.' "No, Lyus," I said. "It is yours now." So with that and a happy twirl of the blade across the back of his hand, we two shoved aside the bodies obstructing our way and the swinging door alike, plunging into the dark beyond without further delay.

After ascending a stair, the passage opened into a wide hall which extended in either direction from our entrance far past sure sight; we'd emerged into its near middle. Here the stonework was much less functional that what formed the rest of the keep. Every arched pillar, every knuckle of the hall's perimeter save the many massive, stained-glass windows at its heights shone with a blackness so pure, the fire from the torches threw rainbowed mirages upon it as surely as the reality of one's past - indeed perhaps one's future as well - creates image from the perfect void of sleep. There was a great commotion to our left, but women's screams could be heard equally as often as those of men, and these latter at least were made from every impulse but pain, to be sure. We had no desire to see what exactly was transpiring there in Kaliya's baths; therefore we turned right, passing door after door without slowing in our haste to achieve the hall's other extreme. Most of the portals remained firmly bolted, but one had been thrown open by means of smashing the carefully cut and polished obsidian into which it had previously been secured. Revealed inside the chamber beyond were more slain, though their blood was doing little to hamper the English remaining from shoving riches from a great pile into whatever container they could manage. These interrupted their wary watch of each other to join in a combined, suspicious glare toward us as we passed but nothing more, for we made no move toward their prize. Some twenty or more pillars and torches saw our arrival to a great arched doorway that sat at the hall's

end like an eye pressed against a telescope, past which open barrier were Kaliya's personal chambers. We knew our path remained true, for sadly, just outside the doorway, among a dozen fallen men and orcs, were what remained of Iorath and Sora, hand in hand perhaps but quite unmoving. We could only shed a brief tear for them and a promise to return to see to them if able, for it was made clear by their rigor that we were still far behind.

The trail of bodies led past what might have once seemed a section of wall, but by then was swung far into the chambers, into a tunnel that descended at once from the palace's heights. How many flights of stairs I do not remember, but suffice to say that by the time we came to a level path, I was certain we were far below ground. The careful, perfectly polished stonework was long gone by then. This passage was rough-hewn and the going treacherous, but still we made our way forward, our clambering progress illuminated by the flashlight Lyus had made no complaint about bringing this time. Thankfully, our way would be unobstructed. Those before us had cleared it of all danger. Here the enemies had all been orcish; massive, horned adults all, thrown aside as if by a giant wave, left whole or not by chance of the force with which the water met shore. Their bodies were not the only ones to be seen, however. Within the many chambers that branched off the serpentine tunnel were revealed piles of bones, not to mention the occasional man or woman; partially consumed all, sometimes dead as well, otherwise begging our aid as we passed. We spared not a single glance for the moaning meat, however, for among the deceased in the hallway was the occasional familiar face. No more than a few minutes into the passage, we passed the body of Milain, intertwined with that of the largest orc I've ever seen so thoroughly they might have been a sort of chimera. Some time after, we witnessed the last panicked breaths of Rhosyn. And no more than fifty yards later, Darathi, kneeling among the bodies of many orcs and some Serenashi alike, would smile at us then expire. Our pace quickened with each reunion, for not only were we reminded by their condition of the perilousness of the path walked by our Suiko, we knew that we were catching up.

Soon the tunnel emerged out into the night; from within the last tendril of Mount Olethe's rise onto a windswept field of variously ice-crusted snow upon which the Amician could be heard lapping some distance away. "This way. They're not far," Lyus insisted after the briefest halt to listen. And as we slipped and staggered our way off into the moonlight, paralleling the shoreline, indeed we could occasionally make out tracks sunk into the white ahead of us not yet filled in by the windblown sleet and freezing spray. Some seemed, like mine, to sink only half a knuckle or so, rarely deeper. One set of tracks, however, was very deep where it punctured the ice. And though more often than not the footprints were by the time of our arrival already completely filled in once again, where still discernible, these were over twice the size of mine.

At last, after what seemed an interminable trek, even I could hear the clanging of weapons and shouts of battle ahead of us. We had arrived in time. The newest Kikuaza was the first to appear. The ogre had remained on the snowy bank, hoping his weight might allow him greater stability than whoever dared to challenge him; while Kaliya, helmet tossed aside to reveal his contrasting angular features set on a wide, occidental face, and his pet Serenashi Queen, Helene, were making their last stand on a stretch of rocky shoreline cleared of ice and snow by the high tide, now largely receded. arianwen, seeming a ghost, dressed as she was in only a

sleeping gown, long sliver hair blown sideways into the moonlight like a memory, was behind them, gritting her teeth against the cold, nearly forced into the ocean by the struggle before her. I remember the every strike I witnessed as we strode toward them as if it were made yesterday. Cherry and Flynn were greatly affected by the terrain; their agility was nearly wholly sacrificed to the snow and ice. All they could manage to do, it seemed, was evade Kikuaza's massive macuahuit. The ogre had planted his feet and had no need to shift his weight any more than was necessary to send the obsidian-covered club zipping through the air over and over again. Perhaps they had been able to make an occasional strike, but their weapons seemed as if toys to the towering warrior, twelve feet tall at least. The three fought on unrelentingly as we approached. And the others seemed to be locked in permanent struggle as well. Helene and Gwyneira were in fact near mirror images of each other. Though the one elven blonde was swinging a mace and the other now a sword again, they wielded the different weapons with an identical ability, trading blows against each other's shields with equal intensity and fervor. And it seemed as if the primary contest, that of Kaliya and Adoneus, was destined to be as much a stalemate for the next million years as it had for the previous. The two were perfectly matched. Both bore their weapons with a cool-headed, patient viciousness that left absolutely no room for error; not that either made a single slip as far as I could tell. Adoneus was using his ᓪarpe - his longsword we had long since passed, discarded in Kaliya's chambers just before the tunnel - and mirror shield. Though he manipulated the things with a devious sort of glee, on initial inspection of the scene, Kaliya seemed the better-off, for he still wore his wyrm-scale mail, his similarly enhanced shield was surely far sturdier than the other and his gently sickled broadsword had a good foot or two of reach on ᓪarpe. But still their battle raged on with neither giving in. And the closer we approached, the more certain I became: Adoneus would be the winner eventually. He was tiring the other out, forcing the more encumbered to spend himself in defense. That was where our victory would need come from, I decided. Either that or numbers, of course, as I surged ahead of even nimble, sure-footed Lyus, making a straight line for Cherry's side and consequently the massive villain around which she was dancing.

But just before I got there, things changed drastically. The state of struggle developed far too quickly from there, in fact, for any description past a list of nearly simultaneous events, which I can only hope to state plainly, the time for artfulness being long past. Flynn, landing what seemed a devastating strike to the ogre's side with his eket, was unprepared for his opponent's quick reprisal. A single slip in the snow and the Lleuanashi youth was in Kikuaza's grasp. Cherry lunged forward, but could do nothing. Neither did multiple blows into the ogre's forearm stop the inevitable; Flynn was soon cut in two. The bulk of him would fall to stain the snow, while his head was uncaringly tossed aside. Cherry was next, it seemed. She had erred in coming so close. Catching her on the backswing, Kikuaza hefted her up into the air just as he had poor Flynn. But he wasn't quick enough. I was soon there. I shattered one knee, then the other, while Lyus took an eye. Thus released, Cherry was free to slip her dagger through the ogre's hand. And soon after, with a furious yell, after struggling with the thing's weight for a moment, she took Kikuaza's head with his own macuahuit. Helene cried out at the sight, and Gwyneira's sword slipped through her parry, forcing a desperate defense. Lyus was there before she recovered, and no matter the cringe and involuntary cry arianwen

released at the sight, Helene was soon impaled on their weapons. Cherry was already on her way to Adoneus, as was I. Upon noticing the turn of events, euastir finally began a wholehearted effort against his opponent. But he left a tiny crack in his defenses as he began his furious attack, which opening uaza, apparently, had been patiently awaiting. A simple, sure parry Adoneus failed to foresee sent the man's weapon out into the night. I watched as the twin serpents flew off into the waves and cried out at his foolishness as Cherry surged forward desperately. But Adoneus showed no such emotion. Though it was surely not the ending he'd intended, he seemed unconcerned by his now defenselessness. For Cherry was then mere feet away. She would never miss. None denied it. None suspected otherwise. And thanks to the final sword stroke Kaliya then began, that seemed impossible to avoid, Adoneus had given her an opening as wide as the one he'd left on himself. For there was hate in Kaliya's gaze to match even that in his. It seethed out from their eyes as if made of fire. There was nothing in the world the villain wouldn't sacrifice, his own continuation included, to make the strike before him. Adoneus fell to his knees and turned his gaze to the moon, awaiting the blow; as I cried out with renewed despair, for I saw Cherry's true target before he did. She knocked Adoneus back just before Kaliya's sword fell, taking the blade across her back from the root of her spine to bottom of clavicle. Seconds behind her, I attacked Kaliya desperately, but he was unaffected by the turn of events; I ended up face down in the black sand, for he twirled easily out of my way, the maneuver continuing to fuel a final strike that had it landed would have sliced both Adoneus and Cherry in his arms in two. But the mirror shield raised just in time, deflecting the blow directly into the sand beside me. And before Kaliya knew what was happening, Adoneus was behind him, one arm wrapped around his neck, the other the wrist of the first. They fell backward together into the last advance of a strong wave, writhing and twisting round each other in hateful struggle as I clambered for Cherry, catching her just before she toppled from her knees for good.

"Why didn't you just kill him?" I spat angrily. She exhaled once, as if to laugh, the effort costing her the last of her will. All she could do afterward was look up to the color-filled sky for long seconds, finally closing her eyes and going limp in my arms as I pled for her to stay. I looked for her dagger, but she'd discarded it, as if its weight might have held her back from her target; it remained some distance away in the snow.

When Kaliya finally stopped his struggle and expired himself, Adoneus released him to the surf and crawled hesitantly toward us, as if by delaying his witness of the scene he might deny its realness for the duration. But eventually he arrived to take Cherry from me, and screamed out toward the heavens, thereafter demanding immediately to any and all that he be given a blade. Kaliya's was no choice at all. I had none. Gwyneira refused, tears in her eyes; she saw what was coming as surely as I did, and though she likewise could not bring herself to prevent it, she would not participate. But Lyus had the serpent dagger, and, falling to his knees in despair himself as he looked on at what remained of his mother, he extended it toward Adoneus with a mere moment's hesitation.

"No," was all I could manage, but it was too late. Adoneus had already seen the weapon, the same with which he'd killed his own daughter on Kaliya's account millennia before; the deed was already all but done.

"Old friend," said Adoneus, half to the sand, as he took his blade back without a

bit of seeming surprise. "You were right. How right you were." And after pressing a last kiss onto Cherry's unmoving lips, he whispered, "My love. My life. My muse. I will follow you. I will bring you back." As he directed the point of the dagger to a spot of skin between his ribs.

13.

Therefore if I'm asked today whether I believe in immortals, I can only say that I can't really be sure. I saw two men die. Much I've read, heard and seen leads me to conclude that they were both over a million years old at the time of their passing, and I've never been presented with any proof that, had they not killed each other of course, they wouldn't have survived another million years or more. A month later, when we finally made it to Monvitori, an elven messenger came to us to make sure Renault understood that the new Serenashi King, far from bearing either him or Valverde any ill will, considered himself and his people deeply indebted to the heroes who'd sailed with the Ancient Adoneus, well-acquainted with many Serenashi for millennia; also a scribe named rasid was requested by said King Velanthas to please faithfully record in any works of note that on the night of testudo 23 in the Terran calendar, year 900 of the 1685th millennium, not only did algeneb, the central and brightest star in euastir, the hero, wink out quietly for good, but the north star disappeared for three days and three nights, thereafter blazing in the night sky with unprecedented intensity, which last bit everybody had of course noticed by then. It wouldn't be until we got to Mazminat some years later, when I was informed in one of the many taverns I visited there that the simultaneous stellar events were considered an accompaniment to the birth of our Divine Emperor Orula's daughter Oshunmare, that I took more than passing note of the star elves' implication, and actually began to wonder if the stories of twelve, reincarnating immortals whose spirits extend to the sky might actually have a grain of truth behind them. For Oshunmare's older twin brother had persisted, seemingly healthily, for three days; the same that Polaris was missing. But at the end of those three days, the babe prince, still unnamed as is the custom in the south until the first new moon of life, had died suddenly, indeed as if his soul had simply been snatched from his body; and the north star had reappeared, meaning that the new princess, of two souls according to most of the oso, was sibling to the now brightest star in the sky according to all. I viewed the coincidences in a bit less optimistic light; a pit opened in my stomach as I forced myself to admit that it was possible for U Votan to actually still be out there. Beyond noting his lifeless eyes with a grim satisfaction, I had no proof of continued death: Lyus, Gwyneira, frostbitten arianwen and I had barely been able to haul the bodies of Helene, Flynn, Cherry and Adoneus back to Ty Gwydir. Kaliya and Kikuaza we'd left. When I thought to return to the scene some days later to perhaps retrieve Adoneus's carpe had the tide not washed it away (the serpent dagger, impassive to the tragedy it had overseen, had returned to its sheath round my neck of its own volition as always), not only was the body of the father missing as I expected given where he'd fallen, but that of son as well. Although the stain in the snow where the ogre had done his beheading and been beheaded in turn remained, unwashed by the tide. And once finally back in celia, a week or so after Mazminat, when Earl and I made a trip for more bullets and batteries, I felt compelled to confirm with Maddox Malloy that Lotho was long since gone. A promotion, the dwarf had proudly called it; his former assistant was now working directly for "the big boss." It was then that the nagging suspicion in the back of my mind transformed into a terrible certainty. As I hefted my pack, I spun to demand whether it was possible for a man to be revived

after being strangled; Maddox shrugged of course, given the windpipe was still intact. Then I asked whether, to the best of his knowledge, anyone had ever come back from a three-day coma; he smiled and said that *anything* was possible there at Omni, Co.

In any case, our bitter victory, if one can even call it that, there at Ty Gwydir was the end of neither our travels nor troubles. Though the sky may only be divided equally into twelve parts, the year has more than twelve moons, does it not? My story, though complete in one sense, has in another only begun. Sever, with hundreds of orcs at his service, was quick to assert his dominance over the black keep. We were treated well by all of them, and allowed to remove anything and everything of value that we desired, even protected by them from the other English to a certain degree. But it was clear that our best swordsman had chosen to renege on his contract. All went well for a while. The Serenashi surviving our assault were allowed to leave peacefully; the necessity of this Maithellen impressed on Sever quite fervently in way of parting gift, for Ty Gwydir is well within the boundaries of the star elves' influence and domination. Those any threat to him, who had been in league with Kaliya and might wish to reclaim the keep, would be weeded out in time, the elder Lleuanashi said, since, all witnesses now freed from the threat of his retribution, they who had conspired to deliver their Queen to U Votan's snares would face certain judgment eventually. But on the lead orc, Xapo's, advice, Sever began a series of 'trials' for the Silvern. Most of the males were judged guilty of some offense or other and summarily eaten, as might not astonish one any more than it did me. Likewise the sad fate of the few high-elven ionnas unfortunate enough to be staying at Ty Gwydir when we took it may come as no more of a surprise. A Malloy or fifty met his end there in short order as well; their many Murdoch henchmen fared little better. The King of Sani was sent off whole, but minus his slaves; for though he and his men had wisely been careful to make no move to hamper our takeover, neither had they helped. It was the English, of course, that ruined everything in the end.

Captains Guthrie, Kern and Wellesley, at our service, they'd said. But Guthrie was a weak old man who'd soon fall to a mutiny. Kern and Wellesley, meanwhile, must have felt their portion of the keep's riches too small, and, along with the Cetula one lord Ledras mustered rather than return to Solethra, the Serenashi capital, to face his certain judgment, attacked the King Tide, Siren and Thresher out on the open water. The King Tide, manned in its near entirety by new recruits from Weiseong, sailed off after a single half-hearted release of cannonfire. The Siren managed to sink both the Cetula and Wellesley's Dervish at great cost of both life and structural integrity, but they would need be saved from Kern's Tritech by the Thresher's ramming her side, delivering both to the deep. Witnessing the battle from the keep with more than a single tear, Renault insisted that we depart that very day with whatever we had managed to load up already rather than risk more misfortune. But the process was more difficult that that, for all remaining from the assault save the broken of heart like myself had quickly fallen into the habit of visiting Kaliya's baths, the eager debauchery of which had diminished not at all over the course of the keep's change in ownership, between their shifts hauling treasure down the ravine. To a man, they said they didn't see why we couldn't stay, "for just a bit more," to assist Sever and secure more riches when pressed with any urgency to leave; the Siren would be fine if she still floated, supplies is what we and they

needed most. All as the now heavily bejeweled females there, orcish and others alike I recall with a shudder, though with the same soulless, hungry stare, gripped the sailors happily with playful nibbles on their ears, fingers and necks. A yet more thorough cringing accompanies my recollection of the tall keres tattooed head to toe in a soothing teal (only her hands, elbow to claw, were done in black, the transition from color to lack thereof an intricate web of tendrils that extended toward her heart and wrist but reached neither, as if it were her hands alone that were evil despite her best efforts), with a female's body to be sure but a less than entirely feminine face, who for some reason was clothed below her massive, flopping breasts in that sweltering, steamy hall filled with hundreds of wholly naked sluts, who suggested that I stay and keep her company with a disturbingly deep chuckle and too-knowing shake of the goods when I made my own visit there to try to get some of our fellow crew to leave with us. None who followed this path, in any case, for any length of time would ever be heard from again; I have little doubt as to their fate. Even if their help was greatly wanted to make it through the maze of arches and spires to the open water once more, in the end, McGee, Earl, Renault, Gwyneira, Maithellen, Comal, Undrik, Lyus and I would be the only ones to leave the keep whole. Although it would not surprise me to hear that Sever still sits on his throne to this very day.

We and the Siren, after seeing to her repairs, rather than fight the trade winds only to return to Saerohan, chose instead to continue our way to the east and south. We would come to regret that. For the whole of the year is the season of storms in that part of the Amician. We would see calm seas for mere days before coming upon our first. This, at last, was a real squall. Finally I understood the depth of Renault's laughter as I'd balked at the monsoon winds; likewise our continued boldness as that mere hurricane passed us by at the Hold. This winter storm hit us full on, with driving snow and sleet and any other terrible combination of ice and frigid water one can imagine to keep things interesting just in case the howling, bone-chilling winds weren't enough. I remember with the most thorough shudder of all the sight of the biggest waves of the ship-killer as we fought to stay afloat, that would rise up to rival the height of the foremast from my permanent post attached to the main. But once it passed, we and the Siren alike still somehow made way, so we continued on after making whatever prayer of thanks we each thought best. Would we had all given an added prayer to avoid further problems, for we soon found ourselves harassed by the fleet of one prince Thelos, of close to a hundred of the sleekly sinister Serenashi ships called carabosi. We set our bows to the southeast and every sail remaining to us was unfurled, but the wind died on day three of the chase, and far too exhausted - and too thinly manned in any case - to row to any effect, we were forced to turn to do what we all assumed would be our last battle. But so intent were we on what followed us by then that only rarely did we turn to watch where we were going so long as the color off the bow remained generally blue. We were saved by Velanthas's fleet in the end, I assume. We certainly didn't wait around to ask who exactly it was that rowed straight past us to engage those behind beyond noting the identical shape of their ships and the same upturned nose with which they held their bows at the ready. Past then, I guess, was smooth sailing. I will continue on in any case before I recall some other terrible thing.

Monvitori saw our spirits renewed at last. Jesenia, Aedis's wife, was waiting for

Renault in the throne room, her son Aeduard suckling happily at one breast while his Rease sucked equally happily on the other. I frankly don't know how they managed the feat; I don't think I remember a single other time the two princes were simultaneously both awake and not bawling. It had taken some time, my complete lack of contribution in surmounting the storm not helping matters in the slightest, but eventually, the event commemorated with a single grunt of approval as I securely tied off a line with my one working hand, Renault seemed to have forgiven me my many former transgressions. Once docked, I was rarely to be found far from the Prince Protector's side. I noted well the ease with which he and Queen Regent Jesenia settled into each other's company, indeed as if their similar level-headedness had long since been the true glue to cement their royal posts to reality, married in all but name and consummation for years. I remember my time there with more than a smile; it is a long way from an Archaean campsite to one of the planet's most ancient royal halls, after all. His brothers James, Ceril and Zed would call me Aedis the second, insisting that I looked just like the late King when he was young while displaying a marked improvement in manners. Also that I should leave nothing out on account of their hospitality; that though they'd loved their older brother as any sibling does, they were more relieved than anything to see Renault now at the helm of their nation. As were we crew who survived Ty Gwydir and the Amician's battering happy to see him at the literal helm whenever he deigned to visit the ship. The English New Year having just passed, the nameplates 'Decade's End,' so recently attached were quickly torn down in favor of the new title, 'Century,' plain and simple. All were very happy with this rechristening.

Maithellen made clear his intent to leave us after a few days, passenger on one of the many ships which today make the short voyage up the Virgin Sea from the Valverde capital to Annwyn. What a sad day! All that had sailed so proud and bold beside us from Hank's Hold, save what likely sat still in a half-house in Weiseong awaiting Aoiffelyn's recovery, was by then reduced in its entirety to him, his llang and a string of six braids. Gwyneira and her children were to go with him in order to pay their respects to Queen Athawyd and, in the case of verna, dencɲ and ɜn, visit the center of elvendom for the first time; in arianwɐn's case to see anything more of it than the inside of the Regia Heulwen. Therefore Undrik and Comal insisted they be allowed to go along, if only to see the children, who, even considering the full rainbow of gems to be found glinting from within the mountain of bullion filling our hold, we'd all come to consider our most precious cargo by then, back safely from the clutches of those treacherous, too-tattooed, damn wine-loving moon elves. Lyus would go as well. What had started out as outright fear of him from arianwɐn on account of his eager assistance in the death of her surrogate mother Helene had turned by then into unabashed and unaffected infatuation, interrupted only by Lyus's continued impassive but uncomplaining reception of verna's same sentiment, the little devil. All Gwyneira, ɜn, dencɲ or anyone else could do was look on in amazement at the state of affairs. In any case, Renault, McGee and I made sure to see them off. Their ship sailed into the clear blue of a tropical winter's morning, and, no matter McGee's insistence that we be ready to sail off without them, I knew we wouldn't be going anywhere for quite a while. Therefore I set aside most of testudo to explore Valverde as best I could by myself. The trip might have proved a logistical nightmare had I, no more than a half a mile from Monvitori's western gate, not run across the medina-moras, finally resolving

the years-long mystery back home of where they'd gone off to exactly. ɷ conɹardɟɷ.

I happily had no hand in tabulating the exact value of our treasure; that feat was accomplished by a team of smartly dressed dwarves, under the constant scrutiny of all the crew we had to spare at any time of course. McGee oversaw the whole process, day and night. He'd never found his sunrise stone, though thanks in no part to lack of trying. Therefore our collective riches were his only chance for the dual retirement he so desired. But when the figure came back from the head Allan, one Paudrik, funnily enough, after a furiously scrawled half page of division to determine shares among the remaining crew, he was angrier than I've ever seen a man since.

"Is almost twenty thousand pounds not enough!?" I remember complaining.

"Twenty thousand!? Twenty thousand!?" he shouted. "In what would are you living, that twenty thousand is enough to fuck off on?" from there reminding me that not everybody can live in a rickety cart for their whole life, also that some women eat far more than others. Therefore the attitude with which he received any Allan thereafter came as little surprise. And when they came to take back the Siren, it was to the tune of his most abused platitudes. I didn't mind in the slightest, for it meant that Nora and I now shared a forecastle, not to mention forty thousand pounds; so long as one of us bothered make the trek to the bank to get some of it, that is, which she rarely did considering how busy she generally remained, or the fact that her total deposits well outweighed her total withdrawals. I... might have helped with all that. For a small percentage.

So passed the days, weeks and months. Well-off English are no English at all, as the saying goes. We sat there like a barnacle in Monvitori's harbor half a year before any dared suggest we depart. But by then, the whole of the crew, myself included, was ready for a change of scenery. Renault, also, seemed worn by his kingly duties. What had started as an exciting, purpose-filled return to wise and fair governance after Aedis's nearly two decades of neglect and taxation had by then seen all pressing matters resolved and the royal coffers refilled – for the first time in millennia - by the Prince Protector's captainly share of our riches. I'd noted the wistfulness with which he strolled Monvitori's western shores in any case, and the length of time spent by any body of water, fountains, even, included. As had Jesenia, I'm sure. Neither she nor I, therefore, were much surprised when he made his intentions to return to sea known. "Por outro ratitio," before he settled down for good, he told me with a wink. We departed on a threatening cɔnsɛr afternoon, he, Gwyneira, McGee, Whaker, Marcello and I gathering in the captain's quarters to plan a route only once we'd quit the harbor. Marcello rolled out the map as he had for Aedis a thousand times, with south facing our captain, at which backwards thinking the dwarf could only laugh before McGee bothered flip the thing the right way. The voyage of the Century had begun at last.

One day, I will write about it in detail, but not this day, other than to note that our travels were extensive. We sailed the Shallow and Endara for months, accosting every slippery Kanakai female we came across until Renault found his princess. He thinks, that is; they all look very alike. She seemed to recognize the ship and was happily lured to the captain's quarters by dangling promise of a few pearls whoever she was. Afterwards, among many other (only slightly) less grand achievements, we whaled the wild, southwestern Aztlan coasts with a furry sea-elven escort, made landing on the Adalantan shore at behest of the Orula himself in order to remind

the would-be settlers there that without Imperial protection their every bit of property was at constant risk, made bloody journey through the Mana Gap without paying the toll, made yet more of a mess of the Shallow (which is when I discovered that there is in fact no actual place called South Fomoria), took the Siren back on a whim only to have our accounts frozen by the Allans, visited a certain island in the Barren Sea to play in the dirt, traded with the fat, peaceful orcs who live on the islands north of the Aztlan, revisited Dominica, Reedsport and Elendsall alike, hauled black beer to Bod for a killing, lost the Siren to the Seahorse II, Enoli and his wonderful mustache now working for the enemy, the traitors; and one day, some three and a half years after having left it, finding our accounts magically reactivated (We were all penalized a hundred pounds with the simple label 'piracy;' no small sum to be sure, but let me put it this way: the fine for littering in Whitehall is a thousand; Allans know who butters bread the thickest), on the island of Hind, caught the easterlies to head straight for the only place on Archaea where one can spend some money in style.

We sighted œlia on a frigid salamandre morning just as the sun rose behind us, Whaker crying out, "land ho," with the sort of joy one reserves for releasing a pack of children from grace to gluttony. Not that any beside McGee dozing at the helm, Gwyneira or I were up that early to hear him.

"What will you do, then, when we arrive?" Gwyneira asked me.

I had to think a moment to decide fully; the matter had weighed on me for weeks. "I'll go to the library," I finally said. "Find Rose. Somebody has to..."

"Better you than me," she laughed. "Still, though, don't you intend to find your samara?" she ventured. "They should be down from the mountains this time of year. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you."

I could only scoff at the sentiment, and roll my shoulders to remind myself of the sensation of their renewed full function in case I should lose it again in the near future. But then I remembered why Gwyneira might broach the subject. I had wondered more than once over the course of our travels why she'd chosen to come with us on our journey, after all. She could have stayed in Annwyn or Monvitori. Should have, more like. Either seemed a sensible place to raise her children in peace and happiness, with the added advantage that they wouldn't have picked up any number of English habits along the way. arianwɘn, for example, was by then all too happy to twist her tongue round the most foul of language; she could switch from the very model of innocence to full sailor on the drop of the hat, the impact of her coming statements only deepened by the fact that she had no idea what the filth she loved repeating really meant - or so I can only hope. verna as well, was less than positively influenced by us. She'd finally grown herself a pair of nice, meaty tits, the cleft of which she insisted on showing off to the best of her ability day in and day out just like Nora; her mother could only roll her eyes and do her best to hide her robes and 'armor.' And dencɔn could by then not complete a single sentence without either spitting somewhere or itching himself. Only ɜn seemed immune to us, her insatiable curiosity somehow making light of our most base of habits. The girl could walk up to a sailor while he was literally rigging the deck to

win at kings (a most dangerous pastime), ask what he was doing, and receive his most straightforward of explanations with little more than an uncertain, "OK," before returning to playing with the wooden orca named Fred she so adored, that a certain dwarf had carved for her somewhere round Reedsport. At some point, though, I'd realized why exactly their mother had brought them along. There was only one place in the world that could ever feel like home to Gwyneira: a clearing in the Terran countryside, lounging in a cœrevɜn somewhere close to sadɐʃ's. I understood completely.

"I don't see why I shouldn't find them soon enough, though," I made sure to add, sparing no time in getting right to her point for her: "pɐʃ cuaʔ cuɐ ʌandi bi manaʔ": 'Why? Would you like to come along?'

"Yes," she said plainly, with the tiniest glance down at the deck. Still ashamed to ever need ask for assistance, it seemed; it was her one flaw. "Yes. That would be nice," she said.

Therefore I told her to wait for me at the Prancing Pony, a slightly pretentious name for an inn perhaps but the proprietor - an extremely well-read Englishman who'd somehow washed up an astounding five miles inland; Gordon would always complain about having to make the trek for the one man alone - wouldn't hear of renaming it anything else for some reason. "I might be quite a while, though," I told her once I described the place and how to get there. She told me she wouldn't mind staying put for a few days; she had all the time in the world now, thanks to us.

Once I could clearly make out the seven circles of ɶelia, I went below-decks to get my sack, the poor abused fabric of the thing complaining hopefully one last time at being forced to direct my pile of miserable belongings to its spot on my back. After checking fondly on my dagger and gingerly sliding Cherry's hair tie into my breast pocket above the tattered first draft of al alonostra, I gripped Adoneus's longsword in one hand and hefted my hammer and shield in the other. Thus equipped, I made my way above once more, depositing my burdens in Rema before turning to the helm.

McGee gave a waking start at my approach. "I'll go to the library, then," I said, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

He grunted knowingly as he stretched. "Thought you'd say that," he said. And, pulling something from his pocket with a smirk, he told me, "Go on. You give that to her for me." It was a wooden sculpture of him, full, drunkenest smile and mangy beard most certainly included, though these atop a far more well-exercised, -manicured and -proportioned man's body, the semi-adonis lying provocatively on his side, twined enticingly though extended hand and leg below the knee round a similarly finely carved rose, the two making a sort of heart. "That should piss 'er off," he chuckled, as I inspected its fine craftsmanship. I even sat it down on the deck to see if it stayed put. No matter the gentle rocking of the ship, indeed mini-McGee stayed splayed securely on his elbow, the rose balanced perfectly above him.

"What's wrong?" he demanded as I turned it over in my hand to admire it. "Beard's off? Knew it. Rutting... beard."

"No; it's just..." I began, searching for the words. "I never knew you *could*..."

He saw right where I was going. "Here it comes..." he complained with a developing scowl.

"Have you ever..." I chuckled, as he insisted that I'd better not. But my mirth only deepened as his scowl did the same. I lauded him, "I mean, it's quite good. Have

you ever considered... changing clans? I could put in a good word for you..." His murderous expression would only lighten into one of surprised dismay at my subsequent wordless disposal of the sculpture in the Sudden.

"Do you know how long that took to carve?" was the extent of his complaint, however.

"I'm not giving that to Rose," was my similarly brief explanation. "She will eat me."

"Rose don't eat kids," was his unsurprising rebuttal, which label, witness to twenty-six long years or no, I didn't even bother trying to deny the old stump.

"What's wrong?" I was forced to ask in turn some time later, for his squint toward the approaching shore had by then turned into something resembling pain.

"Should be able to see the Whale by now..." he murmured, his voice catching in his throat the slightest bit as he apparently considered the impossible. Then, in as serious and somber a tone as I've ever heard emanate from his chest, he insisted simply, "rasid. Bring me my glass, please," from there raising the thing to his face three separate times, each time growing less sturdy of posture. He finally fell to his knees outright, all the better to offer the glass up to me wordlessly, a single tear - I lie and exaggerate not - falling from his cheek. I would soon understand the source of his sorrow if not its depth, for the tavern was gone. The rock remained, but it was now as bare-backed as an actual whale. The sad second I spared in wistful commemoration of the place was nothing compared to McGee's ritual, though. Don't ask him to confirm the sentiment, but I am certain today that he loved Cherry as deeply as I did; he took the news of her death as would have a statue. The tavern, on the other hand...

"It's alright," I attempted, gesturing toward a stretch of green to the northwest. "There's always the Wharf and Willow..."

"The Wharf and..." he exclaimed, as he nonetheless rose to dutifully point us a few degrees to starboard. "Five diamonds a ploughing pint. And the rutting smell. Like a fucking... flower garden..."

Soon, no matter either of our opinions of the place, we were floating a hundred yards off of said dock. I therefore made for Rema, as he reminded me that we wouldn't be staying there all year.

"Good bye, McGee," was all I shouted back, only bothering to add, "It's been... well..." as I skillfully released my chariot with a single hand as I'd learned to do by then, riding her flying descent to the waves without a single misstep. I didn't need hear it to be certain of his insistence that I'd be back.

Not having any desire to pay five diamonds for a pint myself, an insulting upcharge to be sure, I set off down the road toward Celia after tying Rema off and bidding the swift little skiff fond parting as well. I would soon find myself at the site of the late Whale. Being very early still, the way past the rock was wide open. Nonetheless, I hopped up the ladder anyway to pay my respects, only to come face to face with no less than ten dwarves, who I could only assume were similarly engaged, for they were circled-up and all quite somber, and as I approached I heard one, releasing his hat from his head to better manage what remained of his hair, mourn, "cheapest ale this side of Andria," the others humming their sad agreement.

"What's this, then?" I demanded, hoping to find out more about the circumstances of the tavern's demise. But the circle remained stoically sentimental and

silent. It was from the trio of well-dressed men off to the side of the impromptu funeral that my elucidation would need come.

"What's happened, good sir, is that the sea is rising, of course," said the first of them, with a practiced air of impatience. "Why this tavern has been allowed to remain open all this time I can only wonder. We should be thankful no one was hurt! At least now we will be able to direct the road to a more sensible, permanent place. Toward this end we are gathered this morning. *If* we can ever get to the business at hand, that is," this last with an annoyed glace toward the circled-up dwarves.

"The sea. Is rising?" I laughed. "What. All of it?"

The second was quick to berate me, as one does a child, "Does that surprise you, boy? We have conclusive evidence that the planet is warming. Warmer global temperatures means less glacial cover in Arctica. Less ice means more seawater. More seawater means higher seas. It is so simple, even the uneducated - like yourself, clearly - should be able to understand."

"You ever *seen* Arctica?" I laughed. It was still too early for any real thirst, so I didn't begrudge them the time for a brief actual education to supplant whatever nonsense they'd been reading. "I have. Do you *know* how rutting cold it is there? Trust me, the ice is going nowhere anytime soon. Plus. Know when it snows there? In the middle where it piles up? That's right. Summer. Can't snow in the winter. Too rutting cold. So. Warmer temperatures means more snow. More snow means more ice, cetra, cetra. It's so simple even the brainwashed like you should be able to understand," the second half of this in the same demeaning cadence with which the fool had attempted explain his infantile theory of course. Now well-heeded by even the nearby dwarves, I went on, "'N where're yer thermometers?"

"Our..."

"That's right. Yer thermometers," I said, turning to address the dwarves individually, each in turn. I don't try deny it; I'd become my supervisor at last. The true end of the world had arrived already. Nonetheless, I defended our planet's chances by continuing, "Your conclusive proof. Where're yer damn thermometers?"

The third was happy to inform me, "At the uni-*vers*-ity, if you must know."

"You must be the one what reads 'em," I surely correctly guessed. "Sounds like a tough job. Which... uh university is it. Which one you work for? sɷrou, cɘlitos or umaɪz?"

"culjya umaɪz," he replied at once, with the kind of dumb pride that'd always made me sick. "Although my associates..." he began, as if it mattered which of the essentially identical mind- and money-traps they each belonged to, for all three are named after trees.

"Tell me," I sang, "How many sycamores are there today at your uni-*vers*-ity? That's what that means: umaɪz. Big old things. Every animal alive loves the little figs. 'Ll only grow on a south-facing slope down here. How many?" He could barely start to stammer before I went on, "Twenty? Twenty-two? That's right. Barely a single one left, in fact. They all got cut down, for this reason or that, or blown over by a storm. Worse yet pollarded every damn year. Compared to a hundred years ago, your precious culjya umaɪz might as well be a solid slab of stone." The long dearth of new plantings had been one of Adoneus's chief complaints whenever the topic of the aθɘljθa - or indeed, the ɘtnea or mɘdia - came

up. And don't get him started on pollarding! "Guess you'd rather bake in your little boxes than let something grow taller than what you can build. Nice views, though..."

"Our data is... extensive," he tried. But I was on a roll even McGee would've been proud of.

"Extensive?" I laughed. "So you got thermometers in Whitehall too? Been there as well. Know what the Malloys say in Whitehall?" The only answer forthcoming was a curse directed at the clan from the dwarf who'd so loved the Whale's prices, so I answered myself, "*They* say its getting colder there. Suppose it doesn't matter much. Warmer, colder... so long as someone's getting paid more than, say, ten working men, to study - for their whole lives, somehow makes sense - exactly how far we're gonna have to step back from the shore sometime in the next century."

The first was happy to fall into the trap I'd laid. Swinging a hand toward the now bare rock beside us, he declared, "What more proof do you need than this!? The sea is rising and has been rising for a *thousand* years. Next it will be the Smoked Oarsman, and after that whatever other sad shack the poor cram in between society and the waves, thinking they might drink there in safety..."

I'll admit the boldness with which the man complained of the poor drinking in front of ten McGees gave me enough pause to wonder if there was some larger game afoot, but at the time, I was content to make a fool of him. "And if we were standing here a *million* years ago, we'd be *hundreds* of feet under water," I said, grabbing the bag that laid at the man's feet that I knew would hold the dynamite. "The maps are at the *li*-brary." Here, laying my burdens down for the moment, I procured a pickaxe from a now chuckling dwarf and made my way toward the rock face that'd obviously have to go. My voice still carried like a bell in the crisp morning air: "There is one thing on this planet that is true, my friends: the sea. It may rise in the morning and fall in the afternoon, but in the end it always returns. It is only on land that a lie can stand for long. One day, all of this... will be gone. Underwater... once more." I was chipping away to great effect by then. Between swings, I went on, "Your permanent road... Your precious university... Your miserable apartments... And our miserable shacks too... All gone, a maze of stones inside the coral. But it's not... the sea... that's rising. Here," I concluded, job done, tossing the tools back. Therefore, my departure set to the happy rhythm of repeated, great explosions, I made off for the day's business feeling quite good about myself, nevermind the depth of the trio's laughter as they reassured each other atop their slab of limestone of such an impossibility as a continent ever doing anything but sliding across a page in a book.

The hike up the rock face was as pleasant as ever, if as tiring; I don't dare warn off the wise from going to sea, but if one intends to stay in good shape all the while, far better to eschew that sort of wisdom entirely. In any case, the frigid breeze that'd started to pick up by then was little more than a pleasant accompaniment to the sweat and steady breath necessary to reach the top. I didn't expect to have to avoid anybody. But when I made the turn from the gardens, there was the cart being loaded up at so unbelievable an hour as four-thirty by a pair of gawkingly tall lads. I suppose I felt the slightest tinge of jealousy noting the trio of likewise extremely large young men then bearing Paudrik's loud oversight among the nonfiction shelves with practiced grace. But my heart did give dual pauses of joy to note a skunky smell wafting down from the balcony as always and a black cat,

purring loudly as she noted my stealthy entrance with one eye, cuff the tallest of the assistants as he turned a corner.

Regardless of how I felt about the now-functioning library, I therefore had to find Rose's hole on my own that morning; though it turned out to be no real feat, for by then I'd cut back drastically on the one type of smoke in favor of an excess of the other. Indeed, now freed from any uphill exertion, I lit sɟɛɾɪt after sɟɛɾɪt from my borrowed candle as I made my way back down into the earth. I caught her just before her own fire burned out for the day. She was lounging there in front of the glowing embers on a certain chaise lounge, nodding toward sleep, bottle of gœme in one hand, romance novel in the other, when I pushed open the door, releasing the tiniest squeak from hinges just starting to wear. She woke with a start at the noise. Though I almost took the bottle of wine to the face, in the end she recognized me and received me with a chuckling, "So the little acorn returns for more..." I of course had dreamed more than once of what exactly that "more" might entail, but had come for a purpose that day and would see it done before anything else. She grew as somber as me the moment she noted Adoneus's longsword, accepting it only with reluctance, thereafter examining its every detail with such earnest I thought she might never let it go. She only bothered hold on to it for mere seconds, however, afterwards hurling it furiously into no more cherished of a resting place than her mountain of broken wine bottles, from there sulking back to her place by the fading fire. She said not a word as I departed. The poor novel, I saw, fed the embers to one last bright blaze as I slipped out the door.

McGee's apartment was as locked as we'd left it, but not for long. The inside was the same as when he and I had fled it those years before. Not a single stack of balsa was missing, the empty barrels of ale tottered still in the corner and my mother's colorful dress laid there on the massive bed exactly where samara had left it before caring for me the last time. I deposited my things beside the dress and spent a few smiling minutes trying to read some of the balsa's backwards text, but soon decided that Rose would most likely not be coming to ease her mourning - indeed that I needed not experience whatever various sensations that might include until she'd slept the worst of it off. And so, donning my spoiled lordling disguise, a bit worn perhaps but still whole, with a smirk, I slipped back outside, took a moment to complain loudly that the library's supervisor be brought to me at once to the pair loading the cart, borrowed the horse when they left and rode off to the west.

It would turn out to be an exceptional morning, for I would be forced to visit three relaxation inns before anyone had anything other than hearsay to offer at the mention of the star of al alonostra. But finally, at the Heated Heart, if the sign hanging outside it be any indication of its title, the girl energetically stroking my back declared with equal excitement that not only had she been there that night, she was certain that the rich estate just across the way belonged to the mysterious beauty. So I departed at once, for after so many massages even the sturdiest of sailors begins to chafe, directing my fɐɲa the second - the poor mare was anything but beautiful; not that she minded, she was so overjoyed at the change I'd wrought in her daily routine - to the fence row opposite, where my own heart gave a little leap. For galloping across the fields thus enclosed was a dwarven maid I recognized at once, and who must have recognized me just a quickly, she directing her vœner via a wide, arcing circle to my side after but a moment of adjustment.

"I see you managed to retrieve your pants," Rhodelia yelled as she approached.

Only then did I realize the uniquely stained bottom half of my getup was the very same that I had temporarily discarded in a comfortable palakti those years before. No matter. "This is the last place I expected to see you!" I called back in all honesty.

"Yes, well," she began, now mere feet from me. She was as rigidly beautiful as ever, if with a wrinkle or two threatening under her eyes, as she pouted, "If I'd a certain sword, I might be in a far better place. But..."

"Aedis is dead," I stated simply. "I'm sorry."

She cleared her throat to continue without any seeming sentiment, "...but fate isn't something that can be crammed in wherever we'd like, as they say." Once again, a short trumpet of air was necessary for her to continue, chin held high, "Would you perchance... be here to see the lady of the house?"

"I don't know," said I, smooth devil that I am. "It's a fine morning for a ride..."

"Well, I wish you a fond journey, then, sir, for it is quite out of the question for a married lady to go for a ride with a scoundrel," she replied at once. And after noting my shocked expression with a lopsided smile, she added, "Not that it is much more appropriate for a former acquaintance such as yourself to be calling on the lady unannounced, since she is set to be married herself as soon as the weather allows for so joyous an occasion."

As one can imagine, I didn't know where to start my dismay aloud. Rhodi married? Peach engaged? What was the world coming to!? I settled for chiding her, "The lady, hmm? My dear Rhodelia, are you her..."

"Head servant, thank you very much. Yes. The lady is as gracious and forgiving as ever, though I should say her forgiveness may be hard pressed upon receiving you. You hurt her dearly, you know, that day."

"What day?"

"Come now, you know the day! Our first..."

"What, the day with the zucchinis?" I cried. But my voice, no matter the mirth that came through for a second, trailed immediately after into shame, since I'd always known it. I'd been Peach's first and had hurt her as deeply as I had the poor Terran maid who'd wandered into the tavern looking for me that same afternoon. She'd never said it aloud, but I'd admitted it to myself eventually, one lonely day rocking on the waves. For the love she'd made to me upon my return to the Whale had been one of a kind; equal parts furious, pleading and competitively athletic.

"Yes. The day with the zucchinis," said Rhodi, all business once again. "So. When shall I say you'll arrive? Is that... a watch on your wrist? Oh my... The lady is at singing practice until seven; dancing until nine. al opera is nearly rebuilt, though my husband, ever the artist, complains of the progress every night. Our first performance will be on the first day of spring; therefore the lady must practice. Either that or she spends the whole day eating. How she never gains any wight I haven't the slightest. After that she will have a brief lunch with her beloved. She might be free at nine-thirty. For an old friend."

"Friend? Are you sure?" I was finally free to complain. Even knowing I would not rest until I saw her, I sang, "Perhaps I should just ride away, rather than risk hurt to my poor Peach."

"Uji" she corrected me at once. "The lady's name is Uji. And you will do nothing of the sort. You are an old friend who we will all be happy to see. You will arrive

at nine-thirty. And no later! I will make the arrangements..."

"All?" I wondered aloud as she tried to send me off; the words, 'good day, sir,' so clearly on her lips, her stallion all but spurred off to the fields once again.

"All, yes," she replied with a new sort of smile, if one can believe it, that I'd never seen before, as she checked the beast. She continued with glee, "For now you will just have to guess who beyond the lady and I might be pleased to see you. But I will give you a hint. There are two more, who have been looking for you and your friends for some time. And we will hear of your travels, so please be prepared. Good day, sir. Until this afternoon. And rasid..."

"Yes Madam Duncannon," said I.`

"Mrs McGee, if you please," she corrected me, with her ready smile. "Nowadays I wouldn't trust a Duncannon to carve a single door. McGees, on the other hand, I've found are often much more than meets the eye."

"You can say that again," I moaned.

But she was already riding away, shouting back, "In the meantime, please be frugal with the wine." She really should have known me better than that!

But willingly or otherwise, I would obey. For the expression of alarm I engendered by ordering a glass at the first cafe I came to would be repeated again and again. At the next place, I wouldn't even get my prize; I would be politely asked to leave instead, without explanation beyond insistence that they would never dare serve something so terrible for the health. The next ushered me into what I can best describe as a large closet, where I was allowed to down half a glass at the price of ten diamonds, then with a wink told that they would await my next visit! I was seriously considering buying some new pants at this point. I've never understood completely what goes on in the ætnea. What else could such disrespect be attributed to other than the sad state of my clothes? But after being refused service at the next three restaurants with an identically immediate twinge of panic, I began to suspect that my pants had little to do with it. Regardless, I was starting to get very thirsty. Almost seven-twenty noon already, and all I'd managed was a few tantalizing sips. Therefore I directed fɐna the second downhill, passing the aθɐljθa and mɐdia without slowing - beyond noting, that is, the staggering number of light posts that had for some reason been planted in my absence instead of more trees - to arrive at the Hammered and Nailed, where I was certain I'd get what I was after. Considering the urgency of the matter, I skipped wine altogether and ordered whiskey.

It would be up to the tavern-keeper, a hunched, balding ray of sunshine named Otis, to apprise me of current events. "Best get it while you can..." he complained.

"What?" I wondered aloud. "Oh no. Is that it? Are they starting with *that* again?" It was a yearly occurrence: someone who thought his influence an unassailable thing would get the worst of a brawl and demand that the watch patrol for liquor. They didn't mind the extra duty, for the effort generally culminated in a single city-wide confiscation, after which our noble peacekeepers could not be trusted with any overly complex task for a month or so, until they ran out and had to start buying their serious drinks again. "Is there... a discount?" I ventured. "Last time there was a discount most places, if I remember..."

"No; no damn discount," spat Otis. "Where have you been? There *was* no last time they did this! They're taking all of it! Starting tomorrow, you fool, and dumping it into the sea. Me and my children'll be out on the streets in a month, so

no; no discount! Here. Take your damn... drink."

"All of it?" I cried. "How can... But... the wine. So much wine! Good wine!"

"Aye, the wine," he moaned. "And the ale. Good and bad. And the whiskey, you can bet on that! Better hide your cough syrup; they'll be after that next." As one can imagine, I made it a double. When he returned with the second half, he told me where I could voice my complaints.

Excepting the handful of times I'd stumbled there, bottle in one hand, pipe in the other, during my tenure at the library, I'd only been to the Church of Remembrances once before. We'd had nothing to eat for an entire day and a half, so, our morning efforts paying off no better than those of the day before, fernjard and I had dragged ourselves in shame to noon service, leaving content with wise counsel in our hearts, as long a swig of red as the priest would allow in our bellies and a borrowed loaf of bread under each of our shirts. We'd been two among a crowd of twenty or so that day. But this day was quite different. Half the upper daiɾas was in attendance, it seemed. They were swarming, thousands strong, before the massive edifice, with its distinctive five limestone lumps that used to be statues and six massive stalagmites that likewise used to be columns. Zombies might have been more animated, they were all so obviously sleep-deprived. They were bravely knocking cobblestone after buried cobblestone down the cliff slowly consuming piatza duomo from the west to better form an orderly line to gain the front entrance, as fejna and I strode toward the side. How fantastic it'd be if today was the day the place collapsed at last, I mused as I slipped through the southern chapel, cursing myself for not bringing my hammer. A stone here, a stone there... It wouldn't even have been that hard. I would repent myself of the thought after taking a seat in the back row, however, if reluctantly, for the place is as magnificent as it is ancient, and they say it is the oldest building in the city; over one thousand, six hundred eighty-four millennia young, nearly as worn as the measure of time itself. Although Adoneus once said it was in fact even two millennia older than even that, a temple to a wise sister of his.

I sat there contemplating what exactly I might achieve there beside killing the hour and a half remaining until allowed in Lady Uji's presence in relative sobriety (I'd brought a flask, of course, if one only partly filled) as the few hundred lucky enough to be granted admittance through the front entrance shuffled obediently where directed by the many ushers. I believe I was in the slow process of forbidding myself from peeing anywhere, priest's offering cup - if they even had one, there being no wine to dispense apparently - included, when Thera found me. She thrust her pretty face mere knuckles from mine without warning to offer a ruby for my thoughts.

"You don't want to know," I said, once I'd recovered from the fright of her sudden approach. As I examined her, I realized why the usher's uniforms had seemed so familiar, for her white and gold robes hugged her tight, little body in exactly the right places, just as Gwyneira's do.

Noting the duration and direction of my stare, with a nod toward the deep shadows of the chapel, she offered, "We've got a few minutes before they begin..."

"My dear Thera," I laughed. "As lively as ever. I *have* missed you."

"Poo," was all she said, though with the slightest upturn of her lips.

It was my second unexpected meeting of the morning. Also the second unexpected condolences I was apparently going to be forced to deliver in a day already far too full of that sad duty. As such, I wanted to see it done right away. "Thera," I began. "Adoneus..."

But, tight lipped, she cut me off, "I know. I rode down as soon as I saw the ship." She would refuse me any further attempts at consolation by means of pressing herself against me, pouting, "You didn't come to visit me first, though."

"Well..." I tried.

"It's OK," she said as she faced forward again. "Peach needs all the friends she can get today."

"Why do you say that?"

"Did you see her?"

"No," I admitted. "Rhodi..."

"Rhodi... did what she always does I bet: brood over us chicks," she complained. But her countenance lightened suddenly as she declared, "But! Speaking of Peach, seeing you's just brought something to me. How does that suit you, my muse? We were going to wait until tonight, but I don't think the others will blame me if I take care of it now. In fact, I think Rose'll be very, *very* happy with me. We've had no end of problems, I'll have you know, since you big, bold men sailed away. Dealt with them all ourselves, with the help of a friend or two... Ah. There he is now, speak of the devil. Our little problem." And she nodded toward the pulpit, then being ascended by none other than dɐtie Roo-zhay.

"le conɟard," I spat.

"oui. le. conɟard," she spat herself, surprisingly with such emotion that it seemed she chewed on each word. "Our Peach's dearest."

"You're rutting kidding me," I cried, drawing the ire of the couple in smart, matching suits who'd just sat down in front of us.

Thera shook her head. "She thinks she can change him. Thought she could change him, anyway. Until last night."

"What happened!" I demanded, assuring any and all listening, "I'll kill 'im..." But by then, no matter the steady approach of the happy, growing family that would shove in next to me, Thera's hand had drifted toward that spot on a man where babies come from. Would that I paid a bit more attention to where her *other* hand was wandering.

"rasid," she cooed as I fidgeted. "If I were to ever be in trouble, you'd save me, right?"

I wouldn't have the chance to confirm my honor aloud, however, for just then, spurning song and scripture alike, dɐtie began: "Ladies. Gentlemen. Thank you for coming to the last and final service of this aged and venerable institution. We have quite an event planned for you today. But! Let me assure you, there'll be no rising and kneeling, rising and kneeling. Not today. Perhaps you've all heard... Perhaps that is why we are so full!"

A surge of what might as well have been scripted laughter filled the ancient hall, as Thera suddenly left me, slipping between the columns separating the nave from the aisle to stand somewhere within the wall of white robes that stretched from the pulpit to either side of the building. After the noise subsided, dɐtie, churning the

crowd to polite chuckling with his every other statement, continued, "Like I said, we have quite an event planned for you. Among today's many speakers, we have professor Graves here, of international renown in the rapidly evolving earth sciences. We have the equally respected Matthew Malloy, Doubly-So - yes, of *those* Malloys - *master* of all matters regarding health. Who shall talk at length about his recent exploits... And of course, Sir Dal Omore junior, our most respected friend from the north; a procurer of good, honest women and men, many of whom are gathered here on my either side.

But first! Before turning to the future, we need bid farewell to the past. A fond farewell to this Church of Remembrances. May we all forget it as quickly as gravity takes it at last! Yes, yes... It has - at times! - brought the world closer to the ideal one we will soon usher in. Now and then, by the efforts of good, honest women and men like those on my either side, the church has been an instrument of good. But our efforts are thwarted at every turn. By the very 'wisdom' it teaches; that of farmers and fishermen. By the so-called truth of a world we can, if we all work together, banish to the past once and for all. But especially by the association of this worn institution to its core with a drink that sows madness in the hearts of all men. No more! That is all past. What need to remember it at all? It is to the future we must turn. And so, I give you..."

With a flourishing sweep of his arm, he yanked the black curtain beside him back to reveal what sat on the easel underneath. It was a single, ponderously large painting depicting a series of towers, the grandest and tallest at the center; which multitude of spires gave way by carefully crafted, sloping tops, like a sort of segmented pyramid, to the more familiar, ɐtnea-esque scenery round the edges of the canvas, where whimsical facades were set against streets traversed by countless tiny couples arm in arm and frolicking children, all of it apparently illuminated, no matter the blueness of the sky, by equally numerous halos borne on steel poles, with a single tree placed by the nearest building, perennials spilling from planters set on the balcony. A great murmuring started to echo round the place and the people in front of me began to poke their heads up one at a time, like rodents searching for danger on an endless plain, to better catch a glimpse of the future of ɕelia.

Turning back to the crowd after his own inspection of the vision, his voice echoing off the sagging wooden ceilings with such reverberation that the ruckus died at once, dɐtie shouted, "Omni Tower! It will stand here, where we sit and talk today, on this unused spit of land called ɑɾtiʊɹa, overlooking the rest of the city. And a thousand years from now, when the rising seas have swallowed the decrepit docks and ɕalifa alike, it is Omni Tower that will be the new center of the greatest city on Archaea. Omni Tower from which goods and knowledge flow like a tide. Omni Tower where art is created and truth determined. It is scientists from Omni Tower! that will *save* us from those rising seas. They say this church has stood for a million years. Well, Omni tower will stand for twice as long. Nay! Ten times... A thousand! It will stand, simply put, for ever.

We have taken the most important step, my friends; the first. You, who have given up drink willingly, are our faithful. Without you, it would not be possible to realize our ideal world. But even without drink to muddle and confuse our way, there are temptations. Desires of the flesh. Lack of faith. Here, in this book, called the Lexia, we have the solution. The Order of one Truth has already created

their paradise in the north, where the hated orc so recently reigned supreme. Now it is time to spread their wise teachings. Those who do not already have a copy will be given one free of charge. Take its counsel to heart. More importantly, follow its prohibitions to the letter. Only in this way can you become sinless..."

Here he was, to my immense and startled surprise, interrupted by outright applause. The women of the place especially were eager to rise to their feet. And who did I note jump up at the very first a few rows ahead of me but Venus herself, shoved into a getup far too extensive for her former reputation, though I must say far tighter than her new status deserved, considering her obvious pregnancy and the bowed, well-to-do man she dragged to his feet to join her in celebration of the impossible. All as I polished off my flask, wondering if I could manage to slap them all, just once, before I was tackled. A crow's distant call from outside the many broken windows topping the nave echoed my unease. dɐtie continued, unheeding of either:

"And so, with this vision of utopia in our hearts and the Lexia in hand, we may forge ahead. Fear not the slings and arrows of the unwilling. For what lays in our other hand is knowledge. Behold! With this weapon, any man - or woman! - can become as powerful as the most dedicated, well-trained of warriors. With a single pull of this trigger, a good person can end a lifetime of beastly behavior. There will be some tomorrow who refuse to give up their sinful ways. But their struggle will not last long. When they see and hear the executions, they will change their tune, you can be sure of that!"

After a second round of now roaring applause, dɐtie placed his hand-cannon on the pulpit, waving for them to quiet. The crow outside must have been curious as to the cause of the repeated din, or perhaps just alarmed to see so many people between him and the bread that generally sat unguarded behind the priest until service was over, the unused portion being thereafter dispersed down the nave as a matter of ritual as respected as any other part of ceremony. He sat atop the window directly behind the high altar, adding to the noise of clapping hands his own occasional cawing cheer.

Finally, as the hall returned to quiet, dɐtie deigned continue, "Let us not dwell on such an unpleasant task, however. Killing is forbidden by the Lexia, as well as all other forms of violence. Only a properly ordained judge may, after a reasonable trial, pass such a sentence; though it be in his or her power to enact any punishment he wishes for any offense, as the unwilling will soon discover. Let us turn now to the more thorough, long-lasting methods of purifying the soul." Here he beckoned off to his side, receiving none other than my dear Thera to stand by him. Departing the pulpit so that they could be visible standing together, he directed her under his arm to the center of the nave. And, after bearing frustratedly a trio of loud caws from behind him, he explained, "It is to the young that we must turn our attention most of all. The young who are born sinless and can remain sinless with proper guidance. What is your name, dearest?"

"Anemone," she sang, indeed as innocently as a newborn. A single moment of confused pause as dɐtie considered whether to correct the girl followed. But such detail was beneath him, surely.

"Well... Anemone," he said, complaint at her going off script not indiscernible, as he waved at the painting. "What do you think? Wouldn't you love to live in so nice a place as this."

Though she replied, "Oh yes... It's very, *very* nice," at once, she interrupted the sentiment with a stifled yawn, as the crow cawed above a few times more with equal impassivity to the image of so grand a future.

dɘtie's verbal response to the girl was too quiet to hear, though the true substance of it was wordless in any case; he crushed her against his side with such force that his desire to make her regret thoroughly her lack of excitement was obvious. After releasing her, with a chuckle, he admitted to the crowd, "But of course, the young are only sinless in one sense. In another they are far closer to beasts than any of us." Thera must have thought to second the sentiment, for now passing the front pew, she made sure to drop her hairclip, which she only bothered retrieve with extreme slowness and graceful arc of her back and hips. dɘtie, unlike every other male within eyeshot, didn't notice; he was too busy casting angry glances up at the increasingly noisy ceiling, where the first crow had been joined by a number of others. Now needing to yell to be heard, in fact, he complained, "That is why we must guide them. Fill them so full of knowledge, true or otherwise, that they have no desire to examine the world for themselves. For we are beset on all sides by the wickedness of that world. Not only by men who act like beasts but beasts themselves. Do not underestimate them!" Here, with a last angry glance up toward the birds, who must have thought their traded calls with the man below a great game to preface their customary feeding, dɘtie started back to the pulpit. A few seconds of harshly whispered instruction there prefaced a sudden expulsion of bread into the nave. Shortly, a single bird, after a leisurely trio of caws, descended cautiously, if surely very content with how his day was going, to stalk with stately awkwardness as is their way among the crumbs, pecking happily between his careful watch of all the silly people surrounding him who eschewed for some reason perfectly good food and the occasional fluttering leap in response to the wayward gesture or glance. As the bird thus intermittently enjoyed his feast, dɘtie admitted, "Yesterday, my friends, was my first time with this fine weapon. Sir Omore and I, and a few others, went pheasant hunting. Great fun, they assured me. But even though they were quite right - it was a fantastic time firing into the trees - a whole afternoon spent in the fields and all we came up with for supper was a few potatoes bought from the farmer who lent us his land. My future wife seemed quite happy with our failure..." This rare truth that passed his lips brought the hall to a laughter as restrained as was the single crow's feeding. But it would die on their lips as surely as the bird when, after taking a second to aim, the man released his hand-cannon right there from the pulpit, filling the hall with the smell of sulfur and a rain of black feathers as the rest of the birds fled the scene.

While the poor crow twitched still in his death throes, dɘtie yelled, "In the world we strive toward, creatures such as these selfish... things... have no place. Better to bring death until those who remain understand. That is the only way we can create our world without suffering. Without sin! Facilitated by knowledge and love. Only love, stripped of all negativity, will remain. All hate will fade away. The idea that they are linked, that to stifle hate is to also remove the root of love, is past. The heart - nay, life itself - will obey the rules set down by the Lexia. Or be removed to unheeded history by the hand of its believers. We must only follow the steps set down by the holy book. But make no mistake. There is a great weakness of which we must be wary: any and all acceptance of the world as it stands today. We must avoid belief in such so-called truth, for it is a poison. A disease that spreads with

its every mention. Only our vision of the future need be real, and so it shall be created. Therefore when you depart for your homes today, take careful stock of all your books and other works, even the paintings that adorn the walls of your homes. The first to meet the fire should be anything encouraging lustful behavior. But do not stop there! Better that you should burn every book you gathered together in your former ignorance, leaving only the Lexia lonely on the shelf, than you should suffer a single remembrance of the world as it used to be to remain. Allow in your daily lives no offensive language; by its very definition it describes the beastly things of the past. Neither should you suffer any music that stirs the soul to emotion to be heard. If you find yourself swinging in any sort to a sound, it bringing the body to motion without the permission of the mind, it is as foul a thing as drink and you must not suffer it to be heard by yourselves or your children. Do not allow yourselves to acknowledge a world in which insurmountable suffering exists, and you will be well on your way to banishing such a world to the past. And most importantly, though you yourselves may err at times, allow no such misstep in your seeds. Cherish the innocence of your daughters, mothers and fathers! Make no allusions, even, to that filthy thing called desire, until whatever age as the whole of their soul is firmly rooted in the society we create; only then may the act be described in a calm and scientific manner. Better they remain pure their whole lives, not knowing the joy of motherhood, than give birth to those who would return the world to one of wickedness. With such a wall of resolve their only option, the sons will attend to the true leaders of society. Believe me. I have been to the north! Take these steps, as the Lexia describes, to heart..."

At last, he took a breath. And as he inhaled, he beckoned again, summoning Thera, now bearing the awkwardly massive, bejeweled cup in which wine used to be distributed, to his side once more. She'd been chastised by her uncles to full compliance in the ceremony, it seemed; she barely dared look up at dɐtie as she tiptoed back up to the pulpit. The sight of her supposedly bowed caused as deep an anger within me as any of the careful invention that had prefaced her reemergence. But my anger, no matter how deep, would quickly be replaced by an alarm equally as thorough, as I reached unconsciously toward my neck to find that my dagger, whose sheath I had made sure to refill outside Dominica, was missing. I wondered at its absence for no length of time, for I quickly noted the tiniest upturn of Thera's lips as she reached dɐtie's side.

"Follow these simple steps," repeated the fool. "And our ideal world will arrive as described. So, before we hear from today's various speakers, let us commemorate our dedication by toasting. Not with that foul thing I prefer to not even name, but with simple, pure water. I shall - happily! - go first..."

It took him a few moments of panicked confusion, but dɐtie put the pieces together eventually. His last breaths would fuel a furious but futile grasping toward Thera before he, blood spewing from his mouth, nostrils and eyes alike, fell over for good. Thankfully, she was already on her way toward me by the time anyone else realized what had just happened. Only when she hiked her robes up to her thighs to make for freer strides did the judges turn, hand-cannons at the ready,

to pursue her. But her doom would still have been certain had I not dragged the woman from the pew in front of me by the hair from her matching man, tossing her as happily as one does the last sack of grain at the end of a long shift into the central passage just behind Thera's retreat, there to be filled with shot as surely as the poor crow, in such a wonderful way driving the whole place into utter panic at the sight of human blood and gore. If only her tits'd fallen out too it would've been perfect, but alas, those things were wrapped up tight. In any case, the judges were thrown into a desperate frustration at their vengeance being so efficiently denied them. They unloaded time and again into the crowd in their attempts to hit Thera and me, to my immense satisfaction and glee. I even took a leisurely moment to review my handiwork, watching the chaos unfold before me with a smile, before realizing that not all were as confounded by my cleverness as I might have hoped. I was forced to down not one but two volunteers with my bare hands, may their teeth grow back in the next life, from there finally turning to flee.

fɐɲna the second was ready to go; she even snorted at my approach in impatience. Thera, likewise, was eager to depart. She was already atop a fine, strong stallion, who seemed overjoyed at what he understood to be the situation. Thus we set off through the gardens of ɑɲtiɕɲa, barreling past the library and down the mœcsɲma to the west; she leading and I following. Would that it had been the other way around, for no matter my attempts to call out to her, instead of turning right down the footpaths toward lɐntini that might have, after some jumped fences and opportune, stream-meandering crossings, led directly to the road to the Prancing Pony, she took the next left, down the hill to the very source of the wickedness then after us. Although we were too far ahead of our pursuers to regret the decision immediately. A handful of turns at seeming random and she stopped to wait for fɐɲna and me, with not a single shout or sound coming from behind to indicate our pursuers.

I tried to direct her back up the hill by another route, but our lead was already a fragile thing. I had barely begun to explain when the clamor began behind us. She spurred her stallion at once, only to be forced to turn again, for fɐɲna, bless her unexercised heart, was already lame. We were forced to abandon her; may she have to haul only the lightest of books forevermore. By then Thera had repented her recent rashness a bit, and would insist that I take the reins. She gripped me heedlessly as I did my best to manage her headstrong steed. Thankfully, even considering the horse's obvious displeasure at my presence and struggle against my every other direction, we remained some distance ahead of our closest pursuers, who might only peek around a corner behind us for half a second before we disappeared round the next. But being substantially slowed in our progress by the ɐtnea's usual traffic, our return above remained impossible. Counting intersections, I frantically searched my mind for a direct route back up the hill, but when I made to turn up the few that I recognized, what did I see but more pursuers already barreling down it in search of us. It wouldn't be long before we were cut off completely, so it was down to the aθɐlɟθa somewhere around fortieth.

We chanced turning back down toward the sea, and seemed to lose them for a while. But they had swarmed to everywhere by then. After passing no more than three or four stately halls of learning, I saw a pair of riders ahead of us, and noted with a curse the distinctive hiss of one of their radios as the other informed all of our location. Good thing they weren't nearly as able with their hand-cannons as they were with their mouths. We were able to fly past them without either of us

being hit. Knowing that risking more than a few similar encounters would mean a certain end to the chase and likely our lives, however, I turned down twenty-eighth, hoping none of our pursuers might have made it so far from above as of yet. I was right; our way remained unhindered. Although as we passed the mɘdia, I noticed that we were well within the intermittent eyeshot of another pair of riders paralleling us on thirtieth. I had little choice but to urge the stallion with even greater urgency. The beast raced down the hill like an avalanche; there was no sight of white robes down the arrabia when we passed it and we delved happily into the bustle of the ƍalifa likewise unwitnessed.

Only then, when we finally slowed, did I realize that our steed had been hit. What I had assumed to be his fright at the sound of the discharge above had been in truth a reaction to the pain of the shot as some of it entered his flank. The initial adrenaline of receiving the wound was fading fast. What's worse, he was bleeding at quite a pace, and would not bear another hard driving, I knew; mightn't last the night without care even if we stopped then and there. So I did the only thing I could think of, making directly for the nearby courtyard where livestock are bought and sold.

The place was as busy as ever, beasts and people fighting for space with equal lack of courtesy. As I kept a watchful eye on the ƍalifa behind us, noting the judges arrive and spread out to search as surely as I did the trail of blood leading directly to us with a rare sense of dread, I zigzagged to approach merchant after merchant. A number would drive us and our wounded steed off like a plague before I heard a familiar voice call out, "Wait, my friend. Wait! Why such a hurry? It appears you are in need of a new horse!"

And there he was, rooted to his usual spot as if a part of the courtyard as always, pitchforking hay from a pile to just in front of a magnificent filly, black as night from hoof to eartip, saddled and ready to ride. He sang, "ƍani... where better to arrive at such a time? If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times. All things are connected. What is this life, after all, but a mountain of minutia? What combination could possibly fail to inspire the heart to praise all existence? For time rolls on like a song, every interval hit as it pleases, like waves on the sea. What has happened before happens again. Different, and yet the same. It is *fate* that has led you here in your moment of need. Since I am a man who specializes in beasts! In fact, your coming here is more than I could have hoped for. For I have a horse that was born for you! A steed on whom you can depend until your dying day..." I was instantly sold, of course. For I was in a hurry. How to pay, though, was another matter entirely. I would have been prepared to hand over the entirety of my substantial purse, some five or six gold pieces, plus make all sorts of promises, had he not with a smug smile continued, "I have no time for the beast. She needs a strong hand to train her to the saddle. As it is I risk injury to these ancient bones of mine every time I top her. A constant worry, this one. I would be happy to sell her to you - along with taking in your poor stallion, of course - for... a single pound, let us say." It was the most fantastic deal I'd ever heard of! To trade a wounded horse for a fresh one for a single pound! I couldn't help eyeing him a bit suspiciously, in fact, between frequent backward glances that after a few revealed a single judge approaching within mere yards from us, only still unheeding of our presence thanks to the train of carts behind which we were for the moment partially concealed. To allay my apparent unease, the horse-seller explained, "My

friend, look not at me so. To sell horses in Terra is to know all about its people! I have seen you! Time after time these last few years, as you ride back and forth, back and forth. When you make a splash in the sea, does the sea forget? Or do the ripples carry on forever, being ridden by the smaller, riding upon the larger; until one fine day some years later, you can watch your own handiwork return to you after traveling the globe? Dispersed a bit perhaps; just as likely riding atop your other deeds to create a magnificent swell. What goes around comes around, as they say. Times such as these, it is all we can depend on. Take your horse, son. Time, it seems, is short for you today."

leɟla might as well have understood every word. She bore the both of us happily. And just as the line of carts ended and we were revealed fully to the judge, she kicked joyously off to a gallop as if a gust of wind. I'd never ridden so fine a beast. She was as strong and enduring as the largest stallion but still youthfully sleek; we made our way through the courtyard like a fish wriggling through a raging river. She took to my management with a patience I'd only ever been privileged to by feɟna the first. And the way things turned out, her few missteps in understanding my direction might as well have been perfect foresight. As I failed to swerve her strongly enough to accommodate the motion of another rushing rider, the other horse gave a start at our sudden approach and we flew by straight. When I tried to spurn her on once past the heavy crowd, her delay saved us from a barrel falling unexpectedly from a passing cart, which she leapt over as gracefully as a bird. We made the edge of the courtyard far ahead of not only the judge who'd seen us, but every other still searching for us therein. Only a single rider was ahead of us on ʃəɟa ilɘl. But even so close to escape, the danger that lone man presented was all too real. He was quite ready for us, his weapon already raised and aimed at the narrow path we would need take to flee the others, as if all the fortune to befall us that day and indeed for the rest of our lives previous had only existed to deliver us to that moment; that certain end. But just as we swerved in a desperate attempt to evade his blast, three crows descended from the sky to claw at his face and hands. He angrily turned to fire on the birds, hoping that he might have time to get us with his second shot, and I gave an involuntary cry at the thought of our rescuers ended as terribly as their brethren cold and trampled in the nave of the church above. So it might have come to pass, had the weapon not backfired and exploded in what used to be the villain's hand. We could hear his loud disappointment for some seconds after passing him, even at the speed leɟla was happy to achieve afterward, along with a frenzied cawing cheer from all around.

We barreled up the sea road to the north at a steady gallop, drawing the ire of all those we passed; those unprepared, in any case, to dive headlong into the nearest alley to avoid our sudden approach. Then once past the ɘtnea, I let the filly have her full freedom at last. We sped ahead, leaving all our pursuers choking on the dust. I said a prayer that must have been heard, for when we passed the site of the Whale, there was no traffic; the McGees had long since finished allowing what had backed up during their last blast by as they prepared the next. One of the them was just starting to accost passerby again when we flew across the limestone ledge without a single obstruction beyond his quickly aborted attempt to halt us. Those behind us must not have been so lucky, for we wouldn't see them again that day. All while the explosion set off shortly after our departure only encouraged leɟla to yet greater speed forward.

But we weren't in the clear yet! The trap of the city we might have escaped, but in spending so much time there, we'd allowed those who knew the surrounding roads more than enough time to intercept our flight. As we approached the intersection with the road to Lentini, I could see a cloud of dust rising from between the trees on its either side. And when we finally came to the clearing round the crossing, I despaired to see no less than ten horses racing down the road toward us, the leaders of which were on a course for certain interception.

But it would be the last time I'd have to. For a while, anyway; since it was right then that Rhodi and her mystery guests, Aoiffelyn and Ementhygar, finally arrived to save the day. And not just them but that same Sir Lance-a-lot and a certain former watchman named John, both of whom were also crazy and loved a good fight. Four of the descending horses, therefore, were bearing not judges but friends; Rhodi and Aoiffelyn were sharing her vœner, the ionna balancing contentedly, as if a training martial artist perched in standing meditation on an unmoving pillar, on the beast's rump as they flew by. Another trio of horses were already riderless, only continuing with the rest of the makeshift herd instinctively. I would watch another two judges fall to an arrow each before they even reached us; the final one would fly past us to the north without a single thought on his mind except his own escape.

Now. I will describe what happened next as best as I can. But given the circumstances, I will not fail to make note here that had I the paper, I might spend a further two or three pages delving into the exact physics of my greatness. And one is certainly welcome to trace the maneuver I made in one's mind at whatever length one chooses. Suffice to say we were not quite free from danger yet. For coming straight for us from the north, just then passing the Wharf and Willow, were five more riders, the slowest of which was an excessively large man; Omore Jr, I assume. I never stopped to ask. With an impossibly awesome shot given the speeds and obstacles involved, Ementhygar felled the furthest from their approach. Lance-a-lot impaled the closest immediately after with a no-less-ably handled spear. John took the lead two; the crew would laughingly pick up pieces of skull from all around for weeks, he shot them so close. But Rhodi and Aoiffelyn, intent on the one still fleeing, had barely noticed that these new riders were also dressed all in white; Omore had them well within his sights. Too bad for him we got there just a second before. He might have made his shot had he truly committed, but upon noting me flying through the air toward him, all he managed to do was cringe and cry out, "Wait!" But I had no choice. I needed slow my flight to be able to land in one piece. The chase would conclude - as all good fights should end - with a single punch; that bore some accumulated righteousness, I suppose, and all the rest of whatever I made up before, propelled as it was by the giant, leaping bound I made from one horse to the other.

I will here omit the vast majority of the details of that afternoon, for they are quite private. But I will mention that, given the questionable state of the bones of my right hand, I was almost as happy to see Hendrik McGee attending to Peach as I was the girl herself. Even if he now demanded two-fifty for his magic potion. More importantly, to my immense relief, my Uji was not nearly as battered as I'd feared. No matter the length of Rhodi's fretting before she finally left us alone, the girl in fact looked perfectly fine; only her voice was a bit raspy. Although her previously permanent smile was conspicuously absent for the remainder of the day and would fade with a rapidity comparable to normal people's forever thereafter. My well-practiced speech explaining in detail what had happened to Cherry became a half-truth hastily forced through tears as I tied back her hair; that her sister was traveling for a while longer, but Adoneus would shortly fetch her. She told me of the day Cherry had appeared at the orphanage out of the blue, demanding with her usual expectation of compliance that from then on they would be siblings. Thinking I might be the only one of us privileged with the truth of their relationship, I thought to spit out something to that effect, but she cut me off before I could utter a sound by insisting, "She was always there for me, even before then..." with a knowing, almost defensive stare. The waterworks started all over again. We talked at great length once we finally released each other. Every time I affectionately brushed the stray hair from her ears as we talked, she gave the slightest twitch, explaining after a few that she'd never much liked anyone to touch them; not even as a child. All as I noted the faintest, tiniest scars on their very tops.

I would spend another two days and nights there in ꞓelia, very much because, once ensconced back in McGee's apartment, I received a visit from Rose, Thera and Rhodi all together, the last bearing two zucchinis, a cucumber, an eggplant and that newest, mischievous smirk of hers. Which debauchery deserved multiple encores of course. But I also stayed because I found three separate works there that would demand my every other minute of attention. The first was a complaint in form somewhere between pamphlet and book brought up from the library's lowest depths tossed haphazardly on the bedside table, that I'd noted before but never taken the time to read. I've included the first few pages as an appendix as I believe Adoneus would have wanted me to. The second was the substantially thicker volume on which the first was perched, of which I had likewise never thought much; a detailed recent history of Saerohan starting with the causes and campaigns of the unification in 875 up until Huanung's assassination in 881. The moment I cracked the spine, it opened to a well-worn page near the end describing what little was known of a certain nameless courtesan, who had stolen the King's heart completely after he was forced by political rivals to exile his fire sorceress, and who was, to the authors estimation, certain to have killed him, for the day his body was found was the same she'd mysteriously disappeared, never to be seen again. And the last - which demanded far more of my time than the other two; indeed I needed read it cover to cover twice to appreciate it completely - was a handwritten journal that I found in the drawer beneath, under a subtly constructed but obvious false bottom given its depth, that I assumed was fiction at first, it beginning quite dramatically: 'panθɘra 3, 882: I've never been one for journals; for recording what will likely never be read, but today I make an exception, since I've met the most wondrous woman this morning, who I am certain is here, willingly or otherwise, to kill me.' I realized quickly that every word was truth.

So absorbed was I by the tale of Adoneus and Cherry's romance that I might have stayed there reading the thing over and over, in fact, if it weren't for the dream I had on the second night. I remember it as well as any, it today occupying that largest nook associated with sleep's record in my consciousness; that reserved for recognition of the fact that they do in fact occur, and at the time of their suffering often seem far more real than life itself. It also, I will only summarize, mostly because to truly experience its substance one must pay the very reasonable ten diamonds for a lawn ticket to ʌɐndrites. The second act, widely lauded, is essentially the dream from start to finish. All I will mention, therefore, on this topic is the vision's conclusion, where Adoneus and I, making through a deep wood, are beset by Dryad after Dryad, each correcting the previous's label of him. 'That's ɑmadios,' says one, biting the air twice at me. 'No, that's psilas' the next, swinging through the trees. 'lɷmpɐter,' the next. ɐljuθɐrios, lisɟos, mistes, zɷgrius... This goes on for literally dozens of epithets, until I am walking alone. How I remembered them all from that single book describing the gods of some ancient people, that I've never been able to find since, that I'd, quite stoned at the time if I indeed recall correctly, picked up to peruse at random from the cart on the very first day of my employment at the library, I will never know. But remember them all I did. The names in fact flowed from the depths of my memory onto the paper with ease, exactly as if, as ʌɐndrites claims, among the twelve primal spirits is a single one that resides not in the majesty of the inanimate, but the spirit of all organisms; who is both life and death in their purest forms, and who can as such be summoned to dwell for a time in one's heart whenever one desires - *if* one fears not to do so.

In any case, all the dream reminded me of the next morning was the fact that I hadn't seen leaves or even the sky in a number of days, so I packed up and left for the Prancing Pony at last, convincing Thera to lend me her elven guards/fellow-acorn-distributors for a few days. (She refuses me no requests to this very day, and I mean *none*.) Lyus we picked up on his way there from the ships as well. Ementhygar knew exactly where the mʌiɟas were; it was in fact with them that he and Aoiffelyn had spent the majority of the last year, awaiting Gwyneira's inevitable return to their camp. He let me lead the last half mile; as soon as I realized the only one of their spots we might be headed towards was the island formed by a closed-off turn in the θɑban river, covered throughout with oaks and sɷrou. As Gwyneira made her tearful introductions, I slipped away, off to a brand-new, richly adorned cɷrevɜn that I saw tucked off in a private nook away from the river under a few of the evergreens. I might have made the thing unnoticed had a certain little runt not, quite stealthily, if I do say so myself, run up to me from behind and uppercutted me directly in the crotch.

"azama talabi ʒ'ɑŋ peɡ," chuckled ʒeaŋ in way of explanation, as I grabbed confoundedly at myself, when he appeared from the trees carrying a bundle of wood, "tɑa'ce ʈaʌ ɛisi suʁ'ce yeɡuʁ solpei aman bi yigalɐn loɒɡɑ ce peri fi ɑ wɛlɑs.": 'Every time she asks about her father, all *someone* says is that she should punch any man with long arms she sees in the balls.'

He departed without another word, shaking his head. My assailant attempted to follow, but, "mɐɟi," I cried "li puʁ ʒisi pa mana sɑna ma ʈeɡa?": 'Can you tell your mother something for me?'

She consented with a suspicious shrug far beyond her three years.

"ɛani, ɒisi a arɚθuza ce vɐcie sadiq sta ʈaʌa pa eɟɜnʈi. oui arɚθuza. sɑna ma,":

'Well, you tell Arethusa that an old friend is here to see her,' said I with a smirk, for I'd gotten the story from Renault eventually. I sidled up to the cœrevɜn's side to overhear my message's delivery.

"uma, suɤ aɾɘθuza?" said the girl.

"aɾɘθuza?" spat samara. Then mumbles. Then, "mɘɹi! ɵa tamart?": 'Wait. Does he have a beard?'

I poked my head round the corner to demonstrate that indeed I had shaven that morning.

"ɛŋ," responded the waif, now enjoying the game, considering the depths of terror this delivered her mother to. The cœrevɜn literally shook with the fury of her preparation; even if when I was finally allowed entrance, she was calmly stroking her hair with a certain mahogany-handled brush as if she'd been doing nothing else with the whole of her day.

"ɒɷ. suɤ *vu*," she said.

But her disappointment would not last beyond my pulling out a pair of earrings I'd had made in Whitehall, with matching rubies of distinctive size.

Indeed, "suɤ tiʌi ʒ'ɒnɷ wɬɒs," said my young love when she finally clapped eyes on them. She was a very different person after that!

We would remain thoroughly occupied, in fact, until a sudden triple staccato banging on her window some hour later. "ya ʛara, suɤ Dunedin," she exclaimed, from there doing her best to shove me out a trap door in the cœrevɜn's rear. The dwarf must have been filled with pluck that day, however, for he made the front quicker than expected; just as I was reaching back through for my pants.

Thankfully, I was dressed and departing by the time my sweet aɾɘθuza let him after me. verna was quite popular already, I was happy to see. She was surrounded by no less than five young mɤʌiɹa boys. Aoiffelyn was then helping ʒeaŋ start the fire that would cook the massive ten-horn sadɘʃ and two of his grandsons had just hauled back. Lyus had arianwɜn up against a tree, meanwhile. He was leaning on it to bend to whisper something in her ear. She didn't seem to mind, if the deep blush and wholehearted smile then spreading across her face were any indication. And I could hear Gwyneira suggesting that gita and dencɲn go run off and leave her, ɜn, Ementhygar and sadɘʃ alone when I came to fetch leɲla. He seemed surprised by my sudden approach; apparently no one had bothered tell him that I was the one who'd brought them all there. ɷ conɲardɲɷ. No matter. I wish I'd had more time for salutations, but as it was, Dunedin was after me already, clenching his fists with the very real kind of anger I knew I should avoid. So I pulled a pound from my pocket - I don't think he minded that all I had on me at the time was gold - as leɲla reared up in preparation for flight, tossed it to sadɘʃ without a word and made my rapid exit.

"You're a scoundrel," he said once he'd caught it and slipped it in his pocket while Dunedin was busy yelling after me, adding to the complaint, "A complete scoundrel, Rasid McGee!"

Appendix:

To summarize first of all; the current theories of continental drift, supercontinent formation, seafloor spreading and mountain range formation, as well as all other geologic thought based primarily on the fantasy of permanence of continents, while loosely supported by sound sciences like seismology and paleontology, are all false. They are not just false; they are ridiculous. If Pangaea ever existed, it would have been covered two-thirds in water like the rest of the Earth, the center of mass of the planet having been moved so much toward it over the course of its creation. However, let us count their merits so that we can more easily disprove them. They are initially appealing to explain many phenomena:

1. Continuity of Cynognathus, Mesosaurus, Lystrosaurus, three terrestrial animal species alive approximately 240, 280 and 250 million years ago respectively, and Glyossopteris, a fern extant for all of this period, fossils between South America, Africa and Antarctica.

2. Continuity of geologic features; primarily the approximate age of bedrock exposed today between areas of not only South America and Africa but also North America and Europe.

3. The presence of alternating bands of polarity in igneous rock formed at mid-ocean ridges, suggesting continual spreading as the Earth's magnetic field flipped over time.

4. The presence of lingering traces of magnetism in exposed, igneous rock around the world that not only doesn't align perfectly with today's magnetic poles, but also whose vertical component demands interpretation that said rock was formed at a different magnetic latitude than it lies at today.

5. Evidence of glaciation 300 million years ago across South America, Africa, Antarctica, Australia and India.

6. The simple fact that Antarctica has ever supported temperate or perhaps even tropical life.

7. The continents fit together, sort of. Supposedly.

Well, that was fun. Let's take it one at a time, bottom to top.

7. The fit. Except for South America and Africa - sort of - they don't.

6. Life in Antarctica. Climate change is an obvious possibility, and in fact all evidence points to the average temperature of the Earth being substantially higher than today for most of its history. But given the extremeness of the weather there at present, it is hard to believe that, no matter the warmth of the rest of the planet at the time, the continent in its current position would ever have been able to support life beyond the rugged sort of miracles of survival that currently call it home. Therefore we are forced to chose: either the rock has moved relative to the

ocean basins that surround it or the whole axis of the Earth has shifted, meaning Antarctica has, at times or for the vast majority of its history, lied at a different, warmer latitude. Let's forget for a moment about where exactly all the billions of tons of rock at the bottom of the ocean a novice geologist might think would prevent Antarctica's lateral movement are supposed to have disappeared to; also that there are no neat, simple convergent or divergent fault lines to support this theory as there are on the west coast of the Americas or mid-Atlantic ridge; also what mysterious force might have caused any lateral movement to start with, especially at the poles. But to be honest, upon initial inspection, true polar wander seems not much more likely. All objects save perfectly rigid bodies utterly devoid of external torque settle after a very short time to rotation around their axis with greatest inertial moment; which is to say things naturally spin the fat way, like a top or pizza dough being spun. The gyroscopic motion that accounts for a top's ability to stay upright can in fact be considered a special case of this tendency. Even though the top is constantly beset by a torque due to gravity that, were it not rotating, would easily topple it, once spun, it simply refuses to change its axis of rotation enough to include its falling in its overall rotational axis, seeing as the most minuscule bulge adds so significantly to its moment of inertia. And the Earth is no different; the equatorial bulge, a very large thing to start with, only has its influence on our rotation magnified by its position. Even before considering moment of inertia, the height of our tallest mountain ranges barely rivals the bulge, and only in distance from the center of the Earth at the peaks; the rock that comprises even the Himalayas fails completely to compare to the continuous mass of the substantially denser added mantle at any point on the equator. Therefore it seems at first an equally hard pill to swallow to believe that the poles have ever moved with any rapidity, the equatorial bulge being so large and well-positioned to maintain our axis. It is assumed that the magnitude of real polar wander of the Earth is limited to less than a degree per million years, based on a direct measurement of a few centimeters a year at present; which might be enough to explain life on Antarctica a hundred million years ago in addition to points five and four above, but not the others. Of course, all we have done by this thought process is satisfy ourselves that *at present* the equator and poles will remain where they are or shift only very slowly. No one believes that the Earth's crust will remain as it is for very long geologically speaking. And new arrangements of high and low points round the Earth's equator coordinated to allow for a fatter way to spin would cause the rate of wander to increase substantially. Not only that; any change in rotation of the planet initiated by a changing crust would only reinforce itself by means of skewing centripetal forces spread throughout the mantle below; which is to say that any mass that undergoes increase in elevation significant enough to change our moment of inertia and therefore axis would be subjected to yet increased rising from the mantle below along that whole line of longitude, due to increased force being necessary to hold an object at constant spherical radius at a lower latitude. And vice versa; sinking that results in change of axis, increasing the latitude, would only create more sinking there, not to mention north and south. But this is all without measure of course, and therefore potentially unimportant. The only task that remains, therefore, to truly decide between these two seemingly equally unlikely explanations as to how Antarctica might ever have supported life other than penguins, is to consider the rate at which the crust changes of its own devices. A process that need not be confined to the essentially static thing current theory

assumes it to be, nevermind the wealth of evidence suggesting otherwise.

5. Glaciation. Geologists, perhaps choosing their data extremely carefully, are quick to tout the presence and direction of glacial striation, dubiously dated by fossil evidence in the eroded rock, over large parts of the southern hemisphere as evidence of Pangaea. Simply put, if you twirl the continents and India the way they say happened, these marks are all next to each other and all line up. Anyone who has seen an actual glacier, however, knows that even in close proximity, they will often flow in erratic directions, down whatever pathway the terrain below provides for them, casting doubt on any correlation of direction being important in the slightest. And as for how exactly large glaciers might have formed in India, Africa and Australia, we are back to the same problem as before; either these land masses somehow slid like a snake through the ocean basins surrounding them away from an earlier position close to the south pole or the axis of rotation of the planet has changed substantially over time. Simply put; nothing proven, nothing disproven.

But on the topic of glaciation, the (infinitely more) well-documented extent of our most recent mass-glaciation is evidence only contributing to the theory of rapid real pole shift; for twenty thousand years ago, while much of Canada and western Europe were covered in ice, what is today Siberia and Alaska were not, as surely would have been the case had the north pole then been located closer to Greenland, and the south somewhere on the Australian side of Antarctica. I find this possibility much more plausible than attempting to blame ice ages on precession alone, which requires graphs upon graphs - none of which are guaranteed to be the actual case by the way, seeing as they rely on the assumption that precession due to gravitation from the sun and moon on the equatorial bulge is the one and only possible change in the rotation of the Earth - to examine the minutest differences in total radiation received by the Earth thanks to the combination of eccentricity of orbit and orientation of our axis in space; also that, according to this theory, we should be well on our way into another ice age today. In any case, here is our first test: to consider the extent of change in the crust that would have been necessary to initiate such shift; how much rise and fall would have been required to move the bulge from one round a Greenland axis to the one of today.

Thankfully, the math is simple. A change in rotation substantial enough to account for the possibility of piled up ice over land masses in the northern hemisphere snowballing the Earth into an ice age by reflecting a large portion of radiation back into space, of five degrees let's say, from spinning round Greenland's northern shore to the current north pole, corresponds to an only modest change in elevation round the equator. For a perfect shift, at longitudes 45°W and 135°E it'd be 160m at 5°N or S, 479m at 10°, 782m at 15°, 1062m at 20°, 1310 at 25° and 1519m at 30°. Well within the amount of variation in elevation we see traversing any of these latitudes east to west. And all other longitudes would need far less change. With a timeframe of 20k years, that's a maximum average rate of 8mm, 2.5cm, 3.9cm, 5cm and 6.5cm rise or fall a year, well in line with estimates on how quickly mountain ranges rise. And this is an ideal scenario, in which there is a perfect shift of the bulge from the old equator to the new. There are infinite other combinations of elevation changes, including more modest changes across a wide range of longitudes, which would result in an identical difference in inertial moment between axes so long as they are somewhat mirrored by a similar change

in the opposite hemisphere. Neither should we demand a perfect shift, seeing as we still measure polar wander to this day. Not to mention the fact that these rates need only be assumed to explain a tilted axis being the true underlying cause of the last ice age; five degrees in twenty thousand years is a far cry from a maximum of a single degree in a million. As for the middle latitudes, while they would have to rise and fall more quickly (1520m ~ 1860m at 45°W and 135°E for a 5° change in poles) for us to maintain a perfect ellipsoid shape, they matter far less than the weight distributed round the equator; a rise or fall of mass at thirty degrees latitude changes our moment of inertia 3 parts for the equator's 4; forty 2.3, fifty degrees 1.7, sixty degrees a mere quarter, and seventy degrees a tenth as much. And if, as data suggests, ice ages have been repetitive over the last few million years, the middle latitudes would only change inclination from the equator temporarily, shifting right back to where they started after a while, their partial lingering conformity to an old equator likely being the reason for our regular return; also that they, flexibly defined to accommodate meandering poles, would need only conform to a perfect ellipsoid shape equally roughly, just as, once again, we see in practice, with the tallest mountain ranges spread across the middle latitudes in Asia and the deepest trenches due east (for now).

Suddenly, the one theory looks much better than the other, no? And going back to the southern hemisphere, we can justifiably wonder how, considering the extent of polar wander demanded by even conservative changes in elevation round the equator, evidence of glaciation in parts of the world far too warm for it today, oriented in any direction, might be explained any other way. How people suggest that entire ~10^20kg sections of rock must have moved thousands of miles across the surface of the Earth to explain this phenomena is beyond me.

4. Orientation of magnetic rocks. We've been over this; the poles move. Sometimes a lot. In my attempts to understand the mindset of the modern geologist, I have been subjected to all sorts of creations of the utmost vanity, such as animated sequences showing the 'exact' locations of the continents necessary to unite the data found in rocks from around the world. This data, however, is so flimsy as to make me ashamed to even mention it. It is igneous rock, which is formed in spurts, some of which last only a few days. Even if you can't bring yourself to believe that the actual poles move, no one doubts the constant, rapid shifting of the magnetic poles. To combine all this rock data, then simply average it over time, then blame it all on continental drift; it's asinine.

3. Mid-ocean ridges. For a few miles, there are alternating strips of igneous rock with their ferrous elements aligned one way then the other; and in the middle of the ridge is a long strip of lava rising up to create new rock. So we say that this gives firm evidence that the crust there is spreading and has been forever, laying down these strips as our magnetic poles flip over time. That's dumb. At least equally as likely is that this area is welling up for now; and that what was once relatively flat crust is now pushed upward, demanding more rock be created to cover its larger surface area.

2. Continuity of geologic features. This one is just as flimsy as the idea that the continents fit together. But let's take a minute to examine it anyway. How does sedimentary rock form? By deposition of eroded rock into bodies of water next to

land masses. Therefore we may assume, since there is only so much rock around, that the rate of sedimentary rock creation is roughly the same as that of erosion if the two could be measured across all of the planet at any given time. So. Take a region of a continent. Clearly, it has been regularly submerged or it wouldn't be covered in its vast majority by sedimentary rock. Let's say it was under water for ten million years, then above for three. We can expect a fair amount of sedimentary rock cover remaining. But if it was only under water for three, then persisted above for ten, we would expect all the rock formed during its submerged period to have been weathered away; down to the solidest, sturdiest rock available below, metamorphic. This is what our 'shields' are; and it is to these shields of ancient rock that 'scientists' are referring when they tout the continuity of geologic features as proof of continental drift and supercontinents. But they need exist only thanks to being areas of land that have been exposed to the elements for a greater time than they've been submerged recently. It doesn't even have to be the same amount of time. Take the Appalachians, England and Scandinavia. Ancient, mountainous crust all. Need we really assume they were once connected and created by the same orogeny? Of course not. Just as likely is that they have both been exposed to the sky for a far greater time than they were submerged previously, and therefore have been weathered down to similarly metamorphic, mountainous terrain.

1. Fossil continuity. Here is where it all really falls apart. Four genera. While today there are dozens no more likely to be able to cross oceans found on disparate land masses. Let's count some. Monkeys in South America and Africa. They sure didn't swim; and the idea of a 'raft of vegetation' (they sailed, apparently, without a sail of course, and in large enough populations to breed), is even worse. Similarly, rodents on the same land masses. There are alligators where? In Florida and China is where. They didn't swim; alligators are a freshwater species, and if they did swim, why would they only have swum directly to the complete other side of the planet from where they started and nowhere else. Neither did they strut across Alabama, Mississippi, the great plains, Rockies, Alaska, Beringia in an ice age, Russia, Manchuria, Shandong and Jiangsu, leaving not a single fossil behind past the great plains. Neither did venomous snakes slither their way in reverse. Nut trees, the viable nuts of which sink, and which would not have survived an ice-age Beringia any better than alligators, are found across the entirety of the northern hemisphere. Nearly identical Rhododendrons in the Himalayas and Appalachians both. Closely related ruminants not adapted to polar terrain on every continent save Australia. Nothofagus and its fossils on South America, Australia and Antarctica but not Africa, which was supposedly between them all in Pangaea. It just keeps coming. We simply need another theory.

The theory I suggest is a simple one: that the geologic history of our planet is a much more vertically active one than currently admitted aloud, and that the lateral motion of land masses is comprised only of that necessary to accommodate the vertical. It is a matter of mistaken causality. We are aware that land rises and sinks. We are also aware that there are major fault zones where whole sections of crust collide, separate and slide laterally. Geologists say that it is the second phenomena, caused in turn by mysterious convection currents (for which, by the way, there is absolutely no independent evidence) that causes the first. I say it is the first that causes the second. Any why shouldn't it? Land is heavy, isn't it? Take the deep

ocean for comparison: a square centimeter section weighs one million grams if you go down 10,000 meters. No feather, surely. But the same square centimeter under Everest weighs over five. We are well aware of the extreme pressure to be found deep in the Earth. Under the middle of oceans, where the weight directly above is least, this pressure causes rapid rising. Thus are mid-ocean ridges formed. This rising continues to make islands; the rate of rise can even increase now with less water above to hold it back. These islands, despite cooling and solidifying at some level, if supported by a still relatively shallow upwelling of magma as wide as an ocean, might rise on an even grander scale to become new continents; now erosion and deposition widens the shelf of land while the rising of the original mountain chain continues thanks to the extensive fracturing of its underlying rock, like a pile of sand pushed up by a waterbed between two shifting people to cover them despite being of greater density than them. Until finally the tallest, mountainous center of the continent towers miles above sea level, all is glued together by magma from underneath, then cools and starts on its way back down again. Simply put, continents rise and sink with regularity, and the creatures they support can travel from one to another at any temporary point of overlap. Perhaps this occurrence being shoved into a few-million-year period is fantasy. Perhaps not; the oldest chinese alligator fossils date from a mere 3 mYa, and their only close relatives inhabit the complete other side of the planet. But tens of millions of years a certainty. And for a continent to persist vertically unchanged for a hundred million years is a very, very hard theory to swallow.

Any ambiguity is removed simply by considering the rate of mountain range rise. First of all, our current estimates are only minimums. Mountains erode; therefore, for them to be mountains at all, they must be rising as well, and at a rate greater than the erosion. The Himalayas, for example, beset yearly by the monsoons, are eroding, according to geologists, at a rate of about 1cm per year. I find this in itself to be an extremely conservative figure. Yet this land is still mountainous; it must be rising faster than that. Therefore it has risen *at least* a million centimeters in a millions years; even at this lowest possible rate, 4 million years is all it would take to rival the equatorial bulge even were the range located on one of the poles. And erosion, while substantial in areas of soil and sedimentary rock cover, is extremely limited once stably perched metamorphic rock, that created under the rest as the range began to rise, is reached, thus making real changes in elevation of substantially greater rapidity than erosion a possibility. Geologists, counting changes of weight distribution over eons literally *millions* of times less substantial than the difference between continent and ocean, say that for every mountain range out there, its rate of rise is somehow unequivocally and exactly offset by its rate of erosion, allowing for the pleasant fiction of permanent continents. But the two need not be matched; this is another example of conveniently confused correlation and causation. When mountains rise, they must of course rise faster than they erode. Since we cannot, having no reference point other than nearby, likely simultaneously rising land against which to make our comparisons, measure the rate of rise directly, we are forced to rely on this fact to guess at the rate; even satellites depend on regular interaction with landed stations to maintain their position data. But these rates are a minimum only; there is no guarantee of the kind of equilibrium that geologists assume, that seems so neat and tidy on paper. And considering the wildly disparate landscapes to be found spread across the planet, I would venture that vertical geologic equilibrium is about as likely a thing as being able to

skip a stone on the ocean.

As for mechanism of rise and fall, one must first admit that, no matter our careful and exceptionally sophisticated study of seismic waves, we do not know concretely what lays below the floors of our deepest mines, except to say that at least in some places it is fluid; we know because we can see the lava when it pours out onto the surface. While there is much information to hint at the true nature of the subterra, put simply, we don't really know what it is and probably never will. But to limit ourselves to describing it in terms of strict analogs to the three phases rudely forced on eighth graders is a complete disservice to science. There is at least one more phase that can be considered distinct from solid, liquid and gas: that of magma underground. Why should we need label the mantle as purely solid? Even continental drifters claim that, while solid enough to hold up continents, it is liquid enough to float them wherever they like. The mantle is surely equally as distinct a beast from ice as it is from water. I would venture its closest surface analog would be molasses, a substance in which the forces between particles are strong enough to form lasting interactions, yet one that remains fluid in overall character. In the case of molasses, the forces of dissolution provide the strength to rival the kinetic energy of the water molecules; in magma it is the pressure and covalent bond strength. The particles that comprise magma, be they silicate molecules and sheets or metal, phosphate, sulfate, etc. atoms, ions and molecules, despite being in constant and somewhat random motion, are forced by their extreme proximity into lasting covalent interaction. In such a way are shear waves able to travel through the substance; all that is needed is a long-enough, regular interaction between particles to transmit the transverse motion of one to the next as in a surface solid. This continuous material would be able to transmit seismic waves substantially faster than a generally solid, but regularly faulted and often water- or oil-saturated, crust. And the speed would only increase with increased pressure and depth, just as observed by seismologists. In this I am making no outlandish statement; most geologists would find little fault with this description. But when it comes to the motion of the mantle over time, I firmly disagree on how this constrained fluid would behave. Vertically, thanks to the differing weights of what covers it, it would be free to ooze up and down. Laterally, though... Why would it ever, ever move much except to accommodate its vertical motion? And even if it did, why would it move in any way different from those other massive bodies of fluid to be found on Earth, the oceans and atmosphere: east to west round the equator and west to east at mid latitudes? My point is this: that a rising mountain range needs no explanation past admitting that it is being pushed up by a fluid or semi-fluid from beneath. Where are volcanoes to be found other than mountain ranges and emerging island chains, after all? And moreover, that the rates at which large mountain ranges rise are so great that there is no other assumption to be made except that the process is far more common and frequent than admitted aloud by those who cannot imagine anything other than the seven continents we are familiar with today. Not all besides the Cascades, Sierras and Andes are plain in the Americas, after all. As is the majority of the bottoms of the oceans no less intricately arranged in three dimensions than eroded, mountainous terrain. No need for assumptions of equilibrium; we should, in fact, thanks to the wondrous variety of landscapes to be found on this wondrous planet of ours, expect exactly the opposite: an oozing, chaotic mess that we have only begun to describe...