

Infinite Islands: The Seatrees

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Sarah, and my son, Brooks.

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ABSTRACT

Infinite Islands: The Seatrees investigates the subject of infinity as it relates to storytelling and the novel. The critical introduction lays out the relation between reality, fantasy, the imagination and the history of the novel as a source of inspiration for the fictional portion of the dissertation. It considers the similarities between canonical literary novels and fantasy genre novels. Through this consideration, aspects of reality and fantasy in the novel are considered in both theoretical and primary texts. In the fictional portion, an unnamed narrator retells the story of his life from beginning to end. Although he works to gain control over his life and pursue his hope of joining a secretive group, he continually becomes caught up in forces more powerful than himself, only some of which can he ever understand.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

1.

This introduction presents a critical understanding of an artistic project. *The Infinite Islands: Book 1, The Seatrees* is a work of fantasy fiction. I arrived at this project through reading in the history of the novel as well as writing both speculative and realistic fiction, attending workshops, and revising. This introduction recreates my thinking in the critical sphere as it relates to the creative sphere. Although related, the two spheres do not always intersect perfectly or at all: what seems to me a logical leap from one sphere into the other, might strike others as tenuous, haphazard, even random. The creative writer's critical understanding is not systematic, but rather idiosyncratic, at least mine is. While acknowledging that idiosyncrasy, I hope here to set my creative work within the history of the form (and some theory) of the novel as I understand it, in particular the uses of fantasy. That history has informed my understanding of what is possible with the novel, and the idea of that possibility is, itself, a thematic interest of mine in *The Infinite Islands*. That sense of possibility, in turn, inspired three closely related questions, which I returned to repeatedly during the writing of this novel. What is possible in a narrative form in which anything is possible? How do you create a world in which anything is possible but that is seamless rather than disordered, random, or chaotic? How can that sense of infinite possibility inform the novel itself, either thematically or structurally?

The nature of the novel form, with its encounter of reality and the imagination mediated through language and the ordering of time, informs the world I created in *The Infinite Islands*. I invented the world of the islands. They are purely fictional. Each of the islands---those depicted

in this novel, those to come in future novels set in the same world, those sailed past by the characters and those only referenced, alluded to, and implied---represents new and specific possible or potential worlds as well as paths the narrative could go: new worlds with new beings and new physical laws, new types of magic, new social arrangements, new economic arrangements, new characters, new challenges, new problems, new threats. A potential novel could take place on a single island for its entire length, or the main character could simply touch on one to get fresh water. He could overthrow the king of that island or become imprisoned there, become a librarian, an armorer, a mucker of stables, or a chemist's assistant.

To me, fiction is about those possibilities for new imaginative experiences. It's about the reader turning the page without knowing what will come. I take this idea from a lifetime of reading novels. To me, each novel I open as a reader is like sliding ashore on a new island. To me, far more separates any two novels from each other than anything that makes them similar. There are genres and types, and taxonomists can track them. But compared to epic or dramatic literature, or to folk and fairy tales, the novel thrives on originality.

Another way to state the terms of this analysis is to say that I will look at the history of the novel from the perspective of the possibilities inherent in the form and how those possibilities have been investigated through representations of the imagination as fantasy rather than from the perspective of the re-creation of reality. Here, the word "fantasy" refers to the elements of the genre of contested definition and dubious legitimacy. The term "speculative fiction" or SF would perhaps be more accurate, but the term "fantasy" is more closely linked to imaginative rather than logical experience and, to my thinking, applies better. Fantasy in terms of writing is the representation of the imagination; the claims of mimesis or verisimilitude are put to one side. The mirror of nature is openly shattered, often from the first sentence. As a

literary element, fantasy as a representation of the imagination predates the labels SF, SF&F, and speculative fiction. To look at the history of the novel from the perspective of fantasy is a through-the-looking-glass manner of going about it, but what interests me here is how fantasy remained a part of the novel and carried through its history through the major examples and epochs, only to solidify again as a genre that seems increasingly relevant in the 21st century.

2. Sources of Potential: Reality and Fantasy in Cervantes and Borges

In his chapter on Cervantes in *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács begins by discussing the harmony or balance of the imaginary and the real as it existed in the classical epics. Because the hero of the epic is in direct correspondence with a god who leads him through his adventures, the relationship between the objective and the subjective worlds is therefore maintained in adequate balance: the hero is rightly conscious of the superiority of the opposing outside world; yet despite this innermost modesty he can triumph in the end because this lesser strength is guided to victory by the highest power in the world; the forces of the imaginary and the real correspond with one another; the victories and defeats are not contradictory to either the actual or the ideal world order (Lukács 98).

For Lukács, the absolute belief in gods or God within a society is the precondition for the epic; the abandonment of this absolute belief the precondition for the novel. The novel's hero has no guide maintaining the balance between the ideal and the real, instead, the hero must stumble through adventures without help from that ideal soul. For example, Athena turns middle-aged Odysseus into first a decrepit old beggar and then a youthful hero in order to help him solve the exterior problem of first killing the suitors and then rekindling his marriage with Penelope. Had

that been a novel, the main character would have possessed only his internal resources and probably imperfect solutions to the problem. Facing insurmountable odds, the hero of a novel must summon extraordinary personal solutions or face failure.

Lukács's definition of the differences between epic and the novel helps me understand how the imagination plays a role in the newer form. The imaginary is the ideal world when it is transferred or translated into the world of reality, the world of imperfection, the world that no longer completely accepts that idealism, that code, that system of gods. Sometimes that imaginary world yearns for a distant past (a past version of the ideal); sometimes it is grotesque and horrifying, a deliberate violation of idealism; sometimes it is playful in its fantasy; sometimes analytical and reflective of the real world. Each genre and epoch of the novel has its own way of defining the imaginary, and, over the history of the novel those definitions have become increasingly splintered and recombined, exponentially so. However, the imagination in the novel remains connected to that epic past while maintaining the tension with the real from which it is alienated.

Lukács goes on to call *Don Quixote* "the first great novel of world literature" (Lukács 103). Besides Cervantes' genius, the reason he gives is that it emerged from a world of tension between the former system of belief and the confusion of those beliefs: no longer was god ever-present or was the nation state the object of perfect loyalty. Instead the main character has taken those former systems of belief and transferred them into his interior life while the world outside him has abandoned those beliefs and finds his motivation incomprehensible. Don Quixote's imagination, which allows for this internalization, has been both inspired and warped by reading:

our gentleman became so caught up in reading that he spent his nights reading from dusk till dawn and his days reading from sunrise to sunset, and so with too little sleep and too

much reading his brains dried up, causing him to lose his mind. His fantasy filled with everything he had read in books, enchantments as well as combats, battles, challenges, wounds, courtings, loves, torments, and other impossible foolishness, and he became so convinced in his imagination of the truth of all the countless grandiloquent and false inventions he read that for him no history in the world was truer (Cervantes 21).

Quixote's imagination (his "fantasy" in Edith Grossman's translation) absorbs the elements of the chivalric romances he reads, sucking out of the values and beliefs and inventions of the past and carrying them forward into the present despite the actual course of history. This is "the first great novel of world literature" because the novel form has since become for us *the* locus for the interaction and exploration between the imaginary and the real. As Carlos Fuentes put it, Quixote "makes evident a challenge that we consider peculiarly ours: how to accept the diversity and mutation of the world, while retaining the mind's power for analogy and unity, so that this changing world shall not become meaningless" (Fuentes in Wilson 777). Fuentes' statement about Quixote articulates what the form of the novel does. Fantasy in the novel thematizes that "power for analogy and unity" as a way of re-presenting "the diversity and mutation of the world."

At the foundational moment of the formation of the novel, then, exists the interaction between the imagination as inspired by reading, and reality, or the world as freed from homogenous belief. The fundamental relation between imagination and reality in the novel has changed little in since 1605, although the specifics of the relation has changed; in fact, the details of the relation in a each instance is always unique. Each novel that is written is a new definition of the relation between reality and the imagination. Lukács argues that the moment of Cervantes, because of its unique historical position at the turn of the tide of belief, passed away,

and was replaced by entertainment novels, novels of adventure merely. They might have the Knight figure, and a series of picaresque adventures, but they would not return the ultimate tension present at the inception of the form. Other, more specific novel forms, grew up to better negotiate the tensions of a changing world.

In his chapter on Cervantes in *Mimesis*, Auerbach qualifies this type of reading of *Quixote* by stating that the Don is only mad when the situation is directly related to his Chivalric-inspired madness, but otherwise he is basically of normal, average intellect. Auerbach also asserts that *Quixote* does not represent an encounter with reality because reality is never truly affected by the Don's presence, but rather "in the resultant clashes between [Don Quixote] and reality no situation ever results which puts in question that reality's right to be what it is" (Auerbach 345). Auerbach argues that the presence of Don Quixote within reality allows for the transformation of that reality into "play" so that both good and bad, and everything in between, are untouched by criticism and allowed to stand for what they are.

This argument clarifies what is meant by reality in the novel: at its point of invention, then, the reality is in "play," in terms of which all novelists must choose to take a position or not. Reality is freely real, occurring beyond the edges of the narrative and not completely crafted and controlled by the writer in the same way that it is not affected by Quixote. Fantasy, as I am using it here, often seems inherently bounded by the authorial presence and not "in play." However, in my work, I attempted to return to fantasy a sense of play beyond the edges of the world and my narrative. I tried to do so by introducing the idea of infinity at an early stage of the prologue and to base my thinking about the world of the novel on that idea. Infinity, in terms of the imagination, is play. Specifically, the novel suggests this idea by having multiple maps, many version of the world, none of which can be confirmed. Also, neither the central character nor

anyone he meets can absolutely account for the totality of the world. Like a “real” world in a novel, it extends beyond the boundaries of the narrative.

The reality Don Quixote encounters, and that is thus seen to be in play in the text, is a particularly cruel and brutal reality, a reality devoid of sympathy for the Knight of the Sorrowful Face, a reality that persists in punishing him for his gentle nobility. The cruel nature of reality develops sympathy in the reader for Quixote’s quest, which is by extension sympathy for the validity of imagination within the cruel world. Reality does not, in itself, require much proof or argument: reality is. The imaginary, however, hidden in the dense circuitry and the cultivated habits of the mind, requires continual rebuilding because its idealism is always under threat from reality. In episode after episode, the Knight’s imagination abuts the real with painful consequence and, to Sancho’s amazement, the Knight’s imagination remains steadfast. The frequent physical pain suffered by the Knight through beatings, exposure, collisions and other mischances symbolizes the cost of maintaining the imaginary within the world of the real.

In the relation between Part II and Part I, *Don Quixote* is also a metaphor for the act of creating fiction by having the fiction become part of the real world. This relation is established in the episode early in Part II during which Don Quixote hears about the publication and reception of Part I. Carrasco, the reliable source for this description, explains who Cide Hamete Benengeli is and how his account of Don Quixote’s adventures was received. Carrasco recounts the most famous episodes (windmills, freeing the galley slaves, the same episodes that readers today associate with the novel), discusses the objection to the inclusion of the novella, in short he offers the Don an accurate account of the popular assessment of the book. Neither Quixote nor Sancho seems particularly surprised that this book has been published, although Quixote thinks it must not be popular. Carrasco reassures him: “since stultorum infinitus est numerous

[“the number of fools is infinite”], an infinite number of fools have enjoyed the history” (Cervantes 479). Soon after this reassurance, Quixote asks “does the author promise a second part” and Carrasco tells him that the author is searching for it and will “immediately have it printed, for he is more interested in earning profit than in winning praise” (Cervantes 482). Sancho immediately chimes in that he and his master can provide any number of new adventures, whereupon Quixote hears the neighing of Rocinante and “took it as a very good omen and resolved that in three or four days he would undertake another sally” (Cervantes 482). During this new set of adventures, Quixote and Sancho occasionally run into characters who have read Part I and those who have read the inauthentic Part II. Thus Part II is framed, at least partly, as a response to the fact that an author is telling a story. If *Don Quixote* shows the fundamental relationship of reality to fiction, it does so in Part II with the added layer of the novel’s status as something being written about and the character’s awareness that he is a character. However, Don Quixote’s awareness of himself as a character does not corrupt his idealism and thus does not substantially change his imagination (making him see the world ironically, for example), nor does it dramatically alter the nature of reality, however it keeps in the spotlight the idea of fiction as the site for the encounter of the imagination with reality. Without Part II and its (frequently ironic) considerations of the role of authorship, of readership, even of plagiarism and false texts (which were historically real), Part I’s consideration of reality and the imagination might seem more like an incidental consequence of the historical moment in which Cervantes was writing rather than a more active and deliberate engagement in the novel’s form.

Based on Lukás and Auerbach’s readings of *Don Quixote*, and my own, I conclude the following. *Don Quixote* contains within it the basic and fundamental terms with which all

novelists must contend. It contains the history of the structure of narrative storytelling, the history of epic and romance, in which a world is depicted with set of agreed-upon terms and a complete and accepted system of beliefs as well as the truthful and complete play of reality. Further, this early novel shows that the writer has two primary tools, the representation of the imagination derived from the past and the representation of reality. In its extent and elaboration the novel shows that these two options contain the possibility for nearly infinite combination, possibilities opened up during the course of the novel's history from 1605 until now. Particular historical moments have inspired particular combinations, some more completely combined than others. By looking at the key texts of the history of the novel, from the Gothic, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist, and Postmodernists, as well as in fantasy genres, we can see the decisions novelists have made in this relation between real and imaginary. The imaginary and the real are ineluctably tied from the novel's origins. The novelist's choices are accurately represented by *Don Quixote*: fed by the imagination based on a lifetime of reading, he or she encounters the world as it is and must decide how to represent it in response. When that action involves representation in language, that decision means taking some kind of position on the exact relation of imaginary to real, and accepting and responding to that tension.

Jorge Luis Borges reflected on the act of fictional composition in relation to *Don Quixote* in his story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." In this story, the narrator, a friend of Menard's, catalogues his works, which are each Borgesian in their interests: imaginary or creatively pedantic analyses and studies. Menard's true work though, the narrator tells us, was a complete rewriting of *Don Quixote*, which rewriting he nonetheless destroyed as he wrote it. The description of this artistic project that emerges suggests a paradox that reflects in general on the writer's artistic project. Menard's partial re-creation of Quixote has an entirely different

meaning because of the time the work is produced, even though the words are (or would be) identical. For the narrator “There is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately pointless” (Borges 94), because time will eventually pass and the work will eventually be forgotten, or become a footnote, or have its meaning completely changed. By reimagining *Don Quixote*, Menard is making something new and highlighting that nothing new can be made or that whatever is newly made is pointless. Taken in one way, the novel that Menard chooses for his quest could have been anything, in another way, it had to be *Quixote*. Menard’s quest is only or purely fictional, only the life of something recreated by the narrator. With this story, Borges has added an extra level to the relation of the imagination and reality as described in fiction, by holding a mirror to it and thereby doubling the experience. It is not surprising that many Postmodernist writers revered Borges, for this was a precursor of some of their experimental artistic projects. The mirror doubles and somehow deepens that interrelation that Cervantes presents, cracking open the realm of possibility for both the imagination and fiction. This mirroring also deepens the impression that every novel is a new and unique definition of the relation between reality and the imagination, even if the novel is the same one as that written before.

Borges’s intellectual influences are vast and sometimes arcane; however fantasy literature must be considered one of them. In the recently released transcription of his lectures on literature, *Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature*, he devotes time to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, James Macpherson, William Blake, Wilkie Collins, William Morris, and Robert Louis Stevenson, all in their own way precursors to or founders of modern fantasy literature. Borges’s own fantasy stories, such as “The Circular Ruins,” use invented worlds to investigate the nature of identity and the imagination, often as it relates to the idea of infinity. In “The Circular Ruins,”

Borges's character, "the man," attempts to dream up a man from nothing and "impose upon him reality" (Borges 97). At the end of the story the man comes to realize that he is himself the dream of another man just as his creation has gone on to dream up others, suggesting that actual creation and imaginative creation are analogous stages in an infinite regression. In Borges, reality is frequently imaginary, with no clear lines drawn. In fact, the idea of "lines" does not apply to Borges, who is much more interested in circles, lemniscates, or hexagons, structures that fit together seamlessly or imply continuous recursiveness.

I have stated above that the relation between reality and the imagination presented at the inception of the novel contains within it the possibility for nearly infinite combination and elaboration, that each novel that is written is a new definition of the relation between reality and the imagination. Another of Borges's stories investigates that idea. In "The Library of Babel," the narrator is a librarian like all other people in the world of the story and lives, as they all do, in a system of closely connected and identical hexagonal cells. Librarians in this world have for centuries debated the meaning of their lives and the volumes that line the walls of the cells. With a somewhat morose tone that suggests both the meaninglessness of interpretive meaning and the hope that the search for it inspires, the narrator recounts the debates and discoveries made over the course of an invented history. At one point "five hundred years ago," a philosopher uncovered the two fundamental premises of the library: the first is that all volumes are made of identical elements (same number of pages, same character set) and the second is that there are "no two identical books" (Borges 115). From these premises it was deduced by the librarians that the library was "perfect, complete, and whole," that it contains all possibilities:

All—the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalog of the Library, thousand and thousand of false catalogs, the proof of the falsity of

those false catalogs, a proof of the falsity of the *true* catalogs, the gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary upon that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book into every language, the interpolation of every book into all books, the treatise Bede could have written (but did not) on the mythology of the Saxon people, the lost books of Tacitus (Borges 115).

Here, the narrator specifies infinite possibilities. In the world of the story this realization inspires a great joy in the potential of the library, that all answers must be contained somewhere.

Unfortunately, the librarians soon realized that sense was almost impossible to find, since, odds favored nonsense. Nonetheless, as a fiction writer I take great inspiration from this description that suggests the infinite possibility for what can be exist between the pages of the book. The librarians are only that, readers and cataloguers...interpreters. Nothing is mentioned of them creating anything new: the volumes all have the same number of orthographic symbols, the same number of pages. Though the question of who or what created them torments the librarians, no one in the story seems likely to create a new volume.

In terms of this analysis here, we can think of the volumes, with both their sense and nonsense, as imaginative reality in play, the infinite fantasy space as I have attempted to create. The reality of the world is mostly chaotic, with moments of clarity and sense few and far between. The librarians do not question that reality since it is made obvious to them by the opening of a single volume of apparent gibberish. Despite the apparent order, reality is incomprehensible. Strangely enough though the library contains such possibility that there must be meaning behind that gibberish, in fact infinite possible meaning is defined elsewhere in the library: "there is no combination of characters one can make---dhcmrlchtdj, for example---that divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a

terrible significance” (Borges 117). Borges has translated reality into an imaginary world. His idealism is the perfect ordering of the world: the meticulously describes hexagons, shelves, volumes, symbols. The reader recognizes this ideal world as imaginary. However, reality appears within the imaginary world, bound in the pages of books.

If *Don Quixote* examines, at the inception of the novel form, the possibilities of the relation between the reality and the imagination, Borges presents another system of possibility, that of combination, elaboration, and extension. Although infinite possibility may lead one to despair, it nonetheless implies that nearly any combination of words could be meaningful. “The Library of Babel” is as important to me for its form as its meaning. It is a speculative fiction story set in a fantasy world. In attempting to create a fantasy world with similarly unbounded yet clearly defined parameters, I was filled with both the joy and despair that afflicts the Librarians. Essentially, I don’t think that the writer of fantasy literature has any more or less of a relationship to the potential of the novel than any other variety of would-be novelist, but, for me, during the writing of *The Infinite Islands*, there was a continual sense that, since the world of the novel was entirely made up, an invigorating possibility that anything could happen existed, and the correspondingly despair-inspiring sense that the world could simply disappear, that because it did not exist that it was not actually there. It seemed like I was building a bridge out over nothingness while also standing on the bridge. The world the writer sees every day is omnipresent, but, when he or she sits down to write, it moves away to at least one remove. The extra layer is that of the writer’s consciousness, which is acting as a filter to that re-creation of reality. Other things act as filters as well, most importantly language. A writer is limited to only the language he is working in and how the reader will respond to that language. The structure of narrative provides yet another filter, allowing for certain orderings of events.

I began what would become *The Infinite Islands*, while writing in bed in a notebook. The story that I wrote is the one that appears in the prologue in slightly different form. Here is the original:

I was young. I traveled to the seacoast and apprenticed with a sailmaker. He died of the grummage. I stole his best vessel and with sails of my own design set off for the island of Nur.

At the port of Nur a Knitel pirate tried to cut my throat. I held the blood in and clubbed him to death, and stole his gold teeth. I hired a lion tamer to sew up my wound. Her name was Abigail. She had earned her way out of slavery with her ability to communicate with lions. Scars were the emblems of her mistakes. She wore sixteen diamonds in each ear. She bore me a son and left me for a scurb witch doctor who passed through Nur as a part of the Third Prince's caravan. The witchdoctor wore a long gray beard---the seamen said he was 10 generations old; he cast a spell on my beautiful Abigail and stole her away. In recompense, I let her lions starve to death. Their rib cages tore out of their sides. The flyswarms clouded the pens. On the shores of Nur, the sea air sponged the rot insufficiently. I enrolled the boy in the Jester's College and tried to forget my past.

I continued this narrator's story in the notebook for a while and then decided to make it into a novel. The experience described above was supposed to be the one that inspired the narrator not to settle down in life but rather to continuously move forward, with the intention to see all of the islands and thereby determine if they are, indeed, infinite. In my imagination a world grew up around this narrator's voice, a world of islands. I could see them spread out in groups across a vast sea. Even while writing the above, I could tell that the narrator would have to be near the

end of his long life. The next section described the reasons that he was writing what is effectively a chronicle of himself. I eventually rewrote that part into the prologue.

In the first draft of rewriting the above, I made the lions immortal. It seems like I had already had the idea that they were, but hadn't written it down. Here's what it became:

I let her lions starve. Their ribs cut through their pelts and their skin dropped away. Their organs rotted in baskets of bone. People came to watch them walk back and forth in their cages. Their eyes were pits, their teeth grimaced. Soon, the last flesh fell away and, at the joints, brittle tendons creaked. Bones clattered. In the Nurian sunlight, the lion skeletons paced. I sat crosslegged in the dust and watched. Because of the sound, I left our son at Jester's College and tried to forget my past. But the past is like an immortal lion pacing through the night.

This image of pacing lions skeletons became a metaphor for what the novel would explore: in a world where you can let an immortal lion starve and it continues to pace, even after its flesh has fallen away, almost anything else is possible. Immortality, or timelessness, seemed a necessary precondition for the potential that the islands could indeed be infinite. Space and time could be without limit.

Although *The Infinite Islands* is set in a made up world, in terms of the writing, it still must take reality into account. I was constantly aware that every word choice, reference, and description was being rendered in a language tied in some ways to reality and thereby contained the potential to suggest a reality within the world of the novel that was literally not there. I was also aware that I had the freedom suggested by Borges's Library, the freedom to create an extensive and original world of infinite proportions. If a conventional fantasy world can best be represented by the map one often finds inside the covers (Middle Earth, for example), then my

fantasy world would extend beyond such bounds, to be, strangely, like reality within a fantasy. In attempting to depict something that came wholly from my imagination, I struggled to maintain a world that contrasted the everyday reality I existed in as I was writing. Within the world, my imagination struggled to support its magnitude and to have its extensiveness always present in my thoughts. The desire to find a map, to discover the proportions of the world becomes a large part of the plot of *The Infinite Islands*.

3. Influences: Realism and Fantasy in the History of the Novel

As much as *Don Quixote* contains the basic outline of the relation between reality and the imagination in the novel it nonetheless does so in its own historically determined way, a way that can seem impossibly different from our novels and our lives today. The Knight's often convoluted chivalric rhetoric and Sanchos' and the other character's earthy language of everyday life loses much of the nuance they probably had. As the novel form developed it went in a thousand different directions. What I hope to do here is to trace that history in terms of the relation between realism and fantasy, using a handful of books that influenced the writing of *The Infinite Islands* and that are canonical in the field of the history of the novel. In the English-language novel, the debate about realism and fantasy has remained. As I was writing and thinking about all those possibilities the novel allows for, I often thought that what I most clearly needed was a comfortable position in the discussion. If I was going to make up a world, what language choices would I need to make in order to build and sustain it? As I've already stated, my novel is closer to fantasy than reality, but the basic question of what that means dogged my every thought. If I describe a conventional aspect of real life---for example the words "starboard" and "larboard" for the sides of a boat --- will I be allowing a false and disruptive

reality to peek through the fantasy? It also seemed possible to go too far in the direction of the fantastical. Strangely, this question came down to decisions involving certain human landmarks, such as the stars and the moon. If, for instance, a world has more than one moon, it can't be considered Earth. If the stars are in different positions, the world will be considered much more fantastical. As it happens, I decided on a single moon, and different constellations, constellations seeming to me to be an interpretation of the positions of the stars. But even now, thinking about it, it does not make logical sense to have my world resemble earth at all, since no earthly system of plate tectonics could produce infinite islands. And then there are the conventions of the genre, which I had the option of using or ignoring. Would I for example, have trolls, elves, and the like, which owe their existence to folklore and their role in the genre to other authors, particularly Tolkien? Aid in these questions came from a handful of books, both canonical texts in realism and examples of fantasy fiction.

As a baseline for realism in the English novel, two authors from the eighteenth century seem the best exemplars: Richardson and Defoe. Both authors used writing techniques to emphasize the reality of what they were writing and to, in a way, reassure their readers that it was not made up. Richardson used epistolary forms in *Pamela*: the epistles act as “real” because they are “in fact” written by the characters. Putting aside that approach, Defoe's *The Life & Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* is more relevant to my project with its narration of moment-by-moment life. Describing Crusoe's third year on the island, Defoe goes through the stages of his creating earthenware storage pot, then cookware capable of withstanding high heat, then his attempts to mill corn and bake bread:

It need not be wondered at, if all these things took me up most part of the third year of my abode here; for it is to be observed, that in the intervals of these things I had my new

harvest and husbandry to manage; for I reaped my corn in its season, and carried it home as well as I could, and laid it up in the ear (Defoe 157).

Defoe leaves out none of the details of life that allow Crusoe to survive. There is little romance to this tale of a man stranded on a island, despite its extraordinary plot: it is about the re-creation of reality, the opposite of the broad sweep of romance. Defoe's language is equally unadorned and humble. As he states in the "Author's Preface," the work "is a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it; and, however,[...] because all such things are despatched [sic], that the improvement of it, as well to the diversion as to the instruction of the reader, will be the same" (Defoe "Author's Preface"). The "history of fact" that we get in the novel, is particularly detailed descriptions of action and the thought behind that action, along with some moral reflection on the meaning of those actions.

A challenge to the Defoe and Richardson models of realism came from Fielding and, simultaneously, the Gothic novel. Fielding's *A History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* derives directly from *Don Quixote*. Fielding positions his novel against what he saw as the hypocritical and moralizing forces of realism. He uses instead ironic distance and an active engagement of his writing project and an ongoing debate with actual or potential "criticks". In the introductory chapter to Book Eight, the author, as he does before each book, analyzes the narrative art of the novel, in this case considering the idea of "the marvelous." The question seems to be what are the boundaries of reality and how do you know if you have crossed them too far. Fielding dismisses "elves and fairies, and other such mummery," as belonging to a separate type of work with less restrictive boundaries, not compatible with novels about the "highest subject," "Man" (Fielding 324-325). He goes on to argue that "falling into fiction" is a great risk of the historian, but that for the historian the public record keeps that tendency in check (326). However, when

the novelists takes up “private characters” as his subject, the writer is in a “more dangerous situation” (326). He continues by giving the example of a real life extraordinary man, who is exceptionally good in all aspects of his life but dismisses writing about such rare character because it is a “single instance” and the audience for the novel will have no knowledge of that person. With this point, Fielding suggests that an extraordinary, but true, character does not seem real. What is necessary for the novel, Fielding concludes, is that actions should be “within the compass of human agency” and “likely” and that the “conservation of character” should be maintained, the latter meaning that a character should not act outside of his established characteristics. Fielding concludes that within these bounds the novelist should write about the “wonderful” (in other words “fictional”) as he pleases.

The Gothic novel allowed for increasing the amount of wonder and farfetched situations, with its decaying castles, exotic or grotesque settings, and the heightened emotions of the heroine. In his second preface to *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Horace Walpole defends the form by saying his novel “was the attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success” (Walpole 9). Like Fielding, Walpole is forthright about what he believes a novel can and should be, and he makes a case for his version. He states he was “desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, [I] wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability” (Walpole 9). With this statement, Walpole outlines the basic aesthetic of the Gothic novel: the imagination should have free play, but people should act according to what seems probable. Ann Radcliffe took this basic outline, added to it lush descriptions of the Italian countryside and natural world,

focused more on a single heroine, and popularized the Gothic novel for English readers. The Gothic, with its allowance of “fancy” or the imagination to have “free play” with characters who are acting and behaving as recognizable humans, is one source of the fantasy novel genre. Countless fantasy novels can be described as worlds of free play as the imagination swirls around a single recognizably human character or characters who act according to the standards of morality and behavior that are recognizably probable from “real life.”

From the history of the novel, then, up to this point, we get the idea that there are limits on how much free play is possible in the novel and that the limiting factor is probability. If all novels, as I have argued above, are a new definitions of the relation between reality and the imagination, all novels that include fantastic elements are new explorations of the possibility of free play of the imagination. The most important novel representing this tension (and among the most important novels for its formal innovations, *and* one of the most important novel for this writer’s life of reading) is Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. Even the title suggests Walpole “ancient and modern” romance coming together. It is a modern version of the Prometheus myth, in which Prometheus is punished for giving life to his creation. However, with her descriptions of the arctic tundra and the Alps rising toward the sky, Shelly surpassed Gothic conventions to include the Romantic sublime as an aesthetic. But it is the author’s breathing life into the improbable that makes the book so important. A third of the novel is given over to the thoughts and emotions of the Creature; by giving narrative life to the fantastical being, Shelley took the realism and folded it inside fantasy. Almost every one of the creature’s thoughts are recognizably human, and all his actions are probable. He is set apart from other humans by a slight absence of reason, a powerful anger at being rejected, and unusual size and strength. An artistic move that seems so natural to us now given the dissemination of Creature

images and adaptations, was truly revolutionary in the history of fantasy within the novel. Here was the imaginative creation of the novelist as imaginative-scientific invention of Frankenstein, he was a “monster” by the definitions of the time but utterly human and capable of inspiring empathy, despite his murderous rage.

Throughout the nineteenth century the novel would develop along lines that integrated gothic and romantic elements. Victorian mystery, science fiction, and horror all derive some of their elements from this history, but it is evident that certain trends splintered into specific genres, where they developed on their own. With Dickens, in *Our Mutual Friend*, we can detect elements of the Gothic (the ash heaps, the shadowed river), the romantic (heightened emotions), alongside the sentimental and the Victorian. In the nineteenth century, you also get the American Romantic and Gothic, with novels like *The Scarlet Letter*, which uses a supernatural Gothic to comment on the Puritan history of the country. In Poe’s stories the Gothic becomes contorted and visceral. In the early 20th century, there were many precursors to the modern fantasy novel, especially those that integrated myth and fairy tales into contemporary settings. But we really see those innovations in light of Tolkien and Peake, two solidifiers of the fantasy genre. It is worth looking at two of their novels, in addition to a more modern take by Roger Zelazny, to understand what modern fantasy took from the history of the novel.

Because of its setting within and around the great sprawling castle of *Gormenghast*, Mervyn Peake’s novel *Titus Groan* seems to owe much to the Gothic. But there is something different and utterly fantastical in the castle. It is not in Italy, Spain, or anywhere else; it simply is its own place, its own explanation. The majority of the novel takes place inside the castle, among the machinations of its servants---from the cook, Swelter, to the Doctor, Prunesquallor---before and after the birth of Titus, destined to become the seventy-seventh heir to the castle.

Peake's negotiation of the reality and fantasy combines highly imaginative situations and characters with highly specific and detailed descriptions. Steerpike, the rogue main character, escapes the kitchen for the "freedom" of roaming the castle, only to find himself left alone and with nowhere to sleep except the roof:

The darkness came down over the castle and the Twisted Woods and over Gormenghast Mountain. The long tables of the Dwellers were hidden in the thickness of a starless night. The cactus trees and the acacias where Nanie Slagg had walked, and the ancient thorn in the servants' quadrangle were as one in their shrouding. Darkness over the four wings of Gormenghast. Darkness lying against the glass doors of the Christening Room and pressing its impalpable body through the walls, hiding them to all save touch alone; hiding them and hiding everything; swallowing everything in its insatiable omnipresence (Peake 101).

The description carries on from there and is indicative of Peake's art. In his descriptions of fantastic setting (the details of which are often, as above, alluded to more than explained) he presents the psychological mood of the character. The mood is usually morose, alienated, or frightened, when not angry, avaricious, or threatening. The world of the novel reflects these dark, tempestuous emotions. It is a world of internal infighting, meaningless ritual, and strange rooms in the castle (one is a room packed full of white cats). As in Walpole, the imaginary is both ancient and modern. Ancient for its feudal feel, modern for its lugubrious tones of alienation and disconnection.

From Peake, I take the specificity of his description of the fantasy world. To me, it is his style that incorporates "reality" in the description of a "fantasy" space. Descriptions of the air, the change of seasons, the extensive castle. In fact, the castle itself is a metaphor, for me, of

what a fantasy novel is. It is a world to itself, with all of its own rules and codes without reference to the specifics of the outside world...but reality is still maintained by the probable actions of the characters and the realistic recreation of the world. It contains the world and it is inescapable. Peake was not the first to create an entirely complete world not dependent on reality, but the way he did it has provided one option for the fantasy novelist ever since.

The much-copied Tolkein “universe” described in *The Lord of the Rings* (Fellowship of the Rings, the first novel, published in 1954) famously took its definitions from its creator’s detailed, scholarly understanding of ancient Europe, particularly its mythology and history. Although few 21st century fantasy novels resemble Peake’s world, many resemble the fantastical northern Europe of Tolkien. It is difficult to wrestle with such an influential novel, except to make sure one is not influenced by it. Looking at its use of the reality-fantasy relation it is worth questioning how having characters of different types play such key roles in the book is related to the idea of characters acting within probability. Elves always act according the ways Elves act and the same goes for Hobbits, Men, Dwarves, etc. Although fantastical, the beings act realistically within their defined rules. If a dwarf were to be suddenly agile or a Hobbit turn down food, the “realism” of the fantasy would be violated. Although this is a world of “elves and fairies, and other such mummery,” it still retains elements of a realism that even Fielding would recognize. However, and like Peake, it is primarily the bounded world of *The Lord of the Rings* that inspires its copiers, because Middle-Earth is a world unto itself, its edges extending much farther than the boundaries of Gormenghast, complete with geography, cartography, sociology, mythology, languages, and gods and demons, magic, etc. Tolkein’s genius is in both realistically describing this setting in such a way to imply rather than specifically describe the world, yet have it be bounded by its familiar cartographic landmarks. Peake could specifically

describe every crumbling stone and rotting leaves, Tolkien achieved sweep by focusing on the character's interaction with the "map" of the novel. A true epic in that Frodo begins and ends in the Shire after accomplishing his quest, much of the narrative is made up of characters in dialogue or descriptions of action, the world being built, as it were, around and at the edges of action and by reference and implication in conversation. When the narrator, though, takes time to describe a place, he does so with a simulacrum of medieval English. Here is the description of Isengard, in thrall of Saruman:

A strong place and wonderful was Isengard, and long it had been beautiful; and there great lords had dwelt, the wardens of Gondor upon the West, and wise men that watched the stars. But Sarumen had slowly shaped it to his shifting purposes, and made it better, as he thought, being deceived --- for those arts and subtle devices, for which he forsook his former wisdom (Tolkien 555).

The word order of the above passage, similar to those scattered throughout the text, reverses the modern syntax in order to create an archaic, medieval inflection to the description, which in fact does not describe Isengard at all, but gives the impression of its likeness. The trilogy shifts between such language and the sometimes child-like discussions of Frodo and Sam, to the descriptions of battles, creating a fantastical world of great breadth but limited descriptive specificity. Breadth is achieved through the absence of details.

A third major work of fantasy in the 20th century is *Chronicles of Amber* (ten novels published between 1970 and 1992). They tell the stories related to a city called Amber that exists on a plane separate from the real world but connected to it. In fact Amber has the potential to connect not only to our everyday world, but to all possible and potential worlds past and present (if the traveler is a Prince of Amber and has the right knowledge and keys). The style is

dramatically different from either Peake or Tolkein, and, as a result, the world of the fantasy has a distinctly different feel. The style is fast-paced and contemporary, free from the deliberately archaic, medieval-European feel of Tolkein or the Victorian and Modernist inflections of Peake. Zelazny's fantasy world resembles the library of Borges if, instead of books, each volume contained a possible world. Some are dangerous and bizarre, some are strange, each contains its own beings. The Princes of Amber travel between these worlds (called Shadows) and into and out of the city of Amber, vying for power. Like Tolkien, Zelazny can, at times use a suggestive diffuseness in his descriptions. Here is a portion of the description as Corwin, the narrator of the first five books, negotiates The Pattern, a physical task almost like a labyrinth that will allow him to travel freely within the multiverse, including returning to Amber (from which he had been banished):

There was a crackle and I felt my hair beginning to rise. I took another step.

Then the thing began to curve, abruptly, back upon itself. I took ten more paces, and a certain resistance seemed to arise. It was as if a black barrier had grown up before me, of some substance which pushed back upon me with each effort I made to pass forward.

I fought it. It was the First Veil, I suddenly knew.

To get beyond it would be an Achievement, a good sign, showing that I was indeed part of the Pattern. Each raising and lowering of my foot suddenly required a terrible effort, and sparks shot forth from my hair (Zelazny 58).

Using non-specific words such as “the thing,” “a certain resistance” “some substance,” which suggest presence without specifying what that presence is, Zelazny creates an imaginative space for the reader to enter. He also uses details such as the “First Veil” and even “The Pattern” without ever defining them. Even the multidimensional space of the world is never further

specified beyond Amber, Chaos, and Shadows, the Shadows being everything possible. The characters do interact with these places as they encounter them. This variety of fantasy allows space for the reader's imagination to fill in the details, just as Peake's variety of fantasy worked to fill in every detail. In terms of character, Zelazny's human characters seem as though they just walked out of a realistic novel: talking, smoking, and acting according to average expectations.

4. Making A World

I have written above of the initial idea for *The Infinite Islands*. The books I have chosen to discuss here are the books I thought about most when trying to define the edges of the world of islands I had created, and to make those edges seem unbounded. A big part of what I tried to do as a writer is simply let myself write without thinking too much about anything. Once I had the initial idea, and felt it had enough internal energy to carry me through a novel-length narrative, I focused daily on completing the work. However, when I got stuck, or had to make any of the thousands of decision I had to make each day, I often reflected on the above novels, and on Borges's work, for help in answering the questions. This is probably because I read the majority of them a long time ago (all but Zelazny), when my ideas about novels were being formed, and have reread them over the years. Because of the subject matter of *The Infinite Islands*, which is also related in my mind to *The Odyssey*, I also often reflected on Lukács and his analysis of the relation between epic and the novel, as well as the chapters from *Mimesis* that are about works I am familiar with. Although literary theory can be less productive for a creative writer than a critical writer, these two works helped me understand the novel form better.

A fantasy novel must be about something more than itself. Mine is about the education of the main character and is intended as the first volume of a much longer work. I frequently asked myself, why not write a novel about the education of character in the conventional reality? For me there is something important about the pure act of invention. The act of inventing the world as I am writing it seems to allow me to have greater control over the world and thus, a greater degree of control over how the character interacts with the world. The infinite islands, the world of the book, inspires me to move forward through it in search of meaning in the same way that Borges's librarians search the infinite library for them. I do not know what dwells on all the islands, I have only suggestions, what types of magic, what types of gods. Just as Tolkien incorporated themes from northern European mythology, I borrowed ideas from the mythology of the Greeks and Romans and the stories of the Thousand and One Nights. But unlike Tolkien, I wanted to avoid the epic structure and instead opted for a kind of continuously linked peripatetic events using the idea of a world of islands as a structuring device. Like Fielding and Defoe, I thought that the characters needed to act within the boundaries of probability, and then I tried to bend those rules, as when the narrator walks on water when he has inadvertently become the succubus of an immortal demon. However, the fantastic world he lives in makes it more probable that he would encounter many interesting, challenging situations.

Finally though, the heart of all of this, of any of it, is the story, for me anyway. I want reader to want to know what happens next. To communicate a novel-length story there has to be a world within the novel to support it, whether it resemble Middle-Earth or Buffalo, New York. The following portion of the prologue to the novel serves as an introduction to the novel, as well as my critical ideas.

I put aside the question of what it means to tell my life as a story, aside the question of who will read it. For a story is itself, is a giving of life. Like the islands, stories go on, extend to the horizon. As the short days grow and fade---too quickly...more quickly now than when I was young---the story grows and grows. A story holds back the final falling of night.

INFINITE ISLANDS: THE SEATREES

1.

I was born on Clayd Island. Soon after my naming, I left my obscure inland village and traveled to the seacoast where I was apprenticed to a sailmaker. After four years, he died of the grummage and left me in charge of his workshop and family. I stole his best vessel and, with sails of my own design, set off for Nur, the largest of the Ten Cities. I don't know what happened on Clayd after I left. When I returned there nearer to the end of life than to the beginning, my family and our former dwelling were gone. Vines grew over the flattened ground. On the coast, no record of the sailmaker's family remained.

When I docked at the port of Nur, a Knitel cutpurse tried to slit my throat. I held the blood in and clubbed him with a carpenter's mallet. The stench of Knitel food stung my nose as I pried the gold teeth from his skull. I gave his boots to a dock urchin. With the gold, I hired a lion-tamer to sew up my wound. Her name was Aba---she had earned her way out of slavery with her ability to communicate with the deathless lions from the island of Vinfer. Scars across her body were the emblems of past mistakes. Throughout Nur, the City of Cities, it was known that no one heals wounds as well as a Vinferian lion tamer.

Aba wore sixteen diamonds in one ear and leather boots to her knees. Her skin was the color of honey collected by the Prims on my home island. They live halfway up the Trelson volcano. The bees suck nectar from lush flowers nurtured by the ground heat of the rock. This tints the honey purple. I could feel her breath as she stitched the skinflaps shut. When I stretched my neck to kiss her, thread tugged in my skin.

Above the taming ground, we slept in a chamber hung with Vinferian tapestries. Spun gold lion gods grappled. At the place they call “Origin,” two green rivers flowed into one and, in the silver shade of the Vin-tree, became a single blue current. At night Aba braided whips to the thinness of silk and planned newer, more death-defying routines. When we slept I dreamed her dreams and she dreamed mine. During the days I repaired the sails of merchant vessels, and, when there was no better work to be had, held my breath, dove down, and scraped barnacles from hulls. I learned to speak gulla-gulla from galley slaves who were left chained in strings in the sun. Deep in seawater pearly by bubbles, the sound of the scraping tool seemed distant and my hands seemed not my own; the burning of my lungs consumed my thoughts. Gulla-song thrummed above.

Aba was stolen from me by a scurb witchdoctor who passed through Nur as a part of the Third Prince’s armada. The witchdoctor had a ruby in place of one eye: seamen said he was ten generations old, that he appeared in the third chronicle of Nur under the name Ascandulus the Thundercaster. During a performance, he cast a spell on my Aba-girl and, when she left the ring, she dissolved into the leathery night.

I let her lions starve. Their ribs cut through their pelts and their skin dropped away. Their organs rotted in baskets of bone. People came to watch them walk back and forth in their cages. Their eyes were pits, their teeth grimaced. Soon, the last flesh fell away and, at the joints, brittle tendons creaked. Bones clattered. In the Nurian sunlight, the lion skeletons paced. I sat crosslegged in the dust and watched. Because of the sound, I left our son at Jester’s College and tried to forget my past. But the past is like an immortal lion pacing through the night.

To you, I can be Halhzeed. On Cimrandia, the word meant “beauty” and was without gender. “Halh” meant “thing” and “zeed” meant “good.” Pronounced together with the right intonation, the word could be used to refer to the felicitous curvature of an oil jar or sunlight bending around a mountain peak. In the wyndrine, the Cimrands fought for two years, on land and at sea, against the Firk-Greheim of Grindolian. The Cimrands lost that war and their island was overrun by stoop-shouldered Firks, who took the character “halh” and used it to mean “goat,” and the character “zeed” and used it to mean “ass.” This transformation of meaning seems to me an apt description of the twists and turns of the times of men, who can go from beautiful to goat’s asses as quickly as a leaf can fall from a tree.

Only my mother knew my true name. In a sacred grove and after circling me a hundred times as I kneeled, she whispered it in my ear. Sometimes I turn that name over in my thoughts and it seems like a word from an unknown language. Other times I think it is all I know to be true of myself. As is the custom with my people, I will only repeat the name she whispered with my last breath, which may come any day now. I was fourteen when I left Clayd for Nur. You who now think of me as “Halhzeed” should know I have been called by many names. The name my mother whispered in my ear protects me from those who would take power over me. Each name I have taken or been given has a different significance in my story. A girl named Nemony gave me my favorite and so I shall tell of it first.

I found her imprisoned in the palace on the island of Fent. Her chamber was lined with purple silk and quilted lemon-colored cotton. Day and night her inarticulate cries filled the air and were smothered by luxurious cloth. “Other islanders”---the name given to strangers everywhere, spoken in many languages---call Fent “place of excess and disease.” All

Fentians contract the disease eventually and to varying degrees. It peels their flesh away from extremities and leaves behind yellowish dripping scabs. If a harbor master of the port of any of the Ten Cities boards a ship from Fent, he will light it on fire and ensure that no one escapes. The harbor master will then bathe in sulfur water and spend six months in quarantine as a precaution. I had gone there to kill someone who could not be allowed to die fast enough. Nemony was pure of heart and mind, a girl of only ten. I stole her from the Prince to prevent her marriage to a counselor, a man with nose and lips eaten away. I tried to find where she had come from. On the sole of her left foot someone had burned a circular brand but no one I asked knew the significance of that emblem. Nemony's mouth lacked a tongue and her gestures would not compass my craft in a sensible direction. One morning, she would point to the sun as it rose; at night her finger singled out amongst the stars the yellow eye of the Boar. When I failed to discover her homeland, I sailed to the Sisters of Howling Vale, who raise sheep and take vows of silence. I left Nemony pedaling a spinning wheel under the eyes of the Mother of that group. Nemony was smiling. She pointed to me and then pointed up to the sun and pointed to me again. The Mother nodded benevolently. That is my favorite name. A finger pointed to the sun, in silence.

I have now told the story of the one good thing I have done. It took me until I was half-aged to know what "good" even means. This deed was performed when I was an old man (though far younger than I am now) and long after I lost Aba-girl. When I was sixteen and had dropped our son the Jester's Gate (a boy of fourteen who thinks he is a man has no pity for a babe), I made a secret pledge. I would see all the islands, all those I had heard of and all those I had not. I would never settle, never marry or take up a trade.

My immediate destination was to be the Astute Brotherhood. A boy of fourteen puts his faith in exciting stories. Growing up, I had been told countless stories about the Brotherhood and its founder Cerie the Wise. My uncle was the storyteller. He had served in the Navy of the Ten Cities, had lost his left arm to an Aluot cutlass and the use of his right leg in a fall from mast to deck. He used to lie on his side next to the fire, sucking hurcha brew through a wide straw and telling stories. My favorites were of the founding of the brotherhood...Cerie giving up the wealth of his father's kingdom to travel the higher road ... gathering followers to his missions of protecting poor villages...founding the Fas deep in the eyrthrine at a location "impossible to discover, but once known, impossible to forget." Cerie and his band of solders and followers were the masters of all weapons, the bravest and the strongest in all the islands. They came to him from all over, and he rewarded their loyalty with noble causes and great adventure. Though Cerie was long dead, stories of the Brotherhood still circulated and my uncle had always had faith in their truth. Looking back now, I see a broken sailor telling stories to a boy to pass the time, but back then the Brotherhood as they appeared in the stories was real to me. I knew that in all the islands anything was possible. When I set out to see the world, I set out to join them.

3.

I am now so old that my bones feel like ice and my papery skin hangs loose from my face. My feet swell and the pain of their throbbing wakes me in the night. When dawn falls on my eyes and I yawn awake, I can taste the rotting of my last few teeth. Every night when I lower my body to bed, the Vinferian lions pace, foot knuckles grinding. When I stand in my boat steering into the wind, I want to give in to the force of air and allow myself to bend like a reed. Stories are all I have left of the life that made me so.

I have sewn gloves for a princess on whose hands the sun had never lit. I have fought the undead hero Ylud on the decks of his own galleon. I have been a groom for a holy donkey and I have communed with long-necked Jilbathia at her temple on the island of Hope (which many believe does not exist). I have learned the name of a thousand gods of the sea or, perhaps, I have heard the name of one god of the sea spoken in a thousand languages. I have built with my own hands six vessels of perfection and I have lost them all. I have fought a giant squid and a giant octopus, on separate occasions, but with a trident both times. I have been a prisoner and a warden. I have caught and milked wild mountain sheep to prevent starvation. With a band of loyal warriors, I have laid siege to Castle Impenetrable until all the residents starved. I have fathered children and abandoned wives. I have been chained to an oar, hung by the neck, and shot by an arrow. I have been branded, tattooed, and scarred. Against my will, I have been rendered invisible (and silent) by a sorcerer; I became the spirit of a sacred grove until I was freed by the accidental intercession of a princess who kissed a clear pebble. I have been taught the tongue of dolphins and the speech of hermit elves that live in the windward caverns high in the rock of Gurtron Island (known as the “tiny tongue” there are only thirteen words: is, are, was, were, me, you, food, water, sex, friend, enemy, thing, and god). I have followed leaders and sacrificed to many deities. Concealed in high branches, I have watched a satyr woo a nymph. I have hunted beasts with tusks, teeth, and horns. I have hooked an articulate fish who promised to grant me three wishes, but, but as I thought of what to wish for, he slipped my grasp and swam away. I have looked down on a village of sleeping innocents, planning their plunder, when a silver bird glowing like moonlight came to me and said, “Leave these people in peace,” and I could not ignore her directive. Out of cowardice, I have stabbed a friend in the base of the skull.

For love, I have been poisoned. I have many times since wished that my friend had murdered me and that my lover's poison had proved fatal.

The Islands are said to be infinite. Among people who believe that the world is in the shape of the serpent Guloh swallowing her own tail, the islands are the motes of dust clinging to her scales. Among those who believe the world is the eye of a whale named Olowopolot swimming in yet a bigger ocean, which in turn is the eye of Iteriopolox, a yet bigger whale, and so on, these islands are both incalculable and insignificant. Among those who believe that the dust of the islands is everything, that those bright lights above in the night are aberrations of the imagination or holes poked in the night silk, the islands are said to be mistakes in the perfect world of water. It is universally agreed among those who think about the world beyond their own shores --- a small number of all those who live ---- that no man or woman has seen them all.

Nur is the largest in the mydrine, its ruling counsel of nine the most powerful and stable government. Within written time, the island has never been overthrown. The Navy of the Ten Cities is a powerful (though corrupt) protective force. With its stable volcano, with its buildings running up from beaches and the harbor, with its merchants and goods, the island is the immediate choice for a young man on the loose from family, apprenticeship, from the navy of lord or regent. I left there as a young man and never returned.

Islanders everywhere enjoy a good tale. I have been the one to tell it. Perhaps I got this from my uncle. A traveler, I have beached or anchored, or swum ashore, and been welcomed to fire, hearth, banquet, rite, and festival. I tell true stories and go beyond the truth with every breath. The islands are said to be infinite. There is much I have seen and much I have not seen. There are many stories to tell.

I once sailed beyond the icerine for three days. Besides ice floes rigid and glistening in emerald water, I encountered no land. For three more days I sailed on: nothing but water, deep, cold, still, and endless. My men grew restless, not believing me that if the islands are infinite we would eventually meet another. We sailed on for six more days with indifferent wind and fear gripped even me. All was silent and cold, the sky a cruel and depthless gray. Could we travel beyond the time of our lives without ever meeting another piece of land? I turned back and fought the wind for several months to return to the village of Timuit sealhunters. I had been of middle age on that failed voyage. I lost heart because I loved life too much.

Now, I am again in the farthest icerine, a guest of Wurl the Split Beard, regent by successful trial of what the Timuits believe is the last (by which they mean the coldest) dirt island on the farthest edge of the icerine. The island's name, Chuk Kuk, means "seaedge." It is so cold here that the air does not move. Sound, such as a cracking piece of ice, moves so quickly that it both seems to have existed forever and to fly like an arrow loosed. Wurl has provided me an ice house and his third wife. I write down my story during the short, bright days and, at night, challenge Wurl to drinking contests that I let him win. I am telling my tale of tales so that any who find it will understand the world. For language, I choose the language of Nur (and how I learned to write those characters is a story I will tell). For you who read this, I will translate the others. If the islands are infinite, the languages of the people are infinite as well, but you can't tell a story for all hearers at once. Fire lights the faces of my audiences and I judge their reactions in their flickering eyes. For this, told on paper, I must imagine all those faces at once and many yet besides. Nur, the language of trade, has spread as far as any other. When I have written down all the stories I can remember I will again leave the world of what is known. I will board my single-masted closed-hulled boat and hold the tiller well. I will take this book, bound

in sharkskin and wrapped in many layers of oiled cloth. I will carry with me a year's supply of dried seal meat provided by Wurl, my old friend. I will go alone beyond the end of the islands.

The short days of Chuk-Kuk wane as I spread octopus ink with my cut quill. I put aside the question of what it means to tell my life as a story, aside the question of who will read it. For a story is itself, is a giving of life. Like the islands, stories go on, extend to the horizon. As the short days grow and fade---too quickly...more quickly now than when I was young---the story grows and grows. A story holds back the final falling of night.

4.

In the eyrthrine on the peaceful island Joonish Light, I once met a shepherd named Retder. I arrived there on one of my last voyages as a wool merchant. This was not very long ago. I told him my plan to sail beyond what was known and find a place about which nothing was said.

“How do you know that you will not simply return to the islands by another route?” he asked.

I said that the world is spherical but also endless. The horizon was an idea that made a nice story.

“How do you not know that you will not find the islands again? All identical except for the slight difference that you are not already present in them?”

I said that possibility was improbable.

Retder laughed at that. “Have not many improbable events taken place?”

I agreed that a great many had.

“Have not a great many improbable events happen to you alone?”

That was true, I said.

“And are there not many more islanders throughout all the rines and seas?”

This too, was true.

“Then does it not make sense that there is no difference between what is likely to happen and what is unlikely to happen?”

I said, “Shepherds have too much time to think. There is much a man can count on in life. He cannot breathe water. If he bleeds enough or loses his head, he will die. Once he sees a pattern in the stars, such as the outline of Xin the Two Headed Wolf, he will not be able to forget that pattern. Because there are ten fingers and ten toes on the bodies of most men and some animals, the base unit for all figuring is 10. The wind always pushes it never pulls. Metal that is sharp becomes dull through use, the mind that is dull becomes sharp through use. All this is known and reliable.”

“You may be right,” he said. “But I know you can count on the improbable and the surprising happening at every turn. When you sail beyond the seaedge you will find yourself again. If you looked for me, you would find me again and I would say the same things to you. And you would find my words as hard to believe as you do now. But in finding yourself you would be saddened to have discovered only the same thing again. The thing that you cannot quite know and that you do not quite understand. What you have looked for you will find and find that you need to look for again. And you will sail again and find it again and again find that you need to look for it.”

“But at least I would have looked and will know for myself what is and what is not. What you say is good for a shepherd who goes nowhere and knows about nothing first-hand. You can safely imagine made up answers to made up questions. Mine is right for an adventurer

who goes everywhere and knows what he knows first-hand. A man can only go to an island for the first time once, can only be a stranger to another person once, and can only live and die once. This is true even for demons and the undead."

"And are you certain that is right?" asked the shepherd.

"I am certain, yes."

"And I am certain that it is wrong," said the shepherd

And with that I left the shepherd Retdeer behind.

5.

You who read this, where did you find it? Frozen in ice? Sunk among jetsam on a rocky beach? Floating among purple anemones in a tidal pool? Sloshing in the belly of a whale whose eye is the world? Aboard a bleached vessel overtaken in a calm, next to a skeleton of a man who came to believe that the horizon is a fiction and that all the stars are islands?

Am I with my book, having died and been reborn? Have I found my young self again on the last island? Am I telling it again around the fire? To myself? Am I reading from it in the afterworld?

You will read my story and know perhaps who you think is right, the shepherd or the adventurer. And then perhaps you will know something.

Part 1

3.

After leaving our son with the Jesters on Nur, I rechristened my craft Greywart and rigged her to cut the water like a blade. I stole a silk merchant's inventory and set sail before

dawn on a new moon. The lights of the capitol city got sucked into the darkness as I sped away, aided by tide and wind.

The nearest island to Nur is Selja. There I traded the silk for three bronze swords of indifferent craftsmanship. I took the three swords to Zill of Selja, a master armorer, and asked him to make me, in trade, a light weapon with an edge that could cut through rope at the barest touch. I planned to earn my place among the Astute Brotherhood with my swordskill. I was young and burned to live a short life.

Zill gave me a weapon of passable use and told me it was all he could do given the paltriness of my trade. Zill's body was bent, crippled from his work. The ceremonial scars of the Jikkick sect of the Seljian godcraft stroked his face. The fire had burned his fists purple and hairless; his hammer hand was twice the size of the other, which was frozen into a claw from long gripping of tongs. As I balanced the sword he had handed me, I thought about plunging it into his neck and stealing his best weapon. Zill eyed me with a look of a man who had had such attempts made before. His hammer hand gripped the handle.

"May I offer you a glass of Krimpt to seal the deal?" I asked instead.

"I have much work to do," he said.

"I'll go to the Krimptmander and return with a bottle. Please allow me."

In the dim workshop, the forge hissed and popped. He nodded and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a leather sleeve.

In the street, warm fat raindrops were falling. Selja is an island known for the making of things, particularly weapons and spirits. The men of Selja are said to be dull-witted but careful. On the north side of the island there is a cavern facing the sea in which a family has made saddles for the last thousand years, intermarrying sons with daughters. Their pale sightless eyes

frighten the messengers that come from far-flung islands to purchase the sought-after saddles. Because of the reputation of these saddles and their makers, many slurs about mothers and sisters come from the Seljan language. The expression “elgrelhandae mucta” translated into Nurian as “to ride the pommel,” means to sleep with one’s sister. Among sailors this is a low-grade insult that few take seriously. Similarly the question, “What are you, a Seljian?” is meant to imply utter stupidity. However, to possess a “Seljatic sword” means both to be well armed and potent. Dull as they are, the Selja armorers turn out the sharpest blades of the mydrine. Their families are large, as well.

Bare boards slapped over mud form the streets of Selja, a low village of wooden huts built carefully but not decoratively. Tar coats the roofs against sea storms. The walls have no windows or openings. Like most of the inner islands, their home volcano has long gone cold and filled with rain. Although the Jikkick customs are brutal, their gods have lost most of their fire. Perhaps I should say that, because the gods have lost their fire, the Jikkick’s customs have become brutal. The Filkick’s admitted this long ago and became peaceable scholars of their own long history, abjuring the sacrifices of their fathers, and concentrating on preserving, through illumination, their mythologies. A Filkick will rarely deign to speak to a Jikkick. The mountain, a broken cone rising above the pathetic roofs of the paltry town, clung to a field of fog lit purple by the sinking sun. When the gap between boards was wide enough, I could see the red eyes of Seljatic lizards watching me.

I searched for an adequate Krimptmander. Soon, I found a sign that read THE SEABEAR AND THE PORPOISE and entered the establishment, stepping over an unconscious man as I did so. It might seem surprising that such a young man as I then was would know of Seljatic Krimptmanders and their brew, but it was something of legend among young men who had no

experience of it, and the whispers of its powers have reached the shores of most inner islands. I did not, however, know the customs of order and design.

A leather hat stood behind the bar. Under it, an elderly misshapen being, which I now know to be an Ilk from Second Spehk. They are somewhat like men, but of smaller stature, with short powerful thighs and big powerful jaws. In that moment and in my ignorance, I thought that this was what a krimptmander looked like. A thousand bottles containing herbs and tinctures lined the bar back. Nearby, a complex network of heated tubes of brass and tiny gold knobs at the junctures connected repositories of tar-colored glass. Under broad, gourd-like bottles, flame twisted, bubbling the contents.

The ilk stared at me, breathing hard, his blue-green chest skin wrinkling and smoothing.

“Give me a bottle,” I tried.

Although slight, I thought I saw an imperceptible smile rise on the corners of his green lips. The man on the ground stirred slightly. From behind the counter, the ilk removed a wooden hammer and a hand sickle.

I held up my hands. “I apologize, sir. I meant no disrespect. I have come from an island far away and hope only to offer a gift to Master Zill, in order to seal the deal I have made with him for a sword. I am not aware of your customs.”

From behind me, I heard murmuring.

“Perhaps you can inform me of the proper way of ordering what I’m sure is your masterfully crafted drink.” Even as I said that, I put my hand on the handle of my new sword.

The Ilk shifted, seemed to loosen his arms and hands.

The body flopped to one side but grew still again.

He jumped over the bar and flew at me, swinging first the hammer, which I ducked and fell to the ground, and then the sickle, which flew by my ear. The handle of it caught my shoulder with surprising force. Ilk-smell stunned me as his solid body landed. I blocked a second swing of the sickle and cut off one of the Ilk's fingers with a slash of my new sword. He did not register the wound, which caused me to lose some heart. He swung the mallet a second time while I slashed at his head. Then he kicked me in the chest with a bare horny foot.

With some loss of breath I rolled to my feet. I was fighting a creature no higher than my waist, but he had remorseless look about him. He had gotten to his feet and was staring back at me, his weapons ready, his jaws open. He dashed forward but listed to one side. He was deep in the influence of Krimpt. His hand, where I had taken the finger, bled freely a tarry purple liquid. I glanced at the body on the floor and saw the clothing of a Seljatic tradesmen, leather apron tied at his back... the krimptmander, knocked cold by a denizen of his drink.

I ran at the Ilk and kicked him in the chest. He flew back but landed on his feet. His mallet tumbled through the air. I ducked. Behind me glassware shattered. He leapt, passed the sickle behind my neck and tried a pulling attack with the cutting edge of the blade. As it came against my skin, I grabbed his wrist, flipped him back over my shoulder, caught the sickle, and wrenched it from his hand. With a mix of triumph and disgust, I threw him back over the bar. He smashed the wall of ingredients, showering them down in glass and pungent liquid. I jumped over and cut out his tiny ilk heart with my Seljatic blade. His body died in a pool of blood and tinctures.

After I had caught my breath, I went to the Krimptmander on the ground. He had propped himself up on a single elbow and was looking about his shop with dazed eyes.

"I've killed the being."

He nodded as though he distantly understood me. Then, with great effort, he pointed to the bar and said, “Cabinet...black...bot---“

I searched where he had gestured and found a small wooden cabinet. In it were a jade idol, a handknife that looked like a ceremonial blade from the fyrine, a fig, and a black bottle. The bottle, hewn from volcanic glass, was plain except for one mark, an etched skull. The glass was unusually thick and weighty for its size. I carried it to the krimptmander and his eyes told me this is what he wanted. I broke the wax seal and handed it to him. He drank it off.

Soon he was standing and brushing himself down, putting the mysterious black bottle on the counter, looking about the shop as though surveying the damage.

I introduced myself.

“I owe you, young man.”

“What happened and what was that drink that restored your wits so quickly?” I said.

“Do you know the old saying, ‘Never sell krimpt to a Ilk?’ The Krimptmander issued a pained smile. He had no teeth.

“I don’t,” I said. “But I see its wisdom. He appeared not to feel any pain.” I kicked the Ilk’s finger.

“It affects them with a strange and total violence. He came in the guise of an herb and spice trader and, as I am always on the lookout for new ingredients, I welcomed him. He said he was from Second Spehk, an island in the middle of the inner eyrthrine, and that the fungi he carried were said to have both an unusual flavor and a powerfully transformative effect. He said I was the first Krimptmander in Selja to have the chance to view his wares, an opportunity too good for me to pass up. As I bent over his satchel of fungi, he clubbed me with a stone pestle. As I passed out, I could see him guzzling krimpt. He knew what he was looking for and what he

needed to do to get it. As for that restorative, I cannot tell you that. The recipe is my own and I would guard it with my life.”

“I’m sorry to have destroyed much of your wares,” I said. “I had to fight the little devil off of me. He was wielding an herb sickle.”

“Those bottles were mostly for appearance. I store the valuable stuff far from here.”

I explained to him why I had come.

“You bought a sword to join the Brotherhood?” he said.

“That’s right.”

“Then I shall send you off with the finest fighter’s krimpt. This will impress Zill, who would never be worthy of it, and will give you luck on your journey. I’ll add some Xerate dust for luck...a prized ingredient over all the islands.”

The Krimptmender returned from his back room with a shapely bottle of curving blown glass. The color at the base was a rich dark blue and inside, the green krimpt sparkled with the finely suspended mineral.

“What will you do with the Ilk?” I asked, before I went.

“I’ll harvest the blood, sell the head, leave the body on a pike as a warning.”

“Could I have a second bottle of Krimpt, what you might give a bumbling young man with no relations in the town?”

“Ass-Krimpt?” he said. “Of course. It can be good as trade with those who know the name Krimpt but not the taste.”

I stashed my fighter’s bottle on Greywart before returning to Zill with the metal flask of cheap Krimpt.

The bronzesmith nodded when I showed it to him proudly.

“I have scored the finest drink to seal our deal.”

I offered him the bottle. He took a drink with a pained expression. He nodded.

“I don’t see, boy, why you make sure a ceremony of buying a cheap sword.”

“Because the next time I come I will be a rich man, and you will remember me,” I said.

“I will order a two-handed kingsword and a bejeweled boarding axe.”

The cheap krimpt, the first I’d ever had, was beginning to affect me with a warm flowing thickness in the brain.

The bronzesmith nodded impassively. “I wish you luck then,” and he took another drink. But now I must get back to work.”

Outside, dusk was creeping over Selja. Women were returning from the dock with baskets of silver fish. Shopkeepers were locking their shops for the night with intricate turning pins only they knew how to undo. As I walked the boardwalk streets, the tiny red lizards with single eyes were crawling out of the cracks. They cut through dusk’s shadows to the roofs of buildings and clustered together. As the sun dipped even lower, I boarded my craft and lay back on deck with the flask of Krimpt and took another draught. The waves sparkled out into darkness. Water lapped hollowly against the hull of Greywart. One by one, the bright stars came out. Then, as a kind of breath, the fine dust of night was alit. The Seljatic lizards appeared, their red eyes glowing, outlining the waterside town against the dark volcano behind. Their throats and chests expanded and became glowing orange globes and issued a low rhythmic call. Once it began, it built as each joined each, overlapped and interspersed, and became deafening. I listened. My body was warm, my vision watery. Suddenly, the singing stopped and their glowing eyes slunk from the rooftops.

Flashes of bleeding Ilk skin, of hot-chest panic, the feel of a blade cutting through the air near my ear, Aba's face haloed by hair, my son's tiny face, flashed through my mind and interrupted my sleep. Cheap krimpt traces nightmares, but my own acts were demons to me. That was the first blood I had spilled, my first taste of krimpt and my first taste of the costs of being unmoored and loose among the islands.

4.

There are sixteen seasons on a sixteen-cycle cycle. The first season of the first cycle would be highest summer. To be on a fyrine island in the highest summer, would mean certain death. Likewise, to be on an icerine island in the eighth season of the eighth cycles would mean your lungs would freeze trying to breathe. What do the people of these outer islands do every 256 years, when the extremes of cold or heat are too great for life? They migrate. Their leaders take them in ships built over the hundred years in preparation, and they attack a more temperate island. They succeed or they do not. Their survivors rule or intermarry or become slaves or laborers. And when the sun shifts lower or higher in the sky, their descendants return or do not. The governance of those extreme places changes. They are depopulated and repopulated. They burn for a year and smoke for a decade. They cool and the plants begin to regrow. The cycles continue. This interpretation of time is called the Keylocklunderian Calendar and it is the system under which I was raised.

The Keylocklundrian institution of learning from which the calendar system emerges is known as the Disputatious Tower. I had heard during my time on Nur that the tower has a squat base and rises over the city. When approaching the island, its pinnacle is supposedly the first thing visible from the sea. The instruments of the calendar makers are protected by a group of

black-masked guards, known as The Solemn, who patrol with their swords drawn. Occasionally, they say, a dispute breaks out and the voices above ring over the tower square where the guards stand in the dust. The substance of the argument mystifies the guards. There are rumors among them that once, many generations ago, the guards were alarmed to hear a particularly violent dispute break out, followed by silence. Investigating further they found all inside dead, the faces beneath the beards still red with argument. Soon after, new wise men appeared to take the place of the dead and the tower returned to its usual order. For this reason The Solemn of the Disputatious Tower have their own calendar, which simply adds one day to the number of days. In other words, they believe one calendar is as much good as any other. When I finally made it there, it was day 134,642,783, a day said by some of the Mathematician's Guild there to be not a propitious number and by others to indicate a day of felicity and plenty.

The grand system of Keylocklundrian time and the simple counting of the guards are only two of the systems that I have encountered. As is only natural, regions of islands use their own system of time. What to an islander from Ver is a natural way of thinking and understanding the world is repugnant to an islander from Qon. Even those islands in regular trade and, for this reason, who share the same measurement of time, get out of sequence. Not all instruments are of equal accuracy. Curvatures are miscalculated; stars misidentified. Goods or payments arrive late. Further disputes arise. Navies meet at sea. Boarding axes have the final say. The disputes in the tower may be mystifying to the guards, but they are also representative. All trade, all succession, all life and death is determined by the measurement and ordering of time. Those who control how time is understood by those around him can be considered all-powerful. The guards are simply symbolic. A true ruler who overtakes a new island will simply declare it Year 0 and his people will count up until his throat is cut in his sleep.

My life began in the thirteenth season of the fourth cycle by the calculators of my home island. In my sixteenth year of that life, we had moved to the fifteenth season. The mydrine islands such as Nur and Selja were temperate at this time, though these inner islands grow only slightly warmer or slightly colder as the cycles turn. It is for this reason, combined with their centrality to the rest of the known world, that their prosperity has grown over the generations. When I left Selja, my destination was the eyrthrine to the Astute Brotherhood on the Island of Fas Cerie but I had no instrument or chart. My only guides were details from my uncle's stories and a few rumors about the Brotherhood I had heard while working in Nur. The rumors were mainly that within the hidden harbor of Fas Cerie, if you could find it (as it was said to have a narrow opening obscured by overhanging vegetation) stood a statue of Cerie the Wise, called sometimes Father Brother. His legs were sunk into the deep water of the harbor and his chest was the height of a mountain. He held his hands up to the heavens in supplication and on his chest was carved an image of the brotherhood's seatree. All of this, it turned out, was nothing but the suggestive details of generations of storytellers.

I first had to obtain charts of the eyrthrine, or parts of it, but such charts were considered impossible to get through trade or barter. Because of the vast spread of the islands, charts were highly prized yet often unreliable. Many islands have traditions of creating false maps, with their location missing or misrepresented. If home islanders were the only ones who knew exactly where their island was, their homes would be protected. Everybody could find the powerful islands, but they were protected by their governments and their navies and city guards. Small, obscure, or poor islands could best protect themselves by seeming to be where they were not or by being where they seemed not to be. Perhaps it is these deliberate prestidigitations that have given rise to many stories of floating, hiding, and disappearing islands.

A wing of the Astute Brotherhood devoted itself solely to drawing plausible charts with spurious locations for Fas Cerie and insuring their circulation along trading routes. On these charts, all other islands were accurately located so that any merchants could recognize the positioning of well known trading centers and deep water ports, confirm the veracity of the map based on familiar landmarks, and thus fall prey to the Brotherhood's tactic. Even if sailors knew better, they still lacked an accurate positioning. If, in some theoretical effort, a merchant captain collected all the charts, he would not be able to say which was the true one or if a true one existed.

However, I did know some facts, from which I could deduce a general destination. The Brotherhood was never said to be anywhere except in the eyrthrine, an area so vast it would take sixteen Keylocklundrian cycles to sail across it, though the seatrees would choke your progress. The Brotherhood's association with the seatrees and the long bows made from their wood determined that location. The seatrees could only grow in a specific climate especially given their age, which exceeded the 256 year rotation of the seasons felt on the hot and cold islands. It was also said that there existed true charts of the eyrthrine produced for the Brotherhood itself, showing the actual location of Fas Cerie, but that were only able to be possessed by brothers themselves "because of the nature of the map itself."

5.

Keylocklundria is icewards of Selja. As I set out for it, I thought I was lucky to be so close to the seat of learning. I needed a map of the eyrthrine. Since navigation depended on the measurement of time, and time, as it were, lived in the Disputatious Tower, then it seemed a good place, although the wrong general direction, to start my journey toward Fas Cerie. The city

of Keylocklundria was not only the site of the Disputatious Tower, but also the seat of all fields of learning for the mydrine. The intellectual guilds had their halls there, and the new sciences often grew up there in the residence houses and their huncha houses on the ground floor, where the sharp minds congregated. The mydrine was known to me by nature, or by virtue of hearing sailors talk about the islands. The island and its tower looked, it was said, always away into the north sea and toward the purity of the icerine. I did not have the stores for a voyage of that length, although Greywart was seaworthy enough. My aim was to make my way, one way or another.

The Navy of the Ten Cities patrolled the vast Mydrine Sea. Their narrow-hulled, broad-sailed vessels, forty oars aside, had been developed over the centuries to outpace most craft in the becalmed vastness of the Mydrine Sea. However, the further toward the center, and the farther away from the watchful eye of their masters, the navy vessels could seem as much like pirates as the pirates that they patrolled for. They would not hesitate to commandeer the craft of a lone traveler, declare its goods contraband, and press its sailors into service that could last a lifetime short or long. I took, therefore, the long way icewards, sticking close to the inner edge of the eyrthside islands, setting sail on a cool day with a field of low gray clouds. The wind followed me, suggesting that I had made the right decision. As my eyes watched the horizon for sails and the water for shifts in wind, my mind sometimes wandered. I could feel Aba's body laying lightly on mine, I could see her legs spread violently in childbed, could see her in the ring as a lion leapt over her, its belly fringe dusting her brow, could see the last look of the lions before their eyes rotted away, the way the decaying orbs looked at me as though I had killed not that one poor soul, but all life. Lurking under all of that, the attack of the Ilk, the fearsome

pleasure of killing him. Sailing, I would put it all out of my thoughts again, and look to the bow, forward, always forward.

I sailed for a day in that direction, passing islands off my korberd side, sometimes near enough to see people moving on their banks, in and out of fishermen's huts, brightly yellow above the sand. Off the coast of Nur Mercado (a Nurian protectorate used primarily for the salting of fish) I was followed by a black porpoises with a white blotch on her dorsal fin. She had been trained by other sailors to perform for food and would leap high into the air, land on her back with a splash and come up smiling, looking hopeful. My food stores were too low to offer her anything. Eventually, she slapped her tail twice and swam away. I passed flocks of tusks flocking on the surface: the flightless birds spent their lives, it was said, floating in great rafts. They organized themselves into such shapes as to catch flying fish as they breached the surface. The tusks were sharp beaked and ill-tempered looking, broad as the barges of a princess with keen eyes. They made a harsh clucking call as I passed as if to warn me off from their food. Had I a crossbow I would have killed one for spite alone; I had heard they made malign eating. As for trying my sword on a dolphin, the idea was unimaginable for a boy raised on Clayd, where the black dolphin is revered.

As night was falling I spotted an island with steep cliffs facing the sea, dark stone folded and broken into tall lines. The last island I had passed had been well before noon, and the horizon was empty of others. Here the stone rose up straight up out of the foam of crashing waves. As I grew near, the sound trembled the wood of Greywart's hull. I guided her away from the dashing face of rock. As the waves rose up, the gnarled teeth of the reef broke through the troughs. The air grew cold in the shadows of the cliff at the fall of night.

My hope was to trade some of my remaining ass-krimpt for food, or, barring that, steal what I could manage, but looking above the rock face, the island seemed uninhabited. Following it around and gazing upward, an unnamable fear gripped me. The size of the rock, the power of the waves hitting it, the sharp-edged reef, all seemed to desire my death. Yet starvation was no pleasant thought either, and I had been steering my tiny craft across the open water all day. My mouth was dry and my stomach empty.

I follow the cliff around, buffeted by the churlish air, to the leeward side of the island. The waves died down and the high cliffs began to drop and finally to merge with a sandy beach. The water was deep and dark but I could see silver flashes, schools of fish passing over the reef far below. I had been a fool not to steal a hand net on Selja. Greywart was stocked with containers for food and water, but no fishing tackle.

Dense forest ran down to the rock. Beyond, the broken peak of a seamed volcano poked jaggedly at the sky. It looked like one that had cooled long ago, like most of those in the mydrine. It had exploded violently at some point in the distant past, forming the cliffs and decimating the rest of the surface. As I came about in the stillness, the sun dropped below the horizon; all that remained in the sky were his purple fingers. I shipped the sail and thrust out the oars and pulled hard to find a beach on which I could land before dark. Hunger weakened my arms and filled my imagination with hopeful images. The island seemed giant, the beach longer than my home island. The water lapped hollowly at the hull. The purple was dissolving into darkness. The nose of the Squid King twinkled overhead.

I pulled in the tiller and oars and beached Greywart in darkness. I stepped out onto the cool sand. In the language of Nur, the sand would be called hunjsta, the coarse dark sand of a young island. Nurian alone has over fifty words for different types of sand and the differing

colors and qualities of that sand. Hunjsta is the sand of cooled volcanic rock when it has been beaten by the water for only a short time. In the darkness, under my toes, the large irregular kernels shifted like desiccated insect bodies. The sound of it, more fernac than shurnuss, was hard like the edges of two sharp blades knocking together again and again. The soft foot of a city man, used to protective sandals, would not be able to tolerate the fernac hunjsta of this island. As I stood there, listening, the feel of the sand disquieted me, not because my soles were soft, but rather because of the newness of the sand. The mydrine islands were ancient, the oldest of all islands. In the beliefs of the Gens, one of the people of the Ten Cities, and among the wealthiest, the mydrine itself was once an ancient volcano, and, following the explosion of its peak, and the great flood, all that was above water became the mydrine islands. They were the jagged tops of a vast cone. The Gens believed, of course, that the people of that ancient mountain were the Gens. The sands of these old mydrine islands tended toward the shurnuss, or powdery soft. The deep black beaches of Nur were the most well known. On Clayd, we had a derfty (salty, as a texture) sand that was aswirl with pinks, black, and tans, from the coral, rock, and shells that had been beaten there. My mother, when I was young, would fill a jar with freshwater and drop into it a handful of this sand and then scrub my body with it. The particles barely scratched. But here in the mydrine, this giant island, of which I had never heard a whisper, had young sand.

The vegetation as I had rowed the shore looking for a place to land had not appeared different from that of my home island. Coming from somewhere far away in the wyndrine, the moon had just begun to rise. It reflected off the rolling sea. The languages of the islands have as many words for water as they do for sand. Among those are all used to describe the sounds of moving water, the sound that surrounds us. In the language of Nur, the words for types of water,

their colors and their purities, the level of salinity, the age, the origin, are incalculable. Words for sound, however, are nearly infinite. As I sat on the beach, in the mostly dark night, I hear the gentle sound of a leeward wave hitting the edgy sand kernels and then withdrawing so that the sound itself was an overlapping the raw edges. The words for this sound is shishi hashi. But underneath that, faintly and perhaps deep in the foliage, I heard another sound, the gentle tinki of a spring pouring a rivulet down a rock face. This was the sound of fresh water, the sound that conjured in my mouth the taste and in my mind the anticipation of relief.

Not without fear did I go into the forest with my water jug, but, survival is a strong force, and the desire for water is ignorable. The pictographic language of Furnca D'Pherus, in the far fyrine, has the simplest image for this basic need:

[insert drawing a circle with a dot in the middle near the bottom].

The unlearned such as I need only scan the sacred tablets at the base of their temple to see how the symbol dominates their thought. Why do we sacrifice to our gods?, the tablet asks.

Thirst, is the answer.

Vines tangled up the floor of the forest, grabbing at my feet. Thickly branched trees grew close together. At times, I lost the sound of the spring. At other times, I feared that I had lost the sound of the beach. I hacked my way though the forest with my Siljatic sword in one hand and my heavy earthenware jug in the other, and stopped occasionally to listen. As I got deeper into the woods, something else struck me as strange. There were no sounds of animals. No tree frogs, no deep rustling of boars, no beating of insect wings, nor the distant screech of a monkey. Perhaps, I thought, the island was inhabited only by silent panthers or by serpents that do not hiss. But there were no spiders, no ants, no worms under the vines I tore from trunks. No life but plant life.

I was going back toward the direction of the high cliffs. Eventually, though, in the double darkness of the forest, after several hours of searching, I came upon the source of the sound. It must have been made of stone, but the outcropping was densely covered with flowers. The flowers had thick petals, in the thin light that penetrated there, the petals were pale pink or yellow or blue. The water slid down the rock behind the plants, so I had to cut them back to get to the stone and the source of the trickle. I did so without paying much attention to what I was doing; thirst, and the desire to find what had driven me to that spot, caused me to tear apart the flowers haphazardly, completely, until my fingers met the cool trickle of fresh water.

No sensation is as complete as the quenching of true thirst. I did so by filling a small cup made of my fingers and bringing it to my face. It seemed as though the flowers had flavored the water with a fruity sweetness. As I leaned my head in, waiting for my finger cup to fill again, a flower from the nearby growth seemed naturally to touch my lips. I took it into my mouth and bit down, partly out of hunger and partly out of the trance my mind had gone into at the water going down my throat. The flavor was unlike anything I had ever tasted before. It combined roasted goat meat and the richest, thickest cheese, and the most delicate sweet concocted from the bowl fruit of the Vernian tuit tree. Notes of nut swirled with those of spice and a slight hint of fermented fish heads favored by my grandmother, which I had only tasted once when I was a very young boy. Before I knew what I was doing, I was tearing at the plant, filling my mouth with it. The flavors overcame my mouth and became nearly insensible. As I ate, I filled my hands with water and drank. I don't know how long I was doing so, but at some point, I lost consciousness.

Euphoria. Never have I awakened with such pleasant bodily sensations. It was as though I had been asleep for days and my body had been repaired beyond its initial state: muscles

strong, lungs, filled, senses sharpened. I sat up. I sat on an even rougher version of the hunjsta found on the beach. I was at the bottom of a narrow tower about three times as deep as my height. How I had gotten there I had no memory. Had I been drunk on the flowertaste and stumbled upon a tiger trap? Then I remembered that there had been no signs of animals on this island. Maybe the large beasts had been trapped out of existence by a silent, hunting people who had now trapped me. I even worried, for a moment, that I had been trapped by a people long extinct. I stood up. My body felt good, without stiffness or incapacity, which ruled out a high fall. The tower's cylinder was of stone and roughly made so that the wall furnished abundant foot and hand holds. It was narrow enough to span it with my two feet and work my way upward. If I had fallen down it would have been impossible to avoid hitting the sides and having my skin scrapped off, if not my skull cracked. My skin was flawless. It even seemed to glow as though it had been rubbed with precious oils. Rather than dwelling on how I had ended up there, I began to climb out, rebelling against the sensation of being trapped any longer.

As I reached about halfway up the tower, I looked up to find my next hand hold and saw a young boy sitting on the lip of the cylinder. He was silver against the sun, as bright and reflective as a smoothly polished sword blade. He had a long mane of silvery hair and a pointed, vulpine face with glimmering curious eyes. He looked deep into my eyes and, as his gaze held there, I nearly slipped. He laughed. In a high, ringing voice he sang a short few notes in a language I had never heard before and would not hear again for half a hundred years:

derift way hillson tampir

un ghondstat werewall wiy

xicato vindopeedo

brindoti ferni wir

As I stared up listening and trying to understand the words for some clue to my situation, my toe slipped painfully off a sharp ridge of rock. I caught my knee on an edge, which cut to the bone. When I stabilized myself again and cool blood began to run down my shin, I looked up. The boy was gone, but a powerful afterimage remained, as though a part of him had stayed behind. I continued to climb, and made it to the top. I pulled myself over the lip, finally, and sat, with my legs hanging over the outside.

I was higher than I seemed to have climbed up, at least ten of my own body lengths above the ground. I was surrounded by walls made of the same rough-hewn stone as the tower. The tower cylinder stood almost perfectly at the center of the field of walls. The stone that surrounded me was grayish brown. At first, I thought it was smooth, crafted of some singular marble. A longer look revealed the intricate joinery of the rock. Smaller stones had been fitted between larger to balance the forces and create a tight bond and a smooth face. The perfect intersection of numberless parts had created the apparently smooth stone face.

The first walls began at the base of the cylinder and then stretched for the total width of the island in all directions. In the far distance, at the edge of the new horizon in three directions, the walls seemed to drop off the edge of the cliffs. In the fourth direction, the walls sunk into the lush green of the jungle. The walls were short and long, curved and angular. They bent at perfect angles and at irregular ones. Dead ends terminated in rounded chambers. Long, straight stretches traveled unbroken for great distances. I could see multiple openings, pathways. In some places the walls were crumbling, in others, flowering foliage of the variety I had eaten from was growing over the walls. Based on sound and the air, I must have been on top of the high stone outcropping that had been my first glimpse of the island. The labyrinth had a downward slope to it, and the magnitude of its unfolding was roughly the size of what I had seen

from the water. Was I being punished for drinking from a sacred fount or for eating a sacred flower? Was this a test? Was the boy my prison guard or my rescuer? And where had he gone so quickly and how? Was this a torture? A jest? A trial? Should I try to follow him? I called out. Silence was the only response. Again, I was reminded of the eerie lifelessness of the island's soundscape: no cicadas, no parratos or woodpeckers, only the seawind coursing over the tops of the stone, a muted rustling that emphasized the strangeness of the place.

If I was going to return to Greywart, I would have to make my way through the labyrinth back to the forest and down to the leeward beach. I examined the route from that view as best I could. It seemed to take me away from the forest and toward the top of the outcropping first, via a route of inward turns that ended with an escape. I drew a line with my eyes that would lead me outward, but the walls seemed to defy my very attempt to do so. It seemed as though the walls shifted as I planned my route, so that when I started over, tracing in the air with my finger, the options were different the second time or those that I was positive of only a moment before had disappeared. The third time, again, the walls had subtly shifted or my mind had failed to retain the former route. By forcing me to climb to this height, whatever power had put me here had given me the chance to see the labyrinth from above. Yet, that view seemed of no advantage in escaping, seemed almost a disadvantage because, now, after trying to come up with a plan again and again, I was disheartened to learn that no plan seemed likely to be useful. Although the forking pathways did not appear to change, they also did not stay the same. With the impatience of youth, I climbed down and aimed to escape using my wits as best I could. I can remember the excited confidence of that decision. I was positive I could overcome all obstacles.

I made my way down the cylinder as easily as I had climbed out and faced the only opening that released me from the square blockade to the base of the tower. Rather than blindly

playing a game of shifting walls controlled by an unknown force, I climbed the first wall that seemed sturdy and stood on top. I had a version now of my earlier perspective, but at a lower angle. I spotted the top of the trees and dropped down the other side of the wall heading in that direction. It seemed a simple problem, then. Climb over walls in the direction of the trees, head in the direction of the trees, hack my way back to the leeward beach, find Greywart. The walls reached just above my head, so the climb up and down was easy. However, when I climbed up the next one, going in the direction I had known to be the direction of the forest, I was not facing the direction I had been heading. I turned again in the direction of the forest, which again I could see a hint of, and then climbed down and back up the next wall. I was facing the cylinder this time. For the distance my feet had travelled, I seemed impossibly far away. I climbed down again, wearied by the hopelessness that was evident in my failed stratagem.

I decided to follow the labyrinth as best I could. My initial attempts had all been a breaking of the rules. A labyrinth wanted itself to be solved, I thought, not defeated by memorization or clever stratagems. I had tried to break the apparent rules by climbing over the walls and had been unsuccessful. Perhaps by following within the walls, I could find better luck.

My footfalls crunched the rough hunjsta as I moved forward. I came to a wall and was forced to decide whether to turn left or right. I searched the surface of the ground for aid and found nothing but a generally smooth and uninterrupted surface of young sand. One way looked as good as the other. Both eventually turned, one in one direction, the other in the other. It did not seem to matter which way I turned. I finally decided and began in one direction, lost heart instantly, and went back the other way, retracing my steps and continuing on that path. It turned to the left and I followed. Then it began to curve away one way (although I did not remember seeing such a curve from above) and abruptly angled back the other way. As I walked through

the labyrinth, the distant presence of the silver boy haunted me. The presence was neither threatening nor welcoming. I wondered if he were watching me struggle and laughing at my failed stratagems. Or whether my failures were all a part of a larger, and more insidious plan to wear me down, to send me into a state of mental distraction. But my mind worked continually on the problem in front of me. I searched the interstices of rock for evidence. No hint of shifting walls or magical events betrayed itself. No eerie waft of wizardry drifted in the air. The walls were solid and real, unchanging as an island. The openings I turned into seemed permanent. With despair, I dreamed of climbing on top of the walls again to see what progress, if any, I had made, but, knowing the result would be inconclusive, I resisted.

At one, point, I walked past a part of a wall that had fallen in, toward the direction I was heading. I could climb over the rubble and continue along the pathway I had been following, or climb over the crumbled portion to the pathway that had been disclosed. I chose the latter, although I knew not why. I was rewarded in this by finding, in the corner of wall a few turns ahead, a flowering plant cascading greenly from the stone. I was hungry and thirsty again and the sudden appearance of the bloom filled me with incalculable joy in the barren meaninglessness of the labyrinth. No spring trickled behind, unfortunately, but the blooms would hold moisture, so I gently plucked several from the plant. The colors---orange, and pink, and blue---lit the corner of the dark rock. My first bite was waxy and flavorless, with a subtle perfumey sharpness to it. As I swallowed, my stomach rebelled at the flower and tried to heave it back up. I ate another, hoping to settle it down, only to incur the same effect. The ingesting of the flower seemed to cause my hunger and thirst to double. I fled the corner, reeling and bent over, holding myself up and moving from sharp wall to sharp wall.

I ran. Panic had overtaken me. I tried, with desperate certainty, to maintain a mental image of my progress, to remember the turns I had taken, the dead ends I had reached and retreated from. I watched the hunjsta for footprints. The sun was directly overhead, beating the rock hot. Thirst drove a fist down my throat. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth and sweat stung my eyes. I turned again and again. I ran at full speed, half tumbling and tripping as I went, down long straight corridors and winding ones, and ones that turned sharply back into themselves. I fell at times, cutting my shoulders against the rock edges. But I got up and kept going until I faced an empty, bright blue wall.

I was high above the water, at the edge of the great rock cliff, the very one I had first spotted from the surface of the ocean. The cliff cut in below my feet. When I looked down, all I could see was the disturbed surface of blue water as the waves hit and the currents tangled. The drop had a sweet call to it, the permanent solution to momentary hunger and thirst and pain. It was there, a simple step. But I was young, then, and believed in life. I thought I might be able to climb down, perhaps swim around the island and escape that way. I dropped to my knees and tried to find purchase on the underside of the cliff. The cutback was steep, but I swung my legs over the edge and tried to pull them up and under. I came tantalizingly close a number of times, my toes seeming to find a lip. But the pull of the water downward was too great, even if I could have found a way to hold on. I slung my legs back up again, more tired than before. I scanned the horizon for sails. I saw only the straight line where blue fades into blue. The sky was empty of birds and clouds.

As I was looked far to my right, I had an idea. The labyrinth wall in which I had arrived at that point broke off when it arrived at the cliff. No magical force was going to prevent me from jumping. It seemed possible that the labyrinth, the silver boy, or who ever then controlled

my destiny wanted me to jump, that this empty terminus was the intention. Because of that openness, I could climb around the wall and see where it led. As before, scaling the walls of the labyrinth was easy. I climbed up, chose to go to the right and went out.

I now clung to the wall and hung far above the sea. I had expected this to lead me around and back into the labyrinth by another opening, imagining the vast pathways all terminating on this end with the cliff that offered no escape. However, I found myself on the outside of a long edge, without opening. I could just as easily climb up and over the wall, but I despaired of that being a solution for I would be back where I started and not positive if an opening to the sky would be offered again. Since I had not yet tried this tactic, it could be no less likely to be successful than what I had tried before. And although hunger and thirst still poisoned my mouth and my gut, having a new approach gave me some hope and some strength. I followed the outer wall for a long time, until it came to a corner where the cliff cut in. I looked down to see if there was a way to get down the cliff at this point, when I was suddenly struck by an idea. Because it was formed by the island, other laws controlled its form. Stuck inside of it, I had gradually accepted its utter and complete power over me and had assumed its other and complete power over everything inside of it, including its own shape. It might shift its walls internally all it liked, but, unless it were to grow out into the empty air, I should be able to work my way around the outside to the forest. An island was an island; the labyrinth was built upon it not the island under the labyrinth, however young the one and ancient the other. My escape would be half the entire outside distance of the structure, but, compared to going nowhere, constantly being set back, or playing by a set of laws that were constantly changing, a dangerous climb around the outside of the labyrinth seemed a preferable solution.

I made my way around, slowly, but regularly. At one point, I came upon a break in the way, the opening to the sea of another of the pathways. Rather than be tempted back in, I quickly stepped across, and, without pausing for a rest though a rest I needed, climbed back out and followed the outer wall. Eventually, I was on the windward side of the outside of the labyrinth. The climbing was much slower going. The force of the wind held me against the wall and each new handhold or grip required extra strength. Having made such progress without impediment, however, gave me further strength and I doggedly continued along the wall. Finally, I turned away from the rushing of the wind and into silence. Dense forest foliage grew up against the wall and I could walk on the ground, at times. At other times I had to climb back on the wall to avoid large roots and thick vines. Where the growth had destroyed parts of the wall, there were crack and openings. Superstitiously, I avoided looking in, lest some thrall pull me back over the wall. At some point, I guessed, based on my then more complete sense of the scope of the structure, that I was close enough to the leeward beach to drop down and make my way. I would lose my water jug, but searching for it seemed to be likely just as futile and going back to the spring too risky. I had no memory of the cause of my initial loss of consciousness and no desire to re-experience it. It would have been difficult or impossible to avoid drinking from the spring and eating from the plant and I had to assume I would have ended up in the same tower at the center of the labyrinth.

When I finally hacked my way through the forest to the hujsta beach. My lips were cracked and bleeding. My throat would not close to swallow. My limbs felt dead. A rising tide had lifted Greywart off the beach. Between shore and reef, she floated and turned peacefully, a short wade away through sunwarmed shallows. She looked beautiful in the water, with her long low line and her partially covered hull. When I reached her and, still standing in the waist deep

water, took hold of her solid gunwale, an odd sensation overtook me. Though the boat itself could be easily moved, buoyed by the sea, the boat felt the most solid thing I had ever touched. Too weak to row, I set sail and coasted slowly down the leeward coast of the island until I caught wind again at its end. I sailed for near a day. The next island I came upon --- a small hovel of a place called Kilj I traded my ass krimpt for two water jugs full of fresh water and a cask of salt fish. I traded my fine warrior's krimpt for a hand net and mending kit, three bone hooks, some strong silk handline, and trident head, which I sunk in one end of a sturdy staff and shipped alongside my oars.

The fisherman's wife with whom I traded did not believe my tale. When I told her of it, my delirium was total. She was helping trickle water between my lips while those lips babbled talk of walls that move and creatures that disappear. I remember with sweetness her caved in, toothless mouth and half bald scalp. She seemed in the moment to be saving my life. Her husband, when he returned that evening with his haul, only laughed and called me story-spinner.

In my travels since I have described these events to royal consorts, halfman beggars, galley slaves, pirates, princesses, wives, mercenaries, warlords, and priests. I have embellished a little at times---it is, after all, difficult not to add false details to stories to make them truer. I spent longer in the shifting-walled labyrinth, been chased by the silver boy and chased him, been more or less wracked by sickness upon eating of the strange plant a second time. I have hung by a single broken finger from the edge of the cliff while sea eagles pecked at my head, only to miraculously pull myself back up and complete my escape. But what I have written here is the truth as best as I can remember it. But of all those I told of the episode, only one was able to illuminate its meaning.

I was telling the story in the camp of the conqueror Derton. We were on the island of Uxly in the eyrthrine archipelago. Behind the Fortress of the Crossing, our armies massed, their reddened eyes staring out over the great dark basin. The smell of burning tar still filled the air. The smell of burning skin drifted with it. We sat around the fire. The men there, Derton especially, with his endless energy and need for stimulation, wanted distraction from thoughts of what would likely occur the next day. I recounted the stories told to me by my uncle, of the heroic Astute Brotherhood (which they took to be my own). I told those stories I had learned on the docks of Keylocklundria. I told those that came to me as I talked. But the night before a battle is long and I ran out of my store of stories, for I was still very young. In my fatigue, I told the story of the labyrinth. The listeners did not believe it was true. Some, I could, believed it was a bad story, because it had no obvious point. But they harkened nonetheless. Soon, they went to sleep or lay with their eyes closed, for they had much more on their minds. I went to sit away from them. The story of the labyrinth brought back that time in my life, a time before the prison island and much else, but which then, in its telling, seemed to riddle some truth about my past, present, and future. As I sat and reflected on how I had reached that very moment, which felt so climatic yet filled with contradictory emotions, one of Derton's women approached me on the stone battlement where I was sitting.

Noma was Derton's longtime servant, had nursed him as a babe. She had overheard my story from inside a thin-walled servant tent.

"I have been there...to the labyrinth," she said.

Her eyes were wild. She had been taken by an officer of the Navy of the Ten Cities and held as captive in his cabin, used for his pleasure. She escaped when he was spent and sleeping, jumped to freedom somewhere in the calm mydrine sea. They left her for drowned. She floated

for days before coming ashore on an island with no animals or insects. She heard the same strangely loud spring. She fought her way to it. She ate the delicious plant, the plant that had for ever after made her "forget that food can taste good." She awoke in the narrow tower. She heard the silver boy sing his song, the same words I had heard. She also did not understand the language. She spent days, she said, trying to figure a way through the labyrinth. She had always possessed a good memory and was able to know for certain that walls she had passed once, when seen again, had become openings. New walls appeared and old openings closed. She was in tears talking about it, tears of frustration remembering the experience, and of joy to have found another who could share her experience. Her escape though involved nothing perilous. After many days of laboriously checking and rechecking and memorizing, trying to solve the labyrinth, one day she simply came to an opening back into the forest.

"And do you have the mark?" she asked as she finished her tale of swimming away from the island, drifting again for many days, until being saved by a passing craft of pilgrims who gave her job as a nursemaid and servant.

"I have many marks," I said. I showed her the scar on the top of my head and the thread-like scars left by bladed reeds in the s'twinisay zuxato.

With this the nurse began to unwind her brightly patterned and richly woven skirt of many layers. Derton treated his favorite servants well, dressed them luxuriously, just as he dressed himself. Noma passed it hand to hand in front and behind her body, looking ever more deeply into my eyes with her own black pearls. Around us, all was quiet. A navy and a fighting force waiting for battle, sleeping restlessly. When she was finished, she dropped the cloth to the sand and stood half naked before me. Her womanhood was covered with black hair. Pale thighs

contrasted her dark weathered face. On one thigh a faded tattoo traced a line like the path of a person through a labyrinth as from the perspective of an eagle flying above.

"You must look at it from my perspective," she said. "Stand behind me."

She was small, and I looked over her shoulder at her extended left leg. She took my finger in her hand and placed it at the beginning of the line, which was near the center of the mark. I recognized it as the tower, even though it had been years since I had climbed out of it. From there she traced the line on her leg. It was her path through the labyrinth. Sometimes, it crossed itself, overlapped, or retreated. The sensation on the tip of my finger was hot, well beyond the heat of human warmth, more like the heat of the sun-beaten stone walls. I followed her path and felt her heaving stomach. I remembered my own path through the labyrinth. When I came to the end we lay down together next to the battlement. I cried, as did she. She kissed my mouth and held me. I ran my hands over her legs.

She said that the mark had appeared many years after she had escaped. As she lay sick with fever, the trace had burned there over several days and nights. No similar occurrence had yet happened to me. When it did, I would understand better how it all fit together. As it was, morning broke. Noma helped Derton dress and be armed, and a day of great chaos and loss ensued. But that is for later in my story.

6.

On the horizon, a bend of light. A curve made of brick pushes upward and through. The Disputatious Tower appears. Of pale sandstone, beaten by the sun, solid and wide, without flag or marker, it grows upward. Soon the rest of the city comes into view, tumbling down the hill to the harbor. If there had been a volcano on Keylocklundria, wind and sea, the flood even, had

long ago worn it below the tower of time. I approached late in the day, after several weeks of cautious sailing. I did not engage with any strange people or approach any uninhabited islands. I sailed, I fished, I speared fish, I ate roasted fish on beaches. I did not explore. I used my stores with care. I followed the mydrine in an iceward direction and thought only of my destination. I pictured a book of maps and charts, bound in leather, as great as my chest. This would be the answer to my life's question, the guidance for my life's journey. Maps showed you both where you were and where you were going, depicted the unchanging islands, or so I then wanted to believe. My eye traced the imaginary lines and turned the imaginary pages in search of Fas Cerie, which I would detect in every unnamed absence, incomplete area, undisguised mistake. If the brotherhood were to grow or maintain a force, it must need new members and there must be a way to find them. I daydreamed of entering harbors and being welcomed by the Brotherhood.

When I was close enough to see the water meet the harbor of Keylocklundria with the Tower rising high above it, I was approached by an eight-man crewed boat with three official looking men on a platform in the bow. They wore red capes, gold helmets, and looked down at me impassively. One of them, not the apparent leader, spoke to me in an accented and highly affected version of the Nurian tongue. It was the type of language, I know now, spoken by a people who want to appear either rich or intelligent, or both. What he wanted to say is, "We are in charge here, why are you here?" What he said was,

"We have been most thoroughly privileged to represent the governing body, known as The Few. They have charged us with the inspection and judgment of all visitors to determine their purpose. State your purpose."

I did not mark this then, that I was naturally prone to disguise and dissembling. Life would force me further and further in that direction, but it was always there, a natural instinct.

Perhaps it is the natural instinct of boys who leave their families behind, who choose to change who they are once instead of accepting whom they are told to be. That first change is the hard one, but once made it makes all those to come easier, until the process of becoming a new person, a new name, a new background, happens without thought, becomes a part of ones nature. The best disguise is to be what people see when they look at you. That will be the easiest for them to believe and it is flattering, in and way, for people to have confirmed their own ideas, however flawed incorrect. I can always count on people every where....all islanders....enjoying having their own ideas confirmed for them.

"I have come to acquire knowledge of the world beyond what I know," I told them. "I have heard that this island is the home to many knowledgeable people, where maps and other tools of navigation can be acquired. I have with me only my food and water. I carry no cargo, no animals, no passengers. My sword is the only weapon I own." I withdrew my sword and showed it to them.

"If you have nothing of value, how can you hope to get maps and tools of navigation, which are precious?"

"I am a skilled sailmaker and I can work on all manner of vessels."

The leader of the three suddenly barked out. "You are a escaped apprentice. Too young to be a master. You bring our people nothing. The Few have everything they need. However, there is call for shipwork. Surrender your weapon, turn over your craft, and you may land in our esteemed island city." He snapped at two of the oarsmen, who shipped their oars, threw a rope across to me and balanced on the gunnel waiting.

"He is only going to take what he needs and steal a craft and flee," said the first. "We should allow him to keep his craft. When he realizes there is nothing for such a poor wretch

here, then he can leave in his own boat. But take his weapon so he can't simply murder some fool mapmaker."

This seemed like an accurate assessment to me, but I did not speak up. And anyway, I doubted whether speaking up was going to be successful in this situation. The Labyrinth had been a warning not to underestimate new places. What is a wall might be an opening, but the reverse is more likely to be true: what appears to be an opening will quickly become a wall. I would need subtlety here to get what I wanted.

The third, who had not yet spoken, said, "If he chooses to murder for a map, then he will easily do so with his hands. Is he a murderer? That is the question. If yes, then we drown him here. If no, then let him come into the harbor with craft and weapon. The Tower is guarded, remember. We guard The Few. The map makers have bodyguards. There is little risk. The rest of the citizens can fend for themselves."

I held the rope to keep the two boats together. Shirtless and bald, the oarsmen balanced on the gunnel, betraying no emotion. The three debated for several minutes how to deal with me. They argued two general premises. The first, that it is impossible to discover a person's true motives and desires except through an extended relationship. The second, that any person could kill any other person given the right motive and opportunity, some were simply more prone to doing so because they accepted small and less reasonable motives, such as personal slights or imagined threats. They determined that the first premise made the judging of the second impossible and the second suggested that ever relying on the first was equally unreasonable. They ordered the two oarsmen back to their bench. All the oarsmen backed oars. I sailed into the harbor. Thus was order kept in the city of the Disputatious Tower.

I wondered if this was as much a ceremony as an interrogation, if the intention was to show the reasonableness and logic of the city systems rather than to suggest great military power and determine whether to allow strangers in. According to their argument, there was no point of their being here since they would always arrive at the same conclusion. Perhaps they always talked themselves out of acting and therefore living a leisurely life without conflict. However, I had already, perhaps by nature, learned another of the dissemblers art: never pointing out the flaws of others, especially when they were giving me what I wanted with no cost to me.

As I was sailing in, a number of larger craft were as well. A livestock carrier burdened with oxen, sheep, goats, and other beasts attracted the scrutiny of crewed patrols of the like that had accosted me. A range of craft filled the harbor

The main edge of the harbor was neatly constructed into a series of docks, from which the city's harbor pilots would depart and which the cargo carriers would go to and fro with loads of goods or people. Everything appeared prosperous and well made, and, given that Greywart was lacked a deep water anchor, I was unsure where I was supposed to make land. I skirted the inland harbor looking for guidance from the liveried docksmen there, but they seemed to not see me, or to not want to look at me. I followed the harbor around to the leeward side of the island, where buildings came down to the water, some with barges docked at their doors, others with solid walls going deep into the water. Through an opening in one of these walls, I saw a room of women wearing blue headscarves and sitting at desks with long wooden writing implements in their hands. In another, I caught a glimpse of a thin man in a particolored robe sitting kneeling in an empty room. His face suggested he had not eaten in a very long time. The intricacy of the buildings was impressive: closely fitted jointures of wood beams, broad coverings of dyed cloth, and mortared sandstone. The buildings, and the dust that blew off of them, and the air around

the city, suddenly seemed to me distinct from my home island and from Nur. I had travelled far enough iceward and out wyndrineward to feel the drying forces of the air. As I sailed, the tower was always visible above the buildings, set back from the water in the center of the island city. I continued along the outside until I found the back side of the city, where there were refuse barges setting out to the sea to dump their loads. The area had a lot of broken places and off-kilter docks. I shipped sail and rowed up to one that suited Greywart's length. The refuse workers hailed me.

"Oh other islander," one cried.

"Oh traveler from afar," yelled another.

"Soon you will clean latrines with us, Oh!," said the first. They all laughed.

At the end of the dock squatted a woman with one arm. With her single hand she was picking through baskets of bones, rotten fruit, and scraps of cloth. After weeks at sea, the rich putrescence made it almost impossible for me to speak.

"May I...dock here? I have only salt fish to trade." She stood well enough and shuffled over to my boat. I showed her what I had, keeping my fishing tackle hidden.

"Two days. For the fish." I filled an empty basket of hers with the fish I could spare and she returned impassively to her work.

I approached the refuse workers, who were singing another tune. Their accent was not as affected as the harbor officers, but they seemed to slip in and out of a made up lingo that had no intended meaning. They insulted each other, handed each other heavy loads, and dumped out the city's vessels onto the barge. Nearby was tied another eight-oared boat, but of stained and battered, water-logged wood and much in need new tarring. They must have used it to tow the barge.

"I thank you for your welcome, men! I will see you soon. Most likely carrying a latrine."

They laughed at this. Like the men I had scraped hulls with the refuse men's sense of humor was well developed. Their banter returned to its foregoing pitch and I entered the city from what I soon realized was the part of the town delegated to hold the less clean areas of city life. First I passed slaughterhouses and butchers, where the city designers had crafted a bricked channel to carry away the streams of blood down into the water. I passed tanners with the rotten astringency and weavers with their fatty waft of sheep fleece. There were tallow chandlers, and a buzzing area of honey makers. I walked a street of exotics, with their stacked cages and tanks and boxes. The world here was familiar to one who had lived on Nur, but seeing such a marketplace again cemented in my mind the relative value of things, an understanding of which was important to my later success as a trading merchant. Rarity set value. In one of the exotics shops, for instance, was a thick clear tank, bolted with metal bands. Inside stood a muscular little humanoid, about the size of a fist. Its skin was gray and it had curly black hair and two tiny horns sticking up from its scalp. It tore open its mouth but made only a high-pitched sound.

"What is this?" I asked the vender. He looked strange to me then, but I later came to recognize his kind as typical of the near fyryne, the so-called civilized fyryne. Small of stature himself, incredibly muscular, with a fierce jutting jaw and brow, black hair and eyes. He was finely dressed with three interlinked gold rings balanced on his head and, in place of teeth, a decorated whalebone carved to sharp points. He spoke in the affected accent of the city and, to one such as myself, in a reluctant tone.

"He is giant from Hu Jokol. He has been shrunken by a wyndrine wizard as punishment for attacking his castle. He was captured on the battlefield before his brethren could accidentally stomp the life out of him. That was a thousand years ago."

"Can you understand him?"

"Why would I want to converse with a giant?" he asked. He was petting a palm-sized furry animal the color of human blood. The creature trembled in his hand and blinked two beady eyes out at me. "If you owned, outright, the Tower itself and all who dwell inside, The Solemn, and The Few, and many other things beside, you would not approach the value of this being."

"Then why do you offer him for sale?" I asked. "It seems no one would be rich enough to buy him."

"He attracts buyers to my lesser wares," he said. "As he has attracted you, though you cannot afford anything here."

I moved on. Taking one last look at the shrunken giant, who was beating on the tank with his fists.

As I walked, the small structures increased in size and the goods offered increased in magnitude. Furniture, rugs, cookware and containers, cloth and clothing for men and women. I followed streets and made turns without a sense of where I was going. Soon, the streets widened and I was among the great halls. The first Hall I could recognize, by the symbols carved into its beams, was the Hall of Mathematicians. The structure was like those I had seen from the water: sandstone and wood, with outdoor portions shaded by vast sheets of barely translucent material as thick as sailcloth. But the hall rose three floors above the ground. The ground level was an open hall that served food and wine. At that hour, only a few spaces at the long tables were occupied. The men and the women were garbed in identical fashion: blue robes and black felt

hats that resembled mushroom caps. They ate bowls of soup or chunks of bread while reading from large folded sections of paper propped up on special holders. From where I stood, the marks on the paper were not visible, nonetheless, I was excited by this sign that I had come to Keylocklundria for knowledge and knowledge was evidently something that could be found here. I knew nothing of figures or values, nothing of geometries, let alone the higher arcana of the numerical sciences, but seeing it there in physical reality, made my journey seem perfectly worthwhile.

The halls were organized around the tower square and as I got closer to it, I passed men and women on the streets dressed in guild clothing. I passed the guilds of Physics, of Internal Sciences, and the Guild of the Stars and Larger Bodies. There was a Illuminationist Guild and a Guild of History. The Guild of Ships and Navies was housed in a small fortress. The Guild of Mind was a modest wooden structure with a single young woman sitting in a chair reading. Behind the plainness of the structure, however, lay a great and suggestive weight. If I had had to put words to it then, I would have said in it lay crouched a great fear, but I wrote it off then as simply my own ignorance and lack of understanding.

The four major guildhalls, along with their antehalls and servants quarters, formed the four sides of Tower Square. The structures themselves were massive, and the tower in the middle made The Solemn, who appeared then to me as small beings dressed in black against the huge stones of the tower. The major guilds were comprised of the guild of Earth, the Guild of Water and Ice, and the Guild of Wind. In front of the Guild of Fire's Hall there was a stone carved with characters in place of a door. I could not yet read, but I was curious, and I stood tracing my eyes over the carved characters. The hall was empty and dark. From the outside, it appeared as though the building itself had been filled with earth and stone and stood now only as

a monument. Later, before I left Keylocklundria and could read Nurian characters, I read the inscription:

In the 134th year of the 23,678th cycle, members of the Fire Guild became enthralled of a human who claimed to be a god. These followers ceased the logical, reasonable, and objective study of the properties of fire and all that burns, including the fire under the ground, and began to study how it could be used to create power over others. In that year, they attempted to burn the Tower and seize power over the city of Keylocklundria. They were defeated by the Earth and Wind Guild in alliance with The Solemn. The Fire Guild Hall shall hereby stand for eternity as a symbol of their failures and their banishment from Keylocklundria, the Island City of Knowledge and Reason.

The entire city of Nur could have fit inside the Tower Square. It took, I marked once, a portion of a day or night to walk from one of the guildhalls until you met the first of The Solemn, who stood guard around the base of the tower. The base of the Tower itself was several hours journey around. To walk across the Tower Square took at least half a day if you were motivated to move quickly. It is thus the city is known as the Island City, for it takes up its island from shore to shore in all directions, the primary reason being the Tower square takes up so much room at the center. When I saw the Tower Square for the first time, I did not know that the distance to the middle was as fundamental to the role of the Tower as the contents of the tower itself and its magnificent structure. At the center of the city, an empty space patrolled by guards, at its center a tower of mysteries. I did not attempt the journey to the center of the square on that first day. I had no business there and The Solemn would have only turned me back. I did however, ask a passerby along the edge of the square where I could find the experts in maps, charts, and navigations.

A middle-aged man, balding and tall, struggling to carry a leather-bound volume about half the width of his height, said "Try Stars. They are a bunch of bent-necked fools, but they should be able to tell you where to acquire a map and tools to measure position." I had passed the building on my initial exploration, but the long day was waning, and I had no place to sleep, little to eat, inappropriate clothing, and no way to acquire any of these. Perhaps my life would have turned out differently if I had gone, then, to inquire. But, the immediate needs of life dictated my actions. I followed the square to the harbor side and walked down the narrowing streets. On this side were various food merchants offering freshly landed fish, rich spices, and aromatic herbs, from around the mydrine.

The dry dock formed a block off the harbor. The ships that were being worked on or built stood mastless or with open ribs. Nearby I passed the sailmaking and repair shops, with their hallmark of shirtless, squinting youths hunched over needle and thread. Memories of my younger days came back, and the old fear of being trapped and held in labor to a master returned. It was a noble trade and always in demand, but the thought of sitting at a bench at a broad sailmaker's table for life while the sails I designed and mended filled with winds at the other ends of the rings, was too great a deterrent for me to seek even temporary employment. I walked past the sailmaker's, affecting not to scrutinize their work with a knowledgeable eye. It was of a fine quality. At the dock, I was pointed to a dock captain. His name was Further Yenning. He quickly read my look.

"You come for knowledge with nothing in your pockets then?" he said.

"Yes." I said. "I would be honored to perform any labor you have need for."

"It is a respectful tone," he said. "You have worked, then. You aren't no whelp of privilege."

"I have worked in the shipyards of Nur. Done all manner of shipwork. I was raised to it. Now, I seek a traveler's life. I am here to buy charts and maps and navigation equipment. To learn what I may."

His eye fell to my sword.

"You'll have no need for a weapon here. It'll only rust. Look about you." He gestured to the shipyard. Men and boys sawed and planned, hammered mallets to pegs, scrubbed decks with sand, painted boats with tar. "Here are your fellow adventurers."

"I know," I said. "What I want is improbable. Nonetheless, I am free to pursue it. I am not asking for charity."

Further treated me well. As will happen throughout my story, I was able to present to him the person he wanted me to be, a hardworking youth with story-dreams in his head. A foreman knows well how to trap such a boy into a lifetime of hard work. Even then I was a storyteller, which does not mean I did not tell him the truth. But I shaded it and clipped it and folded it into the size most delectable to my hearer. A man used to forcing others to command respect is gratified when it comes as a matter of course. A man used to being lied to by lazy workers and ships captains who want to pay as little as possible, recognizes the gold tenor of truth when he hears it. It is no use trying to deceive men and women used to being lied to. Even then, the motive behind how I spoke or acted was only a half realized understanding of how to get what I wanted.

He started me above water, working with the carpenters mates. Above the shops, I could sleep on a beadroll and eat fish stew. I gave him my sword to hold and he fronted me a week's room and board and enough to keep Greywart docked for a month. His wife ran the boarding rooms, which were no bigger than a bed roll. Sitting in my chamber, the close proximity of

walls troubled my eyes. The sea, sleeking through the reed window shades, undulated on the walls. In the quiet indoor room, the absence of the rush of wind sharpened my thoughts. As I slept that night, I pitched and rolled with remembered waves. My dreams of pacing lion bones grew brighter.

7.

Further added me to a crew working on a vessel of a type I had heard of but never seen. It possessed two separate hulls, each like large, low-slung ships themselves. A broad platform connected them. A structure including a living quarters, galley, and open storage for livestock clung to the flat middle of the platform whereas water, food, and ballast was held in the hulls. The mast was a massive affair built for triangular sail. When I asked one of my fellow workers where the wood for the mast had come from (having never seen a tree even half as high as the mast) I heard for the first time of the seatrees of the eyrthrine. The craft itself was being built for a long voyage to the wyndrine and was designed to handle the swift and steady winds characteristic of that rine. The craft had been commissioned by a member of the Guild of Mind.

The builder overseeing this work was named Sorgux Berring. He was from the near eyrthrine and had the imposing stature and dark features of the people native to those regions. Sorgux had worked for Further for years and assiduously attended his boss's commands. He was half again as tall as I and his arms and legs seemed wrought from ancient trees. A beard, often dusted with sawdust, met the top of his chest and bobbed when he spoke. I did not ask him about Fas Cerie, for fear he would only laugh in my face and take me less seriously ever after, though I did wonder to what degree a native of those parts of the islands would have additional or different information about the Brotherhood.

I set to work on the tasks he gave me and worked as quietly and well as I could. I did not bother him, nor complain. I spoke as little as possible, in fact. Berring had three other mates under his command. By the nature of the work, I fell in with them quickly. Many of the beams and boards we worked with required two to move. Gut Hammerstead was the oldest of the four of us, by about twice as many years. He wore a long grey braid down to his tailbone and had sapphire-colored eyes with blond eyebrows. His ears were torn and permanently swollen, his hands scarred, for as a young man he had earned his soup by wrestling in the pits of Killhaven, the mydrine island of lust and chance. He was from there, and had been raised to life in a warrior pen. In Killhaven, the warrior pens breed fighters by matching bloodlines of retired champions with fearsome mothers. He eventually stowed away on a outbound after killing his seventh man. He spoke very little and worked harder than the three of us put together, worked daily with threatened, dogged effort.

The other two were younger, though older than I. Their sense of personal failure not as complete as Gut's, but evident enough. Yeflin Vent, also of the mydrine, had come to the Keylocklundria to learn healing and join the Guild of Internal Sciences. His explanation of why that had not happened contained the types of vague passages and specific details of a practiced liar. After a few mornings' work with him and the acrid stink of his breath, the slow foggiess of his conversation, I eventually guessed that his body was a slave to some spirit, herb, or drug, which were abundant in a city of experiments and mindcraft. Yeflin worked to feed whatever need his body held him to and vanished like a spirit the moment work concluded.

The final carpenter crewmate and I quickly became friends. His name was Tung. Tung was a fyryne islander but had never lived in the fyryne nor visited there. Before Tung was born, his father had helped a member of the Guild of Minds who was studying a particular rite performed

on Elder Tung's home island, Dur Trewu. The rite involved the temporary killing of the victim, who dwelt in the otherworld for seven days, and then returned to report on the state of things there and the current inclinations of the local gods. Elder Tung's role was to translate for the guild members, and he was so proficient that they invited him to return to Keylocklundria to speak on the languages and the culture of his people. Elder Tung brought his wife and lived with her and his family in Keylocklundria ever since. He served as head librarian in the Guild of Minds hall.

Tung spoke my language with a uninflected and unaccented manner that reminded me of home. It made it easy to tell him about myself, albeit in a guarded manner. The feeling must have been mutual, as Tung spoke seemingly without restriction.

"I am a great disappointment to my father," he said. We were planing beams with the two-person planer. "He wanted me to study and join one of the guilds, if not his own. We have an ability, he would say. You can do it. Although he is not an actual member of the guild he thinks of himself as one. By the time a single cycle of years had passed I could speak, read, and write ten languages, just by conversing with the guild members and reading books brought home by my father. A sailor from any rine can land here and I can converse with him for a day and a night and forever after speak his language. I can look at a page of a manuscript and deduce the meaning through the repetition of words and characters or pictograms and from that assemble in my mind the structure of the language used to compose the page."

Curls of wood peeled away from the planer as he spoke, fell to the flattened sand of the dry dock, and blew gently in the breeze. The sun was playing on the edge of the blade as it cut and released the curls. All around us the sound of dock work: the yelling of commands, the rhythmic songs of the rope gangs, the sawing of wood.

"How did you end up working here?" I asked.

"Elder wanted me to apprentice at the guild starting at the age of ten. The guild members having witnessed my abilities at a young age and having known my father for so long, were willing to put up the apprentice price and support me in my studies."

"What is the apprentice price at one of the guilds?"

"The four great guilds are peopled almost entirely by the daughters of kings and rich merchants and the second sons of kings and other noblemen. The outerguilds, such as Mind, are only a mite's worth less expensive to join. This ship, for instance, is for the daughter of Nrsgrd Hrlbrd, King of Hroth in the icerine. As an apprentice, she owned three buildings in town and is said to have rebuilt an icerine palace underneath the city somewhere. To have been offered an equivalent apprenticeship to that which a King Nrsgrd could afford, is to be offered a fortune and security for life."

"But you turned this down?"

"I began the process. It is no easy task. While the apprentice to a blacksmith may only be judged on his potential strength, the Guild of Mind must measure aspects of your mind beyond more evident facilities. In the first stage, I was put in a single room. Four walls, floor-to-ceiling books. There was a table and a chair and a candle holder. I was meant to read all the books in the room and retain them. I was given two sixteenths of a cycle to complete the task. All the books were on the Furgas people of Klk Buruntia in the warm part of the eyrthrine. Every book. There were fourteen books on the ceremonial wedding food of the Klk Buruntia. Another eighty at least on the developments and morphology of their watercraft. Six on fishing methods. One book was entitled Shells and Shellfish of the Buruntia. The majority though were comparative studies of the Buruntia godcraft including historical summaries of changes over

time, detailed descriptions of initiation ceremonies, sacred rites, images, with commentary on all of these things. I once read for three days about foreskin. After about eight weeks I began to sneak out of the room, hide my pre-apprentice short robes, and go down to the drinking parlors near the docks. I became proficient at the card game Knocks and would compete for money with incoming sailors who had just been paid off. When I returned to the room, I found it hard to look at the books. I would close my eyes and sleep, watching the dancing cards in my imagination, calculating odd of winning combinations. When examination time came, I failed. That was only the first room of twelve, the one intended to test your ability to withstand extended but necessary tedium. Elder Tung was decimated, threw me out of the house. Now I work here during the day and play at Knocks at night. I make as much there as here. I'm saving to build a merchantman. With my ability with language, I'll be able to make a fortunate trading around the islands."

Tung liked to talk. I liked to listen to him as he knew far more about the world than I. In this way he told me all about himself and the Island City. By eating the cheapest fare from the seaman's inns, slowly I earned more working than I spent. Although it was expensive to keep Greywart moored, I couldn't bear to sell her for fear it would trap me on Keylocklundria. While I did all this, I attempted to move closer to my goal, using Tung as a guide. He had a tendency to get derailed on disparate subjects and go on and on, often talking at length while we worked. His perspective on the world, however, was valuable to me as it showed me the islands that I could not have imagined with my limited experience.

Soon, I asked him to teach me the characters of the Nurian language so that I might practice writing and reading the words I could speak. There were nineteen characters, combined with two hard marks that could appear either above or below a character, subtly changing its sound. Any two letters could be connected in three possible ways. There were no spaces to

indicate the separation of words, but no conjoining mark connected the last letter of the word with the first letter of the next. How any characters were marked and then how connected to each other affected the meaning of the word. The learning of Nurian impressed me with difficulty of reading and writing, which require a fluency with details that seem, objectively, too tiny to be significant. However, no detail is insignificant. Consider the difference between boat and ship.

[insert drawing of example]

That dot over the vere is the only difference on the page, yet in the mind the vessel itself expands in magnitude when you add it. Or consider the expression “tell tale,” which means to lie if the two words are connected by the median mark but refers to a teller of stories if the words are unconnected. According to Tung, the language was among the simplest and easiest to learn, which, coupled with the centrality of Nur and the stability of its government, accounted for its widespread usage. At the time, when the language seemed impossibly complex, this fact only further suggested to the worlds of possible languages that existed. Tung drew a portrait of languages, languages made up of pictures that meant both sounds and ideas at once; there were those in which the letters were not fixed but added to on a basic set of shapes. And these were only some of the varieties and only those among the language that were written down, which in itself was a minority.

From a paper vender I bought a collection of odd, cast-off sheets and blemished pages, the cheapest writing material I could find. Tung helped me cut a pen nib from a copper tube and secure it into some wood. I bought some grainy black ink---called berry ink, it faded over time -- - and with these implements began to practice copying letters and words that Tung would list for me. While he played Knocks and Keylocklundria went about its nighttime business, I learned to

write in my tiny sleeping chamber. Soon after, I stole a book from a box of inexpensive volumes slanting in the sun outside a bookseller. It was weathered and the pages were spotted with mold. It was a handwritten journal of a lady from the court of Zur (one of the ten cities), documenting what she dined on every day, what she wore, and whether or not her serving maid was having an affair with this or that soldier. Since that time, I have never read a more boring volume, besides the parts where she compelled her maid to go through the details of her nights of love. However, the reading of it, the fact that I could do so was exhilarating.

One night, after a day of tarring and an evening of studying characters, I left my box of a room, which was feeling increasingly restrictive, and walked the deserted streets of Keylocklundria. Although I had been living in the shadow of the Tower, my life had been caught up with survival and making some progress toward Fas Cerie, however far away in time, place, and possibility that seemed. That night the tower seemed to draw on my mind weakened by work, sleeplessness, and study. I have found, throughout my life, that this type of fatigue often sharpens some abilities of the mind while reducing others. It sharpens perception while reducing logic and reason. We were still in a temperate cycle but the night was cool. A green fog had drifted over the island and filled up the streets, adding the dreamlike quality of the experience. When I arrived at the square, fog shrouded the Disputatious Tower, but I walked toward what I thought might be the base. My eyes searched the thick gray air for discernible patterns. I thought I saw a sleeve, a cloak, an milky eye. When I was about halfway across the open space, I became disoriented, unclear which direction I was heading, a too familiar sensation only months since escaping the labyrinth. I could hear the movement of feet near me. It seemed a terrible idea to have come. The Solemn patrolled the square tirelessly, I had heard, and their swords were never sheathed.

I panicked and called out, "I'm lost in the fog." Before I could finish, a sword was at my throat.

The face was hidden by black bands of cloth. I could see two black eyes. They blinked. He stood in bare feet but otherwise was covered in black. One sword was at my neck and the other he kept down. "This is no time to be here," he said.

"A bad choice, I agree. I am unarmed," I said. He lowered the sword.

He shrugged his shoulders. "No one has attacked the tower in a thousand years. We have twenty-one guards here at night."

"What can you tell me about the Tower," I asked. I also gave him a brief description of who I was.

"I can take you to it, if you like," he said. "We've trained to recognize every cobble of the square by our bare feet. There are over 800 thousand of them. If the suns extinguished and eternal darkness fell, I could tell you exactly where in this square I was."

I followed closely. His steps did not make a sound. He spoke at times to other Solemn passing in the fog. I never saw them. Eventually we got to the base of the Tower. I looked up. The wall disappeared into the sky. The stones that formed it were half my height and the width of my arms spread out. My guide leaned against the rock. He said,

"I pledge to guard with my life the Disputatious Tower and the wisemen and mysteries it contains."

"We are part of the Tower," he said, "we are here to make it look all the taller and more important. When the fire guild attacked it, their purpose was to knock it down as a symbol not to destroy the time inside. Would people in Nur and Zur and the other ten cities stop counting the changing seasons?" (I did not then understand what he meant, then, but afterward pieced it

together). "Would they change the names of the cycles?" He then told the story of the dispute in which all of the wise men were killed and of The Solomon's ordering of time. I have stood guard for 126, 670 days. Every fifth day, I am freed into this city. I see my family then. And I return and stand guard. I wish we were besieged, under threat. As it is, I have devoted my life to walking and being a symbol." I thanked him for showing me the way, and he pointed me in the right direction to go outward, spreading the word among his brethren that I would be passing through.

I took from this that The Solemn for all their solemnity were a weak and vulnerable guard, too long complacent and untested. Although they would easily thwart a frontal assault, more subtle means might be employed to allow me to penetrate the tower to see what I could see. Over the next weeks, I found time to watch the tower square to see if any of the wisemen who resided above could be glimpsed entering or leaving, although that was said to be rare. Provisions were delivered to a small door at the base, opposite the official entry way, which was a broad wooden door raised by means that were invisible. A group of The Solemn always clustered near both openings. The deliveries of provisions were quite large and represented some of the most exotic, rich, and expensive foods and drinks that arrived in the harbor. While I worked on my reading and saved money for a voyage or for maps, I studied the tower whenever I could. It had a strange power over me and, when I was working, I would often look for it rising above the buildings. What did they do inside, I wondered. What secrets were being protected? I took mental measurements, made recordings. My goal was still to reach the brotherhood, but the tower seemed an essential step toward my reaching of that goal. From all that I had gleaned from rumors and references the key was not only finding maps and navigation equipment but having the knowledge or the authority to rule out the spurious, incomplete or otherwise

misleading maps that the Brotherhood had intentionally disseminated. There had to be a way, and part of the way was in the tower.

The next day, I was tired from study and my late-night visit to the Tower. Tung and I were trying to keep up with indefatigable Gut as we hammered in a series of undersupports for the broad lattice of the platform connecting the two hulls. We worked hanging from slings. Sorgus and Further appeared far below us, accompanied by a young woman. Further would point at some aspect of the vessel; Sorgus would nod, the woman would listen to what they were saying. She wore a robe the color of the night sky that fell down and was then tucked up between her legs and into a belt forged of silver rings. The woman seemed to be asking questions. Tung whispered to me, Juna Hrlbrdtr. The name rung out particularly loudly in my ears, as though I had heard it before or had been waiting to hear it. I stared down at her until Further yelled at me to get back to work. She noticed, though, and our eyes caught together. At such a distance I should not have been able to see much of her eyes, but they glowed a deep and penetrating blue across the space. Her hair blinded with its white. It was pulled back behind her head and plucked loose by the breeze. Her skin, also, was so pale it reflected the sun in flashes like the sparkles that come off of waves. Sorgus and Further walked on, pointing out other aspects of the work, and for an instant our eyes held together across the space, holding time. She walked on.

A few weeks passed and I had almost forgotten Juna. Then one night, I was walking from an inn back to my room for a night of study when I was tapped on my shoulder. I turned. A man with white hair and pale skin, muscular, was facing me. His face could have been carved from stone, for all its expression gave away. I connected him to Juna Hrlbrdtr based on physical type.

"An invitation," he said, handing me a envelope made of paper of a value of what I would be paid for a year on the docks. There was an embossed seal that showed a white bear, rampant, with a harpoon on the dexter.

"You can read?" said the man.

"Of course," I said.

He turned and walked away, using the erect posture and a long-striding gait of one used to military service.

I could read...but only a little, and not that language. Vertical rows of pictures of seals, pointed boats, paddles, small collections of three fish. The pictures were strung together in lines and repeated in patterns. The pictures were hand brushed with fine strokes, each carefully stylized. A seal, for instance, was two curved lines of a back and a belly, each terminating in its pointed nose; the third, a slight dab to indicate a flipper. Spaces broke up the strings, indicating word divisions.

I found Tung in THE MAIDEN AND THE MOLLUSK, a dockyard tavern and locus of Knock. He was sitting, shiny with sweat, at one of the four-sided Knock tables. Crowds of sailors clumped here and there on the warped benches and sunken chairs. Inn maids---haggard and weary looking---slunk and squirmed and laughed amongst the men, plying their trades as prostitutes and pickpockets. Tung held four cards in one hand and had, "knocked down" a fifth, The Castle. In the center of the table there were four stacks of metal coins. None seemed the same size as the others and on the faces of those visible were stamped eagles, and crowns, swords, horses, skulls, faces of rulers, and geometric patterns, the heterogeneous coinage of the seas and islands. More than I had saved sat piled in the middle, with four pairs of eyes greedily glancing at it between checking the cards and watching the other players. If Tung had two more

castles in hand, he would be difficult to beat, although the King of Swords could attack any three. I wanted to get a reading on my message and I wanted to see Tung's hand, but I stayed back for fear of disrupting his concentration or being claimed a cheating accomplice and having to fight with one of the gnarly salts who made up his opponents. Tung was talking constantly during the hand. The other three were not, and were not listening.

The hand came down to a half-kelter, which split the coins between Tung and the one with the burn-scarred scalp and a scar from his ear to his eye. As the cards were being shuffled by the new dealer, I got Tung's attention.

"You know," he said, after glancing at the message. "I've been working on that ship for three cycles and she sends you this! Good luck. I'm not sure you're ready for this."

"What does it say?"

"Come tonight for good fare."

"That's it? It seems like there's a lot more on there."

"Each of those drawings represents what in Nurian would be a small part of a word, and they work together to suggest the meaning. The three grennings here, the fish, that's the equivalent of F-sound in "fare"

"It must take a long time to write something."

"The nights can be long in the icerine. And only those at court read this anyway. It is mostly a spoken language."

"Where would I go?"

"That's easy," he gave me directions up from the harbor area to the residential streets on the harbor edge of the tower.

Now his cardmates were demanding his return, especially the two who had missed out on the pot split during the last hand.

Before going, I went to one of the sailor's baths to clean myself up. There, they had a polished metal for shaving, which I was increasingly in need of doing. I bought a cheap blade from the attendant, bathed and shaved. To wear, I had only my worker's shorts and no shoes and a light shirt stained by use. But I went anyway.

8.

Two mammoths locked in battle. Above, two narwhales leapt toward each other, fencing spiraled horns. On the sides, seals drove upward with their teeth bared, icebears chasing them, broad paws reaching out long nails. In triangular-hulled boats, life-sized men and women held harpoons ready to throw. The interstices between figures held carved characters, the same as those that had been written on the paper, but represented whole speeches worth of the language. The front of the building gave a sense of jagged violence, although the pure white stone was almost creamy. The chisel-chipped faces of the animals suggested their fierceness, their rushing toward conflict and death. I stood, and compared my bare feet and poor clothing to the majesty of carving. My feet were dirty from the walk through town. As I looked down I found that I was standing on a carved pool of sleek sharks and slack-jawed gore-munsts rendered as though they circled beneath a surface of ice. Set in among these vast carvings, a single slab of wood, richly ringed and pitted, acted as a door. The doorknocker was an ancient club: a rounded stone bound by rope into a cleaved stick. I grabbed it and swung it against the door. The note-deliverer soon appeared, creaked open the ironwood, and led me into the building.

He led me to a stone-floored entranceway. To one side was a long staircase leading up, roughly hewn of a lighter stone. No sunlight penetrated the space and the temperature was cool. The servant was waiting for me to follow, so I did, passing through a room with a handful of broad chairs made of ivory and sealskin. At the end of this room, there was a stone door hanging on massive metal hinges. The servant, if that is what he can best be called, opened the stone door with ease; the hinges did not emit a sound but turned smooth on what must have been bear grease. In this room the cold hit me in the nostrils first, freezing them from the inside. And then my skin burned. I was a creature of the heat and the warmth of the moderate mydrine. I had never worn a cloak or pants to my ankles. I began to shiver, first on the surface and quickly into my core. As I was adjusting to this, I tried to observe the room, figure out why I was there, what was likely to happen. There was a long banquet table. Above the table, the walls were lined with heraldic flags of what I was beginning to realize was an icerine islander's motifs. The table was empty except for one end, which was laid for table and, at the same end, there was a fireplace the size of six men standing on each other's shoulders. A blaze licked the carvings that formed its mouth. Two stone benches commanded the fireplace. Juna Hrlbrdtr, daughter of the King of Hroth, sat and stared into the fire.

She rose and said something to her servant, who left the room. The language sounded surprisingly mellifluous, dominated by what sounded like “io” and “ea” sounds. Her face expressed nothing as she walked toward me. She stared into my eyes with an unsettlingly placid look, a calmness that penetrated but was neither hurried nor patient. Her eyes were the largest of any human's roughly my own size that I had ever seen, the size of a small fruit, blue like water pooling on a surface of ice. The room was so long that the servant returned before she reached me. Over my shoulders, he threw a heavy cloak that fell to the floor. I hugged it around myself.

Soft short fur lined the inside of the cloak, gray speckled with black. I have seen them since then, the pups of the icerine jarlpult, an ocean-going beast with five-fingered hands and a breath hole. They are known in the icerine as the singing pups, for the way they signal danger when their mothers are not nearby.

"Welcome to my home that remembers my home," Juna said as she reached me. "The temperature approximates one of the warmest cycles of our climate. It is difficult to hold it below this. I can see you are unused to the temperature."

She was strongly and sturdily build, with broad shoulders and a stout body. Her voice was lower than I expected, as though she had been shouting for many days. Her Nurian was unaccented but overly precise. Perhaps, I thought, this was simply the language of guildmembers.

"I am from the mydrine, in the rainy cycles it sometimes cools but nothing approaching this."

"And where was that?" she asked.

"Clayd," I said. "a day's easy sailing to Nur."

Rather than acknowledge what I had said with recognition or its absence, Juna came close to me and slid her hand into the fold of the cloak. She caressed my bare arm. Her fingers were as cool as the stone all around us. She stared in my eyes all along, as if reading my thoughts of home, seeing for herself the images I saw. My family's three huts; my father's stretter, a blade for cutting plants, hanging next to the door; my grandfather's idol always aflame above the hearth.

"I see," Juna said, withdrawing her hand. "Yes. I see." She seemed relieved by this. She invited me to sit by the fire. "What do you think of my ship?"

The calmness of her words and assurance of her movements made me awkward in my words and clumsy in my movements. Why was I there? Perhaps she wanted a spy to ensure she was not being cheated by Further. Or perhaps she simply wanted to make sure all who worked on her craft were acceptable. Or not allied with her enemies... I could guess that she had enemies, that she harbored fear deep beneath the placid surface. Hard edges would turn some against her.

"Interesting," I said. "I had heard of these twin hulls but never seen them. But I am just a worker."

"It is my own design," she said. "this is why I visit the docks often. But I saw you and you were new."

I could sense a picking and a pulling at my thoughts. I grew angry or fearful and pulled back. An outsider would have seen us sitting on two benches talking, but there was much more happening...though I did not know what exactly or how to respond. Neither of us wanted to give the first specific, the first actual part of our mind to the other.

"I have a voyage planned," she said. "My biggest voyage and longest."

"Where will you go?" I asked.

"To the wyndrine, she said. I will captain the ship and conduct..." a pause..."observations of a certain people of the wyndrine. The minds one finds in the wyndrine have been the focus of my study," she added by way of explanation.

"Sorcerers, wizards, witches?" I said.

"I prefer not to use such terms. The power of the wyndrine is embodied in minds. How that power is generated, in whom consolidated and toward whom and what directed, varies from island to island and individual to individual. Those words fail to describe the actual powers, they are but shorthands, generalizations. All those called wizards are unique, the same is true for

witches. Words transported sailors, spread by storytellers. The truth is far more complicated. The powers far more various. In the wyndrine we find beings of powers not found elsewhere. Some of the powers are great and some small, many in between. But I don't want to bore you with details of my work."

"My grandmother believed that the dead travel over the wyndrine with the asr-floot, the spiritwind, and many are caught on those island or enthralled and never get to the afterworld."

"There are many folk beliefs about the wyndrine," she said. "About all places," she added. "In the Sagas of the Ice Kings, a seadragon steals the princess of Hroth in order to marry her. We know of course that seadragons do not seek to marry princesses, only to eat them, if they bother with them at all. And yet hearing the story makes the possibility seem so very real, I can remember praying to my ancestors for a seadragon to appear."

As I transcribe this from memory now, I can see the wisdom and the truth of what she says of stories and of their relation to reality, of the wyndrine and of all the islands. I was on Keylocklundria, was I not, following a story, a story of brotherhood and adventure. Had I not believed such things were real, I would have been a successful sailmaker on the island of Clayd and never hoisted one for my own transport. Even as I spoke to Juna I was writing a story in my mind of who she was. Daughter of a king she had an independent nature and used her guile and intelligence to convince her father to allow her to join the guild of minds. But she had a nostalgic imagination for her girlhood on the ice so she remembered the stories of icedragons and built a replica of an ice palace in the mydrine warmth. Stories, in other words, can be dangerous.

"Why did you invite me here?" I asked.

"Why did you come?"

"Because I was invited...and I had nothing better to do. My life is modest."

"As modest as learning to read and write and delving into the mysteries of the tower?

Those are important tasks and not the ones usually pursued by a carpenter's mate with no shoes."

Her words made me want to get up and leave, but, Juna's unspoken hold held me there. She must think I am some kind of spy, I thought, that I am in disguise. But I was only a spy of my own journey. I did not answer.

"The tower is but a symbol," she said, "a reassurance for wealthy merchants that their ships will be able to get where they are going on time and to captains that their navigation instruments are correctly calibrated. Humans want to measure their lives, and the Tower lets them think this is possible. The calendar is important...for commerce and military and governments. But, no truth or true power ever draws attention to itself in the way of the Tower."

Again, I said nothing. That seemed the best strategy to combat her attempts to draw me out. If she could read my mind, she would know my thoughts already. If she could not and relied on spies and other informants --- Tung, perhaps, allied through The Guild of Minds?, the servant, others?--- why confirm their information?

"Shall we eat?" she asked.

We moved to the table and, when we did, two female servants emerged from the shadows and poured a drink into the glass, and served a plate of white fish and potatoes.

"Thank you for coming," she said to me and then called out "Alklydr!"

Her male servant appeared at her side. He pulled back his shirt to reveal a series of slender pouches, each with a bone handle protruding from it. He withdrew a long-tined silver fork. He speared some of the fish from Juna's table and ate it. He ate one of her potatoes and

drank a sip of her wine from the pewter cup. He stood next to her for several minutes and waited. When nothing happened, he came to my plate and did the same. Again, nothing happened. I let this go without comment, unsure of if it was a common practice among icerine royalty, a protection against a particular threat, or proof to show me I had nothing to fear.

What the meal lacked in savor it made up for in size. I had not eaten such fresh fish in a while, and the thick potatoes filled my stomach with warmth. The drink she served was pale, dry, and sharp. A tingle and a cool murmuring of life spread through my veins. I began to think of Juna differently and I began to watch her throat, and the curve of her chin, her long fingers that looked almost like a man's fingers but ended in a clear, manicured nails. She did not speak while we ate, but she did drink the same drink as I, and, occasionally, I saw her looking at me with her frank stare. I tried to sit up and look my full height---tried to look strong---but it was difficult to do so under the heavy cloak. Once we had eaten the food, the serving girls brought out two small silver cups. In the cups was an orange fruit cut in half and saturated. Again the servant tasted each of ours and did not die and then withdrew. The fruit was delicately sweet and soaked with the pale fluid in our cups. The combination was delightful.

"This fruit is called Qit. It grows on Drur. As you know, Drur is the iceward-most island in the mydrine. My father's kingdom..." she said this taking for granted that all fathers have kingdoms, "is the mydwards-most island in the icerine, and the greatest. My father sends a crew of iceraiders to Drur yearly at the time of the Qit ripening. His lineage has for three generations, and the Grlbrds before him did the same. The Drurians now see it as custom more than tribute or plunder. Still, it is a great delicacy because it comes from so far away. Here, I need only send a servant to the docks to buy it. But it reminds me of celebrations at home."

Looking back I wondered if the drink that we had drunk and the fruit soaked in it were opening her to me as it seemed to be opening me to her. This story of her fruit, in a way, told me as much about her as I had learned and confirmed the story I had made up. The fire crackled next to us and I was beginning to grow very warm under my cloak. We had finished and she rose, as did I.

"Come," she said.

I followed her through another stone door into a narrow hallway lit only by flickering torches. It made several abrupt turns, and branched and forked several times. My cloak dragged on the floor behind me. Although I still felt the warmth of food and drink, the air grew colder as we went down several steep stairwells. With its silence, the dwelling left the impression of utter emptiness, besides those three silent servants and a cook somewhere. Juna said nothing as we walked, although we had gone farther than it seemed possible we could and still be inside the same space. Then, at the bottom of a final stairway, a broad hall opened out again. The space was carved out of stone beneath the city and was wet with icy condensation, but very cold. Where drips fell from the ceiling, pointed shafts of ice hung above. A dark pool of water filled the middle, edged by sharply carved stone. At the end nearest us, a smooth area of polished stone started above water and dove beneath it. Our breath and our movements echoed.

"This would be an ice cavern," she said, "at home," pointing all around. Her breath huffed visibly with her words. "but the stone here can be only cooled to a certain degree. Do you want to swim?"

I looked at the black surface of water. Its depth seemed unplumbable, its still surface frigid.

"Can I survive it?"

I walked to the edge of the water and looked down. The ink dark surface obscured any attempt to tell how deep it was.

"I'll make sure you live," she said. Standing in front of me, she unbuckled her silver belt and dropped part of her robe down and unwound it behind her. It slid off easily. Beneath, she wore a white scrim of fabric intricately sewn with the motifs of the icerine in fine pale-blue thread. She removed this as well, crossing her arms and pulling it over her head. Naked, she stood on the dark wet stone. Muscles caught shadows along their edges. She withdrew a sharpened stick from her hair piece and her hair fell to her shoulder. She held the wooden hair stick up and said, "my mother made this for me before I left. She died a year later, in childbirth, and the king, my father, has remarried."

Her toes shifted. Against the dark chiseled stone, her pale curves glowed white.

"Come on now," she said.

I dropped the cloak and shifted easily out of my clothes and stood looking back at her. I felt, oddly, that she already knew me in this way and that I knew her. She had been inside of me. It went back to the first look shared between us, but I could not tell if this was my imagination. Certainly, when I had looked at many women, I had imagined them in this state. I was still a boy, then, after all, but little of that changes. To have imagined it and to have had it come to life made it seem predestined, and on a higher order of truth than imagination. But, even though a boy, I doubted whether what I believed to be true would turn out to be so. If nothing else, the lions and the labyrinth had taught me that. I wondered if she knew about that, about Aba and the pacing lion. I closed my eyes for a moment and heard the clatter of their bones. I wondered if she could feel how it had felt for me to leave my child on an empty step, to put aside a part of me that had died then. I felt as though Juna did know of this...at least partly.

She walked to the polished stone slide, sat on it, and slid down into the water until her head, then her hair disappeared.

I tried doing the same, but as soon as my toes hit the water I stopped myself from sliding down. Then, Juna popped up, her hair and face wet with the water, her lips looking red and full. She dipped back her head to pull her hair away from her eyes, blinked back at me, her lashes clumped and dark. I forced myself to slide down into the water.

The water was thick and heavy and made it hard to breath, but I quickly ducked my head under. I tried to swim to Juna several times but she eluded me by ducking under the surface and appearing elsewhere. She swam as naturally as a fish, using her whole body to twitch from one place to another, whereas I struggled to stay afloat, pumping my arms and legs furiously, and had to cling, at times, to the edge. My muscles began to seize up from the cold and effort. Just then, Juna swam to the slide and walked out. I followed quickly.

The air felt warmer than the water now. I followed Juna out of the chamber, into the narrow stairway and up, watching her still wet legs as she flexed from stair to stair. As we went up, the air continued to warm. Soon, we entered a small chamber with a low ceiling, there was a bed and another massive fireplace in which a roaring fire had just been stoked. She stood over by the fire. I went to her and held her.

"It is for me...slrgdr," she said, looking up at me. "A time of my cycle for no child. They teach us these things in the court of a king."

For a moment, I pictured my son's face peeking through a bundle as I set him down.

As though reading my thoughts, Juna said, "If I were to become with child, my father would send three men here to kill both you and me. The tradition is to protect and clarify succession. I have only brother and two uncles with sons. A king can spare a daughter."

She ran her hand over the same part of my arm as she had before. Her hand, which once had seemed cool, was now warm. The after effects of the cold water and the feeling of warmth rising from Juna as our lips met, the suspicion I still felt and the desire that opposed it, all combined to make me unconcerned with anything but that moment.

I awoke, much later, in the bed. My clothes were folded on a stool nearby. They made a small pile. The fire had died to coals and provided the only light in the room, a dull red that danced shadows on the dark walls. Juna lay against some pillows, awake, staring those big eyes into the near darkness.

"I must report to the guild soon," she said.

"What will you do there? What do you do there?"

"Before I make my voyage. I must complete my examinations. I have been an apprentice for a long time. A servant of a master, little more, left to learn our arts and knowledge on my own. Now I will be a master in my own right and can bring back knowledge and have the power over it. But the examinations are difficult and lengthy. The masters do not tell you how long they will last. I have been under examination for the entire time my ship has been being built. And what of you. When do you embark?"

I hesitated to reply. Her question implied knowledge of my aims beyond what I had told her. Next to her, however, the closeness seemed almost natural.

"I do not know enough to do so," I said. "You speak of the islands as though you know them from years of study. I know only those that I have sailed past. The rest is rumor, hearsay, second-hand description, myth, and folklore. I would like to see what sailors of the islands have written down."

"Many maps are little but myth as well."

"I would like the chance to judge myself," I said.

"Have you the charts you need for your voyage?"

"I have some money saved," I said. "I will work for the rest. And I own my own craft."

"Alklydr," she called out. The man appeared from the shadows.

"Bring me my map case," she said.

He returned shortly, left a round leather case on the bed at her feet, and withdrew.

Juna untied three leather thongs that held the case together and unrolled a thickness of sheets. She spread the first on top of the bed.

"I had these made for my voyage. I believe this mapmaker and his scriveners can be trusted. He is an ancient Illuminator's guild member.

"Where are we?"

"Here," she said, pointing to a tiny island near the middle.

It is hard to describe how this initial picture of the islands affected me. At first, the markings appeared meaningless. Then, spreading out from Juna's finger, like sand grains or as many stars, were islands. I was looking at the known world, or one version of it, cast across a finely ornamented version of all the oceans and seas. Maps were widely known as things to be distrusted and questioned...the islands were too vast to be contained by mere pen and paper, by mere mortals with mere ink. But these islands existed or had within recent memory, ships had been there, people had reported their outlines of coastlines, recorded their descriptions of reefs and rocks and harbors. They were there, just as we were where Juna's finger pointed.

And the world was vaster than I had dreamed. Just looking for Clayd I passed my eye over hundreds of tiny marks. Nur stood out for its size. It had been decorated in gold leaf....but, seeing its position only reinforced how little I had travelled, how short a relative distance my

long sail from Clayd to Nur to Keylocklundria had been. On the map it was no longer than the width of Juna's polished fingernail, and she had, in common with ice islanders you will meet, small, narrow fingers. I saw then that I had been nowhere and seen nothing, gulfs the size of oceans existed in my understanding. My progress in the world was less than a drop of water falling into the vast ocean, less than a grain of sand on a beach. Worlds the size of seas existed in my future. Everything was out there, beyond, forward. The thought gave me a thrill of terror, an ineffable feeling of goodness.

Keylocklundria, and all the mydrine besides the ten gold cities, had been penned in green ink. Where Juna pointed her finger, a miniscule tower was visible in the center. Throughout the middle grouping of ten gold-flaked islands caught the fire light, the ten cities. They were known to me as names, though about some of them I had associations based on sailor's stories, and references heard at home and while I lived on Nur. Besides Nur, there was Zur, Drur (the most icewards) and far below it on the map, Jur-longtok (the most fyrwards), Qo-Tur (known for its famous gardens and dance troops), Limnur (known as the city of holy ruins, it was where the priests and priestesses of the seagod had their sanctuary), Gho-san-Mur (where the Navy of the Ten Cities had their base) and nearby Koluria (where sea and merchant law was meted out), Rurania, (known as the island of grains), and Nuron, the sister city to Nur, (governed by the Kolveria, the Sisters and island of women and eunuchs only, where the greatest silver and goldsmith of all the islands lived, protected by ruthless crews in fast sailing longboats rowed by a hundred women each).

I sounded out the name of the island where she was pointing in the Nurian characters Key – lock –lund-ria.

"Here is Clayd. And Nur." She pointed far down a curved line of islands to those I had already spotted.

"I sailed that in an open boat," I said. Adding, with a little too much pride. "I have a sail of my own design."

"Not much in between fishing villages," she said. "Powerful islands do not allow for powerful neighbors. This group is the mydrine."

She followed with her finger a string of islands that wrapped up from Keylocklundria and then down again. The rine itself was made of clusters and strings and individual islands spread out. Most were named in the mapmaker's hand in green ink. In some areas were tiny dots, unnamed and numerous, known to sailors as the Spehks, they were not part of the rine itself, had broken away in centuries past. About a spehk one could hear any number of rumors, but, since they clustered far from where I was born and raised, on the far side of the rine, I had no direct knowledge of them.

The eyrthrine began not far from the mydrine and was penned in brown ink. Several of the larger islands had names, a few had only a list. The eyrthrine was known for fostering conquerors who sought to control strings of islands. I got the sense that many of the names were speculative. Above these, and to one side of the mydrine, the ice islands spread out. Less a rine than a circular cluster, a jagged mass of land that had broken apart from within, the mapscribes had penned it in dark blue. It seemed like there were thousands of small islands marginally bigger than spehks, many unnamed. Juna pointed out Hroth, which was surprisingly close to Drur. In the same direction, the wyndrine islands appeared in purple ink. Not as much a rine as the mydrine but more closely rinelike than the ice islands, the majority of the wyndrine was unnamed and the scribes had drawn the shorelines vaguely or with little detail. The smooth

rounds of the shorelines suggested the absence of surveying, the speculative nature of these places. The rine itself appeared far away from Qo Tur. Below, and farther away from the still and was the red of the fyryne. The mapmaker seemed to want to acknowledge the many islands there. There seemed to be a hundred times as many there as anywhere else but only twenty or so had names. The fyryne retained the outline of Turstan, the last living of the old volcanoes. The rines islands were growing and cooling even then, and continue to now. Somewhere there in the heat and the damp, in puddles and swamps and furnaces of rock, new beings are being born, and new leaders of new armies on new islands.

Noticing some islands that were drawn in black and not clearly associated with one rine or another and which each marked by a strange undulating mark, I said "What does this mark mean?"

"Those are outliers, the mark means the mapmaker cannot confirm their existence but they appear on other maps or have been reported to exist. There were far more of these than are drawn here. Whether they exist or not is hard to say."

I had now seen the world from the perspective of the stars. I had seen only a portion of it, but it was not as vast as I had once thought. Though mapmakers acknowledged gaps of knowledge, they believed in the location of those they drew and labelled.

"And where are you going?" I asked

Juna peeled back the map of the rines and showed another, completely purple. The Wyndrine took up the entire sheet. The island shores were drawn in greater detail. Harbors were indicated, reefs, areas of shallow, some currents. The islands themselves seemed to have great detail on the mydward side of the ring. The far side was blank and the shores of islands lacked detail.

Juna pointed her finger to a tiny island about a quarter of the way up the ring.

"There," she said. "Unra Felar Trunta," She spoke the name like an incantation.

Although I had never heard the words before, a tingle ran through my body as though all the hairs were being pushed back the wrong direction.

"Why?" I asked.

Then, Alklydr appeared with a suit of clothing over his arms. Juna nodded to him.

"I must go," she said. "Alklydr, joi feroth koirustonk."

Alklydr responded to this command by rolling up the maps and securing them in the case.

To me, she said, "there is a back way out of here. Alklydr will show you. It will be better for both of us if you take it. The Few, even the guildmasters have their spies."

The clothes over Alklydr's arm were for me. A simple pair of pants and a green shirt with ivory buttons running down the front. He handed me my other clothes in a small leather bag.

"I don't need these new clothes," I said.

"I had Alklydr sew them for you last night, while we were together. It is the outfit of an iceprince to wear while training at wooden clubs. It is very appropriate for you to take them."

"But I have nothing to give you," I said.

"It is unnecessary. I will see you again. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Then you may give me something then. If you wear these clothes to visit me, people will notice you less."

As we exchanged these words, Juna had receded into the inscrutable figure of the night before, distant and impassive. We had shared something. I would see her again, but our parting was abrupt, especially with Alklydr standing there. I did not know what to say or do. She was quickly gone.

As I finished dressing, Alklydr extended his arm toward one side of the room. I nodded. After another journey through a series of sharp, low, dark passageways, I was let out into an alleyway. The bright sunlight and warm air took a moment to get used to.

9.

I went to the docks---after changing back into my work clothes---my thoughts swirling and tangling with different influences....Juna, her breath, her body, the way she had felt to me, the world, the maps, and the insight into the scope of the world. It seemed no smaller now but more specifically described in my mind. I have never forgotten those maps and, though, they contained grave errors, significant omissions, and much misinformations (some deliberate), they remain with me for their opening up of the world. The maps, and Juna, and Tung underlined my ignorance and lack of experience, the very force against which I had devoted myself. This made me impatient. Several times I had to stop myself from boarding Greywart and setting sail. Instead, I redoubled my efforts in the night and paid close attention to all aspects of life around me. The types of people I saw and where they came from, the ships and vessels, the goods that passed us into the shops. The names of things, the dress, languages, the variations of gesture, accent, expressions. I constantly asked Tung questions as we worked and he constantly talked in answer. Some of what he said I guessed even then, was made up. Sorgus began referring to us as "the mouth" and "the ear," but he acknowledged that we accomplished almost as much as Gut

in our workday, so he had no room for complaint. Yeflin, though, would work far away from us whenever possible, complaining of a headache, a stomach illness, or ailment of the joints. Vent's only utility seemed to be a capacity for incredible detail and mind-numbing repetition. Sorgus once had him sand a hundred wooden pegs until they were perfectly round. Yeflin sat in the shade and did so, occupying himself that way for many weeks.

As we were finishing up the major aspects of construction of Juna's ship, we were interrupted one day by the appearance in the harbor of a longship rowed by twenty or more men. As they approached our dock, the oars rose out off the water and were set vertically, appearing as spines in a seadragon. The ship coasted in, rowers still and disciplined. Sorgus helped them moor. The ship's bow was carved in the manner of Juna's entranceway, only with finer delicacy and details in the wood. It was also intricately painted so that the eyes seemed alive and the scales and fur of the beast almost moved in the wind. From this boat a team of Hrothian carvers emerged carrying skin-covered cases of precious tools. They did not speak our language, but Tung spoke theirs and was able to translate.

While we spent our days fabricating the mast and other rigging, the carvers worked on the bow of the ship. Each of the oarsmen was a carver and each brought with him a roll of tools, slung over his back. They had long blond hair and seemed burned by the wind and the sun, perhaps they were unused to the heat of the mydrine. Juna arrived and addressed them as a group on the dock. She had several men with her bearing provisions. Each in a wooden box.

"They rowed here without eating or sleeping for the entire journey," Tung told me.

This was the first time I had seen Juna since the night we had spent together. She did not look in my direction.

She fed the men then gathered them together and walked around the ship. There was a leader of the carvers, a wizened man with blonde hair sticking out in all directions. Juna, pointed to parts of the ship and spoke in the language of her people.

Sorgus, Tung and I followed behind, our own work interrupted by the presence of the carvers. Tung whispered broken translations of the conversation between Juna and the head carver.

"She's calling aspects of this ship by their Hrothian names. The Hrothian carvers are used to working on ships like those upon which they arrived. To them, this is a strange vessel and these men have never seen anything like it...they have not left the icerine before...nor seen other people...were forced, reluctantly, to come here, by Juna's father...would be inauspicious to sail without their work...but this is not a proper ship...Juna says that they have been commanded to do this work and they will do so...she tells them the date of her expected departure...the problem is the double hull...their tradition dictates the images for both sides of a hull and for the bow...but here we have four sides and two centers...should they be the same or different? they laugh at the ridiculousness of such a question, which, in turn has no answer. And the platform...the carvers seem despondent and perplexed by this and not afraid to show her...he says that no matter what solution he chooses it will not be correct or proper and she will not have the favor of some word like spirit-god-luck ...there's nothing he can do about it...she says she will take responsibility for this...she does not seem to care whether they do their work or not."

Juna approached Sorgus while the carvers further inspected the ship, running their hands over the wood. There was a lot of head shaking and heated discussion amongst them. Fingers were pointed in disgust. Juna stood in front of Sorgus until Tung and I withdrew. Tung looked at me for a reaction to this but said nothing. We overheard her say, "a superstition of my

father's...but harmless. They won't set us back...nor should they bother you. They are born to work and are known for their disagreeable temperaments."

Tung had drifted away from me and was infiltrating the group of carvers. Soon after he was talking to one of them, then two of them, then almost all were standing around, gesturing and complaining, not too long after that he had them laughing and nodding. Then they went back to their work of unpacking their ship.

"What did you tell them?" I asked Tung.

"I said that there is no understanding the whims of royalty and that they simply needed to do their best. They thought this idea amazing, and were astonished that I suggested it. They only understand the one way of doing things, which is the exact way it had been done before. Then I told them that the craft they were working on was one of the greatest of its kind and they should be honored to be asked to carve it. They liked this little better. Then I told them all about the bars and inns nearby and the many women who were there and that, as soon as their work was finished, I was sure they would be given liberty to rest after their labor. They laughed at this and saw the wisdom of it."

Tung was thus able to make those around him comfortable and at ease, even icelanders far from their familiar world with an impossible job to do. Juna left without speaking or looking directly at me. I was not insulted or surprised. Her thoughts had hovered near me, probing my own, but not in a strong way. She had other concerns, her exams, the shops. The fact that her father was sending this crew to help complete work here and that she did not particularly care whether they did or not, suggested some conflict with her home.

That night, I was studying in my quarters when there was a knock on the door. The door was fashioned of poorly fitted strips of bark. Alklydr's outline was visible through it. When I

opened it, Juna had written the invitation in Nurian characters and I was now able to piece them out. I nodded to Alklydr and changed my garb into that which she had given me. I followed Alklydr down the street. Although I tried to walk next to him he always strided one step ahead. His head and eyes remained forward, but his eyes were attentive to passersby and the goings and comings on the periphery.

He took me in the through the back alley and through the abrupt and narrow hallways to the dining area. Juna was once again on a bench by the fire.

"Join me," she said.

Alklydr brought us goblets of the pale drink and I took a sip. I looked to her to say or move to indicate what was between us or why I was there. She looked mostly into the fire.

"I have completed my written and oral examination," she said. "I have one final test to become tenth female Master of Mind. The first of Hroth. But I can rest for a few days before that..." she stopped here, as though searching for the right word, "...practical exam begins in earnest."

I stood and bowed. She bowed back from a seating position. There was no jest in this.

"I am tired from my path and due to start a new one soon. But I may rest for a day or so. Three complete cycles I have prepared for this."

We dined again on plain fare. This time, a red meat cooked over a hot flame, brown and tough on the outside, red and almost cold on the inside. A green tasteless plant was also served; it seemed to give me energy as soon as I swallowed it. Again, the pale drink made me feel warm and connected to Juna and her eyes sparkled in my direction, large and powerful blue.

She did not, as I was hoping she would, lead me to the cold pool of water. Instead I followed her to an even larger space. The height of ten men, it was walled with volumes of

books, brown and red and dark green spines facing outward. Etched gold and silver titles sparkled outward from the dull bindings. A system of curved stone stairwells at either end led up to the levels of books, but the middle was open. Juna led me to a table in the middle. Her maps, which I recognized from the other morning, were spread out across the table.

"Here is what I propose. You travel with me on my voyage to the wyndrine."

I opened my mouth to speak, but said nothing. She continued.

"Like you, I know what I want to do. Unlike you, I have the means and knowledge to proceed. I will not insult you by giving you money, but I can give you experience. Travel with me to the wyndrine and learn about that part of the islands. Learn navigation and the workings of a large ship. Provide me with loyalty. I have Alklydr for protection, but, bring your sword as well, though you know not how to use it. We will never marry. I will never marry, now that I am a Master of Mind. I gave that up when I came here...simplifying the lines of succession. But I have an attachment to you."

"And I to you," I said.

"Unra Felar Trunta," she whispered, her eye brightening. "No one has been there for a thousand cycles. For that long and more the Guild of Mind has looked to the wyndrine as the source of what we study, what we, this race of beings near the middle of things have inside our skulls that has made us spread so. Where did we come from? How do we know? A thousand cycles ago a Master named Tan Gular was shipwrecked, here," Moving over to the map and pointing to an area in the wyndrine marked with a red line through it. He wrote a description of it when he made it back, barely alive. Rocks protrude from the water all throughout here. The currents are treacherous with eddies and whirlpools. The winds beat upon the rocks. The stars are always obscured. The moon never shines. Dense fog forever sits on the roiling surface of

the water. His ship went down, was broken up, and he washed ashore on a place he came to know as Unra Felar Trunta. The next thing he knew, he was sailing away from the island.”

She held up a thin volume, showed me the handwritten page, and read:

“I escaped only with a portion of my lifeforce and a fragment of my thoughts. I knew not who I was. I had only a small poorly made box with me, that held, wrapped in black cloth, a kind of key. I knew none of the facts I had learned as a boy. I knew to breathe. I knew to eat. I was outside the tortuous currents and rock outcroppings in an open boat, with a mast, two oars, and a sail. The sun gradually broke through the fog. I drifted for a day and while I did so, I could not think, my mind was as blank as the open sky. I suffered storm and calm without feeling. After a time, I put the sail up. And tried to hold the tiller straight. Many days passed. I came ashore on Kurosan.”

"Where's that?"

"Here," said Juna, her face lighting up.

"She pointed to an outlying island on the other side of the mydrine, the side closer to the eyrthrine and the fyryne than the island he claimed to have been nearest to. He had awakened in a boat on the far side of the islands.

"Could he have drifted that far?"

"And never encountered another island, ship or Navy? Without starving....its a trip of years. The dominant current goes toward the wyndrine, as do the winds.”

"Do you believe in the Farlands?"

"As much as I believe in the Otherlands...not at all. Tan Gular contemplated his fate for many years before writing all this down. He records that flashes and flickers of memory returned to him over the years, none of it making much sense. He remembered the name of the

island Unra Felar Trunta. He remembers a large structure. Sometimes it seems like a fortress of wood, sometimes a stone castle, sometimes a polished palace of marble and gold. He remembers central figures, sometimes described as a singular being but also as many as of twelve. He cannot remember if they are male, female, or other. Are they beasts or humanoid? He doesn't recall. His nightmares are filled with their faces. He calls them mindcarvers, speculates that he has been a victim of something he can only call knowledge harvesting. He suspects that the aim was to learn about Keylocklundria, the Ten Cities, the mydrine, perhaps to threaten it. He tells his story to the Navy of the Ten Cities. They take note of it, but no force ever attacks from the wyndrine and none ever has. He gives something to the men in the Tower, a device he calls the key, but it unlocks neither door nor lock. They keep it. He warns the guilds of the things he might have known about their weaknesses. Warns the Solemn, warns everyone. Few listened. He died after writing this full statement of what he knew, which was very little."

"Couldn't all this be explained by a simple injury? There was an old man in my village who fell from a mast, clipped the yardarm with his head and then went into the water. He was rescued, but did nothing but stare at a far away place for years, but, one day, he began to talk in a language no one understood."

"And his mind could have developed a flaw, or been what my people call huncha, mad, and that madness could have appeared over time. But, he was a member of the Guild of Mind, he had been tested for years for just such deficiencies. He had developed his resources for mental protection and the ability to protect himself from exactly the type of attack that happened to him. His masters would have included those specialists in unconventional humanoid mindscapes and a dozen other possibilities. I myself have suffered through such trainings."

"So a sorcerer...but you don't like that word."

"As I said, it is always more complicated than that...but let's speculate that a central, powerful figure lived on this island, his or her power would have derived from the island itself and the intimate understanding of it, cultivated over the course of many years. And then what were the motives, what the reasons?"

"There are islands without reason," I said, thinking of the labyrinth.

And in an instant it became clear to me how Juna had chosen me. She had peeled away the layers of my surface consciousness to the inexplicable and found, in my recent memories, the inexplicable experience of the labyrinth. I could feel that she had been there, her consciousness had left a slight imprint on mine. It had been the first night, as I slept, before she showed me the maps.

"And that is where I want to go to understand the power and the logic that is impossible for us to understand. That is the work of Mind," she said. She halfway closed her eyes as she said it.

Several weeks passed. I went to Juna when she sent for me. Juna spent her time preparing for the voyage. On the docks, the other carpenter's mates and I finished the residential spaces on the platform between the two hulls and helped with installing the instrumentation of the ship, which was done by specialist, as well as the steering mechanism and other highly skilled aspects of preparing the ship to sail. The Hrothian carvers chiseled, sanded, polished, and painted an ornate band around the topmost deck on both hulls. The head carver worked by himself in a space off the dock, carving (it was rumored) the two-headed seadragon that would front the bows. They decided to continue the icerine motif around the sides and back of the platform. There were delays because of all this fine carving. Juna grew impatient. Sorgus had to find things for us to do while we waited. We watched the carvers texture the scales of arms

and the hairs of a beast with blades the thinness of wire. We braided rope, we assisted the sailmakers, we assembled nonperishable stores to go in the ballast areas of the hull, and we built water barrels with the guidance of a cooper.

As the carvers grew closer to finishing their work, Juna began to assemble a crew. She had long before settled on a captain. Sorgus had a twin brother, Gorgus. Although from the Eyrthrine, he had been a captain in the Navy of the Ten Cities and since then a merchant captain for hire, especially for trips to the eyrthrine islands where the wood for ships was harvested. He appeared one day on the docks to inspect the ship. Juna trusted him as she trusted Sorgus. She had, she thought, insight into both their minds. There was nothing hidden about the Berrings, she told me. Gorgus spent many hours with Sorgus, discussing the lines of the ship and the rigging of the sails. He had a first mate and second mate with him, also eyrthrine islanders: large men with black curly beards like the Berrings.

My studies of the Nurian language had developed to the point where I could read somewhat freely on my own. Juna's library furnished many volumes that I could practice with. She chose a selection of them for me to read and for her to reread on our voyage, which would last many cycles. They had strange names, the names of wyndrine islands and their people. Once every 29 days, Juna took me down to the pool and invited me to her bed. Otherwise, we spent our nights in the library or dining room.

As we grew close to the date set for departure, which would immediately follow the unveiling of the dragonheads for the ship, I felt like I should tell Tung that I was departing as well. We had formed a kind of friendship and he had helped me as I struggled to read and with the sense of the greater world in the islands.

One day, as we left the docks at sunset, I told him I would depart with Juna.

"I know," he said. "I will as well."

I wish I could say I felt happy for this, but instead I felt an instant surge of mistrust.

"She met with my father and convinced him to let me go as a linguist...to communicate with whomever we meet. Elder Tung has known Juna since she arrived here. The pay is very good. When I return, I'll have enough to outfit my merchantman."

I nodded and turned away. Tung called after me, but I pretended not to hear. I felt both jealous and angry. I did not understand why she had not told me that my friend would be coming along. Did she have the same type of relationship with him that she had with me? No. Tung would not have been able to keep his mouth closed about it. Maybe though I had underestimated Tung, overlooked possible motives. Maybe his constant talk was a type of prestidigitation, an obscuring of what he really thought and knew. He had deliberately not told me he was shipping out for the wyndrine. He had deliberately not asked the nature of my relationship with Juna, never followed up on why I had needed him to translate an invitation from her. Then, I suspected he had known he was going on the voyage for a long time, perhaps even before I arrived.

This series of doubts, half-felt notions, and powerful emotions boiled in me and pulled my thoughts in a thousand directions.

I should have confronted Juna then, cleared the air, seen how it turned out. Instead, I brooded in my room. Lying on my sleeping pad that night, and while working the next day, I began to dream of taking actions of my own. Why should I be a kind of servant to an icerine princess? I had wanted to get to Fas Cerie, join the Astute Brotherhood, receive my own training. Now, I felt no different than Alklydr who tasted her food for her. These thoughts

became like a worm eating my mind, I felt powerless and as though I were missing a key piece of information that was important to know in order to protect myself.

My thoughts returned to the Disputatious Tower. To my mission, to what I wanted, to my life.

10.

Eating with Juna had meant my only expense was keeping Greywart. Since agreeing to ship out with her --- although I had never spoken actual agreement --- I had arranged for Greywart to be dry-docked and stored in a large warehouse near the refuse barges. I paid enough for ten cycles of storage to a person who was not using the space for anything else: I hoped that they would forget she was there and I could find her on my return. I brought with me my trident, my sword (returned, after I repaid Sorgus) and my fishing gear. I had asked Alklydr to fashion for me a belt with pouches for keeping my handnet, line, and hooks, as well the sheath for my sword, and he had done so. It was to him I approached again one night when he came for me at my lodging.

"Alklydr" I said, "I need a uniform of The Solemn, for myself. It must be identical. And Juna must not know."

He shook his head from side to side, betraying no emotion.

"Are you free," I said. "Could you leave her service if you wanted to?"

"I serve family Hrlbrdr by troth, as did my father and his father. I would not dishonor the dead."

"I love Juna," I said. "I am loyal to her, but I am free. There's something I need in the Tower. I do not know what. It may be to help Juna. It may be able to help myself. I cannot say unless I go.

I thought this sounded convincing.

"I will not do it. I would not keep the secret from her."

"Could you tell her only when I was on my way?"

"A lie by omission?"

He would not do it. And now he would tell her. Now I had to do it before word got back to her.

"Tell Juna I am unable to attend her this night," I said.

He nodded and disappeared. Alklydr's refusal forced me to use a plan I had reluctantly developed in my nights of surreptitious observation of The Solemn.

11.

I took no weapons. I dressed in the clothes that Juna had given to me. I waited until the stillest hour of the night and left my chamber as silently as I could. I thought that a member of the Astute Brotherhood would be able to accomplish this if he had wanted to. My mind was still partially fueled by jealousy and indignation. I lurked in a darkened corner of the Fire Guild Hall and watched the tower as I had done time and again over the last many weeks. During that time, I had observed the changing of the Solemn, which took place, not at regular intervals but at the times of the day and night when it would be most likely to proceed unseen. I had begun to distinguish between the men and decided that there were about forty of them rotating on shifts

approximately as long as half a day or half a night. I had learned the streets and alleyway, the forgotten spaces of the city.

The Solemn changed by patrolling the tower square in ever widening spirals. The one who was going off duty would drift off at the widest point while another came on at the exact same point. The two guards did not salute or exchange anything. They crossed paths in shadow. When they left the square they were required by city law to sheath their weapons. There were even false changes, where an apparent rotation would seem to take place and then the same individual would rotate back onto duty. The entire system was well designed to obscure the pattern, aided by the face wrappings of the guards themselves and the unadorned uniforms. But the astute spy could see the sword hands and bare feet of the solemn and their height and physical build, which, although close to uniform, was not completely homogeneous. The guardians of the tower were not paid well, and the honor of their position had diminished as the stature of the tower had declined. The quality of the guard had to have slipped, as would their watchfulness after so long without an attempt on the citadel of time.

After watching from behind the corner of the fire guild hall I backtracked up a street away from the square and toward a part of town with residences. I feared encountering the city guard, which always patrolled in groups of three. Every drunken sailor or insomniac apprentice was a threat to my plan. I wanted no one to be able to place me on the streets that night. I got into position in a formerly shuttered doorway off an alley and waited. For a time, nothing happened. I thought my understanding of the pattern of duty had been flawed, or that it was irregular enough to be unpredictable. But, as the guard I had spoken to had said, in a hundred thousand days no real threat had every appeared....the changing was likely to have become rote,

less-than-careful. Then, I heard the sound of bare feet moving, the subtle shift of air over a carefully walking body. I heard the unmistakable sound of a man yawning.

After he passed my alley, I ran up behind him. I unsheathed one of his swords from behind, and clubbed him in the back of the neck with the butt of the handle. He turned and looked at me, his eyes blinking and vague. I pulled him into the alley. He kicked lightly, as though his strength was gone, and he tried to reach back. I kicked in the shutters on the door and dragged him down some half-broken wood steps to the basement level of the building. There, a dirt floor. I undressed him, laid him on his back, and ran him through the heart with his blade. His body clenched around the dagger, the heart twitched against the deep point, and he died. He was a young man with a square jaw, exactly my height. With little time to spare, I put on his uniform over my clothes, sheathed his swords, re-secured the shutters over the abandoned doorway, and ran back to the square.

I slowed as I approached the corner, another member of The Solemn was already there. As he passed me, he stared straight ahead and sheathed his sword as I drew my own. I passed him. I was in Tower Square. I was a member of The Solemn. I held my sword in my hand. I affected the easy, seemingly random walking of The Solemn, but slowly made my way to the tower. It would be only a few hours before daylight and I had to complete a mission that I incompletely understood.

My goal was the small door used for taking provisions into the Tower and for removing refuse. It was left unlocked because the area around it was a cluster point for the Solemn. Time passed slowly under the Tower. All eyes were upon me, my head would be removed from behind before I heard anyone coming, I would drop to the ground before I broke my gait. My feet made too much noise on the surfaces of the stone. I could not keep my sword hand still and

down. It tended to raise up by instinct ready to block or parry. I would have been quickly defeated by a trained swordsman. Still, the other Solemn ignored me, and I tried to replicate their patterns of motion in which they milled around the open square without ever stopping or growing too close to each other. I came tantalizingly close, once, before another guard drifted in that direction and, to avoid getting too close to him, I had to drift away. The next time I made my way past it, circled back around, pushed the door open and ducked in.

Silence inside. I stood at the bottom of the tower. Curving up ever higher was a great circular staircase. Every few hundred steps a platform interrupted the spiral. Each platform featured an enclosed space, a window, and a ledge. The stairway continued above that. These housed the Saksa of the tower. The broad staircase, a feat of continuous masonry and design, was only one of the marvels inside.

The middle was made up of a single device made of brightly polished metals. It did not touch the ground where I stood and the top was too high to see, but the device turned slowly. Within that continuous slow rotation, the thing itself was made up of an incalculable number of moving parts, that, from the largest down to the smallest seemed to be moving at different speeds. There were turning wheels, meshing gears, rotating and spinning rods, chains going up and down, balls and weights rising and falling and swinging. While the central structure turned slowly, other parts spun or swung or bobbed. Some blurred and disappeared. The overall impression was a vast system of interrelated movements contributing up to a slowly turning effect. The device was as wide as the interior circumference of the platforms. Where they stuck out, parts of the device closely passed the stone, almost brushing it. Within this motion was a rhythm of sound. Ticking, clicking, brushing, whirring....all overlapping and adding up. I could have shouted and I doubt the people above would have heard me.

The Tower housed the device, that was all. Those who lived there occupied but a small portion of the space. Their work must have been on or with the device, perhaps as maintainers of it or perhaps as designers of new parts and aspects. Or maybe the device was relatively new and had replaced some earlier, more primitive device, which in turn replaced another. How they could work on something constantly in motion, I did not know. I ran up the steps, not sure why I was going up. If someone came in at the bottom, I would be trapped. But something drove me up....I was that far, I was young, I had an image in my mind of ... a small device, I realized, like the large one. I had come for something like it and I needed to get it out of there.

I made it to the first platform and looked into the dwelling. An old woman slept there, her huge, distorted stomach and breast splaying out over the bed. There was a desk covered with writing implements, straight edges, an instrument for drawing circles. The paper was covered with shapes and calculations in minute script. There was a larder, a latrine in the stone...nothing else.

I ran to the next platform, feeling my time was slowly running out. The device reminded me of it. My legs burned running up the stairs. There were sixteen platforms, one for each of the parts of a cycle and for the sixteen cycle repetition. I checked one after another. In one, I found a sleeping man and a space crowded with wooden boxes filled with screws and small parts. Another platform held the blacksmith tools, but the hammers were smaller, the smelter pristine and polished, the anvils in a range of sizes. But for the scale of the tools, it could have been the immaculate workspace of a jeweler or silversmith. Another was filled with books and instruments that seemed to be used for counting: bottles of sand, strings of beads, characters I had never seen before written on the wall. Another, multicolored glass bottles in all manner of shapes and sizes, filled with liquids. Next to the doorway, a barrel of grey fat with a pungent

musky odor. None of it made sense, none seemed directly related to the calculations of time. These were the Calculators of the Tower: they were workers on a device that measured time, there was nothing magical or spectacular about them. They were factota. Yet, I was driven upward. The image of the small device growing brighter and clearer in my mind.

I had passed fourteen platforms. The air warmed as I climbed and became hard to breathe. I could barely lift my legs over the edge of each step. Even my feet were burning and felt broken. Inside my head was a screaming, driving chorus of voices telling me to go in different directions. Escape, attack, kill....jump. The device continued its imperceptible turning. On the fifteenth platform, the bed held a man whose long legs and arms dangled onto the floor like a dead insect. His skin was striped and mossy. A huge nose emitted broken snores. The room was jammed with feathers, bones, and sacks of hair and fur. On a broad table, massive spools of a delicate fiber sat awaiting their next task.

The last chamber was circular and took up the entire top of the tower. The device was anchored inside of it, passing through a narrow circular opening in the floor. The stairway brought me to a opening near the center of the space. Around the outside, curved walls formed rooms, but each of the rooms had an opening looking toward the center. With my feet, I followed their inward gaze. The device came up through the floor as a perfectly round metal cylinder. It struck me suddenly and completely, with the awe of perfect logic and the clarity of something foreordained, that I found myself once again inside a circular chamber unsure of what to do next or how to escape. What this meant, or how it helped me, how the events were connected when they seemed so impossibly distant and different eluded me and was quickly pressed out of my mind by the need to find whatever I was there to find and make my way back down and out (without a plan to elude the guards while crossing the massive square).

I approached the place where the device came up through the floor. At the top, the metal was bonded to the stone in a way that seemed almost impossible to understand even while looking at it. The stone turned in a fitting that itself was stone, but there was no clear joints or hinges holding it in place, nor was there audible sound or apparent rubbing at the meeting of the materials. The impression was of a device on a massive scale delicately and precisely fabricated, perhaps over thousands and thousands of cycles. The turning had a mesmerizing quality, slow and silent, but burdened with a massive weight. I pulled myself away from looking at it.

I went from window to window looking in the rooms: one was an eating hall and next to that a galley. Another held a room of twelve ornate chairs in a circle around a round table. Another was lined with floor-to-ceiling black slate on which, in white, was written numbers and symbols and characters I had never seen before. Portions had been erased and rewritten in different hands. Another room held dozens of instruments of various kinds on square shelves. I entered that room.

I searched the shelves, looking for something I thought I would recognize, that would mean something. My eyes alighted on a small box on one of the highest shelves. I had to climb up to it and reach my hand back to take it off the shelf. I opened it. On a bed of dried seaweed, sat a rounded, pear-shaped object. The end of the object was carved in a pattern of crenellations, almost like the top of the tower. The device fit neatly in the palm of my hand the object but was remarkably heavy. The dense material felt like a cross between metal and stone. As I had been mesmerized by the turning edge of the top of the device, I was now overtaken by the material.

"We wondered if anyone would ever come for it," said a voice suddenly behind me. "A member of The Solemn?...I think not."

The man's voice resonated at a low level, nearly inaudible by so full of vibrations that I could feel it hit my chest. He was very large and his skin was so dark black as to appear blue. His eyeballs were blood red and his pupils were a pale blue. He was wearing a long orange sleeping gown. I guessed, given his residence in the sixteenth chamber that he was head of the Disputatious Tower.

I drew my sword again. He could not see my face and if I could simply get past him I could make an attempt to escape.

"In the Annals of the Tower," he said "that object holds a unique place. We don't know what it is, but the metallurgists studied it until they had the basis for a new material, one that welds metal and stone without becoming brittle and is almost without the drag of friction when two pieces are rubbed together. You must know this if you are here. But its origin is...suspect. Perhaps it has been listening in on our debates for all these years. Are you truly from Unra Felar Trunta? Are you a descendant of Tan Gular? Or is that all simply a long story. I must know for I am the holder of the history, the embodiment of all disputes."

He had a peaceful mien, and he kept his hands still when he spoke. Years later I heard mention of a blood-eyed race that made up the Ghulom Dynasty that ruled a portion of the fyrine. I could see in his blood eyes that he wanted the answer, he had exhausted all other lines of inquiry and looked to me, an interloper, to bring the truth to him. But I had no truth. I did not even know why I was there.

"For years our kind disputed the wisdom of making use of power that we did not understand, whether material or otherwise. The Council of the Fifth Miscalculation, which concerned itself with an error that was made many cycles ago, disputed the wisdom of this material. But, since we were able to create the material ourselves, without directly drawing on

the object, and since no threat seemed posed by it, after about 500 cycles, we made use of the discovery. The absence of friction is the key to the perpetual accuracy of the device. Once in motion, the main body will turn for all time. Thus, we have solved the problem that gave rise to our Tower. We have become caretakers, merely, but that is our fate. So please...tell me the origin of our demise."

While he spoke, perfectly relaxed and unsurprised by my presence, I stood like a lion ready to leap upon its prey. Finally, he moved toward me with his hands palm up in a pacifying gesture, and I ran past him, out of the room, and down the stairs.

I took three or four at a time going down, feeling weightless and free. I bounced off the interior wall and kept my eyes focused on the platforms to see if there was anyone to stop me. I heard one or two voices calling out in protest, but no voice sounded angry or convinced to stopping me, merely confused or uncertain. The problem waited outside. When I landed on the bottom floor I listened at the door I had come in. Nothing. I cracked it open. A box of vegetables had been delivered outside the door. I cracked it a little more. Across the broad space of the square, the black figures of The Solemn moved in pale yellow dawn light. A small amount of fog was drifting in from the harbor. Voices above, rousing each other. Outside, all was silent.

I slipped out and moved back into the pattern of movement. I had to hold my breath to keep from panting and my uniform was wet with sweat. I held the smooth object in one hand and my drawn sword in the other. I tried to force my way to the outer edges of the square, but I kept getting overlapped by another, which kept me spiraling back inward.

The front door slammed open, breaking the early morning silence.

A deep voice boomed: "There is an impostor amongst you, you Solemn Men. He has been inside the tower."

Heads turned. Men snapped out of their dullness of routine and stood looking around. I mimicked them. Then, I called out, pointing at the nearest man to me. "There he is..." I pointed my sword. The man looked at me with eyes filled with sudden terror. A group surrounded him, but then surrounded me as well. I called out.

"Wait. Over there. One of us just disappeared off the edge of the square." I pointed in the direction of the Wind Guild. Another group started running in that direction and I took off behind them. By the time we got to the edge of the square, members of the Solemn were swarming down the streets and alleys. I sprinted ahead, ducked down an alley, came back around the direction I had come and, still running, worked my way back around to the harbor side of the island. I found a dark corner and tried to slow my breathing. My legs burned from the efforts of the day and my hands fumbled with my clothes. I peeled off layers and bands of the uniform and stuffed it under a basket of rotten fruit and animal bones. Although I wanted to keep them, I couldn't risk being seen with the swords. I threw them up on the thatched roof of a nearby hovel so that the blade sunk into the rotten straw. My clothes were completely soaked with sweat and my legs could barely hold me up. I had a choice to make. I was closer to Juna's dwelling than to my own. I'd be better off changing, going to the harbor, and beginning work like any other day. All they had seen of me was my eyes, my hands, and my feet. The Solemn would hardly have had time to see even that. But they might soon know about the object. It was big and heavy enough to be difficult to conceal. I held it in my hand and kept my hand cupped to the side of my thigh as I walked, not the most natural posture, but the only way to conceal the object.

I turned the next corner onto a street of fishmongers already up and doing business. Servants haggled over prices and weight. Fish circled, half stunned, in bulbous, blown-glass tanks. As I passed one stall, a green octopus stared at me for a moment, twitched one of its legs, and turned a blood red. I pushed through milling shoppers, trying to look like one of them by examining the offerings.

"You!" a voice called out.

I turned to run.

"Your master needs a droyopteroy for his table!" the fishmonger said to me and continued his patter to the others.

But the roar started by the infiltration of the tower had soon begun to spread through the street, Heads came together and whispered. "All dead, the Solemn fleeing...one of their own."

At the end of the street a group of three city guardsmen appeared, scanning the crowd. I turned off before I reached them.

The alley was lined with warehouses and salting shops. Peppery smoke tangled with the smells of fish. I moved as quickly as I could without seeming hurried.

The street let out into a short street of oil and jar vendors and it was comparatively quiet, but I had gone in the wrong direction and needed to backtrack around again. Shouts volleyed from parts of the city, "Stay in your homes" "Over here men." Each one landed on my head like a new panic. But they seemed to be coming more from the harborside of the city...they were trying to make sure I did not slip out on a fishing boat or stowaway on a merchant ship.

That fact pushed me toward Juna's. I wanted to go there anyway, just not right that second. I needed answers from her, although in the panic of flight I was starting to realize them.

I wanted to force her to say them. I wanted to force her to say them as I held her throat between my two squeezing hands.

I took a circuitous route to get there, a route I had learned through practicing not being noticed going there. When I finally hit the small alley door, Alklydr was standing.

He held the door open without speaking and closed it behind me.

"Where is she," I said.

"In the library..." and then, perhaps for the first time in all the times I had ever encountered him, his cool, impassive countenance flickered hotly and his eyes dropped to the hand that held the object and flicked up.

"Follow me," he said.

As many times as I had gone from the alley door to the library, I had found it impossible to memorize the route because he took a different set of hallways every time. I never knew where they all went as my experiences there were limited to the few rooms. The space must have been massive, but the pathways were convoluted as a mechanism of defense.

I entered the library, I found Juna standing in the middle of the room dressed in a highly elaborate ceremonial gown. It was like her regular guild attire but the sleeves were longer, flowing down onto the floor. A flowing train spread out behind her. Throughout the gown were sewn gems of color I had never seen before and would not see again for many years. Her white hair was tied up in a top knot and her face had been made up with white and silver powder to surround her eyes and lead seamlessly into her hair.

"Well done," she said, to me.

"So this is for you," I said, holding the object up. It was no longer a question.

From behind her, a voice spoke up out of the shadows. "Well done," it said. "A knife's edge."

The owner of the voice slipped out of the darkness, a female creature, the height of my hips and as thin as a leg. She was wearing a gown almost identical to Juna's only smaller in all of its appointments and decorated here and there with jade beads carved in the shape of raptors.

Juna replied, with a hint of arrogance, "Not as close as all that. I found the best way to get him to act on my behalf was to make him think he was acting on his own...otherwise the survival instinct would be diminished, or disappear."

"The craft was sound," the woman said. "But the city is in an uproar. The aftereffects may be severe."

"I have a solution for that," Juna said. The two were clearly in close competition with each other, the master not wanting to yield any ground to the apprentice.

Before I could turn and run, Alklydr was behind me, binding my arms. The object dropped from my hands, cracking the stone of the floor and leaving a white chip in the surface. I did not care. Ever since I had entered the library, a wave of clarity had rolled through my mind and I saw everything around me with new perspective.

I tried to pull loose but Alklydr held my upper arms back in such a way that I could not move my shoulders or torso. His grip felt as unbreakable as iron. Both my hands were losing feeling. Juna came near me. A waft of perfume came with her, a haze of beautiful scents so powerful that even under the circumstances my heart pumped warmth and desire for her into my veins along with the black coursing poison. She was beautiful too, then, as she came before me, lit with the glow of power and success, which danced like bright powder over her skin. And I could not know if that was my own thoughts or those that were planted by her.

"I was your last examination," I said, more a statement than a question.

"Yes," she said, "This is my master," she gestured toward the tiny being. "She is a Krellite from Trugokawa...the wyndrine. My exam was to show the weakness of the Tower and The Solemn. Retrieving the object is simply an extra...I know not if it will prove useful on Unra Fela Trunta, or if it indeed came from there."

She bent down to pick it up.

The masters of mind, can be...impractical.

As she bent, I kicked her in the face and knocked her back. Alklydr reached a single hand out to help her, years of servitude had conditioned him too well. As he freed my one arm I slid his tasting fork from its sleeve and drove it into his face. The long tines pierced his cheek and bit into his gums. He dropped my other arm. I stomped on Juna's neck as I ran past her and grabbed the minute Krellite. She weighed nothing, her arms swung rapidly against me, as powerful as butterfly wings, her screams were ear-piercingly high, almost too high to hear. I put the tines to her throat and ran out of the room, holding her with my one arm.

I wracked my brain to remember the turns we had taken, the patterns that I had memorized, but I kept meeting stairways going up. The master of mind was spewing incantations and I could feel them trying to overtake my thoughts. I slammed into some walls, experienced flashes of dizziness and despair. For a moment, I felt as though all of life was pointless, that giving up was inevitable, but I shook off the sensation. Her powers over me were weaker than Juna's and I fended them off. Emotions, false memories, and motivations antithetical to survival and escape swirled in my consciousness and I forced myself to focus on the next step, the next turn, on balance, speed, flight. By some luck I found myself in the entrance hall, staring at the back of the front doors.

Luck? After this adventure I came to doubt luck. On Keylocklundria all was a plan of some entity, each plan nested inside the ideas of another, more powerful force.

When I got outside, there were about twenty sets of guardsman, swords drawn. I did not know what would happen next, but I still had the screaming, cursing, mindcrafting master in my arm with fork tines pressed to her neck. She was bleeding there as the tines had scratched and pricked her as I ran.

A set of three guardsmen came for me. Others were closing in from behind. I drove the fork through her skin, which made little resistance. I twisted the handle as much as I could, before I blacked out after being clubbed repeatedly over the head.

Only months later, when I had all the time in the world to reflect, would I realize that, in killing the master, I had in fact fulfilled Juna's greatest ambitions: eliminating her competition as well as the only person besides Alklydr who knew what she had done. But by then I had new problems to think about.

12.

I awoke. My head was between my knees. My back was pressed into the ceiling, my heels were jammed into my bottom, my arms were folded under my knees. A small door abutted my knees. Every few hundred hours---which felt like eternities, for I could neither sleep nor find physical comfort---the door opened and a bowl of hot soup was held outside the door. When I reached for the soup, it was sloshed into my face. Luckily---luckily---it was lukewarm, although had they poured boiling soup upon me I could not have been in much more physical pain. My hands were stuffed back in, and the door slammed again. I remained alive by licking the soup from my knees and thighs, and laboriously wiping it from the stone with my fingers and then

licking them. Gradually, my body shriveled from starvation and I had more room to move in the space.

Much time passed, then I was pulled out, thrown into a deep pool of salt water, and, being too weak to swim, jerked out of the pool right before I drowned. Half-seen hands threw a rough woven shawl over my naked body and a black sack over my head. I was pushed and dragged and knocked about until I was seated in Guild of Law court. Against the cool black marble, my burning thighs cooled.

It seems natural now to have pieced together over the years what had happened to me. I have had plenty of nights lying on decks, earning my way, and I have told embellished versions of the story many times. In those versions I am a young dupe overwhelmed by Juna's body and overtaxed by her mind, thus prey to forces I did not comprehend. But the truth is I grew so cool sitting in the court room, facing the judges, so cool and starved, and bent, that I did not recognize myself nor understand much of what had happened to me at that point. It was as though my mind had been separated from my body and floated away. It seems likely now that the mindcrafting done to me by Juna and the Krellite had left residual effects, a trauma that would take months to repair.

The judges faced each other at a tricornered table in the middle of the room. Lists of the duties and expectations of the citizens of Keylocklundria were graven in the walls, gold inset in pale stone. What I could read seemed convoluted: my vision was bleary and my head dizzy. I remember only

ALL TURN OUR FACES TO THE SUN

and

THE WIND OF KNOWLEDGE BLOWS THROUGH THE ANCIENT CITY.

It seemed as though I were seeing everything through a thin fall of water. I had trouble following the proceedings at the triangular desk. I got a sense that they were debating whether or not to kill me. Sometimes other people, factotums of some sort, entered and whispered to the judges or obsequiously handed them scrolls. The debate seemed overly formal, a rehearsed rhetoric leading to a preordained result. Questions and answers proceeded in rote fashion, but never seemed to address me or what had happened to me.

“Has the sixth quorum been achieved by munerapting confligrine?”

“The sixth quorum was achieved by the munerapting confligrine on the day ordained for the achievement.”

“Was the achievement deemed complete or incomplete?”

“The achievement was deemed complete”

“Was the munerapting confligrine satisfied with the reception of the achievement?”

“The munerapting confligrine was satisfied by the reception of the achievement.”

Each night I was stuffed back into my cell; each morning thrown into the water, shawled and hooded. Hours passed with the judges making extended speeches, reading testimony from great scrolls. At times, I luxuriated in the simple pleasure of not being folded up into the cell. I moved my fingers, I stretched my back. I closed my eyes and fell asleep. I do not know how much time passed during these proceedings. It seemed as though I was jerked out of the cell hundreds of times, but it may only have been a few. My memory of this time is weak, spent dreaming of food and freedom, fantasizing about vengeance.

One morning, I was pulled out of the cell, hooded and cloaked, but not washed and was dragged through a series of streets. At a certain point I either lost consciousness or was knocked

unconscious. When I woke I was on my back in an inch of putrid water, with another person lying on top of me. The water smelled like a corpse. The person smelled like a dead animal, but I could feel it breathing. I shoved him off and tried to roll to the side. There was another body next to me. I sat up and immediately slammed my head against a wood beam. I had to lay back again in the water. My skin was soft and slimy with the dampness when I finally sat up again, feeling for the beam with my hands. I pulled off the soaking hood.

I was in the shallow hold of a narrow hulled boat. The craft floated but was not underway. As it rocked, the water lapped hollowly against the hull. My legs were shackled with two bands of iron and a metal bar between them. The bar was thick and heavy, heavy enough to sink a man who tried to swim for it. My fellow denizens of the hold moaned or squirmed or called out. They all seemed to be in a stupor either out of weakness or injury. The hold was so low and full of bodies, I could not sit up or move and was forced to lay back in the water. Too long in that hold and disease would solve the questions that the Keylocklundrian judges took months to argue.

It was terrible to have come awake in that hold. I wished for the dim consciousness I had formerly been experiencing and that my fellow prisoners---for that is what they must be--- wallowed in it. I was suddenly and terrifyingly awakened in the hold, unable to move or breath. I was starving and thirsty, my tongue and throat so thick that I could not swallow. Strange flies swarmed in there as well: they had thick, bulbous bodies and giant eyes sheathed by hexagonal meshes, and four translucent wings. Their buzzing filled the space. Enough light fell through the board of the deck above to let me see them land on my face and hands and try to sink their mouths into my wrinkled, water-softened skin. I moved enough to scare them toward other victims, where I watched them bite away patches of skin, turn around and lay eggs in the opened

flesh. Although the next years of my life were filled with terrible images, for some reason watching those flies lay eggs in my fellow prisoners flickers among the worst.

Soon, the deck above was filled with the shuffling of feet and orders shouted by a single voice. Based on the hold, the craft was not large, probably something propelled by twenty rowers or fewer. Soon the beat of the drums and the sound of water moved across the hull began. The beat steadied, the creak of oars under load sung out rhythmically. Water sloshed over my face.

Soon, the flat harbor became the sea's long rise and fall. If we encountered a storm, I knew, the prisoners in the hold would be thrown upon each other and perhaps drowned by the filling of the hold. I listened and felt for changes in the waves, for the pull of currents, for the orders above.

The orders were given by a man with a high-pitched voice, a young officer no doubt, given the job of transporting prisoners. There was the beater, who kept the rhythm of the rowers. I must have been near the stern of the vessel because it seemed as though the beating of the drum was directly above my head. Soon it became the beating of my head in an interminable rhythm. The beating lasted for a day or more and then I could hear the sounds of a mast being set and the sound of air hitting the sail, feel the urgent pull of the wind against the sail. We must have turned in front of a following wind. The rowers rested and ate, the beating stopped. My fellow prisoners moaned.

Occasionally, one of them would speak.

"Where are we?"

"In the water, crund."

"Where?"

"Z'k, Xin's Maw.

I knew that Z'k was sailor's slang, of unknown origin, for the place where evil spirits dwell and those who are killed by gods are sent. The other Xin's Maw, was a name I had seen written somewhere...and then I remembered. Juna's map. Xin's Heads was the name of two outlier islands set close together in the outermost sea, far from the mydrine in the direction of the eyrthrine.

The two speakers were apparently confederates. As the days went on, we drifted into and out of consciousness, they argued back and forth about where we were headed. The others were bodies sloshing in the hold. Some it would turn out, were already dead. The fly's eggs would eventually give squirming life under the skin of these corpses.

An attempt was made to keep us alive. Ever day or so, the deck above my face would open with a trap door. I would be blinded by bright sunlight, a piece of thick fruit would be shoved into my mouth and I would greedily chew it. The fruit was the only liquid we were provided with, but it was dense and full of sustaining energies, at least enough to keep us alive. I did not want more than enough food to stay alive for the feces it generated only added to the swill in which I lay. The trap would close. Other trap doors would open and other prisoners would be fed. The dead were sometimes removed. The sound of their bodies disappearing into the sea lasted but an instant. After not too many weeks, I had room to move about the hold space. I began to practice a technique to help me stay alive. I would squat in a hunched-over fashion for a time, to let the skin of my back dry and firm up. Then I would lie back in the water and brace my feet and legs against the beam to allow them to dry and firm up. All the while I swatted the flies away. Once, when I fell into a stupor that was like sleep only not restful, a fly bit the back of my hand. I woke to find it laying its eggs in the opened flesh. I flapped it away. I

took my own soggy skin between my loosening teeth and bit down, carving away my flesh, spitting out eggs and my skin with it.

Once I gained enough space to rotate my exposure to the water in the hold, I began to think about where I was and what I was going to do. Convicted of murder, I had been condemned to a prison island, an outlier. If I could manage to avoid disease and stay alive, I would arrive there in a drastically weakened state. I had no muscles on my body. To clamp my hands into a fist was painful: all my joints worked with difficulty. My eyes burned, my ears were filled with a constant, unnatural hum, and my stomach would cramp without warning. When I arrived at the prison I would be vulnerable...to disease, and to attack by prisoners and guards. I decided to try and engage the other two prisoners that I had heard talking in the hopes of banding together with them, the only others, besides me, who had remained alive thus far.

Eventually, I got their attention. I said, "Have you been to Xin's Maw before?"

One of them said yes.

"If you were there, how did you get off?"

"Not even a prisoner yet and he wants to escape... he's a ripe one. They can hear you through the deck. Watch out you don't become a member of the claimed dead on route. "

It was a good point. As a prisoner, I would have to watch my words and actions, I would have to hide as much as I could and trust no one.

"Where are you from?" I said.

"An island in the sea," said the more vocal one.

"I fell from the sky," said the other.

"I don't remember," said the first one.

"Too many things to remember," said the other.

"We're professional prisoners, like," said the first. "Born to it."

I was unsure if this was the truth, if even this could be the truth.

"Do you have names?"

"Probably said the first, but we forgot that too."

"They call him Nivin," said the second.

"He's Typhon," said first. "You?"

The sound of my own name in my mother's voice ran through me. How distant it seemed, profane to even think of it. In the diary I had stolen while learning to read, the wife's maid had a lover, a sailor named Barossa. I took it now as being as good as any other. It felt as though the prisoner Barossa would not live for very long anyway.

Soon after this exchange, a storm hit. I was pitched back against a bulkhead and forward into Nivin and Typhon. I dug my fingers under the beam above my head to hold still. Above, the curses of the rowers sang out as thunderclaps ripped through the world. The wood of the hull creaked madly with the rise and fall of the waves. The water turned us. We got sideways to a wave and nearly capsized. I threw my weight against the force of the fall to prevent my drowning.

At some point during the storm, Nivin said, "We're close now."

The storm abated. The seas remained heavy. The temperature dropped. The drum beat rung through the wood and wind and the high pitched voice shouted orders.

After a few days of this, during which we were not fed, I came very near to losing consciousness from thirst. I keep myself alive by drinking rainwater seeping through the deck. It was flavored with the sweat of the rowers and the tang of seawater. Nevertheless it was rejuvenating.

Then came a hard bang against the hull and another on the other side. The voice above shouted "hard larboard, easy now, hard all." Bang...the powerful hits slammed against my skull. The wood splintered inwardly, weakening. Shortly, we ran aground on a beach of what sounded like stones.

The trap door was flung open and two or three set of hands pulled me out and flung me overboard. I landed in a heap on the beach. Nivin and Typhon landed nearby. Even though it was dark, the brightness of the stars pierced my eyes like arrows shooting down from the sky. The constellation Xin hung directly above us, its attacking mouth directly over me as though it were about to bite down. I began shivering uncontrollably the cold air bit my damp skin and muscle-less body. The wind blew off the beach and toward the water. The rowers bent their backs to the task and pulled away from the shore. Jagged black rocks filled the water out from the beach.

Nivin and Typhon started yelling at the boat. I thought at first they were begging not to be left, but then it became clear they were spewing curses. I did not know the language they were using. The gestures indicated strangulation and rape, no doubt directed at mothers, wives, and sisters. This was my first clear image of them, writhing their hips and contorting their faces and shouting and laughing. Nivin was emaciated, as was I. He was a large framed man with no hair on his head or face. Typhon looked surprisingly well compared to me and Nivin. He wore a well made suit of clothes of a style that seemed very old to me, but certainly the style of a city dweller from a prosperous island. It was soaked through, and torn and faded by the journey, but not as torn and faded as it seemed like it should have been. Red hair clumping into thick strands clung to his face and neck. As he shouted, Typhon's eyes glowed in the darkness. I watched them swear and watched the boat row through the treacherous waters. After breaking an oar, the

boat made it beyond the rocks. I happen to look down at the beach. It was made up of some fist-sized stones, broken shells. Added to that were bleached bones of all descriptions, human and other. A skull with a long pointy head was split from eye hole to nose hole. There were fingers, and necks, and legs of all description, and other, stranger, unrecognizable bones.

Nivin and Typhon came up to me and said, pointing to the beach.

"Thems all swam for it," Nivin said. "Let's get back from the water. The monsters can reach you from there."

We turned from the beach. In the distance, a mountain rose against the night sky, in the center of the island. The base of the mountain was near us, and the peak rose gradually from there. Jagged and irregular, the peak glowed in the night, casting a flickering red image onto the sky and emitting a yellow-gray smoke. Pockets and bulbs of lava descended downward, orange and curling. Where the lava entered the ocean, a bank of steam hung.

I followed Typhon and Nivin away from the water. They moved nimbly over the shifting rocks of the landscape. I fell, landing heavily on my forearm. I had not walked freely for a long time and my limbs struggled to find balance. The rocks and shells cut at the softened skin of my soles. The wind tried to buffet me backwards. The two forms pulled away from me in the darkness. I fought to catch back up. It seemed important to my survival to be with them, since they clearly had knowledge of the island, though they did not seem to be trustworthy.

I was not, at that point, thinking about anything besides immediate survival, moment by moment, the prison and the prison boat had inflicted on my mind this change. Who was I and what did I want? Where did I come from? I had forgotten. What had I done to get there? As I look back on my life, I realize that there are times when I could think and times when I could not. Physical deprivation extinguishes the constant thought that usually crowd the mind, eliminating all but the

necessity: eat, drink, escape a threat, kill an enemy. When I could think, I could see the connected actions and piece them together into a reasonable story, but when I had to act I simply moved forward, like a thoughtless beast clawing at the darkness.

I stepped, groping my toes for solid footing, following the only ones I knew or could see, out of necessity rather than judgment, moving forward, and, my only goal to not get left behind on that beach of bones.

13.

I caught up to them in the darkness. They were outside a shack made of piled stones mortared with ashy mud. Through holes in the walls, a tepid firelight glowed, issuing beams of smoky light in to the darkness. The roof looked as if it was made out of crossbow quarrels fashioned together and strung over with stitched together skins. In places, square points poked through the skins, which looked as though they were gradually rotting. Nivin ducked inside. I heard him shouting and laughing. He came back out and gestured us to the inside. A smoking fire burned in the center of the space. I went to it. As I did, I saw the reptilian face of a creature staring at me with oblong eyes. The scales on his arms and legs were flaking and peeling. Beneath some of the missing scales was a soft pink skin crusty with dried blood. Next to him was a more human-like being who was feeding himself with his feet because he had no arms or shoulders. A third beast was a cross between a human and a bear.

Typhon said, "Barossa."

Then he pointed to the three: the scaly one's name was nearly unpronounceable: Fl'p-lent, spoken very quickly, a sound made by spitting. He was from the fyrine. The one with no arms

was called Juggle in Nurian, a nickname. The bear-man was called Cron and he hailed from the eyrthrine. He was the leader of these three.

Cron said, "He's a mortal?"

"We haven't asked him," Nivin responded, casually.

Cron sniffed the air with a huge black nose set between two tiny dark eyes. "If I tore his head off, he would die."

"If you tore my head off, I would die," said Typhon calmly.

"Shall I try?" said Cron.

"I concede the point," said Typhon. "The one who created me might seek vengeance."

"If a god created you, you wouldn't be here, " Cron said.

"And who created you, Cron?"

The bear man made a humphing noise and looked at me. "Mortal and immortal alike must eat," he said and gestured to the pot over the fire. His furry finger ended in a long black claw.

I became temporarily blind to the world around me and grabbed a roughly carved wooden spoon from the pot and filled my mouth with a bite. I handed it to Typhon then and he spooned himself some and handed it to Nivin. It was a salty paste with chunks of gristle and strings of hair and bristles. After we had eaten several helpings, I sat back and let pleasure spread through me. I almost lost consciousness and I almost heaved it all back up, but the basic need for the food kept it down.

Juggle said something to Cron in a language I could not place, and Cron said, pointing to the pot, "The last mortal sent to the Maw. I didn't kill him, The Saksa did. Don't worry," he said to me, "he was not a human."

I looked into the pot. In my mouth, a still elusive hair was stuck to my tongue. Like a frog head coming out of the water, a bubble of heat pressed up and burst. Instinctive disgust rolled over me, but settled. The paste resembled nothing like me. I was starving and ate some more.

"Is there water?" I said.

"Cron handed me a shell smaller than my palm that he had dipped in a bucket. The bucket was fed by a channel formed in the skins of the roof to collect rainwater.

Cron allowed me two shellfulls. When I had finished the second, he asked again, "Are you mortal, man?"

"I think so," I said. It was a strange question. "If you tore my head off I would die."

Cron hurumphed at that. Nivin and Juggle laughed.

"He knows nothing of the world," said Typhon.

"How did you get sent here?" said Cron.

"Law Guild at Keylocklundria. I killed a member of The Solemn, the tower guard, and a Master of the Guild of Mind."

Juggle started laughing uncontrollably. "They sent you here for killing two men?"

"One was more of a woman. I don't know where she was from," I said. "I used a fork. In front of a hundred guardsmen."

Nivin found this part funny. "Sounds like a welstlander...you didn't kill one of those poor beings did you? Their very frail."

I did not inform them of the details...held back the fact that I was manipulated into perpetrating these killings, that I was vulnerable to manipulation of that kind...or had been.

"It seemed necessary at the time," I said, trying to sound a little dangerous.

"Perhaps they believed he was like us," said Fl'p-lent. His voice was barely more than a whisper, but he had a formal manner and launched into a seemingly rehearsed story.

"I am the son of a girl from Gohojokoloyo. Her name, they tell me, was Viant. The islanders of Gohojokoloyo are devoted to the god Zio, the god of the mountain. When he grows angry and erupts, they hold a series of ceremonies purifying their bodies and thanking him for not destroying their villages. Part of the ceremony is the snake killing. The villages from across the islands band together to beat the jungle with sticks until they corral all the snakes into the lava fields, where they are burned alive on the surface of the molten rock. In another ceremony they choose a maiden to go to the temple at the base of the mountain. There, Zio comes to her in the form of a priest and takes her maidenhead. If she conceives, the village she comes from is favored for many years. If it is a son, he will become a ju-lan, a village king. My mother was the virgin chosen, but Zio's brother, Oinza, the snake came to my mother in human form and took her. He was angry that they had killed all his sons again. When the priest arrived, and saw what had happened, he sent my mother back to the village in disgrace. When she gave birth to me, they stoned her to death and cast me into the volcano. When I climbed out, they fled the village and it became a taboo to speak of me. Out of fear, the villages moved to nearby islands. I grew up alone. I tried to live peaceably, but men would challenge themselves to come and kill me. They would paddle up on their canoes and attack me as I slept. I would kill them instead. For a time, they delivered tribute to the beaches: food and gourds of coconut wine. One day though, Gohojokoloyo was surrounded by thousands of canoes. A king had unified ten nearby islands with the promise that he would defeat me and bring prosperity to all. I killed many of them, but was overrun. I endured a thousand cuts with their bladed clubs. When the wounds

healed as quickly as they were inflicted, I was tied with rope, put in a net, and held down with stones. Then I was delivered here."

"A pleasant story," Cron said, "the gods of fyr are weak. Why did your father not help you? I am the son of Hunj, terrorbear. My mother was a forest nymph, Galadny. I harried the coasts of the eyrthrine islands until the Astute Brotherhood became involved, mercenaries paid for by wood merchants. They came silently from the trees; they shot me with a hundred poisoned arrows, threw a net over me, brought me here. I am sure they were well paid. We know nothing about Juggler."

Juggler laughed hysterically again. At the name of the Astute Brotherhood, my ears grew sharper. To Cron they were the enemy.

Nivin said, "...and Typhon...is Typhon and I am Nivin. Nivin serves Typhon and Typhon serves himself."

"My origins are a mystery I intend to protect," said Typhon. "My offenses are myriad. Nivin is like you. A common outlaw."

I wanted to learn more about them and about the island, but the food and water and warmth were overtaking me. Soon, I fell asleep.

When I woke, daylight was piercing the stitches in the skin of the roof, falling through the smoky air of the hovel. I was alone. I went outside. The air was brighter than I was used to, but roiling, dark clouds filled the sky. They covered the top of the mountain. But I could see, finally, where I was.

The sea dashed on the jagged shore rocks and churned through the beach of bones. Behind the hovel was a barren waste of broken lava rocks, bones, and other debris thrown up by the waves. The wasteland continued around the side of the island to the base of the volcanoes,

where the hardening lava was filling in the water. To the other side, there were a few dying trees, small dwellings, and more dark jagged rock. The wasteland curved around to the base of the volcano on the other side. Spread throughout this open burned-out space, beings worked at tasks, too far away for me to see exactly what they were doing. They were lifting and heaving stones, using hammers, throwing things.

At the place where the wasteland met the base of the volcano, a massive white tower rose. Smooth and marble, its height was lower than the peak of the volcano, but close to it. The brown and yellow smoke drifted stolidly off the top of the cone before joining the cloud cover above. The tower had no features throughout its length, until just below the crenelated top there was a single continuous opening in all directions. It was impossible to see into the opening because of its thin width, but I got the sense then that someone or something was watching me. I stared at the tower and it seemed to stare back at me with its all-seeing opening. I started to hear a faint whistling in the air, as an arrow flying through the sky. Then I caught a glint of it coming directly for my right eye and, at the last moment, fell to the ground. Behind me, a quarrel was sunk half its length into the porous lavastone.

I pulled the bolt out. It had a dull metallic point fashioned to the wood shaft. A piece of paper had been tied to the bolt. On the paper was a picture of a crudely drawn figure with a boulder on his back. The picture was fashioned of dried blood. I interpreted this to refer to work. I moved across the wasteland to the area where the other prisoners were moving. I carried the bolt with me in case it could be useful.

I saw a broad back covered in flakey greenish scales bend down and wrap its jointless arms around a part of a tree trunk, heft it above his head, and then, with a whispered outlet of breath, heave it down.

I tried to say Fl'p-lent, but it fumbled out my lips. He continued with his hefting and heaving.

"Where do I get a log?" I called to him. "What should I be doing? I just got shot at from the tower."

"Try banging rocks together until they break. Keep your ears open."

"What am I trying to do?"

"Work...," said Fl'p-lent. "There is nothing here that has a point, nothing here that has an end. The rock regenerates at night. The wasteland is eternal."

I found a palm-sized stone on the ground and began hitting a nearby boulder with it. Again the whistling, the last-second avoidance of a bolt. On the piece of paper, a crudely drawn image of two workers with a big space between them. I moved away from Fl'p-lent.

Hitting a boulder with a stone felt good. It warmed me, as I had insufficient clothing for the cool smoky air that moved between the boulders. It felt good to move my limbs after being so long confined. I caused little damage, the black volcanic rock was porous but tough. A single strike collapsed it inward but did not sheer off sections or cause cracks. When I thought about what I was doing I thought mostly of the unseen eyes watching me from the tower. Whoever they belonged to had a powerful weapon with remarkable accuracy. They were enforcing arbitrary work of destruction on a set of prisoners who mostly could not die. The destruction itself regenerated. I didn't know the others, but I could see them from afar committing feats of outstanding strength in the service of meaningless destruction: the breaking of rocks into smaller rocks and, along the forest line, the tearing out of trees by hand. I saw a being planting two sets of feet and wrapping a limb with four arms and wrenching repeatedly backward, its entire body flexing, but with little result. In the distance between myself and the tower, another being,

massive and boulder-like himself, with gray tough skin of a fyrene monster, pounded the ground with his fists, roaring uncontrollably at times.

Rain began to fall, large drops, straight down. The ground shook and shootsprays of red lava fountained into the sky. The wind increased and sheets of rain curled around us. The splats of the water against the open field of rock was deafening. When I felt cold or battered by the wind, I threw my thoughts back to the prison box where I had resided for I know not how long. To be out in the wind and the rain was better than that. I did not curse my fate or fear the future. I was young, I thought that I would find a way to escape. I was imprisoned with minor gods and demons, on an island far from any others, overseen by an unknown force with raptor vision and magical accuracy, who had a weapon trained on me at every moment, surrounded by treacherous waters, on a wasteland without food to create a strong body, forced to do continuous, pointless work (intended to break both body and spirit), and yet, despite all of these, I was sure I would not be there forever, positive that my death would not come on a forsaken island prison. I raised my mouth to the sky and caught a mouthful of drink. The water tasted of sulfur from the volcano clouds (a flavor that reminded me of home). Was I mortal? The answer was yes. I had no history with gods. But I had a thought. Work, especially pointless work, will free the mind to roam.

I stopped and stared at the tower. Soon the whistling. Then the bolt, a square bead in the air, buffeted by the wind. When it grew near, dead on my right eye. I waited for the last second and then moved my head slightly to the left. My heart beat wildly in my chest as the bolt skimmed my ear. I stood up on the boulder I had been beating. I hit my chest with the stone instead. Again, the bolt. This time, I waited even longer and, when it was upon me, ducked to the left and tried to grab the bolt with my left hand. I missed and the point grazed my palm. I

tried again, again I missed, but was closer. I continued up on the boulder, beating my chest and the bolts kept flying, eventually, I caught one.

My thought had been that, though mortal, I had a unique capacity for avoiding danger at the last minute. Whether through quickness or instinct, I could survive when survival would be difficult for others. At that age, I somehow convinced myself that this was true. Standing on the boulder I saw that I could do something that others could not. At the last second, I could narrowly avoid death. Soon I was catching the bolts one after another and throwing them down. Still the bolts came, undeviatingly aimed for my right eye.

Eventually I went back to pounding the boulder in the rain. The ground around me was spined with bolts and littered by those I had caught and dropped. The day passed. Occasionally I took a drink from the sky. Dusk came early, fell, and was followed by night. I stopped working, waited for the whistling, and, when it did not come, I gathered up all the bolts and returned to the hovel.

I ate some more of the gruel, which turned out to be predominately the mashed up pulp of the only trees that grew on the island. Since the trees regenerated at night, as did the boulders of the wasteland, there was always some of this pulp available. Cron tore the pulp out of the center of the trees with his bare clawed hands.

When I came in with my bundle of 75 or 80 bolts, the immortals and Nivin stared back at me.

Cron said, "You can't prove anything here, boy."

"Can we burn these," I asked?

"The smoke is poison. The wood itself is cursed, diseased."

"What about the metal tips, can we use the metal to make a weapon?"

"It is but flake toughening the surface of the wooden point...it falls apart as soon as you remove it."

I left the bolts outside and sat down on the dirt floor to eat.

"Tell me more about this place...what are the weaknesses?"

"The island has an answer for all your attempts to escape," Fl'p-lent said.

"How did you and Nivin escape," I asked Typhon.

"Do not listen to these beings," said Typhon. "They, excuse me Cron, have prisoner's minds in which the thing that holds them has become a part of their thoughts. The tower is always watching them on the inside. They fear that the tower knows what they are thinking."

Cron pounded both his paws on the ground and emitted a great husky roar in Typhon's face, baring his teeth.

"Yes yes. Very scary...yet here you are, with the breath of a thousand-year-old-maggot." said Typhon.

"And here you are," shouted Cron. "I fought the beasts and lost."

"How did you escape?" I asked Typhon again.

"I walked across the water, holding Nivin's hand."

"How?"

"A special talent of his," said Nivin. "Strange. The water hardens right when you set your foot down. If I'm touching him, I share the power."

"The Saksa cease shooting when you enter the water," said Fl'p-lent. "They rely on the beasts and the seas to take care of you."

"However, the beasts did not detect us, for some reason, just as they leave the prison ships in peace." Typhon seemed coy about this reason, as though he knew why but didn't want

to divulge too much. "We walked to the nearest island, which was quite a distance. Eventually, I was recaptured due to a weakness of mine, which I'd rather not discuss."

"I doubt this story," said Cron.

"What, beast?"

"The worst of the seas," said Cron. "I fought a thick, bulbous thing with many arms, slick and impossible to hold on to. It wrapped me up and thrashed me against the deep rocks. The next time I tried, a sleek thing came at me with skin that tore away my fur, exposing the flesh, soon the water was filled with sharks clipped at me from all directions as I tried to fight them off."

"The island is the domain of Pruto, the seashepherd," Fl'p-lent said, "Here he sends his worst creations."

"What about the tower itself, The Saksa," I asked. "What are they?"

Fl'p-lent said, "When I first was cast upon these shores, I tried to scale the tower." He held up his hands. They were covered with a series of soft-looking pale green pads. "I can climb anything. I can hold upside down on a stone ceiling. The marble of the tower, though, is so fashioned or charmed that I could not get my feet off the ground. The only thing I discovered from this attempt was that there is a kind of shadow-angle where from the tower the Saksa either cannot see you or cannot fire at you. For a few spans around the base, you are not subject to their missiles."

"The Saksa are forever unseen," said Typhon. "Though I doubt, on the ground, if they would be a fit enemy for one of us. They have the superior tactical position."

After I ate, I went outside and unwound the messages from each of the bolts. They varied, little. Always in the dried blood, always crudely drawn images of forms working against

the boulders. Some of them showed the worker with a bolt through the head, splattering blood across the paper. But the image was always reducible to the same message: work or die. As I went back inside, the ground quaked and the volcano rumbled.

"What makes you think The Saksa are not a single thing, person or beast?"

"It has been tested," said Cron. "As many as five bolts have been shot at once in different directions"

"And they can shoot quickly, one after another. Which means at least multiple weapons. Unless they load by magical power."

"Unless they are wielded by a god," said Nivin.

"How can the bolts affect you, if you are immortal."

"The poisoned wood paralyzes us and the pain makes us want to die. It lasts for weeks...weeks we have to continue working." Said Typhon. "Or be shot again and have the pain double and continue the longer. When we say you know nothing, it is because you have not yet learned that there are worse things than death."

Juggler laughed at that.

The next day, I was breaking a boulder apart with a stone, and it began to rain. It seemed to begin at the exact same moment as it had the day before. The clouds looked the same, the raindrops felt the same, the temperature, the wind, all the same. I stopped work and looked at the sea. Was it the same? I wondered. Not similar, but identical. Had the wave that just fell fallen at the same moment the day before? With the same spray of wind taken from the top? Not repetition, but reiteration. I tried to memorize the curls of foam through the rocks. The currents, the timing of the waves. And if so was this a terrible discovery of the future sameness of my life or an important opening in discovery of how to escape? I didn't know. The discernment of a

pattern seemed useful. As I stood there and thought about it, I heard the whistling, looked up, caught the bolt using the technique practiced the day before. I broke it over my knee.

I concentrated on strengthening my body for whatever might come. I used both hands to break the boulder. I jumped and slammed midsized boulders on it. I bent back as far as I could and threw down stones on it, anything to bring my muscles back to life. Throughout the day, my hand that had been grazed by a bolt the day before began to throb. The skin peeled away from the palm and grew red. My left hand did the work.

As dusk began to fall on my second day on Xin's Maw and it was almost time for us to stop work without fear of being shot, I heard a violent confusion of sounds coming toward me. I stood on the boulder. A pack of beings was crossing the wasteland, quickly and at different rates. I saw something small, grunting, muscular, and deadeyed leaping from rock to rock; another was huge-legged and like a creature of the trees, slinging himself along fist to fist. Soon though the green one was upon me, knocking me to the ground and sitting with her heels on my shoulders and her stinking genitalia in my face. She bared her teeth and hissed but was not heavy. I was able to throw her off as an ape-like thing landed nearby. His face was a wrinkled mass of leathery skin growing into a long trunk. The trunk darted for my throat, groping like a tree snake for something to throttle. I knocked it aside with my bad hand, but it was thick with bands of muscle and came back for me at the same moment as the creature reached out with his thumbless hands.

I heard the unmistakable roar of Cron. He battered the trunked being from me. Soon I was up and saw Typhon standing with his hand held wide somehow holding the green creature to the ground without touching him. Fl'p-lent was down and gnawing on the throat of a third

creature. Juggler was spinning in the air, kicking with both his feet while twisting, fighting off a brown figure with a skull for a face.

I picked up the broken bolt and plunged it into the shoulder of Cron's opponent and the other into Juggler's. When they broke their grapple to wrench it out, Cron and Juggler took initiative. Cron got the beast's head into his jaws and crushed it. Juggler jumped up, caught the neck of his opponent between his shins, twisted and fell to the ground...a deep, splintering crack could be heard from the beast's neck. Cron and Juggler then helped Fl'p-lent finish off his opponent.

In darkness, we dragged the bodies of the attackers down to the water. I was amazed to see Typhon pick up each of them as though they weighed nothing and walk out on the black waves, and drop each one into the depths. We watched as motion stirred under the surface. A massive squid arm curled slowly out of the water and pulled down a sinking form. Typhon smiled as he stepped off the water and back onto the bone beach.

"It is possible," said Typhon to me, "to so decimate the form of an immortal, that it will become improbable for him to ever reassemble himself, that he is, for all matter of reality, dead."

I remembered the pacing bones of the Vinferian lions...did they pace still?

"Who were they, and why did they attack me?"

"Our fellow residents of this island," said Fl'p-lent. "They wanted to eat you, I believe."

"I hated them," said Cron. "Them attacking you was a favor to me."

"That may be so, Cron," Typhon said, "But now there are four fewer prisoners, which means more attention on us."

"That makes no difference," said Cron.

"I see subtlety is not within reach of your mind," said Typhon, "I'll not explain it to you. I need to find Nivin before either of us expires."

And with that, Typhon disappeared into the darkness. I gradually came to understand that Nivin and Typhon were symbiotic beings. Typhon's life energy was pulled from Nivin, a mortal. Nivin's life was extended by his connection to Typhon, an immortal. They could only be apart for a short period of time. After the battle, Nivin appeared drained of energy.

That night, I continued to ask questions about the island. The fight that day seemed to have awakened a new energy among the immortals. Cron, despite his always negative response to any idea, remained in any conversation about escape. He was seething with an anger so great that it only needed but a little focus to get it moving in one direction. Fl'p-lent was a kind and thoughtful being, helpful in his answers but dismissive of many ideas I had. He seemed to believe that, although thoughts of escape were noble, the best we could do is survive. Typhon and Nivin, who had escaped once, saw no reason why they shouldn't escape again. The method they had used on the first occasion would work just as well as any other. When I asked him about this, Typhon's eye glowed again with the fire I had seen on the first night.

"To escape again and allow this island to remain only makes it possible that I will be returned here. I have often wondered since being sent back whether it is my fate to destroy this place or to have it destroy me. I prefer the former. Nivin does as well."

"Destruction!" cried Cron.

"Yes," said Typhon. "Destruction in order to loose more destruction on the islands of the world..."

"I see two things to use to our advantage," I said. "One, the volcano. It doesn't seem to be under the control of the Saksa. The boulders regenerate, the trees too, it rains at the same time

every day, the clouds roil at the same rate or pattern. But the volcano shakes the ground and erupts on its own schedule. Its power must be great. It would have formed the island out of the ocean before The Saksa came and installed whatever power they draw, which could itself be the volcano. "

"This volcano is forsaken by spirits and gods," said Fl'p-lent. "I feel no presences here. The volcano is a power of its own. It cannot be controlled, it comes from beneath the sea. Not even the god of the sea controls it."

"The god of the sea!," roared Cron. "There's no great god of the sea. If there is, he would not leave immortals here to rot. He would soak this tower with a mammoth wave and drown the powers inside."

"Of course, that would wash us into the abyss," said Typhon. "Nevertheless, Barossa has a point. There is a volcano here that The Saksa do not seem to be in control of."

"The second weakness is that the tower is built at the base of that volcano. If it were to spew lava down that slope, it would engulf that tower."

"Unless the marble," said Fl'p-lent "is able withstand such an attack. It is material such as I have never seen. Spellcrafted perhaps. Remember, I have been inside a volcano and found it not invincible. The tower has, as yet, to be tested."

"Perhaps," said Typhon, " the volcano is but a single element of an all-out attack."

"What of the regeneration?" I asked. "How is this accomplished? Can it be used to our advantage? Is it gradual or instantaneous? Would the towers be regenerated once destroyed?"

"The trees regrow by night, fed by darkness and the rain. The stone grows from within, rapidly, after the middle of the night has passed and dawn is creeping up the horizon."

"There's only one way to find out if the Tower will rise again," said Cron. "Destroy it!"

"You immortals," I said, "Do you know what power is the darkness?"

"The Saksa control the darkness to control us, the days are always the same length, here," said Fl'p-lent.

"I have been inside the tower at Keylocklundria," I said. "There, a device measures the changes in the days and predicts the future cycles of time. The world is divided into 16 cycles...the eighth and ninth cycles are equally long with daylight, the first and 16th are equally short. The longer the daylight the warmer the day. The farther from Keylocklundria, the more skewed the calculation, but the device is said to account for it. Within each cycle, no more than two days in a row can ever be the same length, because the days are always either shrinking or growing.

"And clouds do not burst in the same place twice, let alone every day," said Typhon.

"It speaks to a spell...some wynd wizard."

"I knew a woman. She studied the wyndrine powers," I said. "At least I think she did."

"Oh, did you?" said Nivin. Until then he had kept a deferential silence while Typhon was engaged in a conversation. Juggler laughed. "We are far from the wyndrine here."

"I think that power comes from many places," I said. "But here we clearly have a source. The volcano. There is nothing else. Disrupt that power. Channel it toward the tower and The Saksa will fall."

"It sounds like a good plan," Fl'p-lent whispered. "But how to do that is the problem."

"Another advantage we had is the shadow of the tower. If it is true that The Saksa lose sight of us if we are at the base of the tower, then our attack must start there. You cannot climb the volcano or you will be shot with a bolt. But if we went down from within the shadow and into the tower, tunneling, then we could get somewhere unseen. The question is then where?"

Typhon spoke up, "Tunneling into a volcano will be hot, too hot for any of us. Fl'p-lent alone could survive."

"If we...or Fl'p-lent tunneled into the volcano and hit the molten core, would the lava flow back down the tunnel to the base of the tower, destroying its base?" I said.

I can dig until the heat begins to singe my fur," said Cron. "Dig faster than any of you."

"I'm sure that's true," Typhon said, "but then what? Fl'p-lent could you finish the job?"

"The volcano can do that itself, most likely." Fl'p-lent nodded. "Once the wall of the mountain is weakened, the pressure of the lava will force its way out in that direction. That is its nature."

"That's a good point," Typhon, "Cron need only weaken base of the mountain with a channel, we can let the forces do rest."

"And what will you do, Typhon," Cron asked. "Stand back and watch."

"Destroying the tower may be only the beginning of our destruction of the island. I'll wait to see what comes out of it."

Cron harumphed at this.

14.

Cron started out that night, fueled by impatience and his violent nature. His plan was to get to the base of the tower, and to wait there throughout the next day and begin digging the following night. We did not know how The Saksa would respond to not seeing him working in the wasteland, whether we or the other prisoners would be punished. The pack of prisoners that had attacked me was only one of the other groups on the island. We had to trust that they would

join in if and when the tower began to fall. They kept their distance, leery of Cron perhaps, or like those who attacked, conspiring future action against us.

We worked the next day. I did so with an eye on the dark being waiting at the base of The Tower. I could see him dash his fists together with impatience. By mid morning, when the rain clouds began to move across the sky casting their daytime darkness, I could no longer see him. He had moved to the volcano side of The Tower, there to dig. When evening fell, I helped Typhon, Nivin, and the others harvest food from the regrown trees near the hovel. Without Cron's strength, Typhon had to drain Nivin to tear down the trunk of the tree. That accomplished, Fl'p-lent used his sharp teeth to puncture the bark and his claws to cause a split down the length. Juggler sat on the ground, got his feet in the split and peeled the trunk into two sections, exposing the soft inner pulp. I used a flat, sharpened bone from the beach to gouge and scrape the pulp into the iron pot.

This work took us the first part of the evening. Then we added gathered rainwater to the pot and Fl'p-lent started a fire with a combination of his own breathe and the friction of two sticks together. His breath was not quite flammable but it was "very hot," as he put it.

The pulp took several more hours to cook down to an edible flavor and texture. Until then it was so acidic, the skin in your mouth would peel away if you ate it, according to Typhon. By the time we ate our one meal of the day, most of the night had passed. We sat in silence often, starving and weak. Even Typhon would weaken as the night wore on and Nivin had nothing to eat. Once we ate, we would fall asleep. All except Typhon, who spent the nights whittling and knapping beachbones into weapons. He did not need to sleep as long as Nivin was nearby.

Many days passed as we waited for word from Cron or signs of his work. Each day repeated the pattern of the past. The fall of rain, first straight, then curled by the wind. The beat of waves against the beach. I did not bother testing the unseen crossbow anymore. Such efforts seemed futile, although they at least had made me feel as though I was fighting my apparent fate.

Inwardly, I worried that the apparent weakness of the tower was a designed temptation. Our plan had been quite easy to arrive upon, given the options. Another group of prisoners could have done the same. It seemed to me senseless that any prisoner would live in the wasteland when the base of the tower could be occupied safely, without working all day. Food would have been a problem, as there were no pulp trees near the base, but one could leave the cover of the tower base under the cover of darkness. Yet these immortals chose a life of ceaseless drudgery. Perhaps Typhon was right---he seemed the most intelligent of them all---they had taken on the mind of prisoners: do as you are told, stay where you are put, survive, but do not attempt to live.

In the nights, I asked questions, just as I had of Tung, to find out more about the world. Typhon had been right, I knew nothing of it. Twice I had been tricked into losing something I loved: first Aba, then my own freedom. In between I had become a hostage of a strange and meaningless puzzle. What gave meaning to events of a life? From Tung, I learned how important knowledge was, the ability to understand and communicate languages, both written and spoken, different from your own. During our long cooking process each night, I asked Fl'p-lent to teach me one of the language of the fire ring. He started me with the basics: boat, food, water, arrow, woman, fruit, enemy, kill. It pained him to talk about home, though. He had not grown up around others and knew only the rudiments of their language. He was an outcaste. He did not even know the language of his father. His Nurian was learned on the prison island, from long-gone prisoners whose bones now littered the wasteland.

I asked Typhon once to tell a story to pass the time.

"Mortals tell the stories of gods," he said. "Immortals tell stories of power. On the island of Durukotonow in the eyrthrine, the center is a coolwater lake. The lake itself is precious because of its fresh water. It is deeper than the level of the ocean, which gives it a special place in all the lakes of all the islands. An immortal woman named Cryfalyn is the guardian of the lake. Mortals might call her a nymph or a goddess, but she is neither of those exactly. Her mother was a star, and gave her beauty, and her father was a mountain and gave her strength. She would have had no problem wrestling one such as Cron. She had struck down far more powerful beings. The islanders there, and those on many islands around, celebrate Cryfalyn with every passing season. They pray for her not to freeze in the coldest times. They come on the longest nights to watch and sing songs about the reflection of her mother in her smooth surface....only her mother is reflected, no other stars. There was an adventurer who came to the island, a giant man as great in size as Cryfalyn, but mortal. He had heard of the spirit of the lake, and he wanted to test himself against her. His name was Borq, and he had been challenged by a king to complete seven tasks. The tasks all benefited the king or his people, but Borq wanted to marry the king's daughter. Borq's challenge was to drink the lake. This would weaken those surrounding islands and allow the king to take them over. Cryfalyn of course would lose all her power when the water was gone. To drink the lake, Borq had to first defeat its protectress.

"Borq's first attempt was to defeat Cryfalyn by force. Cryfalyn resided at the bottom of the lake that most mortals would consider bottomless. Borq, a powerful swimmer, swam down. When he reached there, he found a door. Assuming the door to be the opening to Cryfalyn's palace, he burst it open with his shoulder. Inside was a many-limbed lake dragon who held him beneath the water until he lost consciousness and let him drift to the surface. Borq, however,

was not satisfied with defeat. His next attempt was to simply begin drinking the lake with Cryfalyn in it. At first, he was able to gulp many depths of the lake, but as he drank, night fell, and Cryfalyn called upon her brothers, bits of her motherstar, to strike Borq down as he drank. The brothers did so, flying from the sky for Borq's bent down head. They pierced his head and neck, and as they did so, all the lakewater he had drunk spewed out. Cryfalyn then turned the giant to stone, and forever since the Fountain of Borq remains a testament to the power of Cryfalyn on the island of Durukotonow. The islanders continue to pay her tribute and perform sacred rites in her honor. They continue to benefit for the ships that drop anchor in search of her freshwater. Thus is the power of an immortal maintained.”

Typhon knew the stories of immortals from around the islands and he never grew tired of telling them, although it did wear down poor Nivin. Nivin would toss and turn throughout the story, as though dreaming what Typhon was telling me. I collected the stories in my memory and forever since drawn on them when I need an impressive tale to spin. And so the nights passed as Cron, we hoped, was digging ever nearer to the heart of the volcano.

As we were sitting there one night much later, we heard footsteps stumbling toward the hovel. Cron slumped through the doorway and fell to the floor. We fed him---he had not eaten since he left, surviving on only his own internal fire---and he lay there in silence. His fur was caked with black ash and dust. His formerly curving claws were dulled and shortened to nubs. In the smudging on his face and the creasing of his eyes we could see the days of digging had spent him.

When he recovered a little and could sit up, he told us, in a hoarse voice, what he had been doing:

"I started in the night, I ran up the mountainside about a quarter of the way up and started digging. I tore the mountain apart! In the beginning it was easy. Feet of scree and loose stones that could be thrown back between my legs as I made progress. Once day rose and I got a little deeper, I had to carry the loose dirt and stones back to the opening and throw it out, but the Saksa could see me then and I had to be careful. Often, the roof of the tunnel would collapse on me and I'd have to dig myself out from under the weight. The dirt there was a gray ashy clay and I had to take that and bind together the larger stones I found into low pillars to hold up the roof. Once I started doing that, it meant I had less dirt and rock to dispose of out of the opening.

"As I got deeper, the air began to burn my mouth and snout. I would sneak back out toward the opening to breathe cooler, fresher air. I felt the Saksa above watching me, waiting for me to stick my head out. The further in I went the harder and hotter the rock. I drove deeper, made hopeful by the warmth that I was nearing a breakthrough to the lava, instead, I came upon a wall of rock that I could not penetrate. At first, I used all my strength and made only the slightest scratch upon it. Then I spent days digging to the side to go around it, but that only seemed to be leading me all the way around the mountain. Digging up in an attempt to go over the blockage took me dangerously close to the surface. I have expended my last strength in these efforts and still the impenetrable rock remains our obstacle. It is what prevents the lava from flowing toward the tower."

"Until now," said Typhon abruptly. He shook Nivin awake. Then he looked at me. "I need you, as well. Cron has done his part. The brute portion. Now it calls for some subtlety."

Cron laughed bitterly. "You'll never break it." He held up his wounded paws. "I broke my hands against it!"

"We'll see. You should be ready for any result. If we cannot break through this impenetrable wall, we shall return. If we can, then the lava may begin flowing down the mountain toward the tower. What happens then, we have no idea."

"Let's go," he said.

I followed them out into the dark night. Typhon carried a single glowing coal from the fire in a broken section of skull.

The stars above hung in the same places they always did. Spread out directly over head was Xin The Two Headed Wolf, the mouth of one of his heads hanging open above us.

We moved in silence to the base of the tower. Reaching it, I took a moment to inspect the material. My palm, when pressed to the stone, glided to one side or the other. There were no way to push into it directly, or to exert the tips of the fingers against it. The result was always a light and quick slide. The absence of friction against my palm reminded me of the material that I had taken from the tower in Keylocklundria, the same material that allowed the device to turn against stone.

Typhon seemed familiar with the material.

"I can't do anything against that," Typhon said.

Typhon continued to move around the tower to the other side and I continue to follow him.

When we got there, it was easy to pick out Cron's work. On the steep slope of the mountain, a pile of lighter grey mud and dirt stood out, even in the bleak darkness. We made our way up to the opening and got in before light cracked the dull gray horizon.

Cron's tunnel was so low we squirmed through on our bellies. At the edges, it had fallen in. Each time we reached one of the pillars, we had to work our way around to the side of it.

The air thickened as we went deeper and the heat grew close around us, until my whole body was damp with sweat. Nivin complained of the heat as well, groaning and griping as we crawled ever deeper.

Where Cron had attempted to tear apart the solid rock in all directions, the roof opened up into a cavern.

"Ah good," said Typhon, "standing will make this much easier."

I again tested the material and was heartened to find it was not the same as the tower. It was simply a harder variety of rock.

"Nivin, old friend," said Typhon. "I'm afraid that this is the end for us. Barossa, hold him, will you?"

"What are you going to do?" I said.

"The bond that holds us is...powerful. I can use the energy from it to penetrate this stone."

"No," said Nivin.

Nivin tried to get past me out into the tunnel. He was but a shadow reddened by Typhon's coal. I grabbed around the shoulders as he tried to push past me. He was crying and trembling.

"Don't worry," I said, "we'll all be better off if the tower falls," but even as I said this, I did not believe it.

Typhon placed the coal on the ground. He raised his arms, as he had done in the melee with the other prisoners. Then he clapped them together and closed his eyes, tipping back his head. His body began to glow. He turned the color of blue blown glass lit from within by a pale fire. As his glow increased, Nivin's body became weak and he stopped fighting my grip.

Typhon began to glow white and heat radiated from his body in great sheets. Then he said, with difficulty through gnashing teeth.

"Get....back."

I left Nivin and crawled back down the tunnel. Soon, a clashing sound ripped through the air, as lightning striking a tree nearby. Then again, and again a third time. Then Typhon came crawling back down the tunnel. The glow of his body lit the darkness with pale green light.

"Out!" he yelled.

I crawled back the direction we had come, with Typhon behind me and Nivin, I thought, behind him. When we got to the mouth of the tunnel, it was daylight.

"Go, go," said Typhon,

Typhon clung close to my back as we ran down the barren slope of the volcano. I lost track of Nivin. The whistling began quickly and came one after another. I concentrated on the area in front of my right eye, knocking aside the bolts as I ran. It was almost a constant stream and I risked tripping as I ran to divert them. We made it to the base of the tower quickly and I realized that Nivin was not there.

"Where's Nivin?"

As though in answer, Typhon put both his hands on my shoulders and pinned me to the surface of the tower. His eyes glowed red and, where his fingers held me, my skin burned. I tried to break free but found myself paralyzed. Even as I stood there, held by Typhon to the slick material of the wall, I could see behind him the lava begin to pour out of the tunnel opening. As it oozed out, hot and yellow, it widened the mouth and flattened and spread over the slope.

Typhon held me there and, with his eyes closed, began a high sing-song chant. The glow in his

eyes faded and he looked tired. It took me a second to recover and then I noticed an invisible but almost tangible field of energy passing from my own body to Typhon's.

"What have you done to me?" I said. My voice was hoarse from the hot air around us.

"I've saved you from death...forever," he said, his face strangely pleading.

The lava was pouring down the slope faster now. As more came out, the downward force of the molten rock increased.

"We must go," Typhon yelled.

"No," I said. "If I run for it, you will die," said Typhon.

"We can't run away from the tower," I said. "We'll be shot in the back."

"The lava's coming! We have to go...together, or we both die."

Rather than wait to find out, I made a break for it. I thought, in a split second stroke meant to preserve my freedom, that if Typhon were behind me, he would get shot in the back. I ran into the open wasteland. I could hear Typhon yelling for me behind. Once I was a distance from the tower, the whistling came toward my head. I dove to one side or the other, landing hard against the rock. But the bolts did not fly as often as I expected. I thought perhaps the lava was distracting the beings inside. At the same time, the ground had begun to shake, harder than I had felt since arrival. The shaking must have thrown off the shooter's aim because some of the shots went high or wide. I made it across the wasteland in bursts of speed, with dives behind obstacles and leaps from the tops of boulders. Typhon chased me the whole way.

Near our hovel a mass of prisoners had gathered. Fl'p-lent, Cron, and Juggler were all there, standing behind the structure and taking quick looks back at the tower. But others had joined them, about twenty of them. There was a birdlike creature with a mouth like a giant funnel, who snorted and beat his flightless wings against his sides as he watched. There was a

giant serpent speckled in purple and yellow with a hissing head on each end of his body. There were a pair of fuzzy beasts no higher than my knee, with huge gaping mouths of teeth permanently bared in lipless grins. There was a being with the hind legs of a goat and the head of a panther. I did not have time to get a good look at all of them because behind us, a wall of bright lava was crashing against the base of the tower.

As the lava flowed out of the tunnel, the shaking and the heat and the release of pressure was pulling the mountain apart. A fissure appeared, tearing and crumbling the slope, and more molten rock flowed down. When that happened, someone noticed that no crossbow bolts were flying. We all stepped out to watch, stunned in a way by our daylight freedom from work and threat.

Through all this and what was to come, I was constantly aware of Typhon's presence. I knew, without looking, where he was; I sensed his internal feelings of fatigue and the weariness caused by being under threat; I feared, innately, separation from him. And yet a part of my mind rejected and feared this connection.

As the molten lava hit the base of the mountain, it swelled back up, pushing back on itself in bulging waves. When those waves grew too great, the yellow, fiery flow went around one side. I focused on what I could see of the junction between the lava, to see how the material would react to the heat. The quaking ground had yet to fracture the tower. As the lava built up and flowed past, the white stone of the tower began to glow red. The tower buckled, tilting. The ground continued to shake, the lava flow continued to increase, the tower gradually tilted more and more. The prisoners were shouting, roaring, making strange aggressive clicking noises. Cron was beating his chest and roaring. Even Fl'p-lent was calling out in a high shriek.

The tower fell.

The ground shook side to side, throwing rock and lava in all directions. It was like a dying animal, and the blocks of rock that formed it slipped against one another until gaps opened. As the gaps opened the tower began to flex and split apart, until four legs formed on its sides and the slit took on the shape of the head and eyes.

The eye of the tower looked at us. The legs turned the body and moved with surprising speed away from the lava and toward us. The volcano was still splintering and the earth still shaking. Spumes of fire flew out of the long fissure, splattering the wasteland with sizzling lava. The tower changed so that the blocks became metallic scales. Against this armor, the lava skimmed off without causing any damage. Then, it reared up and leapt in our direction. The group of prisoners scattered and attacked. Several beings, Cron included, went for the eyes. Cron leapt through the air and disappeared into the open oculus.

The towerbeast stamped across the wasteland. Typhon and I fled toward the water. There was little I could do against a being that size. I only hoped that Typhon would not choose to "sacrifice" me before I could be rid of him. As far as I knew there was no other mortal on the island to host him. The beast chased the scattering prisoners, stamping down its scaled feet and crushing some of them. I watched as the bird-like beast had his head torn off between a boulder and a armored foot. Beyond, the mountain collapsed in on itself. The ground shook violently. I was thrown into the air by the waves of the quake as I ran toward the water.

The water was disturbed and roiling. Beneath the surface, lurking monsters stirred and circled. Tentacles, jaws, and fins flashed. Typhon was drawing energy from me and I began to feel tired. As we watched from the beach of bones, staying away from the water but as far away from the towerbeast as we could, it stopped moving completely, and then shook its head from side to side and began to slam its head onto the ground. Then Cron flew out of the eye slit

followed by one other. They were covered by an inky black fluid that seemed to coat their bodies and slow them down. Cron struggled across the rocks while the beast shook itself with pain.

The lava was now covering half of the wasteland. As the beast struck its head against the ground, it began to come apart. The metal scales fell to the ground, exposing a black body, soft and glistening. That body though instantly split, as though inwardly charged, into bits of the blackness, a species of cold lava. The drops fell to the ground and became tiny faceless beings. Each took up one of the scales and began using it as a weapon. Some were upon us before we could even tell what was happening, swarming, transmuting, attacking, and the air was filled with the wet cold chaos of a mountain and a tower disintegrating but fighting for its last moments of life.

A scale slung at my head, I blocked it with my forearm and felt the edge cut through to the bone. I reached out to strike the inky thing. Its rubbery body absorbed my thrust. It was cold as ice, but soft and giving. I caught it in my arms and it oozed itself out of my grasp. Then another was upon me, then another. All around us we were being attacked by these tiny creatures. The only reason we had a chance was their minute size. The strikes of their scales, which they used to thrust and block, were small. But they were relentless. I threw a couple I was fighting with into the water. They did not sink away, but they evaporated as they hit the surface. The lava continued to fill the wastelands, beginning to cool and harden in places, turning into a steaming black and gray smoothness. The mountain was collapsing in on itself, its core emptied onto the field below there was nothing left to support its peak.

Typhon was still nearby and I pulled one of the black beings off of him and heaved it into the water.

Typhon's face was wild and sweaty, his eyes glowing red.

"Let's go," he said, and grabbed my arm in an unbreakable grip and pulled me toward the water.

"We don't know what will happen here," I said. "They'll be overrun."

"The tower is defeated. These beings are its last efforts to destroy all of us. If that happens, there will still be nothing left here. If Cron and the others can destroy them, the outcome will be the same. They'll not stand or fall in our presence."

At that moment I was stunned from behind by a metal scale, and two rubbery arms wrapped around my neck. Typhon freed me and slung the thing into the water. A flash of teeth and it disappeared.

"Now," he said.

We stepped onto the shallows of a newly broken wave. As it receded we were pulled on the wave back out to the rocky shallows. We moved with the currents, flowing around the rocks, rising and falling like a boat on the swells. Our steps dug into the surface enough to propel us forward. The water itself guided us around the clashing rocks that rose out of the surface surrounded the island. Beneath our feet the water boiled with seamonsters, their eyes watching us, waiting for our mistake, for our plunge into their domain. Yet, the power of Typhon that held us above the surface seemed to prevent them from attacking.

When we got out beyond the rocks, we stopped and looked back. We were able to rise and fall on gently rolling waves. Above the prison island, the clouds were breaking up. Rays of sun beat down. On the half of the wasteland not covered by cooling lava, the immortal prisoners had discovered a way to defeat their rubbery attackers. The sun seemed to weaken and make brittle the enemies. The prisoners were holding them and stretching them until they snapped.

Many sustained tiny cuts and bruises, but, as we watched, the prisoners took the initiative and soon they were cheering and roaring with victory.

15.

We turned away from the island.

"Now they will turn on each other," Typhon said. He had spoken, but his mouth did not move. I was connected to him in a way that made communication instantaneous and effortless, less like a conversation than a shared thought.

"Will they all die?"

"Some will escape."

"Fl'p-lent?"

"He does not have the will to be immortal."

It took time to get used to Typhon's presence in my own mind. I thought, "I have just unleashed an island full of immortal killers on the world."

"Yes," thought Typhon, "Ones such as us."

"But I was tricked into my crimes, my mind was not my own."

"As it is not your own again," Typhon laughed inside our thoughts.

"But it will be mine again," I thought, instincts not yet accounting for his presence.

"Only if I die, and I cannot die. So only if you die.... Acceptance will make things easier."

"You sacrificed Nivin for your own good."

"That is true. But Nivin would have wanted that. He had lived long past the natural term of his life, seen horrible and wonderful things, things no mortal ever sees. He was dead before the lava touched him. No pain. And he had never been enfeebled by old age.

"But he had to be attached to you for...how long?"

I did not understand his responding thought...an idea of time that seemed stretched and incalculable, a tangible substance in his hands. Time as understood by a minor god.

As we exchanged thoughts, we traveled across the surface of the sea. The waves rose and fell, we rose and fell, stepping over the peaks as we would step over a rise in a dirt path. The strangeness of the sensation passed. I had only to get used to the balance of solid but shifting water underfoot. The further from Xin's Maw we walked, the brighter the sky and fairer the air. Typhon seemed to know his direction, and I was forced to follow, though I could not have chosen a different direction.

Night came over the seas. No land around us. No craft beneath us. No sound but the breaking tips of waves, the fall of droplets brushed off by the light winds. The everbright stars, flashing and winking through the clear air. I remember that night the strangest sensation of having escaped from imprisonment to the utter openness and freedom of the oceans only to have been re-imprisoned in a new and different way. Xin was behind us, sinking down to the horizon. Above, Argon The Hunter unleashed his hatchet toward Khalif The Fisherman Hooking A Whale, the great white band of her belly brightening the water. And the water was silver, like a glittering mirror of the silent stars.

Day followed night, and night, day. We walked across the desert of the sea.

I thought about my new situation without seeming to think about it. I found that my experience with Juna had scarred my mind in a way that made it less penetrable by Typhon. I

constructed a small barrier of mental scar tissue around a portion of my thoughts. His mind sawed through the rest, the unguarded portion, plumbing for weaknesses, for memories, then shedding the memories to ingest them. He saw Aba. He saw the bundled boy left at Jester's gate. He saw the ilk flying for my throat, the labyrinth. He saw Juna's cool white body curving through cold black water. I let him. But I preserved for myself a portion of my mind to plumb his. After all, we were connected and, in a way, equal. But much of what I saw inside him was difficult to understand. It was like the memory of a thousand people seen simultaneously through all their eyes.

My mind's eye could only alight on one still sense at a time, and even those were blurred. I tasted the scent of a flower grown in the steam of a hot spring, which smelled like horse sweat and was the color of a toenail burned in a fire. I saw a vast plain, the middle of a massive island; it was full of steaming stumps and scorched by fire. Two armies met and battled, one with short iron swords and helms that covered their faces, the other in leather armor and long curved steel swords. The sound of the battle was a music from an instrument I have never heard since, a rhythmic plinking and plunking of finely drawn gut. I saw a city of vast gardens, where every roof, courtyard, and open space was exploding with flowers and other growth; half the city was burning and the smoke crawled over the memory like a body being handled by a hundred hands.

Because I was operating from behind the wall of a scar, I had no guide to re-assemble these memories, no key to understanding them. Whether they were Typhon's memories, a dream, a wish, the memories of past hosts, I could not discover.

Dominating the chaos, though, was a powerful series of images that made far more sense. These were the stories of the immortals, like the one he had told of Cryfalyn. A nymph, who can only live in darkness, transforms a soldier into a owl to guard her as she bathes, the owl falls in

love with her and drowns himself because he cannot speak to her. A creature that breathes fire is given as a gift to an immortal and becomes the guardian of a sacred cave, is beheaded by a mortal, who in turn is fed to sea monsters. I read---or absorbed---a hundred of these story memories, transporting them from Typhon's mind to my own.

One story stood out more than all the rest. It was the strongest and most dominant that I could find in Typhon's head. It was the story of his fall, the creation of Typhon as I now found him. I spent many a day walking on the surface of the seas, assembling the story from what I found there.

Typhon's father lived in a kind of golden palace. I could not tell whether this was inside a mountain, or the palace was the mountain, or whether to the immortal it was a palace but if I were to look upon it, it would appear a mountain. I think it was in the eyrthrine, though it may have been an island in the sky, or deep below the water, or somewhere else entirely. The images of an immortal's mind are difficult to parse. They drank an orange wine, so impossibly sweet it hurt me to ingest the memory. An ageless boy served them their food on bejeweled plates. The father appeared perfect in form, sitting on his throne. The mother, an immortal herself, was also perfect, a glowing golden beauty. Other immortals would arrive in this golden chamber to talk to Typhon's father and his father would hand down decisions about the affairs of mortals and immortals alike. He was magnanimous but mercurial, often angering his supplicants, and working against the interests of his wife, and all women.

The young Typhon fell in love with the mortal daughter of an island ruler. Typhon's mother protected the island. They worshiped her by throwing flower festivals in which the residents erected pyramids of pink and white flowers before which they prayed and danced for eight days and eight nights. The island was the gem of her power, the place that she possessed

that her husband did not. When her husband angered her, she would leave the golden city for this island and accept the adulation of its supplicants. The daughter of this king was installed as a priestess at the temple of Typhon's mother, who took an interest in the girl. She was beautiful and wise beyond her years, and performed the rites of the goddess to perfection. When her year as priestess on the island was coming to a close, she would be immediately married to a man selected by her father from the sons of surrounding rulers. The tradition was that the son would appear at the temple on the last night of her year of service, would spend the night with her there, and in the morning, she would be replaced by a new virgin priestess and go off to the husband's island as his wife. Typhon's mother, however, so favored this priestess that she wanted her own son to marry her and for the girl to come to the golden city to rule as an immortal.

Typhon's father was informed of this plan by the golden Seradon, who flew throughout the world collecting information, and he was not happy with the plan. He wanted his son to marry a goddess, and he did not want his wife to gain power in the golden city by having a daughter installed there by her intercession. The night before the full year was up, Typhon's father flew down to the island and, taking the form of a much younger man, informed the princess that he was the one whom the goddess had selected for her, that he was Typhon. He spent the night with her, and then flew back up to the golden city, leaving her as she slept. The next night when the actual Typhon arrived, he found the girl had taken her life with a julek-harnd, the sword of sacrifice that hung on the temple walls. She had learned of her deception in the day time. Typhon had not seen the girl before that moment and was not in love with her, but was outraged at his father's preventing his marriage. He attacked his father. A great storm raged, lightning and thunder hammered the skies. Typhon's mother got involved and was nearly destroyed, and Typhon himself was permanently damaged by his father's wrath and

thrown down to the land of the mortals, where he, as a punishment, would forever have to be connected to a mortal.

All this I learned, bit by bit, as we crossed the vast sea on foot.

16.

White chop in the distance. Green treetops. A dancing breeze disturbed the brighter blue shallows. A few ocean birds coasted on the breeze above us. They had thick, gray bodies and pink-tipped wings. Their glassy eyes seemed to be looking down on us with the utmost curiosity. We crossed with ease the broad reef. Rafts of those seabirds floated together and fed on reef fish beneath the surface, ducking their heads and swimming down. Inside the reef was a broad calm shoreline and inside the shoreline a lagoon fed by a stream.

"What is this place?" I thought.

"I know this place as Wei Wei Lok. It is no place. Very small. It is guarded by a spirit named Wei. She is very weak. You will not even detect her presence. The water here is sweet. Wei Wei Lok...sailors adrift in this outer sea know to sail for it for water and food."

When he said "food," Typhon pointed to the birds. There were a cluster of them nearby on the beach.

When I stepped from shallow water to the hot sand, a wave of fatigue ran through me and I nearly lost consciousness. Protected by Typhon's powers, I had not eaten or drunk for days. Now both of us were exhausted. We crawled to the lagoon and waded upstream through the black muck of its bottom to the spring. Water broke from a wall of rock and poured down a slope slick with soft algae. We cupped water in our hands and sucked it down.

Inland from the mouth of the spring, small thicket of trees and shrubs clustered. A few bore fruit that hung, green and pink. Typhon pulled one off and split it open upon a rock. We scooped out the orange-pink pulp with our fingertips. It tasted almost unbearably sweet.

Once the sustenance was being absorbed and we felt stronger, we returned to the beach and fell asleep in beds of sand in the shade of the wide-leafed trees.

We woke after a full night had passed. We were surrounded by a flock of the gray birds. They were huddled together in the shade and forming a wall around us. When we stirred they waddled down the beach and breasted into the water. Our plan was to rest there for a few days then walk further to the closest of the mydrine islands, which was called Ur-Gandur. Roughly translated Ur-Gandur meant "outsider island," an island that was very near the mydrine, but not included in the Federation of the Ten Cities nor protected by its navy or ruled by its laws.

"Just my kind of place," said Typhon.

I had become accustomed to not responding to Typhon. I thought neither positively or negatively about his statements, nor allowed my thoughts on them to come to the surface, where they would be under his control. I asked only questions:

"Which direction is that?"

He pointed in the direction of the Whale's tale, had it been the middle of the night.

As we were talking, one of the birds walked up to Typhon. It was a kindly looking thing, with a curved bluish beak, and those eyes, as expressive as a child's. It was simply being curious.

Typhon smiled at me cruelly. He grabbed the bird's neck and snapped it between his two hands.

The bird screamed "Nahhh," and out on the water, the flock took up the cry, repeating it again and again. I did not know why, at the time, but the sound of that bird pierced me from ears to my heels. Typhon had the body between his knees and was rapidly plucking it. The underbelly was covered by soft white feathers. They drifted over the sand. When he was finished plucking it, he dug his fingers into the breast and pierced the skin, then pulled out the guts and piled them on the sand. He dug a pit, made a pile of driftwood in it, and touched the base with his finger, igniting the thinnest pieces of wood. When he started the fire, I felt as though the spark had been pulled directly from my chest. I thought of Nivin, of Typhon's bolts of lightening, of the toll they must have had on him.

When the fire was burning hot, Typhon ran the bird through with a stick and held it over the fire.

"They have delectable meat," he said. "If they lived anywhere besides here, the plates of the richest mydrine merchants would be piled high with them. But here is the only place they can be found."

"I can't eat that," I thought.

"Persuaded by their strangely human-like cries...? Their intelligent eyes?"

"I don't know."

"That is but one of their defenses...a poor one. You'll eat it if you want to stay alive," he thought.

"But I don't," I thought. "Not connected to you."

"Connection to me is the only living there is for you now."

While Typhon had been preparing the bird, I had been regaining my strength after digesting the water and the fruit. I remembered, carefully concealed within my wall of thoughts,

that Typhon had been forced to find Nivin after the melee with other prisoners on the island.

Distance weakened him. Nivin had gone beyond the natural extent of his life; if he had separated from him, then, he would die. I had not. I was still a young man. I did not believe I would die if separated from Typhon.

I got up and ran down the beach.

"Where are you going?" he thought.

I used all my mental energy and all the practice I had gotten over the long walk to the island to block him from my mind.

I could feel him weakening. Strangely, I could see both where I was running and see what he was seeing. Up the island, the beach narrowed and became rocky. There was an area, where, because of the currents, flotsam and jetsam washed up and collected among the rocks. It looked like the result of a shipwreck. I saw a broken oar and a staved-in barrel. I picked up the broken oar: it was the blade and a small bit of the shaft. I climbed over the rock and looked back. Typhon was walking toward me, slowly.

"You have nowhere to go and no power to oppose me," he thought.

I made it over the rocky area to the other side of the island, which was a broad beach, where more of those birds had clustered. I ran as fast as I could, about halfway down the beach and then cut through the trees, ducking behind them carefully. The middle of the island was thinly forested with heavily trunked fruit trees that all bent over in the same direction. From tree to tree, going back up the island I watched Typhon. I used all my mental energy to empty my thoughts.

As I was watching him and waiting for the right moment, I saw an ancient lady. White curly hair blew behind her that was indistinguishable from clouds. She was tiny and her bronze

skin was wrinkled. She wore no clothing and her legs barely moved against the sand. As I watched, she disappeared and reappeared several times, as though the barest wind or a single beam of sunlight could cause her to pass into some other existence. Typhon turned to her and began to laugh at her pitiful appearance.

She appeared again, this time with her hands raised to the sky. Then, she flung them down and out of the sky rained a dark and vicious cloud of birds, their heads down, their wings folded back in a dive.

"Twice you have desecrated my island," she said. "Demon! Wei has more power than you believed."

But even as the birds were reaching him, Typhon was drawing on me. He knew exactly how close he was. The bolts of bright light began to fly at the spirit and at the birds, killing them in vast swathes, but still they came.

I ran, then, holding my chest because of the pain, and fell upon him. I swung the flat part of the oar across his face. He blocked it, but, as he did, a bird tore at his ear with its beak. He reached in pain to hold it, but it had torn off and taken some of his cheek with it. I swung the blade of the oar at his throat and connected. At the same time, numerous birds were attacking his legs and arms, pulling at his fingers with their powerful beaks. They were piled on him and they were strong. I hit him again and again across the throat while his face was being torn off by the birds. He was no longer fighting back. I stood up. I called to the spirit, who had disappeared again.

"He must be taken in all directions or he will come again," I said.

Her appearance flickered before me, eyes bright but the rest fading. She made a motion with her hands, like a sword cutting and the birds began to disjoint Typhon and fly away with

parts of him, out over the ocean. I watched as two birds, working together, disappeared toward the horizon, wings beating hard to stay aloft with a thick section of his thigh. With each portion that disappeared, I felt both a burning of pain and a shiver of release, as upon the breaking of a fever at its hottest point. I fell back on the sand and watched as five of the birds carried Typhon's head out over the sea until they disappeared on the horizon. They would return, all of them, before nightfall, their beaks empty, and the peaceful look back in their eyes.

My body felt distant. It was wholly within my own control again, and yet seemed to be a lifeless and detached thing. I had to think to stand and walk, had to concentrate on breathing. I returned to the spring. I drank the sweet water. I thanked Wei for her help. I sensed her flickering presence like the last coal of a fire that deep within the ash burns hot still. I ate more of the fruit. In the shade of the beach, I lay down and slept. It felt like I had never slept before.

I woke in cool darkness. The flock of gray birds was huddled together nearby. They made chorling and cooing sounds as they slept. Above me hung the brilliant stars. I looked for The Whale, found her tale, and took note of her direction. I lay on the sand and watched her drop below the horizon as the morning grayed and purpled the sky.

I sat for a day in the shade, watching the birds fish off the reef. They paddled with their beaks pointed at the water, and, with a sharp kick, dunked their heads and disappeared. They popped up again nearby with silver and green fish squiggling in their mouths, tipped back their heads, and swallowed. Near the horizon, a storm swirled together, dragging a sheet of shade over the distant gray green. Lightning flashed. A few moments passed. Then thunder. Where I sat, the sun warmed my skin. I drank more water and ate more fruit. I dozed. I dreamed of the Whale swimming in a sea of stars. I woke again in the night and watched morning rise again.

As the sun came up and another blue day began on the tiny island, I had never felt more free in my life, although I was utterly stuck on a small bank of sand in the middle of an outer-sea. From my village to the sailmaker, to Aba, to the labyrinth, to work and Juna on Keylocklundria, to the cell and the prison ship, to Xin's Maw, to Typhon I had been tied to something for my whole life. Did I now want to build a raft and navigate the open sea to Ur-Gandur? Did I still hope to join the Astute Brotherhood? Did I still believe they existed, somewhere? Could I live contently on this deserted island? Forever? Until a ship arrived? And a ship of what description? And how could I protect myself from the sailors of such a ship if I needed to?

I still thought the Astute Brotherhood was the best solution for my life. I still believed that getting to them was the most important thing I could do. The difficulty I had suffered up to that point, reinforced for me the necessity of continuing my attempt. I thought realistically, as I always tended to, that the though success was unlikely, it was still worth trying. I had fallen into a lot of trouble, but I had also gotten myself out of it. I had then, when I was young, a unquestioned confidence in both fate and my own abilities. The world seemed an infinite place, where anything could happen, and my youth and strength told me that good things were likely to happen. Particularly, it told me that I was destined to find what I was looking for. And I had gained some understanding of the islands. Juna's map was forever etched into my imagination. All the known islands. I had pledged to see them all, to never settle. On that peaceful little island in the outer sea, fulfilling such a pledge seemed possible.

I went through my daily routine on the island. I ate fruit and drank at the fountain and sat on the beach. The flock of birds, already uninhibited by the threat I might pose to their lives, often clustered around me. I came to distinguish their individual personalities, I assumed that the females were the smaller and duller plumed of the flock. The males had a swath of brightly

colored bands just behind the curve of their beak. There was Bobber, who always bobbed his head and walked around the beach somewhat haphazardly. Bobber had a purplish birthmark on one of his talons. There was Gryphon, who terrorized the others with lion-like screaming. There was a female I called Moh-ma. In the nighttime she would curl up against my chest and during the day she would seem to keep an eye on me, as though I might get into trouble. Then there was Snarl, who had a beak that was notched on one side, so that he always appeared to be snarling. He was the fiercest fisherman of them all.

These birds would often follow me up the lagoon to Wei's spring. I would drink. It was a part of their life, too, to drink from Wei, who protected them. However, their beaks not shaped in such a way that they could not peel open the fruit that grew there. But they gobbled the flesh of the fruit as soon as I gave it to them. Soon after I began doing this, I was lying half awake in the sand and a squirming fish landed on my head. When I looked up, Snarl was banking his broad wings to return to the reef area. It took me a long time to start a fire in a sand pit, but, once I did, and cooked the fish on a bending branch, the meat tasted wonderful. This exchange of fruit and fish continued during my stay on the island. When I would start wading in the lagoon the flock would fly in and glide to a landing on the water. They would swim up the lagoon, wait for me to split open some of the hanging fruit and lay it here and there on the open ground. Then they would gather around each one. They never fought one another for the fruit. Patiently, they waited their turn to be offered a chunk. They were remarkably peaceable animals, in contrast to the bloody image I had of them tearing a minor god apart.

Feeding the birds rapidly diminished the supply of fruit on the island. The only grove of fruit trees were clustered around the spring. The rest of the island was a long spine of trees separating the two beaches. Little edible grew there. With thoughts of building a raft, I carefully

explored the rocky area of flotsam and jetsam at one end of the island. I still had my broken oar. I retrieved the smashed barrel from the rocks: two of the barrel hoops were rusted but still somewhat strong. Another was bent and twisted. There were ten loose staves that I set on the sand to dry out. They were crafted of hardwood.

In the tide pools between the rocks I found a pearl the size of one of my knuckles. It was bright and untarnished, and had a hole through it where a strand of silk or earring hoop once had passed. I waded among the rocks, careful to avoid stepping on the spiny fish that clung to the sides and bottoms there. If a ship had wrecked in the vicinity and some of the wreckage had come toward the island---as the barrel and the oar suggested---there could be any number of valuable items sunken there.

The water was up to my chest and clear as air. The sand was white, speckled by shells and darker rocks as well as the bright purples and oranges of the spiny sea creatures. I stood on the verge of floating. Each wave that passed lifted my feet from the sand and set me back down again. I ran my eyes over the rippled bottom, occasionally sucking in a deep breath and diving down and probing the sand with my fingers, otherwise using my toes and trying to feel for anything hard. One day, I found an underwater opening in a rock. The way the currents and waves tended to hit the rock had hollowed it out over generations. I dove down to explore and found that the opening was a small cave. I could get deeper faster by pulling myself up onto the rock, taking a deep breath and diving in, twisting, and entering the cave. Scraping hulls in Nur had developed my ability to hold my breath for long periods of time. By diving in this way, I could explore the cave.

Beyond the opening, where wavy white sunlight still fell through the water, the cave was dark. I felt about for anything hard in the sand and uncovered quite a few shells. Then, my

fingers fell on a curve that felt unlike a shell or a rock. It was frigid, colder than the water around it. I was able to dig out a finger width but could budge it no farther. After five or six dives, I felt a smooth rod connected to a curved portion of the same material; it was metal or highly polished stone. But I was not able to budge it. With each dive, as the sun followed its bright course overtop, I dug out a bit more of the object. I could feel some kind of rounded connector with a joint. More digging uncovered a flat section of a different material. I discovered that the flat piece was wood by driving a splinter into the water-softened skin of my hand. By the time night fell and exhaustion overtook me, I had worked free the handle, a flat section, and one corner. The corner was bounded by metal. I despaired that much of my work would be undone by the movement of water overnight, but I could not continue the climbing and diving any longer.

Bobber kindly dropped me a good-sized fish for my dinner and I spent the rest of the night drinking water at the spring to wash out the many swallows of salt water and in eating my roasted fish.

The next day, I discovered that most of what had filled back in was softer than what I had dug out before and more easily removed again. I spent that day in the same activity, working around the edges that I could feel. No matter how much sand I removed, the object itself was rooted deep in the cave and at such an angle that a strong pull was impossible to exert against it. After four days of digging and four nights of partial reburial, the object gave when I pulled against the handle. Gave, but did not loose. I spent my time digging around the flat sides.

Bobber, Moh-ma, and Snarl sat on a rock nearby and watched me emerge time and time again. Moh-ma would make a clucking noise of concern every time I broke the surface and gasped for breathe. I reassured her that I was fine. Bobber looked interested in what I was doing

and Snarl simply watched fiercely at my diving technique and then looked disgusted when I didn't emerge with a fish of my own. He clearly took pity on me.

I finally got my fingers under part of the corner and pulled upward from both the bottom and the handle, loosening the chest further. The wood slats of the chest rubbed together with each effort and the handle gave with play from the wood. I was cautious not to pull the chest apart, scattering the contents, if contents there were. Breath after breath I worked my hands under the box and got it loose from the hole that had held it for I knew not how long. The box was as long as my legs and about half as wide. It was packed with sand, but, rather than dig out that part under water, I planned to move it to the beach and extract the contents carefully. What would have been a heavy load above water could be half floated, half drug across the bottom of the tidal area. Eventually, I slid it up over the tide pools and onto the beach.

The chest was plain wood, workmanlike, held together with bands of iron. In places the iron had rusted through, but enough of the nails had held together. I used a cup-shaped shell to dig out the dark embedded sand. I dug quickly, excited by the potential of my find. My bird friends stood nearby, as surprised and anxious as I was. Snarl, in particular, looked impressed by the size of what I had extracted. Even as I dug, the box inspired thoughts of the islands beyond. Where had the chest come from, what type of shipwreck or marooned sailor? Where would a ship be going in these outlying seas?...not to the treacherous shores of a prison island.

The first nick of something hard turned out to be a thin silver point. Gem-tines peaked out, empty of what they had once held. But as I worked it free with my fingers, I found the object was a crown, perhaps for a queen or princess. It was small in size, and worked of silver. Many of the gems remained intact, especially along the main head band. The colors were pearl

and sapphire. The finer work was bent, crimped, and broken off. I still detect the remains of fine filigree trees and vines twisting into one another.

The crown was partially buried in a bed of coins and sheets of gold. I worked some free next and spread them out on a broad leaf arranged on the sand. I did not wait to examine them closely, except to notice the coins' heterogeneity of size and imprint and to take note of their value. It was more wealth than I had ever owned, easily more than ten times of what I had saved in Keylocklundria (and who had stolen that? Or perhaps it remained secreted away under the bench of Greywart...to be found the day my rental of the space went unpaid or perhaps her next lucky owner). As I pulled out the coins and gold piece-by-piece, I uncovered the handle of a dagger. It too was silver, but more solidly made than the crown. A weapon for a soldier or royal guard, well made. The iron blade was triangular. There were marks and residue on it where a leather scabbard may have once held it but had rotted away or been lost. Although the blade had lost its edge, the handle and pommel remained solid and the stabbing point was sharp. I held it up to Snarl. He looked at it and looked away, clearly impressed but not wanting to admit it.

As I got to the bottom of the chest, I found a few loose rings for both a male and female hands and a comb of gold, the teeth of which had mostly broken off. I laid out the final coins on the sand.

Besides the crown, dagger, and rings, there were 32 coins 19 of which were gold, 12 of silver and one of bronze. This last was badly pitted by its time in the water and neither side revealed a sensible origin. The gold coins came in three general sizes. I started first by looking closely at the designs of the larger ones. The first I picked up was printed with a single line of images on one side and, on the reverse, there was a drawing of a bear-like creature wielding a sword and wearing a helm. The images were similar to those I had seen from Hroth and

explained by Tung, the pictures indicating both sounds and meaning. But these were images far different from the Hrothian language. There were sheaves of wheat, tiny mushrooms, wine jars, goblets, grapes. Each image had been carefully cast, and fine brushlike hatchings had added detail. I guessed that the meaning had something to do with wealth or prosperity from an island where such abundance was possible. Several other coins contained the bearlike-emblem and some combination of the same or similar characters. However, some of the silver coins were familiar to me, the widely circulated Sil-tok, the middling denomination of Nur. On it was the Nurian emblem, a vast city lined with people; on the reverse, the words "Prosperity. Security. Honor." Some of the smaller silver coins contained the faces of men and women, in profile, images of gods on the reverse. One showed a thin male figure praying to the sun and moon. Another showed a field of people being smited by a giant blade swinging out of the sky.

I began to put all the objects together in a single origin. The dagger and the crown were a man and a woman of great wealth from an island of plenty. To carry so much of value on a journey indicated a trade mission or diplomatic voyage. Perhaps the riches I had found were intended as gifts for a neighboring regent. Perhaps it was all an imaginary story and the chest, with its divergent coins and regal goods was merely the buried treasure of a peripatetic pirate or exiled warlord. Whoever had lost the chest or buried it there, the goods would help me if I ever got off the Mei Mei Lok.

There were six sheets of gold, no thicker than a fingernail but solidly made. They were remarkably untouched by the uncountable years under the water and still brightly reflected the sunlight. Their surfaces had been so formed that lines on the surface were clearly visible, as though etched by a stylus that day while the goal was still warm. On each was a portion of coastline and, when I fit the coastlines all together I realized that it was a map of an island. On

one side a mouth of land jutted out and formed what looked like a shield harbor, if the water was deep enough. At either side of the mouth two fortresses were indicated with an etching of a tower, which seemed more evidence for a closely guarded harbor. Back from that harbor, there was a square castle with four corner towers and an inner and outer curtain. Outside the castle was a walled city taking up most of the island. The walled city was named in a flowing script in which each letter connected to the next along a line at the top of the characters. The reverse of the plates was completely covered with the same script. If the plates were reassembled vertically, the script could be read from top to bottom.

I had spent enough time with Tung to have learned some of his techniques for deciphering new languages. Those made of pictures, he had told me once, are more difficult because, if given a small sample, it is hard to determine the total number of images that might make up the language. The total number of characters, or at least a general sense of the size of the total number, would help the decipherer understand the importance of repetition. With a large set, repetition was highly significant and easier to translate; with a small set, repetition was less significant and more difficult to translate since meaning would be affected by a number of other factors, particularly what was already understood in the sentence. However, language made from characters, as Nurian was, and as the language on the gold plates was, the number of characters was most likely to be between 10 and 30, with some having more and some, more barbaric languages, having fewer. On the gold plate, the number of distinct letters that I could count was 26, with a single vertical slash-mark used to divide all words. However, any two letters not connected or divided by the slash mark could be joined by two separate types of scripted connector. This multiplied the complexity of each set of characters.

After eating I spent the last hours of daylight examining the details of the golden map and its text on the reverse, looking for repetitions of words or characters, and trying to understand the ways that the characters were linked together. As night fell and my fire died out, I dreamed of this golden walled city with its impenetrable harbor, its princess and princesses (for so I imagined the wearers of the dagger and crown)...I dreamed of the script that night and as I dreamed it seemed to make sense. When I woke at the first light, however, the dreaming sense of it had passed and it again yielded no meaning. For whatever it was, I was unlikely to find out until I left my small island behind, which, that morning, I determined to do.

17.

I continued to scour the tidal area in hopes of finding anything that could help me build a craft. Beside the gold and silver, a crown, a dagger, a broken comb, a broken oar, and the pieces of a barrel were not quite enough. I was also worried about the trees; I did not want to inspire the wrath of Wei as Typhon had and I did not know if she protected the grove of trees lining the long spine of the island. I also didn't know how I could cut them down. The dagger might only help me clear the branches more quickly than my hands would. I did use the dagger to probe the sand. I spent several days stabbing the sand near the tide pools to see if I hit anything sharp. With this method, I uncovered a coil of half rotten hemp rope. It terminated in frays on either end, but I could take the fibers apart and rework them into a line of some kind. Probing with the dagger in the sand near the cave, I found the head of a trident, of bronze and, though, like the bronze coin, badly corroded on its surface, still strong. It had been forged by a smith familiar with the sea. Finding this trident rekindled my motivation to leave the island and continue my intended journeys.

After many more days of searching, I grew restless in the quest for items that I might never find and decided to begin my preparations with what I had. First, I wanted to make an offering to Wei. I had many items of value to offer, much of which would be of little use to me in making my preparations or, if successful in building a craft, my voyage.

One morning, at sunrise, I went to the spring, accompanied by Moh-ma. I said aloud: "Wei. I do not know the requirements of your worship. I know you are an ancient and powerful goddess who saved me from a terrible fate. I must continue to journey in life and need your help again. I will take three of your trees, and, in exchange give you something of great value from where I come from." I laid the crown and one of the largest gold coins on an edge of smooth rock near the spring. Then I began to build a craft.

I straightened one of the hoops under the weight of some rocks. With the dagger point, I carved a slot down the edge of the broken oar. I fashioned several lengths of thin rope from the fibers I had found. I set the hoop in the slots and bound it at either end. The heft of the oar gave it swinging weight and the thin metal of the hoop gave it a cutting edge.

I chose a tree wider than my hips and, near sunset, made the first strike against it. Wei did not appear out of the air to strike me down, although many of the birds flew in to watch. On their beaks, I thought I could see expressions of great concern. I made small cuts with each chop---dishearteningly small cuts. I would almost have been better off whittling my way through with the dagger. However, once I got the skill of my axe, I began to strike at a better angle against the fibrous trunk. I could swing it in such a way to bite the fibers of the trunk and snap through to a deeper segment.

The age of the metal hoop blade and the desiccation of the oar slowed the felling of the trees. Each hard swing brought with it the fear that the oar would split or the hoop dent. I had to

replace the rope band nearly every day as the force of the strikes cut through their fibers, and that meant refashioning the rope into smaller and smaller sections. Still, I made slow progress, day by day. Eventually, the weight of the tree began to weigh on the cut area and, as the chops slowly thinned the trunk at its base, the tree creaked, moaned, and fell. All that was left was the cutting through of the last flexed fibers of the tree.

The softness of the wood was useful to me. I thought that the trunk would float high on its own. But, because of its fibrous nature, it would be hard to hollow out into a canoe, and, given my tools, that would take a very long time. Instead, I decided to fell the two thickest limbs and a much thinner tree trunk. I trimmed the trunk down to a length of about twice my height. This was more difficult than the initial felling because I did not have the weight of the standing tree working in my favor. However, I was swinging directly downward, which has some advantages. I took the dagger and went to work on the discarded upper half of the trunk. I removed its branches and bark, and flayed the wood with the dagger, stripping the fibers out, keeping them as long as possible. The fibers I wove into thicker strands to form a sticky but surprisingly strong braided rope.

Next, I bored two holes in both the small trunk and the big trunk, and whittled the larger branches at either end to fit those holes. I took the ten barrel staves, curved side down, and spread them out along the branches that connected to the two trunks. In appearance it was not unlike a ladder, but it would be my platform for the open sea. Each stave took much time to attach securely using the fiber rope. In its design the craft was rudimentary. Much later in life, I would see similar ones in use by fyrine islanders, but hewn out of beautiful hardwoods that could be dug out and crafted into sharper hulls to aid navigate. As rudimentary as mine was, however, the staves stabilized the connecting limbs, and the connecting limbs stabilized the trunks. The

questions I then had was whether I could figure a way to harness the wind. My initial tree had plenty of long limbs remaining in addition to the broad green leaves. I found some of the youngest of the branches, which still bent with some little exertions and bound together a triangle with my rope. Over this I layered leaves. I used so many that I had to take down another tree-worth of them. They had to be laid on both sides. The only way I could figure out to adhere them was to cut a hole in each leaf at its strongest point, near the base of the central stem. Then, I took the next leaf, put the stem through this hole, cutting another in it, thus layering the leaves like scales and hanging them upside down on the triangle. I created two complete layers in this manner, one for each side of the sail, overlapping and wrapping the edges around the triangle base and binding them with a final double spiral of fiber rope, which formed a relatively strong crisscross.

Because I did not know what kinds of winds and weather I would face, I chose a mast from a young trunk. Giving with force might be necessary due to the sluggish nature of my awkward craft. It would be better to lose some wind than to have it snap off during the first stiff breeze. I bore a hole in the main trunk, between the two lateral supports and affixed the mast.

During this work, the sun rose and set many times. At a certain point in the year, when the sun seemed the hottest, the gray birds came on to the island to lay eggs in ground nests near the lagoon. They watched those nests carefully for many days, until the pink hatchlings emerged. The hatchlings lived in the lagoon and learned to swim, were fed regurgitated fish by their mothers, grew, and began to practice taking off and landing in the lagoon. Soon, the young birds were out on the reef, fishing with the rest.

Although I worked as strenuously as I could, I also did not rush. What difference would one day make as opposed to another, I often asked myself. I did not know what would come of

my next adventure. It was very possible I would capsize shortly after setting off, or be swept off my craft by a wave (in order to prevent this I had made enough rope to lash myself onto the deck while sleeping). While I was building, I continued my exchange of fruit for fish with the grey birds. But, instead of roasting and eating them, I used my dagger to debone and clean the fish, dipped them in salt water and then wrapped them in the leaves and set them over a smoky fire of driftwood. This would be my fare for the voyage. I also felled a third tree trunk and chopped it into three sections, dug out the soft inner pulp of the trunk, while leaving one side sealed, and fashioned large "corks" out of the same trunk. These barrels would hold my precious water. After this, I created a lid of small branches to hold the chest closed. I lined the bottom with my riches and the rest with my salted fish---the chest held enough for a long voyage. I lashed the chest to the deck. I fashioned a lid that could be tied down, from small pieces of driftwood bound together in a plank. My final act was to set the trident head into a shaft. Because of the soft and fibrous nature of the wood there, I was only able to use a short shaft or it would have been too flexible to be effective either in fishing or fighting, but I managed to find one stiff enough for a shaft about as long as my arm.

Thus I had my second craft, my second sword, and my second trident, each a lesser version of the first.

At a dawn ceremony attended by my friends, the birds, I named my craft Mei's Vengeance. That day, I spent at the spring, drinking and eating as much as I could. I rested for hours on the beach, still strangely conflicted about whether to leave Mei Mei Lok or remain there in the peaceful life. If I had not found the gold, my future prospects would have seemed less promising. If I could survive a journey to a civilized, populated island I would have no trouble paying for supplies, maps, and a new sailboat to make my attempt to find Fas Cerie. Gold alone

spoke to me then, telling of its possibilities despite the clucks and nudges of Moh-ma trying to convince me to stay away from the strange thing I had been building and Snarl's poorly hidden attempt to convince me to stay (he would undo small parts of my ropework while I slept). That and the golden map, the sense of cities beyond what I knew, the islands that still glowed in my memory from Juna's maps. Gold and hope and possibility drove me to, the next day, drag my craft across the beach and down into the water.

Mei's Vengeance floated high and held stable on the water. I raised the sail by fixing the mast and, straddling the main trunk, paddled with my broken oar out toward the reef. The entire flock of birds surrounded me, some riding along on the craft itself, watching me operate the sail to catch some wind. When I got out into the dark water beyond the reef, most of the flock turned back. Only Moh-ma and Bobber still stood on the deck, and Snarl glided on the winds above, scanning the water for danger. Soon, though, after diving toward my head a few times to show his affection, he returned to the flock. Moh-ma, came and landed on my shoulder and pecked my head and hit me with her wing. Then, she too was gone. Only Bobber remained, bobbing his head on the far trunk and looking like he would never turn back.

Mei's Vengeance bent and twisted in the middle when the seas began to grow. The fiber ropes cried with tension. I tightened them as they loosen. The process of being swollen by water during rougher seas and then dried by the sun when it was calmer tensioned the ropes into a more consistent hold. I realized that I should have grooved the trunks for where I wanted the wraps to hold in order to prevent slippage. However, the give of the stabilizing branches and staves helped her weather heavier seas; instead of biting into waves and sinking her prow, she absorbed the flow and yawled over. As long as the stabilizing deck held, she would be seaworthy. Without it, I would have quickly sunk. I kept my trident lashed to the stabilizing deck in case I

should raise a fish to the surface and I kept my dagger tucked into a piece of braided rope around my waist.

When night fell, I took mark of the Whale's tale and set my course in my mind, comparing to where I knew the sun to be rising and setting, and aligning it with the path of the moon and stars. I had watched them enough from my nights on the beach to predict their gradual shifts over time. I set the sail to send us in that direction and bound myself to the deck. I told Bobber to awake me if the wind changed, but I did not rely on him. I woke with significant shifts in weather, seas, or wind direction: Wei's Revenge awakened me with her complaints.

When seas were calm and the days long, I straddled the main trunk and, holding the plates carefully over the trunk so they couldn't get dropped into the depths, tried to decipher the language on the back. It was mostly an idle occupation for my mind, with only the horizon to look at and a half-crazy bird to talk to (although talk to him I did, at great length).

"If this map were a gift to a neighboring ruler, the back of the plate must be a favorable declaration or flattering homage to that ruler. Perhaps though it is a factual description of the city itself....what do you think?" Bobber would bob his head vigorously at that, as he did in response to any question I asked him. Sometimes, I tried to convince him to return, but he seemed to have little interest. An outsider to his own flock, itself a group apart from all others of its kind (if such existed elsewhere at all). "Maybe, Bobber, this is a set of directions for finding the island, intended as a welcome and invitation. We could go there if we could read what it said." Again, he bobbed.

That night the stars disappeared behind a black cloak. The sea grew dark. The wind became cruel and cutting. I took down the sail for fear of having it torn to shreds. But, since I did not have a way to furl it, it rode from the middle of the deck to the secondary truck, risking

being split by heavy waves. I tied my waist to the deck and held on to the barrel staves with my fingers. I tried to gather Bobber to my body, to protect him from the wind, but he seemed to have a remarkable capacity for hunkering down and shaping his body so that the wind flowed over it without plucking him from the deck. Mei's Vengeance rose on the steep waves and, reaching the top, flexed and tipped down, riding swiftly to the trough, and then up another face. Sometime we were sideways to the wave, and sometimes head on, but the effect was almost the same. My body was lifted from the deck time and time again, held on only by the hand-made rope and my fingers, which came to be freezing. A dull morning dawned, adding only a gray tone to the water and lightening the skies somewhat. I was weak, hungry, and thirsty. I saw in the light that I had lost one of the water barrels, cutting in third the amount of time I would be able to survive in the open seas.

The heavy seas did not abate for many days. The sun stayed hidden. The stars, precious for the orientation of their map, were gone from the night. When the storm broke I ate and drank a small handful of water, fed Bobber some of my fishhead, and lay on my back in the sun. Bobber took flight to stretch his wings. I fell asleep. Based on the position of the sun when I passed into dreaming, I was headed far off course. I waited until the stars came out to confirm that. I woke as they did and, it was true, I was under the Whale's dorsal fin now, heading the direction, of the constellation of the Stags, which I understood from my memory of Juna's map, to be toward the eyrthrine, but that was far away, much farther than Ur-Gandur. I set sail again, and positioned her in a direction to head toward the Whale's tale.

When Bobber landed again, I asked him, "Did you see anything?" and he bobbed his head up and down, but he had not, or he would have made some sort of sound.

I returned to the pattern of my days, but with a diminished sense of hopefulness. Bobber was a constant reminder of the simple life I had left behind in exchange for the risk of open seas in an open sailing vessel of little durability and navigability. I was well off course. I began to lie for hours on the narrow deck, staring down into the greenish-gray water of the seas.

One day, as I was lying there, I saw something white stir deep below, a glowing orb with a blank black center. I thought, if it had not been so large, it could have been an eye. It disappeared into the murk again. I lay there, unsettled by the vision and unsure if what I had seen was real. As night fell, I saw more than a giant white orb. When darkness fell, I saw lines of violet and sapphire flowing beneath the sea as though strands of glowing string were rotating around a single center. The orb was not visible, but I thought that the two phenomena had to have been related. I kept my limbs out of the water while this show went on. The flowing colors, which could become green or yellow before darkening back to violet, were entrancing, like the dancing head of a snake or the movement of wind through trees. I had heard of glowing kelp and other vegetation of the sea but this was too regulated into the curving, motion-full lines. And, the movement seemed purposeful, as though shaped by an intelligent hand. After a long time of watching this, the orb floated closer. It was an eye and it was looking right at me.

I unlashed the trident and stood up on deck, holding the weapon ready to plunge into the eye. But, it still had a peaceful look, and the pulsing violet waves flowing out from the eye were moving in a rhythm. Then Bobber, who was watching the display as well, squawked and began to take off out of fear. As he did, I watched his gray form against the starlit sky: a few wing beats, and then, from behind, a moving form, a long thin arm, pulsating violet, reached out and wrapped around his body, and pulled him quickly beneath the surface. I sunk the trident straight down into the orb. Bobber popped out of the water and took off, squawking. The trident's three

barbed points sunk true. As they did, the shaft was twisted to one side and, rather than let go on my weapon, I was thrown overboard into the dark sea.

The violet arms were all around me, but they were not thin like string, but rather thick, slick, and muscular, and uncountable, they grasped me from all direction and pulled me beneath the surface. I had my dagger out in one hand and the trident shaft in the other. I managed to work free the trident and slash in all directions with the dagger. The sea around me filled with a new flavor, blood from the arms. The glowing flashes lit the blood greenish. The arms were thrashing me from side to side, pulling me ever deeper. My head and ears throbbed from the pressure, but I continued to stab at the center eye with the trident while wildly slashing and stabbing with the dagger. The arms, when injured, would let me go, and I would begin to float upward, but new ones would entangle me again. There was not a mouth reaching for me either: the goal of the creature was not to feed. My life would last exactly as long as I could hold my breath.

Suddenly, I saw what looked like a dull greenish sun lighting up the water. It was growing in size. I thought I was delusional, my brain starved by pain and lack of breath. Then, I was brushed aside by a rough body, and swallowed and blinded by a flash of sulfurous yellow. I sensed a giant head or a giant mouth, no eyes, just an intense glow and terrible roughness. At first, I was pulled along inside the brightness. I tried slashing at it, but my blade passed through it without resistance. Then, the arms went limp and I was free. By this time my lungs were burning and I struggled to float to the top. The days of diving for the chest had further expanded my lungs. Without that, I would have drowned long before.

I broke the surface and called out for Bobber. I could see nothing past waves breaking around my head. I had to kick to stay afloat enough to breathe, but the wood trident shaft

provided some floatation. From the corner of my eye I saw the bright area beneath the water, the yellowish orange and around it flickering violet arms. I hoped that some greater predator had attacked the one with the eye, perhaps attracted by the blood I loosed into the water with my frantic stabs.

"Bobber!," I called out.

The skies were empty and silent. No sounds responded to my calls except that of water sloshing over my head and catching my ears with their slaps. My gasps seemed the loudest sound in all the islands just then.

Then Bobber glided to a landing near my face, his head bobbing up and down.

"Where's the craft?" I yelled. He took off again and after several moments, landed again near my face and began to swim away. I tucked the dagger in my robe belt as best I could and swam with difficulty holding the trident in front. Mei's Vengeance was not far away, but I would never have seen it without Bobber. The skies were too dark, my head too low, the waves too turbulent and blinding. I pulled myself onto the deck and stood, trident ready again, fearing another attack. My leg, which had been brushed by the second beast's attack, was bleeding badly. I huge patch of skin had been removed. I bound one of the leaves used for wrapping salt fish to it, but this did not keep the blood from dripping onto the staves and then into the water. For a long night I looked intently through the dark shine of the water's surface, expecting the sulfur or the violet glow. I had been saved by the attack of another creature, a creature whose form I could only vaguely imagine, but who was attracted by the smell of blood. I did not feel safe again until daylight rose. In truth, I didn't feel completely safe on the open ocean again.

I'm not sure that since those days and nights on Mei Mei's Lok I have ever slept that soundly again. I know that, aboard Mei's Vengeance in the days and nights that followed, I

barely slipped into slumber and when I did, I pictured that eye rising to the surface. My food dwindled. Bobber had little success fishing in the open sea---he had known only his shallow reef and its steady abundance---though he continued to try. More troublesome than that was the approaching emptiness of my water casks. The third and last held only a few fingersworth, enough, at most, for a handful of days. Then that was gone, and the salt fish became nearly impossible to swallow. I lay inert on deck, half dreaming in the sun, half dizzied by the stars and became too weak to follow my course accurately. Although I never slept, I also stopped waking up.

18.

I heard the creaking of ship timbers first. I could not raise my head. Then a metal clanging, then some men heaving. Mei's Vengeance was pulled sideways through the water. I stirred myself enough to see a grappling hook sunk into the main trunk. Bobber was listlessly squawking. I was lifted by the armpits and a rope was wrapped around me and I was dragged up the side of the ship. Up a deck, and another, and another. My blood must have sunk into my legs during this hoisting, because I lost consciousness.

I awoke, swinging gently in darkness. Feet moved across the deck above my head. Other bodies hung nearby. I lifted my head.

A face covered with boils and a mouth of what looked like four flesh flower petals that unfurled, wavered, and resealed with each labored breath he took. He handed me a green shell containing a milky liquid and pushed it to my lips. Fruit-sweetened water, with a strong dose of something hot and fermented. I held it on my tongue for a moment, wary. But the instinct to swallow was too great. My very limbs were calling out for a drink. A splendid current flowed

through my body. The feeling expanded and plumped me from my desiccated state. I drank the cup's remainder. The deliverer went away and came back with more. I could see a little better now---the sustenance had spread to my head and eyes. The creature who returned with another full shell had neither nose nor mouth, but, in their place, a flowerlike flapping thing in the center of his head through which the snuffling breaths issued. Black, protruding eyes on the side of his head did not blink, nor did they indicate anything of its character. I drank off another cup of the stuff and began to feel almost alive. The creature brought me a bowl. In it, some mashed food, like roots softened through boiling and soaked in the milky white liquid. I shoveled the substance into my mouth. It was salty and sweet at the same time, which caused my mouth to salivate abundantly and before I knew it I had finished two bowls of the food, to the delighted snuffling of my cook or servant.

Soon, I was sitting up in my hammock and looking around the dim space. It was filled with men sleeping and filled with the smells of workers or sailors---a moist, sweaty, astringency-- the sounds of their snoring. My chef snuffled politely and pointed to a nearby corner of the quarters. There my trident hung lashed to the wall and my dagger resting on top of the chest.

I said, "The bird?" My voice was barely a whisper.

The chef held up his arms, which were fingerless featherless winglike flaps. He didn't understand my words. I didn't see any ears on his head either. I pressed my fingers together in a Claydian gesture of wholehearted thanks, nodded my head in the same way. He nodded his head and snuffled, and then, in a flash, turned and waddled away on webbed feet. He returned quickly, with a man who walked bent over to avoid the low ceiling, approached my hammock, nodded.

"Dendurifon han vi," he said, as though I should have no trouble understanding him.

I shook my head. He gestured toward himself and then pointed away from him.

I stood and, with difficulty, balanced. I had to duck my head beneath the deck above. He pointed toward my chest and weapons and pointed his palms toward the ground to mean, they can stay there, and then he walked briskly away. I followed. The path took me past a few more sleeping quarters and some closed cabin doors. He led me to an area of the ship overseen by a hugely round sailor wearing a particolored bandana, no shirt over his abundantly hairy torso, and flowing gold pants. The officer (for so I guessed my guide to be), pointed to me and said something. The round man sized me up, muttering to himself in the same language, and then disappeared into rows of shelves behind him. He returned with a pair of stout white pants made of heavy sailcloth and a loose-fitting blue shirt. I pulled off my bleached white, tattered short pants, and handed them over to him. He took them between two of his fingers and dropped them into a box affixed to the wall. Then he and the officer haggled with each other, obviously about payment for the clothing and the officer reassured him that he would be paid soon. I noticed though, that, as the officer and the man were talking, I understood one or two words if I thought about them with a different accent. I heard "sil-tok" but also "other islander" and "ugly."

The officer looked at me and held out two fingers. I thought this meant two coins, perhaps sil-toks. I nodded in agreement. The officer rolled his eyes at the round man, gave him a dismissive gesture, and walked away.

I made my thanks to the purveyor of clothing and followed the officer once more. We both had to duck beneath beams and step over thwarts. We climbed ladders until I could smell the fresh sea air pouring down. What I found above was not so much a deck of a ship but a village. In width, the village was four or five times the size of Wei Wei Lok and in length beyond anything I had seen afloat. Strangest of all, there were no masts. The deck was covered

with flat-roofed dwellings. Near each dwelling could be found pens for livestock of various descriptions. Outside, women and children moved here and there in groups, wearing dark purple, bright red, and green clothing. In front of others I saw creatures---walking on two legs---I had never seen before. Was it a ship at all, or a vast floating island? But I only had a moment to consider, as my guide was marching down a raised deck that ran across the houses. After several minutes walking through a village that was also like a deck of a ship, we hit the central spine that ran along the middle. It was raised and, on either side, led to elaborately designed decks, recessed with steps of terraced dwellings. There were lines looping here and there. Canvas sheets stretched to either block the sun or capture rainwater, and others pulled vertical to channel fresh air down portholes. Forward and aft more highly raised decks on which sailors were at work on various tasks. I was led forward. Although I was sustained by my recent meal, my legs had once again shrunk down and grew tired with the walking. I noticed, however, that the deck and the "ship" itself moved little with the seas, probably due to its enormous size. I could barely tell that we were at sea at all, though the blue horizons sinking into the gray-white sky in all directions told me we most surely were. I could also detect, barely, forward motion...forward motion that strangely seemed to be into the wind.

As I was still trying to take it all in I went up several decks and was led to one with four or five massive structures. These were not the humble village dwellings of the lower decks, but rather beautifully constructed buildings with peaked roofs, lintels fabulously carved with geometric patterns. The wood itself was blood-red in color, obviously rare, with rich grain to the boards. The details were plated in gold, newly refreshed, and the door itself was of ebony stone yet swung lightly on its hinges. Guards stood on either side of the door. They wore light leather armor and wore curved swords at their belts. The officer nodded to them; they let him through.

All the doors were red and gold and all were guarded. Before we entered I looked back over my shoulder from this, the highest deck. Equal in height with it, spread throughout the ship's outermost edges, other beautifully crafted structures were situated; each of a different style and color, from black to yellow to orange, with high-peaked roofs and rounded thatched ones. Guards stood on all of the highest decks, on either side of all the highest doors. As I cast my eyes across the space, which stretched farther than I could see, I noticed individual guards standing here and there on the various higher decks and all those cascading decks below those. At the edges of the vessel, there stood at an even interval, men on long, railed platforms hanging out over the edge. Their eyes were constantly trained on the water and out toward the horizon. It must have been one of them that first spotted me.

Inside the door was an antechamber with more guards. I waited there while the officer disappeared behind a richly ornamented wall. As I waited I became entranced by the detail of the carving on the wall, which, rather than depict a scene or figure, was a system of interrelated shapes of increasingly minute detail, all interwoven and interrelated in a vast pattern. When I looked the pattern floated before my vision. I wondered how much damage had been done to my body by the time on Mei Mei Lok and adrift at sea, and in the years since leaving home.

I tried some Nurian on the guard that stood nearest me. "What is this place?"

He stared forward without acknowledging me.

I went back to following the lines of the wall.

The officer returned and gestured me to follow once again, going behind the wall.

There, more guards and a broad double door of the same obsidian. We pressed through those into the interior. The view drew my eye first. Windows lined a curving wall looking out over the sea. A broad seating area thrown with pillows and cushions of all description ran along

the windows. In the center of the room, at a low table, kneeled several beings. Broad sheets of paper covered the table, except for the center, where a huge tray of delicacies sat. The perfume of the food wafted immediately to my nostrils.

The beings were not like me and the officer. They were smaller and fearsome looking, with greenish scaled skin. On their backs, they wore blown-glass tanks filled with greenish fluid: the fluid---in appearance no different than water---was piped in tubes to the front of their throats, where it was sucked in through a pink opening and bubbles floated out a second tube immediately afterward. When I came in, all three of them turned their heads to one side so that a single greenish eye could stare at me from the side of their heads. The tubes, which had apparently been glass, stretched and gave with their movements. Then, the center one, took up a wooden pen and dipped it in a pot of ink and wrote, in perfect script.

"You are from Nur, are you not?"

I nodded.

The officer made some sounds in his own language, gesturing to his mouth and ears to indicate that, although they can't speak they can hear you well enough.

"I am from Clayd, an island near Nur. I speak and read Nurian."

All three of them nodded. The center one wrote,

"Are you a member of the Navy of the Ten Cities?"

I shook my head no and added, "I am a member of nothing. I was recently marooned on an outlier island and escaped on the vessel you found me on."

They nodded again. Then they wrote something on another sheet of paper, rolled it up, and sealed it with wax and a giant ring, handed it to the officer (who was now seeming more like a servant of higher powers rather than a leader in his own command), who promptly disappeared.

The three beings stared at me for the entire time he was gone. Their amber eyes did not blink. Their looks suggested neither judgment nor interest, but simply naked presence, as though I was a new wall that had appeared in a room to which they were accustomed. When he returned, he gestured me to follow him again. This time the chamber was small and dark. In the center of it, a man sat crosslegged with a book in his lap. The pages of the books were elaborately illuminated and written in a language I had not seen before.

"Welcome," said the man, waving away my guide carelessly. "I am Ge."

"Thank you for rescuing me," I said, assuming this to be the person in charge.

He laughed. "I am not responsible for that...we have crew to collect...floating debris...in case it is of value. As a man of wealth, you are of value. One of my agents purchased you from a ... garbage dealer."

"As I told the...beings outside--"

"—Yes?...what would the Nurian word be for a being beyond the capacity of a Nurian to understand...?"

"I will freely admit to being at a loss."

"The closest word would be Knowers...I use them to detect truth. This is a very powerful thing to have. They come from far away and beneath the surface....of the...well what you probably know as the wyndrine...their skin is constantly attune to the world around them, so their knowledge of something is not what it appears to be...or someone. They are useful in telling me if a stranger is an assassin or a spy. I crafted their breathing apparatus myself. Here, they acquire enough wealth to return home as great kings...return home to a place where their talents are not unique."

The man who spoke was impressed with himself, yet stern and self-disciplined. For some reason, I was filled with fear standing there, more so than I had been in the presence of any being.

“As I told them, I was marooned on Mei Mei Lok, a very small, outlying island.”

"So they have written. My question, is marooned how...? And in transit to where...? And completely alone....this is a rare shipwreck. And you are from a poor island...unlikely to be fitted out for a transrine voyage. So you must be the member of the crew of a ship that we have not encountered or even glimpsed."

I did not immediately respond to these questions. In the outer room, beings who could detect a lie waited.... And yet I was criminal, escaped from a prison, carrying wealth that was not my own. Yet, again, I could be killed at any moment, since the power that surrounded me was greater than I could hope to defeat. I thought about the book on his lap, a volume of great value, the fact that this man knew of Clayd, which meant he potentially possessed the knowledge of all the islands in the mydrine, if not much more beyond....his Knowers came from the wyndrine...He would have had my belongings searched and examined. The question about the Navy of the Ten Cities seemed to suggest the Navy was the enemy of this island. It was best to tell the truth and see what happened next.

I began with my apprenticeship and told my life story in full detail, embellishing a little here and there to make it run along swiftly. After I told the portion about the Tower on Keylocklundria and the Tower on the prison island of Xin's Maw, my interlocutor seemed to pay greater attention. After the destruction of Typhon, he was no longer believing me.

When I finished, he said, "I was not jesting about the Knowers, but clearly you have seen fit not to believe me. Their power is real, yet I do not require their powers to cast doubt on your

tale. They say you are not of the Navy of the Ten Cities, so perhaps you are not irredeemably corrupt. Perhaps, you stole from your masters in Hilm Rew...or are an escaped archer of the Great Castle of the Family D'V'dennin."

"I've never heard those names..."

"The plates you carry are their property."

"As I said, I found them buried in the sand."

"On an island that doesn't exist on any chart and that I myself have never encountered where you and an unseen god killed an immortal demon."

"That's right."

"I see my purchase is a storyteller of rare value. Nonetheless, our kingdom here has no king. We are a collective of special beings of great wealth. You have joined us. You are not of the status of us, yet you do not belong below decks, because of your wealth, stolen or not....and who are we to judge? If the Judges Guild on Keylocklundria sent you to Xin's Maw as an immortal prisoner and you are now here, you are the most dangerous person I have ever laid eyes on or who has ever come aboard our island...if I believed your story I would have you killed." He was perfectly calm as he said this. "And there is a population of undesirables," he said with disgust, "below decks to fill the world. You slept among them in their hammocks."

He was interrupted by a sound from outside, a voice calling.

"Civi...Civi!"

As one voice called, others repeated, taking up the repetition of the warning or announcement or hail, until voices through the island ship seemed to be repeating it.

"You will find this interesting, I think."

We left the small chamber and passed by the Knowers, who stood and bowed to the man. They each issued a shrill scream---like a child torn from its mother---which seemed to be a form of greeting. We passed the entranceway, and the guard, who followed us out onto the upper deck.

He looked around the water and said, "ah yes. There we have it."

Square sails on the horizon. The lookouts around the island were shouting "Civi!" and the call was now being repeated below decks. Up through the main deck, men were swarming. Each had a task, and under-officers shouted orders from stations throughout the crowd. They were collapsing and stowing the entire village, clearing the decks of hundreds of small dwellings. Elsewhere, hollow hulls splashed down and huge boats rowed toward the ship. There must have been fifteen of these swift attack boats, with a hundred armed men on each, for a total of five or six times what the ship on the horizon could possibly hold. Shortly, the row-boats had crossed the gap. Two or three of them disgorged their crews onto it, bodies swarmed up over the decks, cutlasses and hatched raised and fell, catching here and there the sunlight. The attack, seen from that distance, made no sound. Soon, the sails went down, and the ship was towed back to the island.

When it got close, I could see that on its decks, the men from the island ship were at work dismantling the masts and stripping plank from plank with curved adzes and sledge hammers and chopping tools. A group of sailors were tied up in the bow; limbs and torsos and blood covered the deck.

The island ships main deck was now clear and a great ramp of beam rails had been lowered over one side. The rowers brought the captured ship to the base of this ramp and attached about forty lines to the bow. All the men who had come from belowdecks, positioned

themselves along the lines and began pulling. They chanted a rhythmic song so that their pulls would be in unison. The captured ship moved smoothly up the ramp and settled in the main deck in a V-shaped slot engineered to hold a hull of nearly any design.

The prisoners were unloaded and led below deck. Now, all the belowdecks sailors continued the work of dismantling the ship. They removed all the ship's stores and the trade goods it had been carrying, which came in various barrels, casks, trunks, and chests. Everything disappeared promptly: wood in one direction, water barrels in another, rope and other ship-goods in another direction. All of it shouldered or slung or heaved in teams by the countless sailors that swarmed like ants over the deck. As we watched a three masted merchant ship became nothing but stacks of timbers and piles of goods, which, after a fashion, the men began to saw down and stow away somewhere down below.

"Would you like a tour?" asked Ge.

I said I would. At the least, the man's self-affection would lead him to give me some amount of information that might be useful. He gestured to two of the guards to follow and led me away from the deck.

"What is the name of this...?" I asked.

"Island? Ship?" He said. "There is no exact translation into the language we are speaking now...the only language, I take it, that you speak. However, something like Ydridria is close. In our language, the name is closer to The Power. Our language, though, is a language of other languages....bastardized by conquest. We---me and those like me----we are all there is. A collective of powerful men and this is our ship and our island."

"Where did you come from..." I asked. We were walking on a catwalk above the main deck, where countless workers were reassembling what I had thought to be a village.

He gestured to the village and said, "This is where our women live. We come from here. We were born here, as were our fathers. We hold allegiance to none but each other. Our ancestors were all brothers."

I noticed as we walked that the officers shouting orders this way and that were indistinguishable from the guards that followed us: they were dressed the same and wore the same emotionless countenances. The lookouts too, were the same. A class, apparently, of perfectly loyal servants, serving the class of powerful leaders spread throughout the upper decks.

I followed Ge down the catwalk, down a ladder to the main deck. We walked around as the buildings were reassembled and the women were returned to their dwellings. Ge knew all those we passed by name. The woman seemed to have come from all over. Some were long-bodied and limbed, with dusky skin and dark eyes. Some had pale almond eyes set amid muted brown faces topping sturdy, low-slung bodies. There were head scarves and women with shaved heads. I saw gold necklaces of fine fabrication and leather bracelets adorned with animal teeth. They were all dressed in plain clothes of rough but sturdy material, rather like what I had been given. In their little huts, some were returning to work at elaborate weaving machines, while other minded groups of children. The children ran around chasing the sailors; the sailors ignored them, as they ignored the woman, and us. It was as though the sailors had been so disciplined that they did not even see us. This might be a gesture of respect or fear for Ge, but for an average mydrine sailor to walk among countless women going here and there and not even glancing sideways once, told me that the punishment for breaking discipline was severe. Either that or an invisible power was at work. The women, for their part, paid little attention to the sailors except to stay out of their way.

"Our wives contribute to the ship by making clothing for the workers and raising the children. In return, we take care of them and they live in the fresh air above decks."

"These are all the wives of the powerful?"

"Yes. We hold them in common."

"They are from..."

"All corners of the seas. To raise the strongest children we must bring in fresh blood wherever we can find it....We rely on our sons..." He pointed to the guards.

"And what of daughters," I asked.

"Our daughters..." he said... "are traded.."

I wondered if this were true and, if it were, who would risk trading with such a powerful force, when they attacked other ships unprovoked and swallowed them up whole. Before we left that area, I caught the eye of one of the wives. She was young, with violet eyes and dark hair, tall and long limbed. For an instant, a smile flicked to the corner of her mouth---and then her look returned to the impassive expression of the others. Ge could call themselves what he liked but they were nothing but slaves. The "Powerful" were nothing but well organized pirates. Among the people I had come from, both slave traders and pirates were held in the lowest esteem. I returned the woman's smile. I did not want to escape this place. I wanted to destroy it. And perhaps take some of its wealth. But to destroy, did not mean only to take it physically apart, to shatter and sink its vast timbers, but to cause chaos in its order, to end the rule of the powerful.

I did not know if it was that look, or the way that Ge spoke to me, as though I was a piece of garbage found floating on the sea (despite that is what I was), but I did not like him and I did not like that place. I had seen the powerful, well organized government of Keylocklundria

conspire, or be fooled into conspiring, to imprison me. I looked at the women in their dwellings that now seemed more like the animal pens you would find above decks on an ordinary ship. I thought about what the greatest weakness of the island ship must be. Fire would be the first, though I suspected they had a system for extinguishing small ones. Mutiny next. I calculated that there must have been two or three hundred times the number of men below decks than there were of men like Ge. Adding the women to that number and the "Powerful" seemed to be in a numerically weak position, even with the loyalty of their sons as guards. Something---perhaps something terrible---prevented mutiny. But I still did not know how an island, with no masts or sails, navigated and propelled itself.

Then we went below decks. The first section we encountered was filled with areas devoted to manufacturing and construction: glassblowing and basket weaving and metal smithing took place here. I saw men painting geometric patterns on wooden panels and others weaving rugs and assembling bird cages of thin strips of wood. The area was like the largest bazaar in Nur but with a more organized, regimented feel. In some of these areas, older women were working. The fires were stoked by workers and chimney pipes channeled out the smoke. All the food was prepared and preserved in the stern. As we passed, the livestock removed off the ship they had just untaken was being slaughtered and preserved. The butchers channeled the blood into the buckets that were taken to parts of kitchen area and turned in food.

Ge gloated about the smoothness of the operations. "Notice how happy the workers are here. Most have escaped a life even further below decks and are amused by the skills they have been taught. Just as you would have on Clayd, we maintain a strict apprentice system, identifying talented youngsters to be trained in a skill, or, when wives have aged beyond their prime, retraining them in arts for which they seem suited. The result decorates not only the

homes of the powerful, but provide the goods for our trading ships, which we send in all directions, captained by our brothers and crewed by our sons. You may have even seen our ships in ports you are familiar with; they travel under a hundred disguises and claim to be from a hundred lands. They might be gone for decades before finding us again, but our security is best maintained by remaining in the outerseas where no one can find us. You have seen what happens to the ships that do. They contribute their raw materials to our operations and their men to the least desirable work of keeping us moving."

"Yes. I wondered about that."

"It is the marvel of marvels," he said. "but, before I show it to you, I must extract a promise."

"A promise...?"

"Yes. A promise. Among my brothers, our word is very strong, no one of us has ever broken a promise. Sharing so much...property...can result in complicated conflicts of interest...even so, we never break our word."

"How do you know I will not break mine? I am not bound by no bonds of loyalty to you or your brothers."

"Break your promise and I will have you killed slowly in a very painful...but of course I can show you the method."

"What's the promise?"

"You must promise never to leave this island. Or I should say more accurately, try to leave, you've seen the swiftness of my oarsman."

I did not answer immediately and focused on remaining expressionless. My answer would have to be obsequious enough to flatter Ge's arrogance but not so obsequious to raise his

suspicious. He was not particularly careful...too long accustomed to the orderly and unchallenged existence of those in power. Looking back on this time, I am unsure still if my motivation was simply personal dislike of Ge, of the impression he made and his self-satisfaction. I doubt if I had a truly good motive in attempting to bring down the powerful. I thought differently after being rescued from death (as much by Bobber as by the island ship). I thought differently after the events on Keylocklundria. I was by myself and I could act as I pleased, using the skills I had learned and drawing on my experiences. If I ever made it to Fas Cerie, I would have these stories to tell, the story of how I saved the island city from the ruthless rule of the powerful. This was the kind of thing the Brotherhood did and it would insure my inclusion in their band. Or so I thought in that moment.

"No man enjoys feeling trapped. Think of Ydridia as a new home. Without us, you would most surely be dead." Ge, noticing my hesitation, said.

"Before I promise, I must know what role you have planned for me. Your society is carefully organized. I am an outsider."

"A wooden island is always in need of carpenters and shipwrights....you said this is your experience, did you not?"

"Then I promise not to leave," I said, with my eagerness suggesting that I was a person most worried about my continued security and my desperate hope that this place where I found myself would accept me. "What of my property?"

"You are far wealthier than any shipwright here, so, perhaps you might be interested in purchasing an above-decks dwelling and running a crew of sailors yourself. This is roughly the status your wealth recommends to you."

"And women...?" I asked, both to know and to show I wasn't being too willing.

Ge nodded his head with a look of patronizing understanding. "In time, you will get used to life without women. Wives are given only to the Powerful."

All those men below decks...all the women above? Ge seemed to have no doubts this system was working.

"It would be my honor," I said, after some feigned reflection, "to join this island city with the status you have selected."

Ge smiled thinly. "I thought it would be. Let us continue the tour."

We went down ladders for a time, past six or seven decks, and further and further. The air grew damp and warm. A smell of human sweat grew stronger. I heard the rhythmic beating of drums bum-bumb-bum-bumb-bum-bumb...the same as that I had heard on the prison boat. It grew louder with each deck we passed. Soon we were let out into a broad lower deck, narrower than the upper ones, with stale air. I could even see the base of the hull in places, though the space stretched far into the dimness and was filled with thousands of small, circular sub decks. On each sub deck four men pushed a wooden plank. They circled a massive vertical beam, which turned with their efforts. Men all turned the same beam at different points along its lengths. I looked out over the deck on which I stood to see where the vertical beams led. They went down to the water...you could see the open sea at the further depth of the space, and there, the beams turned great, steel gears, which turned large, fan-like drives that churned the water. The gears took the combined efforts of all those men along the beams and channeled them directly into the propulsive force of the propellers. In the distance, the vertical beams stretched out into the darkness, hundred upon hundreds of them. Throughout, more guards, and the drummers, banging their incessant beat. The workers nearest me were leathery skeletons leaning into their push. The sound of the churning water was deafening. Ge shouted into my ear.

"Our fathers developed this system over centuries. Steering is accomplished by the relative speeds of the drumbeats and controlled by the Captain."

"Who is the captain?" I asked.

In answer, he pointed toward the center of the space, on which, although it was quite far away, I could see a central platform. Men came and went from that platform, running down catwalks, onto decks, communicating with the drumbeaters and other guards and officers spread throughout.

"My brother...the captain," he said.

We went back up a few decks...the lowest ones seemed to be for storing the massive number of workers needed to turn the propellers of the island ship.

We entered another deck. Invisible sources of fleshy sounds moved in the shadows. We passed rows of cells too dark to see into. Each was fronted by a formidable wood door with a circular porthole to look in. A guard stood in front of each door. Here, the guards all wore leather masks that hid their faces. Ge snapped his fingers in front of one door and the guard handed him a glowing green device made of glass. I had seen these hanging on the walls of all the lower decks. The light source made me think of the glowing creatures of the sea that I had barely survived. The devices created light from a glowing substance within. This one was handheld. Ge stuck it in the porthole. Inside, a form lay piled on the floor. A glistening wound caught the light: a limb that ended raw and torn. I could not tell if it was an arm or a leg. The head moved, to moan. Greasy hair shifted over a neck. Ge motioned me onward.

"Here," he said, "We house those who do not fit well into our system. The captured sailor who will not bend his back to the propellers. The cook's assistant who spits in the soup. The wife who does not raise her children in a happy and clean way. This is my particular

responsibility. We all inherited the gift of invention from our fathers and their fathers before them. They had a dream of a self-sustaining ship, free from the government and strictures of other men. It has grown in our family ever since. We all carry that gift...my particular form of that gift...is to use this invention to extract the maximum amount of pain from the average being who comes before me. Our system of laws is swift. No extended trials like that which you suffered on Keylocklundria. Suspicion is guilt here. Our sons are trained to see suspicious activities of the smallest type, insuring that no threat can be allowed to grow. Like all my brothers, I held that position once, a son and guard of the island, and I was found to be uniquely talented at recognizing guilt before...mind you...before the subject was even aware of it. I could sense it. This is why I am so drawn to my friends the Knowers...I have something of their ability in me, though to not so great a degree as those who come to it naturally. I also have the drive to fabricate the greatest and most creative punishments. Let me show you some examples."

We went down a hallway and, after knocking, entered one of the rooms. It was without windows. Two of the leather-masked guards were in there. One was turning a wheel; the other was bent over a body on a raised platform. The one who was bent over had a thin blade and was making tiny cuts on the victim's body; the one turning the wheel was twisting the subject's hips in a device well past the point they should have gone. The subject was a young girl with yellowish pale skin. She was breathing heavily her nostril's flaring.

"There are so many ways to inflict pain," said Ge. "That is only one. The twisting gradually tears open the tiny cuts, which in turn heal and are torn open again. Overtime, her body will fray until one...section final gives."

I tried to hold back the disgust from my voice as I said, "And what did she do to deserve this?"

"A guard thought she deliberately undercooked his meat."

I thought of the look the violet eyes had given me. Surely she would have known the consequences. It seemed that the severity of the punishment for the smallest infractions was the power keeping the system running according to its design.

Ge showed me many more of the torture devices. With each explanation, he focused on the ingenuity of the machine itself or the uniqueness of the type of pain it inflicted.

"As a deterrent, detailed descriptions of the punishments are made known to the general population. If there is a dearth of offenses over a long enough time period, I invent an offense and choose a perpetrator at random. Overtime, our population has become more and more accustomed to their roles, less and less willing to challenge."

The tour continued. The forward area of the ship, below decks, was mostly taken up by what Ge called the waterworks. Fresh water, or the absence of it, was a weakness I had not considered. The vast system of copper tanks, heating units, pipes, and barrels purified and stored the water. As massive as the propulsion system was, the waterworks was as vast and much more complex.

"The sea water is gathered and we pump it into the holding tanks. The water is boiled off and rises as steam through the pipes into condensers, which leads the liquid freshwater into barrels. The pumps then send the water wherever about the island it needs to go. The difficulty comes in removing the salt, which we use for food preservation. The salt tends to recrystallize solidly inside the evaporation units, and it is quite labor intensive to remove it."

We were standing on an outstretched guard platform, overlooking one of the waterworks units. The top was off of the evaporator and, inside, six or seven creatures were scraping away the crystals of salt with their flat front claws.

"It is a little dangerous to have them on board," Ge said, "but these tlilitias from ... what you call the fyrine, are excellent diggers. On their home island each of these creatures would build mud dwelling that soar to the sky with vast elaborate architecture below the ground. To do that, they have to spend almost their entire lifespans digging. We breed them and put them to work scraping salt. They've been de-fanged of course and their poison sacs have been removed."

The tlilitias had spines on their backs and bright yellow strips down either sides of their body. They worked in frantic bursts, their claws blurring as they dug. A look of disappointment hit their narrow faces when they reached the bottom of the tanks, but behind them the powdery salt was loaded into wheelbarrows and carted away to be stored.

We stopped to eat in one of the eating quarters, where a young girl served us our food: fish stew with a thick, black beer to drink. The beer was brewed on board and the fish was the catch of the fishing vessels that embarked daily from Ydridria. After lunch we returned on deck and Ge left me with a guard to show me my new quarters.

I knew, of course, that the tour was all for show. I had seen what Ge had wanted me to see. Based on my own sense of the size beneath the deck, I had seen less than a quarter of what must be beneath it. If what I saw was a message about what I needed to know about Ydridria then what had been hidden from me was a message about what they feared my knowing.

19.

I was given a small cabin in the area raised above the main deck. Unlike the dwellings of the powerful which rose well above mine, mine had little adornment and was made of plain materials. There was a bed and a desk. On the floor, my chest of gold, my dagger, and my trident waited for me.

"I don't suggest going armed about the ship," Ge had told me. The guards might take it the wrong way. I had said that both were only ornaments, given their dullness and promised to keep them stowed.

I checked that my gold was still there and took the plates out to make sure they were intact. I thought I noticed some remnants of wax along their edges, as if an impression had been taken of the images. As I was looking over my things, I heard the rustle of feathers behind me. Bobber was sitting on the edge of an open window that looked out over the main deck. He looked well enough and bobbed his head enthusiastically to see me, his little eyes sparkling and his pink feet moving with excitement. I picked him up and held him under my arm, scratching his head. I had been worried his type of bird would be viewed as a delicacy for the luxurious tables of the powerful. I felt responsible for him, now that I had taken him away from all the others of his kind. Over the days I lived aboard the island ship, Bobber came and went from my cabin. I sometimes saw him flying out over the ship toward the stern, where there were other birds who followed the island. I went to watch them once, working my way around a low deck used mostly to access the lookout planks. Behind the island ship, in its foamy, churning wake, all the cast offs of the vast floating populace: from the privies and the kitchens, the bird flocks dined on the refuse. At night, Bobber returned to my cabin, and slept curled up next to me, just as he and the other birds had on the deserted island, as though they were shielding me from something.

There was an elaborate schedule for eating. I was one level of hierarchy above a common sailor or worker, so I had an eating time designated for each of the four meals. My designated place was near the galley areas and with other men like me, of which there were surprisingly few. They were the highly skilled laborers who had risen out of the ranks of the

brute sufferers to positions slightly higher. They lived in dwellings like my own. Eating with them my first night, I tried to be friendly in the hope of setting them at ease and gaining more information. Although I did not speak their language, I tried nodding in a reserved manner showing attention without threat. The glares and darkened brows I received in return suggested that fellowship was frowned upon....it could be interpreted as collusion, especially among the more able of that class. They could be considered the greatest threat to the established order, which in turn meant that a new member, unknown to them, would be doubly threatening.

They spoke little to each other and hunched, tiredly, over their evening meal.

Throughout my tour and, overhearing the snatches of conversation here, it seemed as though the language of Ydridria was a patois made up of many other languages. It is hard to say how I discovered that. At first it was an innate sense, based on the modulations of sounds and tones. Then I heard broken Nurian with foreign sounding endings to the words. Hrtan would have been the word for a ladder on Nur, but on Ydridria the word was Hrtano. It could have been a related but distinct language, derived from a nearby island in the distant past, but there were words that bore no relation to Nur or anything that sounded like it. The weapons carried by the members of the ships watch were called col!trugati'ii, a word that sounded foreign and exotic to my ears (many years later I heard this tongue and the word for the weapon----a thin, almost flexible rapier with a star-shaped blade know for creating a wound that would not heal quickly---on the tiny island of Winv!loti-i in the fyryne where I went to buy a bride for a princeling, who, when I returned had been poisoned by his sister). The language of Ydridria, like its people, was the creation of its piracy and expansion as well as its insularity. During my first few days aboard the ship, I focused on catching the sense of it, building on the scraps of Nurian that I already knew.

Several of the powerful were in charge of the overall upkeep of the ship and they had special guardsmen that patrolled looking for problems. I took my orders from them. My first day, one of these patrol guards came to get me and led me to my crew, who were already at work repairing a part of the main deck. Since the dwellings housing the wives and children were also designed to break down and stow away, the wood jointures and planks were often under stress and prone to loosening. We were fixing a section of underdecking where a part of the ship dismantling bracket rested, which meant it had to support the weight of the seized ship. I inspected the worksite from the topside and from underneath. From underneath, the underdecking was the ceiling of a workshop of an ancient old man who crafted glass beads in sand forms.

When I got to his workshop, I said, "we're going to need to move you from here."

His opaque eyes blinked at me. He was unused to anyone visiting him and did not understand me. I pointed to the ceiling and made a hammering gesture with my hands. He shook his head from side to side with fear, covering the nearby bowls of beads.

I tried to reassure him in gestures that he would be okay, but he started yelling and screaming until a guard showed up. He looked at both of us and took the old man under his armpits and dragged him away. I had the terrible feeling that he had just been taken to Ge's special deck. After this, I was careful when communicating with anyone whom I did not already know. Just as I felt that those above me in the hierarchy viewed me with suspicion and fear of a type that made them more likely to execute me for the slightest error, I too was above a great many people on board and had a kind of power over their lives that made it easy to be dangerous to them. In such a hierarchy, my most casual act could hurt or kill those below me, or attract those above me to hurt or kill me.

We stripped the fatigued underdecking and began to rebuild the area. The work team I was given knew what they needed to do. They were of only slightly lower status than myself and were good, hard workers. They seemed perplexed by my appearance and confused by how they should treat me. I tried to alleviate that confusion by working side by side with them. This seemed only to confuse them more. I would pick up a hammer, or a plane, or a file, and immediately one of them would come over and take it from me and do the job I had been about to do. Rather than persist, I was afraid I would cause another person to be tortured. They seemed afraid to seem like they were not doing their job. As a result they worked with frantic, trembling energy and assiduous attention to detail. Workers of their ability would be priceless on any dock or ship that I have known in my travels. And yet on Ydridria they were little more than slaves who could be killed on a whim.

That night, at our evening meal, I maintained the appropriate level of silence and impassivity, and focused instead on picking up snippets of language I could use to communicate with my workers.

I soon began to hear the Nurian word for festival. It was modified by "jy" or "gi" which seemed like it meant "big" or "large" or "grand," based on how it was stated, with the eyebrows growing up. The big festival, I thought, would be for a god or gods of the Ydridrian, or at least the highest caste of them. But I had seen no evidence of worship on the ship: there were no priests or priestesses, no temples or altars, no references to ancients or ancestors, spirits or magic. Ydridria was new and made by men; it lacked gods of the soil or gods of the trees. A water nymph cannot be found in tubes and barrels, in evaporators. Yet, as the days went past I heard continuous reference to the celebration. It seemed to involve the entire island ship. I soon deduced that the repairs I was making to the main deck played some role in it as everything had

to be seneturar or perfectly made. A common word in all aspects of the island's life, my workers often used it to rebuke each other, as in, gruft zo seneurar, "that thing is not perfectly made." As clearly as this festival was an important event, no one discussed it in detail, and when they did they whispered, and when I came near, the whispering stopped. I understood little of the festival until the night I saw it with my own eyes.

That first assignment gave me a unique perspective on the lives of Ydridrian wives. Their dwellings surrounded our worksite. As I supervised from above the rebuilding of that portion of deck, I allowed my peripheral vision to take in the women who were coming and going. Their children---their boys, also, gamboled about and played in from on their dwellings. They had elaborate toy puzzle boxes that they often sat on the ground and attempted to solve. Their tutors were yet another class of workers on the ship set aside from the great mass. They arrived at the dwellings shortly after the first meal and spent hours instructing the boys on various subjects. The tutors all seemed to be islanders of the same variety: they were tall and almost pink, with little muscle, but large heads that bulged out over their backs. They spoke through lips that were died dark brown. The tutors, like the women and children, ignored the workers in their midst.

Once the tutors arrived, the wives spent their days spinning yarn, weaving, sewing, and knitting. Their handiwork was, at least that of which I caught views, highly accomplished. Their skill was embodied in the intricacy of the geometric patterns. Their conversations seemed to be exclusively about this. They also supervised various servants that came and went from the dwellings, especially food deliveries and laundry service. Old men arrived from the lower decks and cleaned each of the dwellings. The women yelled at them to go faster or that their work was

not perfect or not to interrupt them. With grim-faced calm, the old men scrubbed the floors and shook out the linens. The wives took for granted a life of ease.

I hoped the opportunity to see again the violet-eyed woman who had smiled at me. The more I saw of the uniform loyalty and discipline on the ship, and the imperious attitudes of the wives toward all those around them, the more her smile stood out as a hopeful and rare anomaly as well as a dangerous possibility.

Then she came to me in darkness.

18.

The day of the night of the festival our work on the main deck was complete. I had been newly assigned to replace some sections of rotted wood that had been damaged by steam near the water treatment deck. All throughout Ydridria preparations were being made. Efficient workers had cleared the main deck of its dwellings by morning. Throughout the day, the fishing vessels and merchant ship appeared on the horizon, were hailed by lookouts, and docked within the hulls. Ydridria's fleet, greater than most real islands, was returning for the event. Most of the preparations occurred while I was working. By the time I ate the evening meal and returned to my own cabin, the main decks were crowded with people. Merchant sailors and fishermen, ordinarily at sea, swelled the population of the island ship, filling in deck pockets and tables below decks. They brought a ragtag appearance and boisterous attitude. They, along with the wives and tutors, all got seated in a stadium that had been set up in the center of the main deck. There was a special section for other islanders: I saw the prescients there, but others as well. Each of the powerful had a pet species or two that they had trained or taken as servants or used for their work: it was a mark of status. As dusk fell, this area became filled with the grunts and

barks and high pitched screaming of beings with boar tusks, leathery wings, giant red eyes, armor plates, and jointed, spidery arms. There were even a couple bulky, square-headed near-giants who must have been the servants of someone especially powerful.

The moon rose over the water, full and orange, painting a shimmering path over the waves to the decks of the island ship. The seas were heavy, but the size of the island was too vast to be affected by it. Below, somewhere, men churned the propellers that kept us moving. I had begun to track our movements against the pattern of the stars. We were far from the whale, but we also circled back. The most I could tell was that we travelled in a roundabout manner, with no set direction. But that night, all the attention was on the ring. The decks were lit by the orange-yellow glow of the lamps I had seen far below. Thousands of the glowing glass globes hung about the center of the decks, swinging ever so slightly with the almost undetectable motion of the ship. It had to have taken the glassblowers 100 cycles to blow the globes for all of those lamps. When the moon rose above the horizon, a drum started to beat. It was not the same as the one that drove the workers to the work, but much larger and more ornate; the drummer himself, who happened to be a few decks below me such that I could see him, was a massive being with huge shoulders who beat on the drum with what looked like clubs that could be used to slaughter pachyderms. As it beat, the crowd at one end of the ring parted. A line of ten young men, all wearing the leather armor of the guards, marched into the ring. At one end, they entered a box. Armorers fitted them each with helms and gave them a choice of weapons: maces and broadswords, daggers, double bladed swords, and other weapons I had never seen before: a claw of razors that fit over one hand, a spiked cube that could be used to attack and to shield.

Once the guardsmen were fitted out, they came to the middle of the ring and waved to the crowd. The crowd of sailors cheered, but the women and the beasts stayed silent, cultivating a

deliberate solemnity. Then the drumming started again and the crowd at the other end of the ring parted. Here the process was much more highly decorated. Servants carried in brightly painted sedans, one after another. The doors opened and ten men came out. These men were naked, their bodies painted gold with black and white patterns covering their backs. They did not acknowledge the crowd, but stood with their heads hung low. After the sedans were removed, several of the powerful came into the ring, each bearing a scabbard. These men---Ge was one of them---stood in front of the naked ones and unsheathed the swords.

The crowd of wives and pet beasts cheered when they did. Out of the scabbards came glowing blades. Long, narrow, and sharp, the metal on the blades glowed either from design or material, but in the night lit by the lanterns, they were the brightest objects besides the moon, seemed in fact to borrow the moon's glow. After Ge and the other swordbearer left the ring, one of the painted men stepped forward and pointed to one of the guards with his blades. That guard stepped forward and the others moved back to their box. The drum beat started again, at a faster pace. Without exchange of words or other ceremony, the two men began to fight. The guardsman had chosen a lightweight wooden buckler and a sturdy mace with a round head. The glowing sword moved through the night and was blocked by the guardsman. The guardsman darted and ducked, looking like the younger man with greater quickness and strength. The naked one had little skill with the sword. The glowing blade itself, its strange power, was his only threat, as it naturally sung through the air, picking up speed with little effort. Soon though, the guardsman recognized the weakness of his opponent and grew less afraid of the glowing weapon. He blocked a loose and directionless swing and countered with a brutal blow into his opponent's midsection. The gold man went down; his side caved in. While the guardsman stood over him, the glowing blade struck at his legs but missed. The guardsman lifted his mace and

slammed it down on the other man's head. The skull caved. The crowd cheered. The body was dragged out of the ring, leaving behind a trail of blood.

In the next contest, the gold painted man fared no better. He seemed nearly infirm and had difficulty wielding the sword. His opponent was wearing the claw device on one hand and, after blocking the sword, plunged it into the chest of his opponent and twisted it until the blood was pouring down his abdomen. He remained on his feet for a moment and then fell to one side.

The battles continued along these lines, with the younger, stronger, better protected guardsmen winning easily...until the sixth fight. In this match, the gold painted man appeared well trained in use of the sword. His footwork was agile. He moved the blade through the air in a way that utilized its special powers. His opponent was wielding the spiked cube, but he did not have the balance of it. When he swung it with one hand, it seemed overweighted for him. When he blocked with it, the device barely got into position. The goldpainted man used quick feints to throw the other man off balance, and, with a single two-handed swing, took his head off at the shoulders. Now the beasts and women yelled and cheered. The sailors and others moaned for the fallen. In the next pairing, the gold-painted man was even more adept with the moonsword and the guardsman seemed timid and unwilling to engage. He was constantly pushed back and hid his head behind his steel shield, knees bent and cowering. The goldpainted man grew arrogant, beating down on the shield, notching it at its edges, and forcing his opponent to his knees. He finished the battle with an flourishing plunge of the glowing sword straight down the throat. The beasts went wild for that one.

The festival was a ceremony of regeneration. The gold painted men were the powerful, the guardsmen were their sons, if not actually then symbolically. If the son could defeat the father he would take over his place. If the father could defeat his son, the father would remain in

power. The order of the competition reassured any doubters that even some of the older powerful were still capable of holding power and that the younger, soon-to-be-anointed were just as strong as those they would join. As the festival ended with the tenth match, which was won by the father, the still-living guardsmen were stripped and painted by their new wives, who came in dressed in elaborately flowing red gowns, faces covered. These would be their first wives of their new position of leadership and stature. The couples were then carried away in litters, the gold-painted men who had won were awarded new young wives. The night became a feast, as long tables were brought into the ring and filled with food, the captured stores of hundreds of ships, richly spiced, and free for all. The men went wild fighting for slabs of delicate fish, thighs of animals roasted in pepper, and large green melons that smelled richly of flowers.

As I watched the fighting and the feasting that followed, I scanned the crowd for signs of discontent: whispering, frowning, scoffing. The sailor's faces were toughened by weather and scarred by battle. They wore the garb of islands far away. But the worst I saw was impassive looks, exhausted stares, or lack of real interest in the events. I wondered, if rebellion lay below those frozen surfaces or if they were merely minds numbed by fear and frozen by constant threat.

The feast continued as the moon hit her peak and began to fall. I returned to my cabin and lay on my bed, Bobber's pink feet standing on one bed post. I was half asleep and half listening to the sounds of the feasting below when my door creaked open and quickly closed. A sweet smell wafted across the room. I knew it was the violet-eyed woman I had seen on my first day on board.

"Hello?" I said, trying out my shaky Ydridrian.

A warm hand fell gently over my mouth. I sat up and held her waist. She was wearing a plain shift of rough-hewn material, the basic uniform of women there. Where the shift was not

covering, her skin was purple and her topaz eyes seemed to glow from behind her hairfall. She reminded me of Aba, although her purple skin was darker and her eyes the wrong color. She was a Vinferian. I reached out and felt her forearm and the skin felt like Aba, thick and smooth, my time with Aba swarmed back, and I pulled the Vinferian woman's face toward me, terrified.

"What is this..." I whispered urgently. "Who are you?"

I handled her roughly, feeling for the lion scars that were there. My fingers met only unbroken smoothness. I put her hand to my throat to feel my scar there.

"My child?" she said.

Our own son came into my mind.

"Who are you?" I said in my language, and then "Her?" in Vinferian, one of the few words I retained.

She grabbed my hair and pulled my face against her forehead. Her skin smelled of honey and sweat. But the eyes...the eyes were different, the scars were missing. And I had to decide---in an instant---if this were a plot to trick me, a woman sent by the Powerful to test me. I did not yet understand all the powers that were at work on Ydridria. Yet a force inside of me was too great to resist her. I gave in and dreamed her dream. Carrying a basket of fruit on her head she sang her way down a mountain path. The sun of this island was hot, the broad leaves shaded her head. A boy met her, his dark skin almost purple, his eyes violet, his chest smooth and strong. He took a bite of the fruit and smiled mischievously. She gave herself to him near the pool of a falling stream. They walked home together next to the stream. In her village, men were there with swords and arrows and carried her away. The lions were silent. The boy too was taken and many others. They were held in cages on deck. From there, she saw the island ship in the distance and her mind flooded with confusion. She was taken somewhere below and gave birth.

The boy too, disappeared below the decks. Old women took her child, a girl, away. She was given as wife to many men. She did not get pregnant. The island she had come from was Vinfer...Aba's island. The lion gods she prayed to did not help her. I wondered if the lions I had starved still paced.

I woke with her head on my chest. The sound of the festival had died down, but there were still voices and laughter outside. I half expected guardsmen to break in. I spoke again to her.

I whispered "little" and "time" and "light," to her in Ydridrian.

She said, "My child?"

I did not know how to say "I don't know." I shook my head in the darkness.

"Help," she said. A common word on my work crew, spoken now with a desperate intonation. She repeated it again in Vinferian.

"Yes," I whispered. I wanted to know if there were others like her who wanted to escape. The only word I knew was "things..." which I said trying to make it sound like "other ones." I remembered the Vinferian word for diamonds and for the training whips that Aba used, but not the terms one for "anyone else?"

She said, "Telabia," and pointed to herself and said, in Vinferian, "Find Nuda."

As quickly as she had come in, she was gone. I guessed that Nuda was the boy I had seen. Perhaps that was all she could tell me without language. If he was onboard, he would be a worker below decks. If he had already tried to escape, he would be in Ge's torture rooms, or in the stomach of fish and bird feeding behind the island ship. Perhaps I retained some glimmer or connection from Aba that had allowed this girl to recognize me, to trust me. The ways of Vinfer, like the ways of all of the infinite islands are mysterious to one not from there and natural to ones

who are. She was fragile, shaken, her mind desperate, but she had seen something that marked me as sympathetic. Perhaps her topaz eyes saw a hint of purple in my skin, or an aura that only a Vinferian could see. I would not know until much later in my life the truth of my connection to this island of immortal lions, but it was real and it brought Telabia to me. After she was gone, in the quiet of first dawn, I trembled with the fear that had come across in her dream, and with the yearning for the child that had been stripped from her, which seemed, strangely, the same feeling as that which I had for my own, left behind.

20.

A holiday followed the festival. The women's dwellings were returned to their positions on the main deck, but sailors and work men could be found milling around the catwalks and side decks, sitting with their feet hanging over the edges, even talking to the guardsmen here and there, although the only topic I heard discussed was the outcome of the battles the night before. I stayed in my cabin with Bobber. As I lay on my chest and tried to think of a next move, he sat on my chest and bobbed his head. I slept for hours and I dreamed Telabia's dream again, with more details, as though the first dream had been a seed that had begun to grow inside of me. I saw the boy's face more clearly this time, clearly enough that I might be able to recognize him if I saw him again. I wondered if the woman would come to me again. I could not risk going to her, as she was surrounded by other wives who would be on the lookout for any infidelity in their midst. She had used the festival as a distraction to come to me, and she must have done so in desperation. It was unlikely she would be able to do so again.

The next day, Ydridria returned to normal, with a slight change. Five guardsmen had won their battles and become members of the powerful. Five of the powerful had died. Thus

five of the luxurious upper deck dwellings had to be rebuilt, reconstructed, and redecorated to suit the needs of these new masters. I was given the assignment to work on one of these five. It was in the bow area, far from Ge's establishment and my own cabin. The interior of the dwelling was torn down and my workers and I would be in charge of rebuilding the walls and floors to the new specifications. A special class of architects oversaw the work. They were only a short step down from the Powerful. I soon realized that the rebuilding process took a year and was completed at the time of the following years' festival. These architects thus fulfilled a ceremonial role as well as the practical one.

Each dwelling of the Powerful had to be different from all the others and all those who came before. The architects maintained that history in an archive and spent much of their time there going through the history while developing each new structure. Apiece with this were the beast masters, who helped the newly powerful choose a species or being to associate themselves with, as Ge had the Prescients. Three beastmasters oversaw selection and training of these for each of the five. The beasts were held in an area cut off from all eyes except the beastmasters, but it seemed as though they had representatives there of the residents of myriad islands in all the rings, they bred them, cared for them, trained them, and harnessed their powers when needed.

The dwellings we were assigned to build belonged to the third of the five successful guardsmen. He had taken the Powerful name of Ka, written, as were the names of all the Powerful, with a single character, as though the names themselves were indivisible and unbreakable. To accomplish our work, we were joined by an icerine islander, a carver, Ottir. He was recognizable as being from the cold climes by his white hair and crystalline blue eyes. Hroth was not mentioned by him and I thought it better not to mention my past connection to one from there. I observed the Ydridrian practice of not asking anything about others. His language

and manner were quite different from Juna's, as far as I knew he was from the island of her father's greatest enemy. Just as likely was the possibility that some ship from Ydridria travelled to an island in the far cold regions and kidnapped carvers for the purposes of decorating these dwellings. He was carving an entire room with an intricate pattern of interlocking swirls and waves. The pattern ran from floor to ceiling to walls, and formed the outer barrier to a meeting room with a broad throne in the middle. While he worked on the carving, constantly overseen by one of the architects, we built a bed big enough to sleep twelve, a privy and bath of polished brown stone and inlaid pink coral, and a dining room with a side table structured to hold the weight of much bounty.

This work was designed to take a long time, and no opportunity for going below the main deck presented itself to me. The risk of being where you did not have a specific purpose was too great. If I was going to find Nuda or see Telabia again, I would have to wait for a perfect opportunity, which seemed unlikely ever to occur.

After many cycles of work, when I had almost forgotten my disgust for Ge and my hope to help Telabia, I replaced those thoughts with the regimented order of life on Ydridria, I was overseeing the building of wall in Ka's dwelling when Ka himself came in with three of the architects. Ka was a fresh-faced young man affecting a haughty bearing. He did not often visit the dwelling. He was training for his new role overseeing some aspect of the ruling and control of the island ship---I had heard the word *fydling* which I thought meant "to get" something. But he arrived one day, shirtless and in pale green silk pants inlaid with gold thread. The architects huddled closely behind him, their hands hidden inside the sleeves of their black robes.

I only half understood Ka's questions, but he was not happy with the design of one of the walls, which included a broad window looking out over the open sea. He yelled at the architects,

who cowered in response. While he was yelling, one of my men who had been working on the portion of the wall in question, stopped tapping the plank he had been trying to get perfectly aligned. Drenk was a thin man with incredible strength and skill with a hammer. He could join two pieces of wood seamlessly with nail or peg. His work on the wall was exactly as the architects had wanted it. When, Ka's diatribe began, he was unsure what he could do. I knew better than to intervene in the argument and tried to catch Drenk's eyes. If I had been able to, I would have had him look as busy as possible and avoid drawing attention to himself. That is what Ydridria taught you, and he should have known it. Instead he stood, slack jawed and transfixed by the screaming Ka. Shortly, Ka noticed Drenk standing there. Drenk was staring and holding his hammer limply by his side. Any reasonable man would have seen he was not a threat, but merely confused. Instead, Ka sang out for the guards, pointed to Drenk and had him taken away. Then he began yelling at me. I had learned enough of the language to know that he was warning me, that my workman had committed a grave error and I was responsible for my men.

I bowed humbly and acknowledged the criticism, but I did not respond. Ka left. The architects consulted in hushed voices, told me to work on some other part of the structure, saying they would return in a few days with a new design for the wall. All I could think about was Drenk, a shell of a man devoted to his job and unquestioning of the world around him being tortured in some inventive way by Ge's torturers. My crew returned to their work, more frantic and anxious than before.

In my cabin that night, with my loyal Bobber asleep on my chest, I decided I had to act. No magical opportunity was going to present itself to me to destroy Ydridria or kill its leadership. Ydridria was too carefully controlled, too seamlessly thought out. Terror ruled. The

possibility of instantaneous pain scared too many and those entrusted with scrutiny and vigilance were good at it. I had been watching for many cycles and had not discovered a point of attack. Darkness seemed the only advantage I had. The light sources of the island ship were primarily the glowing glass globes. But they were neither bright nor abundant. Those citizen-servants allowed to wield fire were closely watched. I had come to believe that this absence of a heat source was the reason the ship used its propulsion to stay in the same region of the seas. It was a temperate climate here...no need for heavy dress or fires. Fire was only used to create fresh water through evaporation and to cook. And the water center was in the bow so that, if a fire did break out, it could be somewhat contained by the natural borders of the ship. Still, the absence of fire meant nighttime was especially dark. The festival was held during the full moon because it was the best time for something outdoors to be seen by all. When night fell, the ship went quiet. Guardsmen patrolled, carrying the yellow-orange globes. But the shadows were vast. Even if I could sneak down below ship and find where the poor brutes that drove it were housed when they were not bent to their beams, how would I find Nuda? How would I find him without encountering a single loyal slave or informant looking to curry favor?

The other problem was getting off the island. I had not been shown the docking bays from which the island ship's fleet came and went. When the festival was going on, the sailors who were there represented at least 10 ships and they were not anchored nearby because the water was far too deep in the open sea, and they were not tied to the island, but rather they seemed to have disappeared underneath her, to a hidden dock inside. If I could find that place---like the propulsion area at the water level---then I could steal a ship and sail away, likely while fighting a battle with the swift-rowing attack vessels or other ships that would give chase.

It was deep in the night when I reached these conclusions. I got up, and put Bobber down on my bed. I felt restless. I opened my cabin door. A mild wind brushed over the island ship, a sour smell joined it from one of the hatches. Near my cabin were those of others slightly higher than slaves. None of us were given light globes, so I had to hope that none were awake in the darkness, as I was. The doors were closed. The narrow railed deck that led to our door formed the roof of other cabins below. To avoid waking those below, as I stepped, I rolled my footfall from outer heel to biggest toe. I moved past several doors before I saw a guard pass on a deck nearby. I pressed tight against the wall. The guard's pale glow passed. I got off of my deck and ducked beneath it via the nearest ladder. I found myself in a narrow hallway. I knew this area as leading to the dining areas for those like me. It seemed empty now, empty and dark. The guard's strategy below decks was to keep everything dark unless there was a guard there. However, this made it easy to see them coming. A glow in the distance, the sound of boots on boards, and I would duck into one of the dining halls, which were empty. The guardsman patrolling at night moved with a complacent boredom, slowly and without turning their heads. I returned to my cabin that night, my heart pumping blood so hard that my ears throbbed.

To penetrate the ship ten decks down, I realized, silently and in darkness, would take hours. I had to be ready to escape or to die. It could be done, based on what I knew about the ship and guessing at what I didn't know. There would be no time to get back to my cabin before light. The next morning I went back to work. And that evening, I lay down on my bed, closed my eyes, and began to map the decks of the ship. I started with the main deck and the tiered decks above it. I pictured where the guards started their patrols and where the lookouts were stationed with their eyes on the water. I pictured the decks below that one that I had visited on my tour with Ge. Based on the dimensions of the main deck, I could use the facts of space below

to guess where the areas I had not been shown lay. Night after night I concentrated on reconstructing the island ship in my mind, turning over every detail I had consciously noticed or caught with the turn of a head. My own movements had been circumscribed, but I had also seen people coming and going: the tutors for instance, used a ladder on a specific part of the main deck: I could then guess that their dwelling and eating halls were near there, and probably only one deck down, because of their status and proximity to the wives of the powerful. The guards and watchmen were changed, and they used yet another set of openings. They were the sons of the powerful, but still young. They must have had their deck somewhere below where they came and went when changing.

In this way I pieced together a nearly complete map of the island ship. I had some dark areas still, of course---was one an armory, another a treasury? I believed I could get from my cabin to where I guessed the dwelling of the lowest of the low were. This process of mapping the ship took about a third of the year.

During that time, our progress on Ka's dwelling continued on schedule....on schedule to be completed the day before the night of the festival. I watched the stars at night sometimes as well, as we were carried around the outerseas under the Whale, but drifting out under her to the Seal, and beyond to the Starfish. Ottir worked with styli, fine brushes, planes, files, and knives to follow the penciled patterns drafted for him by the architects. The rest of my men worked with their usual anxious speed and precision, leaving nothing to chance, and attempting seneturar in all things.

Again, the seductive rhythm of Ydridria set in. Running smoothly was part of its power over its residents. Two ships were captured during that year, and were neatly dismantled, their goods and people instantly assimilated into the island ship's life, either that or destroyed.

Merchant ships belonging to the island came and went with goods, from islands, apparently across all the seas. Their arrivals and departures never were surprises and few took note of them. The wives grew heavy with children and gave birth somewhere below decks (where there must have been midwives, perhaps elderly wives themselves). Children grew up with the tutors. A new festival approached and the ships sailed in again. The full moon rose. The island ship was in the same position under the stars as it had been the year before. If the power of the island ship were not terror it was consistency.

21.

The ten guardsmen entered. Ten gold painted men were carried in. Five gold men fell. Five guardsmen fell. The crowds cheered for the side to which they were most closely aligned. The food was brought in. The festival continued on into the night. In the darkness, Telabia came to me. She was carrying a child, bundled in a gold-woven cloth. As she neared me in the darkness, her thoughts rushed into my own. My mind was concentrated on the map of the island ship and on staying my nerves for the action about to begin, and into that came the idea that her state of fear for her life and love for Nuda remained as strong as it had a year before.

She handed me the babe. I peeped into its face. It must have been one of the Powerful's, whichever had claimed her as wife. And it must have been male. I saw dark eyes like my own. They closed and opened under almond eyelids. I could only guess the circumstances Telabia had been through between the last festival night and this one, but, her appearance again told me she was ready to move, no matter the risk.

We slipped out into the darkness. I guessed that the majority of the lights available on Ydridria being used to illuminate the ring and the festival. I had also figured that with more of

the population above the deck, more of the guardsmen would be there as well. We snuck down a ladder without being noticed, Telabia handing me the babe climbing down, taking him from me, and I following. It was a doubly precarious way of moving, much worse than I had imagined this night would go. When I held the baby, I felt it squirm with discomfort and make little peeps and gurgles that I feared would soon become cries.

But I had my map. To stay focused on its details, I had to block out much of what I was sensing from Telabia and the babe. I had determined that the men who powered the ship must be housed in the bow---forward but adjacent to the propeller works---and below the water works. Because the docking bays had to be at the water level, as did the island power generator, the bays should have some connection to the power station.

I had taken my trident and dagger. Against my lower back, tied tightly with some scrap material, I carried my six gold plates, with a piece of cloth between each one to muffle their sound. The coins had to be left behind....too likely to make noise. I sent Bobber out into the night. He would either be free of his master, if I died, or would find me on the water somehow, if I succeeded.

I snuck through darkness with the woman and her child. She clung to my clothing. I sometimes closed my eyes and moved through turns and down ladders. It is easier to see in the darkness with closed eyes. When the glow of a guardsman appeared, we hid in empty dwellings and shops and halls. On their single night of freedom from abject slavery, their usual denizens were high above enjoying the bounty of a thousand piracies.

Down into the musky air we rushed, my own constant fear drawing sweat from my body. Telabia trembled, jiggling the babe to keep him quiet, but still he would make tiny cries and sounds, each one, though barely audible, like an arrow through my chest. We were far past the

point that would allow me to talk my way out of it, past the reasonably explicable. Strangely, we saw fewer guardsmen the deeper we plunged....until we got to the first opening into the vast chamber of propellers.

Wood and men groaned in greyish yellow dimness. The water churned far below. The sound of the propellers aiding us by drowning out any smaller sound. We could run when needed. Light globes glowed on platforms throughout the space and a dozen or so stood out on the captain's platform. There, several guards congregated. With Telabia clinging behind me, I took her along the catwalks, avoiding the ones that were more lit. I gestured to her to look at the men on the circular platforms, putting their power into the long shafts, assuming she grasped who to look for. As we went, I searched for the face of the young boy from her dream, his face as clear to me as if I had met him. The circular platforms were mostly dark, and the forms I saw there, wretched and contorted, did not seem familiar. The search distracted my vigilance.

I turned and, behind Telabia, a guardsman was running toward us, drawing his sword. Telabia was in my way, but I swung the trident around. As he began to call out, Telabia held the baby under one arm, turned sideways to protect him with her body, and pulled all her fingers together into a point. As the guard got to her with his sword half drawn, she jammed her fingers into his mouth and down his throat. The sinews of her arm stood out against the yellowish bite of his teeth. She was suffocating him. I thrust the trident over her shoulder and into his chest. He slumped to the catwalk. We had no time to appreciate this victory. I looked down....eight, ten levels down to the hectic, moving water.

No one heard the body hit, nor the sound of the propeller blade slowing for an instant as it drove a weight beneath the foam.

Following the catwalks and staying away from the central platform, we made it to a point wedged up under the deck above. From there we could move silently and watch for alarms. The glows of guards moved through space in the distance, and, below, sometimes caught the sweaty limb of a worker. We had little hope to see their faces at that rate. Blood dripped from Telabia's forearm. The babe whimpered and was quieted by her. The space and the ceaseless roaring of the water, the moving glow across the space with its obscured catwalks, ledges, platforms overlaid the image of the ship and our location in the map of my imagination, and I stopped. My vision blurred. For a moment I could not go on. Telabia prodded me. I couldn't speak. I fell to my knees, clinging to the boards. Below, far below, tiny as sand....the men worked. I couldn't save any of them. If I wanted to escape----with Telabia---we would have to leave them all alone.

In my life I have felt responsible for other people but never since have I felt so powerlessly so. I had choices. I could give up and die. I could save Telabia and her babe. I could die destroying Ydridria. I could try to save everyone below and fail and die. I could escape by myself and have a better chance of survival. Or I could stay, clinging, until I was found, tortured, and killed. I had choices but none was good. The worst, though, seemed like staying where I was. I got up and we continued on.

We came to a forward bulkhead. The bulkhead had a door, high up where we were moving. The propulsion drivers were housed beyond. A guard stood on either side of the door. In the center of it, a wheel to secure water-tightness. I gestured to Telabia that she would be responsible for the one on the right. I silently offered her a choice of either the trident or the dagger. She took the dagger by the handle end, pulled it back, and gestured a throw. I nodded and readied the trident. It was unwieldy, heavily weighted to the front. We got into position and I waited for Telabia. She watched with the keen eyes of a hunter, holding her baby slung under

her non-throwing arm. The guard on the right yawned. A dull flash near his mouth. The handle was there, barely protruding past his lips. He fell to the edge of the platform and tumbled, slowly off.

As he was going down, the other guard reached out for him. He knelt, and grabbed his ankle. He held his partner hanging in space. I decided to run up on him, sprinting down the cat walk. His eyes came up, he began to call out, but the sound was lost in the rush of water. I drove the trident in his stomach below his ribcage. The weight of the first man pulled the second man down.

I spun open the door through the bulkhead, Telabia and I jumped through, I spun it closed again.

Before that time, I had sat in my own filth crammed into a tiny cell. I had slept in the piss and bilge of a prison boat. And since that time, I have smelled stewed ferentlic seasoned by stankworm boiled by a Liljkolur witch doctor who had never bathed. I've eaten out of courtesy the maggot rent meat of a bobol calf eaten as is customary on Wer Manchol (the unborn calf is buried for a year in a swamp before being dug up and roasted). In an assault on the castle of Dennock the Sunlit, I escaped through the King's own privy and squirmed three levels down through a thousand years of dried excrement in a pool of it. But, the worst smell I have ever breathed hit me on the other side of that bulkhead. It was sweat, and rotten skin, and unhealed wounds, and blood---the steely panicky smell of blood---and shit and piss and snot and vomit, and diseased breath and rotten teeth, and fear and anger and hopelessness.

The space was completely dark. I saw no glow of guardsmen. I sensed the presence of thousands. As I had dispatched the second guard, Telabia had pried his glow globe from him. I raised it above my head. Like the space we had just left, their area had been built vertically with

catwalks and ladders connecting the levels. But the levels themselves were made out of cages. The cages were so stacked that a single bolt released twenty workers at once. The workers were pressed into their cages as on a low bed. They could neither sit up nor turn over. They lay there, mostly in silence. A few cursed or moaned or breathed loudly.

When they cursed, it was directed at us, for we carried the glow of the guards. Puffy eyes squeezed closed against the glare. I sent Telabia onto a separate row to look for Nuda and I went up and down searching for his face. By standing on one catwalk, I could look down into the faces of many men at once. I saw many I wished to help, but none I recognized. We had little time to think. I searched and searched and found no one resembling the boy from the dream. I went back and searched for Telabia, worried we would be separated by the labyrinth of cages. I found her on her knees, trying to reach a man three cages below her.

I went down a level and unbolted Nuda's row. The long wooden cage door swung out, opening ten prisoners' cages. A head or two looked down at me. I gestured to them for silence. Their eyes were fuzzy with confusion and hope. Telabia was next to me now, calling up to Nuda. One man climbed down and started to run away, I grabbed his sweaty shoulder. He looked at me with uncomprehending eyes.

"We're leaving," I said, in Nurian.

He stepped back in fear, held up his hands. His mind was addled.

Telabia handed me the babe and climbed up to Nuda's cage. I saw her holding a head, shaking it. A limp arm came out. I heard a voice from a nearby cage.

"How? I can help," it said, in my language, the Claydian dialect of Nurian.

I unbolted his row.

"We need 20 men, no more." I said, "To sail from here. Now. Everyone who is released and who doesn't make it out with us will probably die."

"They can't kill all of us at once," he said. "they need us."

"We take only twenty, no more," I said.

He called to the men in his row in a jumble of languages. Skeletal bodies started climbing down, several more stayed, I unbolted another row. Several took off, disappearing in the murk.. Others were too weak even to exit their cage.

"Telabia," I called. She looked down at me

"Nuda...," she said, shaking her head. He was dead. He must have died that night or they would have already discarded the body.

"That one?" said the Claydian, gesturing to Nuda. "He was just brought back from the fulholl---the pain."

"We must go now..." I yelled to her.

Another of the men I had just released climbed up to her and pried her fingers from Nuda's cage and carried her down on his back. When she hit the ground, though, she was ready to run.

The way out was the way in, which was why there were no guards inside the prison cells. I did not know what would wait for us on the other side, whether the absent guardsmen would have been noticed. Behind me, some of the prisoners who we had released were releasing others, I took the ones behind me and made them follow. I twisted open the door and swung it back.

We faced the glows of a hundred globes. The light reflected in the eyes of the guardsmen staring at us.

Our only advantage was the narrowness of the catwalks. They could neither rush us nor kill anyone except the person in front, who was me. My trident was longer than their swords. I thrust it through the throat of the first man and twisted him over the railing. As he was going down, the second guard swung at me, perfectly aimed to slice me in half from my lower back to my stomach. The blade broke on the gold plates secured there. I caught him across the head with my trident shaft and he lost his balance. I fought my way through three or four in that manner until one of the guardsmen behind got desperate and threw his glowing globe.

When I ducked, the globe bounced off the Claydian's head and shattered on the catwalk in amongst the escapees. I was parrying the sword slashes of my attackers but I could hear the escapees coughing and gasping for breath behind me. The globes released their light in the form of a poisonous gas. Soon, all the guardsmen were lobbing theirs at us, and the prisoners behind me were gasping and clutching at their throats. Meanwhile, further behind me, more prisoners were pushing out and, with the panic behind me, I was being forced forward faster than I could fight. I started shouldering the guardsmen, grabbing them between their legs and flipping them off the cat walk. We were fighting too close for swords anyway.

Let me take them," the Claydian called. He and another of the escapees pressed forward.

They fought with unnatural fury and strength, their insulted spirits and modified muscles focusing into vengeance. The Claydian drove his elbow into the throat of the nearest guard and broke his hand to steal his sword, then he slashed and stabbed his way through five more. His partner had martial skills and training, could catch a swordblade between his two palms where ever it was aimed. He disarmed his attackers and lifted them off the railing and into the deep air. Behind me the coughs and gasps continued. As the globes broke, the space grew darker, more to our advantage. As we pressed on, we opened up a second catwalk, and I led Telabia and some of

the others who were still coughing and blinded. The Claydian and his partner held back the swarm until we passed, and then ran to follow, fighting off attacks to our rear.

When I got to the water level, a heavy and abiding quiet fell. The propellers were almost still, turned by only the currents. I looked up. Those at the propeller stations had noticed our action and stopped their work. Some stood gaping, too exhausted. Others attacked the nearest guardsmen they could find. Some were cut down instantly, some evened the contest with strength or fury. I saw a driver biting a cheek off, another caving in a chest, a drummer being beaten by his drum club. In the center, the captain's platform was being rushed from all directions.

Unpropelled, the sea exerted its force, the island ship yawled and buffeted. Some of those who followed me, sent prayers to their gods. Hundra, al'Badar, Neering all were names called to for help. At the water level was a passageway to the docks. This was the direct route for prisoners taken and workers impressed at seas by Ydridrian ships. I had guessed that they would not want to give those prisoners a glimpse of the upper decks, if possible, and would keep them well below...

My story is but my own. The annals of the infinite islands would be too vast to be written, the pages of that book as many as the islands themselves. Ydridia itself had no scribes that I ever saw or heard of. It's life was purely the trade of thieves and slavers. But if those annals were to be written, a description of the floating docks of Ydridria...of the island ship itself, must be recorded. Within the hull of the island was a great gap or opening and inside of that, when I saw it, twenty fully-masted ships floated, moored to floating docks. On the other side of the ship was a second, smaller "harbor" where the attack ships were moored.

Here, masts rocked back and forth beneath an overdeck. Grey morning light filled the vast opening. In the distance, dark clouds. A lightning flash. Shadowed green waves slapped chaotically against the yawling island ship.

Word had reached the main deck. I heard the lookouts beginning to call. I had more than thirty men with me, with Telabia. I chose the nearest ship and ordered the men to begin casting off the lines. I took six more on board via a gang plank. I had only seen these ships approach Ydridria twice, on the festival days. But, as they approached the ship, they had extended six broad-bladed oars, these allowed the ships to be steered into the hull as the island's size stole the sails' wind.

A man called out "I can steer..." and went to the helm. His was burned by the light gas, a seeping bloodiness that forced one eye closed, but I saw him take his bearing at the helm and get the rudder centered.

Below, we found two sailors asleep aboard; I killed them with the trident and handed out their weapons. I set the six at their oars and helped them get set. Only two looked like they knew what they were doing.

I went back up to the main deck and got a group of men working on setting sail so that when we could catch a wind, we'd be ready to spread canvas to do so. The old sailors among them took up the giving of orders. At the opening to the dock, the freed drivers were fighting the first sailors to make it there from the main deck.

"All who are coming," I called out.

Some broke for it, others fought on, deaf in their fury. I gave my pilot a signal and went below to set the rowers working. The oars were meant for three rowers: they were designed to move a great bulk of water. I drove my rowers on and had them push the oars to draw on

strength built pushing the propeller beams. I watched the docks recede through the oar opening, captaining my rowers to guide us away from the island ship.

As the dim light of morning fell on us, cheers went out. Inside the hollow hull, others I had freed were being cut down. A man, clinging to a dragging line, let go and drifted into the sea, a plume of blood swirling around him. Ships were being manned. The wind coming from the distant storm pushed us against Ydridria. I went up on deck to help set the sail and found a ship aswarm with men working to raise and trim the sheets to best harness the ill wind. We drove across the hull of the island ship, hearing, high above, the warning calls of the lookouts. Soon, though, I found I had been correct about the armory.

Once they saw us wending away, the men high above affixed weapons to the watch planks. The first over the deck, but as it whistled past I saw a vicious, barbed harpoon, weighted to drive downward, a defensive weapon that was designed to sink boarding craft. After that, another machine began to sling balls and chains. The first caught a yard high above and showered the people below with splinters.

Out of the floating harbor came the first Ydridrian ship, fully crewed, pulling hard on their oars. When they pulled free of the island ship, they faced the same winds as we and took up the same tactic. One after another came out and raised sail, giving chase. A weighted harpoon drove through one of our men and continued straight through the main deck. Soon though we were out of range.

We slipped into a steady pattern, pursued, but neither gaining nor losing distance. I went to my pilot.

"Where are you from?" I asked him in rudimentary Ydridrian.

"I am a Galentine from Dremtunder..." He said, naming a mydrine island know for producing sailors.

"Your name?"

"Cholf."

"How were you taken, Cholf?"

"I was second in command on a merchant ship. Cloth and yarn from the shepherds of Bremn-Dwar. They took us in battle but the ship itself was damaged beyond hope."

"Do the Gallentines know of Ydridria, the island ship?"

"I have heard of fearsome pirates from the outerseas, but never a ship so great."

We had a storm ahead. Astern, a line of ships in full sail, other setting sail to follow.

"We must not be taken," I said, "Take us into the storm," pointing toward the horizon.

He nodded grimly.

I joined Telabia and others at the stern of the ship. Behind our pursuers, the vast wooden wall, the hull of Ydridria rose out of the waves. They had not yet got her steadied. On the decks, we could see a mass of people watching the pursuit. I hoped that Ge and the other Powerful were among them. Even if we were caught and killed, tortured even---though I had no intent to be taken alive--- we had struck a blow on the morning after the most important day of their year. I thought the island ship could be brought back under control, with the proper amount of force...enough men were left behind. A few tutors and architects, and others of middling power could be demoted to drive a propeller beam.

We stretched the distance between us: with careful navigation, we stole a little wind from our pursuers with each tack. But the difference was minimal and we lost ground at times

because of miscommunication and disorganization. Those giving chase were fluid in their seamanship.

As we watched a bird appeared over the pursuing ships. He beat his wings ahead of them, and, catching a rising breeze, drifted high up, wings fully extended, and then he dropped down and landed on the rail in front of me, bobbing his head. I took Bobber below to secure him in the storm.

The storm was green stone dragons attacking each others' necks. Rain fell sideways against the breaking waves. Windgusts tested our timbers. Darkness gripped the ship. We drove through the wall of low cloud. A fork of lightning ripped the sky, thunder instantly followed. I sent all without useful skills below for protection. This included Telabia....for all her fighting prowess, she was a landswoman, an islander from a place of paddled canoes. She went with her son.

The waves soon came over the decks. My pilot fought with the wheel and held the rudder firm. The waves came from no direction, hitting us from both sides, over the bow, and over the stern.

Our pursuers had disappeared in the white, seaburst air.

I was swept from my feet by a wave and became tangled in some line that had never been stowed. It was around my thigh, tightening, as the wave tried to pull me over. When I recovered, Cholf was gone, seaswept, the wheel spinning freely as the currents pulled the rudder. A sheet flapped loudly behind his empty spot. I took the wheel. The ship's stern got slammed and the wheel tried to jump from my hands. Behind me, the tiller shook in its fitting, trembling up into my frozen hands.

The experienced sailors scrambled from mast to deck to yard. At times, their toes and fingers were the only things keeping them out of the mouths of the waves. Wind flayed their emaciated bodies as they did their sudden duty.

The waves grew taller, the troughs deeper. Up we tilted until my feet were pulled back and the wheel was all that held me to deck. Then, a moment of floating quiet....and a fall, weightless, until the bow caught, and ducked into the downward face of the wave. At the bottom, around us, the wave peaks rose well above the mast, to get sideways, to encounter one too steep, meant death for all. There it was silent too, though the thunder crashed and the ship complained through its every jointure. There it was silent like a battle, when all sounds recede. Each rise was a momentary rebirth, another hope, a reprise as we rose again to the peak.

The winds broke in the night. The seas calmed, though remained storm-tossed. The clouds lifted. A brave sailor climbed to the topmost yard and scanned the horizons. We were all alone. The Ydridrian ships were sunk, scattered, or blown off of our pursuit.

I gathered our people on deck. I had never counted how many aboard...perhaps about thirty. We now had 15 men. Telabia smiled at me with her violet eyes, holding the babe near her face.

"Can anyone navigate by the moon, stars, and sun?" I said, using the Ydridrian argot, "We need to make the mydrine sea."

"If I can see the sun, I can read...how far icewards we are," said an old man, he could barely hold himself upright.

"When the stars come out," said one of the men who had spent his night on the deck helping us survive. He was a willowy youth, boney chest covered with purple birth marks. "I

can tell where we are in relation to Jur-longtok," he said, mentioning the fyrward-most of the Ten Cities.

"We need to check the stores for food and water," I said. "We need a bilge gang."

Those that were left broke into gangs. I heard cheering below deck, after awhile. The ship had been provisioned for a long journey, with abundant food, water, and drink. On deck, the former prisoners and slaves, ate hardbread, salted pig, and sweet juice of the klin tree. I saw one of the men crying for joy as he chewed. Others could not hold down their first bites.

"Found this in the captain's quarters," said the old man. He held up a triangular instrument with a glass lens at the center. "This too," he said, smiling his single tooth at the cutlass now hanging from his waist. It looked like it weighed as much as he did.

He took a reading with the instrument. He smiled as he brought the two arms of the triangle together and looked at the angle.

"We are high...if we sail to windward, we will meet the middle sea or an island at its edge."

The storm that had scattered our enemies and stolen some of our friends had blown us in a friendly direction.

That night, the clouds were still too thick to take a reading of the stars, but the young man stood on deck all night, waiting for a chance to see.

I set up three watches, with always a man up top to look for our pursuers. I appointed two helmsmen for the other two watches. I went below to see Telabia. I found her in a small officer's cabin, lying back on the bunk.

"I am sorry about Nuda," I said. She was suckling the babe. His skin was paler than hers, but his lips were tiny purple suction gripping on a nipple of similar hue.

She nodded, her eyes down.

"Did you get enough to eat?" I asked, gesturing with my hand to her mouth.

She had. Unlike the others aboard, she had been well fed aboard the island ship and was not starving.

I sat on the bunk and kissed her cheek. It was cool and salty. Her hair smelled of sweat. I sat awhile watching the babe work his mouth. The tiny lips seemed so powerful, as powerful as a great storm or a island ship. With my head near hers, I could once again see Telabia's thoughts, though dimmer than they would have been in sleep. Her thoughts were a mirror image of the boy. I was to her but a distant awareness...Nuda's face, the joy they had had together when young, floated through her as well as the touch of his lifeless hand.

The ship rocked. I lay to the side, around them, and slept.

I was awakened for my next watch. I went up on deck and took over the wheel. It was just before light. The seas had calmed from the storm, now, and the sky would be clear that day. The boy with the blotched skin---his name was Arnivan---had caught the first bright stars in the night.

"We are thirty days' sail from Jur-longtok if we were in a craft from that island," he said. "In this, more."

"We have food for ten times that many days," I said.

Following our course, however, we would meet other islands before that, given the shape of the ring as I had seen in Juna's map, but which ones to steer towards or which ones to avoid, I knew not.

So the days passed. The men worked hard to maintain the greatest spread of sails. Under my supervision, those damaged during the storm were repaired with the abundant cloth available

on board. Others made clothes of it, so that soon we were a uniformed crew of white-clad sailors. They told stories of their homelands and of what they might return to. One named Turnapur had been on the island ship since he was a boy. He could not remember his home island. He pledged his life to me and I set him free with my next breath. Many viewed me as a hero, a great leader, and a man above them. I told them that I was a sailmaker, a shipwright, a carpenter...nothing more.

I told them the stories learned on my travels.

For the most part, our time was taken up running the ship, which, with the number of hands we had, was a constant challenge. They took to their jobs, whether in the galley or high above. None argued or disobeyed. They had the custom of quiet labor, and, as much as they were boisterous with their freedom, they maintain silence while they worked.

My eyes grew accustomed to watching the far horizon. That thin line curving away from the sun quickly symbolized freedom. It seemed as though nothing ahead of us, beyond the horizon could be any worse than what we...than what I had left behind.

22.

We saw the birds first. Flocks of white skimmers on the horizon, black motes rising above the bright line. The smell of leaves and grass, and the bitter musk of woodsmoke, spooled through the clear sea breeze. When the green breached the horizon, it was a broad mountain, a cooled volcano rounded by wind and weather. No large structures were visible from a distance.

"Captain!" one of the men---his name was Frand, a red-haired icerineer---came to me then. They had taken to calling me the Nurian word. "Avoid this place....this is Gerhund's Gate the Land of the Obsidrons...attackers. They breath fire and eat ones such as us."

All those aboard were on deck, now, their eyes hungry for land...for safe landing on a real island.

"What do you know about this place?" I asked Frand.

"Ones such as live under the mountain, in darkness, armored beings with small arms and great, powerful legs. They use their legs to paddle attack craft in the night. They burn ships with their breath. All sailors know to avoid this place. They speak to their gods there and their gods demand blood."

We had a surfeit of food. I had no will to be taken again. We had reached the mydrine, there was no need to land. We gave Gerhund's Gate a wide birth and sailed toward the mydsea. The men watched the island disappear back beneath the horizon.

At the barrier between outer sea and mydsea, the water changed from gray-green to bright blue. A seam of foam, where a turbulent current edged a stillness, demarcated the change. Seabirds hovered above and dove beneath the foam, emerged with squiggling brice, which flashed in schools above the ancient mountains. Bobber gave it a try himself, popping up with a squiggling silver body in his beak and a patch of snowy seafoam on his head. Before the flood, men and other beings could have stood upon those dark shadows in the blue, and looked out across a great plain, the plain that was now the middle sea, the plain that had once been the mouth of greatest of the five volcanos. The volcano was known as Ur. The great rains cooled it after its time of power had come and gone. It gave birth to all the mydrine islands, just as its brothers and sister gave birth to the other rines. Urling to the eyrthrine, Vurlo to the ice, Xrur to the wind, and their sister Kristurstan to the fire.

Or that is how the story was told to me. Few islanders agree on how the world began. On the fryrine island of Zo, I once saw a village reenact, in pageant and dance, a war between two

gods. In it, their islands' primary hunting weapon, the goka---a sling that hurls smooth stones---became the weapons of Nil the Sea, and his brother, Vono the Sun. Vono protected Zo; Nil threatened them with storms and tidal waves. In their pageant the islands are the stones of Vono, hurled in the great battle of Sea and Sun; the islands are the victories of light and life over the power of death. If person of Zo touches the sea, he or she is sacrificed to Vono.

On Holoko'o, a short sail away from Zo, the volcano pours red land into the mouth of the sea. To them, the mountains made the world and continue to make it. The islanders leave gifts for their volcano at tiny temples marked by golden rings. They speak to the mountain all day and ask her, "should I plant potatoes here?" "What is my husband thinking?" "Will it rain?" The mountains "sowed" the islands in the field of the sea....the mountains and the sea are benign, beneficent givers of life. The people of Holoko'o are frequently defeated by raiders as they have no weapons and welcome all who arrive on their shores.

I was once captured by an icerine sorceress who believed that she had made the world. She had the power to transform sea water into earth, handful by handful. She had lived since the beginning of time and had been at work constantly ever since. She did possess power---I saw her raise a wall of her castle using nothing but a finger. Yet, she knew little of the world outside her island, for she had never left, choosing instead to make of her island a small world, a work of her mind and powers. The details of the world she claimed to have created were not the same as those that I had, at that point, already seen with my own eyes. The powers and customs of the wyndrine are nearly as vast as the islands themselves. Those who hold power there believe that they are the center of the world. The sorceress created a version of me who lives with her to this day. Allowing her to do so is how I escaped. He is now, the age I was then, and will forever be. The sorceress made her world, perhaps even her island, but she did not make the world, make all

the islands. She made only that which is a mirror of her mind, and the infinite islands are not the work of a single set of thoughts.

One night in our prison island, Typhon made Cron tell the terrorbear creation story. Cron grew angry and said. "It is not a story. It is what happened. The bears tore the islands from the seafloor."

"Why?" asked Typhon, smiling ironically. "And where were they standing when they did so?"

"Because they wanted to," Cron yelled. "And they were standing on each other's shoulders."

Despite Cron's version, throughout the eyrthrine, many islands claim the power of Shurlingla, or the lifecurrent. On these rocky, forested islands with few active volcanoes, the world seethes with ancient life. Shurlingla did not make the world but, rather, gives power to the various gods that did. Though they may have different names here and there, Shurlingla powers all life and is available to all. It is said to give immortals their extended lives and mortals their life after death. It breeds the animals and grows the trees. "Shurlingla Is and That is All There Is," as they say on those islands. The islands are shurlingla as much as a daikkoda monkey with its sharp little face and ringed tail is shurlingla. It is. As much as the Opod Ant, with its giant hills and rudimentary speech is shurlingla. It is.

Here on Chuk Kuk, on the edge of the sea, I ask Wurl's third wife, Isla, in her own language, "how did the islands come to be?"

Isla has a scar down the side of her face. She was attacked by an ice wolf during a year when the seals did not come to Chuk Kuk and the starving white wolves prowled the villages.

Half her face is scar. She was seen as tainted by the injury. Wurl the Split Beard married her to save her family the burden of supporting a girl who would never be married.

"The world came from ice," she answers.

"Is that all?" I say.

"The world came from ice," she says. "And it will end in ice."

"And why are you here upon the ice, Isla?"

"I am here to serve Wurl by serving you."

"And no more?"

"I am here to survive life until my spirit can be free."

"And then what?"

"We should not speak of what cannot be seen," she said.

Thus, the Timuits maintain a connection to the world around them with only silent concern for what cannot be known. The world came from ice...and perhaps it did.

When I crossed into the outersea the first time, I was in the hold of a prison boat. I did not see the seam of seas. Green to blue could not, if described to one who had not seen it, appear of great significance. But there, as we crossed the sea and watched the birds feed, I felt a great transition, a change of power, from that which was unbounded to that which was bounded. I watched the dark tips of ancient mountains pass below and I heard my mother and uncle telling of their making, of the great sunken cities inside of them, too deep for us ever to visit.

The seam of blue and green shows how the world fits together, how all the different creation stories might all be but a single story, if understood in the right way. I did not know that way, but I felt, as I did when I set sail from Nur, that I could find out this secret.

23.

A few days of calm blue water and we encountered the black-hulled warship of the Navy of the Ten Cities, their red dragon flag flying high above. We were boarded, and towed to the nearest port, the harbor city of Burdon, where a large part of the fleet made their home. We were housed in a barracks near the harbor, lightly guarded, for the ownership of the ship was impossible to prove and our story was unbelievable to the captain who found us.

We were brought before an Admiral Vreen, one by one, to repeat the story of Ydridria and our escape. I was called last because all the others had given me credit of the escape and because my Nurian was the best. We sat in the captain's quarters of the flagship. I gave the name of Cholf, a Galentine from Dremtunder who had gone to sea at 10 cycles of age and had served under Nurian captains. I explained that as a skilled ships carpenter the Ydridrians had favored me with enough freedom to plan and make my escape. I did not mention the gold plates still slung tightly against my back.

The Admiral Keen was a tall man with a flowing mustache who appeared perfectly comfortable folded behind his desk uncurling massive scrolls, signing and sealing documents.

"We have spoken to your crew, Captain Cholf. They admit the ship is stolen, but that it was stolen to escape from unlawful imprisonment."

"Yes. I led an action to free some of the thousands of prisoners used as labor aboard the island ship. And I am no captain, nor do I claim the rights of that ship."

"How is it, do you think, that the Navy has never encountered this island vessel, if it is as great as you claim."

"Do you maintain a chart of the outersea?" I asked

"We have unreliable information about this area," he said, sitting up very straight, "which I presume you can shed some light on, if what you say is true."

"May I look, sir?"

He turned an ancient piece of parchment in my direction. Most of it was decorated dark green and, in a cryptic hand, a number of islands were drawn in.

I saw Xin's Maw. It was not named and no deserted island existed nearby.

"This is the prison island...?" I asked.

The admiral's steel eyes leapt to meet mine. I saw I had made a mistake, for there was no reason for someone like me to know of this place.

"What do you know of that?"

"I merely guessed, sir. Sailor's talk of a prison island in the outersea...a story only, I guess." And to distract him, I asked, "Can we align this with a chart of the stars of this season and cycle...?"

He seemed to accept my explanation of the prison island and called for a sergeant and asked for a star chart, naming it by number 8-13. When the chart was spread out, at the bottom was stamped the seal of the Keylocklundrian Astronomer's Guild.

"These are of different scales, but, I think I show you the position roughly. I aligned Whale's Tale with the position of Wei Wei Lok, with Xi's Maw under Xin's mouth. I then peeled back the star chart and pointed to a place that aligned with the stars I had seen above Ydridria. On the Admirals' chart the location was equidistant between the eyrthrine and the mydrine. The mapmaker had written: "Here ye go at your peril."

"Here it is. Where you go at your peril."

"Another story," said the admiral. "The outersea breeds them like a meeting of fishwives. I've heard the danger there attributed to the seamonster Sylia or the great whirlpool Qweng."

"Of course," I said. "But I can assure you. The Ydridrian attack boats are no magical force, but it is unlikely that any ship attacked by them would have escaped."

"If they are there, they are not a threat to our cities."

"Their ships sail from there to here, to plunder, capture, enslave, and then return. Your Navy is the only force that can stop them. Your Navy is the only force that they fear. I once heard one of the so-called Powerful speak of the Navy of the Ten Cities with respect and trepidation."

"How many ships? How great of a force?"

"They have twenty ships like the one we brought to you. Fast warship with holds designed for booty. But there are only ever one or two of them in port at any time. And the same number of long attack boats rowed by twenty men, they are always in port, always ready to attack and take anything that comes near. They have defensive weapons throughout the island ship, but the island itself is not an attacking vessel." I looked out the open windows behind him and said, "you would need all these ship and more to defeat them."

Over the next few hours, I gave the Admiral a detailed description of the island ship, including the system of torture and terror I had seen used as a governing principle. He wrote them down in detail, as he had with the accounts of the others.

Before I was dismissed, I said, "You have the right to attack these people. The wealth you would take would make you the wealthiest man in the mydrine. The people you free will treat you like a king. The ship itself, if you could win without burning it, is beyond price, the work of generations. If stripped to its planks, it could rebuild your navy ten times. I escaped, to

give you this information to the Navy of the Ten Cities. I hope you will act upon it. I have no interest in keeping the captured ship. It is yours to inspect...the charts and logs aboard should be informative."

As I detailed what I knew, I wondered if I was telling the admiral anything he did not already know. Had he truly never heard anything of the island ship? No merchant had ever escaped its attacks? What was the likelihood such a large operation with so many tentacles reaching out did not pay the Navy to ignore their operations. The admiral's lack of detailed follow up questions helped confirm these suspicions.

"Where do you go now?"

"I have been at sea since I was a boy," I said. "I have heard stories of a band of warriors in the eyrthrine...the Astute Brotherhood. I seek to join them and train in their martial arts."

He laughed skeptically.

"Join the Navy," he said. "I could add you to the rolls as an able seamen or carpenter. The Astute Brotherhood is nothing but a bunch of rabble, mercenaries."

"I have heard the Navy of the Ten Cities has an alliances with them."

"We have an alliance that states that if we see any of their members in the mydrine, we can kill them or impress them on sight."

"But you have means of contacting them?"

"We know an intermediary in the eyrthrine port island of Cuxatolk. His name is Prince Hu. He speaks our language and is much involved up in lumber trade."

"Can you show me where that is on your chart?"

He had another chart brought in, this time of the eyrthrine. "Here" he said, pointing to the eyrthrine island closest to our position. "That is the first stop on a journey to the eyrthrine.

Be on your guard there...you will know you are there when you see the seatrees. I will give you a letter of introduction to Prince Hu. The Navy buys most of its lumber from him, so he should respect my introduction."

"Thank you," I said. "And you will not impress any my men, will you, sir. The ship that I have brought you should buy the freedom of these men and the woman."

"Yes. Yes. You will go free. A few of the men asked to join, however."

"Thank you, sir."

"Could you recommend some respectable private captains currently in port so that I might arrange passage for these men I have brought to you?"

The Admiral asked the Sergeant to give me some names of honest ship owners and captains, which I took. Upon being rowed ashore, I found a gold dealer. The dealer was a round and rather suspicious man who was completely undone by the possibility of swindling me out of the plate for far less than they were worth. Their value as relics and maps and descriptions of a foreign kingdom, apparently meant little to him. I despaired giving up the information that they held, so I took a wax rubbing of their surfaces before agreeing to a price. I bought his silence with a lower price, and emerged with a full purse.

I went to the dealer in parchment and bought rolls for myself as well as some pens. I returned to my cabin. The others were off wandering the city, having been freed from their guard after my testimony. Before I did anything, I wanted to copy down, from memory, as best I could, all the maps I had seen heretofore. I started with those that Juna had shown me. Although my memory remained sketchy, I did my best to capture all the details of all the rings, as many names as I could, and the basic outlines of area that I could. I copied the map from the back of the gold plates, and the admirals maps and star charts. This work took the better part of a

day and a night, and after that I added to them as I remembered details or discovered details on my own. These papers became the beginning of my library, which would be, at one point, the greatest library in all the islands...but I will save that description for later in my story.

That task complete, I gathered my former shipmates together at an inn. We ate a hearty meal and drank wine together. When all had supped, I stood.

"Friends. The Navy of the Ten Cities has provided monies for you to return to your homes, or to the destination that you wish. The admiral has asked that we keep this largess a secret, lest we get cheated or targeted. Consider it payment for the prize we have brought them. I understand that a few of you have chosen to join the Navy itself. Others may want to return to your families and home islands. In the next days, I will help you book passage on ships going in the directions you choose. We will give you food for the voyage and insure you are comfortable."

There was much cheering at this, after they had pieced together in their polyglot what I was saying. Several of the men offered to serve me personally and continue my adventures, but I told them I had to go alone where I am going.

"Alone and with the bird," said one of them, for they had all become familiar with Bobber.

"Alone and with the bird," I agreed.

"What of the others on the island ship, Ydridria?" one of them said.

"I have given the Navy as much as I know about the island ship. They must decide to act on that information as they will."

The table fell quiet at that. They were, no doubt, reliving their days on board.

When we left the inn, I returned to Telabia's room. The baby slept in a wooden box softened with pillows.

"You will go...to Vinfer?" I asked.

Telabia looked at me with her topaz eyes and for the first time since I had known her, there was some happiness there.

"Frelo a beremente," she said, which I knew from long-ago Aba meant "the land of the lions," and the "lions" meant the immortal lions that lived only there.

"I can't go ... to Vinfer," I said. "Not from there."

"Not...from...anywhere," she said in her language.

I smiled at that. "But going ... and I pointed out toward the sea."

She nodded. She went to the baby's box and, seeing that his eyes were open, lifted him and swaddled him in cloth. She handed him to me. It was the first time I had seen his whole head uncovered. His hair was dark, not the dark purple of his mothers. His skin was fairer than her as well, though perhaps the purple would deepen over time, I thought. He plunged a fist into his toothless mouth.

"He...your name," she said.

The sound of my mother saying it again rung in my ears. It named someone already distant and foreign to me, so impossibly different that the sounds were like those of a language I'd never learned. And I could not speak them, for to do so would bring death on myself and ill luck on the child. Vinfer had different customs.

"Cholf," I said, as she had been below when the real Cholf had given me his name and, soon after, been washed to sea. The name of the man who helped steer us to freedom would be an honorable name for a boy on Vinfer.

Telabia crunched her nose up at that.

"This...dung...in Vinfer," she said.

"You choose the name," I said.

She smiled. "Nuda."

We sat there together playing with Nuda on the bed. We did not share enough language to say much, but there was a peace and warmth between us. Telabia was beautiful, but the memory of both Aba and Nuda were too strong in my mind. If I had had a sister, I would have felt towards her as I then felt toward Telabia. This connection tempted me to follow her to the lionland and see perhaps if I could uncover word of Aba or even settle in a sunny grotto between volcano and spring. To stop and rest, to sleep and eat my fill, to have a fire and a bed at night seemed desirable. But beneath those pleasant thoughts were another set that told me my life of adventure was far from over, that much lay beyond what I saw ahead. Aba was gone. In the infinite islands the chances of find her on Vinfer were as great as finding her on any other island. The thought of Telabia at home with her son would be better if I weren't also there. I had saved her, that was all, and I hoped that in the future someone would be willing to save me if I needed it.

Over the next days, I worked with the men to find them passage home, speaking to ship owners and captains and making sure they were going where the men wanted to go. There was one, a young man with some strength, named Cocah. I paid him to guard Telabia on her voyage home, purchasing a sword and a dagger, and making him swear on his life to ensure she was delivered to Vinfer. He agree with the strong fealty only possible in a young man who felt a blood debt.

I waited until all their ships departed, day by day. I said good bye to Telabia and my son, on a morning in the rain. The season was turning cooler by then, and she went quickly up the gangplank and below deck. She rode on a merchantman of great experience and quality. Cocah followed quickly behind her. I had hinted to the captain that her father was a great and powerful king and that any harm that came to her would be responded to with terrible vengeance. I also paid him well.

And thus a day came when I was again alone, with Bobber. I stayed a time in the city. I needed to replenish my body with sleep and food. Since I had been a prisoner on Keylocklundria, my life had been at risk every moment. I spent time in the inn that fed the officers, gleaning gossip about the islands in that part of the ring and hoping for information about the eyrthrine islands.

I designed a small sailing vessel with sharper lines than Greywart and sails that could cut through any wind like blades. I hired the craftsmen and oversaw their work. Greywart II was a craft built for speed in the open ocean, which could be rowed into port and easily beached.

I bought myself a sword and a dagger, a long bow and a crossbow, arrows and bolts, and sturdy clothes and boots, a leather shirt and wrist bands. I had a new, lighter-weight trident forged and shafted with a sturdy folowood shaft. I bought a throw net and hooks and line. I vowed never to be taken prisoner or servant again, to never be manipulated or coerced, and to find Fas Cerie, to gain the knowledge of the Astute Brotherhood, and then to continue on, to see all the islands, and never be held again.

To this end, I had cut a black flag. On it, I featured in blood red the outline of the monster that had pulled me off my craft, its tentacles going in all directions, its eyes empty of life. Behind it, crossed tridents, the weapon that had now saved me more than once.

You who are reading this, if you exist at all, may wonder if I ever heard of the island ship Ydridria again, if the Admiral took his ships and attacked it. And for that matter, whether I ever saw Telabia, little Nuda, again, or Aba, Juna, Tung...any of the men who escaped with me from Ydridria. But these questions cannot be answered here, for in my story of stories, my life, the answers arrive much later and in surprising fashion, if they arrive at all. I can promise you, however, that there are many interesting stories in between. However, I can tell you now that when I sailed away in the direction of Cuxatolk, the admiral's fleet was just where I found it when I arrived. When I saw that I pictured Ge, smirking as he spoke of his ingenious tortures, of the men in cages, the women forced to marry and bare children. But what could I do, a man alone? I had the infinite islands yet to see.

24.

Bobber, whom I had sent ahead to scout when I thought the wind had changed, appeared on the horizon and flew up, looped down, and glided back to me.

His pink feet shuffled excitedly on the gunnel of Greywart II. The seatrees surrounding Cuxatolk were visible not long after, first their green branches, then their tall, perfectly straight trunks rising out of the water. Wind blew out of the seatrees carrying their rich fragrance. The Seatrees protected the island from the outersea waves, forming a vast wall through which ships could navigate only with great care, preventing surprise attacks. As I sailed into their shadows, I looked up to where lookouts straddled branches, aiming arrows at me from behind the needle shadows. Rope ladders looped between the guard stations.

The currents tried to spin and slam me into the trunks as the waves churned around them. I shipped my sail and mast, fitting my oars, and, with greater control, rowed through the

treacherous waters of the forest. Without her mast, Greywart was able to pass beneath the roots that formed bridges between the trees, and from which more guards looked down on me impassively. Where the roots and trunks contacted the sea water, they had developed a gray crystalized outer shell, stronger than bark, that protected the wood from erosion. The guards wore green camouflaged jerkins and pointed green hats, and their faces were a deep red-brown color with thin, narrow eyes, unlike the other eyrthrine islanders I had encountered in my travels. It was said their bows were so powerful that they could fire an arrow straight through a man's body so that it would come out the other side, feathers wet with blood. Nonetheless, I met their eye without flinching.

Halved trunks of the seatrees jutted out from land and formed the dock. They floated on their round underside and created a platform with what had once been the middle of a seatree. The trunks were joined with rope ladders and docksmen scampered here and there like spiders. Only a few merchant ships were docked, as, the Cuxatolkins were not a seafaring people, preferring to trade their valuable woods for all their goods. They were woodsmen and women and ate the meat of the forest not the flesh of fish. They were sellers to the mydrine of the hardwood resources needed to build ships and houses. The harbor town itself rose up and back from the water. The houses were all made of oiled wood and overlapping wooden shingles made of bark, so that it blended into the forest beyond. Smoke drifted from stone chimneys. Nearest the water stood storage areas where the logs of various types of wood lay stacked and marked. On the cut ends of the log, in white paint, were the individual characters of the Cuxatolk language, which, because of their dominance in trade had been taken up by many people in the eyrthrine and had been made to represent many different sounds. The town was well made and

orderly, as suited the port through which much of the wealth of the eyrthrine flowed out to other islands.

I moored my boat with the help of a surly youth who seemed unwilling to catch the line I tossed him. They were accustomed, there, to the arrival of familiar traders and familiar types of ships: those capable of carrying the massive harvest would be small in number. I and Greywart were neither of these. Bobber took off when the boy looked at him hungrily and soared into the branches high above. For a seabird, he seemed comfortable alighting on a branch deep in the needles. I climbed up the foothold carved from the wood and tried to communicate with the dock boy. He tied my line to a forked peg and walked away, jumping effortlessly into a nearby rope net and climbing up to join a comrade high above.

As I walked the dock's fragrant wood surface, I attracted the attention of the Cuxatolkins within range. In the branches, planks, and platforms high above, they shifted to follow. They stared silently, their faces unreadable. When I got to the end of the dock and entered the port town, I stopped outside a pen nearby where workers were stripping the fibers of long, straight branches of a distinctive yellow tree, while others were braiding the fibers into rope.

"Prince Hu?" I asked.

I was pointed in a direction. More stares. As I walked the wide grassy lanes of Cuxotolk, I observed the customary hurtos, or "name planks" affixed to each dwelling and which told, through carved faces of animals, beasts, and other figures, the family history, the wealth, and the status of those who lived inside.

With a few other silent directions, I was able to find the enterprise of Prince Hu. His hurto showed a turtle's face, the skull of a serpent, the paw of a bear, and a large wave breaking on an island. The topmost image was a single seatree with golden rays rising to the sky.

Inside, rows of men and women in finely cut suits sat at high desks and wrote on or read from books that were nearly the size of the desks. A woman sitting nearest the door looked up at me. She wore glass before her eyes set in wire frames: they expanded her long eyes larger than was symmetrical. Her eyelids were painted black with charcoal.

"Cha?" she said, abruptly, "whodo tradith?"

"Prince Hu?" I said. I held up the Admiral's letter, which was sealed with the seal of the Navy of the Ten Cities.

She was not impressed, but called out. "Shurwall...camnos ka!"

A well dressed but skinny boy with dark circles under his eyes sprinted out of the shadows and to her desk. She gave him a command and he dashed off. The woman went back to work, but, when she saw I was still standing there, she pointed in the direction the boy had gone. I followed.

The rows of desks went on deep into the building. In the back, wooden lattices blocked the large workroom from some other offices. The boy stood outside of the most central one. When I approached, he took my letter, knocked and entered. I stood outside, listening to the scratching of a room full of pens marking paper.

Soon, the boy was holding the door open for me.

Prince Hu was very like the other people I had seen thus far, his dark red skin was wrinkled and his hair was white, yet he maintained the compact, spritely appearance of strength of the dockboys. The walls of his office were lined with pigeon holes. Scrolls and other pieces of paper stuck out of most. Each hole was labelled by the types of characters I had seen on the ends of logs.

"Sir," he said, in proper Nurian. "You are a friend of the Navy, a very great client of mine. How may I be of service to you."

"Thank you for your offer of help, Prince Hu. I am far from my own island and customs, and new to the Eyrthrine. I seek a recommendation of shelter and provision as well as some information."

Prince Hu gestured to a low table nearby. We both leaned on padded pillows. Our feet hung below where a small fire burned. The fire warmed our feet and a stone in the middle of the table where a pot kept water hot. Hu poured me a cup of the hot brew and one for himself. It was an herb tea, thickly steeped, that tasted the way the air had smelled when I first caught the scent of the sea trees, only more fulgent. It was the taste of the floor of an ancient forest.

Although I only realized this much later and upon reflection on greater experience in the world, the man I sat down to tea with on that day was the wealthiest and most powerful person I would ever meet. The wealth of more than a fifth of the world flowed through him. Each line written down by the scribes I had passed represented a profit in his favor. His name, "Prince" was simply a reference to this power and wealth...he had begun his life in the lumber field of Cuxotalk. And yet, he sat with me to listen to my story and see if I could help him.

Because of the admiral's letter, I retained the name of Cholf. I told him that I had been a sailor taken by pirates and rescued by the Navy when they destroyed the marauders. I was able to do some service to the Admiral in the way of information about a league of pirates. He repaid me by honoring my request to help me get to the eyrthrine and join the Astute Brotherhood.

Hu showed little emotion or surprise during my telling. Towards the end, he nodded as though my request fit with the foregoing story.

"The path you seek is dangerous," he said, finally. "The brotherhood thrives far icewards of here. The men are not like you, they are large and powerful, giants almost with great black beards. But it is true, as you have no doubt heard, they have a tradition of accepting other islanders into their band, to use them for special duties...especially spies," as he said this Hu took a sip of his tea and looked at me carefully. "Their spies have infiltrated, for instance, the Navy of the Ten Cities and groups and bands of all types on all islands...or at least they would like us to believe they had.

"The danger lies in their enemies. If you leave here and mention your aim, you are as likely to be speaking to one who has had their village burned by the brotherhood as you are to one whom they have helped. And others are simply prejudiced and afraid of their secretive nature. People will be afraid of you, and their fear will make them a threat to you."

"Do those here engage in commerce with the brotherhood?" I asked.

"The brotherhood, as I'm sure the Admiral told you, steal what they want. They also sell their services to those who seek power. They are paid in goods, which sustains them."

"And is Fas Cerie their true harbor?"

"It was, at one time," said Hu, gazing into his tea. "I cannot claim certainty beyond that."

"Do you have maps or charts of that place?"

"I have a dozen maps with a dozen locations for it, as well as fifty more that do not show it, but seem to hint of its absence. The brotherhood's secrecy has made the accuracy of charts through the islands an impossibility for three hundred cycles. Their versions infiltrate the copyist offices and private collections alike, as if by magic. Luckily, my trade comes to me, for their forgeries have disrupted much of what could be easily known. For a merchant, light is the greatest tool. For the assassin, shadows."

"Can you suggest any way for me to get closer to my goal?" I asked.

Hu looked deeply into my eyes. He seemed still to be deciding if I were who I said I was or if I were a spy...or something else. I had rushed through my own story, I thought, and had tipped him off that something was not right. But, he seemed to decide to help me."

"There is a man. A woodsman here on Cuxatolk. It is rumored that he was once a member of the brotherhood. He has never spoken of it...but I made inquiries after he was involved in a fight in town...six sailors killed. Those who saw it said this woodman showed supernatural talents fighting with just his hands. My inquiries proved that he was not who he said he was...much like you."

"I assure you, Prince, my story is truthful if not the truth."

Hu laughed quietly at that. "Many a scoundrel has believed thus." He took a deep drink of his tea and refilled both cups. He seemed, again, to be thinking, now about whether to have some of his men throw me out, or worse.

"Before I say more. Let me ask you something and observe your face."

"As you wish," I said.

Hu took a deep breath and let it out. "Do you know the name of Derton?"

"No. I have never heard that name. Is that the woodsman?"

Hu continued to stare at me. "Derton is a problem for me. What I have done is turn this island and this ring into a powerful trader across all the seas. Derton disrupts this, which should run smoothly. He is an upstart, with grandiose plans. A beetle. His plans will collapse from within. There have been others like him and I have dealt with them."

It seemed best not to respond to this at all, lest I imply some understanding that I lacked.

"The woodsman uses the name Quxolotot though he has no right to it. The Quxolotot's died out half my life ago. He works their land as his own. I will give you a name of an inn where you can stay and a provisioner for your travels. Can you read?"

"Yes."

"Then I will write the names down along with a map to Quxolotot....a day's walk from here if you are a landsman and start with the sun."

From a box near the table, Hu removed two sheets of fine cream paper, a narrow brush and some ink. His script was beautiful and clear. His map, whisked off with a few strokes of his brush, would have rivaled any cartographer's art.

"It has been an honor to have tea with you, Prince Hu. The admiral did me a great service in his introduction. I wish you health and long life."

"And I wish you safe passage, Cholf," Responded Hu, "But I fear you will not have it."

25.

The inn was luxurious by my standards. A room fit for rich merchants and those who would deal with Hu. For food, I ate a roasted lamb and drank a heavy barley beer so thick it was like a meal in itself. The meal left me sleepy, so I retreated from the dinning room, where I was attracting too much attention for my appearance, and slept soundly with Bobber nesting on a side table. I had bought a leather pack and, in the dark morning, the inn keeper's wife packed me a bag of provision for my walk, apparently a common duty for her, as lumber agents often set out to inspect groves and orchards. I took only my dagger. Bobber, loath by nature ever to be too far from the sea where his food came from, stayed behind and guarded Greywart.

The road out of Cuxatolk was as wide as a ship. On either side of the road grew a grove of high thin trees closely packed together. High above, the branches intertwined into a vast canopy. Children from town could be heard running and jumping up there, their weight barely flexing the thin stalk near the ground. The canopy darkened the road and the thick trunks muffled all sound. There was no wind. In the quiet, the voices of insects overlapped and filled my ears. The day was cool, though it remained a relatively warm cycle for the eyrthrine. I wondered, while walking, what use such a wide road served and how it was maintained. The surface was perfectly flat and hard, though little but dirt and rock.

The answer to this question arrived around midday, first as a groaning and crunching sound in the distance. The road was dropping into a basin, in the middle of which was a vast silver lake. Beyond, a pair of mountains, which, according to my map was where my destination lay. In the distance, a conveyance piled high with logs was coming toward me, pulled by two great animals. The animals were oxen-like, with branching horn racks, two curving out and up and two curving down and around their faces. High on top sat a driver with a long whip, which he circled high above his head and then cracked above the animals. As I walked toward them, I was forced into the trees next to the road and watched the conveyance pass. The knees of the animals were well above my head and they pulled a cart with great wooden wheels that went to the edge of the road. The logs being pulled were stripped of their bark and their sides were dark and wet. In order to hold that weight, the wheels were not the disk-shaped units of a usual cart, but rather, full-length logs themselves, so fashioned to turn on an axel when pulled by the brute force of the animals. After it passed, the road I travelled was even flatter and harder than the one I had been walking.

I took a break on the shores of the lake. The surface was still with a few flat rocks to sit on. Most of the shores were encroached upon by yet another variety of tree: green pointy ones, fragrant with a waxy, rugged odor. On the far side of the lake, men were binding together rafts of these trunks, to float them to the road for pick up.

After I ate, I was walking uphill for a long time, long enough for the air to grow cooler. I checked the map. I was supposed to climb into a high mountain valley and then branch off this main road to a system of pathways. I passed a village of wood huts; women were outside chopping firewood. They looked at me with eyes full of fear and went inside. I kept climbing, my legs growing heavy as I was not used to being on land, nor walking for an entire day. As the dusk arrived, I had only made it halfway up the slope. Groups of men came down the mountain, carrying axes and saws, other tools. They resembled the dark-skinned men in the port town. They sang happy songs as they walked but grew silent when they passed me, gripping their handles tightly.

As the light failed, it became clear that I would not make it to Quxolotot in a single day, nor even to the first branch in the road. I would have to sleep in the forest. Since that was so, I decided to stop then, as going higher would only take me to colder regions. I entered the woods to look for a good place to sleep. I had with me a cloak, purchased in Cuxatolk, as well as additional food, intended for my return journey. But I had difficulty finding open ground as the roots twined into knots and ropes between the trunks. The open space of the forest was covered by the broad flat stumps left behind by the woodsmen. Standing on one, I thought they must be highly skilled with their tools to create such a flat cut. I jumped to another, which was off the ground and big enough for me to lie across. I set the cloak on the face of it and ate my evening

meal. The dark of the forest closed in around me, as, somewhere, the sun dipped below the mountains. I wrapped myself in the cloak and, exhausted from my walk, fell into a deep sleep.

I woke to the sound of a metallic cranking, directly into my ear. I moved to knock it away, and as I did, I rolled and fell, hitting a branch and catching in a crotch below. I was about 20 heights above the ground. My cloak was tangled in the branch of a tree and I was surrounded by giant leaves the size of my head. Far below, I could see my pack on the side of the trunk of the tree that was holding me, exactly the same place I had left it against the stump I had gone to sleep in.

When I found my balance and woke up, I looked out through the high treetops. The morning sun was but a faint blue presence on some far horizon, just enough to light the sky brighter than dark. An iridescent green and blue bird flew toward my face, beat its wings, and sputtered off again. As I sat, quietly, trying to decide what had happened while I slept, I noticed the bark of the branch I was clinging to was changing in textures. The wrinkles of its surface widened and spread. At the same time, I felt myself floating upward. The tree was growing and had done so throughout the night. I dropped my cloak, but it only carried a few branches down, before tangling up. I climbed down to it and dropped it again. In this manner, I made to the lowest branch of the tree. I let myself hang for a moment, then dropped to rooty ground of the forest. I took my pack to the road and ate breakfast and continued on my way, understanding now more completely the power of Cuxatolk to supply wood to all the shipbuilders and navies in all the rings.

In the mountains, the main road was marked by posts, indicating trails for woodsmen. I found the beaver post from Hu's map. The morning was still dewdamp and the narrower trail was slippery with wet rock and roots. Great fountains of fern grew between the trees. But as I

walked along, I became most conscious of my solitude, an eerie reflection of my time on Wei Wei Lok. The walk was enjoyable for its solitude, the world of the island ship had been cramped and uncomfortable. In solitude, one can reflect on the currents of one's life. Why was I in the dark and regenerating wood of an island distant from my home island? That drive forward, the thing inside pushing me ever on, was continually active. I had notions, too, of being a great fighter, a trained soldier, a member of a hidden and mystical branch of soldiery. That drive had taken me deep into the woods.

My time on that trail was shortened after I crossed a small stream by stepping rock to rock. As I came up out of the stream bed, a barely worn footpath branched to the left. The ferns grew heavily on either side, rising to my hips and covering the path with a low, wet canopy that I had to wade through. I was not long before I smelled woodsmoke drifting in the trees. Soon after, in a clearing the cabin marked on Hu's map appeared.

"Hello!" I called, but only silence responded.

I knocked on the door but got no reply.

The cabin had a peaked roof running to the ground on either side. The roof itself was growing stalks of a dark grass.

I heard the paws digging into the dirt, then the panting, then I was pinned to the ground by a growling timberwolf of twice my bodyweight. Several more circled me nearby. It was clear though they were not going to kill me right away, as they could have torn me apart in an instant. Rather, I was being held.

"Off!" a deep voice said. The wolf jumped to the side and joined his fellows in a ring.

When I stood, I faced a man as Hu had described: tall, broad, with a black beard. He reminded me of Sorgux Berring. He held a hatchet in one hand and through his belt was tucked

a short blade. He was garbed like a creature of the forest, with clothing designed to blend in with the barks and branches.

"Thank you for not allowing me to be eaten by your wolves," I said.

For a moment, my words seemed to hang in the air, empty.

"You speak," said the man in my tongue. "A language from a world far away. It has been many years since I have heard it."

"I am looking for Quxolotot...are you he?"

"Quxolotot is this land," he said, "and the rights to the vuxolot trees that grow here, with their dark wood prized for furniture." He pointed to the hurtos rising up near the cabin. "This depicts the story of the Quxolotot family from the beginning of time. The rabbit shows their poor beginning, the sea eagle their wealth."

"Prince Hu sent me to you," I said. "He told me you take the name Quxolotot, but that you have no rights to it."

"Hu knows nothing of the ways of the woods. I am the head of this clan by marriage. I am the only survivor. The Quxolotots were erased." As he spoke, his voice was dead, emotionless. "The wolves and I are all that remain. I trade with Hu's people. Why did he send you?"

"He said you knew of the Astute Brotherhood."

When I uttered those words, Quxolotot's eyes flicked up into the trees, over my shoulders. He whistled his wolves near to him and uttered several commands to them. They dispersed in all directions, noses down to sniff something out.

Once they were gone, he looked at me more closely. "You are not an assassin," he said. "You have been a prisoner," he added, "for killing."

"I have killed men...I said...and a woman...a witch of some kind...but not for the sport of it."

"So your life has brought you to the eyrthrine to seek out the Brotherhood?"

"I had an introduction to Hu as someone who had influence in this part of the seas. I owe him no allegiance, nor do I owe allegiance to anyone. He gave me a map to you."

The wolves were circling back, now, and brushing up against Quxolotot's thighs.

"You come alone," he said, a statement not a question.

"As I say. I have no allegiances."

"No family? No attachments...Come," he said. "Inside," and with another word to the wolves they dispersed again.

He had to stoop under the low ceiling of the cabin, but he took a place by the fire, where a pot of stew was bubbling. He poured some into a bowl and handed it to me.

"Eat," he said. "The meats of Cuxatolk are sustaining. Shurlingla. The hare has given his lifeforce to us. I will tell you of the Brotherhood."

As he poured out the rich stew, Quxolotot said a prayer in a tongue I had never heard.

"I am from far icewards of here. Whaling people of Huxuctolokolondotop were my ancestors. Before I was waist-high to my father, I rowed an oar in a whaling vessel, and helped the harvest of meat and oil. The sea is ice in the coldest cycles. We traveled by sled between islands, fighting and trading as we saw fit. From a young age, I could commune with the animals of that place, with the wolves and wolf dogs, the sea lions and seals, the icebears, even the great sharks that circled beneath our boats when the ice was broken up. My family came to fear me. I used this power against them..." He paused as his thoughts dwelled on this. "Like

you, I was soon free of allegiances. Like you I had heard stories of the Astute Brotherhood. I sought them out from loneliness as a second family.

"I travelled from island to island asking for them. I was poor, but I could use my talent to perform for meals and monies. My enquiries, as well as a description of my ability, must have gotten back to the membership. One night, as I was returning from an inn where I was performing for my dinner, I was grabbed and I was hooded and taken away. Blind, I was transported across land and sea. When the hood came off, I was landing in Fas Cerie.

"I climbed the Great Stairway in the company of three silent men. They walked two behind, one in front.

"Within the group, there are many secrets. You never know what others are doing. They have a code: Silence. Preparation. Discipline. Obedience. There are three branches of the brotherhood. quisler or men, derkir or arms, and vorna, or powers. Into this last group I was thrown. The initial training is first to learn the language of the brotherhood, a language which only they speak and is synonymous with "silence"; second to learn the vows of brotherhood, and third, to be trained in the arts of the brotherhood. I managed to do this. I then proceeded to learn a dozen or so other languages, including Nurian. And I was finally put under the training of the beastmaster, the leader of the vorna of Beasts.

"When my skills were needed, I was put in a group with those of other talents and abilities and we were given missions to fulfill, always with very specific directions. My first mission was to sail with derkir of the bow to the island of Xuxolot. I controlled the bowmen's horses while they attacked a rogue lord who was trying to raise an army. The bowmen wiped out this army. And we returned to Fas Cerie. The success of this mission was never spoken of in my presence.

"Thus my career as a brother proceeded, usually working in small bands, and usually sent far away to complete a task. I created a distraction by attacking a tower with a fleet of bloodbats; I stampeded dromedaries and stamped a young vizier to death; I used a brightly plumaged vulcon to carry messages between two lovers; I concealed a Derfinian calahoot under in the privy of a princess; I was involved in the great action against the terrorbears.

"I was sent here to protect the Quxolotots. I was sent alone and told to rally the forest animals in defense of the family. As a quisler, derkir, or vorna you are not told who is paying the brotherhood for your service, with what, nor what their motivation might be. The Quxolotots consisted of a family of four. A father and a son, a mother and a daughter. The vuxnor trees were, as I say, their domain. This grove stretches in all directions from here, most of the mountain on this side of the main road. Among all the woods of Cuxatolk, this is among the most valuable. It's rich grain is prized for furniture, but, because it can be honed to perfect straightness, without any flex at any length, it is also prized for weapon. Here:

Quxolotot handed me a longstaff about as tall as he. It was smooth and light, yet almost impossibly strong. I couldn't even flex it over my knee.

"I trained the timberwolves and crows, and set up a wide perimeter of these trusted animals around the family, but nothing happened for a long time. No one attacked and no one seemed to threaten them. The father and son were gone all day, leading crews of harvesters to find trees of exactly the right age: too new and they are too flexible, too aged and they become brittle. The mother and daughter stayed home.

"As a brother, I had become used to constant action, either offensive or defensive. I knew my enemy and I worked to be victorious. Here, I moldered and became distracted. I began working with the Quxolotots as a enemy to boredom. I ranged with them through the

woods. I learned their skills of harvesting: their axes and saws. I learned how much of the tree must be left in the ground so that it can regrow in the darkness. My wolves and crows maintained their vigilance and still nothing happened.

"I fell in love with the daughter, who was only a few years younger than I at that time. We were married in the forest by a Gyhuxtok, spiritwoman of shurlingla. This act was in defiance of my vows to the Brotherhood...as both marriage and spiritual devotion are forbidden. I came to believe---in truth, to know---that shurlingla was the source of my powers over the beasts. And the more I believed in this the more powerful I became. I could feel all the bodies of the forest moving around me as though I were connected to them through a vast web. People too, I could tell how fast their hearts were beating, how much fear they were feeling. Shurlingla flowed through me like water through a streambed.

"Then, one night I returned from the forest to find a pure white timberwolf sitting on its haunches in front of this cabin, its muzzle fur dripping with blood, the remains of the Quxolotots surrounding her.

"She was not from here, I know that. She was cold to me, empty inside. I felt nothing from her.

"She licked her jaws and loped off, paws barely touching the ground. My raven and wolves made not a sound. They saw her neither come nor leave, despite her white fur standing out in the forest underbrush.

"My mission had failed. My wife was dead. I had no idea why or how. Until now... The momentary sensation of being struck on the skull from behind in that moment is retained in my thoughts like a splintering crack, as though tiny fissures spread through the bone at the moment of impact, spread and become lost in the soft spongy recesses of unconsciousness.

26.

I woke and struggled but my hands were bound behind me, my feet under me. Over the hood, a hand clamped a damp cloth to my mouth. Strong vapors were impossible not to breathe. The next thing I knew I was waking up in my own boat. I could hear Bobber making concerned noises nearby. The only sounds were sea sounds. Three bodies other than my own shifted nearby.

"Water?" I said.

The hood was pulled off. I sat up.

Quxolotot---or the man I had known by that name---was there, sleeping in the bow. It was dusk. Two others men were there. One held the tiller and sail line. The other was braiding a multicolored rope from a bag of spare fibers. He stopped what he was doing and handed me a cup of water. I still had my dagger, but my hands were bound. I held the cup between both my hands and drank from it. The man went back to braiding rope. He was not as big as Quxolotot, fair-eyed with close-cropped black hair, and beardless.

"Tell me of Cron the terror bear," he said, still concentrating on his craft.

"Who are you?" I said. "Why have you taken me?"

"We are the ones you seek."

"The brotherhood...?"

He looked into my eyes, but did not answer.

"Tell me of Cron the terrorbear."

"How can you prove to me that you are not returning me to prison?"

The one holding the tiller scoffed at this. "Look where you are." He pointed to the sky.

The first stars of night glimmered above. I did not recognize what I saw, but I knew we were still in the eyrthrine, and heading deeper into its inner sea.

"I was a prisoner with Cron. That is true. I know he is an enemy to the Brotherhood, but on Xin's Maw we worked together to destroy the tower."

"Did Cron speak of us?"

"He spoke of you as an enemy...the reason he was on the prison island. He speaks very little and not in great detail."

"As far as you know, he remains on the island?"

"The creatures that guarded the escape by water were still in place when I left. The tower is destroyed. They could have built a vessel and sailed from there...but I escaped as the tower was falling."

The man did not respond to this and continued picking threads from his bag and braiding them.

We crossed narrow seas between thickly forested islands. The islands were green and seemed to breath out the foggy air. None had a live volcano. They were smooth and quiet and, because of their thickness, unpopulated. The distance between any two islands was rarely greater than I could see. And we sailed the coasts of each for long spans of time. The shores had no beaches, but, instead, wooded cliffs. The one holding the tillers navigated between the islands without a second thought, capturing the light wind and easy breezes effortlessly, following the rocky shores and labyrinthine passages without encountering lag or calm.

Quxolotot woke up, but he did not speak. If he was perplexed about what was going on, he did not show it. If he was comrades with these men, he did not show that either. He sat in the

bow and, sometimes, played with Bobber, who had taken an instant liking to him. This felt like a profound betrayal.

We came to a region of seatrees greater than even those surrounding Cuxotalk. The air was so thick with moisture there it was impossible to tell if it were raining or not....we were inside the rain, dampened by it from all directions. The vast trunks plunged high into the clouds. An individual trunk took a long time to row around. Their roots twisted into arches and tunnels. The two brothers---for that's what they indeed were---rowed Greywart II through the treacherous passages, piercing curtains of moss, cutting through hanging baskets of web, negotiating the currents controlled by the trunks, and fending off with my trident. The air was filled with the sound of birds, the lapping of waves, and the repetitive chirrups, clicks, and stridulations of insect, but overlaying all was the winding and unwinding sound of something, a call and response, a harrowing, hollow, twisting sound heard only on those regions.

Quxolotot called down a flying creature to the boat. It was animal with feathered wings and a body covered with brown fur. Its vulture eyes darted between us. For the first time he spoke, in his own voice, but in a language of culls and small chirrups that only he and the bird-beast understood. Bobber was clearly disturbed by this beast, who dwarfed him. He huddled close to me. As the creature spread its wings and flapped up into the nearest seatree Quxolotot said to the other two:

"All is well. No one follows."

Our voyage through the seatrees lasted several days. When the starless, moonless darkness smothered us, we moored to exposed roots and slept in the boat. My hands and feet remained tied, despite my pleas to be released. I asked where we were going and received no

answer. The nighttime was loud with the sounds of insects, owls, and other voices. Quxolotot seemed energized by the night and often sat up throughout the darkness, listening.

On the third day, I noticed the water between the seatrees growing more shallow or perhaps it was that the root tangles beneath the water were growing thicker. The roots formed an area of almost land with little water in between. Soon, the water was too shallow even for our canoe. We tied Greywart II to a root that the two Brothers chose. One of the brothers cut me loose.

I followed one, with two behind. The slippery surface of the ground made for slow movement. I often resorted to crawling on all fours to get up or under the broad root. The landscape was in darkness with the trunks growing closely together and the canopy allowing needle beams of light. We followed no path, but wound our way through the only passage. Sometimes, I would hear the ripple of water beneath me. All around us we heard creaking, chirping, howling, and hooting. We disturbed slithering presences beneath the dying leaves. Broad moths coasted among the branches. Quxolotot told us the names of the animals as we went. After indicating the hanging form of a skelp, which was like a cross between a monkey and a rat, he pointed down through a root gap to a pair of glowing green eyes:

"The black crock," he said. "Don't slip."

After staring and trying to make out the form for a moment or two, I began to discern the black body sunken in the mud and set between the root. The crock was as big as Greywart II and those eyes the size of a giant's fists.

After crossing the root island, we came to a place where several narrow canoes were hidden under a lattice of branches and leaves. The canoes were in good repair and showed

evidence of having been recently used. We launched one and the two guides took paddles. I was not bound. Bobber sat in my lap.

We paddled through more of the partially open water. The air remained cold and damp. I noticed that the sea trees, which had seemed impossibly massive already were even larger here. They seemed older as well. The trunks grew closely together; in places, they joined into walls. On some, the bark ripples were deep enough to fit an average Nurian building inside and in the depth of these ridges, entire systems of plants, animals, and insects were living. The canoe knocked through the narrower passages. Now, we paddled through the night, which was hardly different from the day, the Brothers working in shifts.

Eventually, when we seemed as far from any other people or places as was possible, we came to a place where three other canoes were tied.

"Fas Cerie," said Quxolotot.

Only the three canoes were visible. I looked around and saw the seething forest of seatrees, no different from what I had seen for the last six days. I listened, breathed the air, noticed nothing.

I was helped up on the roots of the tree near where we had tied---it seemed larger than even the largest and oldest we had passed recently. My two guides and Quxolotot walked directly to the tree.

"Turn around," one of them said to me.

I did so, and when they had me turned back around, I was facing a door, broad enough for the three of us to enter shoulder to shoulder. Inside the door was a staircase going up into the darkness. Here and there above, flickering torches lit the way. Our footsteps were softened by

the wood corridor. The stairway was steep, each step up required an effort and carried us high. We walked up for a long time without talking.

The stairway opened up into a broad hall. Long tables ran the length of it. The smell of old soup and stale bread filled the air. Clusters of men sat in conversation. Some, drinking from flagons, were laughing. Others, alone, stared out into the distance as though their eyes remembered distant horrifying spectacles. When we came up, some of the heads turned to us and some did not.

We went along the end of the hall and through another corridor and out into an outdoor platform. Fires burned in pits throughout the area, which was dotted with small huts, canvas tents, and other small shelters. Here, many men sat outside, around their fires, smoking pipes, making arrows, sharpening weapons, and darning clothing.

High above, the ceiling was formed of arches chiseled directly from the wood with crossing beams that required no joinery. The hall led to an open platform, through which the damp air of the ocean blew. At the edge of it, as we walked along, I looked down. We were above the low clouds and I could see only mist. Above, past the edge of the roof, the tree continued, but I could see other open platforms high above, as well as rope bridges between the trees.

We left the platform and entered another open hall. In this one, pairs of men were fighting with each other using what appeared to be rehearsed movements, almost like a dance. An older man stood at the middle and shouted instructions at them in a hoarse voice and a language I did not know.

We passed through that to a long room. Archers were firing down the length of it at human shaped targets. Their longbows reached almost to the ground. The intermittent whistle-thunk carried through near silence.

Beyond, we entered a spiral staircase and went down, into a small, windowless chamber, brightly lit by torches. There, a man sat at a desk drinking from a iron cup. He was narrow faced, with scars on his ears, chin, and under both his eyes. His white hair sprouted in small patches. He did not change expression when we entered, remained focused on the far distance.

Finally, he looked at my two guides,

"Stamnos. Bentros," and then he said something to them. Since I later learned the language of the Astute Brotherhood, I can record that he said, "You have completed your mission." And then he dismissed all three of them. With the barest movement of his finger he indicated Quxolotot. "Return this man to the beastmaster."

He lowered his gray eyes on me. He spoke in Nurian.

"You have been seeking the Astute Brotherhood. Now you are here."

"What will happen to Quxolotot?" I asked.

"If I were you, I should be more concerned what will happen to me. Quxolotot, as you know him, is a brother. It is not for you to know his mission, nor whether he completed it or not. You are here. You have been brought here. That part of his mission has been fulfilled."

"Why...or how? How did you find me?"

"We have people. Not brothers, but eyrthrine islanders who are good at noticing things. A man you knew as Sorgux Berring is one of these. He told us of you, your encounter with Juna of Hroth, your trial. We arranged for you to be taken to Xin's Maw, where we had another order

of business, but you escaped before we could seek you out. I assumed you were lost as the thrall of Typhon."

His words spin most of my life around my head. That there had been a hidden hand at work in some inexplicable actions made sense...answering why I had been sent to the prison of the immortals rather than being executed for my crime in Keylocklundria.

"I do not say this to all who arrive here, but I am impressed that you survived your experiences thus far. Where have you been since you were on Xin's Maw?

I told him, as succinctly as possible, of my time of Wei Wei Lok and Ydridria.

"The island ship...disabled...he said. And you told the Navy of the Ten Cities about it?"

"Yes," I said. I could not tell from his tone whether he thought this was good or bad.

"They will do nothing, of course," he said.

"But by destroying the island ship, the Navy would help protect many of the islands and ships in its domain."

"And then what need would the mydrine have of such a defensive force as the Navy?" He took another drink out of his iron cup. "You were brought here to learn and to work. What you have done in your young life so far, is, like I say, impressive. It has lacked, however, a sense of purpose. What gave you the hope of joining us?"

I told him about my uncle's stories, in particular, the one of the battle of Gur Fenderop.

"A shining moment for us. I was there myself, not much older than you. But most of what you will do is train, prepare, and go on small missions. You will not know the reason for your missions, nor will those with whom you travel. The good and the bad of it will not be clear to you, will perhaps be impossible to know."

"Which part of the Brotherhood would I be joining?"

"So you have heard some from Quxolotot of how the brotherhood works. If you were to see the men who are recruited for their physical size and strength, you would know this is not the realm for you. And, as I don't believe you have the power to speak to the beasts as Quxolotot does, or some equivalent power, you would join those specializing in the usage of weapons. The longbowmen you passed would be your brethren, but there is much more to it than that.

"Your choice now is death or oath. It is unfair, I know, but you have seen too much. Since I have yet to have a recruit choose death, I will take you to the man who will oversee your training here, and set you on a path to the beyond. If you decide to choose death, simply let him know and he will oblige you."

And with that, he stood. In place of one leg, he had a wooden staff that notched below his arm.

"Come," said. "Welcome to the Astute Brotherhood."

27.

Time is the sea that I sail in. The sea is my memory of seas. The water is of all times.

Time is a device that I have seen but did not understand. In the center of a tower, it turns. Its wheels and levers whirr and twitch. There was a time without land. Pure time, with waves, ripples, and currents. My lifetime has made me sure of that.

The sun rises. Following their cycles, the moon sets. Following its cycles, the moon rises. The sun sets. Islands grow as lava meets seawater and turns solid. Islands shrink as the wind whips them and sea beats them into dust. Volcanoes cool, die, fill with water, collapse, erode, and blow away. Reefs grow, shadowed by the boats of generations of fisherpeople. The cycles turn the fiery islands to winter and the icy bridges begin to melt. Ancient words

grow in power, become air and wind, become the spells of the wyndrine sorcerer. Old weapons dull and rust. Crowns are chopped from heads. Men and beasts die. Immortals live and die. Gods live for those who keep them alive.

For you reading this, my life has been measured by bare black marks on the fibrous page, each one like a movement of the Keylocklundrian device. I have recounted how I learned to write them. When I set out to write this story of stories down, I looked at its many blank pages and wondered how I would ever fill them. Now I see that I am approaching the end of this book and have only recounted the first years of my life. I was fourteen cycles old when I left Nur, already with a broken heart, already a father. When I sent Telabia home to Vinfer, two more cycles had passed, according to the Navy of the Ten Cities calendar (and who records time better than a navy)? And there are things I did not take time to relate. The woman who cut my cloak on Burdon wore an amber necklace in which a red spider had been entombed. There were days on Wei Wei's Lok when the wind would cut across the island such that a tremendous whistling would rise up and continue until the change in its angle silenced it. And the tea that Prince Hu served me left my tongue numb for days. The time of a story has little room for such details, and yet such details are the things out of which a story is made. Wurl the Split Beard has loaned me some of his sons. I sent them abroad to bring back ten more blank volumes, as much ink as they can buy, for I am rich with gold that will sink my ship to the otherworld. To die before finishing my story is terrifying. I live again through writing it. I am fourteen again. I love again, kill again, escape again.

When I began my training with the Astute Brotherhood, I was sixteen cycles old. When I was sent on my first mission, I was eighteen. When I first encountered Derton the Conqueror I was twenty cycles old. As I write this, a hundred and twenty cycles have passed in the time of

my living. Story-time has folds and ripples. The priestess of the Goddess Ire removes her robe and folds it in the sacred way before pouring water over her body. The arms cross. In the fabric of time, the fold brings two moments together. Two towers, now three, touch through the pages.

When you are young, it is easy to commit yourself to a cause that expects to consume your life. When you are old, and understand more of how time works, it is impossible to imagine committing your life to any one cause. The lives of mortals are both too long and too short to imagine it. When I was sixteen cycles old, however, I did so with hardly a thought.

My two years spent in Fas Cerie, began, as Quxolotot's had, by learning the secret language of the brotherhood. Having learned, already, more than one language, this took me shorter than others I was trained with. There was a class of five of us put to the learning. As we delved into the language, we practiced memorizing and discussing the tenets of the Brotherhood as disclosed by the Texts:

Silence is the way of the Astute. Speaking gives flight to your thoughts. These birds never return to you. Silence helps the astute cultivate an inner calm. Silence allows for precise actions. Movement is accomplished soundlessly to surprise enemies.

Preparation ensures precision of action and of mental state. An action must be practiced until it can be performed without thinking in such a way that it can be adapted to all possible situations. The bowmen can shoot an arrow through the eye of a peacock if the peacock is in a tree or running away.

Discipline makes preparation powerful and possible. Only through discipline can a Brother achieve his full potential. Only through discipline can he be perfectly obedient.

Obedience: it is not for one brother to know true goals of his mission but it is for him to follow his order completely and without question.

A teacher name Nomo taught five of us these lessons in the secret language. He had taught the language of the brotherhood as long as all those brothers then living had been alive. He was bent with age and wore a long grey beard, but at one time he must have been a fearsome quisler. Even with his spine curved to rest his chin on his chest, and his legs bowed out, his frame towered over mine.

Two of the five were young quislers themselves. Almost giants, they slumped at the desks we were given and learned the secret tongue with great difficulty. Their giant heads seemed to conceal bony plates capable of thwarting spear points rather than giant brains capable of crafting strategy. They were recruited from icewards of the eyrthrine for their size and strength, their natural propensity for discipline, obedience, and silence. One punch from them would have killed me. They were named Bromogux and Broaudux. There was another derkir, like me from the mydrine. And a single vorna. Among the astute, a group of men who treated everything with reserve, the vorna were afforded even greater distance. A brother could not tell what a vorna's power might be. Could they walk on water, or generate wind, could they bring beings back to life, or, like Quxolotot commune with beasts? A silent, respectful suspicion persisted. Their powers were not on display and, as a part of their specific code, they were not meant to be known among non-vornatic brothers. Often you would not know a vorna's power until he used it on a mission, and often it surprised you. Derkirs were known because they were not vorna and were not quisler: their skills were learned through practice.

The five of us sat there until I outpaced the rest and completed my understanding of the language. As I have said, the word for the brotherhood's language was synonymous with their word for "silence." The language was intended only to be used when absolutely necessary.

I was taken out of the language class and moved on to the first stage of my derkir training. The fundamental weapon of the Brotherhood was the long bow. Their bows were made from the wood of the ancient sea trees and the string from the black crock gut. They were lightweight and powerful. The arrows were fletched with seaeagle feathers and pointed with knapped heads of a black glass that shattered against bone, doubling the damage they inflicted. Because I had completed the language course fast, I was alone with the bow instructor, Win. Win moved slowly and with great purpose. The first thing he said to me was:

"Until...you...can...properly...hold...the...bow...you...may...not...touch....the...string...."

I spent many days aligning my fingers around the center point of the bow, which was wrapped with wax-coated twine so that it could be held without making a noise. Win would stand next to me and place the bow softly on the ground. He would say, "yes." and I would stoop with one leg forward, bending my knees at the exact right angle. I would wrap my fingers around the grip in such a way that the creases under each knuckle aligned precisely with the wraps of my bow (each was a unique instrument of death). Once I had mastered the gripping of the handle from the ground, I moved on to grabbing it if it was concealed in a high place, if it was slung around my shoulders, and if it was holstered on the side of a horse. With each of these actions, I noticed that the repetition of the actions thousands of times a day resulted in a similar pattern. At first, the action was awkward and difficult. Then it became easier and its apparent difficulty eluded me. Then, it became more fluid and I could see that I had been initially overconfident. Then the fluidity faded away and it became balanced and effortless. Once the point of effortlessness had been crossed, I could perform the action perfectly without thinking at all. Once I had mastered holding the bow, I was granted the privilege by Win of touching the string.

I moved through the holding of the string, to pulling it, to the release, to the grasping of an arrow from various holding positions, to finally aiming and releasing the arrow. Then I learned the releasing of the arrow from different positions. Once all of this had been completed, I was given practice on both stationery and moving targets. Then Win took me on a training trip.

We descended the stairway together in silence. I had found over the weeks before that silence is a habit that, once cultivated is not difficult to sustain. When one spends one's time with Win, it is even easier to sustain. As we loaded the canoe to set off, however, I noticed that Win was stowing an abundance of food as well as a case used to hold 120 arrows. I broke silence.

"How long are we going to be gone?" I said.

He did not answer.

Fas Cerie can be approached only from one direction. The open water that admits one to the great staircase does not flow around the island itself. There are points that one could consider the end of the island, but that is because the water is somewhat more visible beneath the tangle of roots. The roots are passable---with difficulty---by foot. The brotherhood maintains a network of canoes in the open water. The open water is a maze, since the branches and forks of it often go for far distances before disappearing in a tangle of roots.

Win guided and I paddled. When we reached a dead end, we tied the canoe there, and travelled over the roots to the next section of open water, where a different canoe was waiting for us. Using this system, we travelled for several days until we tied up at an island. The trees here remained the giant sea trees, but in between, growing on the roots, was a second type of growth, sharp reeds growing from all dry surfaces. Win handed me a bag of food, a quiver with forty arrows.

He pointed his hand and said, "I...will...meet...you...on...the...other...side..."

I climbed off and nocked an arrow, holding it in place with one hand and using the other for balance. I slipped off the first root and reached out, catching the reeds. Their bladed edges sliced down the palm of my right hand. I went knee deep into the edge water, where I could feel deeper, more tangled roots grabbing at my boots. Something flashed in the dark water and I leapt back up, balancing with only my foot. I stepped into the island.

The reeds grew past my face. They could be fought through, but only by brushing through them against their wide faces, rather than their bladed edges. I could use my bow to spread the reeds as I went, but then I would not be ready to fire it. After several hours of this, my feet burned through balancing and crossing narrow passages. My arms were cut and bleeding. Nothing else had happened. As I went, however, I began to notice that each time I moved one of the reeds, it made an expected rustling sound, but deep within that there was a corresponding high-pitched sound, a sound barely distinguishable from silence. The sounds began to grow, not louder but in greater abundance. I could not understand its origin, whether it was approaching, going away, hovering, attacking, lurking. At times it came in waves, but that also seemed like a trick of the ear.

I found an open area to sit and eat. I was covered with sweat and blood, hungry and thirsty. I opened the bag. Inside was a small flask of water and some dried meat, enough for a single meal, yet I didn't know how far I had to go or how long it would take me. The dense growth prevented vision beyond an arm's length. Also, I was worried that I had gotten off course.

I looked up into the dark canopy where a few rays of light streamed through and made beams of the fog before dispersing in darkness. As I was chewing, the high pitched sounds

seemed to start to swarm above me. I could hear, for the first time, the accompanying knocking of wings and bodies somewhere.

I got my bow ready, quiver over my left shoulder.

Glowing green eyes. Wingbeats. The high-pitched sounds. A V of creatures diving on me...at the front of their wings, claws held the razory reeds out to either side. I took the first out by sinking an arrow into its hairy breast. I loosed three more in quick succession, then, as several more reached me, I blocked their reeds with the bow. The screeching was so loud it made me dizzy, affecting my aim as those that had survived circled back up for another attack. I put one knee to the ground to stabilize myself. I shot and missed, shot again and missed, the sound penetrating my mind, making it almost impossible to see. The reeds slashed at my throat, caught me on the ear and shoulder, pulling open shallow wounds. On the next approach I took out two more. And then the flock had been culled down and I was able to finish them off without suffering additional injury.

The sound had been maddening and, in the relative silence afterward, I felt only peace. I stood among the mounded bodies of a strange flying being. The wings were leathery skin, that in lighter climes would have been translucent. The hands held their weapons tightly, even in death. Some were impaled on the reeds, their dead, green eyes staring askew. I left the arrows, as the brothers' arrowheads were for a single kill alone. From the hairy bodies of the flying creatures, pale green blood leaked between the roots and into the water below. The tails of black crocks snapped as they wrestled for a taste.

I made it across the island by the end of the day and found Win asleep in his canoe. He appeared surprised to see me. But he nodded, cleaned out my wounds, dressed them with a fragrant salve, and we paddled on.

We spent several more days of paddling the dark inner territory of the eyrthrine. I would later come to find out that where we were then is know throughout the ring as s'twinisay zuxato, which translates into Nurian as something like "place of the lost" or "the lost place." Many stories told in the eyrthrine feature creatures from the s'twinisay zuxato, although people who live in other parts of the ring do not believe that it really exists, so that the word has the connotation of "no place." Even the loggers of Prince Hu and others like him do not enter the tangles of s'twinisay zuxato.

Win stopped and tied up at a second island, which I was surprised to see had some earth or sand to its base, rather than merely a tangle of roots. Again, he gestured with his hand and again said he would meet me on the other side. As he backed his paddle, I watched him disappear into the falling darkness. I decided to sleep in the low limb of the nearby tree rather than on the beach so near the water. It seemed safer, despite my experience on Cuxatolk...at least I knew the black crocks wouldn't take me from the beach. The night was restless with new sounds: an impossibly loud owl was quickly followed by something that sounded like a human scream. I was expecting another attack from a creature. I awoke from a shallow sleep to hear footsteps on the sand. They were too faint to be a man's, but, it was a biped. It was a biped and it was mumbling to itself.

I could see nothing. The canopy blots out the stars and moon. I imagined a slight being --like an Ilk---with narrow feet in leather moccasins. The sounds of a bucket being dropped into the water, scooping it up. But why draw sea water? Perhaps, in such a shallow region, there are no wells or springs. Perhaps they drink seawater. I did not risk nocking an arrow, but instead concentrated on steadying my mind and body so that I could hear the feet shift the sand, the

hands with a wooden bucket scoop the water. The hoot-scream continued relentlessly, so that my aural images formed only intermittently.

The feet retreated back up the beach, hopped up to a wet root (where I could hear the moccasins slip slightly over the wood) and disappeared from my field of hearing.

When the dull gray light of day was fully risen, I slipped out of my limb. On the beach, the thin footprints I had imagined imprinted the sand next to my own. If the thing could see in the dark, or even feel perceptively with its soles, then it would know someone besides itself was on its pile of sand and tangled roots.

Up from the water, dirt mixed with the sand and roots. The island was more substantial than others I had seen in the s'twinisay zuxato. In places the roots bowed upward to form small caves and these had been packed with earth and grown over with grass. There were even times, as I followed a kind of path, that the walking was easy and natural. All this made me on my guard. I came to a circle of small caves. In the center there was a fire burning with a basin boiled over the fire. Suddenly, tiny beings on two feet ran at me from all points of the circle. Some started to attack my shins and ankles with rocks, but their strikes were barely noticeable through my boots and leather grieves. I kicked them off. But as I did so, I noticed one of them...a female perhaps, perhaps the only female as all the others looked vaguely male, reach her hands into the coals of the fire, and throw a series of hot red coals into the air. With a few words, the coals became winged serpents of fire, circling in the air. I fired at them, but the arrows passed straight through their bodies. The tiny being next pointed her hands at the little men who had been attacking my shins and incanted again. They grew, instantly, beyond my height. They stamped and crushed their dwellings and the fire. At that close range, I was forced to use my arrows as spears, jabbing them upwards through the throats of the things, driving them

home into huge fat guts. The creatures expelled awful gusts of the smell when the arrows entered them, so powerful I could barely breath. Then, the fire serpents began to dive down on me. I hit the ground, ducked between the legs of the confused giants, and let the fire burn my foes. As they fell, shrieking and stamping, I had to avoid their bodies.

I continued to try and kill the giants but there were so many that it seemed futile. Then, I saw the tiny witch kneeling in the crotch of distant roots. Legs crossed the space between, boulder-sized fists swung down at me, burning beings flailed and screamed in the chaos. I shot through the movement and caught a passing hairy calf. I fired again and again, but the giants continued to block the flight of the arrows.

I sprang up and grabbed the belt of a burning giant. A fire serpent dove at me and lashed him again as I slung around behind his shoulder. As it passed I hopped to the thing's neck, aimed, and fired down on the miniscule witch.

As the arrow pierced her forehead, I found myself falling through the air. The fire serpents disappeared. I landed on and crushed tiny beings. Countless others writhed and smoldered around me. I picked one up. It's dark eyelids were half-closed. It had hairy ears, a bald head, and a wizened, old-man's face. It hung limply in my hand, an arrow wound far bigger than its own limbs leaking blood.

This challenge seemed unnecessary to me. A stirring up of sudden chaos with little aim, the unexpected designed for ones who had not travelled the islands as I had and seen what they were capable of.

I found Win asleep on the far side of the Island. I kicked the beached canoe to wake him up. He said,

"An...unnecessary....breaking....of....silence....is....ill...advised..."

"I just slaughtered a village of helpless...little...things."

"The root gnomes are not helpless...the female...?"

"The female was powerful, but, if I had left them alone they would all be alive."

"You forget your vow of obedience. Trust that there is a reason for the mission you are given."

"Out here? These little things...what could be the harm in them?"

"Is their capacity for harm the only possible reason they would be dangerous...?"

"What else would their be?"

"You have travelled much, derkir, but you have learned little. The motives of another are often impossible to determine. What drove Juna of Hroth to use you as she did?"

I was quiet for a minute, but then I remembered Sorgux was connected to the brotherhood. He had gotten the story to the them somehow...but it was impossible they would know all of its dimensions.

"Ambition..." I said, faltering. "She needed the device to unlock a place or a power in the wyndrine island she sought."

Win nodded, as though this were only one among a myriad of possibility.

"But what drove her to destroy your life, as she believed she had? Greed? She was rich. A lust for power....that is a strong force. To know she could use her own powers, to prove to herself that she could use them....? Love?"

"Not love," I said.

"A rejection of love...its power over her...? This is the way you think, seeing the world through your own eyes in the head of another. But Juna...a icerine princess, a root gnome, a

Vinferian lion tamer...an ilk, a terrorbear, an immortal....they see the world through eyes that you can only guess at, never know."

"We of the Brotherhood see the world in the same way as each other?"

"Obedience...", said Win. "Obedience lends us a shared vision for the length of the mission. When the mission ends, there is no need to understand anything."

I lifted the beached end of the canoe and settled it on the water, stepping in and grabbing the paddle.

I paddled for a while in silence.

"But we train alone," I said. "At night, I see my fellows in the eating hall and we talk little. How can we know that, when the time comes, we will be unified in understanding?"

"You may fight each other one day...it would not be fair to make of you friends."

"Brothers fight brothers?"

"On occasion it is necessary to sustain missions on many sides of a conflict."

I thought about Quxolotot's wife's family...murdered so that he would remain in residence on Cuxatolk, until he could meet me and then be allowed back to Fas Cerie. Was that really what had happened? Such machinations were complex and impossible to understand for sure. Surely the death of his family accomplished some other goal...perhaps his presence there accomplished something beyond what I could guess. An implicit threat to Prince Hu that in turn expired when it was clear he knew of Cuxatolk's connections...

The lines of possibility tangled in my head.

"There is nothing for you to know beyond what we have already told you. Anything beyond that is dangerous to you and dangerous to the brotherhood. No mission was ever aided by thought outside of how best to complete that mission. Thinking that killing root gnomes is

pointless or thinking it has a point are both meaningless thoughts. The point is completion of the mission. Non-completion of our missions is always equal to death. Completion of our missions sometimes requires death. You have not yet accepted this...you struggle because of it. But this is just the bow...struggle is to be expected."

After this conversation with Win, my life in the brotherhood made sense. Young men such as I want to die in the name of something larger than themselves. It is a story we tell of ourselves, a story that though we believe wholeheartedly, we probably do not completely believe, for we fear death at that same moment that our strength and youth make us feel invincible. As I write these words, I cling to each moment of life, savor its passing, whether it be dark and cold silence or something with more life in it. As a story, the pledging of the character's life to great cause shows his selflessness and suggests excitement to come. And excitement comes, a great swordfight, a great dual, a great battle. Well, battles come, whether they are great or not.

Just as mastering the bow had several stages, this moment with Win was the second stage and the point at which my training began to become second nature.

After a full day of paddling, we entered a darker region of s'twinisay zuxato. Here, the roots were grown so thick and tall that we glided under them, cutting through thinner hanging roots with a broad blade Win had brought for the purpose. Then, we made it to the sun. It seemed like I hadn't felt its warmth on my face for years. We were at the edge of a great stand of sea trees, but the sea was open beyond. Sheets of white sunlight fell of the bright blue water. The waves rippled and emitted twinkles of golden light. The day was more than half over and a few still clouds hung in the air. It wasn't warm, but the cool eyrthrine air was warmed by the sunlight. In the far distance, a small island peaked over the top of the island. As my eyes

adjusted, I could see huts on the shore, and a few people here and there. They were working on nets, cleaning fish, removing shellfish from their shell. To their backs, another stand of seatrees rose up. These distant villagers seemed peaceful in the sunshine, going about their business of staying alive on the edge of s'twinisay zuxato.

Win shaded his eyes with his hand. He removed a single arrow and handed it to me.

"On the far shore, a man, sitting in a wooden chair."

I shaded my eyes and could pick out the man he meant. Him? I thought. He looked like a village elder overseeing the everyday actions of his villagers. His head lowered. He sipped drink from a gourd with a toothless mouth. Was this simply a test of targeting, or of mettle and ... obedience?

The man sat at the greatest distance a longbow could fly its missile. There was little wind, but it was not perfectly still. Higher in the air there was stronger breeze, but it was coming in gusts. I pulled back the arrow, aimed in the sky, tried to see the currents of air moving above. I imagined the flight, the way the shaft would be buffeted, the way the eagle feathers would turn and spin the gusts and how those turns would alter the falling trajectory. I loosed the arrow.

For a long time there was silence in the sky and the ever-glimmering sunlight layered gold bands on the water. The villagers continued to go about their work on the beach. The elder's head snapped back and the shaft protruded from his eye. A villager turned toward him. Called out. After a delay, we heard their screams. They looked across the water, saw us. Then men ran for their boats, and began paddling toward us. Win and I got back in our canoe and retreated into s'twinisay zuxato, the no place that had just produced two men to kill their village elders and into which a taboo prevented them from ever paddling.

28.

The armory was several heights above the main halls of the Brotherhood, and took up much of the level. Iron torches emitting flickering light into the arched ceiling. Swords of every island the brothers had visited lined the walls: one-handed and two-handed swords; long swords and short swords; crude blades and blades with gold filigree. As we walked the isles and racks and boxes, Win explained the origin and use of the most farfetched items. He showed me a Forgian Claw, a bracelet that activated a poisoned dart with a flip of the wrist. There were the ankle spikes of the Nuxulite treesmen who used them for climbing to their aery nests, for fighting with their legs, and for hunting apes. There was a suit of armor made entirely of tortoise shells, masks carved with fearsome visages, and saddles for warhorses. When we reached an aisle with tridents, I was fascinated by the variety of barbs, the curves of the tines, the length of the handles. Win showed me the trident of a Alгатian Frogman from the wyndrine: a race that ruled a boggy island, they carried the scaly shafts of these tridents under their armpits. The entire weapon was hollow and could be used for breathing underwater as well as for attacking their prey.

Holding the light instrument in one hand, I asked Win if any brother had ever used it.

"That is not to be known," said Win.

The tines were knocked and bent, the shaft burnished with scratches.

And indeed what Win had said was true, what Brothers had done or not done was not to be known. The Brotherhood did not keep records. There were no historians or scribes. It was forbidden to write the silent language. The lore of the Astute went to the graves of the brothers: far flung graves, unmarked, never spoken of.

My training continued with the dagger and moved on to the short and long sword with digressions in the art of thin-bladed fencing. We passed from that to hatchets and axes, including the art of beheading. I mastered the sling, the woahwoah (the bladed throwing stick of Gev), and every other way of flinging stones, wood, and metal objects. I practiced the hand dart, the blow dart, and the throwing star. I practiced with spears and crossbows of all descriptions; I learned to use shields that could cover me from head to toe and those that could be used as weapons themselves.

I learned the methods of infiltration, the tools of espionage. I studied the weak points of structures and the building of siege weapons. Battle tactics and war strategies were reviewed with broad maps and wooden legions. I learned the conduct of a sailing fleet attempting to storm an island and the defense against such a fleet. Over the cycles, I worked my way through the archives of weapons, until I felt comfortable using any device designed to kill as well as improvising some of my own.

Then I continued to the Astute Movements, those that rendered my body into a weapon. These were the tools of the hand-to-hand combat for which the Astute had long been known. The weapon of weapons that can never be disarmed. The teacher of this was not Win, but compact, bald Caturian. Although the use of the Astute Movements was the special province of quislers, Caturian took us through the Regimen, which required the mastery of a single movement before one could move to the next. As the student learned each movement, each possible combination was then also learned, the routines becoming exponentially more complex with each successive movement.

During this time I was joined by another derkir. His name was Skere. He was a dark, taciturn young man, about my age at the time, of fyryne origin but raised in the wyndrine. Like

me, he had a lot of experience in a short lifetime. His parents had been the taken slaves of a sorcerer and mage. Skere had killed this mage and freed his parents and others. Skere claimed that he had pledged his soul to the priestess of a god named Ferent and in turn the priestess had given him a word that rendered the sorcerer's magic powerless against him for one day and one night. He had tied the sorcerer's legs to some rope and allowed his own body weight to drive a spear through him over the course of that day and night.

Skere never smiled, did not blink his hooded and haunted black eyes, and though he had proved slow at learning languages was far superior to me in the mastering of weapons. When he went out on his bow missions, he returned a few hours later. His body seemed to be nothing but nerves. He could move a sword through the air so fast it became invisible. In the mastery of the Astute Movements he was more flexible and balanced than I and thus progressed through the series more quickly than I.

Training for Skere and I continued from our morning wake up until well past the evening meal. Fas Cerie ran on a system of time unique to it. The day was broken up into six parts of unequal length. Time was "knocked" on hollow wooden boxes by brothers whose job it was to keep track: they spent their time somewhere high above in the branches of the canopy observing the movements of sun and moon. At the appropriate time and through an ancient system of coordination, knocked the hour of the day. No matter what a given Brother was doing during the day, he did so according to this arrangement of time. The periods were simply known as 1-7, although 7 was the time set aside for sleep.

I slept on a rush mat in a canvas tent on a covered deck with a large number of other men, Bobber asleep on the pillow beside my head. 1 was the time between wake up and the morning meal. We trained during this time, then ate during 2, returned to training for 3, ate the midday

meal at 4, and then trained throughout 5, ate the evening meal the time of which ended with 7. Brothers often grumbled that they wished they were on a mission so that they could sleep as long as they liked. The only time that was free to us as we were training was the end of six, which was slightly longer than the meal service required, especially if you crammed the food in your mouth as quickly as possible, as all the Brothers seemed to. Skere and I would attempt to sit with other, older brothers at their fire so that we might gain some warmth and respite from our training, which typically left us sore and tired.

Skere and I were not friends: friendship made little sense. The Brotherhood was a comradeship of taciturn understanding. The older brothers acknowledged, even welcomed us to their fires, but they did not tell stories of their own days of training. The language did not lend itself to storytelling, composed as it was of hard action words. It made it difficult to communicate detail and nuance. Tru guar? "Return from mission?" was a question to which the only answer was "yes", since the interlocutor was standing there. The question was never answered, but rather served as a perfunctory acknowledgement. If they were there, the mission was successful, but no details could be disclosed. A silent glare was the only response. But if the sharing of battle stories was impossible, the exorcising of conflict was encouraged. Weaponless fights....the use of the Astute Movements...was routine.

I remember one that broke out during my Movement training. Two massive quislers were sitting next to each other at a fire. One ---Fuxal--- turned his head and coughed in the other's direction. A fist---of Suchugux---slammed the cougher from his stool. Then they were up and fighting. Instantly, a ring of brothers surrounded them. The movements of the quislers were incredible to behold. Fuxal's back bent in a bow as he flipped over into a double-footed kick. Suchugux parried this with both his forearms in front of his face and drove his knee in the

back of the falling Fuxal, who turned in midair to cause the knee to glance off and, continuing his turn as he landed, swept Suchugux's legs from him. They grappled on the ground. Fuxal's knees searched for Suchugux's throat while Suchugux attempted to tear off Fuxal's jaw with his feet. Finally, in a single motion, Fuxal twisted his head toward the ground, spun down, twisting his knees and Suchugux, sprung up, and, with his bottom in Suchugux's face, his hands pinned under his knees, and his legs clamped in his arm, forced the "do sashure" or retirement. After, the crowd broke up sullenly, their entertainment over too quickly. The two fighters returned to their places at the fire.

So went the days and nights in Fas Cerie. Repetition, discipline, and silence eradicated my boyhood imagining of excitement and battle. But I took to the mastering of skills and enjoyed the stability of the life. Every day, I knew what was expected of me. Time knocked by, the practice was completed, the meals---plain, hearty fare---came with regularity. At night, as I fell asleep, I pored over my memories of Aba, Juna, Telabia, of the island ship, the prison island, and the labyrinth. As I was training I was growing older and stronger. I was confident. I had survived much and the scars of my life were mostly internal, despite the missing patch of hair on my head where I had a lumpy mass of flesh. I affected---at first---and then assume the straight posture and balanced walk of the other brothers. They moved, always prepared to fight or flee, to survive or die, and their eyes saw in all directions without moving. The training caused you to sense the world in a circle around your head; it honed your reflexes and rendered your movements more graceful, less strained. When Bobber would fly down from the tree or up from the waters below with a fish and drop it in my tent, a hundred eyes flicked around to watch his movements. When a cup was dropped in the dining hall, it was caught before it hit the floor. I have seen the Gurgadon Dancers of Qo Jur, city of the gardens and arts, and the Astute Brothers

matched them in the ability to have their bodies at their command, to bend and shape themselves to the task. While the Gurgadons shape their bodies to the repetitive beat of the Vedra drum and the fingered melody of the single-stringed Seela, the Astute Brothers make of themselves weapons, shaping their bodies to the mission. At least the Quisler and the Derkirs do. The Vornas...the vornas shape the world with their powers.

Fas Cerie was a vast structure carved from its tree, the levels and heights and decks, as difficult to master as the Hartradian Chained Dagoo (especially since that weapon weighs as much as I do). Exploration of the Cerie was not encouraged, but not strictly forbidden, and, occasionally, when there were no fights to watch after dinner, I would take a few minutes and climb the heights, and step out on the decks, examine the training halls, by then mostly empty. The farther up I travelled the more strange the halls became. There, the masters of various missions reconstructed important settings to train out-going brothers on the specific task given to them. You might find rock fields, a briar thicket, a wall to scale, all conjured, I had to believe, by vornas with those particular powers, since the world around Fas Cerie was barren of those materials and the Great Stairway would hardly support its transportation. I opened a door once and was immediately set upon by a pack of screaming pink monkeys throwing their feces at me. In another, I found a brother contemplating a rope tied into a knot so complex that it took up the entire hall. And in one, one night, I found Quxolotot.

The hall was open at one end. There, the trunks of the great seatrees occluded all light, but on them danced the shadows of torches. Quxolotot sat in a wooden chair at the end of the hall. Near him, on a rug, sat curled up a pile of perfectly white furry creatures. They had long thin bodies, pointy noses, and they all snored loudly. Quxolotot was pale.

"Almost 6," he said. "And I only have eleven Luxorian ferrets."

After greeting him, I knelt down to pet the soft fur of the sleeping animals.

"They're incredibly soft," I said.

"They're used for their ability to devour their body weight in human flesh in just a few minutes."

I pulled my hand back. I knew better than to ask what mission they were being used for, whether assassination, the disposal of a body, or some other, unimaginable act.

He pulled himself to his feet and walked to the open end of the hall. He put his hands to his mouth, and started making cheeping, chittering, squealing noises. The heads of eleven ferrets shot up and looked around. Then they gradually lowered their heads and went back to sleep. Quxolotot continued his call until, from the edge of the hall, a single white head appeared, looked around, saw his fellows and ran over to them and fell quickly asleep.

Before I left, Quxolotot and I exchanged a silent look. There was a doubt in his eyes that he wanted to communicate. Layers of training and, in him, experience, as a Brother prevented anything more certain. I wondered about his life in the groves and forests of Cuxatolk, whether he missed his wolves, his lonely nights. Whether he blamed the Brotherhood for the death of the Quxolotot family, for the death of his wife. Maybe he would be sent back there, maybe his mission was ongoing, maybe he wanted to warn me of something. His eyes were inscrutable and his mouth stayed closed. I returned to my deck for sleep and left him to continue the gathering of the Luxorian ferrets.

29.

Despite the accustomed reticence of the Brotherhood, as my training was completed a frisson of excitement, anticipation....could be felt throughout the wood tower of Fas Cerie. The

origin of this energy seemed to be a number of missions involving big groups of Brothers all getting started. Then all the Quislers left. Hundreds of men...big men...packed up their tents, stowed them in storage, and marched down the great staircase. I went to the edge of my deck to see what means were being used to transport them. Down below, a flotilla of canoes was moored to all the nearby seatrees. As Quislers filled one, it departed and another was pulled up. And so they went. The dining hall was now filled only with derkirs, for the vornas dined alone or with those of like powers, lest their abilities become known accidentally. It was whispered that many vornas had left as well.

Soon after this great departure, Skere and I were learning combinations of the 201st position----Eri Heel Motion with Swift Advance----overseen by Caturday, who was forcing us to perform the same combination a hundred more times because I had wobbled while in the hold position an hour before. Skere obeyed without question though the fault had been mine.

A man in black entered the training hall. He wore a close-fitting hood with three silver bands around his throat. His hands were pulled into sleeves that draped to his waist.

He said my name to Caturday who gestured to me to go with him. I followed, bowing to Caturday as I did. He did not acknowledge the gesture.

I had long speculated on the leadership of the Brotherhood. Someone, I reasoned, must be in charge of setting the missions and with communicating to the outside world. The missions of the brotherhood were paid for in various ways, and the Brotherhood worked to advance its own interests, which were mysterious, but at the very least involved self-preservation and the maintenance of secrecy and the illusion of infallibility. The three types of brothers---vorna, quisler, derkir---must be only the wing of the organization that performed missions, but there were other jobs to be done. The Astute Brotherhood was best known in some places for its

spreading of misinformation, its false cartography. But one needed information to craft misinformation and need accurate cartographic knowledge to create misleading cartography. As I climbed the Great Stairway ever higher, following the hooded man, I was crossing into the upper realm where decisions were made, information taken in and given out, maps drawn, and, as I would soon see, the fortunes of civilizations decided.

The upper reaches of Fas Cerie showed no adornment or exterior marks of importance. The black-hooded man led me to a door with a simple iron handle. Inside, six men sat at a long table. Some were discussing in low voices. They continued as I was brought before them. The black hooded man stood to my left. As I had been trained, I assessed the room for threats and escape routes. There were no windows. The walls were the bare wood of the seatrees. After I stood there for a long time, one of the men looked at me. He was an old quisler and though of wrinkled face and scarred misshapen ears, still looked like he could handle himself with the Astute Movements.

"Brother," he said. "You have been chosen to join a mission."

I was tempted to ask if it was related to the exodus of the quisler and to all the other missions going out, but I knew better.

"Are you ready to listen and remember all details?"

"I am."

"You will go to the island of Wuxvanoor. You will serve as personal body guard to Derton, conqueror of that island and the islands of Terduxat, Meruton, Arbigux, Srux Harbor. Little is known of Derton himself and few are allowed close to him. You have been chosen for this mission because of your skills with acquiring languages and with arms. He is utilizing a

number of Brothers in order to move his men along the eyrthrine archipelago, eventually, it seems clear, to overtake Qur."

The brother paused when he said this name of Qur. Though not as great as Nur, Qur was famous for its mines of gold and silver, for its mints and money exchanges, its vaults. Qur was ruled by a Council of wealthy citizens and run as a giant bank for lending money throughout the mydrine.

He continued. "He has gathered a popular following among the people of the islands he has conquered. His former foes become his loyal soldiers. However, he recently executed his bodyguard when he became convinced the man was plotting to kill him. Derton has powerful energies as well as the capacity to be withdrawn and cruel. We are supplying him with quislers for his attacks on the rest of the archipelago, among other things. You have been chosen for this mission because of your experience with those who hold absolute power. However, unlike your experience on the island ship, your only mission here is to prevent anyone from killing Derton, using whatever means you can, no matter what.

"Brother Win will outfit you for the mission. Your escort will be joining Derton's forces as captains and know the way to the archipelago. The password to use with any Brothers you encounter is "frista." The location is far icewards of here. The weather will be cold. You may now speak or ask questions."

Throughout this description, none of the other brothers at the table had broken their conversations or looked at me, but when he asked for questions, they all looked up, expectantly. Before a mission must be the time that Brothers get the chance to talk, perhaps their last chance to talk before they die or are gone for a long time.

"What if he should be killed...in battle or otherwise."

Another of the brothers spoke up then, an angry-faced man with a sharp nose: "Your mission is to insure that does not happen. I told you," he said, turning to another.

"Should I give my life to spare his," I asked, as they were still grumbling back and forth.

This silenced them. Even as I said it, the idea trembled through me. I was being sent on a dangerous, perhaps mortal mission for the Brotherhood. It would no longer be the familiar world of training, the simplicity of Fas Cerie.

An ancient Brother sitting on the end of the table said---and as he spoke, all others were silent,

"You ask the ultimate question...the question we all have had, whether silently or asked aloud of this body. You are obedient to the mission, yes, but if completing the mission should involve death, your connection to the brotherhood would somehow be severed, the brotherhood would be weakened by one. However, we, here, assign the missions to ones we believe can complete them without dying. You should know that just as you are obedient to us, we are, in effect, obedient to you. We want all Brothers to survive all missions, although we know that is not likely to happen."

As he spoke, I looked into the eyes of the others there. They stared back, disclosing no emotion, nor subterfuge.

The one who had first spoken about the mission began again: "If you have no further questions, then. The Conductor---he gestured to the black-hooded one---will take you to Win. You depart after the morning meal."

The conductor took me back down the flights of stairs and led me to Win, who was in his quarters fixing arrowheads to shafts. A long table was covered with perfectly aligned arrows.

"Yes," he said when he saw me. "Icewards as a bodyguard."

"That's right," I said. The conductor withdrew.

Win rubbed his chin for a while.

"In dress you will want to be able to remain inconspicuous. I think I know what you need."

In the area of Fas Cerie near the armory there was a similar hall with storage for dress. I was given a sling pack for my sleeping and eating items, and a heavy wolf-fur cloak to shut out the elements. Win selected high boots crafted of supple leather, with soft soles for walking quietly. He gave me dark green pants with many concealed slots and pockets for holding lightweight throwing weapons and other devices. Win fitted me with a matching tunic and lightweight leather shirt backed by bone plates, enough to dissuade an arrow.

In the armory I chose a short sword that felt balanced to me, several sizes of daggers and throwing knives, a basic leather sling, and many other lightweight handheld weapons. As a bodyguard, Win advised, I would have little time to prepare for an attack and therefore I should always be armed.

As we walked the halls of the armory, I thought of Greywart II and if I would ever see her again. The thought of her recalled to my mind something else...

"I'll take a trident," I said to Win.

"The tool of a fisherman," said Win.

"I know," I said, "but I have saved my life with one on occasion, and I have faith in it."

Win thought for a moment, and then took me to the aisles of tridents. He selected one with a silvery steel head and wooden shaft of intricately grained hardwood. At the juncture of wood and metal a fine ropes twined and was coated with a thick lacquer. The result was a well balanced and elegant trident.

I smiled at Win. He did not return the gesture.

As was the way of the Brotherhood, we said goodbye without ceremony.

At dinner that night, Skere told me that he too had been given a mission. Because we were not at liberty to speak about our missions, we could only wonder, silently, if they were related.

"When do you depart?" I asked.

"Three days," he said.

"Then we do not depart together," I said.

"No," said Skere.

Although our lots had been thrown together by the sequences of our training, I did not expect to miss Skere and was relieved that we would not be travelling or working together on our first missions. Although he betrayed no emotion in any situation, Skere's energy was that of a pure killer. The Brotherhood needed men like him, but as a companion, I would have not welcomed his fellowship on the waves of the seas. We did have the morning meal together on the day of my departure, but alone I stepped down the Great Stairway, more than two cycles after I had first walked up them, now a member of the Astute Brotherhood, on my first mission.

30.

At the bottom of the stairs two quislers sat in the fore and aft of a quisler-sized canoe, waiting for me.

"He's decided to join us," said the front, whose name was Dorgux.

"Nice of him," said the one on the aft, Vruux.

I was surprised at their breaking of the silence, but I stowed my gear in the canoe and took my place in the middle. The canoe was far wider than one ordinarily given to derkirs and there was plenty of room to stretch out as the quisler's paddled.

The two paddled with great force and we moved rapidly through the dark shadows of the sea trees.

"What's your name?" said VruX.

I turned to look at him, but did not answer.

"Haven't they told you about missions, then?" said Dorgux. He faced ahead when he spoke. "You're supposed to be able to blend in. Silence is only for Fas Cerie."

"My name is Cholf," I said, having almost forgotten what I was probably known to them as.

"What name will you take for this mission," said VruX. "I am going to be Thraxux the Nightmare," he said.

"And I am going to be BruX Power Arm....these iceward islanders go in for those names...fearsome sounding ones."

"I hadn't given the matter any thought," I said. I did not add that the name I had given them was not my true name either, nor even a name I wanted to use, but rather an incidental designation invented many cycles ago. But if this was my chance to choose a new name, I was willing to do so. As the water lapped against the solid canoe and the shadows, I reflected on my life and what name I should give myself. I had stolen and killed, I had escaped and freed others, I had sailed the inner seas and the outer seas. Clayd, my home island, has little to distinguish it. Villages subsisting on the bounty of Mt. Trelson, berries, edible roots grown large in the warm soil....fisherman, boat builders, and sailmakers scraping by far from the prosperous ports of the

Ten Cities. The volcano, still a warm steaming threat, never erupts with any vigor. Names from home did not represent me as I was then, as I saw myself: Brother, warrior, adventurer, survivor. But, when I was a very young boy and free to roam the beaches and rocky shores of the island, I used to "hunt" the julucan, that lived in deep burrows in damp areas. The julucan was a scavenger with dark fur and a pointy face. Its eyes were yellow and its forepaws were capable of untying human knots and prying open the most recalcitrant sea creature. As I watched them with my bow and arrow (which was not powerful enough to kill one) I grew fascinated with its ability to survive. I watched one fight off a tree leopard once and avoid an eagle diving for it.

"Julucan," I said.

"What?" said Vruux, for I had been quiet for some time.

"Julucan will be my name for this mission."

Dorux shook his head. "Very fearsome....sounds like a flower."

Vruux and Dorgux kept up a lively chatter throughout the canoe ride out to the edge of the s'twinisay zuxato. When the edge of it grew near---as evidence by the increase in the amount of sunshine breaking through---we tied up the canoe, crossed an area of roots with the black crocks silently watching, and boarded a twin-sail boat, capable of holding the quislers, our belongings, and me.

Vruux took the tiller and Dorux rowed us into the bright open ocean. I turned my face to the sky to feel the warmth of the sun upon it. Dorux set the sails and the wind pulled us away from the dense forest of the s'twinisay zuxato into the sapphire of the eyrthrine sea.

According to my mental image of the eyrthrine, we were cutting up the inside of the ring, heading icewards. The temperature dropped as we did so, and the sea grew heavier and gray. I had the long watch over night, holding the tiller in the direction set by Vruux, guiding by the stars

above according to his command. The quislers snored heavily, and the chop beat the hull, but the night was quiet. It was a time when three moons could be seen throughout most of the night, and the tiny fifth moon would peek brightly before dawn. During the day, the fourth moon reflected the sun towards us, orange and translucent. As we went icewards, the islands we saw were no longer bounded by the high seatrees and instead were edged by massive-lichen painted boulders, the tumbled remains of long-cooled volcanoes. Above those, the dense forests, the tree huts looking ever outward for approaching enemies, through which men the size of Dorux and Vruux stared out at us watchfully.

On a particularly cold morning with broken seas and dense gray cloud cover, Dorux said, "Smells of home,"

"I think I just caught a whiff of Cuxinkian boar stew just like my mother used to make" Vruux said.

"Take a bowl of that and some nice goat butter tea...."

"Now you're just torturing me," said Vruux

"And a earthen tankard of woodbeer, a tankard that hasn't been cleaned for a hundred cycles..."

"Stop. Stop...I'm going to throw myself overboard and swim for the nearest shore. I'll go ashore and sing the Ballad of the Island of Tyndux, beg to be paid in woodbeer."

At that, Vruux broke out in a deep, guttural chanting that lacked all melody but was arranged around a system of beats. He stomped his foot with each beat. His voice was so deep and so loud I could feel it in the skin of my face.

As he was singing, a bird appeared above, coasting on an updraft, broad wings spread.

"Bobber!" I cried.

I had not seen him for a long time. As my training had intensified, I had forgotten him. Sometimes he would appear near my bedroll at the time I went to sleep, so I knew that he was alive and had been able to find food in the lush forests. But his visits had increasingly grown farther and farther between. Now, he flew down and landed on my shoulder, much to the amusement of the quislers. I scratched his head and he bobbed it for me, and then curled up for a rest in my lap. Out on the open ocean, with Bobber again with me, brought back a few of the days of freedom I had felt when sailing from the mydrine to Prince Hu's island.

31.

The eyrthrine archipelago was a string of islands that stretched from the icewardsmost eyrthrine island arched in the direction of the icerine reached out toward the mydrine. All I knew of it was that the islands in the archipelago became smaller and less populated the farther out into the outersea one travelled. Srux Haven, our destination, was about halfway out. We saw the smoke first, grey green billowing up and mixing with the clouds.

The canoe beached quietly on the pebbled strand. Burned wooden planks, boat ribs, branches scarred the strand. The waves rose and fell, foaming through the skeletons of battle. A powerful sweetness wafted with the smoke across the island, from inland locations obscured by the trees. Although they were nothing compared to the great seatrees around Fas Cerie, the forest there was thick with needled branches. It was cold enough to see my breath.

Dorux unloaded my bag and pushed off the canoe. The two quislers no longer joked, for they, too had caught the smell of burning flesh, and it was strong. They were going elsewhere, it seemed, or were returning to the base. But they were not accompanying me any farther. There,

on the beach, as they pulled away, I was alone again. Bobber took off to explore the island from above.

I walked the beach until I saw an opening in the trees and entered it. It carried me along a forest path softened by brown beds of needles. Besides the sweet smell that overpowered all others, the forest was peaceful and quiet. I walked with a concealed dagger loosened at my wrist. After a while, as the undulating terrain began to climb upward into brighter, rockier pathways, I saw a guard tower made from treelimbs.

"Exch!" a voice yelled.

I stopped.

Two guards with spears were upon me. They were not as big as the quislers, but were of the rugged, broad cast of the upper eyrthrine. Their clothes exuded the smell of greasy meat, and their dead eyes darted for an excuse to kill.

"Frista," I said.

They stood back and looked me up and down. Each stood two heads higher than I. Despite their disbelief, they gestured for me to follow them, while giving word to the guard tower that they would return.

As we walked up, we passed more and more soldiers, both men and women, who were camped on either side of the path. They looked up curiously at me. My clothes set me apart from them, clad as they were in animal skins and shod with wrapped bands of leather. At one point, the path entered an open field. The sweet smell had been strengthening and here was its source. Throughout the field, spread out in rows, naked bodies, black with blood hung upside down from crossed sticks. Where what had been their heads touched the ground, slow fires smoldered. Blackened skin pulled tight over skulls; grimacing teeth smiled out of the blackness.

At their limbs, the ropes that had held them bit into the skin where they had struggled against final pain. I looked quickly as we passed: my escort followed my eyes closely to see my reaction. I concentrated on making none.

Once we passed the execution field, we entered a village. In the center was a larger structure than I had yet seen. I was led inside a guarded door. The guards were differently garbed than those soldiers I had passed. Their weapons were polished and they looked healthy and well trained.

Inside, I found five men, four standing and one sitting. Although the structure had appeared to be a hastily constructed fort, the interior was as richly decorated as the bedroom of a pampered princess. Silk tapestries depicting heroic battles in greens, golds, and oranges hung from the walls. A tightly woven carpet covered the floor; my boot soles sunk into its richness. Gold dining ware decorated an ornately crafted table. On the desk were gold cups, silver pens, and books of maps.

The man sitting, whom I correctly took to be Derton, was small of stature. His skin was dark, as were his hair and eyes. His beard was neatly trimmed close to his face and angled down into a point at his chin. He wore a leather tunic with long gold armbands. The most beautiful sword I had ever seen lay across his desk. It caught all the light in the dark room and shimmered it back out. Despite the ceremonial sword, Derton himself looked like a fighter.

The four, who had all been arguing, stopped. Derton rose.

"Frista," I said aloud.

Derton got up and circled me, examining me as a man examines a horse. When he returned to my front and looked up, for he was far shorter than I, he asked,

"You speak the language of Nur?"

"Yes," I said. He had spoken the question in the language.

He looked about the room.

"These four all want to kill me," he said.

It was clear they did not understand Nurian.

"Should I take care of them now?" I asked.

"No. No. They are my generals, they seek rest and food for their men, but there is no food to be had and rest is a luxury I cannot offer them. They wish for a slowing of the campaign and I wish for a speeding of it, they claim what I ask is impossible and I demand they figure out how to accomplish it. I hold their families hostage in an island known only to me...they will do as I ask."

I measured the Generals with my eyes as Derton talked. They did not look like they wanted to kill him, not right that moment, they looked too tired for thinking. They looked as if they wished he had never been born, that they had never lived their lives in such a way to be in that position. Each showed their dejection differently---one beady eyed, with a spray of silver hair; another relatively young; a third had a healing blade wound across the bridge of his nose; the last just looked as though he was about to crumple to the floor---but each equally showed their fear of Derton.

Over the ensuing weeks, I pieced together Derton's story from snippets overheard as I guarded him, from his own accounts of himself, which were expressed as both boasts and apologies depending on what mood the mercurial man was in at the time. He was from Flem Qurtur, known to some as the Island of Dreams. His father was king there, and profited by his trade in the seed pod of the Nubit plant, which was used by healers and herbalists to calm the mind and body when it was in pain and by others to induce a dreamstate used in ceremonies and

missions into the vision land. It could poison as well, and, could be found in the brothels of Nur to double the pleasures of the bed. Derton's father had long controlled trade of the singular good: a unique combination of underground hot springs and the field of soil created by the decay of ancient plants created the precise conditions for the nubit's cultivation. Despite the island's disreputable reputation around the mydrine, Flem Qurtur's court was a place of great wealth, and as a result, a place of erudition and culture. Use of the nubit was strictly banned on the island of dreams.

When Derton was a boy, his father had hired the wise man Vinistro from the seat of learning in the wyndrine. To lure the great man away from the academy he had founded, the King reputedly sailed a ship whose entire cargo hold was filled with gold to the wyndrine himself to beg the wise man's tutelage for his only son. The great philosopher had schooled Derton from a young age in the strategies of battles, in the arcana of magic, in mathematics, on the reading of wind, weather, and currents, on ship and castle building, on every subject that a king would need to rule. It was said that when Derton reached fourteen cycles old, he turned on his tutor and poisoned him with a nubit tincture; others said the Vinistro had become dependent on the drug and died of his own hand, overindulging. Shortly thereafter, Derton left Flem Qurtur with one of his father's ships, a group of hand-picked men from the Qurturian Troops---the fearsome guard of the nubit fields---and a massive load of dried nubit bales (a year's crop, some said). He sailed to the wyndrine and began to trade and plunder the islands near the base of the archipelago. When he overtook Wuxbanor, he sided with the Nuxtanog people in their ancient dispute with the Dred Isinors, gaining the loyalty for the former by exterminating the latter in brutal and uncompromising fashion. It was also said that he used the nubit power to drug his soldiers in battle so that they were unafraid of death and fought with supernatural strength. Still

others claimed that Derton could, with a few whispered words, animate an army into a berserk killing rage. For years he occupied Wuxanoor, building a castle, establishing nubit fields, building his armory. Then he began to expand his territory, using any means necessary.

As he told me that he held the families of his generals hostage, I could see the curved glimmer of light bending in his eyes. He enjoyed the power he held over these men, enjoyed making them wait.

"May I," he asked, gesturing to my trident.

"Of course."

He took it from me and hefted it to get the balance, and then took it up in the way you would hurl a throwing spear. He targeted one of the generals who backed away in fear; he believed Derton would loose the weapon at him.

Derton laughed and handed the weapon back to me. His look told me that he wanted me to think that he was an expert in the trident. Why he should care what I believed about him, I did not know. He had that desperation, there and always, to be seen a certain way.

"You are here," he said to me, "to insure that I am not killed. As you can see, I can protect myself, but I fear...surreptitious means..."

With his statement, he contradicted himself...his eyes showed he had no confidence in his ability to protect himself and the intensity of fear he had about being killed in secret was overwhelming him. He lacked the will to disguise the depth of his fear.

As though in compensation for this exposure of himself, he said, "We will talk later. I must deal with these men now,"

And he began shouting at them in the language of the eyrthrine archipelago, which I would learn quickly over the next few weeks.

The generals were dismissed after this scathing address, which sounded as if it had to do with preparations.

Derton then gave me a tour of his headquarters, including sleeping area. He then led me outside for a tour of his camp and armies.

He spoke quickly and endlessly. His energy was constant. As we walked, he pointed out a thousand tiny details about the clothing and weaponry of his soldiers. He knew the name of each of them, what islands they had come from, how many men they had killed. He had jokes and words for all we passed. There were female soldiers, and he laughed and joked with them. The women of the eyrthrine were stout and sturdy looking and Derton did not patronize them or treat them differently from the men. When there was no one nearby he told me about his campaigns thus far, about his beach landings, and battle strategies, his willingness to take heavy losses to establish a beachhead and his hate and loathing for certain tribes and peoples on the archipelago. He talked about changes in the weather, variations in the tides according to the position of the moons and how to best use them in "our"---he quickly began referring to me as a part of him---strategies.

Wuxvanor was the staging island for Derton's advancement across the archipelago in the direction of the mydrine. He had recently completed his takeover of Srux Haven. After we had toured the armies spread around his head quarters, he took me through the far side of the Wuxvanor, where his lumbermen were stripping the island of its wood, and down to the harbor area where he had constructed a vast shipyard. Four identical warships were under construction. They featured low bronze bows designed for ramming and room for hundreds of rowers in order to generate speed. Hundreds of men crawled about the ships and docks...the vessels seemed to grow towards completion as we stood there.

Once we had toured the knocking, thrumming shipyard, Derton took me aboard his private craft, where sixteen rowers waited and carried me across to Terduxent. It was a short trip as the shore of the second island in the archipelago was visible from the shipyard. Upon landing, we were met by several guards, who helped us tie up and greeted Derton with the utmost respect. Again he led me through the vast encampment of his army occupying this island, again greeting every soldier by name, and again relishing the mutual sense of his own power reflected back at him from the eyes of his men and women. All of Terduxent was covered with encampments, from the beaches to the tops of the hills. Derton took me up to one of these to look down upon his power. Everywhere, I saw men and women lying around, squatting over fires, or practicing their swordplay or hand-to-hand. Beyond, to Meruxton, I could see a continuation of the vast camp.

"I promised them all the world will be ours," he said. "They come to me to fight. In ten cycles, each warrior you see here will be a ruler of an island of their choice."

We rowed back to Wuxvanor. At his headquarters I first saw the woman I would know as Noma. She helped him disrobe and bathed him in a vast brass bath. Once clean, he stood naked before her. She shaved his body with a long straight razor and a steady hand and anointed his skin with oil. He was then dressed in eleven robes of brightly printed material, which he selected with great care and indecision and repaired to his dinner at the table in his headquarters. I stood in the corner and guarded him through all this. His long rambling introduction to his operation completed, Derton took little notice of me. I was there to insure he was not killed. He seemed to take comfort in that and directed his energies elsewhere. He must have implicitly trusted the Brotherhood or to have had such an arrangement with them that he could assume their good faith and mine on the mere knowledge of the correct password.

As I watched, Derton ate for many hours. Counselors came and went, eating and drinking with him. They were dismissed. He continued. He made his way through an entire roasted boar and three suckling pigs; a plate of fruit that looked like it had come straight from the fyrrine jungles; a plate of cheese from the finest vendors of the Ten Cities; of wine he drank twenty-one goblets but they had little effect on his sobriety; when he finished the jars of wine, he moved on to cup after cup of a thick, black liquor that was apparently the local drink (it had a strong smell of smoke and tar). An ordinary man would have long grown weary of fullness and drunken by the spirits. Derton continued his stream of talk unabated: the only apparent effect of his meals seemed to be a skein of sweat that appeared on his forehead. He continuously sent his guards for more of his generals and captains, he sent for individual soldiers and asked him to tell him stories from their home villages and then he told them stories he had gathered from others, but as the night continued he ran out of people to send for. Finally, the room was empty, but he was still enjoying his table.

Derton, looked around the room with eyes that were ever-so-slightly bloodshot.

"You," he said. "You come from afar. You must know a good tale or two...."

"If you ask me, I tell you I do," I said.

"Yes, yes, here. Sit, have a leg of lamb and tell me a story."

"I may not sit, sir. My responses would be weakened by it...but I can talk from here if you like.

"Yes. yes....do," he said in distracted way.

I will break this scene now to say, as I have hinted on the first pages of this book, that over time I became a storyteller and made my way in the world by it. This part of my life will come later in my story of stories, but it was always a part of me. As the wind buffeted me from

place to place, I always had my ears open for a good story. My life as an Astute Brother came about as the result of my uncle's story....perhaps my life as a storyteller came about as a result of my uncle. So just as the end of my life is about writing this story and the beginning began with those stories, I spent parts of my life as a storyteller. This moment when Derton addressed me--- I who was supposed to be his silent and indomitable bodyguard---and asked him to tell a story...and I agreed against my training, was a moment when two parts of myself came together. The result of that changed my life forever after...how, exactly, is part of the story and shall have to wait for the proper moment to be told.

"Do you know the story of Non-Nuck and the Water Sprite?" I asked, choosing an innocuous tale I had gathered from Typhon on a night he had been trying to cheer up the bleak cabin on the prison island."

"No... good...good," Derton said, chewing down on some sticky powdered dry fruit.

"Non-Nuck is the god of ploughmen in the far icewards of the mydrine. He is said to be the son of the sun and a mortal girl. Non-Nuck was born when his father disguised himself as Musk Ox and impregnated the farm-girl. The Sun's wife, the Moon, so hated the girl that she punished her with a life of ceaseless toil, the life of a farmer. Non-Nuck was born to such a life, but had the size and strength of his immortal father; unlike his father, he was less than bright.

"Very good....," said Derton, laughing and taking another cup of the tarry liquor.

"Though not bright" I continued, "Non-Nuck was handsome, with golden skin and long curly hair. One day, when he had reached manhood Non-Nuck was walking through the forest near his mother's farm. He was singing...badly. He came to a small stream, which he tried to leap over, but fell short, sinking his legs. A Water Sprite name Galevlia saw this misstep and began to laugh. Her laugh was the sound of water falling over rocks. Non-Nuck heard this and

became entranced by the sound. He waded to a place where he saw water pour over the rock and he put his ear to it, wetting his hair. Again Galevlia laughed and the sound grew louder. Soon, she made herself appear to Non-Nuck in the form of a beautiful woman bathing upstream from him. Non-Nuck saw her perfectly naked form and grew shy. He hid behind a tree. Galevlia gamboled in the water, splashing herself, and, overall, tried to enthrall Non-Nuck with her beauty. She succeeded, until he finally made himself appear. He was, however, so struck by the sprite's appearance, wet and glistening in the sunlight, knee deep in the forest stream, that he began to cry. Galevlia took pity on him and turned back into a sprite and flew over to him, showing him her translucent wings.

"Non-Nuck, she said, you are son of the Sun, you shouldn't cry."

"Non-Nuck had been confused and startled by her sudden transformation and grew angry. He swatted her out of the air with his big, clumsy hands. Her wings damaged, he caught her on the ground and clapped his hands together, killing her. At that moment, her father, the stream, tangled Non-Nuck's legs with vines and held him in the water. He called a nest of vipers to bite the youth and they covered his legs with holes until he became paralyzed by their venom. Now, on the island of Vindurear, which some claim does not exist, you will find the statue of Non-Nuck in a stream, where he stands stock still for eternity."

Derton, who had enjoyed the tale immensely throughout, was laughing and clapping at the end. "Another!, " he said. "Another,"

And so I told him the stories I knew. Those I had from my uncle and from Typhon. The stories of the fyrine from Fl'p-lent, stories of the wyndrine told by Tung as we had sanded boards on the dockyard of Keylocklundria. Through the whole night, Derton ate and drank and I told story after story, until, at last, I emptied my reservoir of stories from others and began to make

up some of my own. When the sunlight came through the windows, and the racket of an army began all around us, Derton pushed back from the board and was dressed in his military costume, and went out to oversee the battle of Uxly.

32.

Although Wuxvanoor was the largest of the eyrthrine archipelago islands, Uxly was the most difficult to conquer. It was made up of seven principle mountains---ancient volcanoes long cool---and many hills. In each of these hills thickly embedded bands of people lived with ancient tribal traditions. The island's population was larger than any of the other archipelago and none of the groups there living had been able to be coaxed into allegiance with Derton. Instead, they had put aside any enmity that existed amongst each other and pledged loyalty in the defense of their island. The generals who had been begging for more time, had wanted to put off this invasion until better terms could be reached or at least alliances formed that could be advantageous to landing an army there. Derton had set that day as the day he would begin his next conquest.

The entire army that had been encamped around his headquarters was packing and getting ready to move. When they saw him emerge from his headquarters, a great cry rose up amongst them, which Derton echoed with barbaric yelp of his own. We went down to the shipyard. Amazingly, the four new warships were anchored in the harbor, already manned. A fleet of wide-bodied, blunt-nosed landing ships were moored off the beach, being filled with his troops. Derton supervised the progress of this loading for a while, much to the annoyance of the captains in charge and then we boarded his vessel to sail to Srux Haven, from which the engagement would be launched.

Morning, and the mist was rising with the sun. We passed Terduxat, Mercuxton, and Arbigux. Their shores were stirring with martial life, the loading of boats, the sharpening of blades, the ritual prayers. On Arbigux, cook smoke from a hundred small fires drifted over the water and joined the mist. On our half-days sail to the staging island of his attack, I saw the might of Derton. The ramming ships were shadows skulking out of their moorages. Their sails had been blackened by grease and ash, marked by runes of battle power. Silent soldiers crowded the decks, helms steady, eyes fixed on the horizon. Oars knocked as they pulled against the weight of the overfull troop carriers. Drumbeats synchronized the pulls of the rowers, who would themselves fight. As the sea filled with vessels, Derton bristled and shook, pacing the deck of his barge. Whatever cajoling and threatening he had done had gathered his troops spread out over his conquered islands. When we reached the tip of Srux Haven, I saw the Quislers....their massive frames hulked aboard specialized boats, wider and higher-sided than the others. The Quislers were there to front the attack against Srux Haven, to absorb the damage taken in a landing action. Derton must have paid the Brotherhood the fortune of his nubit bales to acquire such man power.

The mass of ships was growing all around us. Derton shouted orders in all directions, his voice absorbed by the sound of waves against hulls.

The point of Uxly was guarded by a vast stone fortress. That portion of the island had been guarded by the Rour-Ux Clan for as long as anyone knew. The Rour-Ux were paid tribute by the rest of the archipelago for protection. Situated as it was outside of the eyrthrine and pointed toward the mydrine, Derton was not the first to threaten the security of the islands. As he had overrun each island, the Rour-Ux had fallen back to the Fortress of the Crossing, which guarded the sea between Uxly and Srux Haven, the deepest and safest channel for ships of any

great draw to cross from one side of the archipelago to the other. The fortress looked in three directions and down from a pointed slope. A Navy would have to be divided in its attack to come at it from both sides, but, because of its axehead shape and position on the mountain, it could not be flanked. To come at it from behind meant first landing against a sheer rock wall, then scaling steep cliffs and fighting across the entire inner length of the island.

The slope running up to the fortress from the water was covered with boulders, in the places where plants or trees would have grown, sharpened pikes protruded. The ground was a thicket of these spiked heads. It was a masterpiece of defensive weaponry, too vast and spread out to dismantle before an attack, especially with the Rour-Ux bowmen raining arrows upon you. The actual weapons of the Fortress were said to be fearsome, but, apparently, even the Brotherhood had been unable to find out specifics prior to the battle, as Derton betrayed no clear knowledge of what he was up against. The strength of the quislers were his answer for anything.

When the great mass of ships were in place and all the quislers loaded onto their carriers, Derton stood at the bow of his ship, where a warhorn was mounted. It must have been taken from the body of an ancient mammoth somewhere in the icerine. Its sounding end was as broad as a man's shoulder and in length it stretched the length of the ship's deck. The great horn emitted a low reverberant call; Derton's men replied with shouts and yells. The sun was fully up. The quisler boats began to pull. There were twelve of them, each with about 40 soldiers aboard.

The Fortress of the Crossing stood motionless and quiet as stone, no men visible on the towers, no restless eyes at the loop holes. From where I floated in the undulating waves of the channel, it looked like the quislers would overrun the place with little resistance beyond the buried pikes and the other physical barriers.

As the quislers neared landing they began chant. The quislers practiced a method of preparing their mind for fighting in which they chanted a series of sounds as a group. By the end of it, they were almost insane with bloodlust and the fear of death had been replaced with a fear of defeat.

"Closer, closer" Derton called to his helmsmen and the rowers below took us in closer. The quisler chant drove across the water at us, and Derton took it up, chanting himself to a near madness. I would not have been surprised if he had jumped in the sea and swam across to join the attack. For my part, I was keeping a close eye on the sky. As we had gotten closer, we had, potentially at least, come within the range of whatever weapons the Fortress possessed. I carried a tall, body-length shield, now, to protect Derton should something come in from the sky.

The quislers landed and began to crawl over the boulders. With their powerful legs and arms, they flung themselves through the air from footing to footing. When most had gotten ashore, and the fastest were well up the slope, gaps opened in the base of the fortress and tar came oozing out. While the last quislers were jumping ashore the tar was filling in all the spaces between the boulders. Then, from above, the snap of multiple small catapults. Into the air flew sprays of fist-sized coals. They fell upon the quislers and burned them or landed in the tar. Flames roared up from the ignited tar. Still the quislers fought their way up, their light armor burning, the flames lashing them.

Then the archers appeared, shoulder to shoulder across every tower and at every loop hole. They fired together...and again. The arrows plunged into the flesh of the quislers, but few fell. From behind the archery came a rain of palm-sized rocks. They looked like a circular blades, their edges sharpened all the way around. The arrows would have killed a normal man and the sharp-edged stones would have cut chunks out of his skin, but the quislers continued,

their wounds seeming like little more than stings. The fire, though, had consumed a few: a misstep here or a poorly timed jump landed them in the thick blaze that had overtaken the base of the fortress, and still the tar came.

Despite the quisler's survival, there was no place to enter the fortress: it was built into the mountainside. As groups of quislers reached the face of it, they broke into two groups. One set began to lift each other on their shoulders, creating a kind of human ladder over which others could climb. The other set began to get their hands into the opening that had released the tar. If the Rour-Ux had felt that the tar release holes was a clever idea, they must have regretted it when the first of the great men began to pull apart the opening stone by stone. As the tar holes opened wider, though, more of the black substance glugged out, catching the flame that already burned around. Once they had opened the holes wide enough to pass through, they allowed the remaining tar to empty. Their comrades, at the same time, had reached the top of the fortress and were fighting hand-to-hand at the top. The Rour-Ux knights were overmatched almost instantly by the gigantic quislers. I saw one, who was able to get a quick foothold, simply beat the sword out of a knight's hand, while standing on the edge of the tower being shot repeatedly. Arrows stuck out of his body like spines. He fought until the blood was drained out of him.

When the tar reservoirs had emptied, quislers started disappearing into the widened holes: it must have led to a drainage system in the bottom level of the fortress. Soon enough, the quislers were penetrating the fortress both top and bottom. We could see them coming up to the tower and yelling to each other to join in the fun. Before long they had taken the fortress and, as the fires died out, the rest of Derton's soldiers were landing.

That night, we made camp on the high plains behind the fortress. There were still six mountains to vanquish. They were all on the edges of the island, rising from the cliffs. A great

forested basin filled the center of the island. It became clear as we inspected the fallen fortress that the Rour-Ux were either not as strong as they were reputed to be, or that they had fallen back and left only a small part of their force to thwart the landing, were lying in wait deeper within their island strong hold to surround and smother Derton's force.

"They were weak...they were weak all along," said Derton as he walked about, congratulating the wounded quislers, "they had a good position, a decent strategy, and from there took tribute from all the islands hereabout."

Derton's face was aflame with the warmth of victory. Several of his generals, who had landed their troops, begged caution, sensing a trap, but Derton was either too happy or too confident to accept that idea.

"We'll roll over Uxly and the rest of the chain will fall!" he said.

That night, I told story after story to Derton and a few of his close captains, fighting men whom I had not seen before but whom Derton kept close. From a tent nearby Noma delivered the food Derton's cooks prepared. It got late, and I could not think of any more stories to tell. Derton remained his awake, energetic self; he had not slept for nearly three days. I told them the story of the labyrinth. They took it for a strange legend into which I had merely inserted myself as the principal character to make it seem more believable.

When I concluded, and the rest fell into a shallow sleep, and even Derton seemed to fall into a restful state, I spoke with Noma, as I have already told. I have written of her undressing and of the mark upon her skin. I traced the line of that mark, which represented her route through the labyrinth. I followed her path and felt her heaving stomach. I remembered my own path through the labyrinth. When I came to the end we lay down together next to the battlement. I cried, as did she. She kissed my mouth and held me. I ran my hands over her legs. She said

that the mark had appeared many years after she had escaped. As she lay sick with fever, the trace had burned there over several days and nights. No similar occurrence had yet happened to me. When it did, I would understand better how it all fit together.

...And now the story connects back to the labyrinth. But I did not write how I had been changed by tracing Noma's path and by recalling my own. It was as if I had been hit with the flat side of a sword or been plunged into an icy spring. Thin light rose over the forest basin. In the distance, gold brightness touched the top of each peak of the seven mountains. Over that, the tracery of the labyrinth covered my vision. Just as this story loops back together like a rope as you tie a knot, my memories of that enigmatic adventure were so total, so complete, that they seemed to erase the intervening time and all that had changed about me. Who was I but a boy setting out on adventure, pledging to become a Brother and see all the islands of the world. Were these two goals complimentary or even possible? Now I was a Brother but I was guarding the life of one whose only goal was power. On the island ship, I had freed those under the power of such men...had freed some of them, had left many more to their continued fate. And, I was pledged to a Brotherhood that would control my life until it ended. They would even order my death if it suited the hidden agenda of their upper echelons.

In my mind I had then two ways of escaping the labyrinth. In one, I clung over the edge of the cliff and climbed around the outside. In another, she spent far longer inside, trying every fruitless possibility, every combination of route and turn, only to be magically allowed to leave. These two solutions were as different as could be imagined. What was the meaning of this? Who was the silver boy and what did his song mean?

By that morning, I was barely present as Derton ate his meal and shouted at his generals, pushing them to push forward.

"It is a trap to lure us into the basin," said one, who had just enough courage to face the Conqueror.

Derton lashed out at him, "Trap or no trap, we continue on. Superior manpower will win the day and we'll stamp these primitive tribes to ashes.

"These primitive tribes have been holding their ground for centuries...you are not the first to threaten them."

"Coward!" Derton said. I'm sick of your," and he included all the generals in this. "cowardice. Now is the time to push them back and finish them. They are there for the taking, he said, gesturing to the basin and all the world around it...the lives of your families depend on our success."

He dismissed them with their orders. All soldiers would march down the mountain into the basin and then split in two halves, each one attacking the smaller fortress on the mountain slopes, over the ensuing days we would take the smaller fortresses one by one, with our navy ramming ships waiting for any attempts at rescue or escape from the water side.

Derton took up position on one of the Fortress of the Crossing towers in order to watch the armies fill in the basin. The morning was bright and cool, with heavy winds. From our position on the tower, I watched Derton's massive army file out of the fortress and down over the slopes and disappear into the forest below. Looking into the dense forest, we could only see flashes of movement from those who entered the trees. The quislers were big enough that the branches they brushed past shook, but for the most part, we saw the vast army disappearing into the dark green thickness of the forest. At a certain point, the signs of movement divided and the great column sent one flank to the fortress on my right, which was seemingly a massive,

disorganized pile of rocks, and the one on my left, a flat-roofed shelter designed to be protected by archers.

Derton paced restlessly as his force split and the day grew hot, waned, and became close to night. The majority of the force was in the forest or heading to their respective side, with a few of the siege machines bringing up the rear and making slow progress through the dense growth.

"I'm going to join the men," said Derton, his day-long impatience overtaking him.

And he pulled open the trap to go down the tower stairs. As he did, I took a moment to look down the tower to the inside of the fortress to make sure my charge would be safe, and then I looked out over the basin one last time. As I did, I saw two things.

First, someone far below was just then entering into the tower. The quickness of the movement was remarkable but also vaguely familiar. They were dark clad and hooded, and moved on silent feet.

"Derton," I said. His head was disappearing down the trap. "Stop."

He shook his head impatiently and continued.

"Terrorbears," I yelled.

I said that because, second, I had seen far in the distance of the basin, a great disturbance of the trees and the tops of the broad brown backs of hundreds of giant bears and bear men. Trees were torn from their path and flung. Soon, their roars hit the fortress, trembling the stone under my feet. As the men on the plain caught the sound, they all halted and a temporary stillness fell on the area of the forest where they stood. All throughout the armies, everyone was still. The force, now almost completely split, was being attacked at the fork in their column by the nose of the terrorbear swarm. At the same moment, both fortresses under attack sprung to

life with archers, far more than had been used during the attack on the Fortress of the Crossing. Since the Quislers were at the front of two forks of the split column, they took the brunt of the arrows, while the terrorbears reached their rears and flanks. Although it was still hard to see what was happening in the forest, the momentum of the terror bears carried them through Derton's two columns and began to eat through them. The quislers, tried to double back, but then were slowed by their own force and the fact that they were then being shot in their backs by the archers.

Derton had returned to the tower top now, and watched in unemotional silence, while I went down the spiral stairs, keeping my back to the outside and intending to surprise whatever assassin was coming. His moves had been coordinated with the terrorbear attack and, thinking about it now, so many years later, such coordination must have been dependent on information as to Derton's battle tactics. My short sword would be unwieldy in the tight space. From my tunic I withdrew a thin Ascalian dagger capable of puncturing the heart with a single thrust and easily made to slide between the ribs. Onto my off hand, I slipped a set of spurred rings, which doubled the impact of my fist.

The assassin came through the air like a ghost...I did not see him before he was upon me, a throttling blade at my throat. As I had absorbed the force of his body landing on me and throwing me into the stairs, I landed a blow at his temple with my spurred fist. I was able to hold back the blade at my hand, and attack his head at the same time, forcing him to release me. I quickly recognized the Astute Movements as the first came at me, but nothing but the eyes were exposed by the assassin's black mask and even those eyes were shielded by screens. I blocked a kick to my head with my forearm and tried to slash with the dagger, but it had no edge. Instead, I drove it into the thigh, aiming for the thick artery, but it missed and did little damage. He

jerked his legs and disarmed my hand. At my wrist, I kept a thumb-sized blade intended for gouging out the eyes of an opponent. With that in hand, I tried a Narrow Thrust, but this was easily blocked. His counterattack knocked me from my feet again, and again he was upon me trying to slash my throat. My neck was strong enough to resist the thrusts. He gave up and tried to knock me unconscious against the edge of the stone stair. But this took both his hands. I feigned a temporary stunning, and was surprised that he left me and continued up the stairs. He was impatient to finish off Derton before he could react to the terror bears. Once he was past, I tried to catch up to him. He was quick though and I couldn't get to him before he reached the trap. I had miscalculated the speed he could get up the stairs.

I caught his leg as he was going up the trap. Above, Derton was screaming "No. No," his scream like a wail of mourning. I pulled the assassin down the trap and called out for Derton to help. He could have finished him from above. Derton did not react. He either did not hear or could not stop watching the destruction. The assassin kicked me across the bridge of my nose, which blinded me for a moment, then he was gone.

I threw open the trap door. The assassin held Derton's body. I saw the final twitch of his feet. He must not have turned, must not have fought the threat, for his hands fell at his sides. His eyes watching the destruction of his army as his throat was cut. The assassin shoved the body over the edge of the tower. It hit, sounding like a bag of dried bones. The roars of the terror bears continued throughout the basin. The assassin turned to me then and pulled off his hood and mask. Skere's lifeless eyes stared back at me.

"Let's go," he said, meaning that we could escape.

"A pawn?" I asked.

He didn't answer, his dark eyes merely peered through me. Then he cleaned the blade on his thigh, pulled my own dagger out of his leg and handed it to me.

"Obedience," he said finally.

And that's when I understood fully what the word meant. Skere had no notion of contradiction or imbalance. The quislers were being massacred below by a force known to hold great enmity for the Brotherhood, hired by the Rour-Ux as the teeth of a great trap for Derton. Skere worked in their favor...murdering a murderer, it was true, but at the expense of a third of our Brothers. There were many possibilities as to why this had happened...the Brotherhood may not have known to what extent the Rour-Ux would go to defend themselves from Derton...now, they would be ruled by the terrorbears, for those beasts would never give back ground they had taken. The Rour-Ux would soon find themselves in the power of one far worse than the restless conqueror, who would have, at least, spared the lives of half the islanders. Skere had been sent on a mission contradictory to my own. One of us had been set up for failure...Or, I realized, I had, for no judge of our fighting prowess would have thought I could protect Derton from the likes of Skere. I had been set up for failure...my life story a tale of having been susceptible to manipulation and blindness as to the deeper layers of possibility that existed in the motivation of people.

To you who read this I have given myself the name of Halhzeed---goats-ass---and for this reason. Despite the repeating patterns of this life, I have learned my lessons slowly. I should have questioned more, when young, I should have doubted the motives of others. What did the Brotherhood want? How did they remain powerful, feared, and in demand. A world of chaos and threat....a world in which a conqueror rises and falls, and a formidable enemy harried the shores of islands. Their missions were contradictory, for the Astute Brotherhood was a merchant

of conflict, nothing more. The dead quislers....? A hundred more strongmen looking to leave a life of logging or husbandry might be found in the eyrthrane. A hundred other lonely wanderers inspired by the challenge of finding Fas Cerie might wind up in Prince Hu's office...for what was he, but a merchant motivated by profit. The rich and powerful do not cede riches or power easily. The secret and the hidden are not readily pulled into the light. Behind it all, Derton was a useful force for a while, but, when it seemed he could get too powerful, they ended him, sacrificing their own men to do so.

Or, I was seeing it wrong. It could have been that the Brotherhood was tricked by the Rour-Ox. Perhaps the Brotherhood intended to allow Derton's forces to win the island, wipe out the Rour-Ux, while at the same time being killed, so that his armies would disperse and the archipelago would return to its old ways, without the Rour-Ux to protect them. The Rour-Ux had made the move of alerting the terrorbears that the quislers would be there, fighting for Derton and they had been there to seek vengeance. Whether or not Cron was there leading, I did not know. It made sense, given how interested the Brotherhood had been in my experience with him. If he were, then I had had a hand in it all, having helped free him from Xin's Maw. Whatever the version of events that was the true course, did not matter to me then. I had to decide for myself and in that moment to continue on the course as a Brother, knowing what I know thought I knew about the motives and machinations, and the corresponding motives and machinations of those whom they fought and protected.

I looked out to the sea. Derton's navy, which had been waiting for Rour-Ux attempting to escape, were, alerted to the defeat taking place, sailing away. Their square sails bellied with wind, taking them quickly away. In the distant basin, the terrorbears had cut through both columns. I pictured Rux and Dorux having their bodies torn apart by paws. The Rour-Ux were

descending from their fortresses in massive waves to help finish the destruction their archers had begun.

"Your mission is to bring me back," I said to Skere, realizing it myself as I said it. "To kill Derton and bring me back...willingly or as prisoner."

Skere simply stared at me....his eyes hollow. He might as well have kept his mask on.

We were equally armed and equally trained. He had greater quickness than I and was stronger. The space at the top of the tower left us more room than the stairs, even with Derton's body there and the pool of blood around him. I attacked him anyway, with a sudden and powerful anger in my heart. I launched over the body and landed a kick to Skere's throat. Even while I was in the air, I saw him realize that he wasn't going to take me back alive. He blocked the kick and I landed on the balustrade of the tower, flipped back over him as he tried to sweep my legs, and was facing his back. I pulled my short sword then; Skere had none. I swung for his shoulder. From his tunic, he pulled a blunt blade that was thick enough to parry a sword. He caught my next with it, and caused it to glance off his head. His strength was impressive. He slashed at my face with the blade; I ducked and swung for his ankles; he jumped, and turned in the air to land a kick to my face. My limbs were already growing weary and the kick knocked me into a daze. He slashed my back with the blade, and I could feel the sick loosening of my skin. I swung on him then and landed a cruel blow to his upper arm, the blade sinking past all flesh and halting against bone. The pain was too much for him and he went down. The next blow was to his neck.

Two bodies now lay on the tower. I was staggered and bleeding. At the edges of my vision, the light was too bright to see and in the center all was a blur. I looked out again. Half the basin was torn up, trees laying on their sides, bodies flung here and there. Terrorbears were

grazing on the corpses, while, near the base of the two fortresses, the Rour-Ux were standing in circles, arms linked over each others shoulders, chanting hero chants.

I ran down the stairs and through the empty fortress. It would not be empty for long. I crossed the inner courtyard, through a shattered portcullis and out. This led me away from the water. I worked my way around to the waterside and down over the boulders. The empty landing vessels rocked on small waves there, the sounds of the hero songs on the other side of the fortress almost completely blocked. Most were too large to be manned by me alone, but Derton's launch was small enough, and on it were provisions, perhaps weapons and other useful goods.

I spotted where we had left it moored to the back end of a flat landing vessel and I ran for it as fast as I could.

Then, behind me, I heard the unmistakable voice:

"Where go you, mortal," Cron roared. "I knew I smelled you. You and that devil left us."

"We left you free," I said. "Free to massacre your enemies."

He looked at me with his small eyes, his snout sucking in the air. The furred part of his body was caked with dirt and blood. He had an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. He roared with exaltation.

"That we did..." he cried.

"The brotherhood will thank you for what you did today."

"What we did today was kill them."

"They wanted the conqueror defeated," I said. "You did this for the Rour-Ux."

"And now we will defeat the Rour-Ux and hold the entire string of islands."

"You can attack the eyrthrine and the mydrine from here?"

Cron let out another exultant roar.

"You have no sense, but still I will tell you. You have aided the Brotherhood today. Now, with the threat of the terrorbears, they will double in power, have twice as many customers, twice as many recruits. They are merchants of war, and you have given them a big one.

"War!" roared Cron.

Nothing I had said seemed to have sunk in.

"I've done nothing to hurt the terrorbears," I said. "Leave me to go in peace."

"You've done nothing but protect a man who lead an army against us. I smelled you with the man, up on the tower. I came for you. I found you."

"He is dead. And you are victorious. I go to return to my state of wandering."

"You return to the Brotherhood to hatch further plans to imprison us."

"I just killed a Brother sent to kill me. I was betrayed. Smell his blood on my sword."

I held it up. Cron's snout flared in the wind.

"If you lie, I will tear you apart the next time we meet. If you return to the brotherhood tell them the terrorbears are coming for Fas Cerie."

"Fas Cerie lies deep in the s'twinisay zuxato. The trees grow too dense and the roots too narrow for a beast of your size to threaten it, even if you could find the way."

"We will find it, if we tear the seatrees down," he said and bounded back up the slope, toward the fortress and disappeared.

I cast off Derton's launch, set sail, and made my course mydrine. In not too long, I was in the outer sea, the eyrthrine archipelago disappearing below the horizon. I had my weapons, my

trident, and enough food for the journey. I would survive on rich food and wine, the fare of a conqueror now dead.

Just after the last island disappeared, I heard the familiar sound of wing beats in the air. Then, a threshing cloud of wingbeats. When the terrorbears had attacked the island, their sound had frightened all the bird life on wing. The horizon was filled with black beating silhouettes of every size. From that cloud of bird life emerged a single broad shadow, lit against the sinking sun. He coasted almost joyfully on the air, dipping and diving and gliding, before landing on the gunnel of the launch and bobbing his head.

32.

I stand at an ice cliff. The daylight sky of the seaedge winter is dark purple. Beyond the black water, the unknown. The stars stand out brightly on the waves. I breathe out the air from my lungs and it becomes a cloud before me. The beard I have grown over the last months of writing freezes around my mouth.

My sealskin-covered feet crunch on the snow as I walk back to my icehouse. There, I look again at my book. Only a single page of paper remains blank. Wurl's sons should return soon from their trading mission and then I will begin my story again. Ten volumes should be enough to fill with all I have seen. I will need to have a chest fashioned to carry it....a chest impervious to water and damp, capable of being sunk for cycles beyond measure and then retrieved by some lonely reader, far hence. Before I end this volume though, and close its cover, and wait for the return of Wurl's sons, I'll tell one last story.

After the chaos of those previous days, I sailed in quiet across the outersea, not even speaking much to Bobber. Language escaped me and my thoughts were dull and slow. The

launch possessed a canvas sun shelter, and enough food for five people. The cool air of the shifting seasons was high in the sky. There were few clouds, and friendly seas.

On the third night, I grew sick. The wound on my back began to burn. The heat soon crept to my head. I lay on deck half awake, half asleep for I know not how long. I was aware, at times, of burning on other parts of my body. I dreamed of the labyrinth, of my own time there and of Noma's mark. I heard the silver boy's song in my head, louder than my thoughts:

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brindoti ferni way

Again and again the words repeated and my feverish mind tried to make sense of them. If I could have, I believed, I would know what the labyrinth meant as well as where to turn next. But the words remained inscrutable, without repetition, without suggestiveness, just those sounds in the high, clear voice of the silver boy.

When I woke, the burning in my head was gone. My back itched powerfully but seemed on its way toward healing. I stripped away my shirt and pants. The waves being calm, I thought I would bathe. Although the salt would sting my wound, I would have water enough to rinse it out after. As I stripped and bared my thigh, I saw the tattoo of the labyrinth in the same place that it had appeared on Noma. The lines were different from hers, for my path had been and was different from hers, but the mark was the same.

After bathing and rinsing my wound, I dressed in the torn silk of a conqueror's robes. In my fever, I had lost sense of my direction and would wait for the stars to rise to get a position. I sat at the tiller alone and watched the horizon, knowing not what island would appear next.

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