

A WIZARD'S HOOKAH

With an extra big snore, Travin startled himself awake.

He gathered his bearings. Daylight. He was sitting in a big wooden chair on a porch that looked out over a lawn, beyond which was the woods, with many white birch trees at the fore.

He checked for any dangers. Holding his breath, he listened carefully. Birds chirped. The wind whistled through the trees. There were no footsteps, tapping over wood or shuffling through foliage. No snorts, growls, hisses, or whisperings.

He double checked it was all real—fool him three times, and all that. He smacked his arm up and down against the arm of the wooden chair he sat in. He could feel the arm smacking, and even more importantly, he could feel full control over the arm's movement, no paralysis, no forced inaction. He looked at the nearest tree in the woods, a skinny birch, and willed himself to teleport to it. He did not. He stayed put in his chair. He reached for the deck of cards in his left pocket to give the cards a shuffle. There was no deck, nor did he ever carry one. It all seemed to check out, so far.

He counted his friends. Lief. Anda. Rin. Jerritz. Kee. Tegg. Lohss. Loh. Dellia. Lyle.

There. Done. He was here. He was safe. It was real. His friends were all counted.

He turned his head and looked around. He sat on his own front porch, at his house in the woods. Indeed, he had woken up similarly enough for two, nearing three years. He looked down at his feet, saw a half finished pint glass, and leaned down and

picked it up. Settling back in his chair again, he chugged the remaining half of the pint, the taste of it a delightful and refreshing resumption to his day, the nap he had just awoken from a good rest. He ran his fingers through his scraggly beard, and scratched at the chin underneath.

He stood, stretched, yawned, and walked to the other side of his porch, where there was the bar. His hip was a little bit stiff, from sleeping on the chair again. He so rarely slept in the master bedroom. The bed in there was very comfortable, but with it being up on the fifth floor, it was quite a lot of stairs to bother with. The couches inside on the first floor's sitting room often proved a good middle ground, for convenience and comfort. And the gloves which hovered through the rooms, carrying brooms and feather dusters and neatly re-straightening the furniture, well, they had no mind to comment on it if he slept here or there.

Stepping behind the counter, Travin refreshed his pint glass, had a few big gulps from the new drink, and then wandered off of the porch, down the steps, and around the house to his open air workshop. He sauntered up to his work table, had another sip of his pint, set it aside, and looked at where he had left off.

On the table was a wooden race car, resting upside down. If upright, it would be a sleek black specimen, the hood all coming to a sharp wedge, and ripples going back along the body that resembled a flag caught in the wind. Into the hood, on the upper surface of the wedge, were shallow carvings of two big eyes and a linear mouth, also painted over with same coat of black as the rest of the body. Blackest Trout, he had named this one.

In spite of Blackest Trout's grand appearances, this one had not done very well on debut, and so Travin had brought it back for more work. The car was presently upended, and showing a hole he had bored in the underside. The hole, cutting through the paint and into the pale wood inside, was not so deep as to come all the way out through the top of the car, yet was still wide enough to get some appreciable weighting in there. Travin picked the car up, held it up to his eyes, and looked at it at an angle in the sunlight, gauging the circumference and, more particularly, the depth of the hole he had made.

He nodded, set the car down, had another sip of his pint, and then walked across the workshop to a wooden crate. He picked the crate up in one hand and began rooting through its contents. Inside it there were bits and bobs of iron—bent nails, scuffed spoons, found buttons. Sifting the contents around and brushing things to one side and the other, the muscular man gave a triumphant cheer at finding a thick iron filling, cylindrical. It looked to be the exact circumference needed—he had bored the hole with this discarded part in mind—and, on holding the filling up in the sunlight, he gauged that it would fill the depth of the bored hole very neatly, as hoped.

He dropped the crate back to the ground and returned to his workbench.

Taking Blackest Trout up in one hand, he used a little mallet to tap the filling into the hole. It fit perfectly snugly. The extra weight would be good, give the car a fighting chance on the track—a newcomer, it was to be expected that Blackest Trout had been unequipped to go toe to toe with the likes of Firesteed VI and Mordecai. It was more-so the fact that Blackest Trout had only barely beat out Driftfeather that gave tell to real need for improvements. Travin smiled to himself. With this extra weight alone, unless something very interesting occurred, like a wheel malfunction or an act of the gods upon the track, Blackest Trout would leave Driftfeather in the dust, and would stand a chance to place among the rest. He would have to see it though, to know it all fully.

With the extra weight slotted in, Travin picked up Blackest Trout, and wandered around to the back yard. There, running down one side of the yard, was a big wooden track. The side nearest him was raised twenty feet off the ground, with a stairway up to a platform where he could walk back and forth up there and arrange the cars in their starting stalls. From there, the track sloped downward, each car having its own walled off lane, each lane having its own unique descents and rises, straightways and plunges, until all eventually came to a stop at the end, the bottom of the slope.

Travin climbed up the stairs and walked to the far end of the platform, where he placed Blackest Trout in the last stall. The competition in the other seven stalls already waited, with a red

and white awning overhead to keep them in the shade. There was Firesteed VI in the champion's slot, the first track, and the solid iron body of Mordecai, a car of Lyle's construction, in the second. Then in an order determined by random lot, Twilight Torchbearer, Swift Hart, Good Messenger, Driftfeather, Firesteed V, and of course now in the newcomer slot, Blackest Trout. Other cars, not in play for this current race, sat in their own cubbies at one end of the platform, a sheet over all of them to protect them from the elements. Some were more or less retired, others, only resting.

Hand in his beard, fingers combing the wiry hair, Travin paced the platform back and forth. He paused behind Good Messenger, a race car that was carved out into the shape of a ship, masts and all, though with ribbons instead of sails—the cannons aboard, and the cargo of tiny gold bars, gave the whole thing a mean weight to throw around. Getting his eyes down low with the car, he examined the track beyond from the car's level, pictured how it would go, and then nodded. He walked a little more, picked up Swift Hart, and rubbed the wheels so they spun back and forth. The front left wheel squeaked a bit. Foreboding. He set it back down.

With the race cars all in place, Travin went back down the steps to the ground, and wandered up to his back porch. There, eleven treasure chests stood on a long table. He went to the first chest, marked "Travin," and opened it up. From inside, he counted out eighty golden coins, a pearl necklace, and a jewel-encrusted silver crown. He brought those items over, a few pieces at a time, to a round table out in the back yard, where there were eleven seats. The table at each seat was marked for betting. At his chair, he placed sixty golden coins, the pearl necklace, and the silver crown on Firesteed VI. He placed nineteen golden coins on Mordecai. And, in the spirit of taking a gamble, he placed the last one golden coin on Blackest Trout.

He then went up to the next chest, marked "Jerritz," and took a stack of ten golden coins out from inside. Travin chuckled to himself as he walked the coins to the table, shaking his head. If all the currency to buy them a needed night's stay at an inn were on the line, Jerritz would have insisted on betting it on Swift Hart. "It screams to us its sign, and you would ignore it!" he

would say, even teasing himself in the dramatic delivery, but all the same entirely intent on what he was saying. Travin could hear it as he walked. “The underdog! Aren’t you the least curious about its call?” No one would have been able to talk him out of it, short of holding his or her own coins tight, and only allowing Jerritz to risk just his. At Jerritz’s seat, Travin placed ten coins on Swift Hart.

One by one down the line—Anda, Rin, Lief, Lyle, Kee, Lohss, Loh, Tegg, Dellia—Travin carried the bets over and set them down.

Then, he went back to the head of the track. There on one of the struts, there was a lever that lowered all the gates above, and sent the cars going.

Travin took a slow, deep breath, smiled at the precarious about-to-happen nature of the moment. He looked over at the betting table with all of the gold and silver and jewels shining in the sunlight. And then he pulled the lever, and quick as he could ran along down the track, until he could see the cars racing down.

By the time he even got in a position to see anything, Firesteed VI was nearly at the end and Mordecai was fast behind: indeed, the two of them slammed into their respective finishing plates and then rolled up the curved slope beyond. The two of them came rolled back down from the steep slope, and managed to each backtrack over the finishing line in a sort of victory lap, before third place, Good Messenger, came over. Fourth was Firesteed V, then fifth Blackest Trout. Travin, seeing Blackest Trout place fifth, clapped heartily at the improvement. Torchbearer and Swift Hart crossed at nearly the same time, and Travin was entirely pleased that he would have to check the official recording mechanism. Last, Driftfeather rolled across.

Down at the end of the track, Travin knelt down, and opened up a chest that was tucked away underneath the course. From inside he pulled out the logbook, which was a very large tome, and a pencil. With those items in hand, he turned, and looked at the recording mechanism.

It was, he felt, maybe the cleverest thing he had ever come up with. In some ways a shame that such an accomplishment wasn’t made until recently, but in other ways even that was a

victory. New days in his life, new leaves to be turned. Lyle himself had complimented it, and not just in a way where he was being nice, he had gotten down into the mechanism and looked around at it from all sides, and said, "By the gods, what a perfect solution to this."

Below the track, near to the finish line, there was an octagonal glass prism. Inside of it presently, now that the race was finished, were stacked eight spheric gems: a red ruby from the first lane was at the bottom, then on top of it a purple amethyst from another lane, then a blue sapphire from another, and so forth, each gem corresponding to a lane, stacked in the order of first place at the bottom, first to fall into the prism, and last place at the top, last to fall into the prism. At the top of the prism were eight gates, one on each of the prism's eight sides, all equally high. Behind each gate was a steep slope in which each lane's gem had rested, waiting for its gate to come open so it could fall in and mark its lane as finished. The gate mechanisms at the top of the prism where each connected with wire to plates at the end of each lane, such that when a car hit the plate in its lane, the wire was released, and the gate was instantly opened, and the gem could fall in.

The original idea for the mechanism had been to produce eight slopes below the track, one below each lane, and have the gates open and allow the spheric gems to fall from below each lane, down their own slopes, and into the prism. There was no way to arrange it though, where each gem would be certain to take the same time to get to the prism: if the prism was placed at the center, the center lanes would take very little time while the outer lanes had to roll some ways; if the prism was placed at the far left side, that left lane would have its gem in in no time at all while the right lane would be sure to be marked as a loser, even if the right lane had won by a mile. The wires made any lane quick as a flash to drop its marble, regardless of whether some wires were shorter or longer.

Lyle, when he had been looking at it, had even asked, "Do I have it correct, that it was you who came up with this?"

Travin had given a pleased laugh at that. "I was bouncing the ideas off of Rin, but yes, the ideas were mine."

Lyle had again remarked that it was very good work.

Looking at the results of this latest race, Travin marked the competitors and victory order all down in the logbook. First a table for which race car was on each track, and then a table for which race car had taken which place.

The victory order, as marked definitively by the recording device, was Firesteed VI, Mordecai, Good Messenger, Firesteed V, Blackest Trout, Swift Hart and then Torchbearer, and Driftfeather in last.

Travin put away the logbook and the pencil, closed the chest, and reset the mechanism, reattaching the wire loops to their hooks and sliding out the bottom of the prism to collect up the gems, replacing the bottom of the prism, and putting the gems each back into their stalls.

He stood at the finish line for a moment, and looked at the cars, hands on his hips. He let them stay there for now, glad to let them revel in their achievement at getting to the finish line, even Driftfeather.

Leaving them there at the end, he returned back to the betting table, collected all of the lost bets into the center, and redistributed the pot according to the winning bets. He himself had put the most up, betting sixty gold and some accessories on Firesteed VI, and so he regained the most for himself—though he did make sure not to give himself back the specific coin that he had lost on Blackest Trout. That, he distributed to Lyle, who had bet on Firesteed VI as well: even though Mordecai was Lyle's own creation, Lyle was not someone to be prideful. Knowing race after race that Firesteed VI in track 1 beat out Mordecai in track 2, Lyle was not one to think, "Oh, but mine will surely win next, because it is mine." Maybe he had once been. But after the march across the dread woods, Lyle became such a person to abandon all follies, and fit hard wisdoms into their place. Even after Lyle had more or less singlehandedly gotten them across those woods by his brilliance and leadership, the man had remained a changed person. He took no joy at all in failings.

Travin brought the won treasures back to their appropriate chests. He had made out very well indeed on this round, and Lyle had as well. Rin, though her bets were often very small, all

the same very often did come out profitably on them, and her treasure chest's content was nearly level with its top.

With that all done, Travin walked down to the end of the track, grabbed up each of the race cars, and began walking with them in his arms up to the head of the track again.

As he was halfway back, he saw Lyle coming around the house, to the back yard. The robed man waved.

Travin, his arms full, called ahead, "Good to see you!"

Lyle gave a bow, and waited at the head of the track.

Travin, once he was standing before Lyle, informed the robed man, "You did well in this last race."

"Did I?"

"Firesteed VI has been the one to finally beat out Mordecai. You have been very wise to notice, and bet as things are, not as you may hope them to be."

Lyle's cheeks raised up in a smile.

Travin went up the stairs, and put the race cars away in their cubbies.

Coming back down the stairs, Travin asked, "Would you like a pint?"

"I brought you yours," Lyle said, and from behind his back produced the partially finished pint glass.

Travin gave a pleased laugh, took the glass, and had another sip of it.

"Today marks the start of the month of second salt," Lyle said.

"Ah," Travin said, and nodded. "I've lost the particular count of the days, my apologies."

As part of Lyle's devotions, the man did not drink on certain months. Had it occurred to Travin that the month of second salt had begun, he certainly would not have offered anything. In fact, he finished his own drink quickly, and hurled the glass off into the woods.

Lyle, holding his hands behind his back once again, asked, "Have you your sword, Travin?"

"Inside, yes. Why?"

Lyle answered, "One of Farmer Jen's boys was out playing and says that he came upon a hydra, guarding the entrance to a

small fort. Other townsfolk went to investigate, and confirmed that they have seen it too.”

Travin asked, bewildered, “A *tame* hydra?”

“One guarding the entrance to a small fort, that is what they say.”

“And they say it is a hydra, oh...” Travin trailed off, and scratched his head as he gathered some estimation. “What do you suppose, nearly a thousand miles from the nearest ocean?”

“One thousand and twenty three, I think. I did some reckoning off of Brother Fenis’s atlas on that very matter before coming here.”

“So the hydra is illusory.”

“Yes, I think.”

Travin laughed, and said, “Sure, I’ll fetch my sword. Come in, come in.”

The two of them proceeded up the steps of the back porch, and into the beaded curtains that led into the house this way. As they walked through the house towards the front door, Lyle mentioned, “From what I could gather, according to the reports of the townsfolk, the fort is very interestingly tucked away in the hills. I could believe that no enchantments disguise its location, but that it simply has good obfuscation through the leafy trees on the hills surrounding, and is among a network of valleys that could make one think, ‘Oh, but I have explored that one, already,’ even when one has not. Do you think that makes any sense?”

“Very much so, yes,” Travin said, nodding. “It reminds me of that time with Kee, around Yellow Lake. Or that time with Lohss and Loh in the western goblins’ quarry. Or that time with Rin on the side of Heaven Scar.”

Hands behind his back, cheeks raised in a smile, Lyle added, “Or that time with Tegg by Locke’s River.”

“Yes!” Travin agreed. “In the caves.”

“Were they caves, or trenches?” Lyle asked. “I had mixed impressions from the stories I heard. I was with Dellia and Jerritz in Fall Keep at the time, remember.”

“They were caves,” Travin assured. “Dug caves. They began as trenches, at first, but burrowed down into the ground, it was very cold and you would need a light to see by.”

“Were they tunnels?” Lyle asked.

“Tunnels! Yes, maybe you would call them tunnels. I will call them that from now on, in fact.”

The two arrived at the front door. There, resting against the wall beside the front door, was Travin’s rucksack. He had set it down there two, nearing three years ago, the same with his sword that was in its scabbard on the ground beside it.

“Are we going far?” Travin asked.

“No, not too far,” Lyle answered. “If it suits you, I hope we will rest at Farmer Jen’s house tonight and go forth to the fort in the morning.”

With that information, Travin picked up just the sword, and strapped the scabbard about his hip. He held the front door open for Lyle, closed it behind the both of them, and the two set out on the road through the woods, that led from Travin’s house to town.

Along the walk, Lyle spoke about the fort. “I have an inkling as to how an illusory hydra could have come to be there. Brother Fenis, when he was just a boy—he is old now—heard a wizard of the temple muttering about an enchantment. Apparently, the wizard had enchanted a hookah, such that the smoke would show an image of your truest love—very powerful divination, if it indeed worked. And perhaps it did, for all young Fenis heard from the wizard at the time was the wizard’s incessant complaining about the item. ‘People won’t like what it says,’ the wizard muttered, time and time again, as he was going about his day. And then one day, while Fenis was minding his chores, sweeping I think he said he was doing, he overheard the wizard saying to another member of the temple that he had locked something up. Young Fenis had not caught what the wizard was referring to, but did realize that from then forward, the wizard never muttered of the magical hookah again.”

Travin absorbed all of the information, nodding.

When Lyle had said his piece on the wizard and the fort and the possible nature of the fort’s contents, Travin asked, “When we face the hydra, will we use all of our same signals?”

“Yes, I think that would do wonderfully,” Lyle agreed.

The friends, at times before, had faced all number of challenges, including the liberation of a town that had been

beset by an illusionist. The tricky thing about that had been that for the townsfolk, it was best for them if they still saw the illusioned threats to be defeated, even after the source of them had been stopped. And so the friends had some systems, for telling each other things that they marked about illusions, without saying anything so obviously out loud.

Likely, for this hydra, Travin would step forth with his sword and stand there, pretending to muse on the upcoming battle himself, while Lyle, who had a far better knack for discerning magic, would be behind, finding out if the hydra or the circumstances posed any real threat at all—sometimes, besides the illusions, there were booby traps. If Lyle came up to stand to Travin's left, the hydra actually did pose some danger or complication, and Travin was to step back. If Lyle came up to stand on Travin's right, then Lyle had in fact assumed control of the illusion, and Travin could step forward and put on a show of fighting it, for the townsfolk.

Travin and Lyle walked through the forests and hills.

In the evening, they came upon Jen's farm. A number of men and women from town had gathered there, congregating in the yard with tents and a fire. As Travin and Lyle neared, many townsfolk raised their hands and applauded. "They're back!" one man shouted, and another man whooped at that. Another commented, as Travin and Lyle were walking past, "It's the non-swordsman you've to look out for with this sort."

Travin was glad on the inside at hearing all of this, but he and Lyle kept a stern and skeptical demeanor as they walked up to the farmer's front porch. Travin knocked at the door. The farmer inside swung the door open, and, seeing who it was, stepped aside to let the two in. Travin and Lyle spoke with the farmer, and with the boy who had found the hydra, and it was agreed that the two would spend the night in one of the bedrooms, and in the morning go out and see the fort.

In the bedroom, Travin put his finger in his left ear as though to take out earwax, and twisted the hand three times, then rubbed at his forehead with his thumb as though getting an itch.

Lyle smiled at that, and said in a very quiet voice, "No, I don't think that will be necessary at all. If there is danger, it should yet be far from us."

Travin had asked, in their codes, if they ought to sleep in shifts, and had offered to take a longer shift awake, keeping guard. Being told by Lyle it was fine, though, he tucked himself into one of the beds, and slept through the night very soundly.

In the morning they all ate eggs, and then, Travin and Lyle and the gathered townsfolk set out into the hills. “Just this way, now,” said one man, and then later another, “Just through this valley,” and then, “Now is it this way, or that a’one?” and “That a’one, that a’one, the stump at the mouth marks it,” and “Ah, right you are, right you are indeed miss,” and “Are you ready, sirs? The hydra will be down a hill a little, but it will see us before much farther, and it’s likely heard us from miles off.”

Lyle answered, “We are prepared, I think.”

Travin, as they walked, began doing stretches for his arms.

Travin and Lyle and the townsfolk all came to a bend in the valley, and indeed, farther ahead, down a long slope, at the deepest part of the valley floor, there was a stone fort, a boxy main building and a round tower above it, and in front of the fort, on a stone brick plaza, there appeared to stand a scaly green creature with five heads. Each head snarled, showing pointed teeth. Lyle took in a sharp inhale, and pursed his lips tightly; Travin’s reaction was even stronger, he needed to turn back and face away from the townsfolk to keep from visibly laughing.

The hydra’s heads all moved on the same pivot, all left, and then all right, scanning back and forth, and not even observing anything in particular. It was lost on the townsfolk, but extremely funny to the two who had dealt with true hydras before, heads moving about independently, trading off jobs from one to the other, one body yet many minds, and hyper keen perceptions intent on staring at the objects of their fixations.

When Lyle had composed himself, he asked, “Be you ready, O Travin?”

Travin steeled himself with a solemn exhale, thumped his fist against his chest a few times to ground himself, and then drew his sword, and turned and marched forward. As soon as he came forward to a certain threshold, the five heads stopped rotating left and right, and all fixated on him. He did grant that if the

illusion weren't so apparent, it likely would be *very* frightening to see five toothy heads eyeballing him.

After a few seconds, the two left heads turned away and began looking off into the trees, the rightmost head looked up into the sky, and the second rightmost head turned down towards the stone brick plaza. Only the center head continued to stare. Lyle stepped up on Travin's right side.

Travin smirked, and then charged down the hill with his sword. With his first swing, the hydra's center head reeled back, and the leftmost head came over. Travin took a slash at that one, and a burst of smoke exploded forth from the wound—Travin laughed out loud at Lyle's absurd effect, but was able to save it and make the laugh sound like the beginning of a victorious battle cry.

Continuing to yell and taunt, Travin defeated each head as it came to him, each one bursting out smoke as it was struck with his blade—the blade cut through the illusion like air, as that was, in fact, all that was present. By the end, Travin realized the cleverness of the smoke—as he defeated more and more of the hydra, more and more pieces of it went away into dissipating clouds, until he cleaved again and again at the body, and the illusion was gone. Lyle would not have to maintain it in any way after this showing was over. Clever.

With a final shout and strike, the last of the illusory hydra went away in smoke. The townsfolk roared and whistled and clapped. Travin turned, and bowed.

Lyle, facing the townsfolk, instructed, "I request that all of you stay back, for now. Travin and I will try to venture in and neutralize any danger."

The townsfolk did stay back as Lyle went down the hill, nearly slipping on the wet grass.

As the two went in, Travin briefly clasped an arm around Lyle's shoulders, and gave the robed man a firm jostle. "It's good to be at it again," Travin said.

Lyle smiled.

Travin took his arm off of the robed man's shoulders, and stepped ahead to venture forth into the mouth of the fort first. Lyle followed behind closely. Just inside, the hall turned and descended in a winding staircase—the fort as visible from

outside seemed to be nothing more than a vacant room, to serve as a daunting cap to this tunnel down. Down and down Travin and Lyle ventured, until the floor leveled out into a passage that was straight, not bending or descending.

Lyle conjured up a flame, which hovered above his cupped right hand.

By the flame's light, Travin continued forward at the lead, Lyle close behind. The tunnel's walls were of stone bricks, and came to an arched ceiling, with a level floor of stone bricks underfoot. It seemed that nothing much had disturbed this place since its construction, as every brick overhead and underfoot was perfectly in place, untouched, and there was no detritus to indicate anyone coming or going.

"I ask that you stay a moment, Travin," Lyle said.

Travin did stop, and kept a watch glancing ahead and behind as Lyle knelt down, and put his free left hand to the ground, then stood up and placed the hand flat against the ceiling.

"By my best discernment, there is a faint enchantment at work in these stones," Lyle reported. "I think it shouldn't be anything that concerns us too much, only a mild subduement of life, to keep mold or moss from growing here. I imagine that water from the valley does flow down through this passage regularly, if the fort is at the lowest point."

"That would make sense to me," Travin agreed, imagining his race cars.

"I ask that we resume, if it suits you, Travin," Lyle said.

Travin, sword in hand, continued forward deeper into the tunnel, by the light from Lyle's conjured fire. At the end of the straight section, the entire passage took a curve to the left. As they were just nearing the start of the curve, Lyle shrieked, "FREEZE, I DEMAND."

Travin froze exactly in place—when someone as attuned to magic as Lyle said to freeze, that did not mean "Finish your step and then stop walking" or "First let me ask why we are halting, and then I will stop when I have heard the answer." It meant "Do not move your body an inch from where it is right this second, or you may trigger something that will disintegrate all of us."

On the walls of the tunnel, Travin saw lights of many colors illuminate the stones, as Lyle behind him coursed through different schools of magic. Finally, it was back to the firelight, and Lyle said, "I release my demand that you freeze, and I thank you for having done so. We have just gone somewhere."

"Oh, I think I agree. Is that how I smell the salt of the ocean, and hear the crashing of waves?"

Travin and Lyle inched forward around the corner in the hall. Just around the curve, the hall opened to a sheer cliff face over the ocean, such that one walking thoughtlessly through the hall would step right over and fall to their death.

Lyle looked out to the sea, stepped back, looked at the hall they had just come down, and then stepped towards the opening to the sea again, and stuck his arm through the mouth of the opening to be sure. "I am astounded," the robed man said. "This magic may prove more lucrative than the hookah the wizard seemed so obsessed by. The town will be quite interested, I think."

Travin agreed, "Yes. Let's go back though, and find the hidden entrance."

Lyle smiled. "I would like to find that. I do not object to that plan at all, sir."

The two of them stepped back into the straight passage, and began feeling and prodding at the bricks.

"Here," Travin called, finding one brick that was loose. He pressed it into the wall, heard a latch click, and then a section of the bricks swung forward as a loose doorway.

"Well, that was quite normal, in my opinion, after all of the eccentricity of the rest of it."

"The secret brick door is a classic," Travin said fondly.

"Oh, please be assured, I did not mean to imply that I faulted the man for it."

The two proceeded into the hidden room. In was about as big inside as a chapel, though rather than two rows of pews, there were numerous crates of quite meager treasures. Brass coins, lumps of copper, and the majority of the crates filled with rather mundane rocks such as granite and limestone.

"Among other interests, he was an alchemist," Lyle noted. "Perhaps not a very good one."

At the end of the room, there was an iron box shaped much like a coffin. Lyle's eyes glowed green for a moment, and then he said, "That iron holds the item. Aside from the item contained in the iron, there are no enchantments in this room. I would feel safe in allowing the townsfolk to come in, with the stipulation that we be the only ones to handle the item for the time being."

"Very good," Travin said, and then clapped Lyle on the shoulder. "Another verse for our grand song of accomplishments. I wonder what treatment Lief will give it."

Lyle patted Travin's hand that was on his shoulder.

Travin took the hand off. By Lyle's firelight, they returned out into the straight passage, up the winding stairs, and stood at the mouth of the fort. Travin waved to the townsfolk who looked cautiously down from higher up the valley floor's slope. "You may come in!" Travin called. "It is safe!"

The townsfolk came nearer. Lyle explained the geography of the fort's depths, and warned against investigating the way to the ocean for the time being. He told that there were items of a little value for the taking, and that he and Travin, for their part, wished only to claim the item inside of the iron coffin—this garnered no protest at all. With all matters at hand covered, Travin and Lyle led the way back down, with the townsfolk following—some lit torches of their own, freeing Lyle to go back to holding his hands together behind his back, conjuring no magic.

The group moved down the winding stairs, and through half of the straight passage until arriving at the door in the bricks, which they all shuffled through in a line. Inside, the townsfolk got to dividing up what there was. Perhaps aided by the watchful eye of a brother from the temple, the townsfolk did act fairly among themselves in dividing up the spoils, even paying mind to others from the town who had not been able to spare the time to come along. They divided claims to the crates of stones as well, if any man should want to come back later, equipped to haul them away, though even to themselves they joked that it was unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble.

Travin, standing beside Lyle in the corner, said very quietly, while there was enough chatter for the remark not to be the sole

echo off of the stone walls, "Should we investigate the item in their company?"

Lyle answered, "I would prefer to be very open about the item's function. I worry at what mistruths might spread otherwise."

Travin and Lyle stepped forth from the corner, and both came to the iron coffin.

"It is safe?" Travin asked, no longer at a whisper, aware that they were now well in the eyes of the townsfolk.

"To the utmost of my abilities to discern, you will not be harmed by opening this."

"You never say 'yes' or 'no' anymore," Travin noted.

"I have become very interested in accuracy."

"Huh."

The townsfolk had stopped talking among themselves, and were all watching the swordsman and the robed man from a cautious distance.

Travin lifted open the coffin's door. It made not the slightest squeal. Inside, there was a hookah, as they anticipated. Travin lifted the item out, and held it up. It did have a rather fancy look to it, and showed curvy thin writing engraved down the entire body of it, the line of text spiraling down and down.

Lyle turned, and asked, "Would anyone lend us a light?"

One townspeople stepped forward, and held out a torch.

"I thank you," Lyle said, taking the torch.

The townspeople nodded, bowed himself to make himself scarce, and stepped back.

Holding the light near the hookah, Lyle squinted, and placed a finger to the lettering. Travin rotated the object as needed while the robed man slowly spoke. "I read the writing as this: Behold, The Hookah of Superlative Matrimony! Smoke may be drawn from it until the day it is cracked! When breathing out its smoke, identify by speaking any person whose company is present, and in the smoke, all present shall see who loves that person the most in all the world! Love, of course, comes in many forms, but this device casts aside familial and friendly, and cares only of romance!"

Travin commented, "It doesn't rhyme."

"Well, many enchantments do not."

“I like the ones that rhyme.”

Lyle smiled without comment, walked back to the townspeople and returned the torch, and then came again to stand near Travin.

Travin asked, hookah in his hands, “Should we see if it works?”

Lyle answered, “I think we should. Do you know how to use it? From what was written on it, I think it is ready.”

Travin held the stem in one hand and the mouth piece in the other, and drew in a big breath from the item. He held the breath in for a moment, and then began exhaling a stream of smoke, which came forth in a huge cloud, bigger than when they had been in frozen wastes well below zero, and he and Lief had taken turns lowering their warmth-enchanted scarves to breathe out into the frigid air as they walked. As Travin exhaled the smoke, midway through the exhale, he whispered the word, “Myself.”

The smoke swirled around in the form of a dust devil which reached from floor to ceiling, and then flung itself against one of the walls: there the smoke all spread out flat, and among the smoke on the wall, there came to be an image as though looking through a window. In the image, there was a Golden Retriever. She laid in the shade of a tree in an otherwise brightly sunny scene, panting as she kept her head up, glancing around left and right at the goings-on in the field around her.

“Um, well that,” Lyle began, and then had nothing. “She is gorgeous, sir.”

“Did I use it right?”

“As best as I can tell. Would you show me it again? Oh, and if we could have the light once more—thank you, hold it just like that. As I read it, once again: and in the smoke, all present shall see who loves that person the most in all the world! Love, of course, comes in many forms, but this device casts aside familial and friendly, and cares only of romance! Yes, sir—oh, I thank you for the light, that was all I had request of it for—Yes, sir, this image would then be... as described.”

Travin began drawing in another big breath from the hookah.

Lyle noted, “I don’t believe there was any stipulation at all that doing it a second time would change the results, but please,

do not take that as me stopping you from investigating the device's consistency for yourself."

Travin exhaled, and whispered, "My friend Lyle."

Lyle gasped, and shot a glare at Travin.

The smoke swirled around and around, and then flung itself at another wall, and in that image stood a horse in a stall, tail flicking at flies who were pestering him—the 'him' of it was very apparent, as the stallion's endowment hung out down under himself.

Travin, and many of the townsfolk, began to snicker.

"I think," Lyle said, "that I am beginning to understand what the wizard had in mind, when he said that people would not like what this item showed them."

Travin asked, "How long have you and him been seeing each other?"

"I could ask you just about the very same, you know."

Travin looked again to the image of the Golden Retriever, which still lingered on a wall in smoke. "I do remember her," he said. "When we were coming here, we stayed at a farm for a month, so that if anything from our travels was still tracking us, it would not befall all of the townsfolk—we paid the farmer more handsomely than I would have ever thought to for lodging, even for such an extended time. This dog belonged to that farmer. Her name is Acorn. She slept in my bed, she wasn't allowed to sleep on the beds with anyone else, but I didn't mind, it reminded me of sharing a tent with Rin, or with Lief when he still camped with us."

Lyle interjected, "Are you about to tell us that one thing led to another with the dog too?"

Travin gave an amused laugh, and said, "No, no, no. If her feelings for me really were *that* strong, I suppose I missed it. All I can say is that I let her sleep on the bed. Was that all it took?"

"I would not know," Lyle responded.

"More of a horse person," Travin said, nodding.

Lyle rolled his eyes, and said, "By my brotherhood, if I speak a lie then the fires of Chthuth will forsake me." The robed man brought his hands forth, and conjured a small fire in a cupped hand. "I do not know that stallion."

The fire remained strong.

Travin prodded, "Are you fond of horses generally?"

"I am not *averse* to providing for them, or to making practical use of a beast of burden, but only in intrusive boyhood thoughts long ago did that ever extend into lust, and even then those thoughts were only briefly held, and never acted upon."

The fire, again, remained strong.

"In truth," Lyle went on, "I think very little of lust or romance anyways. They often feel more to me like devices that other people have, but not I. They are alike to another man's religion: real to him, a passingly interesting fiction to me."

The fire held as true as ever.

Travin said, a bit shyly, "I do not have any fire to prove it like you did, but I too have never cared much about lust or romance in the same way others seem to. All that ever happened with Lief, or Rin, to them I think was something deeper, to me, I don't know, it was a bit of fun to have with a friend. I didn't mind it, but it's nothing I've sought out on my own."

With piercing sincerity in his eyes, Lyle said to the swordsman, "I believe you, and I thank you for sharing."

"Happy to. Anything that helps."

Lyle dismissed the fire, and put his hands behind his back once again.

Turning to the townsfolk, the robed man asked, "Would anyone else care to see what the item says about them?"

There was brief silence. Then one townspeople, the miller, said, "There uh, what was it now, how did the smoky thing say exactly it eh, functioned? Shows you who you are the most in love with, or—"

"No, Miller Mardo," Lyle interrupted. "The hookah, irrespective of any of your own thoughts, shows who in the world holds the strongest romantic love *towards you*."

"Right uh, yeah, huh." The miller shrugged. "Yeah why not, give my name a whirl there. Can't hurt to know."

Travin drew in a breath, spoke "The miller Mardo," and the smoke spun away and hit another part of a wall. There, a donkey was shown, grazing in a field.

Many townsfolk laughed openly, especially the miller's drinking buddies.

The miller though, without even feigning an inkling of surprise, said, "Yeah I told every last one of you laughing now, didn't I, how much that jenny loves me, yes I did."

Lyle, interest piqued, asked, "Is it then true that you do know this jenny?"

"Yes sir," the miller said. "She stays by the mill, I see her about every day rain or shine, mind her, feed her, and yes I didn't need this item to tell me she feels powerful urges towards me, if it gets to about that time of day again she can't be ignored on the topic, and I help her plenty gladly, I feel the same way towards her."

The miller's wife shrugged, and said, "It's all true."

The townsfolk roared, and then another townsperson called out, "Me next!"

Travin on that breath spoke "The farmhand Ishek," and the smoke blew to a wall. In it was shown an image of another townsperson present, Lui.

Ishek gasped, and looked to Lui.

Throwing up his arms in faux drama, Lui proclaimed, "It's true!"

Ishek asked, "Okay but is it though?"

Voice then entirely straight, Lui said, "Yeah I mean, I do love you man, so probably."

"*Right* back at you."

"For really real?"

As the two had been speaking they had been inching cautiously closer together, and by that point were face to face. Rather than any further words, the two cautiously shared their first kiss. The other townsfolk and Travin and Lyle all clapped.

Looking into his new love's eyes, Ishek suggested, "Wanna get out of here?"

Lui nodded. The two men scampered off, each snatching up their sack of meager treasures they had been allocated, and disappeared out of the brick door, and ran up the stairs and off into the woods.

Travin pointed out, "It can show humans."

Lyle added, "And it seems to be accurate, at least in cases we have more knowledge on."

“Why did the wizard not like this?” Travin asked. “I think it’s rather sweet, to know that the creatures of the world care about us so much.”

“Amen, sir,” chimed the miller.

Lyle asked the group, “Would anyone else like to try it?”

The room very suddenly became silent.

“Hm,” Lyle intoned. “I thank you all for coming. Before you all go, does anyone, ah...” The robed man gave a quick bashful glance at the image of the stallion.

The miller’s wife offered, “I don’t know the horse, but that looks to be Farmer Yenet’s land, out of town southeast a little.”

“I thank you. Hm. He and I likely have crossed paths then.”

The townsfolk all began to chatter among themselves again, as they all moved and collected up their treasures. Travin and Lyle turned to one another.

Travin asked, “Are you thinking of going to see him?”

“I am thinking of it,” Lyle affirmed. “I do not recall any time that horse could have met me, long enough to garner any strong impression. To the best of my memory, I might have only seen a horse from that farm in passing on the road now and then.”

“Maybe you are very beautiful to horses.”

Lyle smiled.

“I mean it!” Travin said. “How many love stories begin with one lover seeing the other’s beauty at a distance, and falling in love instantly?”

Lyle considered it, and then answered, “I can think of quite a lot, now that you mention it. How about you? Do you even like dogs?”

“Of course!” Travin bellowed. “What kind of question is that? Dogs are wonderful.”

“Have you any plans with this, then?”

“I have some ideas,” Travin answered.

A month later, Travin stood at the top of his new track. Ten times the size of the old one, this one ran all the way down the length of an enormous hill, down towards the farm below. Travin had a hand on the lever, and stood at a slight crouch, prepared to begin running.

“Are you ready Acorn?” he asked.

The Golden Retriever wagged and lowered her front half playfully.

“Are you sure? We can walk back down, take our time—”

Acorn barked and hopped, her wagging betraying that her intent could only be friendly.

“Alright. Go!”

Travin pulled the lever, released the race cars, and he and Acorn sprinted down the hill, wagging and laughing.