

GONDOLA

The city then was criss-crossed with canals like the wrinkles of skin on the back of a finger, and abundant in flooded plazas where canoes and swimmers paddled about. The air wavered under Helios's close company, his slow despondent sighing breaths falling onto the city day by day, stoking the heat of each new noontime that came in that summer. In one plaza, a statue of a tall bird on a plinth in the center: children clambered onto the plinth and jumped off in a variety of squealing daring ways, cannonballs, dives, spins. At one side of the plaza, a gondola idled around, in the shade in the hollows of the gondola a black dog with long fur panting where he laid, and steering was a human with a trim beard and a wide and flat hat to keep off the sun.

From a window that overlooked the plaza, four stories up, with a knotted rope thrown out of it long ago and resting neatly and lazily in one corner, a pair of bureaucrats from those offices stuck their heads out, and one called to the gondolier, "To the high streets?"

The gondolier, Waybringer, lifted a hand and tipped his wide hat towards the bureaucrats, and then lifted the hat off of his head and pointed it with a fully extended arm in the direction of the high streets: all by way of saying, Yes, I will take you, and I know where it is.

The dog, Inkspill, saw the shade change as Waybringer moved his hat about, and looked up to see the hat returned to Waybringer's head, and Waybringer taking them with his

paddle straight towards the plaza's edge, towards the buildings head on, rather than idling about. Inkspill stood up in the steady vessel, took a small number of steps, and lied down fully against Waybringer's ankles.

At the building, the two bureaucrats had climbed down the rope, one hanging on just above the water, the other hanging on just above the head of their colleague.

Waybringer brought the vessel right below them, or so; one viewing from even a short distance away would think the gondola was scraping against the building's gritty walls, though, from the gondolier's sight of it, there was room just enough for the boat to rock as the bureaucrats climbed the last of the way off of the rope and boarded, and still leave the vessel's edges without any new scratches.

Each bureaucrat shook hands with Waybringer, both of them slipping a petty coin into his hand as a token of good will that the final fare would be paid with no trouble. One bureaucrat leaned forward towards Waybringer, over Inkspill, and kissed Waybringer on the cheek, a gesture which Waybringer reciprocated on her cheek; for with the feminine gesture then, it was known, while all present in the boat had hair on their chins and upper lips, that the boat bore a gentleman passenger and a lady passenger.

The gondolier paddled them away from the wall, and began bringing them around the plaza, towards the canals that would lead them to the high streets. Sweat beaded on the gondolier's brow, and wetted his chest, underarms, forearms, buttocks; not much from the work of moving the vessel, but from the sheer heat of the day which he moved it through. The bureaucrats, also, were sweating, as they sat still in their seats, now and then conferring with one another, to the meter of, "Did you review the assistant speaker's manifest for today?" "I did. One item was amiss, I brought it to him, he had it corrected, the version that went out is accurate." "Good, good." "Did you see the reports from the new eastern district, the twenty third, I believe." "Yes, yes, I did, the twenty third. All seems as expected there, moving along proportional to the amount of the eleventh it was taken out of, so." "Yes, I reckon so much as well. Not a runaway

success, but, there was nothing spurring it to be so, so. All within parameters.” “Good, good, good.”

The gondola passed through the open gates of a lock, and Waybringer gently brought the vessel to a halt, not causing it to rock the least amount; the side of Inkspill’s head pressed neither more firmly nor more lightly against Waybringer’s heel as the vessel ceased its movement.

The lady bureaucrat stood, and offered out the amount of the fine to Waybringer. Inkspill quietly inched himself away from Waybringer’s ankles as the gondolier moved about. Waybringer bowed himself as he accepted the bureaucrat’s coins, and then he turned forward again, removed his hat, and waved it for the lock keeper to see in the booth above.

The lock began filling with water. The lady bureaucrat sat back down, as did Waybringer. With nothing to do for some time as they waited, the gondolier rested his long paddle across the gondola, and sat down before Inkspill with his legs bent and apart; The dog shuffled in against the gondolier, and the gondolier began delighting over the fur of the dog who was there in his legs, stroking, gently, firmly, to a consistent, relaxing pace.

After some long while, the lock was filled with water, bringing the four of them up to the canals of a district where the water levels were 15 feet higher than in most of the rest of the city. Waybringer gave Inkspill a firm kiss on the top of his head, a familiar feeling to feel the black fur hot in the summer day against his lips.

The gondolier stood, and picked up his paddle, and brought the vessel over to the booth to pay the lock keeper’s fine. With a polite salute from the lock keeper and wishes exchanged that all may find a cool spot at some time in this day, the gondolier began paddling them on.

The high canals were populated with gondolas of very impressive woodwork, figureheads of dragons and hawks, the vessels ornamented with silver at a minimum, many also glittering in the sunlight with elements of gemstones or gold. Waybringer, while proud of his vessel as something that was well maintained, an ease to operate, a comfort to ride in, was all the same, markedly, visibly, an intruder here.

Waybringer brought them around bends and through plazas, until eventually they arrived at a dockyard. Waybringer took them in to an area for smaller vessels, and with a line of narrow rope that Inkspill had been partially lying on top of, the gondolier moored his gondola to the dock.

With some stretching and little moans, all aboard climbed off. The gentleman bureaucrat thanked Waybringer for the passage, and offered out a pair of significant coins.

Waybringer was startled by the offer, and made no movement to accept the coins. Mustering words—a thing the gondolier struggled with—he did his best to explain the problem politely. “Sir, the fare is not that much, if you may have mistaken which coins you grabbed.”

The gentleman bureaucrat laughed heartily, stooped down to take the gondolier’s hand, and placed the coins into it himself. He patted the gondolier on the side of the arm, and said, “She and I discussed it: We have not a drop of water on us from the trip, not that you can tell it with all of the sweat, ha ha! You are a master, o steerer.”

The gondolier blushed, and bowed, and thanked both bureaucrats. The bureaucrats departed, up the dock, towards the high streets.

Waybringer placed the coins into the coin purse strapped to his side, and took a moment to make especially certain that it was secured closed.

Then, with a giggle and a smile, Waybringer allowed himself to fall to the dock, lowering himself and then rolling out backwards onto his back. Inkspill came over and trotted all around his face, stepping on the human’s chest as he passed back and forth over the human, wagging and wagging as the human reached up and ran petting hands across the dog’s hot coat, the oily black fur radiant in the day’s sunlight.

As the dog calmed some, Waybringer had a proposition for him. The gondolier did a little gasp, immediately fascinating the dog’s attention, gazes locked, the dog’s head tilted, ready to hear. The gondolier offered, “Let’s run.”

Inkspill instantly ran off up the dock.

Waybringer got up, and jogged after him.

The dog and the human ran and splashed and had a fun time all up and down the nice beach. Dashing through the shallows, swimming in the waters, skipping along the shore, they made a good time of being there. The working day was over, with the unexpected payment, and now with more time the best thing to do was inhabit that time with one another, the human and the dog, giving to the dog all the play and excitement and fun that the dog was deserving of. The two crossed back and forth over the beach in the high area time and time again, jumping and rolling and running.

Both panting, and about ready to call it a day, the two looked to one another, the human laughed and fell to the ground again, and the dog walked all over him, as the human held his arms up and petted all along the dog's coat.

The human gave a happy sigh, and then heaved himself up, and walked to a nearby vendor, who had a stand out there on the beach.

The human purchased some manner of meats skewered on a stick. Sauntering away a little from the booth to give the vendor their space, the human, piece by piece, took meat cuts off of the stick, and tossed them to the dog, who caught them expertly and wagged as he ate.

With the both of them seeming rather tired out, the human began back towards the docks, towards the area for smaller vessels. The dog followed along, sometimes trotting around ahead, sometimes investigating back around behind.

The human stepped back into the boat. The dog stepped in after, and quickly settled in among the rocking he had made.

The human untied the mooring, recoiled the rope, and set off.

The two proceeded back through the high canals. At a lock, the human paid the toll, and laid there fully in the gondola with the dog as the water lowered, fraction by fraction, until they were at the low canals again.

The gondolier meandered them around, canal by canal, until they had arrived at an out of the way alleyway, the entrance into the place where Waybringer and Inkspill resided. There was a straight and unremarkable passage of water, which, turning into, Inkspill recognized the turns and ways they had been through, and stood ready to offboard. Waybringer brought them

to the edge of the passage of water, up to the passage of brick pathway. The bricks continued a very short while, then turned around a corner, and then a few yards thereafter there was the door.

Inkspill hopped off onto the bricks.

Waybringer offboarded as well, and pulled the vessel up onto the ground, and around the corner, out of sight of prying eyes.

Inkspill laid down around the corner, against the wall opposite the gondola.

Waybringer took a key from his person and unlocked the door. He held the door open a moment, waiting for a shadow to come barging past him.

When, after a moment, none came, he turned around, and saw the shadow still lying there against the wall.

Waybringer asked, "Coming in?"

Inkspill stretched out his paws, nuzzled his head back against the wall behind him, and remained lying down.

Waybringer asked, "Can I lay down with you?"

The shadow's tail rose and fell.

The gondolier lowered himself down onto the ground, and brought himself face to face with the handsome shade. Each of them occupied their own spot along the wall, meeting head to head, gaze to gaze, face to face. The dog licked the human's mouth. The human returned a smooch to the dog's lips. The two played at touching their tongue against the other's tongue for a little moment, and then, Waybringer slid closer in with Inkspill, nuzzling his face into the dog's belly.

The human closed his eyes, and laid there, inhabiting the rising and falling hair before him as the dog breathed.

After witnessing a number of good breaths, the human opened his eyes, and looked to a part of the dog yet farther up that he hadn't given care to yet that day. The dog's sheath, with the dog being on his side, rested between the dog's legs, the bulk of it drooping towards the ground, lying limply over the grounded leg. Waybringer slid forward a little closer to it, and gave the sheath a lick along the bottom from tip to where it disappeared among the legs.

Inkspill gave a single wag, and then lifted his leg.

Waybringer's heart fluttered at the invitation. He slid forward more and pressed his face fully against the dog's sheath, and the dog lowered his leg, enveloping Waybringer. The weight of the dog's leg over him, wrapping him close, in this hot day, Waybringer planted kisses on the soft skin in front of him that radiated a heat even more. Waybringer smooched the entrance of the sheath, toyed at it with his tongue. He nuzzled against the flaccid penis inside through the sheath's soft veil.

They spent quite a good amount of cozy, playful time there together.

Waybringer then heard a voice above him remark, "Oh, um."

He slid himself out from between the dog's legs, and looked up into the sunlight to see his brother, Candlekeeper.

Waybringer's throat twisted, trying to find some words.

Candlekeeper arrived at having words sooner: "I was only passing through."

Waybringer's brother then jogged towards the door past the human and the hound there sharing intimacy on the ground, and entered into the door and closed it without looking back.

Waybringer's breath was frozen, and the world crowded with blurs and spots as his lungs locked.

Inkspill stood up, walked in a curt circle, and laid back down, with his own houndly head looming above the human's. Inkspill licked at the human's forehead, collecting up a day's dried sweat on his tongue, taking it from the human's body, lick by lick.

Waybringer found his breath, and lied there, letting the dog do what the dog was doing, as he breathed.

Tears came.

Inkspill began licking at Waybringer's eyes, taking the salty tears from his biped.

"I love you," Waybringer said to the dog.

The dog gave a few licks on Waybringer's mouth, and then returned to the eyes.

Eventually, Waybringer sat up, wriggling out from the dog's attentions. He sat there with his back against the wall, and stroked at Inkspill's back.

The two of them would have to go inside eventually.

Waybringer stood, and began towards the door. Inkspill stood, and followed after.

Inside, Candlekeeper was at the table, preparing strong waters. Glancing up at the two entering, Candlekeeper mentioned to Waybringer, "I am making extra, if you might care for any."

Waybringer thought on it, and then nodded. "I think I might."

Candlekeeper continued about his business of preparing all of the components of the drinks. He asked, "You are like lovers to one another?"

Instinctually, without any mulling it over, Waybringer nodded. Then, in the little silence that followed, he felt frozen for any ability to convey just how fully of lovers he and his houndly companion truly were.

Candlekeeper, graciously, merely nodded as well, and said, "A good love it seems to be."

Waybringer's brother then took one cup of drink and walked away, up a staircase, smiling as he went.

The moments and the days continued moving by.

Waybringer and Inkspill stood at a booth at the sea ports, taking alternating bites of a bowl of mixed foods, Waybringer handing down most of the flesh to Inkspill, and the other non carnivorous things for himself.

Waybringer and Inkspill swam about a plaza, no boat to hold them, paddling at the waters with paws and feet and hands and following after one another.

Waybringer and Inkspill laid on a rooftop. Waybringer looked up at the stars; lying there long enough, the stars spinning laid bare how his own planet merely spun among the cosmos, no special thing itself, a mere lone player in this incandescent cast of characters. Inkspill's nose pulsed at the air, little breaths moving in and out, and he learned, of the neighbors, that a nearby building might have seemed to suddenly possess many more rats, someone upwind was smoking a kind of tobacco the hound had never smelled before in this city, and someone was cooking fish at a particularly late hour of the night. In the height of all of these smells, learning so much about the world around, Inkspill looked up to Waybringer for a kiss, a landmark to assure it was all cemented, real, here. Waybringer leaned down

and met the kiss fully. Inkspill wagged as he slid his tongue into the mouth of his tall lover.

Waybringer brought them along the way of an unpopulous canal, himself and Inkspill. Coming the other way, another gondola, steered by a human, and accompanied by a hound. The hound of the other gondola was of brown hair, short. The human of the other gondola bore a long beard, but was not old in years, it would be a surprise if the human had ever once shaved.

As the two vessels were passing, Waybringer slowed, as did the other driver. The dogs of each vessel rose, and leaned forward over the edges, sniffing at one another.

Waybringer began, "Do you and the dog ever kiss?"

The other steerer answered, "It is a joy to."

Waybringer sought to be sure, "As lovers?"

The other steerer answered, "As lovers for lovers we are."

Waybringer, resolute, remarked, "Here, then, is a mirror, as we pass by."

The other steerer's cheeks raised gaily, and they wished, "A good day to you two."

Waybringer answered, "And to you two as well, a good day."

The steerer and the dog paddled on, through the canals.