

THIS ABOVE ALL;
TO THINE OWN
SELF BE
ZOO.

Vol. I No. 9

September 2023

In this issue,
connectedness is felt in an alley,
and a dog lover actualizes his enlightenment.

To the fullest extent permissible, all stories and poems herein are released into the public domain.

To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 9
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SONS OF BELIAL

Azure licked their partner's anus, taking in nostril-flared sniffs as they did, creating as wide a cavity inside of their nose as possible for smell particles to land on. Smells were important to them. The hyper-flowery smell of Bluegreen's deodorant. The sweaty, musky, intestiney smell of Bluegreen's anal sphincter. It was no matter of "good" smells or "bad." The compelling thing was if a smell was strong. Azure and Bluegreen had met at a family Christmas gathering, after they had been excised from overly-delicate conversation for their chosen identities. They had gone on a walk together at a nature trail nearby their grandparents' house, gotten to talking, within the hour gotten up to things that would get them uninvited from future Christmas gatherings if they became known, and by February they were sharing a studio apartment together.

Eventually contented, Azure gave Bluegreen's anus a last deep puckered smooch, and then both of them stood up. Azure pulled up Bluegreen's pants and redid their belt, and they both stepped out of the alley and resumed their late night walk.

"That was really good. Thank you."

"Keh. No problem."

"You are the best kind of asexual."

"Keh. Thank you. I try."

"It's like if I was a vampire and you let me eat you, but like, 'eat you.'"

"Keh. Ass licker."

"You were the one who offered."

“Keh. Hey. I offered this time. You were the one who suggested it the last twenty times we walked by that alley. I figure it is hot as God’s tits out tonight, we’re already sweating like hell, I know that that’s a big thing for you, and the sweat adds to it for me too, I might as well offer. Give you a little bit of a treat.”

“The sweat adds to it?”

“Keh. Yeah. A lot.”

“I thought you just put up with me.”

“Keh. No. It’s just not sexual.”

“I need you to elaborate so much on how getting a sweaty rimjob is nonsexual. Is it something I could be doing better?”

“Keh. No. Keep it up.”

“But what is nonsexual about it? What is nonsexually good?”

“Keh. I imagine that I’m a newborn dog, and you’re the parent licking the slime off me.”

“No way.”

“Keh. Why not?”

“They don’t just lick the puppy’s buttthole! There’s no way that’s what they do.”

“Keh. No, I don’t think so either. I mean I assume not. But I think it’s like. The way I imagine it, the way you’re licking my sensitive stuff is like a proxy for how it would feel for all of my body to be new. So like, I’m extrapolating, but that really works for me. You’re just licking the one part, but I feel it across everything.”

“That’s awesome, what the fuck.”

“Keh. Yeah. I really like it. So, you weren’t worrying about me not getting anything out of it, but still, if you do think of it in the future, it’s good.”

“I can still smell your ass smell so much on my upper lip.”

“Keh, yeah wow! You just had your whole face in my ass recently, and now your face smells like your cousin’s ass! Wow. Unprecedented. Call a scientist. Let’s figure out the answer to this mystery.”

“I was just saying. Saying true things. I can still smell you so much.”

“Keh. Happy about that?”

“Not complaining.”

“Keh. Wanna circle back to the alley again?”

“No. Kinda. I really do but I think we were already pushing our luck how long we were just there. We can just resume when we get home later.”

“Keh. Yeah I’m not against that.”

“Love you.”

“Keh. You too. For real.”

“Watch these stairs, that one is uneven.”

“Oh thanks.”

“Use my hand. I believe in you. Yeah, we did it.”

“So pumped.”

“I can tell.”

“Keh. Hey, I wasn’t being mean.”

“I swear I am going to write a song about how my upper lip smells after eating your ass.”

“Keh. What kind of words would that be?”

“No, instrumental.”

“Keh. What? What would convey, ‘my cousin’s ass on my face?’”

“It’s... hard to explain, I guess. It would sound like it smells. I don’t know how else... Nirvana. It would sound like Nirvana.”

“Keh. It would smell like Teen Spirit?”

“Oh my god no. No that’s not what I meant at all stop.”

“Keh. Did you know that was their partner’s deodorant?”

“What?”

“Keh. Teen Spirit. That was the brand name of the deodorant their partner used.”

“Oh. I’ve never heard of that one.”

“Keh. Yeah I don’t know if that was like, more known at the time, or. I don’t know.”

“I can still smell you so much on my upper lip, it’s kind of driving me crazy. In a good way.”

“Keh. Gimme a kiss.”

“Mm.”

“Keh. Thanks.”

“Does anyone still make Teen Spirit?”

“Keh. I think so. Krista—my wombmate, your cousin—they wear it.”

“Oh.”

“Perv.”

“What!”

“You totally remember just immediately what everyone you meet smells like, huh?”

“Maybe! Also you cannot say wombmate, you’re not twins!”

“Keh. Well, sibling sounds way too, I don’t know, medical, so that’s what we decided on at some point. Do you like how they smell?”

“I plead the fifth. But yes.”

“Keh. So yes, that’s what Teen Spirit smells like. They’re eccentric though. I don’t know if they buy it at the store or if they bought a thirty pack that’s been sealed since nineteen ninety. So I don’t know if anyone still makes it.”

“Are you otherkin?”

“Keh. What? Why?”

“The being a puppy getting licked by your parent thing.”

“Keh. Oh, yeah. Therian. I. Kind of identify as a lot of things. Age regression. Connectedness. The universe sort of, bridging, together parts of itself, across itself, through itself, in me. Animals are part of that. Why not, right?”

“Yeah, why not totally. Want me to call you anything different?”

“They is still good.”

“They is basically overpowered.”

“Keh. Honestly.”

“Want me to lick your forehead like a dog?”

“Please.”

“Mmlm.”

“Keh. Thanks.”

“Happy to help. Love you.”

“Keh. You too. Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm. Keh. Mm. Okay yeah I can taste what you’re talking about with the lip. Keh.”

“It’s really good.”

“Keh. Not complaining, I guess.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmm-m.”

“Sexual.”

“Mhm. Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

FALLOW

What do I even do anymore? Anneth thought. She rocked slowly in her rocking chair, really trying to answer that question. *Kim does real estate, gets to show people around to new and different homes, peek a little bit into other homeowners' lives, and she still goes out drinking with some of the old gang. Howard rock climbs, out on real rocks with real ropes by himself, which is insane of him, man with one hand, but I get it, and it is a thing he does. He actually does things, in his life. I'm... what? Some woman who makes sure office supplies are on the shelves each day? And then comes home, and sits in front of a computer, playing computer games. Not even liking when there's an update to the computer games. I grind levels on the same dungeons that have been in the games for the last, what, five years, longer for some of them. Actually. Actually longer than that for all of them: most are older than ten years, of doing the same dungeons, just grinding. Why? I don't think about anything, at all, while I'm playing. Is that why? So that I can not think? Or is that a side effect that I haven't realized and unpacked until just now? Here's another question: When is the last time anything new happened? Prior to last Friday, of course. Before that, when was the last time there was novelty in my life? When was the last time I noticed anything? Literally anything. A... a nice sunset, or, an interesting smell. When was the last time I had a witty observation, even to myself? I don't think I could if I tried. When was the last time I had an actual conversation? Not telling someone what to do at*

work or being told what to do at work. Not direct messaging other players in the games I play, telling them things they might not have known about the games. When was the last time I talked to a friend? Do I have friends? Or, do I only have friends who I used to have? Fuck, when was the last time I was happy? I'm not unhappy. Well. I'm... What do I even do anymore? It's since Myrtle died. What have I done since Myrtle died, twenty years ago?

She let that thought hang for a while, sat with it. Even the most precious memories of time spent with the palomino were so simplified now. Some flat notion of standing at the mare's head, and the mare leaning her head against her. Some note to self that she was supposed to remember all of the moments of brushing the mare, and both of them liking that. The weight that those things had had on her then was sincere. The most sincere things Anneth had felt in her life. But the other life in that equation had come to a natural end.

I didn't die too, Anneth told herself. I very specifically did not kill myself, and that was really on the table, and I didn't. Shit, I transitioned, that was quite an accomplishment. I got help for anxiety. I've been surviving. Maybe I'm not happy. Maybe I am post happiness, now. But I am surviving. Even if it's not that interesting to tell someone about. Even if the day to day is one-note.

She was putting it off.

Anneth knocked her open palm against the arm of her rocking chair about twenty times, and then hit the speed dial button for her boss. As the line rang, she rocked in the chair. She looked out at her back yard, the back yard of her townhouse, and tried to force some observation about it. Something nice. She saw the wind shaking the neighbor's trees, and the birds and squirrels hopping around in the branches. That was a nice image on its own, she supposed. It did not need any deep addition on her part. It was just nice to see the pretty critters running around and flying. It was a nice thing in front of her.

The line was answered. "What's up Anneth?"

No delaying it with small talk then. Anneth jumped right into it. "Jane, hey. I'm going to have an absence coming up."

With no pause at all, Jane shot back, "How soon?"

“Like, now,” Anneth stammered out, before a more tactful way of saying it came to mind. She rocked back and forth quickly in the rocking chair, though, nothing about that should have been audible through the line at least, which was good enough. She figured she looked like a crazy person. She quickly explained, “I got a summons. I can’t be in starting tomorrow, and I’d count me out for a full week after that too.”

“It is *December!*” Jane said, the harshness of it causing the audio on the line to peak out on the word ‘December.’ In a more modulated whisper into the receiver, Jane added, “We are good enough to get by on seasonal shifts we’ve been able to get on board, but I cannot be out a floor manager and you know that.”

“Jane,” Anneth shot back. Standing her ground wasn’t common for Anneth, but she knew the fuck how to do it. “I don’t have a choice. You know I’ve called in *two days* the entire five years I’ve worked here, and I even wish I wouldn’t have had to do those. I do not get *joy* in telling you I can’t come in, but like I said, I have a summons, it is frankly not my choice right now.”

“Wait,” Jane said, “like a...” She trailed off, and then sighed as the words escaped her. “What kind?”

“Chronuous,” Anneth answered. “It’s the real thing.”

“I thought you were...” Jane began, and then cut herself off before she said something very rude. Discriminatory, someone from HR might be willing to describe it as if backed into the right corner. Anneth metaphorically patted herself on the back for calling Jane by the company line, instead of the bitch’s mobile.

“You thought I was what?” Anneth drilled in sweetly, not willing to waive Jane’s partial statement away if this was going to be part of a record.

Jane quickly backtracked, no doubt picking up on all of the same implications. “I just haven’t had to do the forms for anyone getting any kind of summons in a long time.”

“Understandable,” Anneth said, seeing no harm to herself in conceding whether or not that particular information seemed true.

After a little pause, Jane said, “What day is the summons for?”

Anneth saw through it instantly, and really wasn't willing to concede the ground. Answering that question was heading straight into give an inch, take a mile territory. Instead, Anneth said, "No um, I really have to call in a disability privilege. I really can't be in for the week, and, I'm telling you now that I don't hope to extend that but I am reserving the possibility of it. My anxiety hasn't been... out of control... in years... but this did it. I'm going to be in and out of therapy, and..."

Thankfully, really surprisingly, Jane actually did say the line that she was, in theory, required to: "Take the time you have to. We'll figure it all out here."

And that was about the end of it. Anneth considered asking if she was already fired, but knew that the answer wouldn't be honest either way. If she was fired, she would figure something out after the fact. If she wasn't fired, well, that was easier, her schedule would return to normal in a couple of weeks, probably. For the next week, what mattered was that she was free.

It was a Sunday afternoon as she had made the call to Jane. She had seen the letter on the previous Friday evening, and had, admittedly, avoided opening it for a large amount of the weekend. Purple envelope, and a black stamp on the face of it of an hourglass. Correspondences from the gods were a suicidal kind of thing to fake. It was almost assuredly real, and yet, it was so unexpected to Anneth that she still grappled with the reality of it.

What Anneth's boss had just barely stopped herself from saying out loud, the thing that would have been very rude to point out, was that some people were never contacted by the gods. 'Untouchables' was among the more polite names for them. And it had, in fairness, seemed to Anneth and everyone who knew her that she was one of those people. She was approaching forty and had never been summoned before, even by the more accessible gods. Hermes, Cupid. It was common enough for someone to be summoned by Chronos at one point sometime in their life, to be called away to some point in the past. But it was also common enough for someone to never be called.

Others seemed to be personal favorites of the god of time. Some lived lives in a very confused order, always backward and

forward, even intersecting with themselves as a regularity. The second most of the same person in the same place as himself was a filmed porno, where seven of the same man, Luke T., engaged in an orgy together. The importance of it or the lack thereof was studied and debated at length among religious scholars. The first most of the same person in the same place as himself was 9/11, where videos placed at least 45 of the same man, Jeremy Lucas, at the scene, helping to rescue survivors. Going forward in time was exceptionally rare: four people were documented to have done it, and each of those instances had been of a duration that did not exceed five seconds.

Anneth did not assume she was being summoned to be a part of anything so notable. The surprise, for her, was that it was happening at all. The letter from Chronos contained very little, as was usually the case. It had the time and date she was to show up at the temple, which was noon on the Wednesday that followed the Friday she had received the letter on. It had a brief, standardized statement saying that the nature of the visit was to have her be translocated in time, and that her participation was not compulsory but strongly encouraged.

Anneth had to scroll through her texting history for some time to find the number of the reception for her old therapist. It had been eight, nine years since she had last talked to him. Doctor Holland. He had helped her overcome a lot, back then, but there had come a point where there hadn't really been anything left to talk about between them. She was better, so to speak. She was done. They were done. But now, they were back on at his next availability. At first the receptionist had texted back saying that the doctor was booked up for the next three weeks, but within two minutes, she had sent a follow-up text saying that something had freed up, and the doctor could make an appointment with her tomorrow, Monday, 2:20 PM, preferably nothing that would go over into the doctor's three o'clock. Anneth confirmed the appointment, avoiding commenting to the receptionist how just-so all of that seemed, or, more honestly, how inconsiderate it was to lie about the doctor's scheduling to someone who was seeking mental health help, only to find out that the doctor would be willing to make time, and so have to make up a pretense as to why the

unworkable situation had suddenly become workable. She decided to move beyond looking a gift horse in the mouth, there.

The following Monday at 2:23 PM, she was sitting in a couch in an office that smelled like cinnamon candles. The walls were lined with bookshelves full of nonfiction textbooks and fiction novels. She faced a bookshelf mostly full of sci-fi novels, as Doctor Holland sat on a chair side-by-side with her couch, facing the bookshelf alongside her.

In some ways, she had worried the conversation would have to begin with why she hadn't kept in touch over the last near-decade. She had come in ready to admit she had assumed it would be inconsiderate to take up his time and act like a friend when their relationship had been formed on a more professional basis. But when she had come in, he had opened with such a sincere expression of happiness, and a very warm, "It's so good to see you again!" It had made her realize very quickly that there was no animosity, he was not mad at her. They caught up. Both of them had overall been doing very good since the last time they had talked. Anneth then divulged that the reason she had come in was because of the purple letter she had received, with the image of the hourglass on it, marked for two days from then, the following Wednesday.

The doctor began to ask questions about that. In some ways, Anneth always wanted to criticize his questions for being cliché, obvious, even though the questions were exactly fit to purpose, exactly what they were supposed to be.

"How do you feel about getting the summons?" the doctor asked.

"Nervous. Extremely nervous. I don't even... I can barely talk. I don't know what to..." She tried to put a cap on the thought, and couldn't. In many ways she did hope to wrap this up quickly, and not take up the doctor's time waffling about her feelings. She did want to get to the root of it. But evidently she was not there herself yet. Hence the visit. But she did want to get to the root of it quickly, if possible.

The doctor asked, "Do you think you'll go to the summons?"

"Yes. Oh gods, you think I would miss it? I'm worried... I'm worried I might mess it up, I think? But I know that doesn't make sense."

In a friendly tone, the doctor agreed, "It is comforting that these things are preordained, isn't it? But we don't always worry about things that make sense. Sometimes we can worry anyways."

"Sure. But then what am I worried about?"

"Well. Do you have any ideas?"

Anneth sighed through her nose.

The doctor suggested it another way. "What do you worry will happen?"

"I..." Anneth thought about it. "I guess I'm not worried I'll, I don't know, create some problem in time itself. That doesn't... well, I couldn't, I think, even if I wanted to for some reason, which I don't. I'm not worried I'll screw it up *that* bad. I'm just worried I won't live up to what I'm supposed to be for this."

"Mm," the doctor intoned. He thought for a moment himself, it seemed, and then asked, "Where do you think the summons will take you? What time, who will you meet, what will you do?"

"I have a guess," Anneth said. She felt her cheeks start to burn up a little, and presaged an awkwardness at even being able to say it out loud. She had told this doctor about her past relationship. She had been very open with talking about it. At one point she had been open about it with a lot of people. But she did not currently make a habit of talking about it with anyone. It had, incidentally, been a long time now since it had ever come up. Without intending to, she talked around it at first. "I know it won't be myself."

"Never met yourself?" the doctor asked.

"No," Anneth answered. She then asked, as it had actually never come up before, "Have you?"

"Myself and I have had a couple of very nice dinners, but I have to admit, I wouldn't stop going on about music trivia," the doctor said, and then laughed at himself. "You know what's the worst? One of those dinners, I've now been on both ends of, and I could feel myself doing it, but it couldn't be helped."

Anneth laughed at that herself, not faking it. She was very amused at the idea of the doctor being awkward. "I didn't even know you liked music that much."

"I really don't, but I know that I'm going to talk my own ear off at least three more times about it anyways."

“Oh no,” Anneth said, lightheartedly.

“There was some other good advice to myself in there too, to be fair. Stuff that sent me on what I would like to call a good life path. It was all very specific to things I needed to hear at the time, nothing that’s not a life skill you don’t already have. But that was peppered in among quite, quite a lot of rock band trivia. The one of those I can say I have delivered now, I believe I was phrasing it the way I did to attempt to make the metaphors stick to a less wise self who needed the help.” Doctor Holland cleared his throat. “So, you’ve never met yourself,” he said, circling back. “But you have some idea of who it might be that you’re meeting in the summons?”

“Yes.”

“If you write it down on a paper first, can I take a guess?” the doctor asked.

That caught Anneth by surprise, the idea of that. “Oh. Sure. Do you have...”

The doctor ripped a page out of a spiral bound notebook, and handed it to Anneth along with a pen.

Anneth wrote down the name, glancing over to make sure the doctor wasn’t peeking. The doctor had indeed turned his head away to face the wall.

“I wrote it,” Anneth said, having already folded the paper a few times as well, to obscure the name farther.

“Myrtle?” the doctor asked.

Anneth unfolded the paper and showed it to the doctor, revealing the name *Myrtle* freshly written in her handwriting. “I’m surprised you remembered,” she said, and then added, cutting the doctor off slightly, “I don’t mean anything by that, I just, I’m bad with names, I’m surprised you could remember the name this long after.”

“We talked about her a lot,” the doctor said. “I might not remember every story, I’m sorry, but yes, I remember her name, absolutely. You think you’re going to see her?”

“Nothing else would be as important as that,” Anneth answered. “And it’s not myself. So.”

The doctor let a silence hang.

Anneth finished, “So yes, I think I’m going to see Myrtle.”

The doctor asked, “And you’re worried about that?”

“Yes,” Anneth answered. “Oh gods, I can barely... yes, I’m more nervous than I’ve been in... I’ve never been this nervous as an adult. I’m serious. It’s not a *bad* thing that I would get to see her again, not at all, obviously. But how can... how can she be dead, and then I get to see her alive again for what, a few minutes? How is that supposed to happen and it won’t fuck me up? How could I make enough of that? That’s impossible. I...”

Anneth began to tear up, not even having suspected she was going to, herself.

The doctor handed her a box of tissues, and set a waste basket beside her.

Anneth took out a tissue to wipe her eyes with, and then balled it up when she was done and put it in the waste basket.

“I’m sorry,” she choked out.

“It’s okay,” he said.

A silence hung in the air.

Anneth broke the silence by saying openly, “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s difficult,” the doctor said. “What would you want to say to her, if you had the chance?”

“Don’t—” Anneth began with a tone, and then cut herself off. She started again, still harshly, but not overly combative, “Don’t talk down to me about what me and her shared.”

“Of course,” the doctor said. “I’m sorry. My impression of your relationship with her is very high. I understand that your feelings towards her are very loving.”

Anneth laughed bitchily to herself.

Sounding surprised himself, the doctor asked, “Was there something other than loving in that relationship?”

“No. I mean, we annoyed each other sometimes, but, who doesn’t? No. At the time it was... she was the center of my world. Getting her out to run each day, bringing her new things to try, going on our rides. I didn’t listen to what anyone else said for more hours in a day than with her. That was... we loved each other. But that was then. That was... a really long time ago. About twenty years.”

“Oh. Your feelings have changed since?”

“Not changed, just...” Anneth felt herself becoming choked up. She readied another tissue, but more tears didn’t come. She

held the tissue in a tight fist. “The part of my life where I loved her, was...” Anneth couldn’t finish it other than to repeat herself: “a really long time ago.”

The doctor adjusted in his chair, and then said, delicately, but firmly, “The reason I wanted to ask what you would say to her wasn’t because I wanted to hear a platitude from you, like ‘I would say to her I love you,’ or ‘I would say to her I’ve missed her.’ I think, and you can let me know if I’m wrong, but I think I do understand how heartfelt your position on her is, and I’m not trying to step over that like it isn’t a big deal. I only wanted to ask what you would say to her because if you’re anxious about meeting her again, and you think that you are going to meet her again, then that’s an obstacle that might be troubling you.”

Anneth nodded. “Sure. I think I would just tell her I love her though.”

“Okay,” the doctor said. “Anything else?”

Anneth threw up her arms. “Play it by ear, I guess. If she wants to run circles, we’ll run circles. If she wants to go on a ride, we’ll go on a ride.”

“Is there anything you would like to do with her?”

Anneth covered her sudden smile with the tissue she was still holding. “I don’t have the equipment for that anymore.”

The doctor chuckled along, and said, “Ah, fair enough. It sounds like whatever comes, you’re planning to make the best of it.”

“Yeah,” Anneth said.

“I think that’s all anyone should expect from someone,” the doctor offered.

Anneth nodded. “Maybe. Gods. This is still just...”

The conversation went on, but mostly consisted of circling back to the same topics, finding other ways of saying the same things. Anneth worried that she had moved on from the palomino so completely that she had forgotten her, that the feelings had become too distant, that meeting her again would not live up to the miraculous nature of such a thing getting to happen. By the time she thanked the doctor and they agreed that it was a good place to put an end to the session, Anneth had not gotten as far as no longer being nervous, but she did believe she was ready to appear at the appointment at the temple of

Chronos without being a complete wreck. And as for what would happen on the other side, it was like she had said. She would play it by ear.

That Wednesday, in the morning, she dressed in comfortable jeans and a flannel top, and packed a satchel with two pears. Bringing items back and forth through time was only prohibited if deemed exploitative, and the priests were guided to be permissive in their judgment. She made the drive to the temple much earlier than she was scheduled to arrive, and parked in the lot outside. In a nearby courtyard there was a fountain. She sat on a bench and looked idly at the water, it flying up and splashing down. She wanted to reflect on dear memories of time with her soulmate, as she looked at the fountain. But nothing more substantial came to her than the dim memories she always had. She sat staring at the fountain, and only that. She had to force herself to not zone even that out. When it was time, she entered the sliding doors of the temple.

Standing inside, there was a priest in a white robe. He smiled at her. “Anneth Williams. Thank you for coming.”

She nodded. “Of course. Is there um... where do we do this?”

“Follow me,” he invited, and turned and walked deeper into the temple. The halls had white walls, and at intervals were hung framed works of art, quite a lot of the art depicting architecture or weather.

Anneth and the priest arrived at a room that made Anneth think of a classroom. There were no desks, or lectern. It was likely only the size of the room that made her think of it. She tried to think of other rooms that were that size. There were probably plenty. But she couldn’t think of any others at that moment. This room, the room in the temple, was a room of grey bricks, and no other features. The fluorescent lights in the hall outside cast the only light into the dim room.

The priest led her to the room’s center. “Stand here. Face the doorway. Close your eyes. Okay. Keep your eyes closed as I depart. It will happen shortly.”

She heard the priest walking away, and then the sound of the door closing.

Immediately after the door had closed, the sound of cicadas buzzing filled the air, and the world smelled of grass and dirt

and water. Anneth opened her eyes. She was outside, in the nighttime, standing on a little grassy finger of land that jutted out to encroach meagerly on a large lake. A crescent moon hung overhead. Anneth turned around, and around, and didn't see a palomino anywhere.

From the edge of the water, past a bush that was farther out on the finger of land, a deep voice called to all who might hear it, "Is someone there?"

"Oh," Anneth said, realization causing her spirits to sink. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Excuse me?" the punk said. 'Man' wasn't the right word. Maybe for two reasons, but at the very least, for the reason that the person with the deep voice was still an insolent shit, not fully matured, still didn't know enough about the very basics of the world for 'man' to not at least come with some footnotes. This was herself.

"Hey Nick," Anneth called past the bush.

"Who the fuck," the punk said to himself, but still loudly, and then stood up, emerging from the incidental cover.

The dude wasn't bad looking. She had to give that much to her past self. He had some things working against him, most notably a black pencil moustache, but his features around it were handsome, very Dean-esque. It looked like he still had the black leather jacket at that point, because, well, he was wearing it. She didn't know where that had ever ended up.

"I don't know where to begin," she said to her other self. To him. To Nick. Thinking about what she wanted, in light of the fact that this was not who she had been hoping to see, she supposed that, now, all she wanted to do was impart whatever lesson, whatever information, it was that her past self needed now, at this moment. Get it over with, whatever it was that she was here to do for him. She supposed she would start with the basics. "I'm from 2023."

"Oh," he said. The information seemed to have a softening effect on him, taken the edge off of his rather hostile demeanor that had been present until that point. "Are you someone I know already, yet?"

"I'm you, loser."

“Pffff!” Nick said, and then turned and paced alongside the water, laughing to himself. “I don’t know who you *actually* are but that’s funny.”

“Why’s that, Nick?”

“Easy, I’m a dude,” Nick said, pointing to himself with both pointer fingers. “I’m a dude on the outside and I’m not not a dude on the inside. Being a dude is the fucking best. Why would anyone *want* to be a woman?”

“You’d be surprised. But you know what, part of that is true, you’re not transgender. Not yet.”

“Wuzzat?” Nick asked.

“Wuzz what?” Anneth mocked.

“Transgender.”

“Oh gods I was a moron.”

“Hey! Even if I don’t believe you that is not very nice!”

“Look,” Anneth said, “we can prove this.”

“Oh yeah, how?”

“You’re...” Anneth looked Nick up and down, trying to gauge it. She was surprised she wasn’t even good at placing herself in terms of age, but she took a shot at it. “You are at least seventeen.”

Nick looked at her like she was an idiot. “Twenty two,” he said, pretty bitterly.

“Oh,” Anneth said. Well, damn. That changed things quite a lot, from where she thought this was at. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

Because that put him, currently, in a very dark place he had been in, in the few years after Myrtle had died. She hesitated to even bring that up, though. What did she have to say to him about it? It clearly wasn’t anything that had helped, if she didn’t even remember having had this meeting with a stranger at night by a lake. And at this particular moment, the guy seemed to be in what would have been a better than usual mood, overall.

“If you’re twenty two, I know who you lost a couple years ago,” she said.

“It wasn’t a secret, that doesn’t make you special.”

“No, I know. That isn’t what I was going to bring up, I just didn’t know that had happened yet, and, I’m sorry. I really know how it is right now.”

“Yeah, well.” Nick shrugged.

“But, my point,” Anneth brought back up, “is that you’re older than fifteen, when you got Howard to give you a tramp stamp of Bender the robot lying seductively and burping fire.”

Nick suddenly snorted, and doubled over, wheezing out laughter, barely able to breathe. In the breaths he could get out, he mocked, “There’s no way... you...”

His words trailed off as Anneth loosened her belt, turned around, and lifted up the back of her flannel, showing the exact tattoo that Nick assuredly had. Well. She had actually gotten it touched up, since, but it was the same lines Howard had done, in the parlor they’d broken into that night.

“Nooooo fucking way,” Nick muttered.

“Fraid so,” Anneth said, and then hiked her pants back up again, and faced herself once more.

Nick’s eyes darted all over her, seeming to take her in for real now. He seemed afraid of her, actually. All the implications. Really the one main implication, but, that one was nothing that had started to be on Nick’s mind yet, not for a couple more years, at least. Anneth let out a little huff of a laugh, actually. She really was such a fucking dude back then, back now. She, he, had taken masculinity by the horns. First to jump to the challenge at any implication that he wasn’t the best at something: the number of times arm wrestling had happened at lunch tables well into high school was stupid as fuck, but she remembered the fun he had had in that, because he was really good at it, really strong, and almost always won. The feeling of winning, of impressing people, he sought that out so much. He and Myrtle had been insatiable in riding competitions. She was a competitor type too. He and she, they got each other on that. He had been asked in literal interviews how he pushed the palomino so hard when he seemed to be doing nothing. It was because she wanted to give things her all too, and her all was very, very, very impressive without him needing to act for an audience like he was the one pulling that spirit out of her. The way they would fuck after a victory, her thing giving rapture to his thing, his thing giving rapture to hers, celebrating in their winning, they were champions, the most incredible soulmates in the world.

Nick, twenty two and with that kind of fire dying from him quickly, asked, "So what do you want? Cause I've kinda been feeling done with things, and I'm surprised to see I live more than another year."

"I don't know, dude. You get through things? It gets better than this right here?"

"Does it?" Nick asked. "What do you do now?"

Anneth let out a long puff of air that flapped her lips. "Yeah not much. Shit."

Nick made a pointedly unimpressed hum, and then took a flask out of his jacket, and had a drink.

"Tch! Oh, come on!" Anneth said, only just realizing what should have been a given, given that Nick was at that point in his life. "You're drunk!"

"Guilty."

"You are actually blacked out right now!"

"That is a possibility, random crazy woman who is apparently me."

"Wow, so that's... huh," Anneth said, and then laughed once to herself. "That does explain some things. But then... what could possibly be the point of this? You're not going to remember this, at all, I can tell you that already. Come tomorrow this is just *gone*, from your perspective. Huh." Anneth thought on that. "So I guess this is for me? That seems wrong."

"Maybe this is the gods' last ditch effort to remind you of your old ways and save you from cutting your schlong off."

"Oh that ship has sailed."

"What!"

"Can I wear that jacket?"

"Does something happen to the jacket too!"

"Maybe. But come on. I actually like *part* of that idea that you said, about reminding me of old things. I wanna wear the jacket again."

"It is the best," Nick said. He took another sip from the flask, set it down on the grass, and then did begin taking the jacket off.

Anneth unshouldered the satchel she had packed, with the two pears. She suppressed letting out a sigh of sadness at something about that.

“What’s that?” Nick asked, looking down at the satchel. He handed the jacket out to his later self.

“Oh, it’s a couple of pears I brought. If you want one—”

“I bet I can throw one farther than you.”

Anneth let out a sharp laugh. “Ohhh wow, you are so what you are.”

“Hundred percent. Well, I’m drinking Fireball right now which is actually weak as shit, it’s like, thirty percent, but I was drinking other stuff earlier.”

Anneth took the jacket, and put it on. It had been big on Nick, so it still fit her, actually pretty perfectly, even with breasts in lieu of abs, arms that were all around a lot less muscle, a bit more cushion. It took her back. She wore it pretty damn often. It was what enshelled her, him, in the crisp mornings in the stable, as his breath and an assertive palomino’s both produced clouds in front of themselves. So often, they came close enough, stayed close enough, to where their clouds were one combined effort, breathing in each other’s vapor, having each other’s breath.

Nick rummaged clumsily through the satchel and grabbed out the pears, and handed one to Anneth.

“You’re really serious about throwing them,” Anneth said. She had meant it to be a question, but the answer was so apparent that she couldn’t maintain the interrogative tone for the entirety of the sentence, and it fell out as a somewhat defeated statement, which wasn’t entirely what she had meant for it to be either, she was amused by him, her old self, more than any other feeling, but the words had come out a little bit wrongly.

“You can stand ten steps farther ahead than me,” Nick offered.

“Fuck no, we’re gonna do this even, let’s go,” Anneth said, and walked with her pear to the edge of the water, at the end of the finger of land. The vast open lake laid before them, black water barely perceptible in the light of the crescent moon. Nick came up to stand beside her. The both of them scooted their feet, looking down at them in the dark, to make sure that each of them had the frontmost part of the frontmost toe even with each other’s.

Anneth tossed her pear up and down in her hand a couple of times, feeling the weight of it, and then hurled it out into the water, where it made a splash.

“Oh damn,” she said. “I actually didn’t think I would still be able to throw that far.”

“That was honestly respectable,” Nick agreed.

Nick then hurled his pear out into the water. It went far enough out that Anneth lost sight of it, and only heard the splash.

“You win, good job,” Anneth said.

Nick gave a weird laugh, some kind of half snarling gloat, Anneth wasn’t even sure what her old self was going for with it.

“I like this,” Anneth said. Her old jacket. Hanging out with, well, a more animated self, even if it was from a place of him doing very badly. “Kiss me,” she said.

“Um,” he said back. Slowly, he said, “I have never kissed a human before.”

Anneth shrugged. “Yeah I know. Neither have I. But I know what this is now. I’m getting reignited. So spread the fire.”

“I ain’t got no fire left, since Myrtle’s gone.”

“Well, you’re drinking Fireball, so you’re more on fire than I am.”

Nick gave that snarling laugh again, and then said, “Sure,” and wrapped an arm around the back of her neck, and went in for a big, long kiss. It felt silly, kissing a human, but she gave herself over to it, let his lips peck and suck on her lips, let his tongue slide in and run between her upper lip and her teeth. It seemed like he might have just been getting started when suddenly, he was gone, and she was in a dark room.

She walked through the dark towards the door, and opened it to see the priest standing outside in the hall.

She said to him, in an excited whisper, because the place seemed so quiet, compared to all the buzzing of cicadas, “It happened!”

“I can see,” the priest said with an amused smile, looking down at her chest.

Anneth followed his gaze down at herself, and realized, after a moment, that she had come back wearing the leather jacket.

“Oh. OH.”

The priest chuckled. He did not pry on details as they walked back out, though Anneth did volunteer some of it, saying she had met herself, and it had gone well, it had been good. The priest seemed glad to hear it, and wished her a nice day at the front door.

Anneth stood outside in the sun for a moment, giving her eyes a sec to adjust to the bright glare reflecting off of everything on that cloudless noon. As she stood she thrust her hands into her jacket pockets, and it was then that she discovered the phone resting in the left pocket, with a screen that was cracked in one corner. Her breath stopped. Leaving a hand on the phone in the pocket, she walked quickly to her car, and got in. Only there, where she wouldn't have a chance of dropping it on the concrete, did she take Nick's phone out of the jacket pocket, and press the unlock button. She tapped in the passcode. It was one she no longer used, too obvious. Six digits. And then she was in. Seeing the home screen background alone caused tears to strike her. It was a selfie of Nick and Myrtle, taken by Nick of course, with Myrtle nosing over his shoulder, nuzzling against the side of his head. It called back to mind the closeness of the mare, the weight of a mare pressing her head against her human.

She went into the photos, and looked through them, every one that had that palomino. It was like getting to say goodbye. No. It was like getting to say I loved you. No. It was like getting to say I loved you then, and I love you now, and you have shaped me and the result of you on me will never leave me, and goodbye. When she had looked at everything, she pressed the lock button on the phone, and wondered if she might not ever choose to look at it again, since she had gotten what she had needed to, less or more.

The following day in Doctor Holland's office, after they had talked about some of the other things, she told him, "I'm gonna start dating again. Maybe humans. Maybe not even looking for love, but just to meet people. I'm just gonna go to things. Bars, live music, the state fair. I'm just gonna get out and do things again."

CHEER'S JOURNEY

My part in this matter began on a day that was all around miserable, and I wish, oh I wish, I could say that it did not go on to progress miserably in every instant from then until today, as I sit and reflect on these doings now at the end. For the beginning though, I must start it with the context that the office I had then recently been placed in bore all of the same homely comforts as a burial crypt. In the chamber were four desks, one after the other in a single file from the door to the tall and narrow window. The chamber had a very high ceiling, and the wooden walls high up featured a great many gaps, which caused a cold draft to circulate through the room constantly—a blessing in the summer, were the assurances made to me, but as it stood it was the time in the summer at which the days were their longest, and yet, with the cloudy and raining days, a constant chill hung about the lands, and I had yet to find myself grateful for the wind that came constantly across my desk—my desk was third from the door, separated by one from the window. It was such a cold wind to cause one to shiver even in long sleeves, and to cause one's nose to run, such that one needed to take a moment every few seconds to wipe away the nose's thin discharge, even while sniffing, or else allow the substance to accumulate slowly at the end of one's nose, sorely growing and growing, until a substantial enough drop was formed to fall forth from the nose, and then have the next drop sorely begin where the last one left off. A small hearth was tucked in the wall beside the two middle

desks. Any heat that it did emit was swiftly carried away by the draft.

A year prior, I had had an office to myself, one that was aptly cool in the heat or warm in the cold. Alas, such simple comforts came to an end when Percival said to me, in a bored conversation in the meeting hall, “It seems like you aren’t able to secure the Jaishi peninsula after all.”

The Jaishi peninsula was an impossible task. Lush and grand jungles of tall and exotic timbers, oh yes, a mouth-watering spoil that tempted starry-eyed merchant lords such as Percival from the Amber Sea to the Granite Isles. But it was, all the same, impossible. The natives were a vicious sort, deaf to trade, and meeting the least entrance onto their land with nightmarish violence. Though armed with no more than spears and stone knives, they frequently attacked camps by night or in other manners of unfair ambush. As well, the sea surrounding the Jaishi peninsula in all directions was host to four consecutive miles of tumultuous rocky straits. There was but a single route through the straits which, principally, although winding and none too comfortable, was wide enough to navigate a small trade ship through. This route was aptly called Suicide. Any crew skilled enough to navigate it would be intelligent enough not to bother. To enter the peninsula by land would be to go through the nation of Gom, and immediately lose nine tenths of any timbers to that nation’s governors and guilds and inspectors.

To solve any one of the problems of the Jaishi peninsula—the natives, the sea route, or the land route—would no doubt gain the solver a reputation in legend as one of humanity’s great engineers. But Percival had known from the start that it was a highly speculative sort of thing, putting any man on that task. And, over time, he did come to accept that the speculation had not been fruitful, and so it came to that sentence, that day in the meeting hall. “It seems like you aren’t able to secure the Jaishi peninsula after all.”

I nodded. I told him, “I don’t believe it can be done at all, my lord. I’ve been wondering if the white forests to the far south wouldn’t be a more fruitful undertaking. It’s a longer journey, and the climate there is very harsh, but for all that, the native

population is sparse and skittish, and entry to the continent is no trouble, save for the distance from here.”

Percival frowned.

The two of us sat there, as a gust of wind outside caused the walls of the offices to groan.

His black beard was uncharacteristically unkempt that day. Behind his spectacles, his eyes showed none of the curious and delighted sparks that I had become accustomed to seeing from him.

He sighed.

I clarified to him, at the time worrying that he'd believed I was only making conversation, “If you would like, I can refocus my efforts away from Jaishi, and towards the white forests.”

“Surveyor work, then?” he responded.

He may as well have smote my stomach with a hammer, for the blunt and nauseating effect that those words had on me. Surveyors were two layers of reports below my high office. And yet, he had uttered no error that I could raise objection to. To find out a route as free of obstacles as the white forests was indeed no longer work that required an engineer.

My mouth dry, and my words faint, I did answer, “I could do surveyor work for a time.”

“If you would like,” he said. Then with that, he stood, and exited the meeting room. I remained there for some time, staring at the wall, reflecting on my accomplishments. Nothing. I had accomplished nothing.

So it was that I found myself placed into the surveyors' office, with the four desks in a line, and the horrible chilling draft. Moreover, I found myself there alone. Or, in a sense, I found myself there with the ghosts of my colleagues, who each appeared in various likenesses.

Mahn, whose desk was first closest to the door, had been out on expedition for nearing two years. His likeness was hollow silence, cold vacancy, empty space. I had no notion of him.

Tenk, whose desk was behind mine, closest to the window, had been sent one year ago to seek out any changes to the waters surrounding Jaishi, to see if any more favorable route had appeared. His likeness was bitter embarrassment, weak vengeance, a feeling upon me as I sat at my desk of being

watched and disapproved of. I believe I am the one who ordered him there to Jaishi, but I have not looked back through the records to find out. I believe I am the one who ordered him to his death to keep up my own appearance as an engineer who was still trying.

Carson, whose desk was second closest to the door, had been out on expedition for nearing two years, and had in fact set out on the very same ship as Mahn had, but at the start, Carson, unlike his colleague, had managed to send back reports with some frequency, at first one each week, and then one each month or so. For six months no word had come from him, and it had, apparently, begun to seem that he may have met some untimely fate, but a package arrived on my desk that was marked as a report of his, some seven hundred pages. His likeness was obligation. I was to read the report, and summarize its nature in a more brief report to be given to his supervisor.

There though, at the beginning of this matter on which I reflect over today, I had not progressed through more than the first three sheets of the report before the draft in the room was too much. The breeze nipped at the papers, caused my nose to run, and caused my very fingers to shiver as I sat there at my desk. It was no possible condition to make meaningful progress in reading under. And so, I had repackaged Carson's report, and as for myself, I sat huddled directly before the hearth, holding my shivering fingers to its small fire. It was while I was seated thusly that the door to the office opened, and Percival stepped in and took a seat against the corner of Mahn's vacant desk.

"Cheer, old dog!" he said to me, cheeks high and eyes scrunched in shining praise.

Though I may have been demoted to the office of a happy imbecile, I was not one myself. Doubtless, he believed that with his winning smile, he could send a man to risk life and limb, and the man would do so vigilantly, worrying not for his own wellbeing, but chiefly concerned that he not cause the delighted merchant lord to be disappointed. But such an imbecile I was not, and his manipulating wiles effected no charm over me.

I should add, as well, that 'Cheer' was not an imperative on his part, but merely my name being mispronounced. Though indeed my name did sound similar to the word for good spirits,

merriment, and joy, it was not. Pronounced correctly, it would be in two stresses, chee-ur, and it would have no meaning grander or smaller than whatever was the grandness or smallness of my name. As Percival pronounced it though, a passerby overhearing the conversation could be forgiven for thinking he was commanding me to jubilation.

I stood up from where I was seated before the hearth fire, and I went and sat on the corner of my own desk, facing the delighted merchant lord. Carson's desk laid between us. The draft blew over me, and sapped any heat I had gained from sitting before the small hearth. A cold and unimpressed vessel, I sat facing Percival.

He said, still smiling, "When the weather heats up, this is known to be the best chambers in the building for cooling off. You'll be up to your nose in folks stopping in to chitter chatter."

As if he were a witch ordaining it, my nose began to drain a cold discharge once more. I sniffled, and then withdrew a handkerchief from a trouser pocket, and dabbed some of the discharge away.

While returning the handkerchief to my pocket, I asked the merchant lord, "Do you still wish to stay my departure to the white forests until autumn?"

He responded, "I had the most interesting conversation at the pub in Fairspring last night."

I was neither surprised he had ignored my question about the white forests nor surprised he had indeed had a most interesting conversation in a pub in Fairspring. For the former, the white forests bored him as much as they bored me. For the latter, Percival sought every opportunity to leave the office and rub elbows. I had attended luncheons and masquerades alongside him, and witnessed him speak with minor members of royalty and with minor house servants with equal delighted interest. Indeed, I think he liked the sound of his own voice, and so the ear he spoke in the direction of mattered not.

I indulged him, "Who did you speak with at the pub?"

"Wild man by the name of Gongogast, as muscular as a Mershi statuette, and damn proud of it, clearly, because he wasn't wearing anything but a thong and a sash."

Percival paused there, eyes still twisted up in a pantomime of joy, waiting for me to show some amusement at the nakedness of a man I had never been aware of until now.

"You had to be there, I suppose," he said, saying with a slight squint of his happy eyes that he would forgive me, just this once, for insulting him by not playing into his humor.

Hoping to usher the story forward to its conclusion, I prompted Percival, saying, "And you spoke with him?"

"With Gongogast, yes. Say that once."

"Gongogast."

"Ha ha! Gongogast. You like that name? I love something about it. Gongogast. Anyways. Of course, first thing I do when I walk in and see a man damn near naked and proud of it is buy that man a drink, because I need to know more, you understand the inquisitive spirit, the call of the unexplored. So I sit with him, and—well, it was a fascinating conversation, but you had to be there."

Again, his eyes, though on one level jolly, on a deeper level squinted at me in a pointed hate, alike to a lavish pillow pierced through with a sewing needle.

"I suppose I had to be there," I echoed back to him.

"Are you familiar with the Heaven's Basin cluster, Cheer?" Percival then asked me.

A droplet of discharge fell from my nose. I answered Percival by utterance of the word, "Passingly," as I retrieved my handkerchief once more. With it in hand, I turned to the side and blew my nose, and then returned the handkerchief to my pocket again.

"East of here, innit?" Percival asked.

"Quite east, yes. Notably little in that region of sea." I stood from sitting on the corner of my desk, and walked over to a large map of the known world that hung on the wall opposite the small hearth. "We are here, of course," I began, pointing to the southern end of a sizable island that was indeed called Percival. In all directions surrounding, the seas were populous enough with islands on which civilized folk had settled. In search of Heaven's Basin, I scanned my finger eastward from Percival, moving slightly southward as well to come around the lowermost horn of the Tenia continent, then straight east past

the distant twin islands of Kess and Veritch, through a vast empty region that was three times as far as the distance to the horn of Tenia had been, past a lone island called Shrew's Hill, farther east again through empty sea, and finally my finger arrived at three small dots labeled Heaven's Basin. "Here, my lord. Quite far east."

"Yes, I see, quite far east indeed," he said, stroking his black beard. "Gongogast had been through there in his travels."

Still observing the three isolated dots on the map, I responded, "By the accounts I have heard, it is very eye-catching. No substantial vegetation to speak of on any of the three islands, and the exposed rock has a high content of reflective minerals. Hence the name, for its appearance of a heavenly bright spot upon the sea. Once there though, there is nothing of value to the place. It makes for a useful landmark, perhaps."

"Nothing of value?" Percival asked. "Have a look at this here."

I turned to see what he had produced. Both of us standing beside Carson's vacant desk, Percival handed me a small jar. I held it up to my eyes, and beheld that inside, suspended in some manner of liquid, there was the carrion of a juvenile sea creature. Prominent pectoral fins, three pronounced dorsal fins, and sharp teeth within its mouth which hung loosely open.

"Something I purchased off of Gongogast," Percival said. He took it back, and set it down on Carson's desk, then sauntered past me, deeper into the office, towards the window. He laughed to himself, and said, "I should clarify, he had a variety of trinkets hanging from his sash, he didn't pull that out from anywhere untoward."

I shook my head to myself, and went to stand nearby the hearth.

Looking out the window, Percival asked, in a full voice which echoed easily through the room, "You ever see a creature quite like that before?"

I had another glance down at it. "No, my lord."

"Of course not. That there is a hatchling barther shark. Absolutely unheard of kind of thing to recover. They spend their juvenile period at the ocean floor, and only venture up near the

surface in adulthood. Gongogast received the specimen as a gift from the natives on Heaven's Basin."

"Skilled fishermen reside there, then?" I asked. Dreading that he seemed to be angling towards something in among this rambling having to do with me, I wished for him to at least come forth with it.

He answered, "Ha! A skilled fisherman—a very skilled fisherman—could catch an adult barther shark. To fish up a hatchling, no, they don't make fishing line that's long enough. Actually I hear that in the north, there might be developments on that, but anyways, no, no one on Heaven's Basin has access to line that long. That specimen didn't come from skilled fishermen, not at all. That there is the work of mystics. The natives there have mastered the art of telekinesis, teleportation, they change the weather and part the sea, they walk on water and hover above the ground. According to Gongogast's account of it, anyways. Do you suppose it has merit, Cheer? Or do you suppose he was just making up a tale as it came to him?"

Again, a discharge had gathered at the tip of my nose. I dabbed at it with my handkerchief. Then I answered him, telling him, "Garl, one of my surveyor overseers on the Jaishi project, brought up mystics with some frequency, convinced that their talents would be needed to overcome the water route. I was willing to explore it. Certainly in history, we have record of acts that could be described only as supernatural. My skepticism, though, was as to whether any persons of such talents exist currently. Garl was never able to produce any such person as to overcome my skepticism. This man you spoke to in the pub was more than likely only telling you a tale, my lord."

"And yet," he said, more quietly, almost as if to himself, "there is the specimen."

He continued to look out of the window at the drizzling rain.

A gust of wind caused the building to groan.

Again, I tried to let him down lightly, careful not to directly contradict him. "It is possible, my lord, yes, that the specimen here was fished up by mystical means. Be it also possible, perhaps, that it was taken out of the belly of some other fish? Washed up on the shore?—by unlikely happenstance, yes, but not of any lesser likelihood than successful voodoo. May it be,

even, that this is some other specie of aquatic creature entirely, one from far away and unfamiliar to us, that so happens to resemble a barther shark?"

Percival laughed, slapped his leg, and turned to face me. "Cheer! Cheer, old dog, this is exactly why I came to you about this. You would find out the truth of the matter. If it is just a tale, and you found out for a surety that it was, ultimately, just a tale, then you would tell me. And if there was something here..."

I felt a lump gathering in my throat.

He went on, "If there was something here... something that would let us float timbers over land as though down a river, allow us to levitate ships in the air, grant us teleportation, telekinesis, changing of weather, parting of seas... Cheer, old dog, I would like you to go to Heaven's Basin and figure it out."

The lump in my throat swelled such that at first, I could not speak at all. Already, my career had been driven back from that of an engineer to that of a mere surveyor. But even as a surveyor, there had been promise of reestablishing myself, securing small but surefire gains in the white forests and the like, reproving to all that I was not incompetent in my work, I had simply been saddled with an impossible task, back when I had been given Jaishi. Now though. Now, Percival wished to send me straight out onto another impossible errand. A goose chase even more cruel than the last.

Faintly, I croaked out but a few words, enough to be candid of my worry. "If there is nothing here..."

With a delighted smile still spread across his face, he assured to me, "I would not hold it against you. When you come back, if there is nothing to it, you can get back to work on this white forests survey."

It was the delighted, assuring smile that he almost always wore. He did not mean a word of his promise one way or the other. When I returned, I likely would be able to return to the white forests survey, but not due to his promise of it. I would likely be able to return to the white forests survey only because I was once again far enough below him that it was a waste of his time to oversee my activities one way or the other, once they were no longer of interest to him.

Another gust came through the office, causing my very jaw to chatter. And that was what resigned me to it, I think. Visions of the comfortable captain's quarters aboard Adelia crowded my thoughts.

I said to Percival, even in the face of his empty promise, "Very well. Ha. It will be good to set foot on Adelia again, get out onto the sea."

"Hm?" he responded. "Oh, Cheer. Adelia has been reallocated."

"What?" I shot, far more harshly than was wise.

He again shot me a look of scornful forgiveness, still couching all in the folds of a smile. Passing by me to exit the office, he said, "Leaving a ship at harbor the year round, just wasteful. I don't recall who has it. When you speak to Ahns over the funding of this trip, perhaps she would be able to tell you its current whereabouts, if you have an interest in knowing."

"She, my lord," I said quietly, as he was on the doorway.

He turned back, and asked, "What's that?"

"Mountains and ships are she, not it, my lord."

"Yes, well, good sailing," he wished, smiling his same smile, and then he departed from my presence.

I faced the empty doorway for a time, reflecting on what had just been given to me.

Then, I turned towards the hearth, and looked down at the burning wood. The fresher of the logs burned hotly. Under it, smoldering remains of its cousins. I watched, for quite some passage of time, as the hotly burning log became black and cold.

The draft blew through the room, and I drew in a sharp staccato breath through suddenly chattering teeth. With a hideous grimace, I turned towards the door, casting no further glance back towards the hearth, no further glance towards Carson's report, and I made exit of the surveyor's office. In the passages of the building, I marched quickly, making no pause, taking no curious peek into the offices of any others. My station so upheaved, I had found that there was no longer pleasant conversation here to be found for me. Not among anyone. My former equals, I had come to be below. My former underlings, I was now below as well, or equal with, or less distantly above; all cases were to a similar effect. They pitied me too sorely. I passed

through the passages unmolested, up a flight of stairs to the next floor above, and entered the budgetary department. There, the secretary, Anka, looked up from a chart she had been poring over, and frowned at me.

“I was told you aren’t permitted here anymore,” she said.

To my own self, I scoffed at that. It was the usage of her word ‘anymore’ which caused the greatest undue insult. I had not frequented this office even before, while on the Jaishi project. I had been above it, my own secretary handling the most of the intercourse between this department and my office.

Outwardly, I maintained an upright posture, and told Anka, “Percival has sent me to confer with Ahns.”

Anka continued to frown. “What matters will I tell her you come on?” she asked.

I began to speak, and then felt some horrid speck of phlegm seize my throat, and I turned aside and coughed, at first quietly, though that did no good to clear it, and so I coughed more violently some few times until I could once more feel my throat clear to speak. I took a breath, turned my sight to the secretary once again, and said, “Percival sends me to confer with Ahns. My matter is with her.”

Anka stared at me dumbly for a moment, and then stood from her seat, and departed down a narrow passage towards Ahns’s office.

I stood there in the empty reception room in wait for an egregious interval of time. Near to a full hour had passed, I believe, when Anka returned from the passage, carrying in both hands before her a small drum of unfinished maple.

She set it on her desk, sat down at her seat, and from a drawer retrieved a stack of twenty and some papers.

She said to me, “The funding has been allocated, we must go over a few simple points of policy before transfer of it can be made.”

I asked her, “How much is the funding?”

Her answer was only a small utterance of, “We will come to that.”

“Is Ahns in?” I demanded.

She responded in a small manner, “The department is not at liberty to divulge more than is relevant to any matter.”

In that moment, the fact that I stood still for a time and did nothing was due only to the fact that I was pulled equally in opposite directions. One pull, towards the passage Anka had gone down, towards Ahns's office, to demand the respect I knew she had not forgotten, to be well reasoned professionals and discuss, as intelligent minds alike, what the demands of the voyage were, which ship I might procure in Adelia's stead, what amount of crew and provisions would suffice, and any further margin considered in the face of the likelihood of unexpected circumstances and costs on such a lengthy journey. For all to be set without my input was a grave insult. The other pull, the one opposite Ahns, was towards the exit. I did consider, then, whether I was done with this work.

As my passions on the insult cooled, I found that, while my own heat had made the prospect of leaving seem hot, the cold facts of it set in to a sad reality. Here, I had once had much, and now had lesser. Leaving this work, I would have nothing at all. I would find myself a pauper in want of food within the year, if not within weeks.

I stepped forward to Anka's desk. I was made to put my signature on several of the papers she had produced, all vowing that I would use the funding towards the assignment, and other various contractual points all more or less to that effect. In the midst of the signings, the amount that was contained in the drum did come up: three measures of gold, five measures of silver, and some assorted coinage amounting to another forty measures of silver. While not lavish, it was an amount that would suffice me to get by becomingly at any stops along the way. As Anka and I progressed through the pages, I awaited the indication of what my ship was to be, and how much would be the crew manning her. When I had signed the very last page, Anka slid all of the pages to herself and deposited them in a drawer, and then slid the maple drum in my direction.

"Safe traveling," she said, a sad and pitying tone in her voice.

Again holding myself upright, I asked her, exceedingly reasonably even in the face of all of her dispoliteness, "Has Ahns allocated a ship already, or is the timetable of the departure still being worked on?"

Anka shied back in her chair, not a lot, but enough to where I noticed.

I demanded, having just then grown quite tired of these cat and mouse games, "What devilry now?"

"You've just been given the funding with which to secure passage on a ship."

Her words at first had the appearance of being so disconnected with any form of reality that I could only matter-of-factly respond with the word, "No."

She shied back yet farther, and said, "Yes."

I told her, "Then there has been an error. Three measures of gold wouldn't purchase a ship capable of arriving at the next island, much less all that distance east to Heaven's Basin."

And then, dry on lies and misdirections, she came forth with it outright: "The funding is not to secure a ship. It is to secure passage aboard a ship. Passage."

For what happened next, I should hope that she still reflects often on how blessed she was by the fates, for I was so moved to fury by her words that the sharpness of what stood on my tongue could have pierced a suit of iron armor were it not for the circumstance that then followed. Indeed, by wit or by force, it was my intent then to have an audience with Ahns. However. Oh, however. As I drew in the very beginning of a deep breath to give myself air to speak with, phlegm once again strangled me, doubled me over, left me hacking and wheezing for such a time that tears wracked the corners of my cheeks and I was beginning to feel very faint, and even still the cough could not be dispelled. It went on to a point where it was apparent I would be capable of gaining nothing further there without retreating and regathering myself. Feebly, I made staggering steps forward towards Anka's desk, still wracked by coughs. There I seized the maple drum, took it, and departed from the room.

I proceeded down the flights of stairs. I passed by the surveyor's office without a glance, desiring nothing from that place. In possession of the maple drum, I made exit of the building, and stood at the grey brick plaza outside in the drizzling rain.

There, as my clothes became damp, I reflected on my circumstances. I had been dealt a foul hand. An engineer,

though, is a man of solutions, a man of overcoming, a man of triumph. The task I had been saddled with was lowly. A pointless errand over a great distance with insulting funds. But it was possible. No matter how unfruitful, no matter how much of a waste, I would, in a year's time, be able to return to Percival, and say that I had done it, and reclaim some favor in his eyes and delight in his tone.

A cab entered the plaza through the rain, drawn by a black horse. I waved the driver over. He turned the horse, and caused the cab to swing in my direction and come to a stop nearby me. Seeing the netting which hung from the brim of his hat, a prickly discomfort ran through me, as I realized I had left my own netting in the surveyor's office. I would not go to get it though. On principle. Additionally, the need of it would be behind me after this transit regardless. I approached the cab driver, handed him some small coinage from out of the maple drum, and stepped up into the cabin.

"To the port," I told him, and then I added, "I have much to think over on the way."

His tongue stayed by that, we began off towards port in no sound more than that of the knocking of hooves over the road. Flies began to buzz about the cabin before we had cleared the plaza. Though they annoyed, I made no effort to brush them off when they landed on my hands, my neck, or my face, as they would soon be in such numbers that there was no point to fighting them.

In not much time, we were out from the cluster of buildings that surrounded Percival's high offices, and we began our journey through the fields of mud which surrounded. The forests of this island had been harvested down to every root many years earlier. It was a testament to the spirit of dedication how wholly the landscape had been changed. All thick greenery, gay songbirds, and elusive foxes had been given over to an open expanse and a heavy pestilence. At points in the journey, I could look out through the cabin window beside me and see over the mud for miles, the grounds feeling as enormous and empty as the sea itself, a psychotic artifice of land that nature alone in her temperance and fits could never have achieved here. At other points in the journey, when the wind was more still and we were

over a wider body of standing water, such a blanket of flies and mosquitoes hung upon us that I could not see the cab driver through the window ahead of me. During those stretches, I did what I could to cover my head with my waistcoat, though this left only the thinner material of my shirt as armor for my torso, and so the overall effect was that all I achieved was a more even coverage of pestering and bites.

When we arrived in the port town, dusk was beginning to come about. I itched at a bump that had formed on my side, one among dozens, though that one proved the most nettling. The cab driver deposited me by the docks and wished me happy fortune. I trudged forth to the sand. The maple drum in hand, I looked out to the sea. Most ships, unless directly in the process of loading or unloading, stayed at an appreciable distance out into the waters. I squinted out at them for some time, and then sighed. Adelia was not among them, nor was she stayed at the docks, nor grounded up or down the shore at any place I could see.

I turned from the shore, and passed back up through the main thoroughfare of the town. The rain had been on and off that day, and quickly picked up again as I made my way under the gaudy awnings of the port town's storefronts. In the central square, there walked about many women and men in colorful rags, collecting up various props into carts, the most notable items among the props being swords and shields and spears that were all two to three times larger than would be practical, and made of painted wood with no sharp edges. Performers of some sort. Comics, one could hope, though dramatists making use of such exaggerated items had become tiringly common as of late as well. I could not recollect if the day was a holiday noted by any tradition, or if these performers were more likely merely passing through. Two men about the group shouted directions now and then to the others, as I happened to be walking by. I could not mark the language which they shouted in, lending to the likelihood that they were merely passing through here from afar.

I continued past the square, and went up a road which climbed over a steep hill. Through this ascent there were no awnings along the sides of the road, and the rain had indeed

been growing stronger, such that by the time I stepped into a doorway near the top of the hill, my clothing was fully drenched, and my shoes were swamped in water as well.

Nonetheless, I had at least arrived at my lodging for the night. A clubhouse in the port town for those on official business under Percival.

I saw, upon entering, that the place had changed in some ways since my last visit. The walls, once wood paneling, had been plastered over and painted blue. There had previously been quite a number of wood carvings in the place: elaborate masks hanging from the walls, gargoyles perched on counters and mantles. I had not noticed them much, when they had been there, though I certainly noted their absence as something of a disappointment. If it was not for the same keeper as before glancing up from his sweeping to look at me, I would have believed I had entered the wrong place. I recognized him quite readily though, by the swirling patterned tattoo that marked one of his cheeks, and by his spectacles, which caught the glow of the hearth that was in the center of the room. Two men and a panting dog sat nearby the hearth.

The keeper came over, and stood with the broom across his shoulders, arms hanging from either side of it as though he were a scarecrow. "We have some rooms free tonight," he said. "Dinner will be on in an hour." He then seemed about to relay some third matter, but instead grunted and turned away, and lowered the broom back to the floor, returning to his business.

I proceeded across the common room, past the two men and the dog, none of which I gave much thought towards in that moment, as all of them were quite silent. The two men looked into the fire. The dog had rested its chin by the foot of one of the men, and closed its eyes.

At the far side of the common room was a steep stairway, which parted halfway up, the right continuation of the stairs leading up to the second floor, the left continuation leading up to the third. I went first to the right, up to the second floor, and found that all three rooms bore a red card on the floor before their doors, marking them as claimed. Muttering, I went back down the stairs on that side, and climbed the opposing stairs up to the third floor, quite drained of breath by the time I had

reached the top. There, indeed, there were three of the rooms free, and only one claimed. I entered the nearest, first making sure to remove the red card that laid on the bed and place it before the doorway. I stowed the maple drum beneath the bed. I shook my head. Even the walls in the rooms had been plastered over, and the homely decorations removed. In any case, I then undressed from my soaked clothing, and laid it out evenly upon the floor in hopes it might dry some. To wear in the meantime, I retrieved a robe that was available in the closet. I had worn the robes of this clubhouse before, and did not look forward to doing so once again, but I was, in that instance, pressed for alternatives. In all my times staying at that clubhouse, neither I nor any other guest could ever determine what material the robes were made from. They seemed to be of a textile made out of some horrid mistake, such as a barber's sweepings being spilled onto a shipment of wool peeled off of leprous sheep. My intention was to attend that night's dinner though, and so I did put on the robe. Wearing it felt like wearing a blanket of sand and gravel. By this point in the day I had had though, I was verging on too exhausted to care. In the scratchy attire I descended back down the stairs to await the meal, and to sit and warm myself by the clubhouse's hearth in the meantime.

As I approached a free chair nearby the two men, I was perhaps rather more silent in my footsteps than I had intended, walking slowly from my exhaustion of the climbs up the stairs and down. Additionally, the rain by this point pelted the building rather harshly, further disguising the sound of my approach. I fully believe, looking back, that they in genuine did not know I was approaching. But my ears burned at what I heard the two men uttering.

The one with long black hair, smiling, said under his breath, "Seppa cherra, kolvidi den deykordey." We are exceedingly foolish, we will be thrown from here before we have seen morning arrive.

The one with the short red hair, in a tone as likewise warm as it was likewise conspiratorial, responded, "Kolch kordeyna. Cheya chersil av seppa cherra arro, ah." We will not be thrown out. They are the fools who believe that we of exceeding foolishness belong here.

I interjected, “Yiraicheel veda komeritz eer galr. Kor orra, sinich.” There are beds and plates in abundance. Worry not, gentlemen.

The red haired gasped and whirled back towards my direction. Now smiling even bigger than before, he shouted, “Hingri!” Assassin!

He, his friend, and even the dog all looked ready to jump up and flee for the door.

I gave a warm and relaxed laugh, and said, “No, no. I will be candid with you in full, I am only a man, and not so greatly invested in politics these days that I would assassinate any other.” I was surprised by myself at how easily I was slipping back at once into my emissarial ways of speaking. It had been a function of my engineering work, at many times, to converse with others, negotiate, make impression, gain information, come to understandings. Hearing my mother language from two men who were, apparently, not supposed to be in the clubhouse in which they sat, I was indeed curious to know more. I took a seat in the vacant chair that was beside the red haired man, and I leaned towards the hearth fire, holding my hands up before it. The skin of my hands was riddled with bumps and red spots, after the cab ride.

The red haired man remarked, “Rare is the man who speaks the tongue of the Galwur.”

I answered cordially, “I am yet rarer: I am Galwur.”

“No,” said the red haired man with a laugh, “you are not.”

“More by birth than by upbringing,” I said, which was truthful.

He squinted at me for a moment, and eventually conceded, “Yes, that much you may be. You will throw us out for sure now, though: we are Nessayk.”

“Nessayk!” I echoed, my surprise genuine though my outburst about it put on for effect. I then settled in again, and said, “No, that sours nothing of my opinion. You speak in Galwur because it is lesser known here abroad?”

“Exactly.”

“What is your business here in Percival?”

“Sightseeing,” the red haired man answered. “Not for just this island, but for the world across.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you destined from here?” I asked.

“We were more or less finished with this region, yeah?” he said, and turned to the man with long black hair.

That man gave a simple affirmative “yeah,” and slumped back in his chair, and pet the dog.

The red haired man went on, “After this, Death’s Coast, The Green Towers, The Ursa Sea...”

“Alice,” added the other man.

“Alice on the southern horn of Tenia,” the red haired man agreed, and went on, “Heaven’s Basin, Davin well beyond that, and by then we will likely be circling back westward again, though the exact landmarks we hope to hit on the return, we are undecided.”

I did not speak at first, as I was still trying to work out, before giving anything away, how they had pulled off such a trick on me. For them to ‘happen’ to have stepped in to the clubhouse to which I had access. To ‘happen’ to be speaking the first language I had ever learned, and which hardly any others in this region were even aware existed. To ‘happen’ to be making a circular transit which, though not directly there and directly back, did include Heaven’s Basin, where I had come to town that very day to seek passage to. I did not know, then, that it had been accomplished because the trick had not been played by them at all, but by the fates. In that moment, I was the fool enough to believe that because I had not spoken the words “Heaven’s Basin” in the port town that day, this was finally the beginning of my dealt hands making up for lost luck.

“How do you get about to all of these places?” I asked. “Stowaways? Crewmen?”

I chose not to insult them by suggesting they may be men of any importance, only to cause them to have to tell me that they were not.

The two of them looked to each other. I could not discern their cypher. There was no nod, wink of the eye, twitch of the ear, tapping of the nose or rubbing of the stubble from either of them. They seemed to do nothing other than look into each

other's eyes for a few moments, and then the red haired turned to me again.

"We are crewmen, yes," he said. He was lying, in the manner where someone considers himself too important to falsify information without being pressed to, and so he speaks in riddles and details. It is a very careful kind of speech and very easy to notice.

So, somehow, when looking at each other, they had agreed not to tell me the true nature of their travel arrangements. My best guess at the signal they had used is that it was done in a lack of signal: if there had been a nod, a wink, or so on, that would have indicated to the other to be forthright. It was the fact there was not a signal that caused them to default to deception. That is how I believe they did it. That they did it at all is incidental to these events, but there were times, later on from then, I would reflect on it. So that is what I believe they did.

Although I was being lied to, I also did not believe that all was lost. They did not seem bent on harm. As well, for all the lie that was said in "We are crewmen, yes," they had nonetheless been truthful with me until that moment, in telling me their planned travels. They were destined to Heaven's Basin, and securing passage alongside the two of them was a more direct arrangement than I was likely to get from anything else: even were I to independently arrive at the southern horn of Tenia with no difficulty, I had no ship of my own and no funds great enough to command one temporarily, and so I would be left to wait, perhaps for months, before a ship already happened to be going that way and would take me. It would all be easier, I believed at that time, were I to secure passage with these two.

The red haired asked me, "What of you, sinich?"

"Please, call me Cheer."

"Cheer," he echoed back, using the correct pronunciation, saying it in two parts, chee-ur. It was no wonder he should say it correctly, as he then told me his name: "I am Cheek." It was pronounced by the same principle: chee-uk. He was not making up that similar name to ingratiate himself to me in some way either, as that is the name I observed him to be referred to by at all times later.

Cheek turned towards the man with long black hair.

That man turned down to look at his dog, smiled, and told me, "She is Checha."

He then looked to me with some kind of pleased finality, as though his part of the introductions had, in all sincerity, been completed. From that moment, even having not known him very long, I found his manners to be very strange. At first, though, my assumption of the most likely truth on the matter was that he was simply not as well spoken as his friend, hence why Cheek had done the most part of the talking with me until that point.

"And what may I call you by, sinich?" I asked him.

His expression dropped. What manner of slight he imagined me to have given him, I do not know. I only know that he appeared, suddenly and for no reason, displeased with me. "I am Solok," he told me.

"Steeg, Cheek eer Solok," I told the men. Pleased to meet you, Cheek and Solok.

Solok said nothing, and looked at me with open contempt, as though my pleasant greeting had been some grave insult. I wondered then, and to this day I still have no good answer, whether he wielded as full a command as he seemed to over either of the languages which we had in common. It may have been, when hearing me call him a gentleman, sinich, his untrained ear for Galwur had guessed at some other less flattering term, though what that would be, I cannot make a reasonable guess of, as it would be something predicated on incorrect information, and could therefore be anything. All I can say in confidence is that in that moment Solok very quickly detested me, and his opinion of me as time went on did not rise in leaps and bounds. Whatever slight he had conceived of right then was not one that he ever forgot.

Cheek had noticed his friend's cold response to my pleasant remark, and, to his credit, at least attempted to cover for his friend's poor manners. The red haired laughed a little under his breath, leaned back in his seat, and lifted an imaginary glass into the air. "Had I wine I would lift all of our names in a toast," he said.

At other times I may not have been moved to playing along with a gesture as childish as that one. Being quite glad to move

the conversation along from there, though, I raised an imaginary glass as well, and clinked with him.

“As for my business,” I said, and then I itched at one of the insect bites on my shin. As I shifted, the material of the robe then seemed to constrict, and nettled at me from neck to ankle. I sat upright again. I made a show of looking at the arms of the robe. “This material is awful.” I had also begun to sweat, sitting by the heat of the fire, and my sweat now held the prickly material against my skin no matter which way I sat. I adjusted in my seat a few times, and eventually I resigned to discomfort, and I continued, “I am a surveyor. Percival sends me to Heaven’s Basin.”

At those words, Solok muttered something under his breath that I took to be an oath. He stared into the fire and said nothing else in my presence for the rest of the night.

Cheek glanced at his friend. He seemed to want to play ambassador, bridge the gap between, but he evidently could not form a plan to do such. He continued to speak with just me. “What business could you possibly be sent to Heaven’s Basin on?” he asked.

Nothing of my business necessitated being deceitful. Them knowing I was on a fool’s errand would not impede the errand, in any way I could see it. I told the red haired, while also still able to be heard by the black haired if he was listening, “There are rumored to be mystics living on those islands. My lord would like me to find out whether it is true, and report back anything of use.”

The red haired asked, “Do you believe there are mystics?”

I shook my head. “No. Not of the caliber my lord hopes for.”

He then asked, with a mischievous smile teasing the corners of his lips upwards, “Why not lay low for a few months, and come back saying you went and that there was nothing?”

I was speechless. He spoke of insubordination as though it was a thing to find glee in. Of misuse of a lord’s resources as though Percival were a surly tribal chief. The answer to his question, “Why not,” was because such idiotic betrayal could never have occurred to me.

With a laugh, Cheek reached out and put a hand on my shoulder, and said, “Cher pech.” We are joking.

I do not think that he was. I think he truly wanted to know why I wouldn't hide from my responsibilities in some manner akin to what he had suggested.

He went on, "Come with us tomorrow morning to see our ship."

"I would like to," I said.

Shortly thereafter, the keeper came to tell us that dinner was prepared.

We all gathered to a side of the common room which had a long table, and many chairs down the line, the extra chairs not removed in spite of the fact that only the four of us ate that night. The keeper had done correctly, according to custom: Every spot was to remain ready, such that a passing man of need or an unanticipated extra guest would not feel he was inconveniencing his host. The keeper had, in fact, set up in fullness one more place than would be necessary: Solok dished stew into his bowl, fished and strained extra pieces of beef from the broth to drop into his bowl as well, grabbed two cuts of the thickly sliced bread on offer, and then turned and went up the stairs to eat in his room alone. His dog followed after him, its nose towards his food.

I inquired with the keeper if any others from above would be joining us. He said that there were others staying the night, but they were each taking their meals privately. I could guess, then, at some of the men who might be present. Garl, perhaps. In any case, I did not dwell on it. I was ready enough by then to finish the meal and retire to my room, and be prepared to get on with the next day.

The meal bordered on inedible. Something about the stew was off. The potatoes or the carrots might have gone bad. I wondered if they might have been intended for a stew the night before or even earlier, been cooked partially, then left to sit and spoil until added to that night's broth. The beef, what few parts were left, was passable if bland. The bread was stale. In dipping it in the broth, whatever taste was off about the stew transferred onto the bread as well. By the time my bowl was empty, I certainly felt that I could have eaten more if the food were any good. I was unsure enough, though, whether I would even keep down what I had eaten already.

Without dishing myself up seconds, I wished the keeper and Cheek a good night, and retired up the stairs. My thoughts reeling over the day I had had, I went up the wrong branch of the staircase at first, realized it halfway up the wrong path, turned, climbed back down, and climbed up the correct side, and retired into my room. There inside, I stripped off my robe and climbed into the bed. Though I was thoroughly exhausted, I was also riddled with insect bites and had been sweating in the common room's heat, and I remained awake for quite some time, wishing for sleep, but kept up by itching spots on my hands, torso, brow, ankles, right shin, and left thigh.

Hours into the night, at a moment when sleep had not been upon me for more than a few minutes, I distantly heard the howling of dogs on the streets outside. I covered my head with my arms, blocking out the sound. It worked, and I thought, for a moment, that I would be falling back to sleep hardly having noticed the interruption. Then, though, the howling seemed as though the dogs were in the room with me. I shot upright in my bed, frantically trying to come up with what the nearest weapon to me was to strike a dog away with.

Looking around my dim room though, there was nothing.

I listened again.

The howling was coming from the next room down the hall, howling back at the dogs outside. I shouted vile things at the wall, telling the cur to stop their ruckus or I would go in and stop them myself. For I had believed, at that moment, not thinking of things fully in my half awakened state, that in the room next to mine, there were only two dogs who were dedicated to ruining my sleep. I do realize now that it was one dog, and Solok.

The howling did cease, and I was, after some further itching to my shin, able to fall asleep again.

In the morning, I picked up my clothing from off the floor. It had still not dried fully. I wrestled my way into the damp things though, and put on my boots, which squelched and squealed with every step as I went down the stairs.

There in the common room, at the breakfast table, was a platter of eggs and pitchers of water. I had always been made nauseous by the smell of eggs. They reminded me of mildew, or

milk gone bad. I do not see how chicken droppings ever came to be such a staple food among civilized peoples who could afford anything better.

Seated towards the far end of the breakfast table were Cheek and Solok. Cheek waved me over. Solok ignored me, and offered down a morsel of his eggs to his dog. It ate straight off of his fork. If I were already upon them, seated at their side, I think I would not have been able to help myself from snatching away the fork, kicking the dog, and telling this rudely disrespectful band of intruders to be gone. As I made my walk towards them across the common room though, I had time to calm, and approach things in a more peaceable fashion.

Standing beside the table, I said to the black haired, "That was very disrespectful."

He turned and looked at me. His eyes were not friendly, nor were they impassioned. He was unimpressed by me. I continued to stand upright all the same, looking down at him severely.

As I did, something else caught my eye. On the floor behind him, against the wall, there stood a bowl. I glanced from the bowl to Solok, and then to the dog, and then turned and looked at the platter of eggs, and then looked to the keeper who sat at the other far end of the table, and looked back at me with an expression as bored as Solok's.

I put it all together, of course. The dog had not just eaten a morsel then off of the fork, but had in fact already had even more from out of the bowl, and what's worse, it had happened with the blessing, or at least the permission, of the keeper. As such, I could not, in the manner of civility, stand and call to task the rudeness I had seen. I was not the host, and I was no longer a man of such a high station as to supersede the host either. Without scolding Solok further, but also without stepping back from what I had said already, I took a seat. I consoled myself by my belief that eggs were filth. The dog, Solok, the keeper, all of them ate filth. I ate nothing.

The red haired tapped his fingernails against a slate that was laid out on the table, calling my attention to it. On the slate was chalk writing. Looking it over, it appeared to be a manifest, detailing the crew and provisions of the ship they were traveling by. Fourteen bodies were the crew, with two additional bodies

who were both called navigators, neither captain. I inquired if these 'navigators' were Cheek and Solok. They were not: Cheek and Solok counted themselves among the crew. The navigators were called Damick and Nir.

We discussed accommodations. Tucked into the stern of the ship were six quarters, three at port and three at starboard: I considered how small every one of the quarters would be, given that the entirety of the ship could not be so large with a crew of less than twenty. There was a quarters to the navigator Damick, one to the navigator Nir, one shared by Cheek and Solok, and the other three were to six further crew members who I did not yet have any notion of, with the remainder of the crew sleeping on hammocks among the provisions. We came to an agreement that for the three measures of gold in my drum, Cheek would give up his bed to me, and he would go sleep among the provisions as well. I would not be made to labor unless all hands were called to deck. I would have access to the provisions evenly with any other man aboard the ship. It all seemed agreeable to me. As agreeable as I could hope for, at least. We brought the keeper over as a witness to the agreement, and I had him attest, in the presence of the red haired and the black haired, that if any mischief befell a surveyor of Percival, that mischief maker would be marked a severe criminal in all lands and waters which Percival touched.

With all settled, we all returned to our rooms, gathered our things, and proceeded out of the door, down the hill, and towards the sea. In the shops near the port I purchased some commodities for the travels, based on my knowledge of what may bring comforts during the long days at sea. Spare clothing was quite an important thing I had been neglected, much of my attire gone with wherever Adelia had gone to, and the trunks in her captain's quarters. Though as to materials with which to pass the time at sea, my chief purchase was a journal and writing implements. Cheek and Solok made no purchases of their own, and stood about outside any shop I went into, bickering between themselves, Cheek cursing the morning's hot sun, Solok cooing and preening over his panting dog. When I had gathered enough to suffice me, we continued the last of the walk to the sea. There at the port, the ship awaited us.

The ship was called Sorry Ester. I will not speak poorly of her. She was not a vessel of grandeur, but in her meek way she was built like an iron chariot to weather the harshness of the sea. She did not sink. She continued to sail at all times she was tasked to.

When we arrived, a gangplank was across the gap between dock and deck. At the top, two women were conversing. In short time I learned them to be Damick and Nir. Damick wore a slim sword at her hip. Nir wore a greatsword at her back, so large that I was surprised a woman could have the strength to walk about with it, let alone lift it in battle, though I would later see her do just that. Upon our arrival, the two navigators looked down at us, and then to one another. Damick, the woman with the slim sword, smirked, and did what I could only describe as letting go of herself: she fell off of the side of the ship, gave herself over to the whims of weight and the natural laws. I believed she was about to break her neck, split her head open on the dock's planks. Upon coming to the dock though, she rolled and in one motion stood to bring her face an inch from mine. She was not the slightest out of breath. I did not realize, until afterwards, until now, even, how much that struck me. By her fall, she had exerted almost nothing, felt no peril. With a nonchalant smile she stared at me eye to eye as though she had turned in place to face me.

"This is him," she said, speaking of me as a subject, speaking to Cheek and Solok as her audience.

Cheek responded, "We believed so."

"Good," she said. And then she turned, and walked back up the gangplank, and she and Nir walked off farther aboard the vessel.

Cheek turned to me, and said, under his breath, "Prophecy followers, both of them." Then he stepped back a pace, and at a more ordinary volume, said, "Shall we go to see your accommodations?"

"Please," I said.

Solok's dog went up first, followed by Cheek, and then myself, and then Solok behind. At the deck, Solok went off to speak with some others. Cheek led me astern, towards the open portal into the quarters. The portal itself was a round door, two feet in

diameter if that much, with stiff hinges that left the door standing open as we were there at port. The portal led into a narrow passage which had three tall and narrow doors to the left and three tall and narrow doors to the right. Cheek led the way to the second door on the right, and held it open for me, standing back in the small space further down the passage. I looked inside. The room was about six feet across and six feet deep. The majority of the floor was occupied by two beds, side by side, a narrow aisle between the two. All else was tucked away in secured cabinets upon the walls.

"It will do," I said, fool that I was.

I stepped inside. From my drum, I removed the three measures of gold, and handed them to Cheek. The red haired took them, mentioned some pleasantries, removed his few items from the cabinets on the left side of the quarters, and then he departed out of the portal again, leaving me to the room he had condemned me to.

I tucked away my things in the cabinets he had just cleared. I then went and paced about the deck of Sorry Ester, standing variously near stern and bow, making small introductions to crew members as I encountered them. Provisions were carried aboard in no great hurry, and ropes and sails were made ready.

At some moment Solok's dog came up to deck from the hold and ran squarely in my direction. Had I not happened to have been facing it to be ready to fend it off, I may have been bitten and clawed to death then and there. But, facing the approaching dog, I shouted, "Back! Scram! Back!" This gave the dog some brief cause for hesitation in its bloodlust, enough for me to turn and flee up towards the helm. With a bark it pursued after me, struggling enough with the steep portside stairs up to the helm that I had a moment to look about and figure where to flee to next: the mast, of course. Just as the dog was coming to the top of the portside stairs, I fled down the starboard stairs, sprinted for the mast, and began climbing up the ladder pegs, making it nearly to the top before I dared to look down.

When I did look down, I saw that the crewmen who were on deck had all paused in their work and were invariably staring up at me. Directly below me, at the foot of the mast, was that

aggressing dog, and standing beside it was Solok. The dog and Solok both stared up at me.

Solok called up to me, "Is the crow's nest to your satisfaction, sinich?"

One crewman, Yansed was his name, laughed loudly at that.

I shouted down to Solok, "Call off your villainous hound!"

The black haired thought about it for quite some while, and then I heard his shout back up to me: "Very well."

He turned down to the dog and said some command to it. Oh, how I wish I knew its command that turned it away from me, but alas, he was too far for me to hear it, and he never repeated it at any later time either, such that I could hear. With the command said though, he walked away to return to whatever his business was in the hold, and the dog followed him back down below as well. I stayed upon the mast until some time later when a crewman, Teetri was his name, called up and asked if I needed any assistance down. Bashfully I made the descent down myself, and retreated into my quarters.

Sitting on my own bed, my feet over the edge of it and resting down in the narrow aisle between my bed and Solok's, I felt myself grimacing at the accumulation of dog hair upon his bedding. I wondered how a man could sleep, pricked so by the hairs of an animal, lying among a dog's stench.

Some time passed as I sat there alone. I felt, in that moment, one longing. I longed to be at sea, and feel the ship rocking under me. That was a simple comfort I had not had in too long.

I felt a small hunger, which caused my stomach to turn as I sat there. I had not eaten much the day before, and I had eaten nothing at all on that day, and the time was coming to late afternoon. I arose to inquire out how meals were organized aboard the ship. As I was stepping out of the narrow door of my new quarters, a crewman, Vish was his name, stuck his head into the open portal out to the deck. He seemed about to shout some announcement into that section of the ship, but paused when realizing he was about to shout it at me squarely. Rather than shout, he simply offered a smile, and said, "Setting off now, sir. You are coming with us?"

I nodded. "Indeed. Do not let me stay the departure."

Again smiling, he said, "Very good." He then turned away, and joined the buzz of activity that had begun all aboard the deck, men shouting and moving.

I remained in my quarters, and laid down for a spell. I did indeed fall asleep soundly to the sounds of a ship's men at work, and the rocking of waves as we got out to sea.

I was startled awake by a harsh rapping of knuckles on wood. Sitting upright on my bed, I attempted to gather my bearings.

Beyond the closed door to my quarters, I heard a woman, who I now know to have been Nir, speaking at a raised volume as she knocked on the door to another of the quarters tucked into the stern, which I now know to have been Damick's door. The two of them seemed at all times to speak in vaguery. What Nir said exactly then, I cannot recall, though it would have been to the effect of, "We are needed! Fortune calls! Fortune will not wait, navigator! Come, let us fulfill today's step in the great play!" Whatever set of grand compulsions Nir had used that day, it did cause Damick to rise, and the two of them departed out to the deck. My ears following, so to speak, in their direction, I marked then that the sounds out on deck had changed. No longer was there the shouting and bustle, but instead, conversation, and occasional laughter.

I exited my quarters, and found, on the deck, that a dinner was being had. Men stood about in little groups, conversing as they sipped intermittently from the bowls that they held. Nearby to the mast was a cauldron, and some empty bowls remaining beside. I ladled myself one bowlful, rueful to find that it was fish. Not a full day out, and fish already. I should have realized, a vessel as tight on space as Sorry Ester, that fish was to be a staple. Bringing much of other substance would not be feasible, if she was not planning to stop to restock with frequency. I stood a few paces back from the starboard railing, and faced out to sea as I ate my dinner of fish soup.

When I was done, I placed the bowl among a stack of dirtied ones that were by the cauldron, and returned to my quarters again. I began penning the first entry of my journal, chronicling the day thus far, while there was yet daylight through the room's small window to write by.

As I was nearing the end of the day's log, Solok entered the quarters, and his unruly dog, which was so bold as to push even its master aside to run into the quarters first, leaping up onto Solok's bed and then over to mine. It nosed at me very rudely, and then laid down on Solok's bed and looked up to its master. Solok came in, and laid down on his bed as well, and settled in on his back with the dog pressed against his side.

I told him, "Your dog is to leave this quarters at once."

By the dim light of day that yet came in through the room's window, I saw Solok lift his head and look in my direction. He then rubbed the side of his head against his dog as though he laid in bed with a woman. And he said to me, and I quote him exactly, "I would throw you overboard before I would make her feel uncared for."

The words he said cannot have hung in his own head for too long, as within half a minute after him saying it, the sound of his deep snoring came from his side of the quarters.

Let me be clear about one thing: I hate dogs. I have hated dogs in all my youth and all my adulthood. I have hated dogs at all times before this journey began. As I sit here now and reflect, I continue to hate dogs in all of the same ways that I always have hated them. They are a miserable and lowly species without redemption. I hate the high pitch of a dog's whining and barking. I hate a dog's two-facedness, its instinct to beg and plead and then claw and bite if it isn't granted what it had feigned a humble asking for. I hate a dog's lesser intellect, capable of only the world's evil things such as cruelty and predation, incapable of the world's good things such as reasoning and dignity. I hate the way a dog will eat its own sick. I hate dogs grilled or boiled. And I hate the armor that some idiotic and gullible men give to dogs, when we have otherwise agreed that all the world's things are a man's to subdue, because such men have been so completely fooled by a dog's basic deceits towards feigning kindness and loyalty. I hate that a dog is all the pest a mosquito is, yet because someone has taken the mosquito to be their own child, I may not destroy it. To say it one further time, to make the point apparent and without caveats or exceptions: I hate dogs.

That first night, I wondered whether I would get a night's sleep during the entire duration of the voyage. I do not fault a man his odor. I have spent too much time aboard a ship to. It is true, that when Solok entered the quarters, the once neutral air was overwhelmed by a hanging steam of sweat. But a man's unpleasantries, while unpleasant, are nothing that he can be held to shame over. To add the dog, though, was shameful of him. Its breath filled every cubic inch of the air in that room that the smell of sweat had not claimed already, such that I was surprised for every minute that I did not lose consciousness due to suffocation in the resulting miasma.

How can I summarize the way in which that dog made all my days and nights of that voyage into agony? It cannot be summarized. I noted every transgression in my journal throughout the voyage, and to recite the journal in full would take too long, such that the point of reciting it would be lost in the process of the recitation. I can only select out for you a great many examples of how that dog was nearly my ruination, and then at the end tell you that for all those examples I have recited, I could recite twenty more.

Day of first dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest, I have decided to call it. Dog is not poor enough a word. Dog does indeed encompass everything wrong with the wretch itself, but pest is needed to also encompass Solok's insistence that it not be barred from our already confined quarters. He cannot be argued with. I do not know if he is dull, or even finds some enjoyment in forcing the pest upon me. It is true that in the exchange we had agreed upon, I had purchased stay in Cheek's side of the quarters, and little had been said of Solok's. Solok refuses to revisit that aspect of the deal and clarify it so as to put reasonable restrictions on his behavior. He will not leave the pest outside. He has suggested that I find some other place aboard Sorry Ester to sleep, if I am so bothered. He said, and I had not even offered, but he said that he would not remove the pest even for all the rest of the contents of my maple drum. Again, I do not know if he is an idiot, or if his pleasure at my suffering simply does exceed that which he could purchase with such a quantity of silver and coins. In either case, he continues to preen over and protect the pest as a man ought protect his

children. I could not sleep much last night for the smell of the pest alone, even putting aside my fear that it would become aggressive again at the slightest movement from myself, and seize upon me with its jaws as I flailed back against it helplessly in the dark. But he is not bothered by it in any of these ways. He shares none of my observations or concerns. Far from it. I have seen something which I regret I can only describe as kissing between them. I revile at even the suggestion that that is what it was, but I do not know what else it would be: he had picked the pest up as they were crossing the deck, so as to carefully step over some ropework that was being done, and not have the ropes be tangled and scattered by the animal which he continues to keep aboard the ship. I note, there, by the way, that he does have some concept of not allowing the pest to bother other men aboard the ship, hence a growing belief on my part that his cruelty with the pest is in some way specific towards me, for what transgression, I do not know. But returning to the point, as he was carrying it across the deck in his arms, it faced him and jabbed its unruly tongue at his mouth. Rather than scold or beat the cur, he opened his mouth to its intrusion, and it prodded its tongue further and licked upon his teeth, as he made no protest, and seemed, even, to angle his head to help the pest reach into his mouth farther. Whatever the practical reason for it was, I do not know. But it seemed to me, and of course I cannot confirm it, but it did seem to me that whatever the reason was he allowed the pest to lick the inside of his mouth, he found some pleasure as well in the fact that the act was occurring. Again, I do not say that he found pleasure in it for a surety. That would be a very grave accusation to make without full knowledge, which I have not. He was at some distance across the deck from where I was observing. Perhaps that which seemed to be the face a man might make when kissing a woman was in fact a grimace. The expressions are, oddly, close enough to one another. Under other circumstances, I would likely assume that it was the grimace. The way he regards that pest though. He is like a native in possession of a clay idol of a devil. He holds evil, worthless evil, and cannot be convinced by any reasoning that it is not holy. I do not think I will sleep much tonight either.

Day of second dawn at sea after leaving Percival: I did not sleep much last night. This is again due to the pest. It may have begun barking in its sleep.

Day of eighth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest has definitively begun barking in its sleep. I believed I had noted it before, but was often half or a quarter asleep myself, and so was led to some uncertainty, previously. But last night, while fully awake, I heard the pest bark as though sent to chase after a burglar. I thought it might have finally made up its mind to assault me regardless of its master's command, but as it remained in place on its side, I realized that it was the nocturnal barking I had believed I had heard before, only it was occurring at the pest's full voice, as though it were not asleep at all.

Day of thirteenth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The barking at night has continued. The men in the other cabins are nearly as deaf to it as Solok, and seem too dull to understand that such a nightly bother demands outrage. Alas. The others still pet the pest when it nears them. They attempt to get along with the pest out of fear, of course: keep the pest on their good side. I do not believe in such grovelish solutions. I will continue to make the pest know it may not approach me. On the day it does tear a gouge in a man of this ship, sinew from bone, we will see whether it will be a man who has attempted to appeal to a higher cause than the pest has any concept of, such as friendship, or whether it will be the man who has kept everything quite simple and to the beast's level, making it know, always, it may not approach me.

Day of fourteenth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest has left a dead fish on my bed. I have placed it on Solok's bed.

Day of fifteenth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest chewed on the dead fish for much of last night and then fell asleep among the viscera. The smell, at least, covered the smell of dog at times.

Day of twentieth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: Someone or something has left a chewed branch upon my bed. The branch is of pine, and sap from it has made a layer of wet gum across my bedsheets. Upon the wet and adhesive surface that had formerly been quite suitable for sleeping on were pieces of the bark and splinters from the meat of the branch. Due to the

adhesion, of course, all of these small pieces will be quite a task to remove. I have thrown what remained of the bulk of the branch overboard.

Day of twenty second dawn at sea after leaving Percival: From all of the sleep that has been stolen from me all these nights, I have been drowsy on and off throughout the daytimes, and suffering headaches as well, worse and more consistently than has ever been typical for me. The pest approached me on the deck today with a branch in its mouth, and dropped it before me. I continued on my way, not stopping to pick the branch up. I later found it on my bed, not chewed to shreds as the last one had been, though this one did have notable marks of gnawing on it. I went and dropped it overboard, and came back to my quarters, and will stop writing shortly and attempt to get some sleep now, before night comes and Solok and the pest come in again.

For all those examples I have recited, I could recite twenty more. You understand the point.

I have heard a saying now and again, often spoken by womanly men. The saying goes something like this: "What matters is not the destination, but the journey." If that is true, then the point of all this has been to tell you of the unceasing misery I faced these last months, and that has now been accomplished. If the inverse of the saying is true, then the point of all this will be to tell you of a much briefer disappointment. I will get to that now.

The day we arrived at Heaven's Basin was heavily overcast, and raining on and off. As such, the island renowned for so brilliantly reflecting the sunlight, for being a beacon upon a flat and vast sea, could hardly be seen. We could have sailed right past it, if the rain had been much heavier, or if Damick had not been as attentive as she was in the crow's nest. We stayed the ship some distance from the islands, as it was clear there was no good place to put in among them: all the surface of the island was rocks. The most it could boast for vegetation was some manner of slime at certain positions upon the shores, and a few lines of seaweed that had washed up here and there. There were three islands. One a bit larger and overall in the shape of a hill, certainly not a mile across any way you measured. One was

smaller, perhaps thirty feet across, and not entirely flat, but closer to flat than its larger neighbor. The third island was more of a tall pillar, about a mile out from the other two islands, with a flat top that I doubted was ten feet across, if it was even five.

On the shore of the large island, standing all side by side to face us, were four men and nine women in grey tunics. I would later come to learn the tunics were all made from the skins of sharks.

On Sorry Ester, a rope was cast over the starboard railing. Damick, Cheek, Solok, and myself all climbed down it, into the water, which was chilling and choppy. Solok's dog jumped after us, and at points in the swim towards land I wondered if that dog might drown its owner, swimming so closely against him along the way, paws striking down over and over against the water's surface.

When we arrived at the island, the natives all crowded around the damned dog. I do not know what they said, as it was all in a language I was unfamiliar with, but the tone of it was praising, and the tone is all that the dog would have been able to understand, in any case. They ran their hands over the dog's back, and many then afterwards had to strike their hands against each other some number of times in order to remove the wet hair that had come off from the pest.

Of the thirteen natives on the island, only one had a language in common with the rest of us. He had a smile as though he was drunk. His name was Mirlo. As the other natives of the island wandered away in one direction, we and Mirlo wandered off in the other, and we talked as we went. He asked us if our journey had been good thus far, and Damick, who was at the fore of the conversation on our side, said that it indeed had been good. I did not weigh in to contradict her.

Damick did eventually say to him, "We have come because we have heard that the people of Heaven's Basin command magic."

The man gave a hearty laugh, as though Damick had just recited a joke that he had never heard before. "I assure you," he said, "we do no such thing. But it is understood what you speak about."

He then stopped walking, and gathered us all together in a circle. He outstretched both hands, and held his empty palms in

the center for us all to see. For some seconds, nothing occurred. I had been subjected to supposed mystics before, and I suspected that in short order, this man would be tediously attempting to convince us that we should all be able to feel some unseen force. That is not what occurred though. I had not even been blinking when a stone appeared in the man's hands. It was a stone the size of a man's head, and water poured off of it as it first appeared, splattering down onto the ground. Mirlo laughed proudly at the summoned rock, and then offered it to each of us to touch and know that it was real. It was indeed real, and of quite a dire weight. When we had all had a chance to observe the rock, Mirlo turned away from us, and threw the rock into the ocean, where it produced a tall and mighty splash.

I do not know why he had said that he did not command magic. It was very clear that he did. The effect of his magic was not causation of faint feelings, but indeed everything that Percival had heard rumor about, and sent me to find out. Telekinesis. Teleportation. Walking on water. Mirlo and the other natives could do all of these things with ease. I was astounded at every demonstration of it. There was no mechanism for it to be trickery. There were not hidden lines strung up from trees: the islands had no trees. There were not tricks of forced perspective: Mirlo and the other natives performed their talents openly, inviting others to check their work, as he had invited us to hold the rock.

I asked him, after he had thrown the rock back into the water, and caused that tall splash, "How is it done?"

His response was the brief disappointment, the ending of my journey: "Most men see, but he who is a master painter sees truly. Most women walk, but she who is a master dancer moves truly. Most creatures exist." He then gave some sort of sweeping gesture towards me with both hands, as though he had explained everything.

In the course of our days on that island, I could elicit nothing from them of the actual mechanism by which their mysticism worked. Damick and Solok spoke the most with Mirlo. I often listened in when the circumstances were opportune to, though Mirlo was often in conversations with Solok while playing with the dog, and I would not subject myself to its presence when

there was room to avoid it. Mirlo had summoned up a branch of some manner of aquatic vegetation, and he and Solok spoke for hour on end while playing fetch with the dog, throwing the stick into the water for it to dumbly bring back again and again.

Mirlo spoke at length of the sea, its currents, its creatures. For food and other materials, he and the other natives summoned up sharks from the water's depths, and smote them with sharp stones to kill them quickly when they were brought up. Mirlo made some claim that the sharks which were selected were ones which were even more aggressive and harmful than usual to the other creatures, and that a great amount of time was invested in observing the seas with their mystic abilities, and selecting those sharks out. That is not all of the exact language he used: his own wording was always quite passive, and I do not think he ever made claim to possess magic or mysticism in any way. Yet day after day, he continued to demonstrate the talent.

On the fifth day, I was sitting at some distance away from Mirlo and Solok, observing them throwing the stick into the water for the dog. And then, I saw it. Solok, as he was raising the stick to throw it again, hesitated. And then he disappeared. The dog barked, agitated over the occurrence. Mirlo raised his hands high over his head and clapped and shouted praises: I spotted, following his direction, that Solok had teleported to the small island, that was as a tall pillar out at sea. Solok raised his arms to the air in an expression of victory, and then teleported back to the main island again, and threw the stick for the dog.

Even from Solok, I could learn nothing. He spoke of the moment he figured it out as though it was the dog that had taught him. He said things to the effect of it being like allowing a dog to chase him, rather than chasing the dog. He kept coming back to that way of describing it. It was apparent to me, from his utter failure to describe the talent in a way that crystallized it, that the talent was not something that could be taught or learned by intelligent thought. If it were, Solok and Mirlo would not be the men to learn it. Perhaps it is some innate ability passed down by bloodline, or even something akin to a disease, spreading from man to man with some more prone to receiving it. I do not know. The only ones among us who were able to

learn it were Solok and Damick. Both of them, and, thankfully, the dog, left the island cluster by teleportation, alleging to be going ahead to the continent we were destined for next, though, I suppose that will not be known for a surety until we arrive to see. I could offer no payment to any man or woman on the island to come back to Percival and perform their talents for his use. All of their desires were to the ocean. Currency did not sway them. I have known many natives so dull, and understood that pursuing the issue farther was a moot point until such a time as their own resources could be destroyed, making the supplantation of Percival's resources a new necessity to them. But I would not be able to do that on this present journey. It would take a fleet to suppress the ocean, and a mighty army to do it in the face of men who could effortlessly summon great rocks and sharks up into the air.

So now, there is the journey back. I will be able to confirm to Percival the rumors of powerful mystics, who can do everything that he asked me to find out. I will tell him these talents can move great items over long distances. I will tell him these talents can be spread to others. I will tell him I have gained him nothing.

TIBERIUS

Meg Pittman leaned back in her swivel chair, holding her steaming cup of coffee in both hands under her nose. It was hazelnut, and the smell was always cozy to her. It reminded her of log cabins, antique furniture, overcast drizzling days. She blew across the surface of the coffee, ostensibly to cool it, but in actuality, in her secretest heart of hearts, she was amusing herself creating the little waves across the coffee's surface and imagining that this was also causing the ocean waves she looked down on. She had spun her chair around to face her office's window, which overlooked the Indian Ocean from a fifteen floor vantage.

Chance, who stood beside Meg, also looking out at the ocean, took a sip of her smoothie. Meg could smell the mixed berries, but could also smell in equal measure or more all of the additives. She didn't comment on it.

Instead, she, Meg, asked, "Have you ever gone surfing?"

"No," Chance said with a warm smile, a self-deprecating 'Heaven forbid' tone of voice. "I loved water parks as a girl. Sometimes I'd try to stand on those floating boards, what do you call them... But surfing, no, I never tried. Have you?"

"I tried," Meg said. "The first week I was out here I started lessons. I had never learned in Florida, and in Fort Worth, I mean, you couldn't. So I figured, new leaf, let's give it a try right away."

"And?"

"Fuuuck thaaat."

Chance let out a sharp laugh, and covered her mouth.

Meg smiled to herself, and had a tiny, tiny sip of her coffee.

"How do you think Pearson's presentation will go?" Meg asked.

Chance didn't answer right away. She took a moment to settle from her laughing outburst, and took a long, thoughtful sip from her mixed berry smoothie. Then she glanced over her shoulder for a moment, and then said in a hushed tone, "The board already made up their mind what they're doing."

"Yes," Meg said. She nodded. "I still want her to sell it though. Make it glaringly apparent it was already decided."

"Cheers."

The two of them gently clinked plastic cup and coffee mug.

Chance looked down at her wrist watch. She sputtered out a sigh. "Scrum meeting in three, I should give myself time to look at my notes."

"Scrum it up. Eugh that's such an awful name."

"You're telling me," Chance said, and then toasted Meg briefly with her cup, and took a drink as she turned to leave.

She closed the door on her way out.

Meg settled in her chair again, smelling the hazelnut, watching the waves out on the ocean. When the coffee was cool enough to take more than just a tiny sip, she downed the cup in one go, feeling the heat all down her throat and settling behind her ribcage.

As she was spinning the chair back around to actually get back to work, she was saved by the phone on her desk ringing.

"Desk of Meg Pittman."

"Hey Meg, Stefan here."

"G'day g'day."

"Getting better!" Stefan remarked. "Pitch perfect, in fact, but it still sounds a little canned. You can practice the phrases in the mirror all day long, but you really have to feel the Aussie spirit brimming up from the depths of your heart to fully capture it."

Meg, not having to fake an endeared amusement at least, said, in her normal American accent, "I'll take that under advisement. What's going on?"

“Nothing dire, I think. You know that, oh what is it, fulfillment, logistics, something like that, position we’ve been looking to create? I don’t have the exact title of it in front of me.”

Meg twirled the line around her finger. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, well. Job open, need someone good with numbers, statistics, not going to be the lead on anything, doesn’t have to be Archimedes, but they should have a head on their shoulders. One... gentleman... who applied, put you down as a reference.”

“Oh. What’s the name?”

“That would be one James T. Kirk.”

Meg’s eyes shot wide open. She slapped her palm down on her desk. “Get out!”

Stefan gave a laugh, and said, “Yeah! Yeah yeah yeah. You know him?”

“Yeah, I know Tiberius.”

“This is real, then? I’m not hiring the captain of the Voyager?”

“Enterprise.”

“What’s that?”

“Kirk was captain of the USS Enterprise. Voyager was a different series.”

“Ah right.”

“I only know from knowing him, I never watched any of them,” Meg clarified. She then cleared her throat, sat up straight in her chair, and continued, “Yes, I do know a James Tiberius Kirk. His parents are big sci-fi dorks. But he is real, that is his real legal name.”

“How do you know him?” Stefan asked.

“We attended Athens together. High school.”

“Yeah, that’s the one he has down! Huh. His application seemed fit for the role. Experience as a CPA in California, extensive volunteer work for some kind of dog charity, helped with inventory management besides the hands-on work. I’m not really calling to grill you on him. I mainly just wanted to make sure the whole thing wasn’t fake.”

“Huh,” Meg said. She spun back to face out the window again, and again leaned back in her chair. “I didn’t know he went on to do accounting.”

“Got his certification and started work in 2017.”

“Right, that was after I knew him, yeah. Huh. Good to hear. Good for him.”

“Application form might say something about... yes, asks for all references to be from someone who’s known you for more than ten years, suppose no one at his current employment fits the bill.”

“Oh, that’d do it,” Meg agreed.

“Easy guy to get along with?” Stefan asked.

“Yeah, he was a great friend.”

“Any reason I shouldn’t hire him?” Stefan asked.

“Umm...”

2015

“Fuuuck me, there is already no way you’re going to be good to drive tomorrow, there is no fucking way you’re busting out three more bottles of vodka right now,” Tiberius said. His chin was augmented with red streaks from wine he had missed the mark on drinking. His dress that night, a white lacey thing, did no favors at all in obscuring the spills either.

“Not just any three bottles of vodka,” Meg said. One by one, she placed them down onto the little table between the couch and the TV: “Chocolate. Marshmallows. Graham crackers.”

“Nooo,” Tiberius bemoaned. “Goddammit, I can’t say no to that.”

“You in?” Meg asked Ron. Ron’s boyfriend, Terry, was asleep on Ron’s shoulder.

Ron said quietly, “One shot of the graham crackers. Curious about that one.”

Meg collected up used shot glasses from everyone, minding the same glasses would be going back to the same people. Between the bottles, she poured seven shots.

All three graham cracker shots were grabbed first. “Cheers,” she said, and they all drank.

“Oh that’s good, actually,” Ron said.

Meg agreed, but she and Tiberius were too busy grabbing their next shots to comment. Back to back, she and Tiberius did the marshmallow and the chocolate shots too.

Upon finishing his chocolate shot, Tiberius laid limply back in the couch, letting the shot glass fall out of his hand onto the carpet. "Fuck me that's good," he said.

"Three more?"

"Go. Fuck yourself," Tiberius said drowsily. "Fight me with your main first."

"Toad!" Meg said, a nickname Tiberius had. "You can't hold a shot glass right now, you're going to puke if you try to play another round."

Tiberius, not attempting in the slightest to get up or look around, felt around blindly with his hands, saying, "Where's my controller."

Meg grabbed it off the floor and handed it to him.

Tiberius held it with all the confidence in the world, head lolled back, facing the ceiling, mouth hanging open.

"Toad. Are you going to look at the screen when we play?"

"When it starts."

Meg brought them to the character select screen of the fighting game that was in.

Still facing the ceiling, Toad selected his main on muscle memory.

Meg groaned. "This is going to be so embarrassing."

"Yes," Toad said.

Meg selected her main, and confirmed the start of the fight.

As the timer was counting down, Tiberius was still facing the ceiling.

As soon as it began, the sounds of both of them manipulating their controllers filled the air, clicking and mashing and sliding. Toad slammed Meg's guy into the ground repeatedly until it was over.

Mouth agape, Meg turned to Toad, who was still laying back on the couch, facing the ceiling. "Tiberius!"

"You were right, I really can't deal with the movement on the screen right now, I couldn't look."

"Toad," Meg said.

"Meg."

"Toad," Meg repeated, and slumped over onto him, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Meg. What?"

“Fuck. You,” she said, and then weakly headbutted his chest. Basically just got the dampness of the wine on his dress onto her forehead. “Fighting games are about highly, highly honed reflexes.”

“Yeah.”

“You are so drunk I’m shocked you’re not puking.”

“Yeah. Same. I might be able to deal with another shot of that marshmallow though.”

“You weren’t even looking at the screen.”

“I was listening.”

“Oh my fucking god.”

Over on the other side of the couch, Ron was getting up, keeping Terry’s arm around his shoulders. “Gonna get us home,” Ron said.

“Walk safe,” Meg said. Then to Toad, she said, “We should both get to bed.”

“Yeah,” Toad agreed.

They both continued to lay there, Toad laid back on the couch, Meg sprawled over Toad.

Toad began snoring.

Meg rolled her eyes, and figured she would get up in a sec and get to bed in her room. Instead, Tiberius’s rising and falling stomach was comfy enough that she settled in and gave up on not falling asleep before she had realized it.

In the morning, she got up off of Tiberius, who was still snoring. She sat on the couch looking around the living room. Empty hard cider bottles stood on the little table, and several were piled unceremoniously to either side of the couch. Three bottles of flavored vodka stood centerpiece on the little table. The TV was still on, playing the gameplay demo of the fighting game.

Meg found the remote and turned the TV off, then stood and walked to the kitchen for a glass of water. She did have the tiniest headache, but she was usually fine at bouncing back the morning after a night of drinking, and that held true for that morning too. By the time she took a shower and got into a new change of clothes, she was ready go get on the road like they’d planned.

As she returned to the living room, she saw Toad sitting hunched over at the center of the couch, bottle of marshmallow vodka clutched in his hands. He had changed out of his white dress, and into a black t-shirt with orange gym shorts. He glanced up at her. "Hey," he said, and then took a drink of the vodka.

"You ready?" Meg asked.

Tiberius nodded. "I guess so. We're really doing this?"

"I will basically call you a pussy if you back out at this point."

"Sexist."

"You watch your cis drag wearing mouth."

Tiberius giggled, and then took another drink.

Meg, as much as she loved ribbing him, pointedly restrained herself from ribbing him about getting drunk immediately that morning. It was in line with the plan.

Tiberius set the bottle down on the table, where it made an empty thump.

"You ready?" he asked.

Meg took her car keys out of her pocket, and spun them around on her finger. "Bags are in the car, phone is charged, I'm ready to hit the road."

Tiberius groaned as he stood up. He grabbed the two remaining vodka bottles, one in each hand, and followed Meg out the apartment's front door.

It was a cloudy day. The blacktop parking lot of the apartment showed damp regions, signs that it had already rained some earlier in the morning or sometime the previous night. On the way to the car, the two glanced around. Nobody else in the parking lot. Nobody passing by on the sidewalk adjacent. Meg unlocked the driver's side door with her key, got in, and leaned over to unlock the passenger door. Toad got in, and they both slammed their doors closed.

"Are we really doing this?" Toad asked.

"I mean, we don't have to, but with that said yes we absolutely are."

"Yeah, but like... this part?"

"Don't be shy," Meg encouraged. "You said you would love to go on a road trip, but have trauma of worrying you'd ruin it by having to stop for a bathroom every ten minutes—"

Tiberius protested, "I don't think I used the word *trauma*."

"Well it sounded like that's what you were getting at," Meg said, half teasing.

Tiberius sighed. He set the two vodka bottles in the car's cup holders. "Yeah. I still don't know what it is, if it's the seatbelt or the bumping road or just worry at being confined, but I swear it's like, the second I get in a car I have to go."

"Yeah. I thought we had a fun time outlining all of the ways we could make it work for you."

"It was fun *talking* about it," Tiberius said. "When I thought we were *joking*."

"And what did we come up with?"

"Basically two things. Number one, I get to be drunk the whole time."

"Number two, put on one of those diapers already and pee yourself to your heart's content, no one on the road would possibly be able to see you below the waist while we're driving."

And they weren't even going anywhere in particular. Just getting on the highway north until she spotted a motel that struck her as somewhere they could stay the night at.

Tiberius took a drink of the graham cracker vodka, and then said, "Alright. Keep a lookout for me?"

"Nah no one's around I'm going to look at your dick and balls to alleviate your modesty."

Tiberius reached down to the pack of adult diapers that sat on the passenger's side floor. He tore the packaging open, grabbed one out, and tossed the rest of the pack into the back seat. He took some time finding which way was forward and back on the grey diaper, and then he quickly stripped his gym shorts off, and replaced them with the crinkling material.

"Comfy?" Meg asked.

"I feel naked," Toad said.

"You were for a sec, I did see your dick and balls."

"Yeah. Oh my god. So, I peed in the sink while you were in the shower—"

"Woow, thanks for respecting my living space."

"—and I know we haven't even left the parking lot, but I do already have to go again actually, so since we haven't even left yet I might as well go back in for a second—"

Meg started the car, threw it in reverse, backed out of their spot, and began through the residential streets that would eventually take them to the highway.

"This is cruel," Tiberius said.

"Freeing," Meg countered. "The wide open road before you. The ability to pee or not to pee at any time you like. I say give it a test drive before we get on the highway."

"I..." Tiberius sat there for a bit. "I don't think I could if I wanted to."

"Just imagine you're at a urinal and someone is standing there beside you waiting for you to start going."

"Meg."

"Toad."

"That is the opposite of helpful."

"You're a nervous peeer?"

"Yes! How is that surprising!"

"It sounded like your peeing is out of control! It sounded like you can't *stop* peeing!"

Toad took a drink from the chocolate vodka, and then a drink from the graham cracker vodka, and then another drink from the chocolate vodka, and then said, "I think the anxiety is kind of self-defeating in either direction."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get there. Because you have no choice."

Toad took another drink from the chocolate vodka. "Can we turn on the radio?"

"Yeah. Do you want the radio or my phone?"

"Ehh, phone."

Meg took her phone out of her pocket, unlocked it, and handed it to Tiberius. Tiberius plugged it in to the aux cord. As he was going through Meg's music to choose something, the car went down the on-ramp and onto the highway.

Tiberius put on some Simple Plan.

"Oh shit, throwback," Meg commented.

The highway wasn't all too busy on that cloudy late-morning. Meg drummed along to the songs with her fingers on the steering wheel. Toad sat slumped back in his seat, staring spaced-out through the windshield at the sky ahead.

A few songs had passed before he said, "Oh that feels so weird."

“Did you pee!”

“Yes.”

“How is it!”

“It’s like. Aaaa. It isn’t like having wet clothes like from the rain. It’s like. A damp pillow inflating around my balls?”

“Oh, that sounds weirder than I expected.”

Toad took a long drink of the graham cracker vodka and finished it off.

“I don’t hate it,” he reported.

“Good. Think this is going to work?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Simple Plan continued to play on the radio.

Meg giggled, and commented, “I can hear you peeing this time.”

Tiberius didn’t stop. “Get used to it.”

“Fuck yeah, own this.”

Meg flicked the turn signal to get into the other lane to pass someone.

As the miles went by, Meg eventually noted the signs telling them they were crossing up into Oklahoma. Tiberius gave a surfer “tubular” hand sign.

He said, “I forgot what letter we were supposed to be on for the alphabet game.”

“Oh, I forgot we were playing, yeah. Oh well. Oooh, how about never have I ever?”

“Nooo I’m too drunk, I’ll tell you secrets,” Toad said, and then flopped an arm around in search of a bottle. In the cup holder, his hand found a bottle of peppermint schnapps that he’d taken out of the glove box. He drank some, and then set it back down in the cup holder again.

“You are actively peeing in a diaper right this second,” Meg pointed out.

“Yeah?”

“So I feel like it would be fair to say we trust each other,” Meg continued.

“Yeah.”

“So what secrets do you have?”

“Ugh. I don’t wanna say. You can know, but I don’t wanna say. We can do never have I ever. Remind me how it works.”

“Hold up ten fingers,” Meg said.

Toad did. Meg did too, driving with her palms.

“Now we take turns. I say a thing I’ve never done. If you’ve done it, you—”

“Bestiality,” Toad blurted.

“Wait, what?”

“I’m only into bestiality, that was my secret,” Toad said. “I didn’t really understand the game, sounds like a lot of double negatives, hard to follow, I thought I’d just say it and get it over with.”

“Huh.” Meg lowered her fingers, taking hold of the wheel again.

Meg heard the muted patter of Tiberius letting out another squirt.

A second after he was done, he asked, “Have I ruined everything?”

“How the fuck did this never come up before?” Meg asked.

Tiberius reached for the peppermint schnapps. Meg swatted his hand, and he drew the hand back, empty.

“No, seriously, how did you never say anything about that until now?” Meg asked. “How did I never say anything about it to you?”

“What?”

“Zoophile,” Meg said. “That’s the word for it. You’re a zoophile, right?”

“I’ve heard that and bestialist, yeah.”

“I’m only into bestiality too,” Meg said.

“What?” Toad said. He sat up straight in his seat, his diaper making a squishing and wheezing noise. “Meg what the fuck.”

“You what the fuck!”

“This is insane,” Toad said. He grabbed the peppermint schnapps quick and had a drink, then sat holding the bottle, arms limp laid over his legs. He flexed his entire upper body, and a loud fart smacked its way out of him.

“Good push,” Meg commented.

“I really thought I could sneak that one out,” Toad said, turning a little red. “Thought it would like, mute the sound, but this situation is actually more like an amplifier.”

“Apparently. I mean, do do what—”

Toad snickered.

“Oh my god. No I’m sticking with that, you can giggle if you want: do do what you have to do. It was part of the understanding that all bodily functions within that garment are free from judgment.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to go that far.”

“Can we get back to this bestiality thing though!”

“Please,” Toad said.

“Have you done it!”

“Yeah. A lot. I work summers on my aunt’s farm for a reason. Basically why I never dated anyone in school. I was like, all good, didn’t have any further questions about what it was like that I didn’t get through with cows.”

“Funnnnnn, that’s such a cool opportunity.”

“Yeah, it really is,” Toad said, nodding. “You?”

“Neighbor’s dog Garth. He’s so old now, but he’s still so friendly when he sees I’m back on a visit.”

Toad’s voice cracked as he said, “Oh.”

“What?” Meg asked.

Toad sniffled.

Meg glanced over, and saw that he was crying. “Hey,” she said. “Toad.”

Toad sniffled again. His face was contorted into a sudden sorrow, and tears made his cheeks glisten.

“Toad.”

Toad shook his head.

“Toad.”

Toad clenched his fists, and stared forward.

“Toad.”

“You can’t fuckin do that, Meg,” Toad said, his voice high, choking it out.

“What?” she asked. “With a dog? It’s really fine, I promise he’s not hurt by it at all.”

“That dog’s name. How immediately casually perfect you are about, about goddamn bestiality of all things, right when I thought, right when, right when I thought I found someone like me, genuinely fucked up like I am. And now already, two seconds later, I don’t know again,” he said. “The cows don’t have names.”

“Oh. Oh sweetheart.” Meg put a hand on his shoulder, and rubbed it gently as she continued to drive. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve thought about burning that place down so it can’t hurt any calves ever again. I’ve thought about poisoning the corpses before they go out.” He sniffled. He shook his head. “I keep working there.”

Meg took her hand off Tiberius’s shoulder as she steered over into the other lane to pass a semi.

As they were passing, she said, “You don’t have to stay there.”

Tiberius nodded. “I was scared there wasn’t anything else.” He screwed the cap onto the peppermint schnapps and let it fall to the passenger side floor. “Take what I’m saying with a grain of salt, I am gone. I’m not making any sense.”

“I think I follow,” Meg said. “There are other jobs, dude. You could find something else.”

Tiberius sniffled, and shook his head. “I was scared there wasn’t anything else for a, for a monster like me, who would put so much blood and sweat and sleepless nights and shit into helping cows live through a place I knew was going to kill them. To treat them with love, genuine, heartfelt, nuzzling, caring, listening, devoted love, all while knowing this place was going to kill them. Not when they’re ready to go, or when, ooh, times are tough now so we have no choice. Never even, pretending, that that’s what that place is. That place just kills them. That’s what it’s for. That’s all it does. And I keep working there.”

“But that’s not you killing—”

“I do the slaughters.”

“Oh.”

Tiberius shuddered, and then went on, “I was, what... eight? The first time I helped. I was excited to, too, what little boy doesn’t want to see blood and guts? I knew what it was like to kill them and take them apart a long time before I ever realized there were lights on behind those eyes.”

“Jesus, Tiberius.”

Toad bent down and fished up the bottle of peppermint schnapps, and had a drink.

Neither of them knew what else to say, for the rest of the Guns N Roses song that was playing.

Portugal. The Man came on next.

Tiberius started to say something, and then stopped to gather his words, and then tried again. “Maybe I’m glad to know there’s a better version of someone who’s only into bestiality. A happy version. A non-monster version.”

“Well, thank you.” Meg sighed. “I’m sorry that’s what your experience has been.”

The car crested the top of a large hill. Looking forward through the windshield, there was a wide open grassy field below them, shimmering in the sunlight from recent rain. A rainbow stretched across the horizon ahead of them.

Tiberius shat himself aggressively.

Meg doubled over in the driver’s seat, screaming out one defeated laugh and not able to get the breath back in to keep laughing. Toad, a smug look overcoming his face, reached over and took hold of the steering wheel, doing his best to keep them from veering off the road as Meg recovered. He held off from taking another drink while his hand was on the wheel.

Present

“Hello?” Stefan said. “Meg?”

Meg snapped upright in her swivel chair again. She turned away from the window and the ocean, and back to her desk. “Sorry, just got handed something, one second.” She put the phone to her chest, and said, to her empty office, “Looks good at a glance, I’ll compare it with my figures and get back to you by, woof, by two at the latest, if nothing else comes up. Okay. Thank you.”

She leaned back in her chair, slid some papers from one side of her desk to the other, and then returned the phone to her ear again. “Sorry again about that.”

“No, no worries at all, sorry to keep you from your work,” Stefan said.

“Remind me of your question?”

“Any reason I shouldn’t hire this James fellow?”

Meg thought back on what Stefan had said Tiberius had been up to in the years since she’d known him. “No, no reason at all comes to mind.”

“Wonderful. Alright, thank you Meg.”

“Cheers.”

Meg hung up the phone, and went through the motions of getting back to work.

A HAIKU

Small dog talking shit
Throw big dog over the fence?
Maybe someday, punk.