

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, through 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 therefor 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 lead 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.