

1 - Bral Attacked

The buzz of Bral's usual activity has been lower than usual for a few days now, without outside ship traffic to stir the hivelike community into more vigorous life. The muted sunlight that filters through Haven, the air world around which Bral orbits and which it faces (thus forming an oddly distant sort of sky), is dimmed this morning by a vast gathering storm, promising theatrics at a safe distance later on.

The town is far from quiet, of course. Bral is a densely packed place, and the sounds of people talking, laughing, arguing, and working echo through the tunnels dug out of the rock, make their way through the mazes of now-covered streets left behind by earlier occupants, and bounce through the windows of those lucky enough to live in the upper stories.

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Emmett Half-Man is sitting in the Blue Wyvern, an adequate (and cheap) tavern frequented by spelljammer crews, looking from his drink to his small amount of remaining coin and thinking dark thoughts about tinker gnomes when a boyish head pokes through the door and announces, "Ship!"

"Where from?" a half dozen others want to know.

"Don't know yet. Big un, they say." He's gone.

Emmett folds his small leather wallet one handed and slides it back under his loose-fitting cotton shirt. _Whoever it is, they may need a marine. And it's time to move on. Just, please Gond, not a gnome ship. Please._ He gestures with his off hand, the light glinting from the hook catching the waiter's attention. There was enough on the table to cover his tab. It's not like the Blue Wyvern staff didn't know him.

A casual shrug as he stands reaffirms the location of all of his tools and weapons. _Tenet 17: know where your tools are._ With a casual gait he lumbers to the door, his peg-leg striking the floor off beat from his scabbard striking his leather hip. He pushes the door open with his hook and pauses, scanning the room with his good eye to see if he needs to hold the door for anyone.

A few tables away, Val Ehrendrin pricks up his ears. One way or the other, this is an opportunity. Pickings have been slim on the Rock.

He takes note of any other patrons heading out at the news of a ship, stands and tosses a few coppers on the table to cover his last drink. "Hope this is something I can work with," he thinks to himself as he heads towards the door. He smooths the vest he wore and runs his fingers through his wavy brown hair. It wouldn't do to look sloppy, especially if there is an opportunity to impress someone.

The man at the door holds it open and pauses. Val pauses too, noticing the arm that ended in a hook and the peg leg. It takes Val a moment to even notice the eyepatch, as he tries valiantly not to stare. Other instincts take over, however, and Val is a bit disappointed to note the man carries no money pouch at his belt. Not that many people who eat at places like the Wyvern have much money. Besides, this guy looks like he needs every last copper he can get his hook on.

"Thanks, stranger," Val says cheerfully to the fellow as he slips out the door. "Looking for work too?" The last was more commentary than question, and Val doesn't pause for an answer.

Emmett falls into stride next to the brown-haired man, covering the distance between the two with an impressively quick hopping gait. "Looking for a ship. I've been on the Rock too long. It's time to get moving. I've seen you around the docks - you hoping to get a job unloading?"

The emphasis on the last word implies something. Emmett has been around long enough to know that many working on Bral's docks are actually sell-swords, adventurers, or sailors down on their luck and looking for a few quick coppers. In another week he'll be forced to do the same if something else didn't come up. His new companion has that look, and Emmett would bet that he had done more with his life than move crates.

"Unloading?" Val is a bit surprised that the man at the door fell into step beside him. He adjusts his stride to match the odd gait. Now that it is mentioned, Val thinks he recognizes the man as well. "Maybe... I've done worse. I wouldn't mind getting off this rock myself," Val answers with a smile. "I'm Valarin," he says, offering a half bow.

Emmett smiles broadly in return, then offers his hand, "Emmett. Nice to meet you. Maybe you'll get lucky and they'll need two people." As they turn the corner and see the huge-but-still-swelling crowd, he adds "And maybe all of these people will be really lucky and the ship will still need people after hiring us, eh Valarin?"

"Maybe *I'll* get lucky?" Val quirks an eyebrow at this as he shakes the offered hand. He likes Emmett's sense of humor. There is also something about the way the other carries himself; a certain sense of authority and experienc.

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Several blocks away horizontally and in the second subterranean layer of the Rock, the endless dice game in the back corner of the notorious Brass Bottle, where the variety in the clientele is balanced by the uniform awfulness of the wine, is interrupted by the news. Most of the players shrug and go back to their game, but there are several in the oligarchs' employ who hastily depart.

Ibn Fadil looks at the seven silver coins he just won, none of them from the same sphere, and then at the door, where the boy bringing the news has already gone to spread it to the rest of the town.

"I'd better keep these for a while," ibn Fadil says, shaking his head, and tucks the coins away in his purse. He can leave with all of them, since the Bottle's staff knows better than to let him run a tab.

Out in the tunnels, his step lightens the farther he gets from the game with his new money still in hand. He wends his way unerringly toward the surface, stopping once to buy a drink from an elderly water-seller, and getting a lengthy update on her battle against arthritis along with it. In no hurry, he buys a second cup of water and the latest news about her neighbors as well, delivered with the zeal of a dedicated gossip.

* * *

Alais Zeremin has spent the day down by the docks, looking for work. His athanor, old and second-hand as it was, has broken, and even another such one will be costly. So he has spent the morning going to the various dock houses, asking if a ship needed to be moved or a tug or pleasure-boat taken out. Often he can grab quite a few gold doing this. He finds no work today, but he does get an excellent view of the arriving visitor.

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A few levels up from the Brass Bottle, the news reaches a small soup stall.

"Where is it from?" someone asks.

"Dunno." The boy continues down the street, passing the news. The soup stall promptly closes up to prepare for the expected influx of visitors.

Brother Pham tries to stifle a pang of annoyance. _Ah well_, he thinks, _at least a ship coming in is bound to have interesting tales of other spheres to share. And perhaps another food vendor will be selling something more interesting than soup at the docks._

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The docks are at one end of the asteroid's flattish oval, a complicated structure jutting out over nothingness, strongly constructed of timber and stone. At the moment, the only ships in are one of the mostly-giff mercenary transports whose squadron is currently on duty on the Rock, and the private vessels of some of the oligarchs. Immediately after disembarking, one finds oneself in one of Bral's few open areas, a half circle hedged in by the offices and warehouses of the intersphere trading houses who maintain presence on Bral.

Now that the news has spread, into this open area vendors rush and stake out a few square feet of ground with baskets of fruit and bread, bottles of drink, displays of sundries, weapons, and flamboyant cloth, anything that might tempt a newly landed visitor. A laundry tub advertises a halfling-run washing service, a pole with strips of brightly colored paper fluttering from its end a letter-writer, a sweet jingling sound J'x'st's glass goods shop.

As they near the docks, Val stretches his taller than average frame to try and see past the vendors and hawkers. He can't make anything out yet, so he contents himself with scanning the gathering crowd for *other* opportunities.... Subconsciously, one hand slides to his sword belt, and he takes mental stock of his own person and surroundings. No sense in becoming someone else's opportunity. He reminds himself to be mindful of the man with the hook, as that one seemed to see quite a lot with his one eye....

Eventually the ship comes into sight, a galleon -- ungainly and slow but big, and sure to carry some interesting cargo. A few streets away there is the noise of what sounds like a brawl erupting; the giff confer for a few moments and send some of their number to deal with it.

Their captain has a spyglass, and stands on the end of the dock bellowing out identifying details as soon as they can be made out. She's the _Fair Enough Lass_, and her flags identify her as a human-crewed free trader out of Phanail; she's a long way from her home sphere.

Emmett pushes his way towards the docks, trusting that Valarin to follow and trying in vain to get a better look at the vessel. In this he is hampered by his height, as always, but can make out the ships colors. He smiles a half smile at what the flags convey, and waits for his lanky companion or the children atop the boxes with the loose tongues to give him more information.

As he finally approaches the surface, ibn Fadil hears the brawl starting and changes his route to avoid it, and still arrives at the docks in plenty of time to see the ship approaching and hear the scant information available. Phanail is an unremarkable sphere, he recalls, rumored to be a pleasant enough place but of no great importance; the ship must have picked up cargo elsewhere to have bothered coming all this way. Looking first at the "sky," he immediately resolves to stay out to watch the storm's display.

"Looks awfully quiet on board," someone remarks as the galleon orients itself properly with regard to the dock and begins its approach, and others around her nod agreement; there seem to be only a few people moving around on deck, although in the dimness it's hard to see much detail.

"Maybe she ran into trouble?" someone else ventures, though the ship looks undamaged. She's shadowed at some distance by another of Bral's mercenary ships, standard procedure even for a lightly armed vessel such as this one.

"Maybe she's hiring," Emmett said, tossing out a line in a loud voice and hoping someone in the crowd would confirm it.

For ibn Fadil, the next order of business is to buy something to eat, since his stomach is fully aware that it's morning. He finds an enterprising baker who's carried a tub full of still-warm pies out to the docks, and knows him well enough to charge residents' rates. "What kind of a name is 'Fair Enough Lass'?" ibn Fadil wonders, taking a pie in each hand.

"Who knows?" the baker shrugs. "I just wonder where all the sailors are."

Ibn Fadil agrees around a mouthful of pie and wanders off, aiming toward the spot his favorite candy-maker has staked out.

Pham makes his way through the increasingly crowded streets, arriving shortly before the galleon pulls into port. The sight of a terrestrial sailing ship floating lightly through the air (or vacuum, to be pedantic) always fills him with a sense of awe. And to remember that he himself had been at the helm of such incongruous vessels still seems to be almost the act of a dreamer, not a down to earth man. Still, it is Hextor's will to experience such wonders - how could he deny the gifts that the god had seen fit to bestow on his humble servant?

The ship glides into her berth with commendable smoothness, and several people run around on deck making everything fast; then a man pushes out the plank and follows three others off the ship. They're all a bit shabby-looking; their leader is a tall man whose much-mended chain mail is covered by a patched blue cloak; he has a black, spiral-shaped tattoo on his left cheek and a smile for all in the crowd as he steps onto the dock.

Alais squints at the man, hardly able to believe his eyes. _That tattoo -- is it -- is it -- I think it is! The symbol of the Hurgan Brotherhood of the hypothesized Urcan civilization! But how? Damn, he moved. I need to be sure, and to talk to him -- but there they go._

"Greetings to the people of Bral! Your hospitality is legendary, and I see that legend does not exaggerate. Only allow us to deliver one small part of our cargo, and I promise you that the crew still aboard as well as ourselves will be at your disposal," he promises with a bow. "We have come far, and look forward to our leisure here." To the guard captain he presents a leather document case, which is handed back after a swift check for contraband. The four men make their way through the narrow path that forms for them, toward the receiving office of the venerable Three Trees trading company.

"Sounds like he's selling something," Mirabette the halfling candy-maker remarks cheerfully. "Ibn Fadil, how are you? Going to ship out this time?"

"Not while you still have lemon drops," he says, fishing in his purse for another coin. Two urchins materialize at his elbow to observe the transaction.

"I have orange today too," Mirabette says, and he buys a double-handful bag containing both.

Like its fellows near the docks, the building is tall and narrow, with small balconies on each of the three upper stories and an alleyway to the left, leading back into the maze of inner Bral. Vines cover much of the old brick facade. On the lowest of the balconies stands the wizard Mel-

kin, glowering down at the crowd with his usual lack of cheer. He's a middle-aged, slightly balding human, on the tall side and a bit portly, with splendidly embroidered robes.

As the four men approach, he holds up a commanding hand; they halt obediently, enduring his scrutiny until with a disinterested grunt he waves them on and returns to his work within. The doors open silently, admitting them to the offices of one of the wealthiest trading consortiums in known space.

Outside, the crowd settles down to wait, casting an occasional curious glance at the still-quiet ship. One man can be seen on deck, coiling a rope. More giff drift off to deal with the brawl, which has shown no signs of abating and, long-time residents can tell, has more likely spread to a second tavern.

Emmett rubs his jaw, feeling the untidy stubble, and chews his lip. _Four men ashore, one man on deck. Where's the rest of the crew? If they're from as far away as they say, they should be chomping at the bit to get ashore. They're either incredibly well disciplined and guarding something below or just not there...._

Trailed by a half-dozen children, ibn Fadil weaves through the crowd to a building a few doors in from the edge of the Rock, and sits down on the corner of a low wall defining a small patio in front of it. He can see the ship and the crowd and Three Trees from here, and begins throwing the children pieces of candy, making a game of it and wondering about the ship's apparent absence of crew. Nothing in the tattooed man's words alarms; the opposite, in fact. Maybe he just runs a very tight ship. Still, it's peculiar ...

Suddenly the wizard reemerges, his expression perplexed, hand at his throat. His mouth opens and closes, but he does not speak. Instead he puts one hand on the balcony rail and vaults down to the ground, quite lightly for a man of his stature. The crowd, alarmed, rapidly shifts away from him as he turns a circle three times widdershins --

-- and then gets down on all fours and begins barking. Those closest can see that he is wearing a jeweled collar. Before anyone on the dock can properly react to this development, there is the sound of clashing steel from within the Three Trees building. Someone within shouts, "In the name of Fang the Fearless, if you drop your weapons you will come to no harm! I'll take that if you don't mind...."

As one, those in the crowd outside think, No one tries to raid _Bral_! Then they look at each other with puzzled expressions and say, "Who?"

As he nears the docks, a slight grumble reminds Luc Pham of the more mundane task ahead of him - finding something for lunch. He turns around and looks for a vendor selling food. Unfortunately, everyone else is looking at the new arrivals. Then the shouting - and the stunned silence - and ... growling?!?!

As it dawns on them that they are actually under attack, the square begins to empty slowly. The half dozen giff remaining on the docks are as startled as anyone else at this turn of events. The streets are too narrow for the crowd to move quickly, and there are a lot of people; it is going to be some time before the area is clear.

"Not to worry," one giff remarks to a comrade. "It's not like they can get off." One of their number lumbers off toward the brawl to let those participating know that there's a *real* fight in the offing. Three head for the ship, slowed by the crowd as they try not to step on any of the puny beings around them, while the captain and another begin making their way toward Three Trees.

Amazed by the turn of events, Alais hunts in the pocket of his robe for a copper piece, makes a series of passes over it with his other hand as he murmurs the words to the spell, and attempts to read the thoughts of Fang. The mind he touches is awash in adrenaline and lunatic glee as he carefully places a bonsai crystal worth several fortunes in the leather case he brought, then spins to exchange further swordplay with one of the guards inside, who clearly did not lay down his weapon as requested. The uppermost thought in his mind is that if the ship doesn't work, they are all quite dead. He is also worried about a companion.

"Shit!" Val mutters. He'd bet gold that the brawl **is** a distraction. Not that many giff left in the immediate area; how convenient....

Val fades into the crowd, mindful of the weapons he carries. He has no intention of being a hero. Heroes tend to attract too much attention, and sometimes wind up dead. Just in case, Val palms a dagger as he tries to conceal himself amongst the stunned onlookers.

Emmett sees Val backing into the crowd, heading in the same direction he is, and lays his hand lightly on Val's arm. He notices the palmed dagger with some satisfaction - the man **is** more than just a dock worker. "Four men is not enough to mount a long raid - they'll either break for their ship or they have more men about to come off it. Either way we can block them at the gangplank before they can reinforce or get away. There's sure to be a reward."

With that the Half-Man moves to the back of the crowd, heading for the gangplank to put his plan into action, again trusting Val to follow.

"Reward?" Val hadn't thought of that. Greed overcomes common sense momentarily as Val thinks about this new opportunity. "Are you crazy?!" he asks of Emmett, but follows the shorter man anyway. Valarin might not be a hero, but Emmett just might need some help.

Val also keeps an eye on the building, looking for some sign of the four men that had yet to reemerge. If worst comes to pass, they could always knock the gangplank over to make things more difficult. He whispers his idea to Emmett as the two make their way around.

Emmett nods. That's a good thought - this Val guy is on the ball. As they near the ship, it's clear that like the men who came off it, it has seen better days; it will probably never land in water again -- not if it wants to get back out. There is no sign of the man who was on deck earlier.

Astonished, ibn Fadil tries to guess what the pirates' next move might be and finds he has no idea. But he does think of one thing: Leaning forward, he speaks to the children, his voice low but still cutting across their excited chatter. "I think you should all run home now."

Then he sits back (unable to really compel them, but he had to try) to watch and wait for developments, mentally taking note of several avenues of escape, possible vantage points, and the exact angle at which his sword is currently tucked through his sash.

Pham finds himself in a rather uncomfortable position. The crowd, retreating from the ensorcelled wizard, has retreated from around Pham as well, leaving him on the inner edge of the circle around Melkin. Spying the jewelled collar, Pham's first thoughts are, *_Melkin may not be the kindest man in the world, but no-one deserves to be enslaved that way. But how'd they get it on him? Well, the first order of business is to stop him before he hurts himself or others._*

Pham bows his head, staff held high, and begins to chant, at first to himself and then louder. As Hextor's power flows into him, the rest of the crowd ... the rest of the world ... seems to retreat. Pham speaks the final phrases, names "Melkin!" as the final word, and points at the barking man on the ground in front of him

The growls are cut short as Melkin suddenly stops moving, paralyzed in a rather awkward four-legged stance. Once the chant is done, Pham runs up to Melkin and attempts to remove the collar, but his searching fingers find no means of doing so. It appears to be made of leather, snug though not stranglingly tight on the wizard, but there is no visible catch or buckle. Pham settles for shouting to the nearest giff, "Melkin here is unharmed. Go rout the raiders inside!" Pham then steps to the side, dragging the still motionless Melkin with him, and waits for a reaction from the ship.

If there is one, he doesn't see it, because the door beside him is suddenly wrenched open, revealing the tattooed man in the act of ducking low beneath a two-handed stroke by one of the men who had been on guard within. There is a cry of pain and a thud as his attacker is incapacitated, and then the raider stands in the doorway for a moment, surveying the scene before him -- no longer concerned about guarding his back, so the men within have apparently been subdued.

Pham he grins at. "Sit, stay -- good doggie, isn't he?" His gaze sweeps the docks as he remarks, "Opposition, I see." As he descends the steps to ground level, the other three emerge behind him; their leader is the only one who does not appear at least slightly wounded, and all four have small bags of loot.

They stop as the two giff approach confidently. People are still trying to flee the square with their merchandise, but curious eyes peer from the relative safety of streets on the periphery and peek over roof parapets.

"Fang the Foolish, more like," the captain remarks, mouth gaping slightly in a giffish grin.

"Fang is many things, but foolish is the least of them," the tattooed man tosses back with impressive insouciance, particularly since the ship that escorted them into Bral appears to have noticed something amiss, and is on its way back to the dock. "I'd tell you more, but we really must be going."

It looks like, despite the odds, they're going to try to make a break for it.

Alais' thoughts turn to the wand his master left him, before his disappearance last year. Unfortunately, its effects would almost certainly extend to both Melkin and the young priest who has restrained him. For the latter's sake, he instead speaks a commanding phrase as he levels a finger at the man he assumes to be Fang. Two streaks of colored light flash across the square.

The tattooed man, hitherto unscathed, staggers as they strike him, but manages a grin as he recovers himself. "So much for that Bralian hospitality...."

The startled giff pause in their inexorable advance to look around for the source of the spell. The captain grunts and nods, recognizing Alais.

Brother Pham sits in quiet shock for a moment at the brazenness of this "Fang's" bravado. There must have been something very specific they were after here - there's got to be an easier way to make money than robbing Bral.

But the time for contemplation is over! First - those two brave souls guarding the gangplank look like they could use some help. In an attempt to prevent the raiders from leaving, they've left themselves open to attack from behind. Pham lowers his head, speaking a soft prayer for the assistance of those defenders.

Knowing he isn't prepared for a real fight (who wears armor to buy soup?) Pham decides that a direct attack isn't warranted. There is also another problem that needs attending to - Hextor's

Will won't hold Melkin forever. So, let's get that collar off! Pham pulls out a small knife and tries to cut the thing off!

The material is tough, and the collar is tight enough that Pham must be careful to avoid cutting the mage; it's going to take a couple minutes.

Ibn Fadil stares at Pham; he does not recall seeing the fellow before, and now he's used magic - gods' magic, if he knows anything about these things. But the other events compete for ibn Fadil's attention just now. The wizardling Alais Zheremin is going to be in trouble if the pirates break past the giff; and there are the other two transients. He recognizes Emmett as someone who's been on the Rock for some time, and is reputed to be a pretty solid fellow. Val he also knows, if only by sight. For the moment, ibn Fadil assumes they are against the pirates, and not for them, though he won't guess about why they've decided to board the ship.

So there is the ship, the four pirates - and perhaps the brawl and more pirates there. Ibn Fadil finds himself slipping along the front of the buildings toward the dock, even though he knows better than to get involved in this. He is, to his own surprise, angry about this brazen attack on Bral. It seems that in five years a man can get attached even to a murky, cacophonous rock like this place.

Moving quickly, but as inconspicuously as he knows how, ibn Fadil reaches the jumbled array of the docks' footings and stacks of barrels and crates. With one eye on the developing situation out in the plaza, he stays under cover as much as possible as he selects a vantage point from which he can easily reach the pirates' ship if he should choose to do so, or else remain unnoticed and see all that goes on.

Meanwhile, Emmett looks over the ship and shakes his head disapprovingly at her condition. "She may have been a fair enough lass once, but they haven't been kind to her since they stole her," he says. The thought continues in his head, _They did steal her, and they don't really know how to keep her up, or care to learn. Unless...._

He turns back to see what's going on, gives up, and asks, keeping his eye on the gangplank to make sure the curiously absent crew doesn't charge him, "Valarin, what's happening back there, have they made it out?"

"Someone moved Melkin out of the way, but he's got company," Val informs Emmett over his shoulder. "All four of them are outside and moving this way." He strains his senses to hear the tattooed man before the Giff move to intercept, but can catch only the occasional word. "Looks like they aren't impressed by the Giff, Emmett," Val adds gravely.

"Damn. OK, either this is a desperate raid by a crew who's ship is on her last legs, or it's a carefully timed operation that has some special surprise waiting inside the ship to help them pull this off. That he's casually facing down Giff make me think the latter." Emmett then says what is no doubt the last thing Val wants to hear: "Let's go check it out. There can't be more than one or two of them."

"Let's go check it out?!" Val repeats incredulously. He turns to see that Emmett is, in fact, quite serious. "You *are* crazy!" The thought occurs to Val briefly that there just might be a reason this man has only one eye, one hand, and one leg.... But then, there is an odd sense of confidence that steals over them, assuring them that their endeavor is bound to meet with success.

Thus bolstered, Emmett gives an authoritative wave to the three approaching Giff, somehow trying to convey that he and Valarin are on their side and taking care of the situation, and almost hurls himself up the gangplank to get to a more defensible position on deck, cutlass out and ready

to defend Val if anyone attacks while the taller man is still on the plank. From there, they should be able to quickly scout the ship for the other pirates and whatever surprise is waiting.

Val edges up the gangplank behind Emmett after a moment's hesitation. He still holds his dagger ready noticing Emmett's drawn cutlass, but hesitates to draw his own sword just yet. Val keeps an eye on the tattooed man and his lackeys, in case they do make it past the Giff.

At a quick glance, nothing appears amiss. The deck is clean and neat, although the ship's age is again evident, and there are signs of recently repaired damage here and there. Not battle damage, however; just ordinary wear and tear resulting in a mended section of rail here, some new planking there. There are a couple of medium-weight catapults on the forecastle and one astern. Emmett can see immediately that they are not ready for use.

Val catches a slight hint of movement from one of the aft stairwells; almost simultaneously, lightning arcs from cloud to cloud as the storm finally begins to break. It is a silent show; thunder cannot cross the slender void between Haven and Bral.

As Val joins Emmett on the deck, the smaller man whispers "They can't expect to fight their way out in this."

"If they're desperate enough..." Val trails off ominously. He moves to Emmett's side as quietly as possible, trying to divide his attention between the movement at the stairs and the tattooed man's progress with the Giff on the dock as the two spread out a bit for a quick sweep of the main deck; there is no one in sight. The doors to the cargo hold are and closed and fastened, preventing a casual glance within. The two of them quickly fall into a pattern, each covering the other against possible attack as they begin their search. The forward cabins are completely empty, and the hatches leading below appear to have been nailed shut, so at least they can't be attacked from behind. They make their way aft with care.

Having seen the movement earlier, Val is not taken by surprise. "Down!" The crossbow bolt grazes his arm as he throws himself to the deck. There is the sound of a slamming door, footsteps, and an indistinct shout from belowdecks, but no further attacks come.

He and Emmett are a bit distracted, therefore, when the tense confrontation on the dock resolves itself as the two giff charge with drawn swords. The four raiders might almost have been expecting it, so smoothly do they avoid Bral's defenders to go sprinting for the dock where the Fair Enough Lass is tied up.

"Don't let them board!" the captain barks to the three on the dock; there is nowhere for the raiders to go. Scattered cheering rises from the spectators lingering around the now-empty square.

What happens next defies explanation. Somehow, the three giff get tangled up in one another -- in their eagerness to close battle with these daring pirates one of them has tripped, and the other two stumble over him and try desperately to avoid impaling one another on their swords...

Emmett regains his feet; the shot at Val was clearly the act of a lone desperate defender, and his companion doesn't seem much hurt. He squints at the end of the dock, trying to figure out what's taking them so long, sees the mess and the other two giff approaching at what strikes the marine as less than all possible speed. The thought hits him like the lightning above: The giff are in on it.

... and then the raiders are thundering down the dock and onto their sad old ship.

While their comrades untangle themselves, the remaining two giff make a rush for the gangplank, then pull up as they see the *_Invincible_*'s approach. Meanwhile, Brother Pham continues to saw at Melkin's unwanted accessory, which finally parts beneath his knife. Pham is now holding a thick strip of red leather, decorated with tiny rubies, garnets, and other semi-precious stones. Words in an unknown script mark the inside. Now that it has been removed, a buckle is visible, and beneath his startled eyes the cut in the leather mends itself.

Melkin licks his hand and pants happily.

Aboard the *_Fair Enough Lass_*, Val silently curses himself for **not** knocking over the gangplank like he'd thought of originally. This could get ugly.

There is the unmistakable snap of another crossbow, but this time the sound comes from Bral -- from the uppermost balcony of the Three Trees building, to be specific, and the heavy bolt sinks into the *_Fair Enough Lass_*'s mainmast, out of reach from the deck. There is a rope attached to it. On the balcony a cloaked figure makes the other end fast to the railing. It could be a woman, lightly built man, or elf; not even ibn Fadil can tell for certain.

Now it's five against two, ibn Fadil notes, dismayed to see the odds rising in the pirates' favor, and to find himself actually drawing his sword. Five to three if Zeremin has something else to contribute, he amends. Not good. He wouldn't bet on those odds if he had all the gold in Bral to spend.

The tattooed man's expression is unmistakably relieved. He turns to Emmett and Val and says, in a faintly surprised but almost friendly tone, "You really shouldn't be here." He glances over to where the Hammership is now nearly in range, and *_her_* crew aren't playing around -- they're readying the forward ballistae.

Emmett nods at the tattooed man's assessment, thinking to himself, *_I was close, I just didn't account for them having additional support on Bral. Still, he doesn't want to waste time fighting us with that Hammership breathing down his neck - if we just hustle off the ship we can end this gracefully._*

Emmett opens his mouth to issue some witty response to the pirate captain when all hell breaks loose.

"Tell me about it," Val mutters, then hurls his dagger at the tattooed man just as the deck shudders. It was more of a distraction than attack, and the dagger glances off the man's mail and skitters over the side as Val springs for the mainmast, intent on preventing the cloaked figure from boarding. If he could get that bolt loose or cut the line....

The spiral-marked man makes a sharp, exasperated hissing sound. On the balcony, the cloaked figure swings over the railing, grasps the rope, and begins to slide down it to the raider ship.

Crap, Emmett thinks, quickly interposing himself between Val's exposed back and the pirates. *_Val* thinks we still have backup coming. He's in this because of me, and now I have to back his play.

"Make it fast Val," Emmett yells as he strikes a defensive stance that is both instinctive and, he knows, short lived - good as he is, he can't hold off three or four attackers for very long. Still, he calculates, the longer he delays them here, the more likelihood there is of help from land - eventually even the Giff will have to act unless they want their culpability revealed. Any thoughts of witty repartee fall by the wayside into the cold mindset that grips the former flyer when he's forced to battle on the ground - defend yourself, watch for openings, strike to disable or kill.

“Get below,” the tattooed man snaps to the men with him. More lightning flickers above.

“But --” He glances at the figure making its way down the rope.

“Go! There’s no stopping it now.” He remains on deck, however, as they hurry aft and disappear.

Emmett's guts unknot as the number of immediate opponents drops from three to one, not that there's any sign of that relaxation on the half-man's face. His back still a bare yard from the shaky mainmast, he is confident enough now to consider talking. "No stopping *what* now? I knew you had to have something down there to think you could pull this off."

"What, and spoil the surprise?" He grins, but Emmett can see his tension.

Val quickly climbs the mast to where the bolt is wedged deep in the wood. Is it his imagination, or is the mast swaying? He draws one of his multitude of daggers, vaguely aware that underneath him the ship is making sharp creaking noises without apparent cause.

Sharp creaking noises, muffled bangs, and a really loose mast? What, is this thing just a shell for a smaller 'Jammer?! Val thinks to himself.

The bolt was wedged too tight to pry loose, so Val thinks of a plan.... With a grimace, he begins going out hand-over-hand on the rope, as far out as he is high on the mast. If he cut the line just right, he could use the rest to swing down and give Emmett a much needed hand. Not to mention, it would drop the figure that's sliding towards him. Seeing him out there, the cloaked figure clearly tries to move faster.

On the dock, Alais is barely able to think for the feverish excitement that has gripped him; the only thing the young wizard is entirely certain of is that the cloaked person should not be allowed to escape. From the inner recesses of his somewhat bedraggled robe, he draws a long, narrow wooden case, and removes its contents gingerly. The wand is the length of his forearm and made of heavily carved ivory, with a crystal of palest blue at the tip.

With all but one opponent off the deck and that one's attention on the rope and its occupants, ibn Fadil sees his best chance so far. Cautiously and smoothly, he steps out of his concealment, trying not to make a sound or a sudden move that might attract the pirate's attention. Getting up the gangplank will be the hardest part; with a little luck, a quick rush might catch the tattooed man by surprise. Suiting actions to thoughts, ibn Fadil runs lightly up the gangplank.

Several things happen almost simultaneously.

Emmett feints toward the Tattooed Man, trying to distract him as ibn Fadil approaches, but a board creaks beneath the half-elf's light tread. Their quarry glances in his direction, startled -- things are quite clearly not going anything like the way he hoped at this point -- and then ducks to port, his back to the rail as he now faces two opponents.

Trying hard to keep a steady hand, Alais points the wand at the figure moving rapidly down the rope and speaks the command word. A whiteness erupts from the crystal and engulfs the figure on the rope, who screams. It lasts only an eyeblink.

“Hell,” says the man with the spiral tattoo.

Barely beyond the wand's reach, Val sees frost forming on his bracers just before the rope snaps, weakened by the sudden brief plunge in temperature. He takes advantage of this, trying to angle the swing of his body to bring him crashing into the tattooed man.

The cloaked figure falls heavily to the ground, too stunned to control his or her fall well.

The angle of Val's swing is abruptly changed as the mast begins to topple; he makes an awkward landing on the deck but manages not to either crash into Emmett or to injure himself in the process. It is now abundantly clear that the ship is coming apart underneath them, and the two of them plus ibn Fadil scramble back over the gangplank as the deck tilts dangerously. The tattooed man has disappeared.

"Fire one!" bellows a man aboard the *_Invincible_*. The ballista bolt rips into the target's port side even as the old wood begins falling away.

Val's guess is proven entirely correct; concealed within the shell of a battered old galleon is a far smaller dragonfly-type vessel, stripped down to her bones for speed. The *_Audacity_* rises phoenix-like from the wreckage of the *_Fair Enough Lass_*. There is a rope dangling from the aft cargo hatch on the underbelly, near the "tail."

"Fire two!!"

The ship is visibly jarred by the broadside, but it waits -- perhaps gambling that the hamership won't try to ram them so close to the docks -- until the person on the dock has caught hold of the rope and been hauled to safety. Then the pilot brings her up and around, above the *_Invincible_*, where her catapult will be more difficult to use, and begins moving away -- toward Haven. The far slower military ship gives chase.

Soon thereafter, under the astonished eyes of the people of Bral, pirate ship and pursuit are both swallowed by the storm.

"What the--*what in the seventeen hells is going on here?!*" Melkin shouts as the spell finally wears off.

After the initial shock of what just happened wears off, Valarin sees to it that Emmett and the other person with him are safe and intact. Satisfied with their general well being, he suggests keeping a low profile for a little bit. He still couldn't believe what he was doing up there....

And he was right; it was a shell for another Spelljammer! Too bad he couldn't share his epiphany with anyone before it happened. Val rubs his hands together to warm them. Somebody else was helping them with magic. *Cold* magic. Val wondered if it was the half-elf with Emmett on deck.

Emmett sheathes his cutlass and wipes the dirt from his already well mended clothes, taking the opportunity to get a good look at his unexpected ally in the recent events. *_Comfortable with a sword, smart enough to wait for the advantage, graceful. Probably in the same line of work as Val then - itinerant adventurer._*

"Thanks for the help up there. We needed all we could get. Name's Emmett." He holds out a well-callused hand to the half elf.

At Emmett's first words, ibn Fadil tears his fascinated gaze away from the storm into which the pirates' ship has vanished. As politely as possible he avoids the man's outstretched hand, instead touching his own closed hand to the center of his chest and making a slight bow. "Yusuf ibn Fadil Manwar," he answers. "Ibn Fadil for, ah, short," he adds, smiling at his own joke.

Emmett withdraws his hand as gracefully as possible, smiling as he takes the uncommon pleasure of looking eye to eye with another grown man. Val appeared even taller in comparison to the two.

Valarin is reassured by Emmett's voucher that ibn Fadil was helping them. He smiles at ibn Fadil, but does not offer his hand. "I'm Valarin," he introduces himself, "my friends call me Val."

He runs his fingers through his hair in a semi-nervous gesture as he looks about the area at the wreckage and the gathering onlookers.

"Where in the hell were the Giff?" Val demands of nobody in particular as they make their way from the scene. He was sure they would've been more than a match for the pirates...

Emmett pitches his voice low, so that only his companions can hear him, and his face might as well have been made of stone. "The Giff were doing exactly what they've been paid to do - stay out of raiders way."

Catching the hard look on Emmett's face, Val pauses. It takes him a moment to piece everything together in his head.

"You mean I was... and they were... and then I..." Val sputters as it finally sinks in. "And you let me climb up the mast?" he accuses Emmett, only half in jest. His knees were feeling a bit weak.

Glancing back and forth between them, ibn Fadil opens his mouth as if to protest Emmett's implication, then shuts it abruptly as the obvious truth comes to him. A shocked and disappointed look crosses his face.

"Let you?" Emmett takes a quick look around, not wanting to risk the Giff overhearing and deciding to eliminate them as 'job protection' before continuing. "When I figured out what was going on I was perfectly ready to call it a loss and get off of there. Next thing I know you're five feet over my head! What was I to do, throw you over my shoulder and jump off?"

"Damn, I'm sorry," Val says, feeling foolish. "Lemme buy you a drink to make up for it? At least we can toast to our health, if not our fortune..."

Emmett looks at the taller man appraisingly, then breaks into grin, "Don't feel bad about it - you backed my move climbing into that shell in the first place, so I had to back you climbing the mast. That's how it works." He claps Val on the back with his good hand, displaying some of his surprising strength. "Not that I'll turn down a drink. I think a couple-three of rounds would suit just fine. Coming along, ibn Fadil? Our watering hole of choice is right down the street."

"Gladly," ibn Fadil says. "But let's ask Master Zeremin to join us; that was an impressive spell, and I'm almost sure it was his." He nods toward a young man in a worn wizard's robe

"Oh really?" Val mutters. So much for ibn Fadil being the spellcaster. He shudders a bit as he remembers how the rope he was dangling from simply broke apart from the frost. "Glad this Zeremin has good aim then," he adds dryly.

"Zeremin!" Emmett calls, hoping to get the young Magus' attention before he leaves the docks. "Ibn Fadil here says you're the one who nearly stopped the masked raider. We're off to go toast our continued health in face of danger. Care to join us?"

Alais waves back and heads over to join them.

A short distance away, near the landward end of the dock, the giff captain (whose name in Gustan), is delivering a lecture. "...Complete disgrace! Twenty-five years in service and I've never seen such incompetence! By all rights I ought to pitch you off the docks to drift out into space! You're on deep duty, all three of you, until we sail. Every day, starting now." The three look about as unhappy as a giff can look -- "deep duty" is their term for patrolling the lower reaches of Bral, which the big sentients tend to find claustrophobic -- but snap off a salute and head out of the square. More of their fellows are returning from the brawl, wanting to know what they missed, and civilians are also beginning to filter back into the square.

His reprimand delivered, Gustan heads over to the gathering defenders. "Ibn Fadil! You of all people! I thought you had more sense than that," he shakes his head in mock-sadness, grinning the while. "Going to sign up for a tour with us, are you?" he jokes, clapping the half-elf on the back -- carefully, so as not to actually break anything. "Clever bastards -- not to worry, they'll be brought in, if they make it through that storm, tiny little ship like that." All friendliness, he nods to the other two men, though there is no doubt he is taking careful note of them.

Emmett smiles back briefly, then looks at Val, trying to force him to keep his mouth shut by will alone. If that fails, he's perfectly willing to give the taller man a good whack with his pegleg.

Val, upon seeing the suddenly stern look on Emmett's face, remains quiet. He nods gravely, if not politely to the giff captain. *_Back on tour?_* Val thinks to himself. He experiences a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach after what Emmett had just mentioned about the giff in front of the half-elf. He rubs the sore spot on his arm where the bolt grazed him earlier...

Struggling to get his breath back, ibn Fadil shakes his head and manages a smile. "I think not, Captain Gustan," he wheezes. "I really don't know what came over me. And I hope it doesn't last!"

"Don't worry, Captain - after the drinking we do tonight, it's doubtful any of us will remember **anything** that went on today." Emmett says, forcing a smile to the huge Giff. "Shall we gentlemen? Bral awaits!"

With that the group decamps to the Blue Wyvern, where they find themselves as quiet a corner as possible. Emmett waves for the waiter and gets things going with the first round.

"We'll probably hear from the 3 Trees people soon enough about compensation for our efforts," the one-eyed man said. "We can afford a couple of drinks tonight. Griffin-Riders always down some rounds after a live-landing, and it's a good tradition."

Emmett holds out his hand to the young wizard thinking that the boy must be some magical prodigy, "Thanks for the help. That was a pretty impressive piece of magic! Haven't seen anything that big in a long time."

Ibn Fadil doubts Three Trees will be suffering fits of generosity any time soon, but says nothing about that. "Griffin-Riders?" he asks instead.

"Live-landing?" Val asks at almost the same time. He shudders to think about any other kind. "And the next round is on me," Val says to his companions. He didn't have much in the way of coin, but what he had should be more than enough to cover a round of beers.

"No, no, I'll get it," ibn Fadil protests, and produces a silver coin from the purse tucked into his sash.

Emmett gives his best knowing grin to his curious companions before expanding. From the change in his voice, it's obvious this is a subject close to the half-man's heart. "When you're a mile in the air and there's nothing holding you up there but 12 hands of temperamental Griffin, you celebrate every time you come down breathing." He gestures with his beer mug, looking mostly at Alais. "Nothing against spelljamming - hell, I've never been at the helm of one - but to me the only real flying is pitting yourself against a mount with the landscape a quarter hours walk beneath you."

"Griffin riding?" ibn Fadil repeats. "Where was this?" His tone suggests that he would never doubt Emmett's word, of course, but still ...

"Long ago and far away, my elf-blooded friend." Emmett waves his hook expressively. "But what's your story? I've heard people say you're from Zakhira, which is generally regarded as a myth. You seem real enough."

"Zakhara," the half-elf corrects. "It is quite real, but also quite, I suppose one could say, private." He looks wistful as he speaks of his home, but the conversation is interrupted by the waiter bringing the next round and taking his money.

Despite his bravado about inevitable payment, Emmett is nurturing his beer, enjoying every swallow rather than quaffing it down. Money is still tight, even with high hopes. He places his mug on the table. "Whoever this Fang character is, he or she is pretty organized. And sneaky. And I have to admire his tool use - that shell was brilliant. I knew there was something inside the ship, but I never imagined that it would be another ship!"

Alais says, "Yes, I have an idea about him. Although I wasn't able to get a good look at it, the tattoo on his face appeared to be the identifying glyph of the Hurgan Brotherhood of the Urcan civilization, of Master Del Farpri's theories. They were a secret society responsible for obscure religious monoliths found on several worlds in different spheres."

While the other two give Alais blank stares at this non sequitur, ibn Fadil asks quite seriously, "Could it not be a coincidence, Master Zeremin? A spiral, black or otherwise, is quite a simple mark."

Alais replies "Your skepticism does you credit, sir, and in truth I am not sure. But the spiral in question was not just a plain shape, but of a definite radius and with a certain number of turns, and it seemed this was of a likeness. Alas, I was not able to count the number of turns on the bandit's tattoo."

Emmett glances from Alais to Val to ibn Fadil and back during this exchange. "So when did this Hungarian Brotherhood turn to piracy?"

When Alais turns his attention to Emmett, ibn Fadil gives the half-man a look and a very small hand signal, discreetly trying to say, "No, don't encourage him any more!"

Alais doesn't notice, of course. "Since the last verifiable evidence of their existence is well over fifteen hundred years old, who knows what they may have gotten up to in the meantime? But regardless, I very much doubt this was a simple act of piracy. There are wheels within wheels here, gentlemen, as there are in almost anything worth a man's time."

Val recovers from his blank stare at Alais and mentions, "I was wondering about the shell thing. I'd noticed the mast swaying a lot when I climbed it." With a sheepish grin towards Emmett, Val adds, "Sorry I didn't get the chance to mention it before everything went to hell."

Val sips at his beer too, regretting he didn't get at least a cheap bottle of wine. He sighs into his mug as he thinks about what he's going to do now. Val wasn't as certain of a reward as Emmett seemed to be, considering the half-man's revelation about the giff...

"Communication is the first thing to vanish in a fight - I love listening to a colonel's plan assuming that they'll be able to directly talk to each unit once the fight starts. Water under the bridge, Val." Emmett gets up. And speaking of water, if you'll excuse me for a minute..." With that the half-man steps off to the Wyvern's glorious and scrupulously maintained lavatory - politely called the back alley.

Ibn Fadil promptly turns to Val. "And how did you wind up on the Rock, Mister Valarin?"

"Mister?" Val is amused by the honorific. "Just call me Val. And how I got here is a rather long story." He sips at his beer hoping ibn Fadil would let the matter drop. Judging by the expectant look on the half-elf's face, Val was under the impression he wasn't going to...

"The short of it is that I ended up on the wrong boat at the wrong time. Turned out to be a 'Jammer," Val shares, omitting the details of that fateful trip. "Once I got to where that one was going, it was a bit difficult to go back to Taros. So I just went along with it. I'd learned a few things, and signed on to a couple different ships. Ended up here not too long ago." He ended with a smile. "What about you? If you don't mind me saying so, you don't exactly look like you came from around here..."

"Not many do come from around here," ibn Fadil observes.

Alais chuckles. "Well, there are a few of us natives around. Although many leave as soon as they are able. Bral is a good place to be from."

"As for me, I have been around a bit since I ... left home." He shrugs a little uncomfortably. "I do not care for traveling, and so I've been here on the Rock for some time. "

Emmett returns several minutes later, just in time for the next round and for the serious drinking to begin. For all of his diminutive size, the small human has an impressive alcohol tolerance. After a the third round, he seems less animated, and his tales of griffin flying bubble to the surface, filled with a sense of loss. Spurred on by ibn Fadil's boundless curiosity, he has, by the end of the evening, given many stories of his adventures in the Imperial Air Corps. Telling the tales seems to improve his mood, but it's hard to tell how much of others' conversation he actually absorbs.

* * *

"Do you think they noticed anything?"

"I don't know. Not sure I like the looks of those guys. Even if they did, what could they do?"

"Cause trouble."

"Nothing we couldn't deal with, surely?"

"You never know. The runts are sneaky. Never seen ibn Fadil stick his neck out like that for anything but good odds."

"You don't think he's one of theirs, maybe?"

"Nah." A moment of thoughtful silence. "Best not to take any chances."

"But they said --"

"This isn't them, it's us. Take care of it."

* * *

Aside: The Oligarchal Complex on Bral

"Please, Captain! You must help me!" Sidney Volant suddenly realizes that his tone has descended from the polite demand he intended to issue into something far less dignified.

"Must I?" his guest replies coolly. "Their ship was almost certainly destroyed, and I've already sent all available flitters to Haven to search for the wreckage. What more, exactly, 'must' I do?"

Volant draws a deep breath and goes on in a more moderate tone. "I beg of you. We must get word to Janik of the... the theft."

“Then you will have to do it yourself,” Captain Greywing replies briskly. “You know that I do not involve myself in Bral’s affairs beyond its defensive measures -- which I believe I have mentioned in the past, and as you will perhaps now agree, are less than perfectly effective.”

His slightly jowly face reddens. “Evidently.”

“Besides,” she leans back in the chair with a faint smile on her narrow elven features, “you haven’t even told me what was stolen. I’m supposed to put men and ships at your disposal merely to keep you from losing face before these other... merchants?” The word has a slight twist, not quite a sneer.

The interview is clearly going nowhere; Volant gives in, and with an exchange of empty pleasantries has the captain escorted from his office. He glances around with a shudder at the thought that the raiders might have decided to strike here instead of at the docks -- but no, they had known what they were doing, far too well.

He must get the word out -- preferably without letting the competition get the slightest whiff that would spell weakness. Of course the thieves’ ship must have been destroyed, he tells himself, but that’s no real help; anyone who guesses the truth will descend on Haven to look for the loot, and eventually someone will find it.

He goes to the window and looks down, across the chaotic rooftops of the city. Out there beyond the docks his employees have been working busily, salvaging what they can of the old ship the raiders used for their disguise. There is really on one thing he can do.

* * *

Aside: The Audacity

The ship floats at rest, hidden within one of the tangles of Haven’s floating vegetation. It’s never particularly “night” on the air world, but between the clouds and the surrounding brush, it is fairly dark as the crew gathers on the small ship’s upper deck to consider their situation.

“That went better than I expected,” Fang rasps; it’s clearly painful for her to talk.

“In that case I can only assume you were expecting to get killed,” Shane snorts dourly. He’d had to carry her up to the deck; she’d twisted her ankle badly on landing, and the beyond-freezing cold of the wizard’s wand has left much of her skin painfully red and swollen, her hands bandaged now where they were scraped raw by the rope as she’d made her final escape. And then there’s her hair...

“Next time we’re there I’ll steal that wand,” she smiles irrepressibly. “As it is, we didn’t lose anyone.”

“We came a lot closer than I’d have liked. I can’t believe those damn fools boarded us.”

“We should have brought them along. They seemed to have the right spirit.”

“More guts than sense, I’ll grant you...”

The others join them -- the three who had accompanied Shane onto Bral, Otto who had remained on board and triggered the bolts that loosed the Audacity from her shell, and the wizard Tokala.

“If you will,” their captain nods at Shane, who sighs theatrically but produces a bottle of wine and set of cups.

Fang raises her glass high, cupped in both aching hands. “First -- to the Fair Enough Lass. Well did she serve, and well-deserved is her rest. May she fly again one day. And second, to you,

my intrepid crew. Bral will be talking about this ten years from now -- and we'll still be living off the money." The men laugh, and drink. "Now. What's our status?"

"Not terribly good," Otto admits. "That ballista hit took us pretty hard, and while the storm was something of a stroke of luck, it would be hard to say which kind. I can jury-rig us for now and if the gods are kind we'll make it to the rendezvous point, but I'll need a week or three someplace where we can do real repairs before we get into any more fights with hammerships."

"Which means we can't stay here," Shane puts in. "Speaking of hammerships. Plus the _Swift Star_'ll be looking for us as soon as she gets word of this."

"I'm of no mind to become a feather in Greywing's cap. We'll be on our way as soon as Otto gets us rigged to his satisfaction, then," Fang declares. "Tokala? What do you say?" The quiet wizard shrugs amiably. "Did you have a chance to look at what we got?"

"Some of it," he admits. "The papers are in code -- you can have a look at them later. The trinkets Volant left around to impress the customers will fetch a pretty penny in any number of places, I think. This, however..." He pulls a many-faceted crystal from his sleeve. "You've outdone yourself."

"What is it?" Otto asks.

"A map." He leans back against the rail and holds the crystal up in a bar of faint sunlight. Colors spring forth in mid-air, floating tracers between pearlescent bubbles. "A Three Trees' map of the Flow, the accumulated knowledge of two hundred fifty years of their operations."

* * *

Late in the evening on the day of the raid, ibn Fadil leaves the narrow room nobody would stoop to calling home, and heads into the warren of subterranean tunnels of which it is a part. Looking into a couple of his haunts and buying a quick meal, he's a bit bothered by how many people are still talking about him and the pirates. No doubt they'll forget about it as soon as another ship comes in and brings some new distraction, but for now he still has to laugh and shrug and pass it off as another ill-considered whim.

Now that he's rested and fed, he feels more or less ready for his next task -- paying back some of the money he owes Vlad. But as he makes his way down another of Bral's innumerable narrow streets, he is not terribly surprised to find his path barred by Parrak's blocky form. The presence of the rather large man standing beside the dwarf means that there is probably another behind ibn Fadil as well, and that his day is about to take a very unpleasant turn.

With a hint of desperation, and keeping his hands noticeably away from his weapons, he smiles and says, "Mister Parrak! I am just going to see Vlad. Is he in his office, do you know?"

"He is not," Parrak replies gravely. "He has, however, asked that I deliver a message to you." His slight shift of stance is a signal; ibn Fadil hears a soft footstep behind him as the man there draws a bit nearer.

"Oh?" ibn Fadil says. He feels so tense he ought to be vibrating, but tries not to show it, or that he'll make a break for it, as he has to, just as soon as one of the others moves. "What is it?"

"Your payment?" the dwarf inquires, instead of answering. "It was, I believe, due a couple of days ago."

"I was going to see Mister Vlad about that," ibn Fadil hastens to reply. "I do have the money!" He starts to gesture toward his purse, then immediately thinks better of it.

"If you would, then." He nods to the man beside him, who steps forward, open handed.

Warily (could he possibly be overreacting?), ibn Fadil extracts his purse from under his sash and starts fumbling for some of the coins in it.

The man behind him makes his move as soon as his quarry's hands are occupied. The half-elf tries to spin away from him, but is caught by the upper arms and held firmly while the other man takes his purse and tosses it over to Parrak, who counts its contents in a leisurely fashion. Ibn Fadil has no real choice but to stand and watch the dwarf enjoy his uncertainty. Were he to escape, that would only delay the inevitable; if he draws steel, they might actually kill him.

Parrak tucks the money away into his own purse. "Not bad. Oh, and I almost forgot -- the message. Don't get any big ideas. Your friends won't be any inconvenience."

As the dwarf settles back to watch, ibn Fadil has time to think: I knew better to than to get involved this morning, I did. Then the man in front punches him in the stomach, prudently takes his knife and sword away and tosses them aside, and starts in on his work in earnest.

When they let him go he crumples to the rocky ground, dazed and gasping. Something soft lands on his face -- his empty purse, he guesses. Three sets of footsteps go away down the street. He wonders bleakly, How did I get on the path to this place? Ah, yes; it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Getting up will not be an option for a while. He lies there listening to the Rock of Bral, to distant and nearby people laughing, shouting, talking, and working. Someone comes along this street, moderate footsteps that falter when they come near, then hastily move on. He tries to imagine what his Uncle Karim would say if he were to try to explain this circumstance and fails; he cannot imagine being off this miserable rock. The sun-warmed streets of his home city are a dream constantly slipping further away.

A heavy set of footsteps approaches, hesitates, and stops. "Ibn Fadil!" a man says. "They found ya, eh?" The voice comes closer: "Fat Jack was takin' odds on when."

He opens his eyes, or at least the one that isn't swelling shut. A large ill-shaven man is leaning over him, someone he knows, but his wits are too scattered to place him.

"Kin ya get up? No? Never mind," the man goes on. "Where -- oh, I see 'em." A slight clattering, as the man collects his lost weapons for him. "Now, let's see," he says, and scoops the battered half-elf up in his oversized arms. Ibn Fadil chokes back a cry at this jostling. "Sorry," the man says, and starts off. "Where is it ye live? Herry's, right?"

As the man's running commentary continues, ibn Fadil remembers him: One of the bouncers at the Brass Bottle, inaptly named Robin. Not very bright, and not someone he's spent a lot of time talking to. But someone who is helping him now. Even though the man's every jolting step sends a spasm of new pain through him, he grits his teeth and keeps silent.

Finally Robin stops and kicks at a door. "It's ibn Fadil," he explains.

There is a pause; then Herry says, "Better bring him in."

He is astonished to find himself deposited in the sitting room of his hatchet-faced landlady, who advances on him with a candle. "Stop that," she snaps when he shies away from her hand, and seizes his chin so she can inspect his face. "Not too bad," is her verdict. "Can you see all right? Not fuzzy or doubled?"

"It's fine," he manages to say. "Nothing cracked or broken, I think, ma'am." It has never occurred to him to wonder about Herry's life before she ran a rooming-house, but he does now as he watches the old woman go to a cabinet and return to him with an old metal flask.

"Drink," she commands, and he takes a mouthful of some cheap, raw brandy and somehow swallows it, coughing. Under her stern eye he swallows twice more, and the pain blurs a little. "You'll feel worse in the morning," she warns.

"I know," he answers dully, unwilling to contemplate that.

Herry commandeers Robin to help her tenant up to his room, and unlocks the door with her own key. "I'll look in on you in the morning," she promises as they leave him on his narrow cot, tucked under his one blanket.

The room is tiny, dark, and not very warm. He would think he had dreamed, except that he's never before dreamed of finding friends so unlooked-for.

* * *

The next day, Hiro waits patiently while the rest of the crew disembark -- the quartet of whooping grommams first, followed by the hurwaeti pair, the human crew, and finally the xixchil called Brilliant. Captain Roe and the halfling owners stay aboard for the time being; they will have business to conduct later on. Perhaps being smaller they do not feel so confined by the ship, or perhaps it's because most of them were born there.

It has been a most interesting year, but he was firm in his insistence earlier that it is time to move on, before the Faithful can begin the return leg of its journey. He has no interest in returning. Thus he carries with him his final pay, and the letter Master Thistlewort wrote praising his service.

Bral certainly appears to be a busy place; the square is thronged with people of a dozen species, all trying to sell something to the new arrivals. He is surprised by this later, when a casual inquiry after the local news brings him a tale of a daring raid carried out in that very place only the day before. Apparently Bral's citizens aren't easily shaken.

There are rumors as well that a ship's crew is being put together the following noon. It would be a stroke of luck if they need a sword; no harm in passing by....

* * *

It is the second day after the raid, and Bral is still buzzing furiously with debate about how it was done and who was actually responsible. Comparisons are made to the legendary Mad Cavalier and other notorious pirates. An elven man'o'war lurks near the asteroid as the captain makes a rare visit to the oligarchs. The docks have been even busier than usual as salvage workers gather the usable timber from the fragmented ship, and the Invincible has repairs made to the minor damage it sustained during the chase through the storm. Her crew have already clashed with that of the Magnus over the latter's failure to contain the "incident" to Bral itself, with a couple of serious injuries resulting. No one has seen Melkin since the crimson-faced mage snatched the collar from his unthanked helper's hand and stormed up into the offices.

And now Three Trees has put out the word that it's looking for men to crew a small ship. Interested parties should report to the Clockwork Dragon, just across the way from the Oligarchic enclave itself, on the following noon and be prepared for immediate departure. Some insist it's a false rumor, since no 3 Trees ships have come into dock, no name is given for the ship, and no one knows who's going to captain her -- but it's an awfully persistent rumor if that's the case.

That morning, both Alais and Brother Pham receive a visitor, both well-dressed gentlemen with a certain bureaucratic air.

"I beg pardon for interrupting your day, sir, but might I have a moment of your time?"

Pham looks up at the stranger from the bench he is sitting on and smiles. "Well met, sir. Blessings be upon you. Please, join me." Pham gestures towards a spot on the rough bench. "My name is Brother Luc Pham, although I suspect you already know that."

"I am Jarett Quillan; I am in the employ of Mr. Volant. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." He seats himself beside Pham, who is able to note the rich simplicity of the man's garb.

Pham smiles, slightly amused at himself. "I have a suspicion that a man of your bearing and refinement wouldn't be talking to a rough priest such as myself without reason. Perhaps ... the incident at the docks earlier? So, how can I help you?"

"Tangentially related only," Quillan replies, "in that it brought you more fully to our attention. You have perhaps heard that we are presently looking for a ship's crew."

"A crew? No, I had not heard. But I am interested. Bral has many interesting features, but they begin to wear on one such as myself after a time. I assume you mean to offer me a berth aboard such a ship? Mr. Quillan, I am quite interested. What is the mission, and who is the captain? And the rest of the crew?"

"The ship will be traveling to our headquarters, a journey of perhaps three months -- nothing terribly taxing. Forgive me if I cannot be any specific, but given our business we must be careful." His smile appear genuine. "Theodosius Barthelm is captain; feel free to make inquiries, but I think you will find that his reputation is impeccable. We are in the process of hiring additional crew, but as I'm sure you know we are careful about those to whom we entrust our ships."

"I don't mean to be alarmist, but... are you aware of the nature of my faith?" Pham nervously fingers the holy symbol beneath his shirt. "I'm afraid that many find it - easy to misunderstand. I do not wish to be thrown among those who would wish me harm based on such confusion. Given time, I can of course convince them to at least give me the benefit of the doubt, but there have been times when I have not been given such an option."

"Of course," Jarett nods gravely. "These matters can be particularly difficult amid a small crew. Still - we have heard no word against you in your time on Bral, and your actions during the incident were entirely commendable. Captain Theo did not object, and he will keep order among the crew." There is the faintest note in his voice hinting that he very much wants Pham to agree to this; it's entirely possible that he has already approached others of Bral's small religious population and been refused.

"Oh, and one more question. How is Melkin? Did they ever figure out how the pirates got that collar on him?"

"I'm afraid that Master Melkin has not confided in me as to the precise nature of the device that was used or how entry may have been gained, but he certainly appears to have made a full recovery," is the smooth reply. "We can all be grateful that these rogues seem to have a mind to pranksterism, rather than murder."

Pham looks off into space for a moment. Not quite meditating, but more than just thinking. Then he looks at Quillan and smiles. "Mr. Quillan, I think that this voyage could do me some good. Assuming the pay works out equitably, I am willing to sign onto this voyage. Allow me an hour or so to fetch my things, and then I will join you. Where should we meet?"

Quillan chuckles, pleased and with a hint of relief. "There's a bit more time than that, I think, but if you'll do us the honor of stopping by the Clockwork Dragon at about the eighth bell, that would serve very well."

* * *

Emmett stumps quickly into the Blue Wyvern, scanning the crowd for Valarin. Spotting him in his traditional shady corner, Emmett waves, then hustles over. "Val. I told you there'd be a reward, didn't I?"

"Reward?" Val looks up at his seemingly excited friend, distracted from casually glancing about the taproom foreign easy mark. He was still cursing himself for having to replace that good dagger he lost two days ago. Val offers Emmett a seat so the two can talk more privately. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, 'what do I mean?'" Emmett looks exasperated. "Haven't you heard the word on the street? The Three Trees are looking for a small ship's crew, but they don't have anything in dock. They've got to be putting a crew together to either hunt through Haven for the *Audacity*'s wreckage, or to find them if they survived the storm. They either lost something really valuable or need to reclaim some honor by making sure that people don't think they can raid 3 Trees with impunity."

"I've heard," Val replies. "But like you said, there's no ship at dock." The one that came in yesterday is an independent operator, with a full crew more's the pity. The young man stretches and runs his fingers through his hair, realizing he'd been sitting here much too long. "Besides, what has this got to do with us or a reward?"

"Given how well the raiders planned everything else, I know they must have made it out of that storm. Heck, they may have planned on it. We were willing to get involved when no one else did. We got up close and personal with the pirates, so we can identify them. They have to hire us. This is our ticket out of here!" There's obvious excitement in the Half-Man's face.

Val grimaces at the mention of their involvement. But, kindled by the gleam in Emmett's good eye, Val's urge to get off this rock seems to ignite. "You have a point there," he says calmly, trying to cover the excitement he is also beginning to feel. Val stands and offers a last glance about the Blue Wyvern. "So, do you think they'll have a position for you after they hire me on?" Val grins at the Half-Man.

Emmett smiles in return, "Sure. They can't need more than one guy to shimmy up masts." With surprising strength he takes Val's arm and 'helps' him to his feet. "Course, if we don't hurry we might have to fight other people who don't realize that we're the natural candidates for the deck-stumper and mast-monkey positions. Pay your tab and haul your cab."

With that the oddly mismatched pair make their way over to the Clockwork Dragon.

The Dragon is a large (for Bral) and quite impressive building. It stands on its own plot of ground, without butting up against any other structures. The lower two of its four stories are walled with stone, the upper two wooden, carved and brightly painted. It faces on a broad avenue, on the other side of which is the low wall that marks the oligarchic enclave, so its upper stories look over into the gardens. Over the door is the inn's namesake, a sinuous, beautifully articulated metal dragon, courtesy of the Rock's gnomish community (which also runs/lives in/works in/occasionally blows up the Incredibly Astounding Amazing Emporium!!!, on the edge midway between the two "poles" of the Rock). Every nineteen days the sign works; the dragon undulates, opens and closes its mouth, flaps its wings. Today is not the nineteenth day.

There is a decent cluster of people waiting in front of the place, a couple dozen faces you know fairly well from your idle weeks on the Rock. There are a couple of giff loitering about, keeping an eye on the riff-raff.

Emmett quickly scans the Giff, looking to see if any of the 'guards' from the raid are also present. Not spying any, he calms down a little giving Val a thumbs up. _At least this way we won't get dragged into an alley and beaten,_ he thinks. Emmett is still angry with himself for not coming forward with his revelations. He had tried to meet with members of the Elvish navy, knowing them to be beyond reproach, but he has no connections, no way to see someone in authority. In the end he had dropped it, but it rankled. He suspects that atoning for that failure was one of the reasons he was so set on getting this job, but doesn't let that dim his actual enthusiasm for the thought of flying again.

Shaking the thoughts out of his head, he looks over the crowd, trying to see if it's a disorderly queue he can cut to the front of or a mass awaiting the sign to enter. The crowd bustles and writhes in a very un-queued way, a dozen sets of eyes staring at the door, answering his question. "Looks like we wait, Val. Guess you could have had that last drink after all..."

"S'okay, Emmett," Val replies. He is still staring at the façade of the Clockwork Dragon, taking in the details. At least, that's what he appeared to be doing. Val is also listening in on the conversations of the people waiting to get in. Information is always valuable, no matter how it is obtained.

He doesn't have to try very hard to overhear neighboring conversations. Given the lack of official word, those waiting are happily passing around their own theories -- that it has some relation to the raid, that it's being sent with the raid as some sort of cover, that it was going to happen anyway and this is just a coincidence.

Someone suggests that more pirates are sure to descend on Bral. Someone else suggests that it wasn't even a raid, but a convoluted means of getting a secret message to Three Trees or the entire oligarchy, or an assassination attempt on Melkin.

There are theories that Volant is planning to flee in disgrace, or he's sending his family elsewhere, or he's planning to track the raiders down personally. Melkin is going to be piloting, or he's still having relapses into doggish behavior and is frantically searching for a cure, or he's vanished entirely. Since the mage isn't around, one hopeful sailor feels safe in demonstrating to his fellows the collar's effects.

Discussion of what ship will go turns to speculation about the unknown deep reaches of Bral; popular wisdom has long held that the oligarchs maintain all sorts of armaments down there in case of prolonged siege, so why not a ship?

About a half-hour before noon, ibn Fadil wanders down the street toward the crowd. At some point over the past two days, the half-elf has acquired a black eye and a split lip. His pace slows as he angles to pass behind the crowd, and he stares indecisively at it or the tall building behind it.

"Hey...Isn't that...Ibn Fadil!" Emmett waves for the half elf's attention. When he sees the man's face he gets a concerned look on his own.

"Whoa. Looks like someone worked you over pretty fierce." Emmett looks surreptitiously over at the Giff, trusting ibn Fadil's sharp eye to catch the message. "Anyone we know?"

"No, nothing to do with that," ibn Fadil says amiably. "I fell down a ladder." He lets his gaze slip back toward the Dragon. "What do you think of this, Emmett?"

"I think this is Val and my's ticket off the Rock. And yours if you want to come along." Emmett gives him a concerned look, thinking the half elf might need a way off the rock quickly, regardless of what he said at the Blue Wyvern two nights ago. "They've got to be mounting an

expedition against the raiders, and we're shoe ins, having come face to face with them at perilously close quarters."

Val offers ibn Fadil a smile to back up Emmett's offer. "You sure you're okay?" Val asks the half-elf, showing sincere concern. He'd seen injuries like that from when he was a kid on the streets of Driahn. It looked to him like a ladder may have been involved, but not as something that was fallen off of.... Val reflexively looks about the immediate area to see if ibn Fadil was being followed.

"Much better than yesterday, thank you," ibn Fadil says. Watching him, they realize that he's moving a bit carefully - he is probably rather stiff and sore around the midriff.

The coast appears to be clear any of anyone keeping an eye on the half-elf in particular, but one person who is clearly not a sailor stands out on the edge of the crowd; a young human woman. She is neatly-dressed but clearly a servant, and just as clearly a bit nervous of those around her.

Perhaps justifiably. One of the men in a cluster near her leers broadly and has opened his mouth to deliver some witticism when his comrade steps fiercely on his foot. In the muttered discussion that follows, Val and the others hear the name Victor.

Finally, as the stroke of noon approaches, a man steps out from the building. Steps lead down from the door, so he's slightly above the rest of the crowd.

The man is medium height, with grey-salted brown hair, and he carries himself like one accustomed to authority. He is clearly known to most of those in the crowd, since they quiet immediately upon his appearance. He pauses to survey the gathering for a moment, then nods in apparent satisfaction.

"I'm sure there's a lot of questions. I'm Captain Theo Barthelm, which should answer those of you wondering who's running this junket." Scattered cheers; he's apparently well thought of by at least some of the locals. "We're looking for crew and weapons, a dozen or so, for a six-month there-and-back. Anyone interested in that, sort yourselves into a queue, and the mate and I'll be talking to you."

With surprising strength and perseverance, Emmett pushes his way to the front of the now-forming queue, dragging along his companions in his wake.

"I guess that'll be you with the patch first, then -- Emmett, isn't it? C'mon inside." Since Emmett has never spoken to the captain before, it's clear that some asking around was done after events on the docks.

The interior is subdued and restful in ambience. There aren't any windows on this floor, but expensive oil lamps in wall niches give off a faintly sweet scent. Paintings adorn both sides of the wide, high-ceilinged hallway; pastoral landscapes and mountain vistas for the most part. The place is clearly designed to evoke a sense of being planetside, to divert thought from the truncated landscape outside. Theo leads the way to a small chamber at the back of the inn. There is another man there, whom the captain introduces as First Mate Delmar. He appears ready to act as secretary, sitting at a small desk; Theo remains standing.

"So tell me, what were you thinking the other day when you decided to storm that ship?"

"No task can be completed without the proper tools, sir." Emmett says.

"Sounds like a maxim. Meaning?"

"There were too few raiders coming off the ship for any sort of serious assault. It seemed obvious that they didn't have much of a crew, because why would the crew all be belowdecks

when they're about to get shore leave? Bral is generally too well defended for any standard assault to work. That meant that these people had limited numbers - so we were safe going on board - and some tool that they thought would let them get away. Deny them they tool and they couldn't finish the job."

Emmett shrugged, "Turns out the tool was a little bigger than I thought is all."

Theo smiles a bit. "Well spoken. Why not let those defenses do their job, though? They are handsomely paid for it, after all."

"They were handsomely paid by someone, alright." The words are out of Emmett's mouth before he realizes it.

The other two men in the room are suddenly paying much closer attention. "Explain," Theo says, with more than a touch of command to his tone.

Hearing his words floating in the air, he decides to bite the bolt and make the best of it. "I was front and center in that raid, sir, and I can't see any way that the raiders got back to the ship without having paid off the Giff in advance."

"That masked woman never got off the ship - she just got on." Emmett glances around the room to see how this is going over. "She'd been on Bral long enough to scope out the most likely target, set up the brawl that drew most of the Giff out of the way, and to pass around other money to smooth their way off."

"I could be wrong. There might be another explanation for a half-dozen well trained Giff falling over themselves and not stopping four wounded men." Emmett smiles a very small, hard smile, making it quite clear he doesn't believe that at all, before continuing.

"Why get involved at all?" Emmett shrugs. "I'm a follower of Gond, sir. Gond states that intention is useless unless tied with action. I intend to get on a legitimate ship off Bral. That meant taking action to do so. I had hoped that by stopping the raiders I would ingratiate myself with Three Trees and land a position as a Marine.

"Plus, I'm not much for raiders sir. Had enough problems with them on my homeworld."

"Really. Tell me a bit about your other ships."

In short order Emmett explains his previous tours, focusing on the events that relate to his role as a marine. His natural self confidence shines through, making it look as though Emmett perceives the interview as a mere bureaucratic formality - he already has this job, but is willing to go through the interview just to satisfy all the paperwork. Theo notes this but doesn't comment, busy with other thoughts at the moment.

"If I can ask, what's the mission for, sir?"

"I can't say much about it at this time, but I can tell you that we're not looking for trouble, but intend to be prepared for it, given what happened the other day."

"I'm perfectly prepared to deal with the trouble we dealt with the other day, sir. I think my actions speak clearly on that front."

Theo grunts and gives a nod that could mean anything. "In light of your accusations, I'm going to ask you to go over what happened during the raid in some detail. Have you mentioned this to anyone else?" he adds.

"Just the two men who helped me try and stop the raid - Valaran and ibn Fadil. Since you knew who *I* was by sight, I assume you researched them as well." Emmett jerks his head to

indicate the door, "They're with me, right outside. And I know they've kept their mouths shut as well."

"Huh. Delmar?"

The mate nods, lays down his pen and leaves the room.

"I..." Emmett looks uncharacteristically troubled as he continues, "I'm sorry I didn't come forward with my suspicions sooner, but seeing as it was the Police who had been bribed, I didn't know who to trust. I can handle myself in a fight just fine, but against three or four Giff in an alley? I wouldn't hold much for anyone's chances. I'm just glad I got into a position to safely tell *someone*."

"That you have. Of course, there will have to be some looking into this. Tell me how things unfolded down there. I've heard several accounts, but your perspective was a bit different."

The captain takes notes as Emmett goes over the events of the morning, frequently asking questions about the exact positioning of the various people involved, or probing for more detail on a particular aspect.

Emmett answers as clearly as possible, not complaining with the captain goes back over some details again and again. It's obvious from his professional nature that he's been through this kind of debriefing many times before. It's also obvious that he's already regarding the Captain as his superior officer - since, after all, he already has the job.

Outside, Val notices another giff passing through, the one that was with the captain during the raid and hence escaped reprimand. He pauses to pass some conversation with the two already present, but they're not within hearing distance. The new one glances in their direction.

Ibn Fadil, too busy with his own problems to notice the giff, recalls that he promised himself he was not going to do anything to draw more unfavorable attention, and contemplating departure so obviously is definitely breaking that promise. Maybe the Dragon has a job for him; he got on well there last year, and perhaps the cook will overlook his failure to give notice, though the headwaiter probably won't.

"Val," he says, "I'm sure I will see you again, should you return to Bral." Nodding, he starts to move away, toward the near corner of the Dragon.

"Wait," Val says to the half-elf before he disappears into the crowd. "What's wrong? It looks to me that you might want to get off this rock too..." Val trails off meaningfully. He studies ibn Fadil's face for any sign of what happened.

Ibn Fadil pauses to look up at the tall man again; he only shakes his head slightly at Val's effort to draw him out, and his expression becomes guarded.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Val pitches his voice low as not to attract too much attention, "If you don't want to talk *right now*, that's fine. But you backed us up the other day. At least give a chance for someone to make it up to you..."

"I'm always in 'some kind of trouble,'" the half-elf says with a self-mocking smile. "But unless you're a rich man in disguise, you can't get me out of it." He glances around, finally noticing the trio of giff, and eyes them for a moment. "And I assure you," he adds, "I see my troubles as entirely my fault."

He looks at the giff again - that's Albon, who's usually glued to Gustan's right elbow ... If the giff can't be trusted, he thinks uneasily, why am I trusting that I'm safe from them? He tries to look past the slowly-forming line of sailors to see if there are any more giff on the other side.

"Listen," Val says to ibn Fadil in a low voice, "I've been in bad situations before myself and I know that help is hard to find... I may not be rich, but I might know a way to get you out." He puts a slight emphasis on the last three words, looking for the half-elf's reaction. Val was recalling his own harrowing flight from the ports of Driahn.

"Besides, what are you doing *here* if you didn't want to leave?" Val adds amiably, trying to ease the tension he felt building.

Not seeing any other giff, ibn Fadil tries to think the situation through, and does not really listen to Val. Their reputation has blinded me, he muses, as it has everyone else. They wouldn't hesitate to protect themselves any more than I would, just delay a bit, to throw off suspicion. With one foolish gesture I've made myself visible and dangerous to them. If I leave, just in case, once things cool down I can return - owing Vlad more money in interest than I could possibly earn. I will *never* live this down. But at least I'll be alive to worry about it. Lady Fate, give Your favor to a poor soul who treads Your ways ...

Something of these thoughts shows in his face, finally resolving into a trapped expression. "Thinking that I had a choice," he answers Val's remark quietly. "Maybe in six months the other day will be far enough in the past ..." He glances at the giff yet again, then turns toward the Dragon's expensive front door.

"There's always a choice," Val says with a grin, content in thinking he has convinced ibn Fadil to try to leave this place. "The trick is making the wrong ones *look* right," he continues, attempting to cheer his dispirited companion. Six months? Val tried to remember how long ago he had fled his own home.

Still uneasy about the giff hanging around, Val remains alert. If more approach, or if the ones present head towards ibn Fadil, he resolved to see the half-elf away safely. He is still convinced the giff might have had something to do with ibn Fadil's ladder incident....

The door above the steps opens again; this time a different man steps out. He scans the crowd for a moment, eyes the giff across the street before glancing at Val and ibn Fadil. "You two -- Captain wants to see you."

Ibn Fadil hesitates for a fraction of a moment, feeling exactly as if he is about throw himself off a cliff and trust the goddess to catch him. Then he starts for the stairs, exhibiting only a slightly wary curiosity.

The two are ushered into the back of the inn, where they wait for a few minutes in silence before the door is opened by Theo himself. Beyond lies a small room; Emmett is there.

"Ah, good. Go on upstairs and keep an eye on things outside, why don't you." When the mate has left, Theo clears his throat. "All right, you two. We'll get to your qualifications in a minute, assuming you're looking for a berth and not just passing by -- I've heard what Emmett has to say about the other day, now I'd like your stories. You first, ibn Fadil." He leans against a wall where he can watch all three of them, eyes mainly on the half-elf, of whom he seems a bit skeptical.

"I got involved because I was angry, Captain," ibn Fadil says simply. "I suppose I've been living here too long. When I saw this raid going on, I responded as if Bral were my home." He seems a little embarrassed, whether by the idea of considering Bral his home or by his unanticipated attachment to the place, it's hard to say.

"As to what I hoped to accomplish ..." He shrugs. "I cannot claim I was thinking clearly. If I was thinking at all," he adds wryly. "It seemed that it might be possible for the three of us to dis-

tract or disable the one pirate, and thus help the giff capture him. The ship coming apart, another ship being inside - I never dreamed of such a thing. It all happened very quickly."

"And the giff?" Theo inquires.

The half-elf glances at Emmett, his expression growing troubled. "Were no help. I confess the thought of treachery did not cross my mind until Emmett suggested it. Then, of course, it was clear at once how it fit what I had seen happen. I do not know if I would have thought of this on my own. All I have heard suggests the giff have always been reliable. But then, who better to suborn than one who is greatly trusted?"

"And sir, I would prefer to think we are wrong. In my time here I have seen that Bral is not so different from my home, with powerful houses balanced against one another - the whole supported by an understanding here, an agreement there, and by other elements like the giff. It is a house of cards, if I may say so. And if the giff cannot be trusted - the balance of it all shifts. There is conflict, trouble, perhaps even bloodshed." He pauses to gauge Theo's reaction and see if he has been understood.

"And also, sir, if we are correct then the three of us may be in danger, should the giff think we have detected their perfidy. The more I have thought about it - well, I'm here. I would only toy with the idea of leaving, otherwise."

Theo listens to this in silence, his slightly raised eyebrows indicative of his surprise; this is not the ibn Fadil he is used to seeing. Before he can say anything, there is a tap at the door.

"Enter."

The mate has returned. With a nod to the captain he says, "Lit out, sir, soon as the door closed behind us. Doesn't look good. T'other two are still there."

"Damnation." Theo sighs heavily. "And I suppose you're going to tell me the same story?" he asks Val.

"Afraid so, sir."

Silence falls while the captain spends a few moments in thought. "All right. Can't say I like any of this, but here's what we'll do. We've got your reports; it'll be up to the Council to do anything about it. We can't delay this trip, and you lot are better off out of sight for a time. I've been known to gamble once or twice in my day, and I'll stake a throw that you're not playing games and take you on for the trip, solve two problems that way.

"Now, I still have a crew to fill out. You probably need to fetch your kits, so do that on the double, and stick together. Delmar, you can go with them." The short, burly man nods. "Go to the ship when you're ready. We'll set sail just as soon as we can."

Leaving the Dragon, it feels as if all the eyes on Bral are watching the four, but no observers are posted at the back door - yet. Delmar proves himself to be a Rock native; he takes them by ways even ibn Fadil hadn't known about, complicating their path beyond all possibility of being followed. It doesn't take long to gather the new crew members' few belongings.

Back at the inn, interviews move at something of a breakneck pace, winnowing the crowd of applicants down into something resembling a crew. The drunks, the lazy, and those who seem over-inclined to dicker about the pay scale are quickly sent on their way. Messages arrive and are sent. A subtle tension seems to spread over the whole of Bral -- but nothing happens to break it.

At last, it's done. Theo scratches his mustache, rubs a hand cramped from all that unaccustomed note-taking, and prepares to report to his employer; no doubt he'll be most interested in much of what has happened this day.

At a soft knock on the door he glances that way, surprised. "Enter." A tall shadow precedes its caster into the room, and he finds himself tensing. "What do you want?"

* * *

"Good morning, Master Zeremin." A man of fifty-odd years bows politely. "My name is Cairbre Weston, and I am in the employ of the Three Trees company. I apologize if I am interrupting, but might I have a moment of your time?"

"Good morning, sir. How may I help you?" Alais politely invites him into the somewhat dingy room; since there is only one chair, he offers that to his visitor and sits on the bed, waiting to hear what the visit is about.

"Thank you. I will not take you long from your studies -- you have perhaps heard that we are hiring crew for a ship. We are also looking for a pilot. Naturally, your name was mentioned." He tilts his head slightly in an inquiring fashion, waiting to see how the idea is received.

"And what would the purpose of this voyage be?"

"A relatively brief trip, transporting a small amount of cargo to our central office."

Hmmmm, Alais thinks. Are they trying to quiet me about something? "What kind of ship, and what cargo?"

"A tradesman, of a type I believe you have prior experience with. Not terribly large. We are looking for crew at this very moment." He pauses, weighing his words. "It is important that we get word to them of what has happened here."

"So is there a cargo or are we just carrying the information?"

The man seems a bit surprised by his persistence. "Since the ship is going, we are taking the opportunity to send some records to the office, as well as selected items that we have been accumulating here since the last ship. Nothing out of the ordinary, I assure you -- some rare wines, fabrics, that sort of thing."

"I am intrigued. I shall sign on," Alais declares. Weston smiles, relieved.

* * *

Much to their surprise, when they have finished their errand Delmar does not turn their path toward the docks, but rather back in the direction of the Clockwork Dragon. He brings them in a looping course that eventually deposits them back on the main avenue -- are they going to walk right in the front door again?

No. Instead they stop at the gate to the Oligarchal Enclave, where Delmar gives a password to the guard. He threads his way with perfect confidence through the gardens and around several buildings. Their path tends upward; they are nearing the end of the Rock.

There, somewhat to their surprise, are several ships, all of them on the small side and more ornate than the vessels they are used to. Their destination is a tradesman, modified to land on a solid surface and carrying heavier weaponry than is standard for its type. There are smaller variations as well; the ship is an aesthetic joy, every detail pleasing to the eye. Taking in the sight, they realize that they are looking at Sidney Volant's personal ship, and remember Emmett's speculation -- was it only that morning? -- that Three Trees has lost something of value. If he's putting his own

ship at risk -- not to mention himself, with no way of leaving Bral should further trouble appear -- it must be valuable indeed.

“Welcome aboard the *_Lazy Cat_*, men.”

* * *

“Sorry to interrupt you at dinner sir, madam,” he gives a shallow bow of apology, “but some surprising information came out of this afternoon and I thought you should know about it at once.”

“You could have sent a messenger,” Volant points out, a bit irritated. Just as he was finally getting his appetite back after other day.

“I judged it too sensitive for that, sir.”

“Very well, hand it over,” he sighs.

“Don’t mind Sidney, my dear captain,” Constance tells him as he hands over a rather thick sheaf of papers. “Do please join us, I insist.”

Wisely, he does not argue, merely bows again, this time in acceptance, as a pair of servants prepare another place at the table with almost blinding speed.

“This is--this is infamous!” Sidney sputters, turning pages rapidly. “Can there be any substance to these wild accusations?”

“I’m of a mind to believe them. You would know best how to handle it, of course. Nothing’s happened so far; I’d say they’ve decided to hold their cards and bluff.”

“That won’t last long once Melkin gets hold of them,” Volant predicts grimly. “He has not taken this incident lightly. It’s not easy to use magic on them, but I’m sure he’ll find a way. What actions have you taken so far?”

Theo explains the stepped-up timetable. “With your permission, we’ll leave tonight.”

“Granted. You know what we’re risking with every delay. Anything else?” He is thinking of how he can turn this to his advantage. That insufferable elf might finally be of some use.

“Couple of small wrinkles. One wants to go as a passenger.”

“A passenger?” He sounds astonished. “Who?”

“Girl called Lenore, one of Madame Victor’s servants. Going home to her family, she says.” He shrugs. “Mistress is willing to pay her way, she’s aware that it’s not the safest way to travel.”

“Use your discretion. Anything else?”

“Just one thing... kind of startled me, it did....”

* * *

As Bral’s day gives way to the almost instant nightfall of the asteroid, the remainder of the crew gathers, ready to depart and curious about the short notice, all of them startled by the ship they are to work on. The interior is just as beautifully appointed; whatever this journey entails, they will travel in more comfort than is common for their trade. The ship is clearly provisioned for a journey of several months.

Few of them have worked together prior to this voyage, so introductions are quickly made. The captain and first mate they know already. To share spelljamming duties are Alais and Pham; there is scattered cheering from those who witnessed or heard about the response to the pirate

incursion; Alais' stock has gone up quite a bit among Bralians, and at least at the moment they seem well-disposed toward the quiet young cleric.

Seasoned spacefarers include the second mate, Nolan, Emmett -- who earns some curious and some dubious glances from the others -- Valarin, an elf named Nahele who is also the ship's new cook, and three more humans, Hamal, Ulf, and Laszlo. There are an additional double-handful with less experience, their number including ibn Fadil and a man who introduces himself as Hiro and says nothing more. Many are clearly curious about the half-elf's presence on the ship, though there is no time for questions just now. Some of them, particularly Hiro and Nahele's sister Nyala, have an air about them that is not that of a sailor, but rather one that suggests they are part of what Theo had called being ready for trouble.

There is also their passenger, a slender young woman in servant's dress who wears a veiled hat and keeps her eyes downcast behind it. Her luggage consists of two small bags, which Delmar carries to a cabin himself -- a silent signal to the rest of the crew that he expects them to behave themselves. This is a Three Trees ship they're crewing, not some wild-haired independent trader that doesn't know how to treat a lady (or a lady's maid, at any rate).

Speaking of trouble, as they prepare for departure Delmar can be seen in a brief huddle with Theo, both of them looking concerned. They are interrupted by the sound of heavy approaching footsteps as a giff bounds up the ramp. Ibn Fadil, despite his shock, recognizes Yestin -- he's young, and short for one of his kind, and he looks very much as if he has just been in a fight.

"Permission to board sir!" He snaps off a parade-ground salute, ignoring the fact that his snout is bleeding.

"Granted," Theo says calmly. "That's the last, then -- stations, all! Prepare for takeoff."

As the more experienced helmsman, Alais handles the takeoff, more than a little excited, and the *Cat* lifts off from the Rock of Bral. For a while there is seeming pandemonium as orders are given and carried out. Satisfied that things are running as they ought to, Theo joins Alais on the bridge to determine their heading -- the constant, apparently random movement of the sphere's stars means that reckonings must depend on knowing Bral's position relative to more stable bodies, and there are calculations to be made.

When that has been done, Delmar calls the rest of the crew to assemble on deck so the captain can say a few words.

"Now that we're off, there are some things I can talk about that we were keeping a bit quiet before," he begins. "First of all, where we're going, which is the Three Trees headquarters on Janik. You all know that the raid the other day was very specifically targeted at our company, and as you may have guessed the pirates made off with some objects of considerable value, some of which can be dangerous in the wrong hands. No one knows where the pirates are, if they made it through that storm, or whether they might try to stop us getting the word out if they did. Even if they don't, you never know what you'll run into in the Flow, so we're going to do our best to be ready for anything. That's all."

2 - Aboard the Lazy Cat

As the *Lazy Cat* picks up speed moving away from Haven, the new crew gets about their business and begins the settling-in process.

After being dismissed, Val seeks out Emmett. In all the hurry, he'd never gotten the chance to thank his friend.

"So, we made it off the Rock," Val says cheerfully. "I'm not sure what you told them about me that got me hired so quickly, but I owe you one." He claps Emmett on the shoulder and is instantly reminded that the half-man is more than he seems.

"That we did, Valarin, that we did. And all I did was tell them the truth - you follow suggestions given by people you just met in a bar and you climb masts faster than a monkey with his tail on fire." Emmett laughs, then continues, "Seriously though, I think what got us hired was my letting slip about our suspicions. They perked up at that, then dragged you two in right quick."

"So what do you think is going on with the giff?" Val lowers his tone for Emmett's ear only. "You think ibn Fadil's safe?" He looks around to see if anyone else is watching or listening.

"At a guess, I'd say that giff is one directly in the employ of Three Trees, and that they pulled us onto this ship to keep us and our suspicions out of harm's way while they figure things out on Bral. Odds are we're stuck on this one for the round trip, so we'll be there to chat with the oligarchs when we get back." Emmett shrugged. "That's how it looked to me, anyway."

"I think ibn Fadil probably left his troubles behind on Bral. He would've warned us if that beating had come from the Giff, so it's probably something unrelated. Maybe he owes someone money." He turns and faces Val head on, dropping his voice even lower. "Think it through, Val. Ibn Fadil has something of a rep as a gambler and debtor. If the Giff had got a hold of him and wanted him silent, he'd be found as a bloody stain in an alley. Why would they beat him? It would just reinforce my theory, which has no real proof, if they did that. Dead though, he'd be another idiot who owed too much to a loan shark."

Emmett raises his voice to normal tones again. "Damn fine ship. And some of the scenery... The lady's maid is off limits from the looks of it, so which do you want a shot at, the cook's sister or the blond in the ropes?"

"Trying to get me thrown overboard already?" Val asks dubiously. "I thought I saw that maid on Bral, outside the Clockwork Dragon, by the way. Any idea who she is or why she's here?"

"Haven't a clue. And if you're looking to get thrown overboard, making moves on her looks like a good start. Stick to the fish in our own pond, Val. Speaking of which, I guess that means I've got first shot on the cook's sister. Have fun with the ropes."

"Where are you stationed?" Val asks, changing the subject. "Or are you just here to keep us swabs in line?"

"Doing my walk around. I'm security so I have to get used to the ship. Normally, I'll be keeping an eye on the starboard ballista." Unlike most tradesmen, the *Cat* has two, and a heavier catapult than most of her type. "Speaking of which...I'll catch you later."

Continuing his walk around to get used to the ship's defensive points, Emmett approaches the spelljamming helm. *Plenty of time for that when things are a little less crowded,* he thinks. As he's beginning to skirt the area, he notes the presence of the other pilot, Luc Pham.

"Hello!" he says, with a smile and a hand extended. *Never hurts to make a good impression,* he thinks before adding, "Lovely day to start a trip. I'm Emmett, ship's marine."

Pham looks over towards Emmett and smiles in recognition. "Emmett - yes, I remember you from the docks. I'm glad to know you got out of that ship unharmed. A pleasure to meet you face to face at last."

Emmett laughed. "You saw that too, eh? Yeah, I got off the ship fine - it was the hangover the next morning that was the killer. Still, it's a price I'm willing to pay, since it got me on this trip, which proved to be interesting." The half man's mind wanders for a minute back to the cook's sister, but he's snapped back to reality when Pham speaks.

"Yes, this should be a good trip. It's been a while since I sat at a helm - it'll be good to get back among the spheres."

"I'm with you there. It's not *real* flying, but it's close enough till something better comes along. Bral's attractions tend to pale quickly, and it's best to keep moving, learn what you can, spread the word."

Pham gestures over towards Alais and the captain. "I was staying here in case I was needed, but Alais will most likely be at the help for several hours yet - let's go find a more comfortable place to talk. You must have many interesting tales to tell."

"I can't rest just yet - I'm doing my traditional security walk-over, getting to the know the terrain I have to defend. But if you'll walk with me?" Emmett gestures with his hook, motioning the cleric to follow him towards the catapult.

"Also, do you know if any other of the people who went with you onto the Fair Enough Lass are also on board? That one event seems to have been a recruiting bonanza for Three Trees." Pham smiles, genuinely happy to meet this unusual person.

"Recruiting bonanza?" Emmett chuckles. "I'm not sure they'd put it that way, but yeah, it did work out for them. Both of the others who followed me onto the Lass are now proud crewmembers of the Lazy Cat in the service of Three Trees. Which is a good thing for two of us at least, though ibn Fadil - the half elf over there - doesn't seem too thrilled with the idea."

Pham chuckles. "Well, at least Three Trees knows they're getting some brave marines out of the deal. As for ibn Fadil - well, to each his own mood, I guess. Maybe the food doesn't agree with him?"

Emmett shrugged, unwilling to speculate on all of ibn Fadil's motivations or to elucidate the circumstances that have forced the half-elf on board.

"So, where are you from before the Rock?" he asks conversationally as he inspects the small ship weapon's gears and workings, making sure everything is ready to go. It's in damn good shape, but he knows on a ship there's a constant need for repair, tightening and modification.

"They tell me my home planet was called Oerth. I never knew that myself of course - growing up in a small fishing village tends to limit one's viewpoint a bit. I received Hextor's call when I was a young man, and when my mentor found me, I wandered the land with him, carrying the tales with me. One misunderstanding landed me on a spelljammer, and here I am."

"Hextor, eh?" Emmett's face gets a very quick, almost invisible furrow of concern - the Liturgy of Gond does not speak highly of Hextor. Two passing crew members may have heard the same, for they pause, then abruptly alter their path to avoid the two. "No offense, but you don't look the Hextor sort. What don't I know?"

Pham sighs. At least Emmett didn't attack on sight. You would think I would have learned by now to keep a little quieter, he thinks to himself.

"Many of Hextor's worshippers are truly reprehensible, it is true. But consider a simple cookfire. From a distance, it is a provider of light, warmth, and hope. And yet up close it is a

devouring menace, destroying everything it touches. If such a mundane thing can be so different, depending on point of view, can you not thing something as profound as a god would not be at least as complex?"

Emmett nods thoughtfully before reciting "'Any tool is a weapon if held properly.' I think I understand."

"The aspect of Hextor I follow is that of the Herald. We are not a proselytizing order - instead, we each receive a call. We travel, carrying news and tales, trying to bring peoples together. Trust me, I have no plans to raise an evil horde and take over the ship. I have been the target of such hordes on occasion, though.

"So, what of yourself? You've obviously got some tales to tell."

"True, but they're tales best told while getting drunk. of course, I tell them a lot when I get drunk, so I'm sure you'll hear them. In short, I used to be a griffin rider, signed up on a spelljammer after..." he stops, waves his hook, and continues, "and have been doing marine duty on ships ever since. After my headlong charge onto the *Fair Enough Lass* Three Trees was pretty much honor bound to take us on, which was what I was hoping for.

"Never been the target of evil hordes. I have fought greys and hegemonists, which counts for something." Seeing the confused look on Pham's face, Emmett smiles. "I'll tell you later. Should be another good story for you to pass around."

He looks back up towards the spelljamming helm for a second, then returns his attention to Pham. "So you gather news and tales, huh? Ever hear of the 'Hurgan Brotherhood of the Urcan civilization?'"

"Hurgan Brotherhood? No, I have to say that's a new one on me. What do you know?"

"Nothing. That's why I'm asking. Alais brought them up the night of the raid - he thinks the tattooed pirate is connected to them somehow, but he could just be yanking my chain. Or full of it." Emmett grinned. "From what I hear, with Zeremin it's awfully hard to tell the difference."

* * *

Val heads back to his station at the starboard ventral fin after talking to Emmett a bit. He'd served briefly on a Tradesman once and knows the workings of the vessel's stabilizers. The gears and pulleys are easy enough to work, but differ greatly from the lines and rigging of a common seagoing ship. Val notes the fine craftsmanship and fine detail of even the ship's workings; it seems his new employers have spared no expense....

Val nods to the man he is stationed with, though he didn't catch the name in the brief introductions. Running his fingers through his hair, he decides to take this opportunity to reintroduce himself and get to know his fellow crewman.

"Valarin," he says to the other, offering his hand and presenting his best smile.

"Ulf," the other responds with a quick, firm handshake. He's a short, dense-looking man with liberally grey-salted brown hair and craggy features. "Crewed on one of these before, eh?"

"You could say that," Val replies amiably. "Had a chance to serve aboard the *Carabella* for a while, a tradesman like this." Val looks around at the well-appointed interior, "Of course, I don't think *Bella* was quite this nice."

After some story swapping has served for mutual confirmation of status, "So tell me," Val begins in an unassuming fashion, "What do you know about our good captain?" He looks for any reactions from Ulf before continuing, "I hadn't been on Bral long, and I haven't heard much about him." He hastens to add, "He seems like a good sort."

Ulf shrugs. "Not from these parts myself, but they say the company's solid. He's logged plenty of time in the Flow, I know that much. Word has it he retired ten years back, they called him out for this trip."

Val is satisfied with Ulf's answer about the captain, but is intrigued that Theo came out of retirement for this journey. There was certainly more to things than met the eye...

Given the opportunity, Val makes it a point to get acquainted with any of the crew he comes across that he hasn't met yet. He may come off a bit forward at first, but his intention of getting to know his crewmates is genuine. It's also a little more than an interest in self-preservation; better to know now who to steer clear of before trouble starts. Val takes comfort in knowing Emmett is acting as security for the trip, and he's met Alais. He also makes sure he knows where ibn Fadil is, regardless of what Emmett thought of the young giff on board.

Satisfied that he knows which of the crew know their business, which don't, and which might be troublemakers, eventually Val seeks out the man named "Hero" when the watch changes. It is amusing to him that someone would actually name their child that. He has to meet this person, just to see what he's like.

* * *

Ibn Fadil goes about his assigned tasks willingly, but without energy; he looks uncharacteristically withdrawn - almost forbidding - and as the work winds down he avoids anyone who looks like they might ask him questions. After the Captain's speech, he seeks out an out-of-the-way spot and sits down with his back against the wall, resting his head on his folded arms, shutting out the world. Very quietly, he sings to himself in Elvish, something his father called "a song to calm the troubled spirit." Nyala passes within hearing distance and gives him a sidelong look from luminous eyes -- even for an elf, her looks are striking -- but says nothing.

Within an hour or so, however, his spirits seem to have revived a little; he gets up again and starts wandering around the ship to see what's doing. To casual questions about his presence, he simply says, "It was time to leave."

The third time this happens, though, he turns to Hiro (who happens to be nearby) and says mournfully, "You see how it is - no one believes I'm a warrior."

Pulling the hood on his robe back to get a better view of ibn Fadil, he in turn also reveals much of his own features. His smooth cranium and unique crimson tear-shaped scar under his right eye are the first thing the Zakharan hal-elf notices. Hiro's facial features are wide and delicate at the same time.

Ibn Fadil looks up at him with open curiosity; he himself is a small man who carries a sword (positioned to be drawn with the left hand), but there is no aggression in his stance, he wears no armor, and his clothing is only one short remove from being shabby.

The Kensai of Kara-Tur gazes ibn Fadil up and down studiously before replying, "Many are misled by appearances. That is their own folly. Do you believe you are a warrior?"

Taken aback by this serious response, ibn Fadil stops to think before he speaks. "Once I thought I was," he says at last, soberly.

"Water takes the shape of its container. People change to adapt to their friends and surroundings. Perhaps in your new life aboard this ship you will be a warrior once more."

The half-elf looks baffled for a moment; he hasn't heard talk like this for years. Then he shrugs, wordlessly rejecting the possibility. "As long as I don't become a sailor. No offense," he adds cheerfully to any nearby sailors.

"None taken," says the lanky young man approaching the two. Val nods at ibn Fadil, relieved his friend appears cheerful. The young looking man stands a little taller than the average human, but would not stand out terribly in a crowd. His straight, shoulder length brown hair is currently pulled back into a rough tail at his neck, making him look more like the other sailors on deck. His sharp eyes take in the stranger with ibn Fadil, but the smile on his face is warm and genuine.

"So, you're the hero, huh?" Val asks the robed man, totally unabashed. He runs his fingers through the loose bangs that frame his thin face when he does not elicit a response from Hiro.

"I'm Valarin," he begins again, offering his hand to the swordsman. "I see you've met ibn Fadil. Or do you two know each other from Bral?"

"No," ibn Fadil says, "we have just met." With more than a trace of mischief, he adds, "He seems to be something of a philosopher - I'm sure you will find him interesting to talk with." And with a very polite nod to Hiro he makes his escape, resolved to avoid talking with this unsettling man again.

"Wonder what's eating him," Val comments to the Kensai. He has the sinking suspicion that ibn Fadil doesn't care for his company much. Perhaps Val was too forward about leaving Bral? He'd have to think on it.

"Philosopher, eh?" he addresses Hiro. "I'm not much for that. Too busy learning other things..." Val studies the quiet man before him.

Feeling the pregnant pause in the air about Val, Hiro responds politely to the query while shaking his head. "Your friend speaks too highly of me. I am no true philosopher. All that I know, I have learned at one end or another of a sword." He gestures Val to sit.

"And you, Valarin, what are these 'other things' to which you have dedicated yourself?" Hiro asks as Valarin's eyes can be seen to follow one of the female crew-mates.

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Val replies vaguely, only half listening at this point. Sitting down, he heaves a sigh as the crewmember of his attention turns the corner around the fo'c's'le.

"Sorry," he says, offering a wide grin. "Other things," he repeats significantly, nodding in the direction of his distraction. "So they tell me you're a hero," Val begins again. "Is that really your name, or an advertisement?" he asks in jest.

He responds simply, "Hi-ro, not hir-o. At one time, perhaps in one shining moment I may have been a hero but that chance eluded me many years hence."

"Ah," Val notes the distinction with amusement. "Probably for the best, really," he continues. "Heroes tend to attract trouble. I'm personally all for staying *out* of trouble." Val smiles.

Val spends some time talking with Hiro, asking about where he was from, what it was like. He'll be glad to share a bit about Driahn and a few of the places he's seen. Val likes this man of few words. There's a certain serenity about him that is almost comforting, and oddly familiar.

During the next few weeks, Val will take notice of Hiro's sword practice. Truly impressive compared to his own meager skill. Something to keep in mind in case there is need of a hero....

* * *

"One of the oddities of shipboard life is that I can honestly consider this spacious." Emmett says, dropping his backpack and saddlebags to the floor in one of the two compartments made by the one foot partition dividing the narrow wall. The two cots -- just canvas tied to frames and hinged it to the wall - are both folded up, making it possible for both men to be standing with a modicum of comfort in the small room.

"Nyala and Yestin got the bigger room, for both chivalry and logic." Emmett takes a minute to picture trying to maneuver around the young Giff in this space, or of the Giff making use of the hanging cots, before shaking his head with a snicker. "I guess that means we're stuck with each other."

"Name's Emmett." he said, holding out a hand. "Which bunk do you want?"

"Hai. I am Hiro." He says slightly bowing his head and then shaking Emmett's hand. Unstrapping a roll from the top of his pack, Hiro says simply, "Neither. I have grown accustomed on my travels to preparing my own bedding." He snaps his roll quickly and deftly places it on the floor.

Emmett shrugs. "I guess that means I'll take the top. Just make sure it's under my bunk. I'd hate to jump down during the night and pin you to the floor with this." Emmett taps his peg to the floor once or twice to get the point across.

"I take it you've done ship's marine duty before? You know your way around the catapult or ballistae?"

"I know my blade. Often that has proven enough. My task on these ships tends to be one of repelling inevitable boarding parties."

It only takes a few minutes for Emmett to figure out that his roommate is a man of few words, which gives him ample opportunity to talk. So he does, starting with stories of previous ships, other fights and the perils of traveling with Gnomes. Hiro quickly gets the feeling that Emmett could talk for days without serious fatigue.

"...they were nice enough, but after the fourth time I found my quarters modified because they needed something in there, or moved the wall to make more room for something next door, or to make the bed more 'useful' by shortening it a foot and a half and putting a spring loaded lever to fold it in half against the wall, I started to lose my patience."

"Patience is like water in a drought."

Emmett nodded, adding "'Hurrying the steps will slow the project.' But eventually I was slowing the project, and just didn't care. They wanted me to sign back on when e hit Bral, but I just couldn't to it."

"That's quite the sword you have there. Mind if I take a look at it?"

"In due time."

* * *

In his later exploration of the ship, ibn Fadil turns a corner and stops to avoid walking into Yestin. Giff and half-elf stare at each other for a moment; then ibn Fadil, glad to see no one else is nearby, says with perfect friendliness, "It is quite a surprise to see you here, Mister Yestin."

The other merely nods in response and makes great haste to be on his way.

Ibn Fadil does not obstruct him, having no desire to argue with a giff (even a relatively small one). His next stop is the galley - last night's small meal, another gift of Mistress Herry, is long in the past now. And, he thinks, he's worked in kitchens before; perhaps if he offers to help he can get that job. It may depend, he knows, on how this elf Nahele feels about part-bloods ... Putting on his best hungry-but-not-quite-begging face, he looks in through the galley door.

Nahele is moving about with great energy in the confined space, cataloguing what he will have to work with during their journey. "Not a drop to be seen ah there it is now if only I can figure out where the keep the oh I see good thing I brought some things with me yes what do you want?"

Apologetically, but without embarrassment, ibn Fadil says, "A late dinner - and breakfast and lunch, really."

Nahele finally stops his rummaging and actually looks at his visitor.

"I've worked in kitchens before," he adds.

A sharply cocked brow seems to indicate skepticism. "Really. And which kitchens would those be?"

A little encouraged, ibn Fadil comes the rest of the way into the galley. "The Blue Wyvern, Llorio's - that was before the fire - the Clockwork Dragon, the Red Dog, the Rose & Thorn. I am not claiming to be a cook," he explains with a shrug, "but I know my way around a bit."

"Hm." The elf looks him up and down for a moment. "Come with me and take a look at the stores in the hold." On their way, he peppers ibn Fadil with questions regarding his previous duties, and others designed to measure his knowledge of food. Satisfied that his would-be assistant can at least identify most basic ingredients (although not some of the more exotic items the cook brought with him) if called upon to fetch them, and that he is neither clumsy nor unintelligent, Nahele gives a slight shrug as they return to the small galley.

"I'll give you a try for a few days." As earnest, ibn Fadil receives a small - but better than nothing - share of fresh fruit. "See you for the morning watch."

Well-satisfied with this arrangement, though still hungry, ibn Fadil finally takes himself off to his bunk. In the morning, he reflects, he should be feeling mostly well; he has a credible reason for staying out of the way; and (with Hiro's remark in mind) working in the galley will put him in no danger of becoming a warrior again. The dilemma of whether he can or should return to Bral he puts firmly out of his mind, so he can regard the immediate future almost with pleasure.

* * *

Meanwhile, back on Bral...

"Gone?" she says. "Do you mean he has absconded?"

"I mean he is missing," he answers carefully. "He was last seen going into the Clockwork Dragon, but he could be dead for all I know."

"Why dead?"

He lifts a much-folded sheet of paper. "His report. Have you read it?"

"Not yet." She takes it, and reads with concentration. "The giff? But if the giff cannot be trusted ..."

He shrugs. "I was thinking, if the giff suspect he suspects them, they might have caused his disappearance."

She returns from her thoughts with a shrug of her own. "Perhaps they'll send someone more suitable at last," she notes. "Find a ship that can take a message; I will write it out now."

As the door closes behind her, he leans back in his seat and studies the ceiling. "Have you ever read the information your predecessor left for you? No?" He sighs. "Well, I know that you like to reach your own conclusions. And, perhaps they will send someone less arrogant, at last."

* * *

When he has finished his shift at the helm, Alais hands the ship over to Brother Pham and sets about exploring the ship and meeting the rest of the crew. The *Cat* has more living space than most of her type, having sacrificed a fair bit of her cargo capacity for comfort. As he was told, however, they do indeed have cargo, he discovers; there are crates and casks and parcels wrapped in protective padding lashed down in the holds, whatever could be gathered in the short time before their departure.

It looks as though he and Pham will be sharing a decent-sized room -- for a ship, at any rate. Truth, it's not all that much smaller than many quarters on crowded *Bral*, and reasonably private, since one or other will have to be at the helm unless the captain calls a stop.

He talks to those of the crew who are willing to listen, cheerfully declaiming about the cosmos and everything within it; many are impressed, and many others aren't quite sure what to make of him.

* * *

Thus the journey out from *Bral* begins. Space in this sphere was long ago pacified between the efforts of the Navy and the oligarchy's mercenaries, and the watches pass quietly as the drifting stars draw slowly nearer.

The crew does and says nothing overt, but it is quite clear that some of them avoid Brother Pham; others seem indifferent. Thrice in the weeks that follow their departure he finds himself dreaming of fire, as if haunted by his own metaphor from the talk with Emmett. This is a devouring fire sweeping across dry lands, such as he has heard tell of but never seen with his own eyes. Birds, beasts, even insects flee in its path or are consumed.

More than once *ibn Fadil* is cajoled by others of the crew to stake his as-yet-earned wages for the journey in some game of chance, but he refuses them politely. Instead he quickly settles into his new role as *Nahele's* assistant, pot-scrubber and general errand-runner, but while the elf talks almost constantly it's usually about food -- questions about his own history elicit nothing of substance, and he seems uninterested in people. He does reveal that he is hoping for a permanent position with the company at their headquarters. *Janik* is a livable moon orbiting a world that is largely forest, from which *Tree Trees* builds its ships, and there is a large elven population there. The cook's skills are impressive enough for *ibn Fadil* to think he has a chance at his goal, and the crew is well fed for the time being; once they are in the *Flow* and without the use of fire, the challenge will be far greater. *Nyala* comes by once in a while, but proves as enigmatic as her brother is

garrulous; she seldom speaks, but spends her time slowly walking every inch of the ship as if patrolling for some unseen threat.

Emmett and Alais both gain an appreciative audience, mostly in the younger, less-experienced members of the crew; others are more skeptical of the things both have to say. Yestin in particular always seems to be present when the half-man has a story to tell, but avoids any attempt to catch him in private conversation, nor does anyone hear gossip from others to explain his presence on the ship.

No one seems entirely sure what to make of Hiro -- his silence, his scar, the way he spends several hours each day in practice with his sword, which in his hand is a living, dancing being -- and for the most part they leave him to himself. He is not entirely without audience of his own, however. When they are a week out from Bral, the girl Lenore finally emerges from the cabin in which she has spent virtually all of her time, at least to the extent of a daily walk around the decks, although she remains veiled and does not speak. She often passes by while he is practicing, and often when she does so she pauses for a few moments, and seems to be looking at the stars.

Valarin's affable nature and clear competence make him popular among the crew. He is on deck late in one daywatch, attending to his station and keeping half an eye on Lenore's progress in her daily walk. She dresses very modestly, appropriate for her station, but the occasional glimpse of an ankle suggests they're quite nice.

As she nears, his counterpart to port -- Seton, one of the green crew -- overadjusts his fin, and the ship lurches. It's a slight movement, but the jolt from the usual smooth travel is enough to rob their passenger of some of her balance; Val unthinkingly offers his arm as she stumbles.

"Thank you," she says softly, adjusting her hat and veil, which have also been knocked a bit askew. Val nods politely and watches her walk away, but he has something else on his mind now. In the moment of her stumble he had glimpsed her face, and it was not that of the girl he had seen on Bral.

* * *

Alais

Alais is starting to wonder about their passenger. Could it be that Lenore is veiled because she is

indeed covered with tattoos of the Hurgan Brotherhood? This must be investigated.

On the monoliths the brotherhood left behind were several cryptic words and phrases written in She, an ancient tongue. Alais engages some of the other crewmembers in a conversation that will be within earshot of Lenore's daily passage, and mentions these words loudly to see what reaction they might engender, but there is none that he can see from the woman. His audience, at that moment consisting of Maddox and the cheerful blonde Inez, are fascinated by his tales of the mysterious Brotherhood, and want to know more.

* * *

Pham and ibn Fadil

Pham makes his way to the mess hall after his late shift ends. For some reason, his evening meal wasn't delivered. Pham tries hard not to blame the misunderstanding crewmen. "Is it too much to ask that the pilot get a bowl of rice once in a while?" Pham opens the door -- it's late, so the mess is mostly empty. Correction -- the two crewmen in here quickly give Pham an uneasy glance and leave.

Pham looks around, and goes up to the kitchen. "Hello?" Pham spies a slim figure in the kitchen cleaning up. "Is there anything left over?"

"Left over?" ibn Fadil says, pleased to be seeing this mysterious priest at last. "Oh, no, Brother Luc Pham - the _Lazy Cat_ would never serve a pilot leftovers!" With a show of imperiousness, he waves Pham away from the door. "Please, sit down, I will bring you something."

In fact, though, the meal he rapidly assembles is pretty much what everyone else got. The flourish with which he delivers the plate, bowl, and whatnot is certainly an improvement over the usual service, however; ibn Fadil has forgotten nothing that he has learned from working in expensive restaurants.

"Ah, ibn Fadil. A pleasure to meet you face to face. I remember seeing you at the docks. Emmett had mentioned you were aboard."

"I am indeed," the half-elf replies with slightly forced cheer, taking this as an invitation to join Pham at the table. "I have been curious about you," he says. "The things the crew says about this Hextor do not accord with what I have seen of you, or with what they say you say about him. Hextor is not known to my home sphere," he adds. "And I do not recall having heard of him even since I left there."

Ibn Fadil listens to Pham's explanation attentively. "Most interesting! But what is the purpose of this traveling and storytelling?"

* * *

Emmett and Pham

Emmett and Pham both fall into the category of having hours on/hours off shift, since the ship needs constant spelljamming and security. It takes a couple days for their schedules to link enough for a casual conversation while neither is on duty.

"Howdy, Brother. How's she handle?"

Pham smiles at the friendly voice. "Emmett -- good to see you again at last. You would think on such a small ship that people would run into each other more often. She truly is a wonderful vessel."

"I see that you ended up bunking with Alias. I'm sure your room's better than ours -- Hiro and I are in a space the size of a small closet. I guess we're lucky that our schedules give us a degree of privacy. Of course, given how the crew's been treating you, you get that everywhere."

"Alais and I haven't actually talked much yet. That's the difficult thing about running the helm -- somebody's got to be sitting in it all the time. He's an odd sort, but a decent enough man from what I can tell."

Pham sighs. "And yes, the crew has been keeping their distance. It's nothing new. Those of my order often face such receptions. Still, I continue to perform my duties, they perform theirs, and we all get through it in the end. I am left alone to pray and meditate, and I will of course assist where I can." Pham smiles. "Hopefully my natural charm will convince them sooner or later."

"Yeah. I saw those two flinch when we were talking, and I guess they spread it around. Sorry about that. Tell you what -- I got an hour before we have to bunk down. Why don't you explain it to me, and I can help explain it to the crew. You aren't gonna convert me," the half man says, fingering his amulet of a toothed wooden wheel, "but you can try and convince me. In return, I'll waste your time with idle talk and pointless boasts. Sound like a deal?"

Pham gestures to a nearby barrel and takes a seat. "All right. I will try to explain. And don't worry -- I won't try to convert you. If you were destined to join my order, you would already *know*."

"Hextor called me when I was a boy. At first, I didn't even know what it was - I just felt a sense that there was something more to the world than the small fishing village that was all I knew. When Deacon Marcus arrived in our village, I finally KNEW what my calling was. Marcus explained the nature of my calling - Hextor the Herald needed me to travel, learn the tales of each place I visited, and to carry them along. And, to help as I could along the way, so that people would want to share their tales.

"Unfortunately, Hextor is stricken with a strange sense of humor or multiple personalities. The other, alas more numerous followers of Hextor are an awful bunch of creatures determined only to spread pain and misery. Most folk, " Pham gestures at a passing crewmember, who notices and quickly moves away, "don't give me the benefit of the doubt. I first found myself on a spell-jammer almost by accident while fleeing from a mob of villagers with the wrong impression. Still, the captain has promised me to keep order on board, and he's kept that promise so far. And I certainly haven't done anything to incite a riot on board.

"I'm sure I haven't answered your big question: why is "my" Hextor so different from the one the rest of the world knows. I can't answer that -- that knowledge hasn't been revealed to me. When Hextor wants me to know, I'm sure he'll tell me, somehow. Until then, I am content to follow my calling. I have a feeling that Hextor is very happy with me right now - I've collected tales of places nobody back home could have ever dreamed of. Hopefully one day I'll get to share them."

"Oh, and Emmett - I'd like to ask you a favor, if I could. I've been having some... disturbing dreams lately. Dreams of fire. Considering we're about to head out into The Flow, I'd appreciate it if you could help me with a thorough inspection of the ship before we go? I'm not prone to prophecy, but these have gotten me nervous."

Emmett, with Brother Pham in tow, closes quickly on the first mate, his leg producing a rhythm now familiar to the crew. "Sir, do you have a minute?"

"Pham and me were just talking," Emmett gestures to the brother with his hook, "and he said he'd been getting dreams about a fire. Now, his god isn't normally a prophet god, but he is a herald god, and this might be a warning or message or something."

"Anyway, he was thinking in light of this it might be a good idea to give the ship a mast to keel inspection, just to make sure there aren't any hot spots before we hit the flow." Emmett is a firm believer in both gods and reasonable precautions, and has obviously had enough close encounters with fire in his life for him to take it quite seriously. "I just wanted to get your permission before we got started."

"Carry on," Delmar tells them, his expression distracted as if pondering a particularly knotty navigational problem.

"OK. I'll let you know what we find." With that Emmett leads Pham down into the bowels of the ship, under the logic that the least used tools are the ones most likely to decay.

"So your god called you since you were a kid? It must be nice, knowing that your doing exactly what you want and need to do," Emmett's eyes seem to get slightly wistful as he continues, but it's hard for Pham to tell in the dark, "and that nothing can take that away from you."

“On the other hand, it sucks that doing it gets you run out of towns. I guess everything balances out. I’d give a lot though, to actually be able to feel the presence of Gond.” The half man smiles. “In a metaphysical sense, that is. In one way, my god is with me constantly.

“Here. Help me shift this box.” Emmett sticks his hook into the wood and wraps his fingers around the corner of a crate that is nearly as big as he is. With a grunt he lifts it several inches off the ground, waiting for Pham to help him move it to clear a path through the hold.

At this early point in their journey, the hold is tightly packed with supplies to see them to their destination. Crates, barrels, and chests are carefully placed to minimize shifting, and in some cases lashed to the deck, while net bags sway slightly overhead with the motion of the ship. After about a hour the two men have given the room a cursory search.

"This all looks OK, unless you're getting a bad feeling about it. Let's just put things back in place and check out the upper decks."

* * *

Valarin and the mystery woman

Too stunned to act, Val simply stares after her. A second minor lurch brings him to his senses. He hurries to coordinate with Seton to correct the ship’s roll, bringing the *Lazy Cat* back even. He’ll have to remember to keep an eye on Seton lest that happen again.

Val doesn’t think about what he saw until after his watch ends. Upon turning his station over to the next crewman, he retires to his bunk rather than the galley or main deck for socializing, as is his usual habit. Lying down on his bunk with arms folded behind his head, he gazes upward, oblivious to anyone else in the cabin.

Who *was* that, Val thinks to himself. Something is very wrong here, and he isn’t sure what to make of it. Should he tell someone? Is she an imposter? A stowaway? No matter what, he is determined to find out. It never occurs to him that maybe he’s not supposed to know.

And yet.... Val’s thoughts stray back to the girl’s face. Was that a look of sorrow he saw there, or was it his imagination? She is hiding; of that much he is pretty certain. But hiding from what? Perhaps if he were to ask her....

In a flash, Val jumps up from his bunk and strides up to the deck. Before he even realizes it, he asks another crewman to switch watches with him. He is intent on being off duty the next time that he sees “Lenore” walking the deck.

After asking around a bit, Val manages to trade watches with someone on the graveyard shift. When asked why he wants to swap, Val mentions that he just wants a change of pace. With his best poker face, he mentions that after a few weeks on the same shift, it might be nice to mix things up a little. This elicits groans from everyone in earshot, because Delmar is bound to hear about it and think it’s a grand idea.

He turns in early so that he’ll be fresh for that watch. Unfortunately, sleep does not come easy for Val that night (night being a relative thing in wildspace). He spends much of the time thinking about the girl and what he is going to do. He decides he needs to talk to her first. He wants to find out who she is, and why she is pretending to be someone else. He isn’t really sure why he wants to know this, but that doesn’t seem to bother him at the moment.

The memory of Emmett’s warning momentarily flashes through Val’s subconscious. "If you're looking to get thrown overboard, making moves on her looks like a good start," he’d said.

"Stick to the fish in our own pond." Of course, Val rationalizes, since it isn't the maid, he could at the very least just talk with her...

The turn at late watch is very uneventful. Val passes the time climbing the rigging to work off the nervous energy he feels coursing through him. When asked what he is up to by his portside counterpart, Val passes off something about checking how secure the leads were on the stabilizer. He is amused to discover the sailor asking him to check the port stabilizer as well when he is done. Nothing like a climb through rigging to take your mind off things. As Val makes his way down the ropes, he wonders how Emmett has fared with Nyala. It has been a few weeks....

As soon as that watch is over, Val once again returns to his bunk. Normally, he'd just be getting up for his turn at this time. He'd have plenty of time to rest up before he tried to intercept Lenore. Or whoever she is. But he is still too keyed up to rest. He hasn't felt like this in a long time, and he isn't even aware of what it is he is feeling. Just as he comes around to trying to figure it out, he is fast asleep.

Footsteps on deck wake Val out of a deep slumber, and he nearly leaps out of the bunk. What time is it? Is he too late? He looks out into the companionway in time to see a few familiar faces passing by. They were off shift, so he was still on. Well, *supposed* to be on anyway. He isn't too late. Val washes up and changes quickly. He doesn't want to miss his opportunity.

Once on deck, Val mentally traces Lenore's daily walk. He knows she'll pass the stairs to the fo'c's'le, so he decides to wait there. Out of habit, he blends into the shadows while waiting for her. He doesn't have long to wait until he hears soft footsteps coming his way. Taking a deep breath, Val steps around the stair.

"May I have the honor of walking with you, Lady?" he asks, putting on his most charming smile.

She jumps in surprise at his sudden appearance. From the violence of her movement and her rapid breathing, she is not merely startled but frightened. Then she draws a more controlled breath and straightens her shoulders in a conscious assumption of dignity.

"Thank you," she says, again speaking softly, "but I prefer to walk alone."

"Sorry," Val says out of habit. He does not move from her path. "Perhaps you're right," he continues, pitching his voice low for her ears alone. "If I were you, I certainly wouldn't want anyone to know I'm not who I'm supposed to be either," he trails off meaningfully. He looks intently through the veil, seeking her eyes.

In the lantern-light he can see only the vaguest outline of her features through the veil. Turning to go back the way she came, Lenore hesitates as his remark strikes home. "What do you want?" Her voice betrays tension.

"Oh, I thought I'd make sure you didn't lose your balance again," Val says with a smile. "Seton is at the portside stabilizer again this afternoon..." He is trying hard to maintain a charming demeanor, despite the feeling that his heart was wedged in his throat. Val scans the immediate area; the hair on the back of his neck was beginning to rise.

"I don't mean you any harm," he says quietly to her, truly meaning it. "I just want to know what's going on. I..."

I just want to get to know you better, Val thinks, but holds these words. _What, am I crazy?!_

"You're just going to have to trust me," he says soberly instead.

Her only reply is a soft, bitter laugh. He can sense her studying him closely, trying to divine his true intentions, find the veiled threat that must lurk in his words.

"Well, you could always look at it like this," Val says into the pause, "It's not like either of us are going anywhere any time soon." He shrugs to show his indifference. "And I'm not especially anxious to get myself thrown overboard. "I just thought you might want to talk," he continues. "I know what it's like to be on the run from something..."

After a moment of tense silence she says, "You mean that, don't you?"

There's a brief pause. "Yes, I do," Val tells her quite honestly. He's momentarily reminded of ibn Fadil, and what he perceives to be his failure to get past the half-elf's apparent distrust. He doesn't want to frighten this girl any more than he already has, let alone push her away.

"Listen," Val tells her, "I understand if you don't want to talk right now. I'll be here when you do..." With a reassuring half-smile, he turns to go.

"Thank you," she says, and watches him leave.

He doesn't dare turn around. Disappointment consumes Val as he heads off for the galley. Did he really expect her to stop him? Of course he did! But he can't admit it to himself just yet. He feels sick. Stopping halfway down the stair to the lower decks, he leans forward and raps his forehead against the overhang. He feels foolish.

Of course, it was his own fault. He was so sure of himself. Wasn't he?

* * *

Lenore returns to her stateroom with a calm bearing and steady step, actress' skills she had learned well before her arrival on Bral, and which have served her most well these past months. If I were you-- her heart had nearly stopped in her chest at those words, until she'd realized that the sailor didn't actually know her true name, only that he had somehow divined that she was not who she claimed to be.

What will he do now? He did not threaten blackmail, at any rate, but I would be foolish to trust him, no matter how much he reminded me of Teague for that moment.... She latches the door behind her and sighs deeply. What nonsense. I am a fool, and that is the end of it. Fool to get myself into this, fool to think I could get out. Perhaps I should have told Theo at once, but... no. Once we are in the Flow -- she shudders slightly -- then perhaps. For now, let me remain another servant dismissed -- a reason for that will be clear soon enough, I fear. Theo will be angry, but we will have come too far then to return; whatever his mission is, Three Trees will be ill-served by months of delay. By that same token....

Her thoughts return restlessly to the fear of pursuit. She once thought little of ships and travel among the worlds, knowing them merely as the hated agency of her years of exile, as she has long thought of her time on that miserable Rock. She has learned a great deal recently. Each day she forces herself to walk the deck, to accustom herself to the darkness and the ways of the ship. Amazing, what one can do for love.

If we are caught up, I will be sent back, if only to avoid trouble between the houses. And then....

She curls herself into a corner of her bunk and contents herself with memories in place of hope.

* * *

Food. Food and a good wine will help, Val thinks to himself as he follows the aroma coming from the kitchen. Shuffling in somewhat listless, Val asks Nahele for his preferred wine, skipping food altogether. He returns to the deck to gaze out at the stars, mug of wine in hand.

Val thinks of home.

Seeing Valarin shuffle unhappily in and out of the galley, ibn Fadil at first tries to keep his attention on potato-peeling, but the memory of the tall man's unappreciated efforts to cheer him up back on Bral prods him into action instead. Drying his hands on a towel, he asks Nahele for a short break and nips out into the corridor after Val.

Finding him lost in thought near the forward rail, ibn Fadil joins him and asks, "What happened?"

It would be an understatement to simply say that Val was surprised by ibn Fadil's presence. He'd thought for sure the half-elf was avoiding him on purpose.

"I'm not quite sure," he answers ibn Fadil, still gazing out over the rail. It isn't a lie. Val has no idea what had happened back there, what went wrong.

"Are you sure you want to be seen with me?" Val asks the Zakharan, half in jest. "It seems like you usually try to avoid me..." He offers a brief flicker of a smile to soften his words. Still, he does not seem quite himself. There is still something hanging over Val, like a dark cloud over a usually sunny field.

Ibn Fadil gives Val a puzzled look. "You think I avoid you? But I have been avoiding *everyone,* my young friend. I have had more than enough of drawing attention to myself."

Val snorts at this, regaining some of his normal good humor. "You have a point," he concedes.

"I have not forgotten your kindness on Bral, though I was much distracted at the time," the half-elf goes on with an apologetic smile. "I would like to return the effort, perhaps with more success than you had."

Val turns to face the half-elf, meeting the other's eye. Val sees sincerity in the half-elf's face, in his effort to discover what is troubling the human. He isn't sure if he should tell ibn Fadil anything. Not for lack of trust in the man, but for fear of losing Lenore's trust. Or whatever her real name is.... As that thought lingers, he runs his fingers through his hair, an apparent nervous habit.

Then again, they're all kindred spirits, aren't they? They're all hiding something, and hiding *from* something. Val seems to make up his mind and takes a deep breath.

"What do you know about Lenore, that maid that's traveling with us?" Val asks the Zakharan before he even realizes it.

"Very little," ibn Fadil says, working a bit at not appearing amused. "The Victors' household servants keep to themselves."

"The Victor household?" Val asks. "As in the 'Victor and Sons' household?" He vaguely remembers hearing the name Victor mentioned back on Bral. But this woman isn't the servant he saw then... "I wonder why they didn't just put her on one of their own ships." The last wasn't directed at ibn Fadil.

Val finds himself staring back out over the rail at the stars once again. To the half-elf he says quietly, "She's not who she says she is." This seems to answer why they didn't put her on their own ship. "And I want to find out who she is."

"What --" The half-elf breaks off speaking, then starts again, much less sharply. "What have you stumbled into now, Valarin?" Somehow, he sounds neither judgmental nor exasperated.

"I'm not quite sure," Val murmurs. "It's not something I want spread around though, okay? And to truth to tell, she stumbled into me..." He's more than a little relieved ibn Fadil does not overreact to his revelation.

"I am planning something," he continues, making sure there is still nobody nearby to overhear, "but I need your help. Can you make me up a dinner to take to her?" A familiar gleam shines in Val's eyes and he smiles at the half-elf.

Now ibn Fadil looks annoyed. "Not unless I know why," he says firmly.

"Well, she's got to eat sometime, right?" Val says innocently. "I just figured I'd get a chance to... talk to her if I took her the meal."

Ibn Fadil doesn't believe that for a minute. "How do you know she is not Lenore? Have you seen her face?" Val's expression instantly tells him that he has. "What does she look like, then?"

Val pauses a moment to reflect. He'd only caught a glimpse of her, but it was enough to make a lasting impression. "Well, I'd say she's probably about my age," he starts, "And she's got chestnut colored hair. I couldn't tell how long it was because of the hat and veils. I couldn't see her eye color, but I do know she's quite pretty."

Seeing ibn Fadil hesitate for a moment, Val tells him, "I'm not going to do anything to hurt her. I think she's in trouble and might need help."

"A woman goes to considerable lengths to leave Bral secretly, hiding her identity, and you think she might be in trouble?" the half-elf asks. "I would say that she *is* trouble, Val." He pauses while another crewmember saunters by.

"Anything to do with Samuel Victor is trouble, Val," he goes on seriously. "You do not -- I mean it -- want to get involved in his affairs."

"I don't care about Samuel Victor," Val says with a touch of exasperation. He wasn't well versed on the politics of the Oligarchs during his stay on Bral, and frankly, he couldn't care less. "I do care about --" he starts to say something, but stops abruptly.

What *do* I care about? Val thinks to himself. He's startled to find he doesn't have an answer.

"Fine. I guess it doesn't matter that I'm just trying to help," he says instead. Clouds once again darken the brief glimmer in Val's features as he turns his attention to the stars once again. "I don't want to screw up everything she's worked at already. Forget I mentioned it."

Taking one last draught of the wine, Val then hurls the mug over the rail and turns to go.

"It *does* matter," ibn Fadil says with a little more sympathy. "It shows a good heart. But that won't protect you from Victor if you cross him. And I promise you, her chances of getting away -- with whatever she is up to -- will be much better if you and I do nothing at all to draw attention to her."

Watching the disconsolate young man stomp away, ibn Fadil hopes he will take this good advice. It would be terrible to see him dive head-first and unsuspecting into such an explosive situation.

* * *

For several days after her encounter with Valarin, “Lenore” keeps to her stateroom, but then resumes her daily walk as if nothing has happened, paying him no particular attention. She reaches the aft deck and pauses, seeing a slender elven figure already there, gazing astern, bow as always near to hand. After a hesitation, Lenore joins her.

“What do you see?” she asks unwillingly, as if the question would not be asked but must.

Unearthly, almost electric blue eyes glance her way for a moment. “What do you look for?” Without waiting for an answer, Nyala resumes her usual circuit. Lenore does the same after a few minutes, taking her usual place to observe Hiro’s practice, but afterwards, instead of returning to her room, she finds herself back at the stern, searching the empty darkness.

The ship is nearly a month out from Bral, with weeks yet to go before reaching the sphere’s edge. The mate does indeed take to the notion of switching shifts about as long as the *Cat* is still in quiet space, which the crew accepts with groans but relatively good grace as their rhythms are upset for a few days before they can resettle.

There is a fair amount of music aboard, as the sailors sing or play to help pass the time -- Delmar’s short, square fingers are surprisingly agile on a pipe, Seton’s clumsiness (by now the despair of most of the crew) vanishes when his guitar is in his hands, and all are surprised one “day” when Nyala unspeaking as usual, joins the group with a small drum in hand.

“Well doesn’t that beat all. I haven’t--” her brother starts to say, but at a glance from her says only, “Well, well,” instead. Most of the others don’t even notice, as Inez (the blonde who so caught Emmett and Val’s attention) beckons for someone to join her in a dance.

The watches rotate; the stars continue their slow approach.

* * *

Val watches Lenore walk past without even a glance. It’s been days since he’s seen her emerge from her cabin. Val’s been keeping himself busy with other things, trying hard not to think of her. He’s endured the occasional threats of being thrown overboard for instigating the schedule changes with good humor. It *is* good to change things up a little. Adjusting to the new schedule gives him time to take his mind off things, and time to think.

Ibn Fadil’s warning about meddling and drawing attention to her seemed to sink in a little. Unfortunately, it hasn’t exactly helped him *not* think about her. Quite the contrary, actually.

Well, the least he could do was apologize to her for what he’d done the other day. No doubt, he was the reason she’d holed herself up for a few days. He runs his fingers through his hair and heads over to the aft rail, making sure to keep a ‘respectable’ distance between the two of them.

"What do you see?" Val asks, not realizing that he is repeating Lenore’s own question of Nyala. He glances at Lenore and offers a hesitant smile, hoping he didn’t just frighten her away.

"Listen," Val begins tentatively when she makes no immediate reply, making sure he isn’t being overheard by anyone else, "I wanted to apologize for the other day. I shouldn’t have approached you like that." He seems to pause, looking for the right words to say. After a moment, he simply says, "I’m sorry."

Val tries to keep his eyes to stern, not wanting to stare at the woman beside him. He feels foolish, but tries to maintain a calm demeanor.

"You have nothing for which to apologize," is her quiet response.

"No, really... I'm--" Val begins, but stops abruptly. "What did you say?" he asks instead, more than a little surprised. He manages to still keep his voice low and his eyes to stern, though just barely.

"I said," she replies with a hint of something like sadness and amusement mixed, "that you've nothing to apologize for. It was kind of you to attempt to help."

"Attempt," Val repeats, seemingly to emphasize the fact that it was not a success. It comes out only a little bitter, a little regretful. "The offer still stands, you know," he informs her after a moment. "I want to help."

"There is nothing you or anyone can do," she replies gently. "Unless you can somehow make this vessel increase its speed."

He looks at her, trying once again to penetrate the layer of veils, both real and implied.

"Why do you sound so sad?" Val asks after a moment, with genuine concern in his voice. His statement is somber, sincere; truly a serious look for a face more used to smiles and laughing. It almost makes him look older than he is.

For a moment she gazes silently into the void. "Because... sometimes one is sad, and remedy a long way off. Are you never sad, then, sailor?"

"Sailor?" Val recoils a bit at the distance implied. Of course, he's never had the chance to really introduce himself properly.... He smiles at his own faux pas.

"I'm only a sailor for the time being," Val continues with a bit of his normal good humor. "That is, until the right opportunity presents itself for me to move on. Being a sailor is just what got me off the Rock." Val looks back astern as if to make sure Bral was indeed far away. "And I am not sad often." The last is said with a touch of assertiveness, as if trying to convince himself of the lie. He's almost convincing.

"My name is Valarin Ehrendrin," he begins again, "but most everyone calls me Val." He simply bows his head to her, still not wanting to move more lest he frighten her away. "And you are?"

She finally turns to look at him, head slightly tilted as if examining what she sees, and there is a hint of genuine amusement in her voice when she says, "If you do not know, it is best that I remain Lenore." _He really *is* like him,_ she thinks to herself, a thought that saddens and warms her at the same time.

He is momentarily caught off guard by her amusement. "Then Lenore it shall be," Val says, resigning himself to accepting he is still no closer to knowing her better. He offers her a warm smile nonetheless.

"Tell me, Valarin who is not always a sailor, do you believe in fortune?"

"Fortune?" Val repeats. He pauses a moment to think about it, looking back astern again. _Fortune brought *us* both--_ he starts to think, but dismisses the notion almost immediately.

"I,m not so sure," he ventures at last, somewhat serious. "They say 'Fortune favors the foolish', but I'd like to *think* I have more say in what I do with my life," Val says with a wry smile. It was a jab at himself, since he'd heard the saying applied to his seemingly foolish actions a few of times.

"What about you? Do *you* believe in fortune?" Val asks Lenore, still gazing at the stars behind them. "Or are you having your say by leaving Bral?" He regrets the last as soon as it's said, but he maintains a casual facade.

"If my fate is indeed to die, then leaving will avail me nothing," she says, almost to herself. "But if such indeed is fortune's habit, I would not mind if she chose to favor such a fool as I have been." For a moment her glance is ahead of the ship, not behind. Then, as if realizing how long she has been standing there in talk, she collects herself. "Good fortune to you, Valarin, and good day." She nods graciously and moves toward the stair.

Val is too stunned by Lenore's reply to respond immediately. He watches her go without trying to stop her, glancing towards the fore of the *Cat* to see if something had spooked her, but sees no likely culprit.

Val remains at the aft rail, watching the stars for a while longer. He feels better for having talked with Lenore, even though she still wouldn't give her real name. Not that it matters to him; Lenore is a nice enough name. Val feels a certain weight lifted from his shoulders, curiously mixed with an odd tightness in his chest, as he spends a few moments thinking about their talk. One thing he's fairly certain of, Lenore is no servant. Her demeanor betrayed that almost from the beginning. And what did she mean by, if her fate is to die?

Almost instantly, ibn Fadil's warning comes to mind. Val feels a brief flicker of shame for not keeping his distance like he said he would. But at the same time, he is glad that he did get the chance to talk to her. After all, it's not like he forced her to talk with him. He'd worked hard at making it look innocent from afar; just two people out on deck watching the stars.

Perhaps Fortune does favor the foolish. It had certainly given him his chance to talk with Lenore again. Val chuckles at this thought. No longer does he feel the almost giddy sensation he'd felt days before when he saw her face. That feeling seems to have been replaced by something else, something much stronger. It is something he still can't quite define, either.

Eventually, Val meanders his way towards the galley, and possible company. It isn't his fortune to spend the rest of the night on deck alone...

Meanwhile, Lenore continues her slow walk around the deck, only to be approached by the second mate, Nolan, who since the change around is supervising this watch.

"Pardon me, miss," he says in a low voice. "But is everything all right?"

She's too relaxed, and nearly speaks normally, chides herself for getting careless. "It's all fine, sir, thank you," she murmurs, keeping her gaze down even behind the veil.

"Just wanted to make sure no one was bothering you." He glances aft meaningfully.

"Not at all." She hopes she is not about to get Valarin in trouble.

"Good," the man says with a firm nod. "You let me know if there's anything wanting." He doesn't move, so she does. She wonders if he is watching her as she continues on her way, but keeps her back straight and stiff.

Emmett:

Delmar had wisely set up the guard schedule to occasionally mix up who was paired with whom, ensuring that should a fight come, each of the four marines would know and presumably trust the others. This night, during the dead hours where only the marines, a skeleton crew of sail-

ors and the pilot were awake, Emmett was watching his partner walk the deck. Admiring her intensity. Admiring her professionalism. And, he had to admit to himself, admiring her looks.

Normally, Emmett didn't much bother with waiting. Griff-Jocks seldom did. Either the woman was interested, or she wasn't. He'd flirted with Inez off and on, and she was obviously one of the ones who had been intrigued by his prosthesis rather than repulsed by them at least, judging from the smoldering look she kept giving him when she was dancing the other night. Emmett tapped his peg on the floor. He'd used to be a pretty good dancer, damn it. He still had the rhythm, but now there was too much chance of his foot slipping. Maybe something slow....

He glanced up and saw that Nyala had moved and he did the same, keeping her across from him on the boat, as per custom. Besides, It made it easier to think things through. Inez was cute, obviously available, and after the distracted look Val gave her at the dance, he had obviously decided to not make a play for her. So why was Emmett surreptitiously glancing across the ship at the Elf? And not acting on it?

Think she's out of your pool, half man? Is that it? He snarled to himself. He didn't have a pool, damn it! With a sudden decisive nod he turned to reverse his patrol (nothing wrong with that, right?)....

....Only to find Nyala standing about five feet behind him.

Emmett starts, then put on his best smile "Nice night. Enjoying the trip so far?"

She glances at the unending night surrounding them and replies in her usual cool, measured tones, "There has been no trouble."

Emmett nods, seeing the direction this is going to take. "If that's your definition of 'enjoying', great. I usually look for something more than the absence of a bad thing, but... Anyway, I'm going to give the holds another quick lookover. Our priest has been having disturbing nightmares about fire, and he does follow the god of heralds. I'll be back up in a few short."

Nyala nods and continues on her rounds.

With that Emmett moves to the ladders, resolving to talk to Inez tomorrow. Elves can get cold, apparently.

* * *

During one of the now-regular gatherings of the crew to pass an hour or two in good cheer, Val, in an unusually good mood this particular day, decides to seize the opportunity. Stepping up next to an unsuspecting Emmett, Val plants his hand firmly against the half-man's back and pushes him towards Inez as she dances, smiling the whole while.

Emmett feels the push start and realizing that going with it gave a much better chance of his keeping his feet than trying to resist. He can always break Val's wrist later, if need be.

After the initial stumble the half-man finds his footing and picks up the rhythm with Inez. While he isn't exactly a graceful dancer, he is exuberant, relying on his good foot to keep him balanced and his partner to perform most of the flash. Fortunately, with her infectious grin and long blonde hair, Inez has a lot of flash.

Once he's sure Inez has a firm grip on his hook for balance, he can't resist scooping her up for a twirl or two, effortlessly spinning the woman about him. She catches on quickly, letting him use a few of the dance moves from home that he can use without risking a spill. Emmett is certain that someone (Delmar probably, unless Nyala has a sadistic streak behind those inscrutable elvish eyes) is picking up the pace as the pair dance. *I used to be able to do this, but now I don't want to

risk things,* he thinks, before giving Inez a quick look and nod of warning before starting a spin that will lead her right into Ibn Fadil.

The half-elf has been taking full advantage of this opportunity to study Nyala without being observed. Not that he's falling in love or anything like that; no, no, he's far too practical for that. This is merely aesthetic appreciation.

So he has not really been watching Emmett's dancing, and did not really notice when the man's last pass around the 'dance floor' caused the sailors in front of him to scramble out of the way. His first inkling of the half-man's 'generosity' comes when Nyala looks at him, he promptly looks away, and that blur on his right side resolves into Inez spinning toward him ...

He gives an audible yelp of surprise, and manages to grab her arms as she nearly collides with him. They spin around staggeringly once, twice -- and then he crashes to the deck with the girl on top of him.

"Sorry!" he gasps, as Inez starts to laugh at the expression on his face. "I don't dance!" He flushes with embarrassment as she huffs and turns away, rolling her eyes. As Inez corrals some other sailor, ibn Fadil steals another glance at Nyala, hoping she didn't notice that was staring at her, but she appears to be concentrating entirely on her drum. Her eyes are closed.

With as much grace as he can manage, Emmett gets out of the way, sliding back over beside Valarin. The taller man gets a good-natured pat on the back that dislodges a couple ribs as Emmett mutters, "Thanks. Remind me to kill you later."

Val sputters and coughs, but remains smiling. "It's well worth it my friend," he manages after a moment. "I've never seen dancing like that. Impressive! I wonder if *Nyala* could keep up," he adds with a sly grin.

Once the others have lost interest in his embarrassment, ibn Fadil tries to enjoy the music and dancing -- but inevitably, when his gaze crosses Nyala's face it stays there too long. After a few minutes of this he abruptly shakes himself and goes below, seeking the galley and some task to occupy his hands.

Meanwhile, at the helm Brother Pham wonders what that thumping noise is on the deck above his head.

At the back of crowd Alais frowns, perturbed by the interactions he has seen this "evening." He has grown somewhat frustrated these past weeks, but continues to bide his time and take careful note of all that happens, particularly where Inez, Nyala, and his acquaintances from Bral are concerned. Perhaps the latter are being recruited.

* * *

Some time before the ship reaches the Flow, ibn Fadil sees Alais in the mess-room, and pauses in his work to speak with him. "Have you ever been away from Bral before, Master Zere-min?"

"Well, no, actually. There was talk of sending me to one of those accursed universities, but fortunately I was set at leisure to pursue my own studies."

The half-elf is mildly surprised. "What is wrong with universities?" he asks innocently (but bracing himself for some tirade).

* * *

A few days before the ship reaches the limits of the sphere, Lenore passes ibn Fadil in the otherwise empty corridor below deck on her way back to her room. This has happened before, just as accidentally, and as before he politely stands aside to let her pass. But this time, his native curiosity wins out over his native caution: when she has just barely passed him he says, quietly but urgently, "Ginevra!"

She freezes briefly, then takes another step, and he can imagine the helter-skelter of her thoughts, trying to decide what tack to take.

"I don't believe," she says quietly and without turning, "that we have been introduced." Her breath is a bit faster than normal, her shoulders stiff with tension.

"No, of course not, my lady," he says just as quietly. Some of her tension communicates itself to him; belatedly, he remembers that she is not just a mystery for him solve.

"What do you want?" she asks directly.

Ibn Fadil blinks, unsettled. For some reason the simple question reminds him that she must have money, and he does not. For the first time, one possible way out of his predicament occurs to him -- and is almost as quickly dismissed. He is not that desperate. "Merely to satisfy my curiosity," he says in his best neutral tone.

At last she turns to face him. "And?" There is still tension in the question.

Unlike the other men on the ship, he does not try to see through her veil, but merely accepts its presence. "I am sorry I brought it up, my lady," he says, his expression still opaque; her problems are not his problem, and he knows how to keep his distance. Giving her a slight bow, he turns and goes on his way.

On deck, looking out at the stars, ibn Fadil reviews the brief conversation and the thought that occurred to him. It was best not to be friendly to her, he decides; it would be too cruel, should circumstances change. But he really is not that desperate. Not yet.

Meanwhile, Lenore continues on to her small, neat stateroom and tries to calm her racing heart.

Again? There are too many inquisitive men on this ship... has Theo unmasked me? She bolts the door behind her with more than usual care. _No, he has little guile; he would simply confront me, not use others. Perhaps I should speak to him myself.... He'll be furious at being dragged into this, and lied to, but I think at worst he will put me off the ship at some port. Perhaps that would not even be worst, for the trail will be less clear._ She paces the tiny room, longing for a true sky again, and _space_ around her, but those are months away if indeed she will ever see them. _Not yet. I won't tell him yet. And I must be far more careful, here, than I have been.

I should have brought Lenore with me, she realizes ruefully. _And traveled as Aidal myself. But it would have been difficult to explain why both should go, and there is money... without a miracle, it is a long way to travel after Janik._

* * *

Bral is a relatively small sphere. When the _Lazy Cat_ is forty-six days out from port, they reach the crystal shell. For a week the positions of the stars in their lazy motion have been changing more rapidly relative to the ship, and some of them have grown visibly larger. Without anything to compare them to, it is impossible to guess the size and distance of the seemingly heatless flames.

Captain Theo checks the portal locator, and for another two days the ship cruises along with the smooth, dark substance of the sphere as a ceiling. At last, with something of a ritual air, the entire crew is assembled on deck and the ship inspected to ensure all flames have been extinguished before they proceed into the flow.

Some of the crew, for whom this is their first trip off the Rock, stifle gasps as the ship noses through the portal and into the pearlescent river of phlogiston, its strange radiance -- as if a sun lay hidden by thick, many-colored fog -- illuminating their awed expressions. At the helm, Pham feels the ship respond to its new environment; wildspace was a placid pool in which the *Cat* was little more interesting than a log raft. Now that her fins and sails feel the tug of the flow, she is like her namesake waking from a long sleep. They will travel far more quickly now, but it will be months before they reach their destination.

Lenore remains in her cabin as the transition from endless darkness to light takes place, and for several days thereafter. Some of the green crew are clearly wishing they had such an option, judging by their nervous stares at the glowing rainbow surrounding them.

"I heard all manner of tales on the Rock, things living out here that'd scare a man white," Seton says to Derica and Evan, the three of them huddled in the safety of the galley -- cheerless place that it is without a fire, and Nahele scowling and muttering to himself in Elvish about a thousand and one things to do with dried fruit. It's been three days, and none of them are used to their new surroundings yet. "And that's not even thinking about slavers and pirates and such."

"Neogi," Derica shakes her head in mournful certainty of their collective doom. "Do you know what those *do* to you?"

"And stuff can sneak up on you, out here," Evan glances at the closed door as if he expects a dozen neogi to burst in any second. "Could be ghosts and you'd never see 'em in this misty-like stuff. They'd drink our blood. Or we could run smack into --"

"If you lot haven't anything better to do than sit around repeating foolishness that some drunken sailor spouted to you, I'm sure someone can find you somewhat to occupy your hands," Nahele remarks; they jump, having sort of forgotten that he was there. "There's no neogi anywhere near Bral, for one thing, the Navy sees to that, and we'll not be running into anything. Doesn't work that way. And I've been in and out of the Flow since I was a lad of forty. I'm somewhere around three hundred now, and I've yet to see a ghost."

With a resentful glance, Evan both lowers his voice and changes the topic. "You seen that lady's maid around lately?" he asks Seton. The other man shakes his head. "I saw Val talking to her a while back."

Seton sighs. "Figures she'd talk to *him*. Wonder what his secret is."

Derica gives him an astonished look and starts laughing, but refuses to explain why when they want to know what's so funny.

They are twelve "days" into their journey and moving quickly through the deep river that joins Bral to the next sphere in their path. Alais has just gone to sleep when there is an authoritative knock on his door.

"Master Zeremin? The captain requests your presence on deck."

Somewhat groggy, he realizes that the ship isn't moving. When he gets to the deck he finds most of the rest of the crew lining the bow rails silently. Even the experienced hands are simply

staring, and for a moment Alais doesn't know why; it's just a school of delphinids*, and at their relative speeds the ship should have been past them before anyone ever noticed.... He blinks.

It is indeed a school of delphinids, but what a school! There are dozens -- no, hundreds of them, and they are moving against the current. Pham has brought the ship to a halt rather than plow through the center of their massed numbers, though they seem to be ignoring the ship entirely, indulging in none of the usual play or begging treats from the sailors.

For many minutes the school continues to pass, and he must again revise his estimate of their numbers, though it is impossible to keep any accurate count. Their changing rainbow hides blend into the phlogiston somewhat.

"So, Master Zeremin," Theo says, stepping to the rail beside him. "I've neither seen nor heard tell of anything such as this. Have your studies told you anything of such large gatherings of the creatures?"

In response to the captain's question, Alais says, "The delphinid is a creature of the Cetacean bythro, that is, whale-like creatures. They are often found in the company of Great Dreamers: large, magically powerful Cetacean beings. Otherwise, they cruise the flow and often play near spelljammers. Their trilateral bodies are yet another clue that the triangle is a cosmic basic, since it relates to several other species. One of the leading answers to the problem of the Continuity of Life across Wildspace is the Xeron theory, which posits trilateralism as the simplest venue for intelligence-

He belatedly notices some of the looks the crew are shooting him. "Ahem, yes. Although I lack expertise in the field, I would think that a pod of the size we have just witnessed to be highly unusual. They could all be journeying toward something--perhaps a spawning ground of which astrozoology is unaware--or running away from something.

"We may wish to make preparations in case the latter turns out to be the case."

Theo nods gravely. "We'll do so." He spends a few more silent moments watching the apparently endless stream of creatures in their graceful motion. "Looks like they're clearing out -- Delmar, go down and tell Brother Pham he can proceed at his discretion. Double the watch, and keep a sharp eye out to all sides. Marines on deck until further notice." The mate nods and hurries off to carry out the orders. "I'll log this, and when we get to Janik we can check the records there. Could be that this is some normal migration." His brow remains furrowed, however, and he spends more time than usual on deck that watch, keeping a close eye on everything, much to the discomfort of some of the crew.

Still clutching a damp towel from the galley, ibn Fadil watches the spectacle with a vague alarm whose source he cannot immediately identify. He has to think back many years, to Zakhara, and a hunting trip with the friends of his youth, before an inkling comes to him. Out on the dry plains they had seen a herd of antelope running like a river of hooves and tossing heads, fleeing a pride of lions. He stares downstream, uselessly trying to pierce the phlogiston's murky glow with his gaze.

Val lets out a low whistle of appreciation at the sight before him. He'd only had occasion to see delphinids once before, and that time there was only a small pod of a half dozen or so. This was almost overwhelming. Seeing that the ship had come to a stop, Val approaches Alais but stops when he notices the Captain already talking to him; no need to interrupt.

The *_Lazy Cat_* proceeds with caution, but although they pass the occasional straggling delphinid, they see nothing to explain such a large gathering moving with such apparent purpose.

"Have you ever seen anything of the like?" Val asks Pham later on. He hadn't really gotten around to spending much time with the good Brother during their journey, and Val was regretting that more than a little now. "Emmett mentioned your dreams of fire, but have you had any about something like what we saw today?"

"Val, hello... no, I've never seen such a large ... herd, swarm, school... what is the term, anyway? In any event, I've never seen so many delphinids in one place before."

The ship shudders for a moment, and then starts to sway slightly. Pham gets a look of concern and says "Excuse me, Val, but it looks like we're hitting an eddy in the flow. I need to concentrate to keep us steady."

Val nods and excuses himself, leaving their pilot to concentrate on his task. Pham continues to pay extra-close attention, but as the ship continues in the rainbow sea, there is no sign of what the delphinids might have been fleeing, if they were indeed doing so.

* * *

Two days later, the lookout voices a sharp warning; there's a deep bed of sluk ahead, a nasty sort of seaweedy plant that can mire a ship badly. Fortunately, its dark blue vines are easily spotted in the rainbow "sea," and the ship continues on her way, giving the stuff a wide berth.

Wearying of the solitude of her cabin, "Lenore" emerges again in time to watch the sluk bed recede into the distance. Once the weed is gone, there is nothing -- no comforting horizon, no sun or stars for the eye to fix itself upon -- and she takes a deep breath and fixes her eyes on the rail, trying to ward off vertigo.

"One grows accustomed to it, in time."

She jumps violently and feels herself flush in embarrassment for having done so. She'd not heard Nyala's approach at all. "Really?" she says somewhat lamely, still feeling flustered and foolish. The woman makes her nervous (a reaction she shares with many of the crew), with her silence and ageless beauty, the way she seems as comfortable in her skin as a cat, and how her bow is never beyond arm's reach. "I -- I suppose one would have to."

After a brief silence, "My brother says you do not eat well. You should take more care."

Now completely taken aback, Lenore stammers for a moment. "That's... that's very kind of him to notice, but really, it's nothing. It will pass, I'm sure."

Arms crossed, Nyala leans on the rail, looking down, and says nothing. Lenore wonders what she knows, or thinks she knows, or suspects. Having secrets is a tiring business, particularly when they do not seem to want to be kept.

"Why are you here?" Lenore asks suddenly, without knowing what moves her to ask. Perhaps only that she is tired of being forever defensive. "On this ship, I mean." The question earns her a faintly surprised glance, or so she thinks -- it is as difficult for her to see others as it is for them to see her, of course.

"My brother wanted to go to Janik. I do not like to be idle, so I accompany him."

This strikes her as less than a complete answer, but she is in no position to press for more lest the courtesy be returned. She concentrates on the phlogiston instead, remembering her last trip -- but that had been a larger ship, and she had traveled as befit one of her family, and she had been secretless and free to speak with the others on board. It had been easy to shut herself away from the disquieting sights outside the ship, and after that there was only Bral. No longer.

After two months of travel together, the ship's small community has settled in as much as it ever will. There is still a small crowd every "day" to watch Hiro practice, but by and large the crew have given up trying to draw out the enigmatic swordsman, and "like getting a word out of Hiro" has become a signifier for any difficult task. Some of the crew remain suspicious of Pham, but others have been disarmed to at least some extent by his soft-spoken and humble demeanor.

Over the past few weeks of watches, Emmett has grown certain that Yestin is watching him. The giff pays careful attention to all of those who were involved in the fight on Bral, but seems to be most interested in the half-man. In the quiet off watches, he can sometimes hear the scratch of a pen from the other cabin, accompanied by an occasional bass sigh that certainly isn't Nyala's.

And the flow rolls on.....

* * *

Val has grown restless in the two months on board the *_Cat_*. It is not as if he has naught to do, but routines can become tedious. It is for this reason that he has decided to practice some long unused skills.

When time and the lack of company permits, Val works at picking the lock to an empty storage room, locking and unlocking it with his tools until he becomes comfortable with the skill again. His walks on deck are on cat's paws, below decks in shadows nipping in and out, often without being heard or seen. Practicing the art of picking pockets is definitely out, as it is bad form to do that to shipmates. Val instead contents himself with lifting his own pouch off his coat hung behind the cabin's door, or off the edge of the cot as silently and casually as possible. Palm-ing was easy enough, however; he would often lift flatware from the table in the galley, pocket it, and return it just as unnoticed. It has become a game to him, though one played by himself. It is a distraction. But a distraction from what?

Since Val's last talk with Lenore, he hasn't gone out of his way to be with her again. If it happens, it happens, he tells himself. He feels it is best to not force anything, lest he harm her indirectly by bringing attention to her. Though he notes, with some concern, that he has not seen her at all since they entered the Flow.

Val moves about the deck, watching the sluk pass by -- he notices Lenore and Nyala at the rail, silhouetted by the rainbow brilliance of the phlogiston. He hangs back a bit, not wanting to interrupt. It isn't his intent to eavesdrop; he has too much respect for each to do that.

It does seem odd to him that Lenore and Nyala would be talking. Val noticed that the crew found Nyala standoffish, but it didn't bother him much. He'd met a few Idell-- **elves** in his travels (he must remember to note the distinction), and some shared traits with this one. She seems aloof and detached, yet sharp and highly observant. Val almost envies Nyala's rock-steady façade, a trait he seems to find lacking in himself. More often than not, he finds himself relying on charm and fast-talking rather than stoicism.

Nyala also gives the impression of being very capable and in control. An interesting contrast to the young woman standing beside her... Not that Val thought Lenore wasn't capable - just not as much in control. They certainly make for an interesting pair.

Val contents himself to watch until he sees Lenore eventually head off as Nyala continues to walk about the deck. Oddly enough, he finds himself wanting to speak with the elf.

"Is everything okay?" Val asks Nyala, falling into step next to her. He's fairly certain she had seen him there, so he doesn't feel a need for preamble. Val remains casual and relaxed, continuing to look ahead as he has seen Nyala do when speaking to others.

"A question with many possible meanings," she notes.

"Then you have the choice of topics," Val replies, mischief dancing in his eyes.

That earns him a long, and completely unreadable, look. "I believe the answer to your question is 'yes.'"

"Ah," is his simple reply. He offers her a charming smile, which she sheds like water off a duck's back. Val is undeterred by her serenely unreadable gaze.

"How are things going with Emmett?" Val asks after a few more paces. There is a hint of earnestness in this question. He'd been wondering since the one night when the half-man didn't take his hint to ask Nyala to dance. Perhaps they never hit it off?...

Is that a touch of amusement? "He could answer that question better, I'm sure; we have not shared a watch in some weeks. You are friends, are you not?"

"Yeah, you could say that," he replies with a smile. It was pretty safe to say that Emmett was the closest thing he had to a friend since leaving Driahn. "He's got a heart of gold. Literally," he adds with mock seriousness. Val isn't quite sure what to make of the flicker across Nyala's facade.

"And, since he *isn't* here to answer the question better..." Val trails off, one corner of his lips turned up in a mischievous smile. He isn't going to let her get off that easily.

"Then you will have to ask him later," she ripostes neatly. With that she nods slightly; it appears that she intends to head belowdecks.

"Wait," Val says, this time in thickly accented elvish. He had come to understand that the Idell he had learned on his own world was remarkably similar to the languages spoken by elves of other spheres. "Why are you so..." he begins, but pauses to look for the right words; his fluency has its limits. "Why do you avoid answers? Not just about half-man. All things," he manages to say.

He gives Nyala an unwavering look. If he weren't so flustered by her, he'd probably be proud of himself for remembering the complex language. *_Why are women so hard to talk to?!_* Val thinks to himself.

Her gaze is somewhat curious now. "One could as well as why you question so. They are my answers, are they not?" she replies, also in elvish -- speaking a bit slowly for his benefit. "And my reasons are my own as well."

Well, you got her to stop, Val thinks to himself. *_Now what?!_*

"Fair enough," Val replies in the common tongue, running his fingers through his hair. He smiles ruefully to indicate he is not trying to cause trouble. Well, not too much trouble anyway. "I meant no offense. It's just that I happen to...care. And you aren't the easiest person to get to know." He softens the last with another smile.

"Yes." Nyala gives him a bit of a quizzical look -- she's well aware of the fact, after all.

Val studies her for a moment. "Aaaaand I take it that you prefer it that way. Well, can't blame me for trying," he says with a shrug. "I'd personally hate being lonely all the time... Life is often too short to be that way, I've learned."

One corner of her mouth curls slightly, and there is a spark of amusement in her eyes. "Perhaps in a couple hundred years you'll feel differently. Have a good day, Val."

He offers her a rather tight-lipped smile, his eyes betraying annoyance, before heading off on his own. _Perhaps in a couple hundred years, indeed!_ Val thinks to himself. _Damn elves..._

* * *

“I do not,” Nyala announces with a heartfelt sigh, “understand men.”

“Fair enough, they don’t understand you.” Her brother scowls at the sack of spices in his hand, weighing it thoughtfully.

“I don’t wish them to.”

“Well then, there you go.” He sets it back in the chest, pulls out another. They are alone in the galley, ibn Fadil having been dismissed for the “night.” Pleased though he is to have an assistant, Nahele has not been able to figure out just what the half-elf is doing on the ship; he performs his duties well and willingly, but does not seem to have interest in sailing as such. Running from something, most likely. Well, he’s not the only one... ah, there’s that dried sage....

“Are you listening to me?”

“What?” He starts guiltily.

“I was trying to be pleasant. He seems concerned about the woman who is not what she claims —I passed on your message, too — and I tried to tell him that she was well, and then he began questioning me and would *not* be put off.” She frowns in some annoyance — between the two of them, she does not mask her expressions.

“What about?”

“Emmett.”

“Oh. I rather like him,” Nahele confesses. “He’s a good sort. Bit rough around the edges, but most humans are. And he appreciates my cooking.”

“This one seemed to think there is something between us.” She glares when this revelation results in a peal of laughter. “What you’re thinking is *not* funny.”

“I think so,” he grins.

“You’re frivolous. I tried to be kind.” She has the feeling she failed rather dramatically at it.

“I’m also considerably older than you are,” he points out, still smiling. He considers ruffling her hair to prove both points, but she might dislocate his shoulder.

“What has that to do with anything?”

“Just—no,” he decides, growing a bit thoughtful. “I think it may well be something that cannot be told, but must simply be learned. You needn’t waste such fierce looks on me, either, they only got you anything when Father was about. Will you take some advice from one so frivolous as I?”

“Perhaps,” she replies dubiously.

“Talk to them. Maybe even smile once in a while. You’re going to be spending a good long while among their company, I suspect — these or ones much like them — and you’d best get used to dealing with them.” _And if you insist on making yourself such a puzzle,_ he adds to himself, _you’d best expect them to try and solve you._ He himself has found loquaciousness a far more useful defense than silence. But she’ll have to figure that part out for herself.

“Much time?” She arches her brows in surprise. “I thought we were staying on Maekalan, even if they won’t have you on Janik.”

"I intend to. I've had enough roaming for a while." He sighs faintly. Just when he would have thought about going home for a bit, too. Well, Nyala's done enough brooding for the both of them, not much sense in that.

"I see, I think." She frowns slightly.

"And in any case, we've months yet to go in this journey," he points out. "May as well try to enjoy it."

A sigh. "Perhaps I will speak again with the woman."

"There you go," he nods encouragingly. "Given her situation, she could probably use a friend." _As well could you._ "Now where did I put the pepper...."

* * *

Emmett

Watches with Yestin sure are interesting Emmett thinks, keeping his good eye on the phlogiston panorama and letting the other half of his mind run through the various mysteries on board ship. _I can feel his occasional big-eyed glances from across the ship. What is he doing? Checking me for loyalty? Sizing me up for the kill?_

The half man knows there are secrets on board the ship -- two months on board and there was no way he couldn't notice. Val is doing something stupid concerning Lenore, and it looks like contrary to all logic ibn Fadil is helping him. Nyala is hiding something, but probably just to look all mysterious and inscrutable, so she can act superior. Pham is disturbingly open, which to some of the crew is worse than if he cackled madly and ranted about their doom. Rooming with Hiro is like rooming with a brooding statue, but those secrets are probably old. The only secret that really concerns Emmett was how the Giff keeps watching him when he thinks Emmett isn't looking.

And two months is time enough to deal with that. I think I have a handle on his facial reactions. Emmett waits for the turn on watch duty to end, then quickly corners the young Giff. "You know. I think I'm going to tell Delmar that we shouldn't be partnered together anymore." The half man says with a serious look, subtly eyeing the Giff to see how he reacts.

Yestin looks thoroughly taken aback, ears twitching disconcertedly. "Wh -- well, as you think best... why?" he asks with every evidence of sincere concern.

"Well, heck boy - the mast!" Emmett shakes his hook and breaks into a grin. "I can't climb and you'd snap the sucker in half. If something happens up there we'd be outta luck!" Emmett slaps the young Giff on the back, free for once to use something close to his full strength. "Come on, we'll get a drink and arm wrestle or something. Maybe we can get over my obvious stature and strength are making you nervous."

Emmett steers the Giff (as much as is possible) towards the Galley, looking for an excuse to sit down and chat with 'the boy', keeping an eye on his face to look for more shocked reactions. _Ear Twitching. He's worried about something, that's for sure..._

Yestin seems a little hesitant -- of course, he's not one of the ship's more sociable sorts -- but after an uncertain moment follows along with every appearance of willingness.

It's late at night, and Emmett sees Hiro and the ice queen start their patrols as he leads his current 'watch buddy' below decks. Emmett takes a quick glance around to make sure ibn Fadil isn't present -- _The last thing Yestin needs is another one of us making him nervous,_ before snagging two flagons of ale and the leftover food set aside for them.

"Sorry about the jest upstairs, boy, but the look on your face was priceless," Emmett says, slipping the full mug into the table in front of the huge Giff. Grasping his flagon with three fingers and thumb he points with the fourth one, "But it proves a point - two months on patrol together and all you know about me is that I'm devilishly handsome and a great dancer, and all I know about you is that you're bloody big and stay up writing all night."

He leans in and fixes his eye on the Giff. "So why don't you tell me about yourself? Saves me staring at the back of your head on watch and just guessing."

Again, the ears twitch; he seems a bit startled by the question. "Me? There's very little to say, sir. I've been on ships most of my life, but have seen little of the worlds outside of them until we came to Bral a few years ago. I was only recently judged old enough to take part in our -- in the patrols there." He grips the mug carefully in a large hand and drinks half of the ale in a swallow.

Emmett smiles. "Well, that's a start. More than I knew before. Honestly, all I know about your people is, well, what everyone knows - that you're damn good fighters and utterly incorruptable." Emmett pauses to take a drink, keeping an eye on the Giff. "So tell me about them - something you're gonna have to get used to on cruises - we've all got time, and we might as well find out about our neighbors in wildspace: who's good at what, how people organize themselves, who can be trusted and who can't."

The half man pauses again to take a bite of the...interesting...unfired food. "And eat up - I won't get any advantage from you losing your fighting strength, now would I?"

Yestin snorts softly, a sound reminiscent of a horse and which seems to suggest amusement. He seems a bit more relaxed now. "Unlikely. As for who can be trusted -- that is hard to tell, isn't it?" He pauses and then says a bit abruptly, "I've heard some of the stories you tell the crew. I would like to hear more of them. I hope I do not presume overmuch. Manners among my people are somewhat different than with humans, it seems -- I have tried not to offend."

Emmett reassures him that he's done nothing of the sort, and keeps watching closely as he launches into one of his favorite tales. Over the course of the conversation, he learns that Yestin is approximately seventeen years old in Cadin terms and last saw his parents when he was ten, at which point he entered his peoples' extensive system of fosterage, which eventually landed him with one of the Bral mercenary troops. He eventually admits that he's only been in one real battle, with a crew of small-time smugglers unwise enough to try practicing their craft near the Rock.

The giff is certainly twitchy — guilty conscience? — when it comes to some subjects, and whenever Emmett mentions Bral he clams right up. He does rule out the “sizing me up for the kill” option, however; unless Yestin is a fantastically good actor, his hesitations are the real thing. Whoever heard of a shy giff?

* * *

One sphere, and then a second, appears and falls behind the ship as she races through the phlogiston at incalculable speeds. It is not until they are nearing the sphere of their destination that they encounter another ship. The *_Palla_* is an elven-crewed hammership, outward bound after a profitable run among the many worlds of Tabaret sphere (among which are Maekalan and its moon Janik).

“Can you take a letter on?” Theo asks their captain, the two ships as near as their pilots can manage. Most of the *_Cat_*'s crew is on deck, hungry for new faces after months in such confined company.

“Certainly,” his opposite number nods graciously.

“Half a minute, then—”

“Captain,” Lenore interrupts breathlessly, having rushed up from her room. “Ask them — ask them oh please, is there any news of a ship called the _Silver Swan?_”

“Excuse me,” he snaps, taken aback by her sudden presumption after so many months of silent deference, then pauses and stares hard for a moment, a searching up-and-down glance. “Hah.” He turns back to the rail and shouts her question across the gap, but the other captain shakes his head. “There you are. I’ve a note to write. We will speak later,” he informs her gruffly. Lenore bows her head in silent acceptance of the rebuke, shrinking back slightly as he stamps past her.

While he’s gone, Nahele engages in a rapid-fire conversation with his opposite number on the _Palla_, and seems pleased by the result. “Ibn Fadil — down in storeroom two, the small wooden chest to the left of the door. Quickly.”

A transfer is worked out; the other cook inspects the chest’s contents, waves at Nahele with a wide smile, and sends over two crates, which he shepherds to their new home in the kitchen with great care and without allowing anyone to look inside.

Theo soon reappears with the letter to send Bral-wards, and with many a wave on both sides the two ships part.

Whatever passes between the captain and their passenger, does not pass the walls of his stateroom. It seems fairly clear to most of the crew by now that the lady’s maid has been sent away — out of kindness or as punishment, theories differ — after discovery of some scandalous love affair, the consequences of which are by now physically apparent. Speculation is rife as to whether the oligarch himself was dallying with his wife’s servant, or whether perhaps it was one of the other lords, or whether she fell victim to some wandering rogue. Their tongues are stilled whenever the captain or the woman are in the area, of course. Or, by that time, Nyala as well, since she often accompanies Lenore on her strolls these days. Or, by extension, her brother. Despite all that, they still manage to talk quite a bit.

* * *

At last, the long-awaited day — the _Lazy Cat_ passes into the crystal sphere that houses her destination. The captain calls a halt so he can determine their location and thence their heading, and Nahele whoops with unrestrained enthusiasm as he lights the fire.

“Out! Everyone out!” he pushes the off-duty crew from the galley. “I must have peace to prepare a decent meal for the first time in months! If I can remember how! Assistant, stand ready!” the elf commands with a grand flourish of his favorite cleaver.

Whatever he’s doing, it involves the crates from the _Palla_, and it smells fantastic. Even those who would normally be sleeping are drawn up on deck, anticipating the results of Nahele’s labors. Emmett’s stomach is growling as he paces his usual course up and down the deck. After so many weeks of phlogiston glow, the starlit darkness of wildspace looks almost strange. At least the ones here seem to stay put, unlike —

“INCOMING! Haagathga!”

In the fraction of a second it takes for him to realize that the commanding bellow he just heard has issued from the Ice Queen, others on deck start screaming. There is a smell of blood in the ship’s air.

Pham stares at the useless mop in his hand. "I should have know better, I need something with an edge, or a point..." A quick look around finds a couple of belaying pins securely fastened to the rail. Pham looks over to make sure a bloodsac isn't closing on him, and drops the end of the mop

between the two close set pins. "Please, Hextor, let this work!" With a sharp tug and a surprisingly loud crack, the end of the mop breaks off, leaving ... a ragged point!

Thus armed, Pham moves quickly to the nearest bloodsac, thrusting with his improvised spear at the bloodsac attached to Joe, but again his weapon slides off without any apparent effect.

Ibn Fadil gets out of the way of the last fleeing crew members and glances over the scene. There is Nyala, there Yestin, there Emmett; and there the several haagathga. I should have stayed below, he scolds himself. Dropping one of his borrowed kitchen knives but keeping the other, he advances on the nearest feeding bloodsac, leading with his improvised torch and watching carefully for its reaction. In the flickering light his expression can be seen as one of concentration.

The bloodsac does not react to the nearness of the flame, but merely continues its meal, and his cleaver glances off the sucker-covered membrane.

Val is unable to stand by as Joe and Seton suffer. He takes the opportunity to hurl a dagger at a bloodsac fastened to one of his fellow crewmen, careful not to impale the victim of the parasite with his throw. There's a flash of silver as the blade heads towards Seton and -- at last! -- pierces the strangely tough membrane. Val draws one of his remaining daggers and stands ready for what comes next.

Unable to leave his post at the helm lest any further threat appear, Alais watches over the battle, ready to direct help anywhere it seems necessary, but now that the deck has been cleared, those remaining seem to have the battle as well in hand as possible.

Ulf again hacks desperately at the bloodsac, but to no avail, and Nolan stumbles in mid-rush and nearly lands on top of the thing as he tries to regain his balance.

In the midst of the chaos, Hiro remains entirely calm, and his follow-through finishes off the bloodsac near him as Inez scrambles for the hatchway and safety; it drops heavily to the deck, leaking.

The two attached bloodsacs are moving slowly; beneath the horrified gaze of the other crew members, each extrudes a slender, tube-like growth into the necks of their victims.

Yestin bellows and swings again at the one still floating freely in the ship's atmosphere, but again it eludes him, and Nyala's arrow goes wide as well.

Ok. this thing is able to flow out of the way of the slash. Deny it a place to move to. With that thought Emmett takes a quick scabbling hop to the right, then advances on the thing, sword first, slashing to drive it back against the forecastle wall. His blade connects, cutting deeply into the grotesque body as he forces the bloodsac into the corner.

As the aft stairwell finally clears, Theo thunders up onto the deck to defend his ship, followed closely by the mate, both of them with short swords at the ready. Both blades bite into the one Val knifed, releasing a sluggish flow of blood -- that of its victim mingled with its own fluids.

"Hah!" The half man's yell cut's through the muted sounds of fighting on the deck. "Take that you Bloodsucker!"

Seeing that ibn Fadil and Val have tools more to the task of prying the bloodsacs off of Seton and Joe, Hiro moves in large almost balletic strides toward the only remaining "free" mon-

ster. Best to attend to it now before more crewmen can be drained. When in striking distance, he grips his katana with both hands about the pommel and swings the blade in the wide swaths typical of the "Sweeping the Sapphire Sky" form in an attempt to bring the monster low.

Cornered and wounded as it has been by Emmett, he opens another slash across its body. It oozes hither and thither, seeking either to confuse his eyes or perhaps merely to escape.

Knowing that he has effectively denied the star vampire any other targets by pushing it against the wall, Emmett adopts a more defensive stance, weaving his blade between the haa-gathga and himself, deflecting its pseudopods and searching for openings. When one presents itself he slashes in again with all of his surprising strength, hoping that he can kill the thing quickly and move on to aid the others.

The bloodsac reaches toward him, but its grasping suckers are unable at first to find purchase on his armor, and its attempt gives him the perfect opening to drive his cutlass into it, piercing the thing through and pinning it to the wooden wall behind it, where it writhes in eerie silence, unable to free itself, movements gradually slowing as the life drains from it.

Pham notices Val ready to work on the sac attached to Joe. "Val - let me get behind it - then we can attack it from both sides simultaneously!"

Pham moves to the opposite side of the bloodsac from Val, positions his "spear" so that the sac is pinned -- actually piercing it this time, as he gets a feel for his makeshift weapon -- and lets Val strike.

Seeing that the deck is clear of noncombatants, Val rushes forward to where Joe lies on the deck. Instead of a wild stab or slash at the bloated parasite, he uses his daggers to sever the tube-like growth that's inserted into the man's neck, careful not to cut the fallen crewman.

If it moves at me, I'm gonna kill it, Val repeats to himself, too close to the bloodsac for his own comfort. Though it takes all his strength -- and most of his nerve -- Val succeeds in cutting the strange attachment. The bloodsac quivers, as if preparatory to some movement, and he hastily leaps backward as it begins to lift free of its victim.

Well that he does so, for Ulf lands another swordblow on the creature, although Nolan's glances off the suckered hide.

At the other bloodsac, Theo and Delmar hack ineffectually at the creature.

"Get back!" Nyala yells to them, looking for a clear shot with her favored weapon, and sinks another arrow into the bloodsac.

Ibn Fadil darts in; scowling, the half-elf touches the point of his knife to the bloodsac's surface, presses gently to get some surface tension from it, and then thrusts sharply downward, piercing the tough membrane and dragging the blade slowly through the sucker-covered surface.

The sac on Seton appears to have had enough; it releases its hold on him with every appearance of reluctance and begins to drift away into the endless night.

"Pham, quickly!" Theo orders. "It may be too late."

Neither victim looks at all good. Brother Pham knows that even by the grace of Hextor, it will be fortunate if he can save one.

Seeing that one of the bloodsacs has already gained too much altitude to fight with melee weapons, Emmett leaves his cutlass stuck in the wall, instead looking for a new method of getting an attack on the fleeing creature.

"Hiro! I'll boost you up!"

Seeing comprehension in the swordmaster's eyes, the half man crouches and makes a crude step out of his hands, wrapping his fingers around his hook to prevent any accidents. With timing born of years of handling griffins in airborne battles, he waits for the taller man's run and leap into the step, then hurls him upward with all of the near-superhuman strength in his partially artificial frame.

The move leaves Emmett flat on his back, but sends Hiro flying through the air with the combined force of his jump and Emmett's throw, closing on the escaping haagathga. With astonishing grace, Hiro twists in mid-air and slashes out at one of the creatures. It tumbles back to the deck, dead, as Nyala's final arrow goes wide and the last of them continues on its blind, determined way, now out of reach.

Ibn Fadil stays out of the way and watches until he is sure the bloodsacs are indeed fleeing. Glancing around, he pauses to observe Hiro's attack on the other bloodsac. Shaking his head in amazement, he strolls across the deck to where a bucket of sand is positioned near the lantern hung on the mast, and extinguishes his impromptu torch in it. Then he sticks Nahele's knife into the same sand, as a start at cleaning the bloodsac's internal goop off.

As he continues his cleaning efforts with a corner of the apron he is still, incongruously, wearing, he also looks around at the others, and particularly at the two unfortunate sailors. Sensible people, he reflects, are afraid of things like this. And then he peers worriedly at the knife, hoping to see it is undamaged.

Val isn't concerned with chasing after the remaining bloodsacs; best to leave that to the professionals. Instead, he watches Pham's back as the messenger of Hextor looks over the wounded. Val wipes cold sweat from his face as he looks on, well aware that they might be too late to save either of their fallen crewmen.

Pham looks at the two crewmen, kneels down, and makes a quick survey of their condition. Their skin is waxen, covered with round white marks where the suckers attached, and it takes a moment for him to find the faint, erratic pulse that remains.

Pham looks to Theo. "Captain, I lack the power to heal either of these men completely. I will lend each some of Hextor's strength, but with the extent of their wounds they'll need further attention. Please arrange a detail to care for them until I can gain enough strength to completely heal them."

Pham then kneels by Seton. Judging that he's worse off, since his bloodsac feasted uninterrupted, Pham sets to work. Soft, earnest prayer comes from the mouth of the young priest, and then a gentle glow spreads from his outstretched hand. Pham lays his hand on Seton's back, and the glow suffuses into the man's body. Seton stirs slightly, and his wounds seem somewhat better. But is it enough?

It is - for the moment, though he can't be certain the man will last long even with the god's aid.

Seeing that Seton is now hopefully out of immediate danger, Pham turns to Joe, and repeats the simple but profound ritual. After having treated Joe, Pham sits back, sweat glistening on his brow in the starlight. "I've done all I can for now. If we bandage their wounds and keep them hydrated, they should hang on until tomorrow morning, when I'll have recovered enough to give

them more strength. Captain, how far are we from port? These kinds of injuries are somewhat beyond my meager skills; they need to see someone better at the healing mysteries than I."

Theo shakes his head grimly. "We've months yet to travel. Do what you can." It's clear that he expects the worst. "Delmar, see about getting them below and as comfortable as we can manage." He walks around the deck, checking on everyone else. "That was good work and quick, all of you!" he tells the assembled defenders. "Didn't realize we had a couple of tumblers amid the crew, but well struck, man," he tells Hiro. "Gods grant we run into no more of the filthy things."

A smile and bright eyes arrive on Emmett as Hiro silently acknowledges the Half-Man's quick thinking and resourcefulness. After cleaning the blade, Hiro's sheathes his Katana. Suddenly his eyes dim once more to the calm, passive Hiro the crew has seen so much of before now.

Emmett clambers back to his feet. "Nice shot." He walks over the wall and wrenches his cutlass from the wood with a single tug, cleaning it and sheathing it as Hiro does the same.

Nyala merely nods, one hand almost caressing her bow. Yestin is scowling slightly and trying to disappear into the planking, deeply embarrassed by his ineffectualness during the battle.

Ibn Fadil, now leaning idly against the mast and looking toward Nyala, silently shrugs off the compliment; his mind seems to be on something else. His glance reveals that she is looking at him with a faintly puzzled expression, though it's likely most people wouldn't have marked the slight flexing of her brows.

He looks away hastily - perhaps too hastily, because of a twinge of guilt and embarrassment. He should be looking for Nahele's other knife, after all, and he quickly busies himself looking across the deck toward the hatch, where he dropped it earlier.

He finds the knife easily enough - luckily it hadn't been kicked overboard in the fighting. When he next glances in her direction, she is no longer watching, but the perplexed expression remains. Something is bothering her all of the sudden....

Hoping that whatever it is has nothing to do with him, ibn Fadil studies her beautiful face for a moment longer and then ducks into the hatch, swearing to himself (for perhaps the fiftieth time) that he is going to stop this nonsense immediately.

Emmett spends the next few minutes helping other crew members get the bloodsac remains off the deck. "Damn shame we missed that last one. I hate to think of it lying in wait for someone else." he comments to the first mate. "Any chance of finding it and peppering it with arrows to make sure it's gone?"

"In this?" Delmar waves a hand at the star-strewn darkness all around them, perfect camouflage for the bloodsac. "We wouldn't see it unless we were on top of it - or it on us. We'll move out quick as we can, and keep a better watch until we're well away from this space."

"I know. I just hate leaving a job unfinished." The half-man shrugged and went back to cleaning the bloodsac off the deck.

Delmar nods understandingly. "I know how you feel, but there's nothing else to do. We were lucky it was a small swarm. Careful there, Evan!" he snaps at one of the men gingerly moving their fallen comrades onto makeshift stretchers. "No need to rush, keep it gentle."

Pham sits on a nearby barrel, leaning heavily on his make-shift spear. "Val, you're pretty good with those knives. Joe probably owes you his life. You begin to wonder about the creator of a universe that can contain such horrid creatures."

"Thanks," Val replies to the compliment, "just wish there was something more I could do." He keeps watch out for more bloodsacs, just in case.

"As for the wonders of the universe," Val continues over his shoulder, "I've seen some pretty strange things before. These are some of the strangest..." A shudder runs through the young man as he thinks of what the 'sacs did to Joe and Seton.

"Anything you can do?" Val asks of Pham, hopeful.

Just about then, frustrated by the lack of communication, Alais storms on deck to where the gathered navigators are. "Gills of the Spelljammer, just give me a course! We should depart this area ere more of those things appear!"

"Wisely if intemperately spoken. Just a moment, Alais," Theo replies, sending a crewman below for his spyglass and charts. Their heading is determined, and the *_Lazy Cat_* once again moves at speed through the void.

Below, Nahele meets ibn Fadil at the galley door, one ear cocked ceilingward as if listening. "It's over, is it? What in the spacers' hell was that all about, I hear a yell and suddenly the whole crew stampedes down here shrieking something about vampires, which I can only assume it wasn't since we're all still here, are we not, and if one of those knives is so much as *nicked*--"

"It was only bloodsacs, four of them," ibn Fadil says when the elf pauses for emphasis. "The knives are fine, but I want to wash this one." He holds up the one that pierced the bloodsac. With a serious look, he adds, "We have two men down, and Brother Pham is not sure if they will live till morning."

"Ah." The usually garrulous elf grows more somber at this news. "Only four, then, we were lucky." After a moment's abstraction he seems to recover. "Well, this won't cook itself -- and I'll have those, lad, if you don't mind." He fusses over the blades for a moment, making certain that they really aren't damaged, then returns to the dishes he has been preparing, tastes one. "This will be a bit longer. If those two can eat at all, I can whip up a soup that'll just about raise the dead..." He bursts into action once again, keeping ibn Fadil hopping until dinner is served to a crew in a far less festive mood than it felt an hour before.

The meal is still a welcome change of pace from those they've been enjoying lately. Thanks in part to the fresher supplies Nahele traded for off the other ship, there are beans and stewed meat flavored with spices most of them can't name, real bread rather than the ship's biscuit they are all heartily sick of, and even a sort of dessert pastry, rich in dried fruits and sweetened with honey. It is, as Nahele never tires of complaining, not a tenth of what can be done with a real kitchen, but as far as the crew are concerned it's little short of heaven; there are a good half dozen burned tongues among them in their impatience to taste something hot.

He brings "Lenore" her portion personally, aware that she does not like to receive the others' stares and whispers. "Your dinner, miss," he bows slightly, presenting her with one of the two trays he carries. She is, as always, veiled, and - he nods to himself - looking healthy enough in her weight, at least as far as he can judge on a human. Her nails, however, are chewed down almost to the quick.

"Thank you," she replies softly. "I heard all the -- all the shouting, earlier. Is everyone all right?"

“Some bloodsacs attacked, I’m told. Joe and Seton were hurt, I’m on my way to see how they’re doing now.” The other tray has two earthen mugs of broth infused with strengthening herbs, in case the two injured feel up to having something.

“And everyone else?”

“Escaped without a scratch, miss,” he tells her cheerfully, aware of her relief. “You’ll enjoy that, I hope,” he nods at her meal. “Good evening.”

* * *

Late that night:

Ibn Fadil is still in the galley, finding small things to attend to, when the bell rings the change of watches. Some time later, an almost silent footstep draws his attention to the door. The feeble glow of the cold light illuminates an unmistakable silhouette.

He turns to face her. "Mistress Nyala! Can I help you with something?" He is pleased to notice that his voice hardly wavers at all.

"I am looking for my brother, if you know where he might be found."

"I believe he has gone to his cabin," he says, not at all relieved by this pointless question.

She nods, but does not leave the doorway, and after a beat adds, "You choose most peculiar risks, gambler."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe you were belowdecks when the haagathga attacked. Rather than remaining in safety, you chose to join us above."

"The ship was under attack," he points out, still with a puzzled expression. "I am perfectly capable of helping to defend it; why would I not do so?"

"With a kitchen knife?" It might have been mockery, but her tone is as usual difficult to read much into. "Nor is this, I think, the first time you have placed your life in play for so uncertain a gain."

"Ah. Well," the half-elf says uncomfortably. "I cannot understand why people think so much of that business on Bral. I had barely set foot on the deck when the damned ship came apart, after all. And here on this ship -- being belowdecks give only an illusion of safety, I believe. I wanted to know that everything possible was being done to repel the threat before it could get below."

He knows he should leave it there, but cannot resist adding, with exaggerated dignity, "And a kitchen knife can be quite a dangerous weapon, Mistress Nyala, in the right hands." Then in this moment of weakness the other reason also comes to mind, and he has to look away from her, desperately stifling the thought.

"Indeed." She moves into the room so she can get a better look at him, quite open now in her scrutiny. "I think there is more to it than that." A shot in the dark on her part.

Ibn Fadil has often longed to speak to Nyala alone, but as she approaches he wishes the planks under his feet would open up and drop him into the lowest hold. He feels like a moon-struck adolescent, and entirely ridiculous. "You were up there," he hears himself say.

He can at least congratulate himself on having surprised her, seeing those arresting eyes widen slightly as she pauses, head to one side, still studying him.

"True that I was, but... I see," she says, though with a hint of uncertainty. Whatever she had expected him to say, it seems it wasn't that. "And so you came rushing up to deck, kitchen knife at the ready...?"

"Did I claim it made sense?"

"No, and indeed it does not," she agrees. She's only a step away now. "You are a puzzle, ibn Fadil."

"So are you," he says, amazed that she has neither laughed nor recoiled. He leans slightly toward her. "Perhaps we can try to solve each other?"

"I wonder." Her tone is suddenly pensive, her expression speculative. "Such solutions are not often easily come by."

He leans closer still. "Then it is a challenge." When she doesn't move away, he kisses her. For a moment he can sense her hesitation, then she relaxes, puts her arms around him. In a distant corner of his mind it occurs to him that she's younger than she would like people to think she is. Her hair is just as soft as he imagined.

A few moments later she pulls away, gently. "A challenge, indeed," she says with a smile, and turns to go.

"Wait!" he says, now speaking in the Elvish dialect of Zakhara. "When can I -- speak with you again?"

She faces him again, still smiling, and replies in the same language. "Whenever you wish, of course."

"Tomorrow morning?"

After a moment of consideration, she nods. "Perhaps. Yes. Good night, ibn Fadil." After a last glance Nyala schools her expression back to its usual cool inscrutability as she departs.

Watching her go, it occurs to him that perhaps he should not appear quite so eager; but then, it is nearly all he can do to not haul her back inside and lock the door.

Then, with her gone, his besotted smile fades as the brain in his skull starts working properly again. "And I thought I was in trouble before," he mutters to himself (in Zakharan). It is many long minutes before he can collect himself enough to go to bed, silently calling himself every name for fool that he can think of all the while.

* * *

Emmett can't help but notice - unfortunately enough in the wee hours of the morning - that not only is his giff comrade indulging in his usual pen-scratchings, but he's taken up talking to himself. Softly, at least for the most part, but it's steady and at times sounds almost agitated. What language is that, anyway?

Emmett wakes up, hearing the scratching of the pen and now the muttering from the other side of the wall. *_This is getting ridiculous,_* he thinks.

With care and as much grace as he can manage he slides his arm out from its precarious position, then lowers himself quietly to the floor. Fortunately, Hiro has stowed his bedroll as usual before taking tonight's watch, giving Emmett more freedom of movement as he pulls on his breeches and a tunic. As an afterthought, he belts a dagger onto his hip. His eye adjusted to the dark of the cabin, he attaches his hook and slips out, taking a look back at his bunk with a slight smile before shutting the door.

Two quick knocks on Yestin and Nyala's door, and Emmett opens it. "Evening, Yestin. Having problems sleeping? Yeah, me too..." The half man slides into the room before the seated giff can react, closing the door behind him and perching on the single fold-down seat, normally latched up to the wall to keep it out of the way. "...after a fight I get really wound up, and it's hard to burn off all that energy. Is that what's eating you, or is it something else?"

Yestin is sitting on the floor where the lower bunk would normally be; it's been removed as unlikely to bear his weight well. He spends a moment gaping at Emmett - and a gaping giff is rather impressive - before scrambling to his feet, knocking over the inkwell on the floor next to him. With a dismayed yelp he dives back down to rescue a handful of papers that were scattered by his abrupt motion.

"Oh, here, let me give you a hand with that..." Emmett drops to one knee, picking up the inkwell with his good hand and trying to mop up the spilled ink with the other sleeve of his tunic (which has, admittedly, seen better days). He is pointedly not trying to get a look at what is written on the papers. "There we go. All better. I didn't mean to startle you."

The half man pivots smoothly, sitting back in the chair in a casual lounge. "That's quite a pile of papers. Keeping a journal of the first cruise? That's what's got you up all hours?"

"Um... er. Kind of," he mumbles, dropping his eyes. "Thank you." He takes back the inkwell, looking sadly at the few drops that remain within, then sets it down and begins going through the pages to make sure none of them have been damaged. From what Emmett can see, his handwriting is incongruously tiny; making the most of scarce resources, no doubt.

"Not a bad idea. Me, I just trust the old memory for that sort of stuff, but I suppose if you have a lot of detail that you want to remember - for when you're telling people about what happened on the cruise - then taking a lot of notes might be a good idea. Keeping such a record would certainly help me keep everybody's names in order."

Emmett makes a little face, half farcical. "Course, in my case, it'd make it harder for me to exaggerate the stories later." He leans in conspiratorially, "You may have noticed I have a slight tendency to embellish the truth for dramatic effect."

"I doubt you suffer from that problem, though. You probably have to keep everything perfectly accurate for your clan mates..." Emmett pauses, as if this idea had just occurred to him. "Hey, you probably have to make reports about all of this, don't you?"

Yestin draws himself up to his full height, ears flat to his skull. "You mock me. Perhaps for you it is a laughing matter, but I must beg you not to treat it as such."

"Whoa, there, Yestin." Emmett looks genuinely concerned. "I'm not mocking you. I've been a professional soldier, doing dangerous duty, in an organized unit. I know all about the need for reports, and I know how serious it can get."

"What I don't get is how much detail you have to put in that I hear you in here writing every night all hours, and why it's getting to you so much that you're now muttering as you write. So what's eating at you?"

"That's why I came in here to find out. It can't be your performance against the Bloodsacs - everyone has a bad day, and as a professional I figure you know that. So what is it?"

He gives Emmett a look that makes it clear he thinks the man is putting him on. "Surely you know... from what you said before, I -- " He pauses to compose himself. "Perhaps I have assumed too much. I thought you knew I was a deserter."

Emmett leans back in the chair, looking as if he'd been struck. "No, son, I surely didn't know that. might not be half so clever as I let on, and don't usually pry. I had no idea, and certainly didn't mean to give any insult or pain. I've been there."

He gestures to the floor of Yestin's room, trying to get the giff to sit down. "Why don't you tell me yours and I'll tell you mine. It might make you feel better."

Yestin does so, perhaps out of sheer habit at following the suggestions of those perceived as superiors. "There is little to tell. When I found that our commanders on Bral were taking pay from two masters, I thought it the lesser shame, but perhaps I erred in that. I have been told that my ways of thinking are... odd."

"It doesn't seem odd to me, Yestin. If anything, you just earned more respect from me than you could have in a dozen battles." Emmett reaches down and starts unrolling the rope from his wooden leg, still keeping his eye on Yestin as he speaks.

The giff looks up at him with a faint spark of hope at this sign of approval, though he looks puzzled by the rope.

"Val was pretty worried about you when we came on, but I told him not to sweat it. I figured you had to be part of a trustworthy group of giff for the Captain to have taken you on after I spilled my suspicions to him back at the Dragon. I didn't figure that you were the *only* trustworthy giff on Bral." When the rope is halfway unrolled, it reveals a set of small secret compartments on the half man's leg. He deftly undoes the latch of one and pulls out a small cylindrical flask.

"The Captain knows my tale." Yestin snorts softly. "Most of them on Bral, I think, do not know, or did not when we departed; no doubt the faithless officers who lead them thought what was already accomplished would prove more readily accepted than what remained undone. Those who were set on me to prevent me from leaving gave no sign that they knew the truth, nor did they give much time for me to explain myself."

When the rope is halfway unrolled, it reveals a set of small secret compartments on the half man's leg. He deftly undoes the latch of one and pulls out a small cylindrical flask.

"Traveling with the pack rather than standing out and doing the difficult thing is the coward's way though life, Yestin." Emmett pauses to pull the cork out of the flask with his teeth. He hands the flask to the huge youth. "I always look for an opportunity to drink with brave men. Or giff, in this case."

"Then I thank you, friend Emmett, for your drink and your kindness." He accepts the flask carefully. "And I apologize for waking you," he adds belatedly. "I did not realize my frustrations were so loudly expressed. The internal rhyme scheme is very difficult."

Emmett's eyebrows go up as he takes the flask back. "Rhyme scheme? This I gotta hear." He pauses to take a drink, "cheers." Then recorks the flask, his eyes watering from the 140 proof whiskey.

Yestin looks down at the papers he's still holding. "I thought the battle would be best suited to the dwarven epic style -- much shorter than any of the real epics, of course -- and have been trying to do both the subject and the form justice, but so far I have met with failure equal to that in the fight itself. It is merely for practice, you understand," he adds, sounding almost cheerful now.

"Practice? How much of this do you do? Is all of this" Emmett stops recoiling his leg to motion to the papers "Poetry?"

"Oh, no," Yestin disclaims hastily. "Mere scribblings, unworthy of the name, though I hope that someday.... I did say they thought me odd in the troops I have served with."

"Hey one guy in my old unit would spontaneously break into song and dance routines in bars after flights. Compared to that, writing poetry is positively commonplace."

"But, all false modesty on your part aside," Emmett cranes his head to look at the papers, "are all of these attempts at poetry? Are you detailing the whole voyage as a poem?"

"Merely as an exercise," he shrugs, still looking somewhat abashed. "Our duties on this journey have been light."

"You can say that again - before the bloodsacs the most exciting part of the trip for me was angling for the job. 'Course, quiet trips are good trips for us: earn your pay, no hard work." Emmett smiled, "It's harder on Val and the rest of the sailors - they have a full work schedule whether we get attacked or not."

Emmett paused and looked serious. "Can I ask you a serious question? You don't have to answer, but... Well I have a bone to pick with those pirates. What **really** went down on Bral? Did your old superiors know who the pirates were? Where they might be going? What they were after?"

Yestin looks somber. "I have thought much about these very questions. And I **think** - though of course I cannot be certain - that this was many months in the planning, that contact was first made while our ship was patrolling the sphere's farther reaches. There were meetings I now wonder about, though nothing seemed amiss at the time. Gustan and the others must have known the plan rather well to have played the part they did, but whether that would include the target I cannot say - for it seems to me that they must have wanted more than baubles, to have run such a risk."

"So what would Three Trees have had that would be worth all that? And where is it now?" This is more talking to himself than anything else, and even that is interrupted by a yawn. Since the half-man does nothing by half measures it is a yawn that near rips his face in half, accompanied by a major groan and stretch.

"Sorry to have started you earlier. I do think that Brother Pham has some ink. It might do you good to talk to him, too. A confessor is better than a journal if you're having self doubt." Emmett opens the door and prepares to slip back into the hall and his still-warm bed. "Have a nice night, friend. Get some rest."

"I will, and allow you to do the same," the giff smiles. "Thank you."

* * *

The Cat is not a terribly large ship, and the next morning Lenore's search does not take her long once she has determined that the one she seeks is not on the upper deck. Val of course hears her footsteps and recognizes the light-slippered tread at once, quite different from either the boots or bare feet most of the crew wear.

"Val?" she calls softly, turns a corner and sees him amid the shadows, looks around at the storeroom quizzically, but is far too polite to ask, what on earth are you doing here? Instead she seems somewhat nonplussed to have succeeded in her search, as if she is now not sure what to say.

For a moment, Val is caught off guard. He usually has the stores to himself at this time of the "day." Sensing Lenore's hesitation, however, he realizes she's as surprised as he is. His mind races as he wonders what she is doing down here.

"Watch your step there," Val cautions from the shadows, "there's not a lot of room to move about."

He moves quickly across the storeroom with cat's grace, trying to keep her from stepping in and tripping over a shadow-hidden obstacle. All the while he keeps alert for anyone else that might be behind Lenore in the companionway, but there is no one else there.

"Are you okay?" Val asks with obvious concern, "Is everything all right?" He automatically takes her hand to help steady her, not realizing he does so until it's too late. An unfamiliar sensation, an instinct to help and protect this woman from harm momentarily, overrides his intent to keep up appearances.

Val simply stands there staring like a fool; too self-conscious to even remove his hand from hers...

She gives his a slight squeeze before removing her hand from his light grip. "Thank you. And I'm fine, really, I - I wanted to speak with you. After what happened yesterday - I'm glad you're all right."

Val is too stunned to reply. It feels as if his knees would give out. Lenore could push him over with a fingertip, if she had a mind to....

"I - I'm fine," Val manages at last, trying to regain his composure. Contrary to his normal mien, he is at a loss for words. This woman certainly has a way of putting him off his guard.... "Thank you," he murmurs.

After a moment half-turns away and says, rather abruptly, "It's just that... you remind me very much of someone dear to me."

"I do?" He asks, almost a whisper. Should he ask her who? Does it matter? A surge of emotion clashes against a wall of doubt.

She nods silently, arms crossed almost instinctively over the gentle swell the marks the child within her. "Aye. You are... very kind."

Val smiles in response. He is mindful of the way Lenore stands, and his eyes drift down to the swell of her belly. A stray thought crosses his mind as he wonders if she means the father of her child....

"I'm not sure what to say," he tells her truthfully. His other experiences with women never left him feeling so awkward. It was both frustrating and exquisite at the same time.

"You know, the others are going to talk if they knew you came looking for me," Val says with a hint of mischief. He smiles at her to let her know he's only teasing. "I'm glad you did, though," he adds soberly, quietly.

"They talk, regardless," she replies a touch dryly. "I suppose it is something to which I must become accustomed."

Without knowing why, Val reaches out and gently lays a hand upon her arm. After a brief pause, his other hand reaches out to lift the veils that cover her face. He moves ever so slowly, almost tenderly; the expression on his face is serene, the look in his eyes intense. Val knows he walks the razors' edge, but the need to look upon her face is nearly overwhelming.

She does not try to stop him, but looks back curiously, as if trying to guess what motivated his action.

"I suppose it is rather foolish of me to go about so blindered, isn't it?" she says with an odd little laugh. "Half of those aboard seem to know, and the others may as well; it makes little difference."

Val pauses; her comment arrests him more than a gesture could have. For a moment, he feels as if he's the dupe of some sort of joke. He furrows his brow and, for a moment, is hesitant to continue.

"I'm sorry," he says as he takes a small step back, the veil slipping from his fingers. He is confused, which is plainly visible in the expression on his face. He had been so careful not to let on. Did ibn Fadil say something....?

"Would you have me know?" Val asks, somewhat subdued.

She looks somewhat confused herself, then her expression clears. "Ah. So he said nothing? Interesting...." She gives a little shrug. "I am tired of secrets. I hoped that by traveling in the guise of my maid, and speaking little to others, I could remain unremarked, but it seems my weakness has shown itself more than once. If we are pursued, all will know, and if we are not, it makes no difference that they do.

"My true name is Ginevra Tain-Durell. I am wife to the Oligarch Victor of Bral, and I have broken faith with him." Having made her decision, she awaits his reaction to this matter-of-fact declaration serenely.

Val feels as if an anchor just hit him. All he can do for a moment is stare as his blood turns to ice. Wife to the Oligarch Victor? Broken faith with him? This is **not** what he had expected. Emmett was right; this could get him thrown overboard.... Yet, it doesn't change what he is feeling for her. Strange how things like that don't seem to matter.

Val gazes at the face that has been in his thoughts for the past several weeks. He notes that she is as beautiful as he remembers and he studies her face, as if to memorize every detail. Again, he sees a hint of something in her eyes. Sadness? Bitterness, perhaps?

"I've been told nothing," he says finally. It was the truth at least, though he wondered whom she meant. Does ibn Fadil know? Val runs his fingers through his hair, feeling suddenly self-conscious and even more awkward. Then something she said dawns on him.

"Pursued?" Val asks. His blood races again as the instinct to protect her washes over him.

She nods somberly. "It is a possibility. My husband is... unpredictable, at times."

Val takes her by the shoulders gently. "I'll protect you," he says firmly, before he can stop himself. How foolish that must sound to her! Especially considering the skill of others on board more suited to the task.

She does laugh, but it is a gentle sound, not mocking, and for a moment she looks very far away before focusing on him once more. "Then my shame is of no consequence?"

"Of course not," is his firm reply. But Val thinks for a moment and asks hesitantly, "What of your baby's father?"

She looks away for a moment and sighs softly. "He doesn't know. He left Bral before - we could not have kept the secret much longer," she explains. "It seemed best.... His ship departed some weeks before this. Where he may be now, I do not know, though I hope there will be news at our landing."

"Ah," is all Val manages to say. Despite his disappointment, he smiles at her. Part of him is still warmed by the thought of her caring enough to make sure he was safe after the encounter

with the bloodsacs. But another part of him was certain she did so only because he *reminded* her of someone else...

"I've spoken too much, haven't it?" she says ruefully. "Forgive me, please. I do value your friendship."

"Not at all," he says with a warm smile. "There's nothing to forgive." He shakes his head and laughs a little at himself. He must be as open as a book....

"Have you eaten yet?" Val asks her suddenly, changing the subject. "I know of this wonderful little kitchen with a most excellent elven chef..." He bows deeply and offers his arm to Ginevra.

After a brief pause for consideration, she smiles a little. "That sounds delightful." She does not replace the veil.

* * *

As he's leaving his shared cabin early enough to be ready when the watch changes, ibn Fadil hears a footstep behind him just a moment too late. There's a feathery caress on the back of his neck, and he turns to see her smiling at him, only a few inches away.

Just then, of course, a door farther down the hall opens with a bang and a couple of yawning crewmen emerge. She steps back - is that a wink, or do his eyes deceive him in the dimness - and murmurs, "Later." A moment later, she's gone.

What have I done? he wonders, trying to restart his breathing. Neither his stern self-lectures nor the especially pleasant dreams he had last night have made the slightest difference in his response to her.

He nods distractedly to the other crewmen and edges past them, making for his post in the galley.

Something of the sort happens twice more that morning, until at last there is a lull in the trickle of men and women in and out of the mess, looking for whatever meal happens to suit the schedule they're on.

"Locusts. We'll limp into Janik with nothing left but a half-barrel of flour at this rate," Nahele sighs. "Go below and see how much fish we have left, would you?"

He's not terribly surprised to find her waiting serenely in the dark - which bothers neither of them, of course.

"You wished to speak further?"

"Among other things." He catches her up in another embrace and perhaps he is already getting used to this dizzying welter of feelings, for this time their separation is more of a mutual pause. Absently stroking her hair, he says, "To solve a puzzle, one must have clues. So - where are you from?"

Her gaze goes very distant for a few moments. "Nowhere you've heard of, I'm sure." When he continues to look at her expectantly, she relents a bit. "The world is called Windhold."

"Interesting name," he says, but seeing her reluctance he decides to drop it. "Now it's your turn."

That speculative look is back as light fingers touch his cheek. "I have never met someone from Zakhara before. Tell me what it is like."

"Right now?" he protests, but does not move away. He catches her fingers and kisses them. "If you were to walk down a street in Zakhara as you are now, you would cause a riot," he says, exaggerating a little. "Zakharan women go veiled in public, and wear very modest clothing, as a rule."

"Really? Why is that?"

Never having tried to explain this before, he has to stop and think about it. "It has to do with our standards of modesty and purity. Even men do not go around in tight clothing, and those who take these matters most seriously also cover their heads and faces in public. And things like shaking hands that are common practice out here simply aren't done, except between relatives and good friends, on Zakhara."

"I am glad, then, that you do not take these matters most seriously...."

Now he does pull away from her, reluctantly. "I am supposed to be looking at fish, and going back to work," he says with mock sternness.

She chuckles; it's a lovely sound. "I think you would not be missed for a few more moments, but if you must... and I must go on duty soon, as well. Perhaps you can tell me more later."

"If you like," he agrees. And of course he cannot resist kissing her again, half-drowning in the delight of it, and when she has gone he has to count the barrels of fish three times to get the number right.

On his way back he passes Lenore and Valarin - the former not wearing her veil, which earns her a very curious look despite his current distraction, and Val being his usual gallant self, helping her up the narrow way.

Upstairs, Nahele nods in his usual absent fashion when ibn Fadil returns with the requested information. "Excellent. That was quick."

The half-elf shrugs and busies himself with the next task, for the moment painfully aware that by Zakharan standards (and perhaps by those of this Windhold) he has been behaving most improperly with Nahele's sister.

His discomfort is only highlighted by the fact that he can't be sure if that's a look of amusement or not.

* * *

"My lady." Delmar sounds startled, and stands politely aside to allow Lenore -- Ginevra -- and Val to enter. Stares have followed them, and more stares meet them, frankly curious on Val, measuring in many cases on Ginevra, who ignores them, although there is a faint flush in her cheeks. Eventually conversation resumes, but in much quieter tones. The two receive more than a few glances, and the mess soon grows crowded. At last the mate returns, opens the door and looks around meaningfully at those who are supposed to be at their posts; there is a slow, reluctant exodus.

Val ignores the glances and talk in the mess. He acts as if there is nothing at all wrong with sharing a meal with Ginevra and he makes the best of it. A number of thoughts lurk in his subconscious, but he doesn't wish to address them now. Later, when he was alone, he would think things through. Right now, he was not going to let anything bother him... Later, as he makes his way toward his own position, a sailor named Evan approaches him.

"Gods above and below, Val, what was that all about?" he wants to know.

Val glances up, down, then around and mutters, "Gods?" A wry grin is plastered on his face when he looks back at the crewman. However, seeing that his humor goes unappreciated by Evan, he quirks an eyebrow and asks, "What was *what* all about?"

"You, her, that whole thing! 'My lady?' Why'd you keep her stashed away like that for so long?"

"Me, her, that whole thing?" Val repeats, somewhat amused by Evan's approach to the matter. "It was called Having A Meal With A Friend," he says, matter of factly. "And I've kept no one *stashed* away." He pointedly avoids the 'My lady' comment. "Now, if you don't mind," Val adds as he slips past, "I have to get to my station..."

"Friend. Uhuh. Suuuuure," Evan rejoins with a leer. "I've got eyes, Val. That's all right - I'd keep her to myself too." He heads off to his own duties, chuckling.

Val groans to himself as he leaves Evan. Well, it's out now and there's no turning back.

A Friend.

Much as Val might wish it otherwise, that's what it was. There are too many things complicating the situation for him to even dream it could be more. Not the least of which was the child she carries. The child of a man Ginevra still worries for and hopes for news about.

That's not even considering the marriage to an Oligarch of Bral. One that she has broken faith with for another man. A man that is not him. Val let that one sink in for a few minutes before pushing the thought aside.

Work. Must focus on work.

Val sets all of his personal thoughts aside for the duration of his shift. He'd have time enough to think things through later...

* * *

Later that morning, ibn Fadil seizes an opportunity to speak privately to Val, saying, "Remind me not to waste any more advice on you, eh, Valarin?" Despite his rather flippant tone, he looks quite concerned.

"I'll try to remember," Val replies dryly. He seems unfazed by ibn Fadil's comment, almost as if he had been expecting it.

"Besides," he continues, "I didn't go to her. She came looking for me." Val says it matter-of-factly, trying not to make a big deal of anything. He looks as if he's about to say something more, but stops and hangs his head.

When Val raises his head again, he takes a long and hard look at the Zakharan, as if searching for something.

Ibn Fadil, whose attention has wandered during the pause, looks startled when he notices this attention. "What?"

"You knew," is Val's quiet reply. It is statement, not a question.

If anyone were keeping score, Val would be getting points for throwing the half-elf completely off balance. "Er ... which part?" he says, trying to remember those conversations from months ago.

"You knew who she was the whole time," Val continues, still piecing it all together. He shakes his head again as if to clear it.

"I guessed when you told me she was not Lenore," ibn Fadil corrects him.

"And you couldn't tell me then?" Val asks, though he's not really expecting an answer. "Never mind," he says, "it's not important now..." Noticing the half-elf's distracted responses, Val asks, "Are you okay? What's on your mind?"

"Not important?" he says (ignoring the other's questions). "When the assassins are tracking you down, Val, please remember I did try to warn you."

"Assassins?" Val looks up at this. He remembers Ginevra's concern over pursuit, and his promise to her. But she never said anything about *assassins*... "What *else* do you know about all this?" His eyes narrow as he locks gazes with the half elf. There is a distinct edge to his voice that ibn Fadil has never heard before, and it is not typical of Val's normal demeanor...

"I see I have your attention," ibn Fadil says with satisfaction. "What I *know* is that her husband is the sort of creature normally found when looking under rocks, and that he is very, very wealthy. I am guessing that he is very, very angry about this. And everything I have heard about him -- Bralians are terrible gossips, you know -- suggests that he can be extremely vindictive." He shrugs. "Perhaps I am overstating the danger, but one can never be too wary, Valarin."

"Bloody wonderful," is Val's only response. It seems as if a cloud has once again settled over him. Is ibn Fadil serious? Is she really in danger? Would he be able to... Val shakes himself out his dark thoughts; there's no sense following that line of thought. He would do what he promised. He could do nothing less. Val once again studies bin Fadil, a new thought coming to mind.

"Bralians are terrible gossips, eh?" he repeats. "I wonder if news of this is spreading around back on the Rock. Might be interesting to see what it's doing to his business endeavors..." Val trails off meaningfully. One might stand to gain a lot if they played The Game right. Maybe even a life or three..."

"Victor and Sons is rather above the effects of local gossip, I think," ibn Fadil says drily. "In any event, the Victor's servants are usually the subjects of gossip, not its source."

"Oh well," Val says as he stretches, "no use worrying over the unknown future. Too much to be missed in the present." He smiles at the half elf, the change of mood quite sudden. "Like how you change the subject when asked what's wrong..."

"Er, if I leave off on your poor judgment, will you leave off on mine?"

"Depends," Val says with a grin. "What did *you* judge poorly on?" He seems his normal self again, seemingly care-free.

"Never mind," the half-elf says with rather forced cheer. "It is a small ship." With a nod and a smile, he makes his escape -- probably back to work, as the luncheon hour is now approaching.

* * *

Emmett waits for a convenient moment when both he and Val are off shift, cornering the taller man when he was heading to the galley.

"Hey, Val. I need to talk to you. In private." He shrugs his shoulder to an unoccupied corner of deck and heads over, trusting his friend to follow him.

Val follows Emmett over, wary of any attention they might be getting. This is becoming quite a busy day...

Once he's sure that no one is listening to them, Emmett starts explaining with a quiet voice. "Ok, two things. First, I had a late night chat with Yestin last night."

Val is a bit surprised Emmett didn't immediately mention his appearance in the mess with Lenore / Ginevra. Maybe he hadn't heard about it yet? He furrows his brow.

"Okay," he says, quite interested in finding where this would lead. "What'd he have to say?"

"I was right in that the big lug wasn't here to watch us - I can't give you all the details, but he's clean. I did get some info from him on the raid. The giff were in on it, and they apparently made contact with the pirates deep in Bralspace. He doesn't know what they were after, but it would have to be something a lot pricier than the gewgaws we saw them carry off."

"I'll trust your judgement of him," Val replies. If Yestin *had* intended harm on ibn Fadil, or any of them, he'd had plenty of time to do it already. "So we were right about them back on Bral, huh? That's pretty sad. Makes sense that they'd be after something big. But what...?" Val lets the question hang unanswered. He really had no idea what would be worth such a risky raid...

"And the other thing. I see you got yourself a new job playing paladin for ladies in distress. Not exactly the wisest move, pal. But I just wanted to tell you..." Emmett breaks his stern expression with a wry grin, "I got your back. You need anything, you holler. I'm there."

Val braced himself for the verbal lashing he was sure to come. Playing paladin? But Emmett certainly surprised him! Val is left momentarily speechless.

"Thanks," he manages to say quietly, not bothering to hide the surprise on his face. "You have no idea how much that means to me." The young man claps his hand to Emmett's shoulder, not knowing what else to say at the moment.

"C'mon my friend," he says to the half-man, "let's get some wine and something to eat. It's been a *long* day..."

* * *

Pham asks Alais to take part of his shift at the helm, and spends most of the next several days nursing the wounded crewmen. Unfortunately, his efforts are in vain, as Joe slips away.

Pham reports to Theo. "Captain, I am sorry to report that Joe was unable to survive the bloodsac's attacks. I did what I could. Seton appears to be recovering, but it'll be slow going." The young man will, if nothing else, bear the scars of his experience for the rest of his life.

The older man nods somberly. "You've done all anyone could expect, Brother. With as long as those things were on them, I'll call it a miracle not to lose 'em both, and your god's all right in my book. We'll take care of the poor lad, and let me or one of the mates know if you need anything for Seton."

That evening the brief shipboard funeral service is held, and Joseph Abek is buried at space, like many an unfortunate sailor before him.

* * *

Some days later, it is with a certain sense of *deja vu* that ibn Fadil looks up from his work in the galley late that night to see Nyala in the doorway. She's not been avoiding him, but the atmosphere aboard has not been a cheery one since their comrade's death, and they have not spoken much nor indulged in any further playful encounters.

"Good evening," she says quietly, closing the door.

"Now it is," he says in an attempt at lightening the mood. He takes the few short steps to reach her and take her in his arms, just holding her for a long moment.

She hugs him back gently. "I am glad to hear that."

"Do not doubt me, Nyala," he whispers, as if to keep his words secret even from himself. "I have loved you for months without daring to speak to you. It brings me joy to see you, to hope that you will smile at me again.

"Then I shall," she murmurs in reply, suiting action to words. "And set sorrow aside." She tilts her head to kiss him (she's even shorter than he is).

Softly, he kisses her again. "I have found a place that is a little more private," he says. "Down in the hold. Will you -- ?"

She lifts a cool eyebrow in mock affront at this presumption. "Indeed?" Then a smile. "Privacy would be... pleasant. Where is this?" At his directions, she nods. "I see. Do not follow too close, then; our shipmates gossip so." The playful light is back in her expression.

"That they do," he agrees, relieved that he has not pushed his luck too far. As he makes his way down the hold, hoping she will actually be there, he sternly reminds himself to be more careful. If she just wants to talk more, he can do that. He knows, all too well, how to be patient.

She is waiting, legs curled demurely beneath her, in the little alcove formed by carefully shifting some of the cargo to screen the spot from the door. After another kiss of greeting she murmurs in his ear, "So tell me - if those of your world value modesty so, does that not make courting a difficulty?"

He laughs. "My cousin used to say that if everyone actually *followed* the rules - and there are a lot of them! - there would be no next generation. We have many tragic stories about young people who fell afoul of the rules, but I think that most people simply marry and everyone pretends nothing improper ever happened."

"I see," she laughs softly as well, her breath tickling his neck. "We do not have so many rules in my homeland, so it is difficult to be improper in the first place. This, for instance, is entirely proper..."

Soon, he is delighted to learn that patience is not going to be required of him after all.

A bit later: "So, Yusuf," she smiles at the taste of the unfamiliar name, "I've asked several clues of you now, and you've only asked one of me."

"Hmmm?" He is still a bit dazed, and the hour is rather late. "You just answered my most pressing question," he murmurs. "-- Ah, that is, let me think a moment."

"If you must." She stretches, snuggles close in a way that makes thinking quite difficult. He's had ample time to find out that she has a couple of scars, one on her back and another on her right leg, and that she wears a small stone pendant in the shape of a crescent moon.

Finally he says, "All right. How long have you been traveling the Flow?"

"Only a couple of years - I think it is about that time, it is difficult to keep track here. Nahele is the one with the wandering feet. And you?"

"Too long." He sighs, trying to remember. "It must be about twenty years, I think. But for the last five or so, I have stayed on Bral."

"Really." She lifts her head from his chest with a curious expression. "What is of interest there? We were not there long."

He is silent for a long moment, meeting her gaze only briefly. "I was in debt when I arrived there, and ... between one thing and another, I never quite got out of debt." Trying to find something cheerful about his sojourn on the Rock, he adds, "And I have friends there, now, which is hard to do when traveling around a lot. I really have become quite attached to the place."

Nyala purses her lips thoughtfully, but does not pursue the question of debt. "And before that? I have not had much chance to see the worlds we have visited, we move on too quickly, so I would like to hear more...."

"In truth, before Bral I did the same. But you are asking all the questions again," he smiles. "Tell me about, oh, your weapons training."

"Well, since I know all about your prowess with a knife..." she teases, and shrugs a little bit. "From my parents, I learned what is customary - though in truth, I'm no skilled fencer," she admits with a small laugh. "There has been little call, and less time for practice, in recent years... enough and more of both for a bow."

"Oh? How is that?"

Nyala tenses slightly, then seems to make an effort of will to relax. "We were at war."

He struggles with his curiosity and loses. Very cautiously, he asks, "With who?"

She sighs softly. "Our neighbors in Theranvald; the mountain passes were ours to defend, and our household would not desert its duty. When we were driven out at last we remained in the wilderness, offering up what resistance we could. It lasted many years."

"I see." And he does see, now, that most of her life so far must have been taken up in this war. "We have a history of such things in Zakhara, but I was fortunate enough to be born to a time of peace." Anxious to find a less disturbing subject, he adds, "Let me tell you more about it, as you have been so interested."

Nyala listens raptly, though he can tell that she's getting a bit drowsy.

At length he winds down, having made himself thoroughly homesick. "I, for one, do not want to wake up in the 'morning' when someone starts moving cargo around," he observes. "Perhaps, for now ..." He kisses her gently.

"Aye, for now," she agrees with a fond smile. "And it would be best were I not asleep should I be needed on the morrow." In the midst of dressing she pauses to say softly, "Thank you. For all that you have shared. This," her vague gesture indicates the little space, and by implication him, and the night, "has been most... unexpected, and yet...." She kisses him again in lieu of explanation.

"As long as you were not bored," he murmurs.

"Never." She pauses for a moment by the door, listening, and when the hall beyond proves clear slips away.

Alone again, ibn Fadil tucks away the extra blanket he has acquired, and slips back up to his cabin without disturbing any of his bunkmates. Far from going to sleep, however, he turns over in his mind the troubling questions of what he can tell Nyala, what he should tell her, and whether he will ever be able to speak with her without having to lie.

She, meanwhile, returns to her own empty cabin, to spend a few moments listening to the noise of the on-duty crew going about their business above and thinking about the past before slipping, almost without noticing, into a bittersweet dream of home.

* * *

Captain Theo makes it a practice to stop by the helm once in a while and make sure his pilots are faring well. He looks troubled today - well, more troubled than usual.

"Good day, Master Alais. How goes she?"

"Wobbly as a bald horse. In truth, when I took this commission I did not know how strenuous intersphere spelljamming was. My previous experience was only within Bral's sphere, and not far at that. Such travel taxes the soul as carrying a pack taxes an ass's haunches."

The response draws a faint chuckle from the captain. "I've noticed no wobbles in our course, at any rate. Fine job you're doing, fine. And taxing though it be, there are compensations enough, and wonders." His frown deepens once again. "I find myself troubled by the... convoy, perhaps is the word, of delphinids we encountered."

"It has been weighing upon me as well. When we reach our destination, I shall make an attempt to seek out some source of accurate information on the species. Note that I do not say 'authority,' for such figures are almost always wrong, kept in their position more by the cob-webbed sycophants that infest the so-called academic world than by any great truth in their words. I do not doubt that should I go to the reputed 'learned men' there and ask about the delphinids, I will be quickly informed that such creatures have no such habits, preferring instead to sun themselves on

tree-covered planetoids, sipping rum, and I am in poor taste to even bring up the subject."

Theo's frown gets a little deeper, and his voice holds a hint of sharpness. "On Janik we have kept records for more than two hundred years, of the things our ships have met in their journeys between the worlds. Once we have landed, I ask that you and Brother Pham investigate the library there and, if there is anything to be found, inform me. That will be all."

* * *

"And just **what** do you think you're doing?" Nahele inquires lightly, falling into step beside his sister as she paces the foredeck.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know quite well what I mean, this is no time for nonsense." He's fairly sure that he's the only one to notice, and that's only because he knows those involved best of any on board.

Her look is cool and sidelong; they are in public, after all, although she has observed that few of the common crew speak the elven tongue. "You suggested, I believe, that I should be more social with our shipmates."

"Yes, but..."

"Do you disapprove?"

"Would it matter if I did?" he snorts.

"Were we at home, you would not have mentioned it otherwise."

"As you may have noticed, we are not at home. There are many worlds, and even I do not know all their ways. There are places where to follow our customs would certainly create trouble."

"So I have been told." She smiles almost invisibly. "But I do not think you have any reason to fear on that score."

He sighs a bit. "I'll be truthful, it is good to see you more yourself - I'm just not certain this is wise."

She lifts a shoulder a fraction of an inch. "It may not be. We seldom know the wisdom of our actions until the future has become the past."

"Feel you anything for him?"

Her glance flicks in his direction, annoyed. "I am not so cold as that, brother. He is pleasant enough, certainly, and I find I am... intrigued. There is something that cannot quite be seen."

Nahele sighs. First the woman, now this. His sister likes a mystery as much as she likes being one. "And when the riddle has been resolved?"

Another shrug, but she turns slightly so no one else can see her smile. "We shall see. We have a number of weeks yet to journey, who can say what will happen?" After a moment she adds with a trace of uncertainty, "You don't really disapprove, do you?"

He laughs at her dissembling. "Merely 'pleasant,' hm? I suppose I do not. Do be careful, however," he feels compelled to add. "I would not see any ill come of this for either of you."

* * *

A few days later, the *Cat*'s crew can tell they are reaching more traveled reaches of space; the ship has picked up a pack of scavvers - a dozen or so, judging from the glowing eyes following after the ship. Fortunately, they're the brown subspecies, which is cowardly and not intelligent but persistent. They prefer to trail after ships and pick through the refuse left behind to endangering themselves.

Still, the crew must keep alert in case one of the animals decides to take a chance on a larger meal, for a brown is large enough to swallow a man whole, and they are poisonous as well. Such a large pack will also put an uncomfortable strain on the ship's air supply, so they should be driven off if possible, or their numbers thinned at least.

* * *

After Joe's funeral service, Val keeps to himself for a while. He avoids the usual company found in the mess or on deck. Dark thoughts linger in his mind...

If only he could have been faster, if only he had acted sooner, Joe might still be alive. The thoughts weigh heavily upon the young man, and Val finds himself wondering if it was his fault that Joe died. Could he have done anything different to help?

"Joe probably owes you his life," Brother Pham had said, complimenting him on his quick actions. But Val apparently wasn't quick enough. Now he feels as if he owes something to Joe...

Val finds himself leaning upon the starboard rail, staring off into Wildspace. He is there a long time, alone with his thoughts.

Other concerns begin to filter in, given Val's current mood. What if he couldn't protect Ginevra as he had promised? Val knows he isn't a warrior like Hiro, Emmett or Nyala. But he might have to be to protect Ginevra from a possibly spiteful husband.

And he would do this so she could be happy with another man.

Val believes himself the fool. Did he actually believe she would be his? She's broken faith with her husband, and is carrying the child of another man. And Val has the fortune of reminding her this man? Where does that place him in all of this? Did he think he could charm Ginevra off her feet so she would be his own lady? The less charitable thought enters his mind that someone else had apparently already done so.... Val pushes that one aside with a touch of bitterness.

Besides, what did he even think to offer her? His is a life of traveling the spheres, not knowing where the next opportunity would lead, and Val feels that is not nearly enough to offer. And that is certainly no way to raise a child.

Someone else's child.

Damn. Damn it all to the nine hells. Fate is being especially cruel lately....

Val finds himself standing before Ginevra's cabin door. He hadn't realized he was headed there; he certainly hadn't intended to. So many things race through his mind as he stands there and he appears hesitant, unsure of what to do next.

Tell her you idiot. Tell her how you really feel.

Then what? Have her laugh in my face because she doesn't feel the same way? Have her remind me that her heart belongs to another she races to meet? That she carries that man's child?

The sting of tears builds in Val's eyes, yet he wills himself to remain composed. Taking a deep breath, he runs his fingers through his hair and pushes everything aside.

Later. There's time to think on this more later.

Like an actor changing a stage mask, Val lets a smile spread across his face. His facade in place, the young man knocks on Ginevra's door. Perhaps the lady would like to share another meal. A meal with a friend....

It is an offer she is pleased to accept, and over the remainder of the voyage the rest of the baffled crew grows accustomed to seeing the two together. It's clear that they think Val's steadfast refusal to admit to anything beyond "friendship" is very funny, and the occasional jibe about whether the kid'll look like him is all the more painfully ironic for their false assumption. When they can't get a rise out of him they eventually get bored with the teasing.

For her part, Ginevra - or Lenore, as she continues to be called by the crew despite Delmar's initial slip - is... friendly. After all this time, she must know how he feels, but there is no cruelty in her; she offers no false encouragement, only kindness and company, despite the discomforts of her advancing pregnancy. When he finally does ask, she tells him of her lover. From what she says, he's a man Val would probably like.

Fate is indeed cruel....

* * *

When the scavvers appear, Alais approaches Theo, who is standing with the first mate at the aft deck watching the creatures.

"Captain, I like not the look of that pack of scavvers. It would be a good idea to fire a bolt to warn them off."

Theo nods brusquely. "It is certainly a possibility. The last thing we need now is to lose any more men."

"I think now is the right time, before they get too close. They are stupid creatures, and it should be

enough to spook them."

Another nod, but there is no immediate action; the captain appears momentarily fascinated by the scavvers' movements. After a few more minutes of observation, he summons the necessary crew. Emmett and Yestin man the starboard ballista, with Ulf and Laszlo to port.

With plenty of time to line up their targets, each bolt strikes a scavver. The two wounded creatures flee immediately, dropping out of the ship's air envelope. A couple of their more opportunistic fellows follow them, perhaps hoping to dine on them, but the rest of the pack only scatter briefly, then return to their positions. They are, as observed, stupid.

Over the next few days, as heightened watch is kept, ballista shots account for three more of the creatures, as does Nyala's bow. Their numbers depleted by more than two thirds, the remaining scavvers give up and look for food elsewhere.

* * *

These have been the shortest and the longest weeks of ibn Fadil's life: he and Nyala have found only a handful of times to be together, which could never be enough, yet each time it becomes more difficult to steer the conversation away from things he would rather not discuss. Even his most diligent efforts to please her body cannot seem to quench her desire to listen to him talk. Maybe this is a good sign (he thinks), but he still spends too much time awake and wondering what her next questions will be, and what he should say to them.

Nyala has in turn told him about her own homeland, mostly the mountains and forests she knows and clearly loves so well. She does not dwell on the events of recent years, or on her family, but paints a quiet, largely peaceful picture of a provincial community, comfortable without great riches, content to tend to their duties far from the realm's important affairs.

Tonight, he has run out of safe things to say about Zakhara, which has interested her so much. Instead he talks about Bral - its labyrinthine tunnels, the way the busy plaza reminds him of the bazaar at home, the peculiar backwards pride of its people (who will say uncomplimentary things about their own home, yet intend the opposite). It is clear that he does like the place, as if it were a disreputable friend that he knows he should avoid but chooses not to.

"It still seems strange to me - a place little larger than our stronghold, and so much more crowded," she marvels with a shake of her head. "To spend years there... why, then, did you choose to leave now, so suddenly?"

He sighs. "A small mistake, compounded by an accident." Then he looks at her curiously. "Why do you think I left suddenly?"

"The ship sailed with only a day's notice. From what I have gathered, the others of our crew were only waiting their first opportunity for a berth, but that does not seem to fit into your puzzle, Yusuf," she smiles.

"Hmm, no," he admits. "I made the mistake of opposing those pirates - not that it did much good. The accident was that it turned out that the giff were colluding with the pirates. I felt I would live longer if I left Bral as soon as possible."

"I see..." Nyala frowns, contemplating this new information. "Yes, that explains much, about the giff. But how, a mistake to stand against brigands? I think not. And if it was accident that landed you on this ship, then I at least must call it a happy one," she concludes, kissing him.

He chuckles a little, kissing her back, but the sound somehow lacks conviction; and then he looks at her searchingly for a long moment. "I would be happy, also," he says at last, "if I had the faintest idea of what to do next."

"Ah." She returns his gaze thoughtfully and after a brief silence asks, "What would you want to do, should nothing stand in the way?"

He glances away, and stares into the dark as if the piled cargo might provide an answer. Finally settling on another truthful evasion, he murmurs, "If you were with me, it would not matter where I was or what I was doing."

Another long pause; her gaze is shuttered for a moment, then meets his again in something like a challenge. "And if I were? I am of no mind to return to what remains of my home, and have no plans other than to follow my fortune."

He takes a sharp breath. "I *should* return to Bral, difficult though that may be," he says carefully.

"Should?" She looks momentarily puzzled by the implied obligation, then nods. "In order to discharge this debt that so weighs up on you?"

"It shows, does it?"

"If it will draw you back to a place where you may be in great danger... yes." She sits up to more easily look at him. "Can you tell me of what it consists?"

Ibn Fadil shrugs, a little embarrassed by this subject. "It was about twelve silver pieces -- plus a year's worth of interest at least, by the time I get back."

"That does not sound so terrible." The notion of "interest" clearly doesn't mean much to her.

"Let me explain the concept of 'interest,'" he says, and does so. "This means that after a round trip on the *_Lazy Cat_*, if I did not spend a cent of my pay on Janik, I would still be short when I got back to Bral." He had cheered up while outlining the world of urban finance, but now he becomes gloomy again. "And I cannot guess what he might add on just for the aggravation, never mind what --" He breaks off suddenly, unwilling to bring up certain of Vlad's other business practices.

"I think I begin to see," Nyala replies a touch dryly, responding more to his tone than his words. "I should like to know how this came about, but... well." She spends a few moments in thought, absently tracing her fingertips down his side. "Whatever else, if you are to return, it would be well to have friends at hand. As for gold," she waves a dismissive hand. "Gold can be found; it is of no moment."

"Huh," he says. "You must have never had to work all day, on your feet, just to pay the rent." Something else she just said occurs to him, and he props himself up to look at her. "Did you just suggest that you might come with me?"

Her eyes narrow a bit as she pulls back slightly. "I have not, although I have spent many days 'on my feet' as you say trying to keep my household from starving. If you do not wish for assistance, you have only to say so."

"I am sorry," he says, dismayed and confused by this response. "I did not mean to imply that you do not know how to work. I do not understand how you can be so, so casual about money, that is all. I --" he breaks off and shakes his head. "-- Had better shut my mouth before I say something else stupid."

She appears willing to be mollified, and shrugs slightly. "My needs are few, and I am told that

ships such as this often need guards; I see no sense in worrying overmuch on the future. And in case my meaning was not plain," she leans toward him once more, "if you choose to return and find yourself in need regardless of our employers' generosity, I will happily aid you. I do not like to see you so chained."

"Thank you," he says, relieved. "You have already helped; as we have talked, I have remembered there was a time when I worried much less over these things. Uncle Karim was

right," he adds obscurely, and sighs. "Perhaps I should not go back. But I cannot decide what to do, especially ..."

"Especially?" she prods when he falls silent. "You are puzzling me yet again - you wish to return, or do not, or can, or cannot? You need not know your own heart now, but...."

He laughs a little. "I do know my heart's desire, I assure you. What I do not know is whether I will achieve it, whether it is really wise to try, or what course I should set to take me there. And in the meantime there are other things I have to do that may interfere." His mood has changed remarkably, to one of wry amusement with himself or his situation; he laughs again. "And I am still puzzling you. I am sorry."

"I do not mind so much...." She smiles slightly.

"Really? Should I keep my secrets, then, and never tell you?" He is, of course, only half-serious.

"If you wish - though I may find them out regardless," she replies in the same manner.

He seems to find this very amusing indeed, but only says, "I will save you the trouble. You see," he declaims, "I have decided to -- decide what to do." He is almost giddy as he laughs once more, then settles down beside her and cups her face in his hand. "When we reach Janik I will tell you all about it. There are some things I will have to do first -- not least of which is probably to repeat to folk here what I already told the captain about those pirates -- but then I will have no more secrets from you. All right?"

"I will be waiting, then." She sounds intrigued.

3 - On the Moon of Janik

After so many months of travel, the *_Lazy Cat_* has finally reached her destination; the moon Janik rolls beneath her keel, an orderly patchwork of cultivated fields and towns separated by woodland. The keenest-eyed of them can make out people and animals going about their lives.

In the last few hours before the ship reaches Janik, ibn Fadil is helping Nahele tidy up the galley.

"So, my young assistant, what are your plans when we make planetfall?" the elf inquires.

"Oh," he says casually, "find a place to stay, and a bath-house and a laundry. And some new clothes!" He brushes at one sleeve of his shirt, which had already seen better days before being subjected to six months of kitchen work and no washing.

Nahele looks amused. "Well, I expect you'll have no trouble with the first, at least. I always let her pick our hostelryes."

There is a loud clatter as ibn Fadil drops the box of spoons he was putting away. "Oh," he says weakly. Calm down, he adds to himself - he is **not** going to threaten your life over this. Unfortunately, knowing that is not quite the same as believing it.

"Do be careful with those. And don't look so nervous. Even if I was minded to take offense, she'd go her own path. And likely skewer me for presumption later," he adds with a bit of a smile.

He tries to pull together a few shreds of dignity as he picks up the spoons. "I do know that," he finally says with a bit more aplomb, sitting back on his heels to look at the elf. "But at home a conversation on, ah, this topic would usually include threats of violence, lawsuits, and the like. Nowadays it would not go beyond threats, as a rule, except in the country," he adds, lest Nahele think Zakhara is full of bloodthirsty barbarians. "But still ..."

Nahele holds up both hands, empty. "No threats here. Haven't held a blade in at least twenty years; I stick to my cooking. And we don't go in much for lawsuits at home. You seem a decent enough sort." He gives ibn Fadil a penetrating look, as if trying to confirm that supposition.

The half-elf smiles at the disclaimer, and stands up again in time to catch the other's more serious look, which he meets steadily. "I try."

Nahele nods. "Good. You don't want to get on her bad side." He quirks an eyebrow; it's difficult to tell how serious he is.

Ibn Fadil manages to laugh. "That I will try **not** to do," he says lightly, but he cannot quite prevent a flicker of worry and pain from crossing his face. After all, thus far it seems that **he** is the one most likely to get hurt in this affair.

When the city moves slowly into view, all but the most well-traveled of the crew are taken aback by its sheer size. Vast wings stretch out from the sprawling stone massif that Three Trees headquarters has become over the two centuries since its modest beginnings -- from one small company of shipwrights to undisputed masters of this moon and virtual owners of the planet its companions. Orderly avenues radiate out from the hub of power. To the east, they eventually become lost in a maze of neighborhoods, markets, and narrow streets. To the west, they abut a dockyard for the ships of the stars, half level field, half artificial lake, where ships return with the choicest treasures of a dozen spheres, or stop for final fittings after the bulk of their construction has been completed on the planet below.

Heavily armed ships cruise the skies above the city, along with the occasional flitter, incongruous in their comparative delicacy. There is a considerable elven population on the worlds of this sphere, and the Imperial Fleet maintains a matching presence in the system.

Shortly before landing, Pham takes leave of the bridge and walks to the bow of the ship, carrying a small parcel. He kneels down, facing aft, and opens the bundle, which contains a small bowl of what looks like rice and a small container of wine. Pham closes his eyes, and begins a singsong chant in a language that sounds very different from the normal common tongue. He then pours the wine on the deck, and leaves the rice behind at the bow of the ship. A moment's prayer more, and all on the ship who are sensitive to such things feel a wave of support, and health, and general good feelings.

The captain orders message flags hung that declare the ship's port of origin and the condition of the crew, as well as Sidney Volant's personal crest, which the dockmaster is sure to understand as a sign of the urgency of their mission. The dock appears very busy, with cargos being loaded and unloaded and a number of ships under repair; as they circle a wasp ship takes off. After a few passes, a flag sequence is hoisted at an unoccupied docking position, indicating permission to land. The ship settles to the ground with scarcely a bump under Alais' somewhat nervous hand.

To those of the crew making their first voyage off the Rock of Bral, the very size of the **sky** is daunting; the field and lake together are larger than the entire world they knew before, and they cluster uncertainly at the rail. Those of groundling birth, on the other hand, feel an opposite measure of relief at the prospect of release from the confines of shipboard life, however

beloved its wonders. The sky is a clear, pale blue, with a few high clouds, and the air holds a hint of crispness along with the smells of smoke from the city and warm grass from the fields, delighting senses dulled by the long voyage.

Ibn Fadil spends the entire descent hanging over the rail, and 'delight' hardly seems an adequate word for his rapt absorption of the free air, sunlight, and open vistas. Oddly enough, Nyala appears to be accompanying him, or at least spends her time leaning on the rail nearby, chatting with him. "Now *there* is a city," he says admiringly as the port comes into view.

"Indeed," she agrees, resolutely unimpressed, though her eyes gleam more than usual.

Val looks out over the moon of Janik as he mans his station, grateful to see land and trees and *sky* again. It's certainly been a while since seeing anything resembling his home this much. As the headquarters itself comes into view, Val is awed by the sheer size of it, reminded again of home. He wonders briefly what new opportunities await down there...

Waiting on the ground is a short, heavysset man in rich clothing of burgundy, with the Three Trees emblem on the pin of his cloak and four tall, heavily armed guardsmen following him. They proceed up the plank as soon as it has lowered.

"Captain Barthelm!" The short man shakes Theo's hand with every evidence of pleasure. "It has been too long!"

"Overseer Torsten, I see it is now," the captain smiles in return. "Indeed it has, if we've both come so far in the world since our last meeting."

"Tolerably far, I'll grant," Torsten chuckles with a glance around the ship. "What brings Master Volant to the homeworld?"

"He is not aboard," Theo tells him, and realizing from the other's expression what conclusion he has jumped to, adds, "He was well last I saw him, but there was no other ship to send with any speed. It is a matter of some urgency, as you can see. I must speak to the Board, or as many of them as can be assembled quickly."

Torsten's bushy grey eyebrows rise throughout this explanation, as if trying to escape his head. "I see you mean what you say. Very well; while you see to your crew, I shall locate those who can be found. Most of them are in town, I believe - there have been troubling losses of late," he adds in an undertone. "But that news can wait until yours has been delivered." He bows slightly to Theo and bustles back off the ship after giving a few instructions to the guards.

In fact, Theo delegates the usual tasks of landfall to Delmar and retreats to his cabin to ponder what he has pondered for months now: how to present the events on Bral to the Three Trees leadership, and how events might have fallen after the Cat's departure.

Among those tasks is to pay the crew for their service. Along with the coins, Delmar gives each of them a wooden chit, with a symbol indicating their ship on one side and their name hastily scratched on the other. As in many ports, sailors' money is welcome but they themselves are not particularly trusted, and it is required that all carry such identification - partly so the constables know where to unload the drunks each morning.

"We will be in port a week at the least," Delmar tells the assembled men and women. "If you are not yet decided whether you will return to Bral, you may leave your kit on the ship until we depart - the docks are quite well guarded, as you can see, so you need fear for nothing. Bows, crossbows, arquebuses and the like are not allowed in the city, but must be left aboard or placed in the custody of the guards." The leader of the four men bows slightly. Nyala frowns.

Emmett holds up his hook-hand, calling out "They're not going to fully disarm us, are they?"

"No, but no projectile weapons are allowed. Cuts down on accidents."

During a pause in the proceedings during which the still-unpaid crew members cluster into chattering groups, eagerly describing the pleasures they hope await with their freedom, Delmar signals to Alais, Brother Pham, and Emmett that he would like to speak with them.

"Three Trees owes you all a great debt," he says quietly. "And is about to incur a greater one. I realize this is your first day on land, but the captain has indicated that he would like you," he nods to the mage and Pham, "to visit the Hall of Records in the city and try to determine if there is any significance to the migration we witnessed early in the voyage. He asks that you," he turns to Emmett, "accompany them and make sure no mischance befalls." In other words, the marine understands, keep them out of trouble. Theo has clearly come to trust in his reliability over the course of the voyage. "We will send a guide as well. There is a chance that your presence will be requested when the captain gives his account of events on Bral; by the time you return, it should be known whether or not you will be needed, so you can then make your own plans."

"Of course I'd be happy to help out," Pham says. "Actually, that school or swarm or whatever it was has had me curious since we left it behind. Would the hall of records be the appropriate place, though? Are there any other libraries here we could look in?"

"In the records hall every captain's log from every ship that ever sailed for us - those that have been recovered, at least - have been pored over by the Masters. If there's anything to find, it will most likely be there," he replies. "It may be after all that this is something new we have come across, and in that case they will wish to know of it."

Emmett nods. "Delmar, giving me something to do right when we get into port makes it much less likely that you'll find me broke in a bar in 12 hours. I could use the adjustment time just to get used to the horizon."

Emmett turns to the mage and priest, sliding most of his pay into the slots of his curious folding wallet with surprising one hand dexterity. "I'm ready to go whenever you two are." He slides the wallet into a pocket in his vest - the two men get a glimpse of the strange line where the half man's skin has been replaced with leather - before shaking his cutlass with his good hand. "I've got everything I need right here."

"Wait. That's not entirely true. Excuse me a moment." The Emmett takes a couple quick steps over to where Inez was coiling some ropes - very much like her position from the first time he saw her. With little warning he picks her up and spins her around, ending the twirl with a last-ing kiss.

When they finally break, he smiles up at her. There is genuine affection in their glance, but it's smoldering nature makes it obvious to everyone that the relationship has a not inconsiderable physical aspect. "I'm going to have to scoot for a bit, hon. Delmar wants me to play guard for the pilots." He slips a handful of coins into her pocket. "Get us a room for a couple nights at a nice place. I'll meet you back here when we get back and we'll start...exploring."

She gives him a smile and a wink. "I think I can do that. See you soon."

"Great." he takes a step away, their hands lingering together. Before he gets too far away he seems to change his mind and spins her into a dip and a kiss, her long hair flashing in the sun. After a few more seconds they straighten up and he finally lets her go.

"Ok. Now I'm ready. The library awaits!" Emmett says with a theatrical flourish before lowering his voice "And can you make it a quick trip?"

Pham watches Emmett's capers with Inez with a bemused grin, and leans over to Alais. I suspect our escort may need more watching than we do. It's good to see passion in such a man, though."

Pham looks at the half-man and shouts "Emmett - if you're done dancing, I'd like to stretch my legs somewhere that I don't have to worry about falling overboard!" After Emmett comes over, he says privately "You're a good dancer, and it looks like you've found a good partner. Sorry to force you away from her to be a baby-sitter. I'm sure this won't take too long."

Meanwhile, Ginevra has gathered her things and is awaiting an opportunity to speak to Delmar before she debarks. She is wearing the veil again, more against the unaccustomed sunlight than for concealment now.

Val watches her from a short distance off. The moment had finally arrived and he had hardly spoken to Ginevra of what would happen when they reached Janik. He'd been afraid to even consider the possibilities. For now, he remains calm and collected, the facade of cheer and encouragement firmly in place.

He had of course offered to escort Ginevra off-ship, but she had neither accepted nor refused. He would again offer after she finished speaking to Delmar. Perhaps they could share one last meal before parting ways. He knows she's about to step out of his life, and he doesn't want to let it show just how much that thought truly saddens him....

Delmar has just given ibn Fadil his pay -- a number of bystanders promptly engage in speculation as to whether his abandonment of gambling will weather this temptation -- with Hiro patiently awaiting his turn, when a voice from the ground calls out, "Hello, the ship!"

From his expression, as he fingers the bright coins, the half-elf may be wondering the same thing as his shipmates.

"See who it is, Nolan," he sighs. The other man nods and strides off to take a look. There is a murmur of conversation, and then he returns, far more quickly, and whispers in Delmar's ear. The first mate's expression grows hard. "Fetch the captain." As he finishes doling out the wages, his glance continually strays toward Ginevra.

Theo arrives promptly, frowning deeply, and goes directly to the head of the ramp, looking down at the unknown visitors. "Yes? I understand you wish to speak to me?"

"Indeed I do, captain," a new voice speaks. "May I come aboard?"

"I can hear you from there."

A light laugh accompanies the sound of footsteps on the plank - several men, it seems, although they stop halfway. "Indeed, however the matter of which I wish to speak might better not be shouted across the field. I am given to understand that on your ship you have something that belongs to me."

Ginevra takes one faltering step away from the rail, as if thinking to flee, and faints.

Glancing over his shoulder to see how Ginevra is taking this, ibn Fadil sees her waver. Sheer reflex carries him across the deck barely in time to break her fall; with a trace of sympathy, he gently lowers her limp form to the deck and then steps out of Val's way as the other man rushes forward as she falls over. His mind races as he tries to figure out what happened. Too lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't been paying attention to what was going on at the ramp....

"Pham!" he calls out for the cleric as he kneels down and cradles Ginevra's head in his lap. He looks her over for any signs of injury from the fall. What happened to her? What if she's hurt herself or the baby? Val pushes that thought aside. "Get Brother Pham!"

Ibn Fadil keeps an eye on the captain and the ramp as he speaks to Val. "The brother is not here," the half-elf advises him quietly. "There is no need to panic yet, Valarin; I am sure it was only the shock that caused her to faint."

Val looks at ibn Fadil, the other's calm giving him pause. "Shock? What's going on?" His voice remains level, despite the panic threatening to take over. Only then does Val realize the captain is at the ramp with a scowl on his face. There is a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach....

"Are you asleep? Somehow her husband got here before us."

Val's mind races. Victor? Here? How did he manage to get here ahead of them? His hand automatically strays to the sword at his hip and a cold, detached numbness begins to slowly spread through him. But somewhere, deep inside of him, a small flame begins to burn.

"We've got to get her out of here," he says calmly to ibn Fadil, his face a mask of determination. "The lower hatch in the hold. We can get her out through there." Without waiting for the Zakharan to reply, he scoops Ginevra up in his arms and heads below deck.

The half-elf attempts to stop Val from doing any such thing by putting both hands on his shoulders and trying to hold him in his kneeling position, and whispering urgently into his ear. "No! Where will you bring her, by yourself, on a strange planet? Wait to see what the captain does!"

"I'll get her as far away from him as possible," is Val's calm reply. He seems determined to follow through with that, but remains in place a moment longer to see what Captain Barthelm will do.

"That would be about ten feet along the dock," ibn Fadil says with inexorable logic. "Did you think he came alone?"

Val remains silent, but his expression momentarily shows that he had not, in fact, thought things through....

Meanwhile, the captain's frown has not diminished. "I'm aware of no *belongings* of yours that may be aboard, sir."

A steely smile appears on Victor's face. "You know my meaning, Captain."

The harbor guards still aboard appear thoroughly confused by all of this, and clearly aren't sure if their intervention is required.

Victor solves the problem for them. "You," he commands imperiously. "Fetch Overseer Jumok. I have awaited your arrival most anxiously this past day, and had time to explain the situation to the good overseer, who I am certain will see it sorted out. You see, captain, your own rules do not permit you to deny me entrance under the circumstances."

The guard hurries off; it seems a brief reprieve has been granted those aboard, but Victor's determination is clear....

Val gives ibn Fadil a steady look. "Now what?"

He hesitates. "Is the child Victor's, or not?"

Val hesitates a moment, unsure of where he was going with this line of thought. "Not," he says flatly.

"Lie," the half-elf advises, even more softly than before. "Say she has confided to you, her friend, that she has lately feared the child will come early. She ought to be in the care of midwives, not subjected to her husband's anger or another journey. Unless, of course, Overseer Jumok wishes to be responsible for her death. Look very worried for her; you can manage that. Understand?"

Val's eyes narrow at hearing this strategy, but he nods anyway.

Satisfied, ibn Fadil promptly drifts out of the scene, back to Nyala's side, interested to see if this plan will work -- which he thinks it should, if the captain backs it up.

After about ten minutes, which pass with unbelievable slowness, the guard returns. In the meantime, Delmar calmly finishes the ship's business, though several of the released crew hang around curiously, wondering what will happen.

Jumok is a man of average height and build, with a neat ginger moustache and beard, and he wears the same the burgundy uniform and cloak pin that Torsten had.

"Master Victor," he greets the Bralian oligarch briskly. "What's the trouble?"

"This is the ship of which I told you upon my arrival. Good Captain Barthelm appears reluctant to give me access to claim that which is mine," the other man replies.

"Ah. Well, perhaps we can get on with things, then. Captain," he addresses Theo, "I assure you that everything will be carried out in an appropriate fashion."

Theo draws a breath as if he might object, but stands aside with a harumphing sound to mark his disapproval as the overseer, followed by Victor and his four men, climb to the deck.

Samuel Victor is a thin man, on the tall side. His hair is black, curly, and worn somewhat long, and like most Bralians his skin is pale. His clothing is extravagant - blue silk, red velvet, and a high lace collar that emphasizes his narrow features.

In his first cursory glance over the ship he does not even seem to see Ginevra, but at a second look his gaze fastens on her immovably. His expression shows surprise, puzzlement, and murder in rapid succession.

"I see," Victor says before turning to Jumok. He shakes his head with a sorrowful expression. "I suppose this is what becomes of allowing a groundling not far from barbarism to get ideas above her station. Not only a thief, but a strumpet as well. My father will be terribly disappointed." He snaps his fingers to his guards and gives Val a pointed look that says he will be remembered. "Take her to the ship."

Jumok clears his throat. "About the theft?"

"Is it not enough--check her bags," Victor snaps, annoyed by the omission of an honorific, and at being questioned. "I believe you will find the items of which I spoke."

"Overseer," Val calls over to Jumok, "Pardon, but I fear the lady needs to be taken to a healer. My friend confided in me that she has been worried her child would come early." He had been careful to word the statement just so. "She collapsed a moment ago and..." He trails off meaningfully. His trained expression reflects concern and worry.

"Excuse me..." Jumok moves past him in a businesslike fashion. "If I may." Under Val's watchful eye, he checks her pulse and her eyes. "She does appear to have fainted. It's clear enough we'll have to get her off this ship, at the very least, before anything else can be done, and let these men go about their business. We'll let one of the healers have a look at her." He glances at one of the dock guards and indicates her small clutch of baggage. "Bring that along and we'll see about

that as well, see if we can't get this all cleared up." It's clear that this is rapidly becoming more of a hassle than he wants to deal with.

"There were stretchers built to move the victims of the bloodsacs," Nyala speaks up. "I will fetch one, and we will bring her to your healers the more quickly."

Theo nods his approval slowly, and she and a somewhat unhappy ibn Fadil go below to get the stretcher; there is no time to discuss what's going on or what to do next.

"Thanks," Val says to Nyala, trying to read her intentions. He was somewhat surprised that she spoke up. Then again, when he considered it, Nyala had spent a good deal more time with Ginevra than he had...

Though he doesn't state it, Val intends to go as well. He doesn't think it really needs saying, truth to tell. Though he's not so sure he'll get very far; he'd have to be sure and watch his back around Victor.

He's somewhat surprised that ibn Fadil didn't say anything; it was *his* plan, after all. Of course, ibn Fadil may just be playing it safe, considering what he mentioned about Victor earlier. Val almost wishes he took his chances trying to sneak Ginevra out through the hold...

There is another delay while Jumok and one of his men search Ginevra's cabin, but it appears they've found nothing there. Val and Nyala end up carrying the stretcher -- the latter is stronger than she looks. She's left her bow on the ship as ordered, but is wearing her rapier and dagger. Ibn Fadil, unwilling to be separated from her, carries the two surprisingly heavy bags, with his own sword at his side. This arrangement satisfies Jumok (although clearly not Victor), as it allows him to leave the dock guards to watch the *Cat* as they were supposed to do. The Three Trees bureaucracy prides itself on orderliness and efficiency, as well as on the safety of its chief port, and disruptions such as this are not welcome. Theo glances at Delmar and nods; the latter attaches himself to the party as well, to report back later on.

Not long after that, Ginevra stirs. "Where are you taking me?" she whispers.

"To the healer," Val advises her with somewhat of a worried look. "You fainted a little while ago and we're to have you checked out. I know you were worried the child might come early," he adds for the benefit of anyone that might overhear. He fixes her with a look both pleading and insistent. *Take the hint and play along,* he wills her, as if his thoughts might bridge the distance where words could be dangerous.

His words penetrate her frightened desperation; her brow flexes and she nods slightly, understanding. Truth be told, she doesn't look at all well in any case. The members of the strange little party can see their destination, a two-story stone building facing the lake.

"The worse off you are, the better," ibn Fadil adds quietly. "He is claiming you stole something from him."

A flicker of outrage breaks through her fear for a moment; she closes her eyes again and lies still, bracing herself for whatever is to come.

"Where were you planning on going before all this?" Val asks her quietly. "Perhaps we can still reach your destination? Or at least send word." The last is said more or less to ibn Fadil.

The half-elf shrugs slightly; he is watching Jumok and Victor, trying to read their body language and get a better grip on the kind of people they are and how they are getting along -- and also suppressing a trace of irritation with being caught up in this lost cause. How much, he wor-

ries, is Nyala willing to do to help this woman? Victor is gesturing a lot, expressing his anger and frustration with the situation. It is difficult to tell what Jumok thinks of all of this.

"I... I had no immediate destination," Ginevra murmurs. "If there is no word, if I cannot find him, then I must return to my family.... I did not expect this. Thought he might send searchers, but not that he would come here."

Val's mind races as he tries to come up with a plan.

Their little parade attracts some attention as they make their way to the door of the infirmary - Jumok and the elegantly attired oligarch followed the latter's personal guards, followed by the stretcher-bearers and their burden, followed by the two with her bags, followed by the long-suffering Delmar.

A young man in plain brown robes greets them at the door with a low bow. "Overseer, honored visitors; enter and be at peace in our house. How may we be of service?"

"Brother Gregory, is Sister Mahal in today? There is a woman here, just arrived, who must be seen to."

"I will fetch her at once." He bows again, inviting them to follow him within. The interior of the building is plain and neat; they are shown to a waiting area with several windows looking out onto the waterfront, the walls lined with benches. Ginevra's eyes are open.

"So you rejoin us," Victor smiles. She looks back at him silently. "Overseer, might we get on with this? It is going to be a long journey home, and the sooner begun the better."

"Yes, yes. You there, I'll take a look at those." He collects the two bags.

"You will find nothing there that does not belong to me, whatever he may have told you," Ginevra says quietly. She moves as if to rise; the others help her .

"According to our contract, you own nothing," her husband reminds her in an almost jovial tone. "And where were you thinking of running off to? Back to daddy? I'm sure he'll look kindly on you for losing our business. Without the Victors, that godsforsaken ball of rock won't see another offworld penny. So much for his ambitions. Or were you thinking of some other... refuge?" His glance flickers toward Val with deadly intent.

"He's nothing to do with this," she replies unsteadily.

"Ah, the readily-believed word of a thief and --"

Jumok clears his throat. He's found the false bottom in the bags, under which was hidden a modest fortune in jewelry.

Peering curiously into the bags, ibn Fadil wonders what kind of idiot would subject his daughter to a marriage contract like Victor describes.

Val's blood turns to ice and he fights to maintain a straight face. Once again, he is surprised by the turn of events. Best not to let the others see that though - especially Victor. His mind races to try and figure a way out of this new mess....

Before he can do so, the door opens. Sister Mahal is a gnome in late middle age; her robe is similar to that of the man who met them, but in addition she wears a narrow stole of purple and white.

"Good day, gentlebeings," she greets them, looking somewhat askance at the large and well-armed company of intruders. "You must be the one he spoke of," she says to Ginevra, assessing

the woman with a glance. "Come, my dear, and we'll have a look at you. The room is just down the hall."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," Victor says smoothly. "I am, after all, the lady's husband."

"Ah?" She looks him up and down for a moment, looks at the men he brought, and replies ambiguously, "I will inform you directly if there is anything useful you can do."

Ginevra takes a single step and sways slightly; Nyala moves quickly to support her, and the two women move slowly out of the room, followed by the healer; the elf's eyes meet ibn Fadil's for a moment. The rest of the group is left with the simmering tension and Brother Gregory. Victor stands near the windows, his guards arrayed around him. Near the room's center, Jumok continues to frown at the bag he is holding. The rest are clustered near the door, uncertain of what to do now.

"Sister is among the best in the sphere," the young priest assures Victor blithely. "I'm certain your wife will be fine. Is there any way I may be of service during your wait?"

"You may *leave*," the oligarch snaps.

"As you wish." He bows and departs without any sign of offense.

"As may the rest of you," he adds to the contingent from the *_Cat_*. "There has been enough foolish delay, I'll brook no more."

Stolid Delmar looks surprised. "Master Victor, these men are not under your command, and I have been ordered by my captain to report on the resolution to this matter. He takes ill the accusation that he has harbored a thief these many months of our voyage."

"The evidence lies there." He kicks the bag on the floor. "As I told the good overseer here."

"That certainly seems to be the case," Jumok admits. "Everything you mentioned is in there. Hardly seems worth a six-month journey, but..."

"There are things more important than gold." He glowers at Val again.

"Ah. Yes. Hm."

What feels like a very long wait follows, the silence broken at times by shouts and thumps from the nearby docks as ships are outfitted, loaded and unloaded. Victor fidgets and occasionally upbraids his men for their slovenly posture. It's hard to tell what's going on behind his dark eyes; rumor on Bral has it that his well-known unpredictability is an attempt to cover for the fact that he's not terribly intelligent, and now what should have been straightforward has become far more complicated. Eventually there is a tap on the door, and Brother Gregory's head appears once more.

"Begging your pardon, but there is a message for you from your ship," he says to ibn Fadil. "The captain has asked that the two of you return at once."

"How much longer is this going to take?" Victor snaps.

"I do not know, sir," is the polite reply as a puzzled ibn Fadil and Val follow the young man out into the hall. "This way, please." He is not leading them toward the door they entered through, but deeper into the building. Around a corner, Nyala is waiting for them, fingers tapping on the hilt of her rapier in a most uncharacteristic betrayal of impatience.

"We have explained the situation," she tells them without preamble. "I am not sure if she believes us in all particulars, but in any case to send the lady back now would be to doom the child she carries to death or to grievous hardship, so time has been purchased -- she will remain here at least until the birth, and they will be wary of Victor. As should we. It would be best for us to be well away before he receives this information; the good Brother consented to a small ruse." She

looks from Val to the nearby door. “The lady is within if you would like to speak to her, but do not be long.”

* * *

Back at the *_Lazy Cat_*, Yestin has missed most of the excitement by virtue of being below-decks at the time, making his habitual final check to make sure that nothing has been forgotten. Of course, this time there isn't much to forget; he'd left Bral with little other than his weapons. Mindful of the local rules, he leaves his crossbow in the corner of the little room he's shared with Emmett these past six months. He wonders whether the man will be making the return trip to Bral or moving on, and sighs, for he has yet to make his own decision, and is not sure where to turn for advice.

That can wait. Yestin suspects that he has been too long away from his own kind; what he needs is a real drink and a friendly fight to get some perspective. No doubt someone will be posted to a ship going in the right direction to carry the letter he has written, as well, with all the consequences that will bring...

Well. He slings the nearly empty pack over his shoulder and leaves the room, comforting himself with the fact that many of the heroes of great sagas start their careers being disowned by their families.

* * *

Alais, Pham, and Emmett set out on their errand to the Hall of Records, accompanied by the guard, who introduces himself as Denis. Mindful of their long journey, he sets an easy pace, and they have plenty of time to rubberneck and get their land legs back. The landing field is really a giant grid, the ship berths divided by lanes paved in stone, the better to bear heavy traffic. Teams of oxen pull carts piled with crates and barrels, guards inspect cargos, the occasional mounted overseer trots by on business, and dusty youths run messages to and from the harbormaster's office. There are a dozen languages in the air, and twice that many types of intelligent beings speaking them, as well as shrieking birds fighting over scraps near the lake docks; it's all rather overwhelming at first. At the gates they are waved through with hardly a second glance.

“It is not far,” Denis informs them. “Just across the square from the Helm -- that's the big building there,” he points. “Headquarters proper for the company, which is why they call it that. Does the steering, eh?”

The group passes onto one of the broad streets they'd seen from above, thronged with people hurrying about their own business and lined with solid-looking buildings. After a while Emmett realizes that all this stone is not merely a show of wealth, but that these were once intended as shelters in case of aerial bombardment.

The half man snags Denis' sleeve and nods his head at the buildings. "How long ago did the raids stop? They must have been pretty nasty to get people to build all this."

"That?" He chuckles. "Oh, there hasn't been trouble on any scale here for my lifetime. This is a settled and peaceful sphere these days."

“How was the journey?” their guide wants to know as they make their way through the crowds, making a few turns as they bear toward the heart of the city/company. “Must've run into something interesting, eh? Been some wild rumors coming down these past few months, more than usual -- pirates getting ideas, and Great Dreamers running around like mad, all the usual stuff

about neogi, someone swears they saw the Mad Cavalier's* ship. And get this, one guy claimed they passed a school, or shoal, or something of night scavvers in the Flow. Hundreds of them, he said, just drifting along." Denis shakes his head and chuckles. "Don't know what he was drinking, but he'd had plenty of it."

Is that so, Alais thinks. Something's up, something big, and a man might make quite a name for himself if he figured it out before anyone else.

The Great Square is indeed great, and filled with people. Vendors have set up booths along the edge, in between statues of presumably important people, and others wander through the crowds. Entertainers sing, caper, play, or declaim, and they pass several people haranguing the crowd from improvised platforms. The visitors catch snatches of speech as they pass by.

"...In the body corporate cannot be allowed to spread! Demand Ivan Jorstoian's immediate resignation!" "...Call for sacrifice! Avert the..." "...Wealth, love, and eternal youth can be yours for only..." "...Penny to view the wonders of the northern woods! All are welcome!" "...Must expand the board! Exclusion of nonhumans is..." "...Fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire..."

Alais notes the cries, especially the politically-oriented ones, for further reference, and resolves to go see the wonders of the Northern Woods if he gets a chance.

Emmett is thinking similar thoughts about how he and Inez could take in the show tomorrow - it had been a long time since he had some quality entertainment - when he spies the muttering madman.

Their attention is caught as much by the man's eerie monotone and blank stare as by his speech. He's clearly been sleeping on the streets for some time, and sits on the ground heedless of anyone who might tread on him, looking up at the sun through the screen of his matted hair.

Denis frowns. "That's a new one. People can say anything they like in the square, so mad folk tend to end up here. More work for us, since now we'll have to track down his relations or whatever ship brought him here and left him in this state. Don't know what people think we have temples for sometimes, they just kick 'em into the street and expect the city to take care of it and complain about the fines later on. Ah, here we are..."

Emmett barely hears their guide's complaints, involved as he is in a silent conversation with brother Pham one involving raised eyebrows, a questioning look and a nod of his head at the unfortunate man. His meaning is clear: hadn't Pham had been having prophetic dreams about a great fire? Does this bear looking into? Had Pham considered getting a drink later? (OK, that last wasn't clear, but it's a safe thing to add when talking with Emmett in any fashion.)

Unfortunately, Pham is too distracted by the nearness of their goal to notice or, if he notices, to respond. The Hall of Records is a big, grim-looking granite structure with narrow, barred windows, and not welcoming in the least.

"I expect you can find you way back to your ship when you're finished. Good luck with the Masters," Denis wishes them, and departs with a friendly wave to resume his usual duties. Left on their own, the three visitors climb the steps to the iron-bound doors and rap with the knocker; the sound reverberates even over the noise of the square.

After what feels like several minutes, one door swings open. The man revealed is clearly a wizard, since he's wearing a green robe with mystical-looking signs embroidered on the cuffs in silver, and his grey-streaked beard comes halfway down his chest. He is also six feet tall and built like a stack of wine casks.

"Identification, business," he demands in a gruff bark.

"I am Alais Zeremin, Ship's Wizard of the *_Lazy Cat_*, and this is Brother Pham, Ship's Cleric. Accompanying us is Mr. Emmett, of the crew. We are on a mission for Captain Theo, master of our craft. Pray thee, let us in!"

Emmett stands unobtrusively to one side, willing to play accompaniment and take in the impressive solidity of the library while he gnaws on the puzzle presented by the muttering madman.

"Huh," the man grunts, looking them over thoroughly, then stands aside. "What mission is this, then?"

"Are you the librarian? The details of our task are for his ears only."

Pham blinks a couple of times at that pronouncement, thinking to himself, *_Librarian's ears only? The captain never said that!_* However, he remains silent, thinking that it would be worse to disturb the united front that the group was presenting than to correct Alais's exuberance.

Still, the thought of standing here ... all the tales held in this building... surely many of them are thoroughly mundane, but the gems that must be here! Pham's eyes narrow, and he glares at the man blocking entrance, trying to more portray importance and impatience than the, let's be honest, greed currently coursing through his soul.

The big wizard grunts again, unimpressed by Alais. "All within these walls are equal in scholarship, youth. Tell me your errand or be off with you; there is work to be done here that ill brooks delay."

"I doubt not that all here are 'equal in scholarship,' but to no matter. Our mission is to seek out reports of strange doings, especially recent, of delphinids or other cosmoceateceans. How can we begin our research?"

Apparently the best thing I can do to protect Alais is gag him. I know he's damn impressive for his age, but a diplomat he's not. Emmett thinks. He also catches Pham's initial shock at Alais' attitude, but decides to back the priest's decision to present a unified front. *_As long as magically animated guards don't show up to kick us out,_* he mentally adds.

"Delphinids, you say?" The librarian's features twist into a thoughtful scowl, and he gestures with his staff. "This way." He leads the three deeper into the building. "Strange doings, eh? We are concerned here with preservation of knowledge, not idle rumor," he warns.

They follow the Master down a dark hall, around a couple of corners, and stop at a heavy door, which the tall man unlocks using three keys. The narrow room beyond has several windows at the far end and is thus startlingly bright, and they realize that the grim-looking outer building surrounds a pleasant courtyard and fountain. Outside, several people in robes similar to the first's are taking advantage of the light as they pore over books or work diligently at copies. Books line two walls, and there is a small desk near the windows.

"Here lie many treatises on creatures," the Master proclaims. "Real and fantastical, theory, observation, and commentary on all from many worlds. The red-bound books," he touches a spine with a sudden smile that seems to transform his whole being, "are collected excerpts from company captains over the past several centuries who had observations to make of the beasts encountered in their journeys. The collection grows and changes constantly, and some of us have spent fifty years and more attempting to index a single room." He touches a tall book lying on its side

atop the shelf. "You must depart at sundown, and may return on the morrow if you have not found what you seek."

Whoa. Now that's a lot of books. Emmett blinked several times, taking in the scene. "Sunrise to sundown? Can we stay later if we have our own light?"

"No," is the succinct reply. "There will be someone outside if you need anything."

Emmett follows the wizards exit with his eyes, waiting for him to leave before saying "Charming fellow. Well, I suppose you two had better..." only to find that Alias was already buried in the books.

"Um, Pham. This place looks pretty safe for you two. Do you mind if I go outside and get used to the square while you do the research?" A vague wave he interprets as assent.

Alais and Pham survey the room's contents and begin their search. It is famously difficult to establish a negative, but as the hours pass it certainly appears that if such a gathering of delphinids has ever before taken place, it has not been recorded by company ships.

There is one reference noted down by a conscientious ship captain over a century before and annotated as "probably spurious" by an unknown copyist. The ship had visited a world called Everfall to take on fresh air and other supplies, where the natives proved friendly if unsophisticated.

Conversation turned to Great Dreamers, as we were blessed enough to sight one of these beings on our way toward the planet, and I idly inquired if any of these seashore dwellers had seen one. Did not know what I meant, but after describing one was told that by these charmingly simple folk there were many hundreds of them seen during what he referred to as the Star Change. One of their children recited what I guess to be an archaic poem, which I have set down here as best I could, finding the ancient form of their language pleasant to the ear.

The poem has not been reproduced; many of the copied records contain elisions where material extraneous to the topic of wildlife has been left out, or where the copyist could not make out the writing clearly enough to reproduce the text faithfully.

Excited by this hint that might bear upon their search, the two researchers split their efforts. Alais looks for other mentions of this "Star Change" or anything similar, but finds nothing. If it refers to some astronomical event, the information might be in another of the great library's rooms.

Meanwhile, Pham thinks to him, _Hmm... Great Dreamers? Didn't somebody in the square mention something about them?_ He starts widening his search from just delphinids to Great Dreamers, specifically looking for recent reports.

There is an entire shelf of entries relating to the habits of the giant spacefaring creatures, but nothing recent; it takes time for information to find its way to the Hall of Records.

The sun is going down.

As the day fades towards dusk, Pham puts down the book he'd been reading, sneezes from the small cloud of dust, and goes over to Alais. "Alais. Alais!" After getting a bit louder than he'd like to be in a library, Pham finally gets the mage's attention.

"They're going to be locking this place up soon? Have you made provisions for lodging yet? I don't know about you, but I'd very much like to sleep somewhere OTHER than the Lazy Cat this evening."

"If you've not found a place, would you care to seek out rooms together? We could get a bite to eat and discuss what we've found. And what to look for tomorrow."

Alais grimaces, profoundly ticked off at having to leave the library. "Yes, I suppose that would be necessary. Let us go."

Pham sees that Alais is simply not interested in socializing, and decides that a night off from his fellow pilot is in order. He looks for a tavern -- not a dangerous tavern, hopefully, but one where sailors are prone to congregate, and finds himself at the simply named Cask. The crowd there is on the older side, less likely to start a fight just for the sheer joy of having room to swing after getting off a ship.

Once there, he sits down, buys a drink, and looks for a chance to trade stories. He'll trade one for one for anything the sailors have to say (stories, that is). A particularly interesting or novel tale (although at least believable rather than a pure fabrication) is worth buying the teller a drink. This, of course, makes him very popular very quickly, as a half dozen old-timers trot out their best yarns and others simply listen, the presence of a new audience making old stories fresh again.

Pham has been far too long away from his true calling.

At the end of the evening, with his newfound acquaintances hoping he'll return for more talk if he can, he finds a room at a nearby inn - small and simply appointed but clean - and sleeps deeply. In the morning he's not sure if he heard two people arguing in the next room, or if it was a dream, or in either case what they were arguing about.

Alais, meanwhile, finds his dinner from a street vendor and then goes looking for places of historical or philosophical interest in the area. The entertainers and rumor-mongers are still going about their business as he wanders, and he hears the word "delphinids" a couple of times in passing, but can't locate the speaker when he turns. The other buildings in the square itself hold the seat of the business/government. There does appear to be a small museum, with a statue of the company's three founding brothers out front, but its doors are locked. South of the main square, a long, curving avenue serves as the city's religious center. Temples vary from a grove of trees that probably predates the city itself, to a massive gilt-encrusted edifice that serves as local headquarters for the Path and the Way, to the efficiently constructed Temple of Gond with its slowly turning windmill (which not only grinds grain for the impoverished but drives a pump bringing water to the neighborhood from deep underground).

At last realizing that it has grown late, he turns his steps back toward the docks. A life on Bral has if nothing else taught him how to tell a good inn from a dangerous one. The night seems to pass very slowly, but finally it's morning again and he can go back to the library.

* * *

Leaving the two more scholarly crew members in the library, Emmett heads back out into the square. Spending a few coppers on a couple 'spicy meat on a stick' concoctions, he makes his way back to the muttering madman, carefully holding both sticks with his good hand.

When he finds the fellow, Emmett crouches down and hands one of the sticks to the poor deranged man. "Tell me about the fire."

No response at all; there's no sign that the man has even registered Emmett's presence. His voice has gone hoarse and hence quieter, but he continues repeating the one word, staring blankly skyward.

Emmett reaches out and touches the man, trying to get his hand the grasp the offered food. (Emmett's own meat on a stick has been transferred, ever prudently, to his mouth).

The man's hand closes around the stick when prompted, but as soon as guidance is removed his arm relaxes and the food ends up in his lap. Now that he's getting a better look at the man, Emmett sees that he is wearing a simple hooded robe of surprisingly good material that was probably grey to begin with. His hands are filthy and covered with small cuts, but uncalloused.

He'd hoped for better, but things being as they are, Emmett asks around the square after the nearest temple of Gond. Once pointed out, the temple is easy to find: it's the one with the attached windmill, a few twisty streets away from the square. The temple itself is a large, low building displaying mastery of many crafts. Several people are working outside.

"Good afternoon, my son," says the thin, dark-skinned man who is trimming the grass back from the path when Emmett enters, noting the half-man's prominently displayed symbol of the god.

"Good afternoon, artificer. I'm Emmett, recently arrived on the Lazy Cat. I could use some solace and advice. Is there someone I should talk to?"

"I should certainly hope so! Come with me." He hops to his feet, wiping the clippers carefully with a rag before stowing them in a sort of holster. "I hope you've had a good journey?"

"Definitely! Good company, got on the move again, only one fight with some Bloodsacs, only one man lost. Not as much time as I liked for leatherworking, but I did get to optimize the ships ballistae using some toned down Gnomish techniques." Emmett follows the priest into the windmill temple, waiting until they're seated to give more detail on his problem.

"Splendid! Unfortunate about your crewman, but those creatures often wreak far greater losses. Wonderful people, the gnomes; we always get plenty of visitors when one of their ships is in. Some have been quite helpful around the temple, as well." The artificer seems to be one of those people who's just really enthused about life.

"Here's the deal - the ships priest worships the god of heralds, and starting having dreams about fire. Call me a superstitious old sailor, but I checked the whole ship over. No problems. Today, I'm escorting that priest and the ships wizard to the library, and we come across this madman in the square. He hasn't been lost long - his hands are soft, his clothes are still good - but all he does is chant 'fire fire fire' endlessly."

The half man shrugs. "I don't know. I've got that same creepy feeling I got when someone was trailing me from behind and above, and in the sun at that. Something weird is going on, but I have no way to get more information. So I thought I'd ask you. Do you have any way to take care of that poor bugger in the square, see what's gotten to him?"

"Hm." He looks quite serious now. "I'm aware of no ill omens such as you describe - when did these dreams take place?"

"About five months ago." Emmett tries to place the date exactly but ships time makes it difficult. "It was just before we left Bralspace. Brother Pham was concerned about it as well, and since we were about to enter the phlogiston... Anyway, it wasn't our ship, but maybe it was something bigger."

"One cannot leap too quickly to conclusions - first lay the path, then walk it," he adds with a smile, "and yet this certainly bears looking into, if only for the sake of that poor man. Bide here a moment, and if you will bring me to him we will see what can be done. We are not well equipped

here to care for such unfortunates, but we can bring him to those who are, and begin inquiries." He vanishes for a few minutes and then returns, apparently ready to go.

"Thanks Aram. He's back this way." Emmett leads the way back to the square, hoping that the authorities haven't dragged the man off quite yet. "Oh, I don't know if this is connected, by our wizard and priest are investigating a massive, umm, 'cosmoceatecean' school we passed on the way. Thousands of them. Never seen the like."

"Truly?" Aram shakes his head with a wistful look. "That must have been an amazing sight. The wonders of the universe are vast beyond mortal comprehension."

Emmett nods. "Kinda like women."

Aram chuckles. "Sometimes I suspect they are beyond *im*mortal comprehension as well."

Spotting the man and the untouched food, "There he is. Blast. Looks like he isn't eating, either," Emmett adds.

The muttering man is right where he was, ignored by busy urbanites who move around him as if he were one of the square's statues. Aram kneels down to look closely, touches his arm, then his face. The blank pliability remains.

"I see he is in a bad way," the artificer agrees gravely. "Something..." He shakes his head, frowning. "Well. Lend me your hand, friend, and we shall see if he can be steered."

"He didn't seem hostile." Emmett reaches down and grabs one of the mans arms, trying to maneuver him upright. He knows he's strong enough to just carry the poor soul if it comes down to it, but better to give him a little dignity.

The two men lead their charge back to the temple, and Emmett is never able to fully ignore the persistent muttering. Once they get there, Emmett makes his good-byes. "I'll be back tomorrow to check up on him, but I have some sailors I have to escort back to their boat."

The half-man stops, fishes out some coins and drops them into the donation box. He hears the distinctive sound of wheels turning, and knows that the coins are being sorted by weight right now, even as their passage winds the mainspring for something else in the temple. "Let no act go wasted" is a cornerstone of Gond's faith, and Emmett hoped that his patron would apply that to his efforts today.

Back at the library, Alais and Pham are finishing up for the day; as they have nothing to report yet, they plan to find a place to stay and pick up their research again in the morning. Upon reporting back to the ship - he has to show his ID at the main gate and then again to a dock guard at the plank - Emmett finds the captain and first mate deep in discussion, though their voices cease at his knock.

"Enter. Ah, Emmett," Theo greets him. "Any luck with the Hall of Records?"

"Fine, sir. Got them there, they did some research. Nothing so far, but they'll do some more looking tomorrow. What happened here to increase all the security?"

"Standard procedure," is the reply. "The company takes great pride in the safety and security of the city." After a moment's pause he adds, "Just the same, if you see any men with a badge of a golden 'V,' keep an eye about you, and let the others know if you see them - 'specially your friend Val. There's a Victor cub in the city who may try to make trouble for the crew." He shakes his head at his own folly in not handing the woman over immediately.

"I'll...er...I'll do that, sir." Emmett says, vowing to have a chat with Val to find out what had been happening in his absence.

"I've been informed that the Board would like to hear your account of what happened during the raid on Bral. Be at the headquarters steps at the eleventh bell, and be ready for a long afternoon," he warns candidly.

Emmett nods. "Aye aye, sir. I'm just glad there giving me the evening to unwind. How long do we expect to be in port? There's a show playing I'd like to see."

"Probably a week. Try to enjoy it."

Emmett thought back to his departure from Inez earlier in the day before responding, "Shouldn't be that hard to do sir. I'll be there at 11 bells tomorrow."

"Good. That will be all."

Inez is waiting above decks to greet him with a sly, "What took you so long? I got us a place, not too far from here..."

"Captain wanted to talk. Have you seen Val anywhere?"

"He came by earlier, looking for you. Talked to the captain and then went off again. Left word where he's staying."

"OK. lets do the same, and then swing by where he is. Something's come up, but we've only been in dock for 12 hours - how bad can it be?" Emmett says with a shrug. "Anyway, we'll check up on him and then hit the town."

He gives her a quick hug, then leads her off the ship, arm around her waist. "I heard them calling what sounds like a great show near the square. So how about dinner somewhere, catch 'the Wonders of the Northern Woods' and then back to the inn for some drinks?"

"Wonders of the Northern Woods? What's that?"

"Sounded like a take on the "group of kids from a small town" legend. Must be a comedy - the crier was going on about noble orcs and toad rustlers." Emmett chuckles. "Sounded worth checking out. And maybe we can find a place with open dancing when we get dinner."

"Sounds like fun," she agrees. "Nothing against ship life, but it's nice to be on a planet again!"

Val is not at the room when they get there, so the two continue on in hopes of making it to the show, whatever it turns out to be. It's a traveling act - Emmett is sure he can think of several ways to improve the designs for the breakdown pieces. At the entrance is a small tent where a beautiful young woman collects their silver and, while waiting for a group to accumulate, guides them through a series of paintings depicting the varied forests of the planet below, from massive pillars two hundred feet high and with ten times that many years behind them, to firs so dense the artist could have saved time by painting the canvas black, to tropical zones harboring a riot of bright and deadly creatures. Though there are some human cities, Maekelan is largely inhabited by elves and centaurs. The show's owners, a dracon clan, have friendly contact with the latter especially, which has been a great boon to their exhibits.

When an audience of about a dozen has gathered, they are led past a curtain and into the exhibits proper. Among many examples of flora and fauna are a collection of cleverly trained talking birds, several sorts of deer, a giant toad of impressive size (stuffed), butterflies with wings the size of a man's hand, and a bear which at first appears asleep but which opens one eye to glare balefully at the audience through the heavy bars. As the group goggles at a section of a tree that when living was wider than three oxcarts, or at a glass box of acid ants from the equatorial jungle (capable of stripping the whole group to the bone in minutes should they escape), their guide tells

and sometimes sings stories collected (she says) from the planet's natives. Young heroes and heroines from unlikely places accomplishing great deeds, romantic quests, mysterious (to the visitors) gods, epic battles....

In short, the two enjoy themselves. Afterwards, they head back to the room Inez reserved, order up a couple of bottles of expensive wine, and enjoy themselves even more. The couple does attract some curious looks, the pretty young woman with the heavily armed and oddly repaired marine, but if anyone has any comments they're wise enough to keep them quiet.

* * *

"There are things more important than gold." He glowers at Val again.

"Ah. Yes. Hm."

Val returns Victor's gaze without wavering. The cold fire burning within is giving him a certain measure of courage that he normally might not have.

During all this, ibn Fadil starts trying to fade into the background -- looking bored and propping up an out-of-the-way wall.

What feels like a very long wait follows, the silence broken at times by shouts and thumps from the nearby docks as ships are outfitted, loaded and unloaded. Victor fidgets and occasionally upbraids his men for their slovenly posture. It's hard to tell what's going on behind his dark eyes; rumor on Bral has it that his well-known unpredictability is an attempt to cover for the fact that he's not terribly intelligent, and now what should have been straightforward has become far more complicated. Eventually there is a tap on the door, and Brother Gregory's head appears once more.

"Begging your pardon, but there is a message for you from your ship," he says to ibn Fadil. "The captain has asked that the two of you return at once."

Val is reluctant to leave, but the look from Delmar seems to arrest any protests he may have come up with. Delmar has already done more than the young man had had expected, and he does not wish to get on the first mate's bad side. At least any more than he probably already is.

Reluctantly, Val turns to follow the messenger. He intentionally ignores the foppish oligarch as he leaves. He doesn't want to give Victor the satisfaction of acknowledgement, as if the man mattered not at all to him.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Victor snaps.

"I do not know, sir," is the polite reply as a puzzled ibn Fadil and Val follow the young man out into the hall. "This way, please." He is not leading them toward the door they entered through, but deeper into the building. Around a corner, Nyala is waiting for them, fingers tapping on the hilt of her rapier in a most uncharacteristic betrayal of impatience.

Val had at first thought to protest, but keeps his mouth shut. Seeing Nyala, even as irritated as she seems, is quite a relief.

"We have explained the situation," she tells them without preamble. "I am not sure if she believes us in all particulars, but in any case to send the lady back now would be to doom the child she carries to death or to grievous hardship, so time has been purchased -- she will remain here at least until the birth, and they will be wary of Victor. As should we. It would be best for us to be well away before he receives this information; the good Brother consented to a small ruse." She looks from Val to the nearby door. "The lady is within if you would like to speak to her, but do not be long."

"I could kiss you," Val tells the elf, half seriously. There is obvious relief on his face, mixed with his uncertainty. He hurriedly slips into the room to see Ginevra.

"Excellent," ibn Fadil says cheerfully as Val ducks through the door. "Now all we have to do is track down her, ah, friend." He had not really expected this to work out quite so well, but now it seems like his extrication from this matter is not far off.

Nyala nods. "In a port this size, there should be news." She's still frowning.

"Do we know his name, what he looks like, the ship he was on, things like that?"

"I do. The only worry is that others may be looking as well."

Ibn Fadil starts to ask, "Such as?" and then decides to put that off until they are on their way, and out of earshot of the helpful young cleric. Apparently optimism is not yet called for, and that dampens his mood once more.

Beyond the door is a small, whitewashed room, furnished only with a low bed and a small cabinet with a washbasin on its top. Ginevra is sitting on the bed, wearing one of the loose brown robes; the clothes she arrived in are neatly folded beside her. When he enters she stands with an expression of relief, both hands extended in a welcoming gesture.

Val steps forward and impulsively takes her into his arms. The awkwardness of the brief embrace reminds him of why she's here in the first place, and he steps back to look at her, still holding her hands.

"I'm sorry," he manages to say. "I'm afraid I'm not doing a very good job of protecting you." There is a look of sadness and regret upon his face, but his eyes are still bright with determination.

"It is I who am sorry - I should never have spoken, never have gotten you involved in this," she replies quietly. "I did not think of the danger I was putting you in."

"Nonsense," Val says with an odd, lopsided smile. "You needn't say that. I would have helped regardless."

"Nyala tells me you'll be staying here," Val continues. "They'll to see you through the birth at least..." he trails off, unsure of what to say next. There is so much to say, so little time to say it, a so few words to truly express himself.

She nods briefly. "It seems they are not entirely certain what to do with me, so I abandon myself to the mercy of the gods." A glance at the door. "I am told there is not much time -- I beg of you, be watchful while you remain on this world. And if we do not meet again, know that I will think of you often, my friend. I would give you something to remember me by, yet it seems I've nothing to give but this." She rises on her toes to kiss his cheek. "Keep yourself safely and well."

Val smiles down at her, resisting the urge to draw her to him. He fights to keep the facade in place.

"His name, and ship?" he asks her after a brief awkward silence. "We've got to get word to him." Val knows there isn't much time.

"Teague Linnhal, of the *Silver Swan*," she replies softly. "Thank you." She hugs him briefly, then steps back. "You should go..."

Val lingers a moment more before turning to go. There are still so many things he wants to say to her, to tell her, but he dares not. There will be time for that later, he tells himself.

"Until we meet again," he says before slipping through the door.

Val rejoins his companions in the hallway, his expression unreadable. "Let's go," he says, not wanting to draw this out any longer. He appears somewhat withdrawn, but not so much that he isn't thinking clearly. They need to go.

"So," the half-elf asks as they start down the street, "do you mean the Victor also knows who he is, or is it someone else who might be looking for him?"

"I meant that Victor may be looking for *us*," she clarifies with a glance at Val. "Though I doubt he has many resources to hand." She shakes her head and looks at ibn Fadil, setting aside such concerns for the moment. "Let us return to the ship, collect our belongings -- and my brother, who is no doubt wondering what happened - and then we shall see what this city has to offer?"

"You mean he'll be looking for *me*," Val says rather grimly. "There's no reason you two should face his wrath as well."

"He is a man of no reason," she agrees blithely. "Who knows what he may do?"

"Point taken," Val replies. "I intend to inform the child's father. Maybe there's something he can do for her..." He doesn't want to dwell on that thought just now, for it reminded him just how little help he had been so far.

Looking at the unhappy young man, ibn Fadil suspects he himself is going to get further mired in this situation before he gets out of it. The Victor is just the sort of man to have his bullies snatch a hapless sailor off the street and take him to some quiet, convenient place, and the half-elf's conscience pinches him sharply over his attempted indifference to that possibility.

Nonetheless, there is nothing to be done about it right now, except try to be even more alert than usual. "I am sure the city has a great deal to offer," he tells Nyala with a smile. "We can look for this mysterious fellow after settling other matters."

For the rest of the journey back to the *Cat*, Val is quiet, occupying himself by being aware of their surroundings. It would not surprise him if they were being followed. It had been a long time since he had needed to act in this manner; at least not since just before leaving Taros, after his mentor Circio had been murdered. He felt the same sense of being hunted right now... but at least for the moment, there is no sign that they are followed.

Nahele is waiting, clearly curious but also willing to wait until they're in a more private place before finding out what has happened. Hiro is still aboard ship, but most of the regular crew have long since disappeared to spend their new gold.

"Is the captain still aboard?" ibn Fadil asks Nolan. "I will join you in just a moment," he tells Nyala and Nahele, and trots quickly down to the captain's cabin knocks. "Ibn Fadil," he says to natural query from within.

"Enter."

"Captain," ibn Fadil says, not quite bowing, but with his usual deep respect, "I was wondering if you will need me to come along when you talk to the -- the board, did you call it? -- and when that would be. I do not plan to stay on the ship," he adds.

"Ah, yes. I do not think that will be required, but check here tomorrow morning and we can be certain. Could you tell Delmar to see me immediately?" he adds, assuming that they came back together.

"Nyala and Valarin and I came along ahead, Captain. The healers want to keep the lady till the child is born, and we thought it prudent to leave before his lordship received this news." His tone is one of bland understatement.

"I see...." He nods thoughtfully, but does not share his opinion of the matter with ibn Fadil. "Very well, then. Enjoy the city."

The half-elf hesitates. "I would be glad to help in any way I can, sir -- about the pirates, that is."

He takes himself out the door, to his cabin to fetch his meager belongings, and back up on deck to join his elvish friends. "All ready?"

"More than," Nahele replies heartily. "I've spoken to our native guards, who tell me suitable lodgings can be found if we take one of the northerly avenues."

"Good," he says, squinting toward the setting sun. "I still have some things to do today."

The three set out in the indicated direction. The first areas they pass through are cheap lodging houses, taverns, and brothels where no doubt some of their shipmates have already ensconced themselves. It is much like Bral in the wide variety of people in the streets, but compared to the crowding there even the meanest inn has a wealth of room.

A half hour's walk brings them to a quieter part of town. The nature of the crowds and the architecture shift; it is a largely elven neighborhood they have entered. Here both the entertainments of the city and quietude are within easy reach, and Nyala's brother can begin making enquiries in his attempt to establish himself permanently.

The fourth place they try, the Gilded Vine, has two rooms to let. They are asked for their identification by the apparent proprietor, who looks to be somewhat older than Nahele, but welcomed politely enough once that has been established.

The building is old and slightly shabby, a bit too far from the docks and the city center to get the best business, but it is clean and comfortable-looking, and the smells from the common room are encouraging, as is the whiff of steam and soap from a bathing-room. Their rooms are on the upper of the two stories, one on each side of the hall. Ibn Fadil and Nyala's faces north, with glassed dormer windows looking out from the steeply-pitched roof. The bedding is clean, there is a fur for added warmth should the night grow chill, and the furnishings while simple are beautifully crafted: a bed, chest of drawers, a trunk at the foot of the bed, a small table and a chair near the window. There is a well-worn rug on the floor.

Ibn Fadil looks around the room and in his mind compares it with the coffinlike rooms in which he has slept (but never lived) for so many years on Bral, and suddenly feels very tired. Going to the window, he looks down at the street, other buildings similar in size and style to the Gilded Vine, what is probably a small market a couple blocks away, some trees that might be a park. For the first time, he toys with the idea of not reporting in -- of taking off and exploring the wide universe with his lover. But it is only for a moment. He turns to face Nyala and says, "I should go out on my errands."

She studies him for a moment and asks, "Do you wish accompaniment?" There is a hint of uncertainty to her bearing; the environment has changed, and the rules may have as well.

He dredges up a smile and shakes his head. "It should only take an hour or two," he says. Thoughtfully, he adds, "If you will tell me about Lady Ginevra's friend, I can start looking for him, as well."

She's clearly curious about this, but tells him what she knows of Ginevra's lover.

The half-elf absorbs this information, then takes her hands and kisses her. "I will return as soon as I may, my love."

Leaving behind the small bundle of his belongings, he goes out and starts back toward the docks; it lacks two hours to sundown, and there is much to take care of.

His questioning of workers near the harbormaster's office reveals that the *_Swan_* stopped into Janik briefly, then headed in-system on her regular trading run nineteen days ago. She'll be back in about six weeks, with luck. He can't find out for certain whether the man he seeks is aboard, since they weren't on Janik long. It might be possible to find out more through bureaucratic channels, but that would no doubt be time-consuming, and will in any case have to wait until morning at the soonest, when the offices are open.

At least what Nyala told him has given ibn Fadil the context to realize that he's seen the man during his stay on Bral; one of the nigh-infinite number of young men of good family but no prospects, taken to ship life as a means to make a way for himself in the universe. Ginevra of course won't describe him in anything but the most glowing of terms, but his reputation on Bral supports her contention that he's charming, generous, and socially adept, which is no doubt how he managed to meet her in the first place. Roguish good looks and a poetic turn of speech surely assisted him in bringing about the current situation.

As always, he takes careful note of his surroundings, getting a feel for the city. It's impossible not to notice that there are quite a few guards, as well as other people wearing uniforms, badges, hats, and so on with the company sign. The guards appear to take their work seriously, at least this close to the docks; it seems fairly common for people to be stopped and asked to show their identification chits. At the same time, there don't seem to be any beggars, and most people look decently fed. There appears to be free trade in intoxicants and sex, catering to just about every species in space.

It is also readily apparent that there are three kinds of people here: 3 Trees employees, offworlders, and people who provide support services for both. Company people move with the blithe confidence that comes of knowing perfectly their place in the elaborate mechanisms of the world-business, and knowing that it's in the upper reaches. Support folk are wary and deferential by contrast; however welcome they might be, they are inessential and unprotected outsiders. Most offworlders appear either ignorant of or disinterested in this groundling dance.

Having accomplished the first of his self-appointed tasks, a few more questions serve to establish where he might find the business offices of the companies, and rarely entire worlds, that have established relationships with 3 Trees. The *_Swan_* is a Silverstream ship, so his questions about how to find their office do not seem strange, although that is not in fact where he is going. A brief search rewards him with the familiar though long-unseen Zakharan banner on a brick building remarkable only in that it has no windows facing the street.

The door is opened at his knock, revealing a youth in Zakharan dress who bows politely. "Good evening, sir. How may we be of assistance?"

He answers in Zakharan, with his usual easy friendliness. "I am looking for passage back home, and I did hope to find some assistance here."

"It will be our pleasure to provide whatever aid we may. Enter and make yourself comfortable," he invites. Beyond the front door is a tiled foyer; off to the left a sitting room. A trio of candles burn against encroaching dusk. With another bow the boy departs to find someone who can speak to him.

Ibn Fadil settles down to wait, enjoying the effort that has been made here to make the rooms look like home.

After a short wait a middle-aged man enters the room with a smile and bow even for this unassuming guest. "Good evening," he echoes the servant. "I am told you are seeking assistance in finding passage?"

"Yes, thank you," ibn Fadil says, getting up and bowing much more deeply. "I have been away for a long time, and I would like to see my Uncle Karim again."

"I see," the man smiles. "It is difficult to be away from one's family." He rings a small silver bell on a nearby table; the servant reappears. "Tea, please, Ahmad. Have you been long on this planet?" he asks ibn Fadil.

"A few hours," he says, sliding easily back into the elaborate courtesies of his homeland; no real business can be done until the formalities are observed. For the moment, he positions himself as slightly inferior to the man, who introduces himself as bin Rashad but does not ask who is visitor is.

Once the tea has been tasted and appreciated and the servant dismissed, "You may speak freely," bin Rashad tells him.

"I find myself somewhat embarrassed," ibn Fadil admits. "I am assigned to Bral on behalf of Olnfar, but -- if I may put it thus -- I tripped over someone else's conspiracy and was forced to leave quite rapidly. I intend to take a ship back in a week or so, but I imagine my superiors on Bral believe I have mysteriously disappeared."

"Indeed?" His expression invites elaboration. "That is quite a journey to undertake on the spur of the moment," bin Rashad notes. "We are certainly happy to assist Olnfar." Another tick in the elaborate balance of favors. "Do you then truly require passage?"

"No, thank you," he smiles. "I expect to return on the same ship that brought me here. I would have preferred not to leave at all, but I am only of use if I am alive." He pauses briefly to let that make an impression, and then outlines the pirate-giff conspiracy. "I let my curiosity bring me too close to the affair," he concludes. "Everyone but myself and two others were too far away to clearly see what passed, and before long I understood that it would be wise to depart.

"Three Trees is much concerned about the raid," he adds. "The ship on which I came is Sidney Volant's personal vessel, the *_Lazy Cat_*, which departed Bral the second day after it."

"I see..." This is interesting news to him indeed. "We shall have to look into this. As for the situation on Bral, it is unfortunate, but such are the vagaries of chance. You intend to return, then?"

"Yes. I still have some hope of finding out more about these events myself," he adds, "however, not only is my post on Bral, but I have invested several years in being a pleasant but somewhat disreputable fellow there." A slight gesture indicates his shabby state, then shifts into a more general movement that indicates a change of subject. "All I ask of you, friend bin Rashad, is to pass on word that Arif ibn Hassan of Olnfar is alive and well and trying to return to his post, and perhaps send on a letter, as well, if you are willing."

"Of course, we are delighted to do so," the man smiles. "Your dedication is commendable."

"If only it were matched by my ability to stay out of trouble," he says ruefully. "I may pick up some more information in the next few days, which I would be glad to share with you, and then I will be ready to write my letter."

After an exchange of pleasantries, he leaves the office, keeping one eye out behind him as he makes his way back through the now-dark streets. He is not in the least surprised to spot the

youth following him. Ibn Fadil gives him a cheerful wave as he passes through the door of the Gilded Vine, then hurries upstairs to their room.

"Done," he tells Nyala, giving her a quick kiss. "I want to fit in a bath before dinner," he adds, going to his bundle of things and taking out his other set of clothes. He looks at them without enthusiasm; they were in better condition before the journey than the ones he is wearing, but are still a bit shabby and none too clean. "New clothes, tomorrow morning, before I go back to the ship," he says firmly.

"And speaking of ships, Nyala, the *_Swan_* reached Janik nineteen days ago and has already left again on its regular run. Whether Teague was aboard, we can try to find out tomorrow, perhaps."

He does not take as long a bath as he would like, but he is scrubbed, combed, and slightly more presentable at dinner. The food is good, though probably not up to Nahele's standard - he's gone out to further explore the neighborhood, kindly giving the two some privacy for their first evening on land. The other diners appearing of little interest, they talk about inconsequentials during the meal.

Then it is time to decide how to spend the evening; and Nyala falls in with his own unspoken preference. It is strange to him, and oddly sobering, to realize that anyone seeing them go upstairs together may guess what is between them; and strange to hope that he might not be alone again. But he sets aside these thoughts in favor of exploring the delights of making love in an actual bed.

Afterward he holds her tightly, wondering how to begin to explain himself. "That was much easier on the knees," he says instead, stalling.

"And other things, as well," she agrees with a smile.

He sighs, kisses her, and very quietly says, "I love you, Nyala. And I beg your forgiveness, for I have lied to you." He can feel her tense, ready for immediate movement. "I have lived under a false name for what must be over six years now. My real name, or most of it, is Arif ibn Hassan Dawud Fadil." He pauses to let her mull that over, and to think how to phrase the next bit of news.

"I am returning to Bral because my work is there. I collect information for one of the great houses of Zakhara; or, to put it more bluntly, I am what most people call a spy."

After a long, still moment she asks directly, "Why? And why are you telling me, now?"

Perplexed -- he feels this should be obvious -- he says, "I am telling you because I am not stupid enough to go on trying to win your love under false pretences. I did not tell you before because -"

He stops, collects himself, and goes on in steadier tones. "I do not frighten easily, but I am afraid now, and I have been for all our time together. You have my heart in your keeping, and I -- I do not know what you will do with it."

She is frowning, and after a moment she moves abruptly, sitting up and breaking the contact with him (though she doesn't leave the bed). "Nor do I, at this moment," she admits. "Some things are clearer now... I must think on this."

He also sits up, not quite reaching out to touch her. With a visible effort he masters the alarm caused by her moving away. "I would answer your other question," he says, "but 'why' is a bit vague."

"I would like to know how you came to follow this path," she clarifies, resting her chin on her knees as she studies him. "Ah - splinters, now I do not know how to call you," she realizes with a hint of self-directed humor. "Well, a name is a small thing, but... I have thought that I love you," she touches his hand, meeting his gaze, "and hope that I have not been deceived in all." Her voice is very gentle, her expression intent and somewhat sorrowful.

"Well," he says, feeling as if he might fly apart at the seams at any moment, "I am -- that is, this is going to sound strange, but Yusuf is not very different from Arif. I was advised that it is easier, and therefore safer, to pretend to be someone much like oneself. Really there are only two important differences: I do not, in fact, have a gambling problem, and ... before I became Yusuf, I had never known a day's hardship.

"But as to how I got onto this path in the first place," he goes on, hoping he has not confused things further, "that is quite simple. When I was about twenty years old I was a bit wild. I had caused no real trouble, mind, but my mother was worried -- she was quite free with her opinions on the matter." He smiles wryly. "In return I admitted that I was bored, and that I had no intention of spending my life building up the family fortune, but I could not say what I *did* want to do.

"Then my mother's brother came to visit, the one who had been out among the spheres since before I was born. Restless as I was, I was fascinated by that, of course. I suppose I made myself a nuisance, asking him about spelljamming and the worlds beyond our sphere. So it was partly my own fault, no doubt, that when he left I found myself packed up and sent with him. It is his trade that I practice now, you see."

"Ah." She nods slowly, mulling over what he has said. The pieces of the puzzle fit together now. "Back on the ship, you said you had a decision to make."

"Yes." He rubs his arms, finally noticing the night's chill, and drapes a corner of one of the blankets around himself. "I preferred to think I had not already decided. I had about a dozen good reasons for never letting you know what I felt for you, but when you spoke to me that night my resolve simply vanished. Yet the reasons still hold." As he pauses and stares blindly at the window for a moment, a subtle change that has been coming over him suddenly becomes clear: he usually pretends to be far less intelligent and thoughtful than he really is, and he is not doing that now.

"And what reasons are those?" She has relaxed somewhat since the start of the conversation, willing to be disarmed from her initial suspicions.

"Where to begin?" he says with an attempt at lightness. "I may already be in trouble for leaving Bral," he says. "My immediate superior there is an idiot who dislikes me on principle, I think. I have asked my colleagues here to send my explanation on, but her messages may reach Zakhara first, and the gods only know how long it will take to sort out the matter. If I were to return with you along -- well, that would complicate things further." His lips quirk in a crooked smile. "Falling in love in the midst of an assignment demonstrates terribly bad judgment, you know."

"I see the difficulty. So you will return, then?"

"Certainly," he says, nettled. "I believe things should have settled down by the time I get there, and any other action would be a, a dereliction of duty. I *will* return, alone if I have to." He flinches a little at his own words, but continues to meet her gaze. "Another reason to keep silent," he adds bleakly. "I am not proud enough to believe you will follow me."

Nyala is momentarily taken aback by his tone, but after a moment her frown softens into a thoughtful expression. She shifts position to sit close by him once more with a quiet sigh. "I see.

Well. I said on ship that I have no plans, and that is true. I can as easily go to Bral as any other place. I do not think I could remain there long," she tells him with gentle directness. "However I might wish to be with you, I am not well suited to the place, and as you say my presence would be a problem for your identity there. But much can happen in half a year's time."

"That is so." Carefully, he puts an arm around her. "In truth, I feel unwilling to stay on Bral much longer. I suppose I had become root-bound." At her puzzled glance, he explains, "When you grow a plant in a pot, every so often you have to move it to a larger pot, because the roots grow to fill up the first one. My father gardens," he adds. "At any rate, I have to return to Bral, but there is no reason why I cannot request transferal to another post. Any new assignment would almost have to be more to your liking than Bral.

"In the meantime, I can work around your presence. I shall be a *reformed* gambler," he smiles. "I think that will be readily believed."

She smiles - quite beautifully. He can tell she's still troubled about this, but there has been enough somber talk for one night.

* * *

As ibn Fadil goes to see the captain, Val heads below deck. The young sailor's dark mood is apparent as he brushes past anyone else on deck. It is somewhat of a surprise to see him like this, considering his usually affable nature. Things obviously did not go well at the healers'....

Hiro had been considering approaching Delmar to say that, if the Captain thought it important, he would stay aboard the ship while the others debarked for Janik...but seeing both ibn Fadil's resolution and Val's troubled countenances he thinks better of it as the former inquires after the captain's whereabouts. He can always make the offer after the Zakharan is finished. Right now, it is the absence of Val's devil-may-care facade that garners the Kensai of Kara-Tur's attention.

Val enters the small cabin he shares and gathers his belongings. He had thought to stow them here until his return from seeing Ginevra off. Ironically, he is still doing just that, though things did not go as he had hoped. His mind is preoccupied with half formed plans and schemes, not the least of which is finding Teague. Maybe there is something that can be done to get Ginevra out of this mess.

Daggers in place.

Val pauses at that thought. He feels so helpless right now, and he fights to hold back tears. Not so much tears of sorrow, but tears of rage. He is angry with himself for not being able to get her to safety. He failed. Damn. And now all Victor has to do is wait for the child to be born. Then Ginevra will be released, and Victor will win. All because of some damned contract. And because he didn't get her away when he had the chance....

Tools in place.

Of course, it doesn't help that she has been caught with those jewels in her baggage. Even if they do belong to her, Val is certain Victor has convinced the Overseer to the contrary. And now Ginevra has nothing. Unless there was something he could do about that.... Another half-formed plan begins to take shape in Val's mind.

Reversible longvest on, colored side out.

First things first, though - Val needs a room. Then he needs a place to stay, because he has no intention of staying in that room. When he was dodging the assassins that killed his mentor, he had used this trick to throw off possible attacks. Of course, back then he had the benefit of being in places he'd visited before, and he had the help of some *friends*. He has no doubt Janik has its share of thieves and possibly even a guild, but getting them to help him will be another matter altogether. He'll think more on that later.

He is ready.

Standing motionless in the doorway, Hiro inquires, "Is this to be your moment as a hero?" recalling not only the pair's first conversation (and the westerner's clumsy mispronunciation of his name) but also the moment Val first gazed upon "Lenore."

Val, having not heard the Kensai's approach, turns now to face the man, a dagger concealed in his left hand. His face reflects a grim countenance, his posture tense energy restrained. Upon recognizing the weapon master, he relaxes a bit. He'd been expecting trouble and *still* wasn't prepared. He wouldn't last long of he left himself open like that.

"I missed the chance," he replies somberly, with a shrug. "All I can do now is try and make up for it." He sheaths the dagger in a fluid motion, not caring if Hiro saw it. Against the Kensai, Val knew he'd probably never stand a chance anyway.

"What can I do for you?" Val asks. He runs his fingers through his hair in an apparent nervous gesture, but manages to put a smile on his face. It's less than convincing, unfortunately.

Knowing full well the weight of failures past, Hiro's eyes shine with understanding. He reaches out to Val, placing a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Perhaps there is something my sword and I can do for you, Valarin."

Val sees the look in Hiro's gaze and accepts it. He too remembers their conversation from a few months back. Val feels as if his own shining moment had already come - and gone.

"Don't tempt me," he tells the swordsman with a rueful grin. He pushes the errant thought aside. Much as it would please him to see Victor skewered on the end of a sword, it's not necessary. Yet.

"I'm off to find a place to room," Val says as he shoulders his pack. "I'd like it if you could make sure my head is still attached to my neck by the time I find someplace safe." He felt only a little guilty for asking this of Hiro, but the man had offered, and he was damned good with that sword.

Hiro nods silently. And with that he bends at the doorway revealing his pack already prepared for travel. He hefts the bag onto his back and gestures to Val that he is ready to follow.

"Thanks," Val says, meaning it more than he can express. He offers Hiro a genuine smile and heads out to find a decent room.

While they are searching, Val keeps an eye out for any signs of an organized guild in the city. Unsurprisingly, he doesn't see any signs he recognizes for certain, but he does note the large number of guards in the streets. They are mostly human and elvish, with other species including of course giff present to a lesser extent, all of them armed with swords and truncheons.

Val has mixed feelings about not finding obvious signs of a guild. He still has reservations about dealing with a den of thieves, never considering himself to be part of that scene, but he has need of their help. He'll have to look a little more carefully. Worst-case scenario: he'll have to be direct and ask someone.

Oddly enough, he does find comfort in the presence of so many guards, contrary to his needs. That might be to his advantage if Victor, or someone he sends, tries to do something.

Val looks for a place to room that is average, not wanting to waste too much time or money on a decoy. He does take care to look for a place that has alternate accessibility, in case he needs to make a hasty retreat from, or to, the rooms. This makes it somewhat harder to find a place, but when they do it is on the second floor of a somewhat run-down place. It's narrow and doesn't have much more in it than a bed, but there's a window that can be gotten in or out of to reach the street or roof if necessary, and it faces onto the narrow way along one side of the building, not the main road out front.

The innkeeper sees they are fresh from a landed ship and tries to charge four times what the room is worth, but seems to find Hiro's stare unnerving. A handful of copper secures the room for three days. For the moment, they have a place to talk.

Hiro enters the room, scans it for future reference, noting placement of and durability of furniture, quality of lighting and amount of oil in the lamp, etc. gauging it all for use value should a battle break out in the small quarters. He walks toward the window, equally detailing the alleyway below before speaking. Without turning he says, "What can you tell me of Ginevra's plight?"

Val is caught off-guard both because of what seems to be uncharacteristic directness (he knew he'd have to answer the question but expected the question to be phrased ... he doesn't know ... soothingly?) and to be honest, he thought Hiro was too busy quietly practicing to notice any of the ship's personnel's goings on.

Judging by his intense review of the room and the terseness of the question, he notes to himself that the Emissary of The East misses little.

Well, it is only fair. He'd asked the Kensai to come with him; the least he could do is tell him. Taking a deep breath, Val relates what he knows; she's broken faith with her husband, oligarch Victor, and that she carries the child of another man. She'd been trying to escape her husband to meet with her lover, but somehow Victor caught up with her. Val also mentions the "contract" and the discovery of the jewels Ginevra had been trying to hide. He tells Hiro of how the healer is trying to help, and how Victor (like half the crew) thinks Val is the father of the child she carries. He glosses over his own personal feelings for her, but he's certain the swordsman already knows.

"And now I need to find Teague Linnhal to inform him of Ginevra's... situation," Val informs the Kensai. "He is aboard the *Silver Swan*. Maybe there is something he can do to help her out of this mess."

The young man finds himself next to Hiro now, looking out the window but not really focusing on anything in particular. There is a distant look in his eye as he stares off, and a calm seems to have settled over him. He appears less bitter perhaps, but no less determined than before.

"Well," Val breaks the silence after a moment, "this room seems nice enough. Now to find one less obvious." Val shoulders his pack and heads for the door. He saw there was a back way out that was not too terribly obvious, so he heads for it now.

Val intends to find another, cheaper room; someplace safe to hole up in where people don't ask too many questions and answer fewer to those not rooming. Past experience tells Val that such places should be easy enough to find, and silence can be bought for the right price.

"I had hoped to send my pay onward to the families of Joe and Seton but if you have need of it instead Valarin...."

Val shakes his head, refusing the offer. "Thanks, but no." He hadn't thought to set aside money for Joe's family.... When they make their way back to the docks, speaking with a few workers there reveals that the Swan stopped into Janik briefly, then headed in-system on her regular trading run nineteen days ago.

"Pretty popular ship today," the man adds with a slightly quizzical look.

"When are they due to return?" Hiro inquires.

The man shrugs. "They usually stop back here before going out, guess it'll be about six weeks. What's so all-fired important?"

Val is reluctant to answer. Instead he asks, "Who else was asking about the Swan?"

"Short guy. Half-elf, didn't get his name." His curiosity is definitely piqued.

Hiro raises an eyebrow sharply to Val, silently questioning his ship mate...

"Thanks," Val responds and fishes out two silver pieces from his pouch. He rubs the coins together as he asks, "Have there been any *other* inquiries?"

"Nope," is the cheerful reply; not only is his day getting interesting, it's getting good. "Wouldn't've thought nothin' of it 'cept he was askin' me not an hour ago." He watches the coins' movement with great interest.

"Thank you for your help" Val turns over one of the coins to the man. He holds the second coin a moment until the worker meets his eye. He holds the gaze long and hard. "And you never saw us," he says as he hands over the second coin slowly. "Isn't that right?" Val says to the man with a smile that is both charming and dangerous.

"If you say so," he shrugs with a puzzled expression. "Sure would like to know what all the fuss is...." Clearly, no answer on that is forthcoming, so he shrugs again and accepts the coin.

As Val and Hiro head off from the docks, the young man seems lost in thought. Six weeks until the Swan returns. Ginevra will likely have her child before then. He had to find a way to get a message to Teague some other way. And he had to think on what else he might be able to do to help Ginevra. *If* there was anything else he could do.

"How does one go about sending a message to a Jammer in transit?" Val asks rhetorically. He does pause to see if the swordmaster answers, nonetheless...

"Perhaps, Brother Pham or Alais, know of a way to send a message to Teague?" the taller man suggests.

"Good idea," Val replies as he changes course to head back to the Cat. Pham or Alais might be back by now...

Somewhat defeated, he thinks about what must be done next. The thought of leaving Ginevra to the care of the healers was somewhat comforting, but he knew the protection would not last. And it may be a while before Teague could arrive, possibly even too late.

The thought enters his mind to go back and see Ginevra once more to find out how to reach her father. Maybe her family could help where he had seemingly failed. Again.

"Thanks, by the way," Val says to the quiet figure walking with him. "I appreciate you coming along, Hiro." There seems to be more he would say, but he does not. Val is under the impression the Kensai understands.

More 3 Trees security is in evidence - the plank is watched by a lone guard, who checks their ID chits before allowing them on board. The ship is quiet; there is a soft mutter of voices behind the door to the captain's quarters, and Inez is chatting with the second mate, but there doesn't seem to be anyone else on board.

"Interesting," Val comments to Hiro indicating the guard at the plank. He feels a bit guilty, as he's certain they are there because of the incident with Victor. However, Val takes a certain amount of comfort in having someone there. He takes more comfort in having the swordsman with him, however.

Upon seeing who is on deck, Val steers over towards Inez and the second mate. "Have you seen Brother Pham or Alais?" he asks without preamble. He glances back to see if Hiro is still with him.

"Not since they went off with Emmett," she sighs. "Wish they'd hurry the hell up with whatever it is; I'm getting tired of waiting."

Hiro's eyebrows inquire of Inez. There's something oddly catlike about the expression, but it's intent registers all the same. Thankfully, the crew's had some time to become accustomed to his non-verbal communication.

"Do you know where they were off to?" Val asks after seeing that this was news to Hiro as well. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he's actually quite happy for Emmett and Inez. But right now, their happiness seems to remind Val just how miserable he is feeling right now...

"Hall of Records. Captain's business," Nolan replies brusquely.

Hiro bows his head, says, "Thank you." And then outstretches his arm suggesting that Val lead the way.

Val looked as if he might say more, but does not. He steps aside with Hiro, but chooses not leave the `_Cat_` just yet.

"I don't plan on hunting them down right now," the young man tells the Kensai, "but I'd better leave word with someone that I need to speak to them. I also wanted to find ibn Fadil. I'm pretty sure he's the one that asked about Teague already, but I want to make certain."

Val takes a moment to look about the deck of `_The Lazy Cat_`. For the first time in six months he was going to be sleeping in a room rather than a cramped cabin. Of course, it was going to be an equally cramped room in a run-down boarding house, but it was still off-ship. This wasn't exactly how he'd planned things to be....

"You know, Hiro," Val says after a moment, "I *do* appreciate you coming with me today. But right now, I think I need some time alone. I feel like I'm two steps behind everyone else, and I'm having a hard time catching up. I need to think a few things through."

Val is being quite honest, and it probably shows how worn he is. The day's events have frayed his nerves badly.

"Know that I am at your call when you wish to take action. There are all manner of mousetraps set to bite our feet on Janik. I wish you to not suffer them alone."

"Thanks," Val says, offering his hand to Hiro, "I'll try to be careful," he says with a wry grin.

"I guess I'd better report to the captain," he says after a moment with a heavy sigh. Val had not been looking forward to it, and had actually been avoiding it since Victor came on board. "This might be worse than any mousetraps set in Janik... How about I treat you to lunch tomor-

row?" Val asks, changing the subject. "We can meet at the first room and find something suitable nearby."

As that plan meets with no objection, Val makes his way to the captain's cabin. Eventually the voices cease and Delmar emerges. He looks surprised to see Val.

"Yes?"

Val is nearly as surprised, but he tries to maintain a calm outward appearance. "I've come to report to the captain," he tells Delmar. "Is she..." he begins, but starts again, "What happened after we left?"

The laconic mate shrugs. "Himself is less than pleased. I'd stay out of his way." He leans back through the door. "Captain? Val here to see you."

"Thank you," he tells Delmar. He was doing an awful lot of thanking people lately. He'd better be able to repay all this kindness pretty soon.

He waits for the captain's consent before entering and takes the brief opportunity to calm his nerves. At least he couldn't be thrown into wildspace right this moment for all the trouble he's caused.

"Come in. What is it?" Theo inquires with something of a distracted impression. Val is reminded that important though this matter is to him, it is doubtless not the captain's primary concern.

"Valarin reporting, Captain," the young man says in a steady voice as he enters the cabin, closing the door behind him. "I wanted to take the opportunity to apologize for any troubles I have caused, and to find out if I am needed to bear witness for the events back on Bral..." Val is hoping the latter would be enough to take the captain's mind off the confrontation with Victor earlier on deck.

"Eh? *You* cause problems?" He gives an amused snort. "This is my ship, lad, and I know what I'm about. As for the meeting, I think not. It'll be a long circus of a day as it is. Is there anything else?"

"No sir," is Val's crisp reply. He'd been expecting worse, and feels more than a bit relieved. Of course, the young man is curious about Theo's amusement over the incidents of the day. There is more here than meets the eye as well.

"I'll let the first mate know where I can be found if I am needed for that," Val says politely. "By your leave, Captain..." Yes, definite relief.

After speaking with Delmar again, Val leaves the *Cat* in search of a quiet place to think, which for him means someplace high up where he won't be bothered. As it's still daylight, some caution is in order, but it's not long before he finds a way up onto the roofs, and a sheltered spot where he can brood for a while.

There is some evidence that others have done the same; some of the nearby roof slates bear what look like deliberate scratches. Though it's hard to say what they might mean, they don't appear to be random doodles. Once he's had his fill of both solitude and thought, he returns to the second, more secure, room to try to sleep.

Hiro remains aboard the *Cat*, where he puts in some practice with his sword, fixes himself a simple supper, and ignores the baffled looks from the few whose duties compel them to remain on the ship, but who would far rather be exploring the city's pleasures.

"There's something really weird about him," Nolan mutters to himself.

* * *

"What do you mean you *lost* him?" the oligarch-out-of-water snaps.

"It was very crowded, sir," the guard replies apologetically, not adding that there's no way in any hell one man can do a decent tail job in a place this size where they don't know their way around.

Victor growls and paces and clenches his fists, and for a moment looks like there might be an outburst on the way, but he regains control. For one thing, there's not enough room in here for truly satisfactory raging, since unexpected circumstances have confined him to his ship. He won't stand to have his movements watched by whining Tree bureaucrats, and here he can best keep an eye on the stupid cow's friends. Or so he could if his men were halfway competent, that is. "You two, keep an eye on the ship. I want to know who comes and goes. The rest of you, into the city. Find one and we can find the rest of the rats. Any more failures and I'll have you thrown to the scavvers. In pieces."

Make me the laughingstock of Bral, will you? His fists clench harder as the men file out. _Laughed at! By those roaches in their fetid cesspit of a city!_ It's something to have recovered the jewelry, but he'll have satisfaction as well....

* * *

Having risen bright and early, and leaving Nyala enviably asleep, ibn Fadil's trip to the nearby market in search of fresh apparel meets with success; after some haggling he leaves the shop somewhat poorer for cash and richer for two gently used outfits, one a couple cuts above his usual clothes. The shopkeeper is not particularly talkative, perhaps due to the hour.

Next stop, a cobbler, who quotes 17 silver yav as his price and insists there's no better to be found. Of course, he would, and that can wait. Ibn Fadil heads back to the _Gilded Vine_ to change clothes. Nyala stirs at last while he is patiently folding a length of dark red cloth into the proper shape for a new sash.

"Good morning," he says cheerfully, extending one arm to show off his new sapphire-blue shirt. "What do you think?"

"Much better - a good start," she judges with a luxuriant stretch. "I think I could stay here all day."

"Tempting thought," he smiles, going back to his folding. "What do you mean, 'a good start'?"

"That it's better than what you had yesterday," she smiles back, refusing the bait. "And tempting though it is, I suppose I must rise eventually. I must inform our princess of your progress in tracking her love if nothing else, and spare her worrying more than need demands."

"Mmm," he says, deciding to leave the matter of 'our' princess alone. "I do think he stayed with the _Swan_, you know, but if I have a chance today I will start asking after him all the same." He stands and begins wrapping the sash around himself with the ease of long practice. "I have no idea when I will be back," he adds.

"Fair enough, 'nor do I. I will most likely keep my brother company while he explores the city hereabouts," she adds.

"While I work, eh? Well, a meddler's work is never done," he says whimsically.

"Away then, meddler," she grins, throwing a pillow at him. "I'll see you later."

Appearance repaired, he heads for the docks, where ships are already in motion. Neither the captain nor Delmar is present, but the second mate tells him that Theo would like him to be at the steps to the central offices at eleven o'clock.

That leaves a couple of hours in which to look for a way to get hold of Teague. If he holds to the same behavior he showed on Bral, he would look for a place to spend whatever money he had in the brief time the *_Swan_* was on the moon. Standing at the dockyard gates and looking out, a systematic approach is called for. Directly ahead, the wide streets lead toward the city's center and the corporate offices, where he'll be headed later, and the buildings are solid and administrative-looking. To the north, the streets he has already passed through once today are lined with unremarkable taverns and houses of ill repute; his quarry would probably be looking for something a bit more exotic if given the chance. South it is, then. He is feeling too cheerful this morning for the probable futility of this quest to bother him.

On the corner of Dock Street and Beech Avenue stands a large building with a whimsically painted and somewhat crowded sign proclaiming itself (in several languages) to be the Beckoning Trout, for the discerning traveler, all welcome, kender to be accompanied by three responsible adults of other species and subject to search, entertainment nightly. The stained glass window under the sign suggests it's in the right price bracket, at any rate.

It being early in the day yet, there are no customers; a glance within shows workers sweeping floors, polishing flagons, refreshing candles, and so forth. There is a small stage to the left, looking dull and barren as these things do by the prosaic light of day. Near the bar in back, a tall woman is talking with a couple of halflings. Assuming an uncertain expression, ibn Fadil takes a couple of steps inside the room.

Noting the door's opening and closing, the woman glances over. "We don't open 'til noon."

He starts across the floor toward her. "May I have a moment of your time?"

"If you're selling something, you can make an appointment. If not, wait a few moments," she suggests. He stops a polite distance away from her conversation, and waits. "Now, then. Who are you, and what can I do for you?" She looks him over with some curiosity.

"My name is Yusuf ibn Fadil Manwar," he says, with his customary bow. "I have undertaken the somewhat preposterous task of trying to find someone who arrived here about twenty days ago, and may already have left." He shrugs with apologetic good humour. "I have a message for him from a friend on Bral."

Her glance grows more critical as she sizes him up, trying to decide if he represents trouble. "Bral, you say? What ship you from?"

Ibn Fadil does his best to look like no trouble at all. "The *_Lazy Cat_*; we got in yesterday."

"Fair enough. Who's this friend? We get a lot of custom, and I can't say I remember everyone who comes through these doors."

"I know," he says ruefully, "but I did promise to try. His name is Teague." He gives a quick physical description of the man, and adds, "I am told he spends his money freely."

"Hm. Three weeks ago, you say?" She frowns, thinking it over, calls to one of the women working. "I think so, but... Gillian? You remember this guy at all?" She repeats the description.

Gillian nods immediately. "Yeah, he was here. Didn't get his name, but I remember *him.* He bought a round for that table of dwarfs."

"And that was about three weeks ago?"

"Some time around then. I only saw him that one night," she adds with a shrug.

"Bought a round? Whatever for?"

She shrugs again. "Beats me, I was working."

"Well, thank you for your time," he says, giving both the ladies another bow. "You have a nice place here," he adds with another smile. "I shall have to mention it to my friends."

He pauses on the doorstep, not really expecting to see any of Victor's men in this district but checking all the same; there's no one suspicious in sight. Then he heads on up the street looking for the next likely place to inquire. One gets him nothing, the second an uncertain recollection of someone who might have been his quarry. Not proof, but a good indication that Teague was here, and left. That will have to do; Ibn Fadil returns to the main square to await the meeting, listening to the conversations around him.

There are the usual doomsayers claiming that the end of the world is nigh because a black goat with three heads and the power of speech - though with only vile things to say - was born in a village to the west, among other omens. Odd how often it seems doom can be averted by generous donations to a certain temple, too.... The political news is of more interest to him. Each member of the board carries his or her own set of rumors.

From what he can gather, the current chairman, Ivan Jorstoian, has been assailed -- though not formally -- by accusations of corruption ever since his election. This might be because of his fondness for displays of personal wealth, a willingness to sell anything to anyone that borders on that of the Arcane, or because members of his immediate family represent the largest single block on the board and seldom if ever disagree with him.

Of course this is not particularly strange behavior for a chairman, and 3 Trees is still a family business. There's only one board member right now who isn't part of the extended family. This appears to be another source of discontent for some speakers in the square; no matter how long and well a nonhuman may have served the company, one has never been elected to the board. On the occasions when it's even come close, the attempt has been followed by a personnel shake-up ensuring that those in a position to vote are solidly under the board's control.

On the other hand, one or two people seem to be of the opinion that not only should the current system be kept, nonhumans shouldn't be allowed to run - or in extreme cases even crew on - 3 Trees ships, in case there are hidden agendas in play. Most in the crowd seem to find this attitude more amusing than anything else; a band of hadozee gather around one of the pro-human speakers and extemporize filthy limericks incorporating phrases from his speech.

* * *

"Back again, my pups?" the big wizard grunts upon seeing them at the library door early in the morning, but he seems to be warming to their presence, as he offers no obstacle and indeed assumes that they know where they're going now. Alais has to ask which way to the astronomy section.

The two are growing accustomed to the way things are organized in this place, and set to work with confidence. The hours pass swiftly as they pore over the old books, looking for clues to a mystery whose shape remains hidden.

In the Chamber of Stars, Alais is having little luck. The exact term "Star Change" does not seem to be found anywhere else in the collection, and there is nothing to say what it actually refers to. Changes in constellations are common enough, due to magic or the acts of the gods, and of

course in some places like Bral the stars are constantly in motion. He does find the rest of the journal entry that spoke of the delphinids, with the poem attached. Over the years some of the librarians have taken a stab at translating it, with some disagreements:

Dark (winds? currents? blood?*) cried among the (worlds? nations? people? stones?*)
Drove all (????) (like? as?) (overpowering? very tall?) flame
Up down, east to west was turned (line also translated as “things were different then” and “life became death, death life”*)
In the years of (dust? famine?) the (strangers? nightmares?*) came
The (lights? stars? landmarks?) are changed -
What (???) was
Must be again.

* Obviously a translator with a very different view of the language. Or possibly of life.

Meanwhile, in the Chamber of Beasts, Pham runs across a handful of references to unusual large gatherings of creatures of the Flow, but these are stories thousands of years old if their tellers are to be believed, and all have been marked as apocryphal by the library’s guardians, tales told by men clearly mad or intoxicated.

* * *

Having been released from mage-sitting duty, in the morning Emmett makes his way back to the temple of Gond, where he spends a few minutes wandering about while a novice looks for Aram. It’s a pleasure just to be in a building constructed with such care and skill.

"Friend Emmett! Good morning to you! How are you this day?" the man greets him with a wide smile.

The half man stifles a yawn. "Excuse me. Tired and overbooked. Stayed up too late checking out the sites of the city, and have an appointment with my employers at eleven bells. Sorry this is so short. How is the poor guy? Any more sane?"

Aram shakes his head with a sad expression. "I'm afraid the news is bad. We took him to the Contemplator temple - Benevolent Order of the Contemplation of Serenity, they're the closest with a really well-trained doctor. Then I recruited some of my brothers and sisters here to play detective and we did our best to find out about the man's past."

He sighs quietly. "We did uncover a trail that suggests he's been getting steadily worse, that even a few days ago he was more... here than he is now, though still with this fixation on fire - people remembered that well enough. He may even have been trying to make his way to this part of the city to find help. Naturally, they'll do everything they can for him, and perhaps some peace will be of help. I certainly wouldn't wish this fate on even a Hextorian. Just like them to abandon him here to fend for himself when it happened and go on their way."

"He's a Hextorian?" Emmett asks.

"We're fairly certain. We back-tracked him to an inn on the outskirts of the city where their group had been staying."

"Oh Bugger. How long has he been in town - did he just fly in?"

"No, they appear to have been on Janik for some months now - gods know what they were up to." He grimaces in distaste. "They had their own ship, of course. It's possible that whatever

happened to their comrade was the occasion for their untimely departure." He cocks his head curiously, noting Emmett's reaction to this information.

"Our ship's priest is a Hextorian too. Aram, you know that certain point where the gears all start to mesh in your head but you have no idea what the machine will do? I hate that point."

Aram nods understandingly. "Patience and prayer, friend Emmett. But you say your *ship's priest* is one of theirs? This is... extraordinary, to say the least, and something of a cause for concern."

"I don't think so, at least, not in that way." Emmett says. "I've usually got good people instincts and I think he's on the level. He's from a sect that worships Hextor just in his role as a herald, a bringer of news, rather than any of his martial aspects."

"Remember how the priests of Gond were driven from Tyrlee for the war crime of bringing smoke powder - 'every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.' If you're really worried about Pham, I'll ask him to come by so you can talk with him," Emmett continues. "I'm more concerned about Pham having fire dreams, and now this other priest of Hextor is having fire fixations. That focuses things a bit, but I don't know how or where."

The priest nods. "It is a interesting correspondence, to say the least. We must not lose hope; perhaps the young man will regain his senses, be able to tell us more. If it is something to do with the god himself...." He shakes his head. "I do not know. If you would like to introduce your friend, please feel welcome," he adds with a smile.

"I'll see him later today, ask him to come by. Since our charge is one of his brethren, I'm sure he'll be interested. You said the guy was at the Contemplator's temple?"

At Aram's nod, Emmett continues. "OK. I'll tell him that too. I'm sorry to have to run, but I do have to make it back to my job soon and I had another stop to make. Can you recommend somewhere in Janik where I can get some quality leather to work with?"

"Certainly! There's a livestock market - follow the avenues to the southeast and you can't miss it. I'm sure you'll find something satisfactory."

Emmett stands and makes his way to the door, again dropping a few coppers in the collection box. "Thanks for your help, Aram. For everything. I'll get back as soon as I can."

And with that he heads to the livestock market, following his nose to the tanners buildings that would undoubtedly be nearby, before making his way back to the Three Trees building.

* * *

"Are you planning to spend the entire day in bed?" the voice at the door inquires.

"No," Nyala sighs back. "What's your hurry?"

"You, sister, are on leave. I am looking for work," he reminds her. "The sooner found, the better."

"I'm sure you could take some time off without seeing destitution immediately." She makes a face and pulls on her shirt, breeches, boots; it seems like she's been wearing these clothes half her life. Maybe while on Janik they can find a place where more display will be appropriate. Rapier balances dagger, a comb and a quick shake see to her hair. "In any case, you're on your own this morning," she tells Nahele as she opens the door. "I have to visit the infirmary by the docks."

“Ah? There is news, then?”

“Some, enough that we may hope for more. Shall I meet you here for lunch when my errand is complete?”

“Not here, there’s a place down the street I’d like to look over, the Swan Garden.”

“Very well.” It is very strange, she reflects while walking toward the docks, how for a hundred years she had been used to her brother coming and going, never staying long, so that until the day she took ship as well they had not really known one another. Now it looks as if he is finally ready to root himself, and she who will wander, perhaps forever. _Although not by choice,_ she adds to the thought with a bittersweet vision of home.

The docks are busy as they were the previous day; she can’t tell if anyone is watching the building, but it is probably best to assume so. Let him watch; perhaps he’ll have an apoplectic attack in one of his rages. Ginevra looks both excited and worried to see her again so soon, giving the elven woman a slightly awkward hug of greeting.

“Is everything all right?” she wants to know immediately.

“So far as I know.” Nyala seats herself at the end of the bed, as there are no chairs in the room. “I came to let you know that Teague’s ship has been here, and will likely return within six weeks. Ibn Fadil will ask this morning and see if he can find out anything more, but that much at least is known.”

“He is? I mean he will? Oh, thank you!” Her eyes shine with grateful tears. “Then it’s... it’s not hopeless, is it?”

“Of course not,” Nyala tells her briskly.

“Do thank him for me, will you? This is wonderful. I’m a bit surprised by his involvement in all of this,” she admits with a small laugh. “I thought he didn’t like me.”

“He can be a rather surprising man,” she sidesteps that question, smiling slightly. “Puzzling.”

“Is that why you find him... interesting?” Ginevra asks.

“Partly.” He had certainly surprised her last night, several times. She had not known the strength of his feelings - or if she had, had been careful to keep the thought from her own mind, lest she ask herself a question that demanded an answer she was not prepared to give. _You are a warrior of Windhold,_ she has had to remind herself, _and may not take life for granted, or lightly refuse its gifts. Certainly not for thinking that you know the future._ And so she had answered....

Ginevra smiles too, no doubt thinking she understands; perhaps she does. The smile fades into some sudden discomfort, and she changes position to try to ease it. “I’m sure you must think I’m very foolish,” she says after a few moments, in a suddenly forlorn voice.

“I beg your pardon?” Nyala shakes herself out of her contemplation.

“To have gotten myself into this situation.”

“You had few choices,” the elf shrugs. Her own solution to the problem would probably have been more direct and violent, but the only use Ginevra has for a knife is at table. It appals Nyala that any parent would send a daughter to be married while so ill-equipped.

“I mean really, there’s no way of knowing if he’ll even want to see me again,” she continues bleakly. “I’ve changed, there will be the baby, I’ve no money, nothing to offer but a burden. What reason could he have to return?”

Reasonable fears all, but, "Love is a remarkable motivator," Nyala smiles more gently than is her wont. She has seen these moods come upon the woman before. Questions and answers again. The question has been asked, the answer remains to be given -- indeed, the one to answer is not even aware of the question yet -- and the nearer comes the time of determination, the more skittish Ginevra has become. "Come now, we have spoken of this before. Even if things are not resolved as you might hope, you are not without friends, and not without resources."

"Or enemies," she adds quietly.

"He would be a fool indeed to try something here, so far beyond the bounds of his lawful power," Nyala replies with a certainty she doesn't feel. "No doubt he will grow bored and go home when he realizes that he won't be given his way."

"I hope you are right." She stares through the small window for a few moments. "Have you seen Valarin?"

"Not since we parted yesterday, after leaving here," she shakes her head slightly. "Do you wish me to pass a message?"

Uncertainly, "No... I only wish to make sure he is safe. I fear I have not done well by him."

"I do not think he feels that way, lady." She's fairly certain that Val is incapable of having even a slightly negative thought about Ginevra. It's remarkable to see an adult human so smitten. "I am sure he knows to be careful while we are here."

"I hope you're right, about everything."

After doing what she can to cheer the human up a bit, Nyala pays a visit to the Cat to make sure things are secure as promised, still somewhat irked by the city's laws; that bow is the only object that matters to her in the slightest, and if anything happens to it... All seems well on the ship, however, so she leaves the docks behind to further explore the city. Perhaps she should follow Yusuf's lead and find some new clothing.

* * *

"I will be your shield."

Words he had said to Noriko during their last tender embrace ring loudly in Hiro's ears today as his thumb absently rubs his beloved's wedding band that is woven into the hilt of his sword. In the dark of their final night together she had warned him of "the approach of misery and madness," and that utterance was his youthful, overconfident, and enraptured reply. Years later, what was meant as a declaration of love to its fullest, now only registers as a statement of loss at it's most grieved.

Though he is looking down on Janik from the rails of The Lazy Cat taking in the hustle and bustle of the small sphere it's clear his attentions fail to make it past the haze of crimson that mars his face and past. This is not the first time this torrent of painful memories has battered the tide walls of his detached facade, but given recent developments on the ship it's taken even greater amounts of willpower to keep his sanity above water. His wooden man wears even deeper cuts than his usual from his daily meditations with the blade.

It is far too easy for him to draw poetic connections between the tale writing itself out between Val and Ginevra and his own woeful love story. Would that he had such ready courage to stand undeterred when Noriko's lies were uncovered, without a moment's hesitation, as Val did when the veil was lifted from Ginevra's deception. Had Hiro not faltered and revealed her heritage to Tsuneyo then his own writ would surely be different these years hence.

Honor demands that Hiro allow Val his due in this matter, but he couldn't bear it if the younger man were cut so cruelly by fate, to be maimed as he himself had been... to see Ginevra and her child struck down in what should be a most joyous moment....

Fortunately for Hiro and his new course of action, the last time he felt any true sense of Honor was when a much brighter and kinder man told his one true love that he would be her shield.

* * *

Sleep did not come easily for Valarin, and his current soreness is a reminder. Morning was here much too early for the young man, and he reluctantly rises to face the new day. Normally, he'd be thinking of what opportunities awaited him in such a city as this. This morning, however, he is concerned with other things.

He'd been thinking about the markings on the roof slates, and he decides to have another look at them before the sky grows too bright. He takes the pooled wax from last night's candle and kneads it to a soft consistency so that he might mold the shapes (he reminds himself to purchase some paper and ink in the future). A quick climb and search are rewarded with what he'd seen the night before. Pressing the wax out, he makes a quick mold of the clearest marks and returns to his room to study them.

After some thought, it occurs to him that in a city with such a heavy police presence, any signs left by members of his... profession will be where they are unlikely to be noticed by casual pedestrians. These signs don't look anything like those with which he is familiar, however.

After committing some of the marks to memory, Val gathers his possessions and prepares to head out. He has several hours before he is to meet Hiro, and he wants to do a few things yet, not the least of which is to get a better idea of the city's layout. First on his agenda is to clean up and make himself a little more presentable; it won't do to have a ruffian making inquiries of an oligarch.

After making certain he is not being followed, Val heads to a local bathhouse to clean up and change. He decides to forgo shaving and leaves the thin stubble of beard growing, trimming it to look presentable instead; a slight change of appearance might help out over the next few days. He also pulls back his considerable length of hair and braids the end at his neck, as was customary of nobles in Driahn, where he was from. He changes into his more formal looking outfit but keeps the reversible longvest; a wide sash at his waist.

Still cautious of being followed, Val drops his belongings off and heads towards the business center of Janik, stopping only once to purchase a wide brimmed hat to help hide his features from a distance, as well as a gold earring, and a slender gold ring to complete his new look. He can now (he hopes) pass for anything from a servant to a minor noble, depending upon where he is and how he presents himself. With the darker colors he is wearing, he could blend in with a crowd or into the shadows. Once he's among the business district, he assumes a more suitable role and demeanor.

Places to go, people to see, lies to tell....

Familiar with ports, merchants, and trading costers, Val feels comfortable in these surroundings. His late mentor Circio had groomed him to operate in this type of environment. A sense of nostalgia washes through him as he sets about making his rounds; he had not realized how much he missed this sort of thing. But Val is still alert for signs of pursuit. His former occupation taught him how to operate in such a way.

He passes himself off as a buyer for a Tarosian merchant, relying on the fact that Taros is far enough off the main trading routes to be overlooked, but still somewhat known. He makes small talk with some merchants, inquiring about pricing and trade, this company and that. He passes along gossip and rumor (mostly Tarosian) to appear knowledgeable and genuine. Some of the information would even be quite valuable, were anyone to ever make it to Taros to apply what was advised.

He learns that Victor's ship, the *Norwell's Pride*, is docked some distance across the landing field from the *Cat*. As for why he's here, none of the merchants and shippers say they have been approached for any business, so it's hard to tell - either he's not doing anything aside from his pursuit of his wife, or he's doing something very quietly. He's got an unknown number of guards and servants on the ship with him. He does appear to be staying on his ship, which is odd for a wealthy visitor, and might mean that he doesn't plan to stay long.

Satisfied with the information gained, Val sets out from the merchant district, blending in with the morning crowds. He is still cautious of being followed, and takes care to change course a few times. His trail eventually leads him back to the docks to have a visit with Ginevra.

Noting the perimeter wall that also encloses infirmary, Val chooses the direct approach and heads for the gate. He carries himself importantly, but he still scans the area for trouble. *Just a quick visit,* he tells himself as he nears the gate. With all the traffic in and out, there's a bit of a wait, but showing the gate guards the wooden token gets him in with no trouble. A casual reconnoiter of the area suggests that one man is probably watching Ginevra's refuge.

Val does not hesitate nor does he stare at the man he thinks is watching the place. He goes in confidently, veiled in his guise as a buyer for an off-world merchant...

Brother Gregory greets him at the door. "Good morning, sir, and welcome. May we be of some assistance?"

"I am here to see Lady Ginevra," Val replies, pitching his voice for Brother Gregory's ear alone. "I hope all is well," he continues in a normal tone, just in case someone **is** listening. He offers the young man a smile and a wink, asking, "How goes the recovery?"

"If you'll wait here a moment, I'll see if she is receiving visitors." He's finally recognized Val. "I'm afraid I don't know your name?"

"I know," Val responds with a smile. "And neither do the men wishing to do the lady, and myself, possible harm." There is an edge of seriousness to his voice, despite the grin.

"Please tell her that her Friend Who Is Not Always A Sailor wishes to see her," Val tells the good Brother.

That earns him a dubious look, but Brother Gregory says, "I will inquire. Please wait here." In a few moments he returns. "Follow me, please." He shows Val to the same room as before.

Once they're inside, away from the watcher, Val stops the brother to give him his name, and to apologize for the necessary caution. Gregory is clearly concerned, but shows him to the room where Ginevra is staying. She is clearly surprised to see him. Once the young priest is satisfied by her reaction that Val is no threat, he leaves the two of them alone.

"Good morning, my friend. I had not thought to see you again, certainly not so soon." She cocks her head questioningly.

Val offers his best reassuring smile as he makes certain the door is closed. "Are you well? I'd been worried since the moment I left..." That he speaks the truth is plain on his face.

"I'm fine. They're taking very good care of me," she smiles.

"I had hoped to return with good news, but I'm afraid I have little," Val says with a somewhat defeated look upon his face. "Apparently the *_Swan_* has come and gone, and may not be back for several weeks..."

She looks puzzled. "Yes, I know. Nyala was here earlier and told me what had been discovered. This is not bad news," she adds with that gentle smile, hoping to lift his spirits. "I never dared to hope to find the ship here after so long, only news of her, and they will return soon."

Perhaps not soon enough, Val thinks to himself. *_How can she not know this?_* "I haven't had a chance to meet up again with Nyala," he tells her. "I'm glad she got word to you. I remembered you mentioning you might return to your family," Val begins, somewhat hesitantly. "How can I help in that regard? They may be able to help sooner than..." Val trails off meaningfully.

Ginevra looks away. "I would prefer that be saved to the last extremity," is the slow reply. "In any case it would be months before any messenger could reach them and return."

"Then so it shall," He reassures her with a smile. He did not intend to broach an obviously sore subject. "Out of curiosity, Val changes the subject, "What can you tell me of the *_Norwell's Pride_*? I understand that's the vessel Victor came in." There is a gleam in his eye as some of the half-formed plans start to fit together...

She gives a somewhat puzzled shrug. "It's Samuel's personal ship. Luxurious, of course, it's something of a showpiece for the business. In general fashion it resembles the *_Cat_*, but the rooms are larger and better appointed." She frowns, trying to remember. "It's been quite some time since I was aboard. He wouldn't go on such a long journey without a large number of guards and servants, or in anything but the strictest comfort... what are you thinking of?" She looks somewhat alarmed by that gleam.

"Nothing really," Val lies, feeling badly for it. "You've answered the part that concerned me most, the large number of guards and servants that might be about." He tells her of the man he suspects is watching the infirmary. "I am worried for you," he tells her in all seriousness, "but you will be safe here." Much as he doesn't want to worry her, Val feels she should know.

"I'm meeting with Hiro in a short while," he changes the subject, "and I need to find Brother Pham and/or Alais about sending a message to the *_Swan_*." He squeezes her hand reassuringly. "I'll be back when I can, hopefully with better news."

"Be careful," she tells him, still worried; she doesn't entirely believe that he has nothing dangerous in mind.

Val gives her a smile and reluctantly turns to go. Pausing in the doorway, he takes a long look at Ginevra before slipping out. Once again he again dons the mantle of anonymity before heading out. He is still mindful of his own warning and takes a moment to spot the watcher, as well as anyone else that might be coming and going; the man is lurking nearby, gossiping with a carpenter working on a nearby ship. He is surprised to spot Hiro checking out the area as well, a bit farther away.

The man in the wide brimmed hat moves across the infirmary yard and stops near the Ken-sai, drawing them both a bit deeper into a handy shadow.

"Pardon me," he says to Hiro in an oddly familiar drawl, "but can you show me where I might find the Copper Lark? I'm to meet a friend for lunch." Val's voice is pitched somewhat low, as not to carry far.

Raising an eyebrow, Hiro shakes his head a bit and squints past the hat's brim. Releasing his body from the taut coil it was seconds before, he stands to his full height. "As am I. Perhaps I could show you the way?"

"That would do nicely, thank you," Val says as he falls into step with the swordsman. He is still wary of pursuit and takes the occasional glance around for signs of any.

"I hope I didn't spoil anything you were working on," he says to Hiro a few blocks later, after he is certain they aren't being followed.

"Simply acquainting myself with the lay of the land should action be needed." Hiro's body language is still tense despite his attempt to alter it. "Have you more information?"

"Not really," Val replies with a sigh. "That was ibn Fadil that inquired before us last night. Nyala stopped in and saw her this morning. I did do some research on our friend though." He tells Hiro of what he learned of *_Norwell's Pride_* this morning in the market place, and adds Ginevra's thoughts on servants and possible protection. Val is not certain if Victor would use those servants and guards to make a grab for Ginevra, or to cause trouble for the crew of the *_Cat_* (or Val in particular). The watcher at the infirmary did nothing to clarify intent.

"How 'bout you?" Val asks when he is done. He is aware of Hiro's tension, but does not comment upon it. It would not do to become more paranoid than he already is because of it...

"I grew increasingly concerned for her safety. I thought it best to canvas the area myself should Victor's men take aggressive action herein."

"Ah," Val responds, not exactly comforted by Hiro's thoughts on the matter. "The place looks pretty secure." It probably sounds as if he is trying to convince himself of that.

"Have you seen Brother Pham or Alais by chance?" he asks the swordsman, changing the subject. "I would still like to send a message off, if possible. Perhaps we can find them after lunch?"

"No. Are they not at the library?"

After a quick and unremarkable lunch (the inn is not exactly up to Nahele's exacting standards), the two turn their steps toward the city's great square, in search of their companions.

* * *

Ibn Fadil is still gathering rumors in the square when he notes Yestin's appearance, moving carefully through the crowd toward the steps of the main building. Not too long after that, Emmett arrives as well, but there is no sign of the captain yet. The giff's expression is somewhat pained, though he greets them cheerfully enough, and the other two understand him to be suffering the aftereffects of over-ambitious celebration.

"Heavens above, Yestin," Emmett says, remembering only after the first couple words to soften his voice, "how much alcohol does a Giff have to drink to get that look on his face?"

"Er..." He now looks somewhat embarrassed, as well. "Less than I thought, it appears. How are you this morn, my friend?"

Ibn Fadil approaches the two once Emmett has arrived, looking fairly respectable in a new outfit of dark blue shirt, dark red sash, and brown trousers; he is carrying both his knife and his sword, tucked through the sash as usual. "Good morning!" he says, as if he has not a care in the world.

"Looks like solid land and a new tailor has done you a world of good." Emmett says, noticing a familiar happy glow about the half elf. _Interesting,_ he thinks. _I didn't take Ibn Fadil as being the brothel type. He must move fast once he gets ashore...._

Emmett takes a moment to look at his threadbare and rough clothing. "Where did you go? I've got everything I need and I'm still flush, so this might be a better investment than alcohol. Oh. Sorry Yestin."

"A second-hand shop," ibn Fadil says without embarrassment.

"Looks good on you," Emmett says. "I'll have to find one myself, if they have people in our size."

"If you keep going northward, there's a quarter where a lot of elves live," he advises. "If you like, this afternoon I will show you the shop I went to - we are staying up there, so it will not be out of my way."

As the eleventh stroke of the clock is dying, one of the doors above opens and Captain Barthelme appears; he looks pleased to see them all waiting as he descends the many steps.

"Morning, men," he greets them crisply. "Welcome to the Helm; follow me." They are checked at the doors, of course, even though the guards could clearly see Theo come out and fetch them. It seems to be a reflex. "I'm sure you don't need me to tell you to be respectful here," he says on the way. "It's not a court, but you will probably feel well-interrogated by the end of the day." Judging from his expression, he's already had some of that himself.

"Captain, sir," the half-elf says anxiously, "do we call these people 'my lord' or 'sir' or, or what?" He seems a little nervous now that they are approaching the meeting.

"'Sir' and 'madam' will suffice."

Emmett lays his good hand on the half elf's shoulder. "First time giving a report, eh? Don't worry - they know we didn't do anything wrong. They just want to get all their gears meshed up."

Ibn Fadil looks dubious. "I hope so," he says, "but right now I wish I had taken my chances on Bral."

For all its bleak exterior, the interior of the Helm is as impressive as any palace. It still has a sort of workaday somberness about it, however - rich without being gaudy, with the patina of a well-worn antique. The company emblem or its echoes finds its way into most of the decoration. The entry hall is three stories high, the heavy carpet brightened here and there with spots of sunlight from above. A wide staircase curves up from both sides at the far end of the room, with mezzanines providing access to rooms in the upper stories.

Theo leads them to the second floor and around to the left (more guards) and through a set of gorgeously inlaid doors. The room beyond is large, brightly lit by south-facing windows. Near them stands a long, heavy table with eleven chairs ranged along one side, in which are seated those members of the board who could be found on such short notice; three chairs are empty.

The man in the central seat is, of course, Chairman Jorstoian, a medium-height, stoutly built man, probably in his late forties. Blonde hair is receding from his forehead, but he's cultivated an impressive moustache to replace it. His clothing is mostly dark green, and he wears a large medalion with the company emblem on a heavy chain. He is the only one in the room smoking a pipe.

Ibn Fadil guesses that the woman to his left, who strongly resembles him, is his sister Viktoria. The right-hand chair would be brother Tobias', but he's out of town. Next to the empty chair is probably Alexandra Jorstoian, Ivan's daughter and one of the youngest members. Of the others,

the only one whose name he feels certain of is Erling Staffen, the Board member who is not part of the extended family; with his coppery skin and straight black hair he looks nothing like the rest of them.

"Very timely, Captain," the chairman approves, puffing at his pipe as he glances over a sheet of notes before him. "You would be Emmett, ibn Fadil, and Yestin, then. Excellent. Ship's Marine, eh? Splendid. Captain Barthelme has told us the tale, but we want to make sure the details are straight. If Mr. Emmett would begin with his account of the attack?"

Emmett does just that, keeping it as tight and as close to the truth as possible. He's been through this enough times that he's obviously comfortable while still standing at respectful attention, and he's gone over this particular event enough times that there are no gaps or backtracking in the account. Once he finishes, he adds, "Once the ship had taken off - and it's my considered opinion that they planned on using the storms to cover their escape - I began speculating on what might have been worth enough for them to mount the raid and small enough for them to carry off. It must have been some pretty important information, m'lords."

Someone at the far left end of the table makes a muffled snorting sound, quickly stifled.

While it doesn't show up on his face, Emmett's brain smiles a little smile. It's always nice to have a shot in the dark confirmed.

"If you are planning on mounting a search for them or have an idea where they might be, I'd like to play against them again when they haven't rigged the machine. If you'll have me, that is."

Some members of the board, never having encountered Emmett before, look slightly taken aback. Ivan puffs on his pipe a few times and says, "We'll keep that in mind. Mr. ibn Fadil? Have you anything to add to what your shipmate has told us?"

The half-elf bows slightly and admits, "Not regarding the facts, sir. Only that I live on Bral, where one can hear all kinds of rumors, and although this raid must have been long in the planning, no one seemed to have heard of this 'Fang the Fearless' before that day."

He pauses briefly, obviously wondering if these august personages are even interested in his opinions. "They seemed rather like the kind who want to be infamous at least as much as they want to be rich, so I doubt we have heard the last of them. And I also wonder if Fang went to such lengths to hide her appearance out of a taste for mystery, or because she does not want her description noised about the spheres."

A couple of the Board members exchange inscrutable glances.

"What leads you to believe this Fang to be a woman?" Viktoria inquires.

Encouraged, ibn Fadil warms to the subject. "It is just a guess, ma'am. I have had a lot of time to think about what happened, and it seems to me that while a man might try to hide his identity, it probably would not occur to him to hide his gender as well - I suppose that might have been an incidental effect, but an enveloping cloak was hardly the most sensible garb, in the circumstances, unless that was one of its goals. Also, the business of hiding a ship inside another ship seems like the kind of subtle idea a woman would come up with."

He shrugs, spreading his hands, with something more like his usual cheerful spirit. "It may not be a *good* guess, ma'am, but that is my thought. In any event, it is clear that she is still able to slip into any sphere at all to look for a new target, since no one knows what she looks like. Or even that she *is* a she, if my guess is right."

Ivan does the pipe thing again and gives a noncommittal grunt, glancing around the table to see if anyone else has a question for ibn Fadil before looking at Yestin. "Very well, then. Captain Barthelme has apprised us of the overall situation, but if there is any light you can shed on these events....?"

The giff looks slightly relieved - he won't have to discuss his personal shame in detail before these important people. "I have given this matter much thought, sirs and madams," he begins earnestly. "When our ship was patrolling the outer reaches of Bralspace in the months before the attacks, we often hailed small ships making an approach, and sometimes stopped them to obtain news or ascertain their intentions. I now believe that we encountered one ship several times during that period, with minor changes in its appearance, and that Captain Gustan and some of the others took this opportunity to speak with Fang and prepare the plan. The thieves' ship may never have gone on to Bral at all in that time, but waited in the outer reaches of the system for the right time to attack."

"Have you any idea what they might have discussed in those meetings?" Ivan pressed, frowning.

Yestin shakes his ponderous head. "I was a very junior member of the platoon, sir, and the captain was little given to small talk. I seem to recall that at the time all this took place, on occasion he would make reference to keys that seemed peculiar, but I might have been mistaken."

"Keys?" a man farther down the table asks in a puzzled voice.

"Keys to the treasury," Erling suggests sourly. "The ship is well-named. Audacity, indeed."

Puff, puff. "Fascinating," the Chairman pronounces. "They knew exactly what they were after months in advance, then. I suppose we'll have to wait until they are captured to find out how they knew what they were looking for."

"Inquiries will commence," another of the unknowns rumbles darkly. "News at this remove is damnably slow, but we'll do what we can."

"Excellent. Excellent." Puff. "No doubt they'll concentrate their attentions on the most lucrative routes." There is a moment of silence while the Board considers their new information, and their options. "Well. Captain Barthelme, you and your men have been very helpful," Ivan tells them, glancing up abruptly from his distraction. "Yes. Quite helpful. Thank you."

"About the other matter we discussed...?" Theo inquires.

"Hrmph? Oh, that. Yes. Excellent. At your discretion, Captain. Someone from the company will be in touch."

And with that mysterious communication, the interview seems to be over.

Guiding them back the way they came, Theo gives a satisfied grunt. "Wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. Guess they wanted to follow form more than anything, make sure they have all the information. Damned nuisance. Are you planning to return to Bral?" he inquires of the three.

"My plans are not yet certain," Yestin tells him with an uncomfortable look.

"Let me know when they are. Since the _Cat_ is going that way anyway, the company wants to kill a second bird," Theo explains. They're giving me another ship to take out that way, so I'm trying to determine how many more men we'll have to take on to cover both."

"Let me know when they are. Since the _Cat_ is going that way anyway, the company wants to kill a second bird," Theo explains. "They're giving me another ship to take out that way, so I'm trying to determine how many more men we'll have to take on to cover both."

"I intend to return to Bral," ibn Fadil says. "And, I expect Nyala will, as well." He is not above a certain glimmer of masculine pride at making such a statement.

"Eh? Oh, good. Emmett?" He glances at the Half-Man inquiringly.

Emmett stops staring at the half-elf to respond. "I'll go wherever you hire me to go, sir. Bral's really just a lump in space that I spent too much time on already, but if you, that is to say Three Trees, doesn't intend to strand me there again I'm perfectly willing to take a cruise back there if

the coin is good."

Theo's lips twitch in a slight smile. "I think we can be fairly certain you won't be stranded there."

Emmett glances around, trying to find some indicator of the time. Judging by the length of the meeting and the hollow feeling in his stomach, it's about noon. If he left now he'd be able to catch Pham for a midday meal break and bring him into gear. "I'm sorry, sir, Yestin, Ibn Fadil, but if

you don't need me any more I need to get going. Inez and I are at the Sterling Badger if you want to join us later - Ibn Fadil, I'd love to go check out the Elvish quarter later this afternoon, but right now I have to run."

Ibn Fadil can't resist pretending not to notice Emmett's surprise, either. "Oh? Very well, suppose I look for you here on the steps of the Helm at --?"

Emmett nods distractedly and says, "Second bell, I think."

As the group separates, ibn Fadil hurries along after the giff and says, "A word, Yestin?"

"How may I be of service?" is the polite response.

"I have been wondering," he begins a bit awkwardly, "--That is, I left Bral out of concern for my continued well-being. It troubles me that I still do not know whether this concern was well-founded or not." He cranes his neck to peer up at the giff, wondering how quickly the creature will catch his drift.

Yestin considers the question for a moment and replies somberly, "I suspect your decision was a wise one."

"Ah," the half-elf says unhappily. "I have wished that none of it were true." He fails at an attempt to smile. "I had a friend who used to say, 'Expect the worst, and you will never be disappointed,' but in my heart I prefer to be disappointed on occasion."

"They may not be disappointed, but neither will their times be pleasant ones." He looks somewhat curious. "Do you then still intend to return?"

"Oh, yes," he says with a self-deprecating shrug. "I am perhaps not the most reliable debtor on the Rock, but neither am I the sort to simply abandon my debts."

"Ah... so it is a matter of honor?" He nods understandingly.

"It can be dangerous stuff," he says ruefully. "Yestin, I was going to look for something to eat; would you like to come along?"

"I have no other appointments for the afternoon. This is truly a splendid city; such variety everywhere," he adds with an appreciative glance around the square.

"And so much *larger* than Bral, eh?" Ibn Fadil smiles and also glances around, though with (presumably) more attention to whether anyone is taking undue interest in them.

"Indeed, there is a great deal to see." He is, in fact, paying attention only to one of the local performers, who is telling a story while juggling several small items. As the story progresses, new items relevant to the scene are passed in by a young assistant, and old ones removed.

Beginning to suspect that this giff is particularly humorless - or, to be fair, preoccupied - ibn Fadil also watches the story for a moment.

"What have you seen so far? Other than the inside of a bar," he adds slyly.

"It is traditional," he replies cheerfully enough. "Very little, I must admit. The library is apparently closed to those who are not on official business," he waves across the square toward the blocky building. "I thought perhaps to visit the local houses of religion today if there was time, but I am at your disposal." He considers the half-elf curiously; they had not had much conversation during the voyage, and he's surprised by ibn Fadil's sudden friendliness.

"Library?" Ibn Fadil is himself surprised. Answering the curious look, he continues, "You did not want to speak to me aboard ship, you may remember. Here, you have plenty of room to run if I alarm you too much." He grins impudently up at the oversized being.

"If I have been rude, I must apologize," Yestin replies earnestly.

The half-elf shakes his head, with a disbelieving, half-exasperated laugh. "Yestin, do you even *have* a sense of humor?"

"Err..." After a flummoxed moment he replies, "I sometimes find it difficult to tell when people are joking."

No, really? "Sorry," ibn Fadil says aloud. "I consider myself an amusing fellow, and it is --" Annoying? Distressing? "-- startling when my remarks fall flat. What I meant to say is that I wanted to ask you about the distressing events back on Bral, but I did not want to pursue the matter aboard ship if you preferred not to talk to me. The matter has also disrupted *my* life considerably, you know, and I would like to know more about it."

"Err... well, to be honest, I assumed that you would regard me with some suspicion if not hostility, given the circumstances of your departure, my guess regarding which you have now confirmed. And there were personal matters I did not wish to discuss as well," he adds candidly. "I would gladly be of help if I may, although I told all that I know of the event to the Board."

"Well, if you do not mind chewing the matter over again, I would appreciate it. But at the moment, I started my day early, and really would like some lunch. Will you lead the search, Yestin? You have the better view."

"If you wish."

After some wandering, they come across a place a bit to the south of the dockyards. The clientele is enormously varied, and there is an outdoor terrace for enjoyment of the sunshine. The menu is mostly fish.

A terrace and sunshine are just the thing, in ibn Fadil's opinion. He orders one of the least expensive items, and sits back contemplating the giff for a moment. This is going to be a difficult exercise ... "Tell me, how did you first learn the truth about the raid?"

Massive shoulders shrug slightly. "I had worked with that crew for some time. Such a complete failure passed the bounds of credibility. The reactions of those I spoke to about the event heightened my suspicion, and when they then attempted to prevent me from leaving...."

"Hmm. What exactly did they say and do?" Ibn Fadil continues along this line, with an expression of sympathetic interest, until he has gently prodded Yestin into describing exactly what happened, complete with quotations, instead of just the giff's own impression of what happened.

There's very little to be learned six months after the event, other than that Gustan had been in far too good a mood following such a humiliating failure. It's an open question whether or not they would actually have killed Yestin for his defection.

"And these remarks Captain Gustan made about keys, do you remember exactly what he said?"

He shakes his head. "It was said in passing, to someone else, and I barely heard any of it."

"Think about it," the half-elf urges. "If it made an impression on you, you must remember it. You were somewhere in Bralspace, correct? You were, what, on watch? In the mess?" He tries to lead Yestin through the memory, hoping that whatever Gustan said will be a useful clue, to no avail. Too much time had passed for anything surrounding the odd remark to have been retained.

Ibn Fadil has to concede that he really should have pursued this sooner, despite the risk of causing conflict aboard ship. Hiding most of his frustration, he abandons the topic.

"Hmm," ibn Fadil says again, absently picking over the remains of his lunch. "I have always had the impression that the giffs' contract with the oligarchs was quite, ah, lucrative. Why would Captain Gustan risk breaking it?"

"Aside from a share in the spoils?" he grimaces. "Boredom, perhaps - Bral paid well, to be sure, but it was not exciting duty. It is difficult to say."

"Perhaps the scheme's potential profit was more than we know," ibn Fadil muses. "Well, there might be more news when I return to Bral."

Shrugging as if he were not passionately interested in these details, he smiles and says, "Why did you want to visit the library? The words 'library' and 'giff' do not go together in my mind - which of course is unfair. Your people must do more than soldiering, even though that is all I have seen of them."

Another shrug. "That is what we live for. I am told I am somewhat unusual."

"Unusual how?"

A giffish smile. "My interest in libraries, for one."

"Many people find that unusual in anyone," ibn Fadil observes, intrigued by Yestin's reticence.

"Do they? I am afraid my knowledge of other peoples is slight," he admits. "We giff tend to be... immediate," he decides is the right word. "There is little interest in history."

"Not even military history?"

"Not to any great extent. Today's battles are viewed as more important."

That seems remarkably short-sighted to ibn Fadil, but he is not going to say anything so critical right now. "True scholars are rare among most peoples I have met or heard of," he says thoughtfully. "If you aspire to be one, Yestin, I have to say that crewing spelljammers does not seem to be the way to go about it."

"Oh, I have no such lofty aspirations," he protests lightly. "It is merely something in which I have some interest."

"Huh," the half-elf says. "If you are going to be unusual anyway, why not take it as far as you can? You could be the first giff graduate of Jaira University."

Yestin's ears twitch slightly. "That would be *most* unusual," he chuckles. "Indeed unique. It is an amusing thought."

The bill having been paid (after some argument), the meal appears to be at a close....

"Thank you again for your time, Yestin," ibn Fadil says with an abbreviated bow. "I wish you luck wherever your course takes you."

"My thanks. And luck be with you as well." He imitates the bow reasonably well.

With mixed feelings, ibn Fadil takes off into the city again. He wonders, briefly, whether the giff will follow up on his half-serious suggestion, and supposes he will never know. Then he turns his thought to the far more important matter of the Three Trees board meeting.

The board members said so little that it is easy to remember all of it and try to pick out the important bits. There was the unknown member's reaction to Emmett's sally -- what had he said? "It must have been some pretty important information." Amusement at a wrong guess, or at understatement? He recalls the other board members' well-controlled expressions at that remark, and for that matter throughout the meeting. Not knowing their normal demeanors, he should not guess whether they were any different today -- but then there is the fact of the meeting itself. Does Three Trees react this way to any pirate raid, or to the murder of some of their important employees? Perhaps bin Rashad will know.

He still likes his own reasoning about Fang, slender though the chain of logic is. Then there was Yestin's report of Gustan's remarks about keys -- the giff will need a better-trained memory if he really wants to be a scholar -- and Erling Staffen's remark: "Keys to the treasury." Valuable information, indeed.

He pauses to study a shop's display of jewelry, which also provides an opportunity to see if anyone is following him. One of the pieces would set off Nyala's eyes beautifully ... perhaps before long he will be able to spend money on fripperies again.

Moving on, he returns to his thoughts. What information is valuable to a trading company like three trees? Profits, routes, sources, customers -- their own and other companies'. To pirates, the timing of shipments, if they have the communication problem solved. Commodities and investments ...

The Chairman, he remembers, was convinced that the pirates knew what they were looking for and got it; could that be true? He might assume that just because it was so important, when it might just have been coincidence. But if Fang had somehow infiltrated Three Trees, then it could be ...

"How they knew what they were looking for" he had said -- something secret, then. No surprise there. And finally, something that strikes his ear oddly: "No doubt they will concentrate their attention on the most lucrative routes." Why state something so obvious? Lucrative for whom? The pirates? Three Trees? Lucrative routes ... finding out that kind of information is exactly the kind of thing ibn Fadil (and perhaps Fang) does ... Did they steal information about Three Trees' trade routes?

He stops again, as if listening to a nearby pair of musicians. Valuable information -- lucrative routes. Of course. Three Trees must have kept some kind of record book in their office, detailing routes and profits and such. Not all that large a book, if it fit in those bags of loot, but large enough, it seems, to alarm the company. He has to remind himself to move along, and school his expression carefully. Perhaps he was wrong about the probability of these pirates being a continuing threat themselves; the potential value of that kind of information is staggering.

Without much assistance from his brain, ibn Fadil's feet carry him back to the main square. On second and third thought, his conclusion still appears sound. It will be interesting to see what bin Rashad thinks; perhaps he has resources to confirm it, if he knows to ask.

It is still too early to meet Emmett, and he does not feel comfortable visiting the Zakharan offices in the middle of the day. With an effort he sets the matter of Three Trees' troubles aside and decides to spend some more time exploring the square and its vicinity, more or less at random, until the second bell.

* * *

In the library, Alais has no plans to go anywhere. A picture is beginning to form in his mind - a picture of a sudden change in the fundamental metaphysical structure of wildspace. But he's not sure where to go next. Even the wild-eyed scholars whose ramblings have formed so much of his education have never hinted at such a thing.

He returns to the Chamber of Beasts and shows Pham the information he has copied down, then searches for more information on Great Dreamers, especially as omens and/or in relation to the Spelljammer. Pham having already looked at much of this material saves quite a bit of time. Due to their great power and peaceful nature, many groundlings and a few spacers view the giant beings' appearances as benevolent omens. There don't seem to be any connections to the Spelljammer itself, though.

Pham listens to Alais's theory with skepticism. Trying his best to be polite, he says "That's... an interesting idea. But something my mentor told me once comes to mind. An extreme theory requires extreme proof. You are drawing this conclusion from a single event - a larger than normal school of delphinids. Perhaps you should consider whether the evidence truly supports

your theory?"

It's about noon, and Pham and Alais have been searching the records for several hours. Pham picks up yet another book, opens it, and rather than reading it it's obvious he's staring off into space.

Pham walks over to the nearest table, drops the book onto it, and sits down rubbing his eyes.

"Alais. Alais? ALAIS!" Having shaken the mage's manic concentration, Pham says "It's fairly obvious that if there's something here, we're not going to find it short of a divination spell, something that I haven't the talent for. Unless you do? No? In that case, I suggest we return to the Captain. He's probably waiting for our results. And I just can't stare at these BOOKS any more!"

Though he thought Alais would be reluctant to leave, the young mage has come to the same conclusion; this avenue of investigation will yield them nothing more. He wants to visit the spacefarers' taverns and see if fresher information on astrocetaceans can be found amid the patrons.

Pham sighs and says "Very well. You keep searching. I, however, will return to the Lazy Cat and report to the Captain. I think we've done as well as can be expected."

Pham turns, leaves the "Creatures" room, and walks out into the sunlight. The warmth and light bring a sigh of relief and a smile to the young priest's face. It's GOOD to be outside again. Pham looks at the bustle of the crowd and walks through the square. He decides to wander a bit before he heads back to the ship. He buys a small dish of vegetables from a street vendor.

As he passes the now empty spot, Pham wonders what happened to the poor deranged fool who was muttering about fire. "A shame. I wish I could have helped him. Still, dreams of fire..." Pham shivers involuntarily as he walks past, and quickens his steps.

He pauses then, seeing Emmett on his way across the square, apparently headed for the library, where Alais is just now emerging from the great doors. By the time Pham doubles back to reach them the mage is speaking to Emmett.

"Sir, I wish to investigate this present matter among other spacefarers, and I think a tavern the best place to do this. But I am unaccustomed to the social conventions of these places. If you accompany me, I would be glad to purchase you a drink and some sustenance besides."

As the crowds ebb and flow around the building's steps, two of them are headed for the small gathering - Hiro and a man in a wide-brimmed hat....

Pham smiles as he approaches the steps of the library again. "Emmett! Glad to see you - I was just heading back to the ship to report to the captain. I'm afraid our researches here have hit an impasse. As I see Alais has been explaining to you. If you gentlemen would like to talk to some spacers, I know just the place. I've already made some friends there."

"Pham!" Emmett seems uncharacteristically unnerved by something. "There you are. There's something I have to tell you." The half-man is about to explain when he is interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Well that was easy," Val says to Hiro as they near library. He is obviously surprised to find Alais, Emmett and Pham all at once.

"Good day, gentlemen," he greets the others as they draw near. "Just the ones I'm looking for." Val smiles at them, nodding to each. He is fairly certain Victor's men had not seen any of them on board, as ibn Fadil said they'd already left before things got interesting, but he maintains his adopted persona and disguise nonetheless.

After the exchange of greetings and pleasantries, Val asks Brother Pham and Alais, "I was wondering if I might ask a favor of you. Would it be possible to send a message to someone on a 'Jammer in flight? It's very important..."

Pham looks askance at Val, but has had enough experiences in having to lay low in a town to know when not to ask. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that is beyond my abilities. I'm sure there's some way, but I do not have that talent. My utmost apologies."

"Thanks all the same," Val replies, waiting for Alais' response somewhat anxiously now...

Pham looks at Val sympathetically and says "Is there something else I can help with? You look like things have not gone your way recently."

"That's an understatement," Val snorts, but not too harshly. "Maybe we can talk about things somewhere less...public?"

"Gods above, it's like waiting for a cart: hours of nothing and then six show up at once." Emmett shakes his head. "OK, guys. I think we all have a lot to catch up on. Pham, if you have a

bar you already know, let's go there. Everyone can spill whatever they're carrying and we'll mop up the mess later. Deal?"

As they walk, Alais continues, "You're going to have to be more specific, Master Ehrendrin. Where is the ship in question supposed to be? In wildspace or the phlogiston? What type of ship is? If it is in a sphere, what the specific properties of that sphere? And so on. What can you tell me?"

Val looks at Alais, nonplussed. He hadn't thought this would be so damned complicated. "It's somewhere in this sphere, a squid-ship. I know the name of the ship and the person I need to send the message to," he tells the mage after a moment. "I can try and find out more if it'll help. If you had this information, how soon would the person be able to receive the message and possibly reply?"

"All I know right now is the name of the ship and the person I need to send the message to," Val tells the mage after a moment. "I can try and find out more if it'll help. If you had this information, how soon would the person be able to receive the message and possibly reply?"

"Um-hmmha...Oh, you actually want to **do** this! I thought you were asking a theoretical question. Oh, that makes it more difficult." Alais then goes into a long lecture that makes it clear that getting a message in these circumstances is more or less impossible.

Crestfallen, Val takes this news as well as possible. At least he tries not to let the disappointment show too much. There would be time for that later. Right now, he has to think of some other way to help Ginevra. Maybe he should speak to the captain to see what he might recommend. There seems to be no love lost between Barthelm and Victor, and the veteran captain might have a suggestion or two.

Meanwhile, Emmett moves forward of the group with Pham, who is leading them to the tavern in question, as to get a quick private word with the priest. "Hi. Like I said, I have something to tell you: the unfortunate in the square? the one with the 'Fire' mantra? He's a member of your order. After I left you two yesterday I went the to the temple of Gond and asked them what they could do for the man. They took him in and did some basic research, which turned that up." He pauses as Pham pushes open the door to the tavern, letting the others catch up. "I don't know what it means, but I don't like the coincidence."

Pham stops dead in the doorway as he hears Emmett's news. "One of...oh, so sorry." Pham starts as he realizes he's blocking the door. He steps inside, waves to the barkeep, and leads the conglomeration over to a table by the wall. A couple of the old-timers he met the previous night wave back, and everyone gives the group with him curious looks.

"One of **my** order?" Pham's voice is incredulous. "I've only ever met one before, and I lost him several months before I landed on Bral. Unless... oh, you must mean one of those, **ahem** other followers of the Herald. Yes?"

Emmett nods through the crowd of his companions passing between the two men into the Cask. "I must. I hadn't realized there was such a rift between the groups."

"I see what you mean about the coincidence. If those dreams were a sending of Hextor, I'm glad my faith is different from that poor fools. Still, I think I should see this man as soon as we're done here."

"In the meantime, the drink here isn't too watered down, and the regulars have some interesting tales to tell. And Val, I suspect you've got one yourself as well."

"What'll it be?" the owner's teenaged granddaughter asks, sweeping an appraising glance over the table.

"Bring us two pitchers and five mugs and we'll work it out somehow. It'll keep us out of your hair for a while." Emmett smiles at the girl, hoping that she isn't the type to listen in to patrons conversations. "OK, Val, what the hell?"

Val once again briefly explains what had happened aboard the *Cat* and at the infirmary after Pham, Alais, and Emmett left. He omits his own personal feelings in the matter, regardless of how apparent they probably are. He does not tell the good brother what he had discovered about Victor this morning, but does share his and Hiro's concern that the Lady Ginevra might be in danger.

"So I'm trying to inform her child's father of everything," Val finishes up his story. "I'm hoping there is something he can do to help her now..."

When he finishes, Emmett leans back and takes another sip of the strong beer, of which he seems to be consciously moderating his consumption. At the same time he is scanning the room for anyone who looks like a man for hire - his people sense is usually quite good at picking out tools from a crowd, and it wouldn't do to have them all being watched. No one in the room arouses his suspicions. "Damn, Val, you don't do things by halves. OK, I'm in - I told you that before.

"Before we get any further into that, though, a few other things. I know what the pirates stole from Three Trees, if anyone's interested, but you gotta button lip on it. Also, Pham, if you don't mind my bringing this up...."

Pham gestures to indicate that he doesn't mind sharing the information.

"OK, on the *Cat* Pham started having dreams about fire. Alais, you remember the chanting 'fire' guy in the square? Turns out he's one of Pham's brothers, but from the more... commonplace arm of the order. There's apparently a shipload of them on Janik, and this guy was one of their number. I got temple of Gond to set the guy up at the Contemplator temple to see what they can do with him." Emmett looks over at Val and Hiro, "They're supposed to be good healers. Are they the same place that's watching Ginevra?"

"Contemplator temple?" Val asks, somewhat confused. "She's in the infirmary near the dockyards. Seems safe enough for now, what with the perimeter wall, but there is someone there watching. Would you suggest moving her?"

Emmett waves that question off for the moment, obviously on a train of thought.

"OK. Val, you need to talk to ibn Fadil - right now you guys and Nyala are duplicating effort, and that's wasted action. I'm supposed to meet him at the Helm in two bells, which is just a few minutes away. He and Nyala have a place together, so he probably knows everything she does. I can meet up with him and let him know where to meet the rest of us who want in on this."

"So I've noticed," Val mutters. He is grateful for the help, but had not thought ibn Fadil or Nyala that involved. He'll have to remind himself to plan better next time. "You know," he starts again, somewhat hesitantly, "In all fairness, I can't ask any of you to help me on this. Not that I don't appreciate it, but there's enough trouble already. This could get ugly..." Val does not know

what to make of Emmett's direct approach, even though it gives him a bit of hope. He dares not hope the rest would so willingly get involved.

Emmett can tell that Hiro is already set on this path, but he isn't sure about the others - or if Val even wants to drag them into an increasingly complex set of gears.

Hiro places a hand on Val's shoulder and says resolutely, "You need not ask."

Emmett nods. "OK, I think it's a safe bet that some of us at least are being followed. Val, he at least has to be trying to tail you. One thing I learned long ago was always have a few guys in the clouds as a reserve if you have the people. We have the people, we just have to keep them in the clouds."

Emmett finishes off his drink before continuing, "I'm going to go meet with ibn Fadil, and tell him to hook up with you, Val, at... oh, hell, someone name a likely bar."

"The Golden Gauntlet," Val interjects, having seen it in his wanderings.

"You two need to get your plans straight. Tonight, everyone who's in on this, lets meet at the Wonders of the Northern Woods show. I was there last night, and we can either use the show as a conversational cover or slip out the back. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I don't want the other side to be able to ID all of our pieces. Besides, it's a good show.

"Pham, why don't you meet me in front of the temple of Gond - it's the windmill on Twist Street - in half a bell. We can follow up on...the other stuff. Does that sound good?" Emmett stands up. "I'll go use the facilities and head out the back way. Everyone else, keep an eye out, I'll see you tonight."

Val sinks back in his seat. Things are getting complex. He was planning on possibly doing something (foolish, risky, illegal?) by himself. Now, it seems, he has to think of something entirely different since everyone else is willing to help. Problem is, Val doesn't know what to do...

What should he do? What *could* he do? His options in helping Ginevra were narrowing down. Emmett hadn't even explained about the Contemplator temple before he left. Maybe she'd be safer there? Damn.

"Okay," Val says in a calm voice to those remaining at the table, "I'm open to suggestions... Anyone have any clue how I can either get word to the child's father, or stop Victor from taking Ginevra away after the baby is born?" His face is a calm facade, but his mind races... What have I gotten myself into?

No one has any immediate suggestions, and they have additional tasks before they all meet later that night. Val slips out of the Cask, making sure to don the persona of the offworld merchant, careful to look for signs of pursuit. He heads off into the crowd, willing himself to blend in as much as possible. Hiro follows a few moments later, so as to avoid compromising the slender disguise more than necessary.

The Golden Gauntlet comes into view, and Val slips in, just one of the crowd. Glancing around the taproom, he selects a suitable table; not too close to other patrons but not too secluded as to arouse suspicion.

Hiro rejoins him, and the two wait patiently for ibn Fadil. Or for whomever else might walk in....

* * *

After his lunch with Yestin, ibn Fadil returns to the square to wait until it's time to meet Emmett. He spends some time wandering around, getting a better feel for the place and collecting

more rumors. News of the raid has started to percolate through the city, no doubt thanks to some of his shipmates. After a while he locates the storyteller the giff had found so interesting (perhaps it was the juggling; there has never been a giff born with sufficient delicacy of grip to master the art).

The current tale is some sort of political allegory involving a wooden donkey, a peach, an egg, a scarf, and a small glass jar. The story ends, the objects are collected, the audience applauds and tosses a few coins. Seeing the storyteller prepared to take a break, ibn Fadil seizes the opportunity and quickly works out an arrangement. It would be to the good for an accurate version of the story to be in the rounds, sans his own direct involvement and the perfidy of the giff.

* * *

Emmett follows his plan, slipping out through the Cask's back door and taking a roundabout route through the alleys (getting slightly lost himself) before finding a main street and returning to the Helm at just a few minutes past two bells. Fortunately for him, the half elf is still waiting.

... Although he appears to be busy learning to juggle, of all things, from one of the square's more colorful characters, a relatively tall man in brightly mismatched clothing. He is still chuckling over something ibn Fadil has told him, while giving pointers on keeping the two balls in smooth motion.

"Ibn Fadil." Emmett jogs (as much as he can) up to the ship's assistant cook. "Glad you're still here. OK, I can't do anything else this afternoon, but **you** need to get to the Golden Gauntlet to talk to Val. Apparently he's spent the last two days dogging your steps concerning, er, our shipmate. The rest of us are getting together later tonight at the Wonders of the Northern Woods show to figure out what to do next."

"Do next about what?" he says with a somewhat blank look.

"What?" Emmett looks back confusedly. "About Lenore, er, Ginevra, er whatever her name is." He hisses softly. "The thing you've been looking into for the last few days. Remember that?"

"Oh, right. Valarin has been out asking questions instead of staying out of sight?" he says disbelievingly. "Very well. Tonight when?"

"Yeah, he has. That can't surprise you? Anyway, the show starts at 7 bells. It's a good show regardless, so if nothing else you and Nyala can have a night out. Just make sure you aren't followed."

"Right," ibn Fadil says again, resisting a sudden urge to flee to bin Rashad and beg for help getting home after all. "See you then."

Emmett quickly moves away, hoping to make his appointment at the temple of Gond with Pham. "Helping out one's shipmates can get time consuming," he thinks. "And confusing. And thirsty - do I have time for a drink on the way ... No, no keep moving."

The half-elf stares after him for a moment. "The rest of us"? What is going on now? Well, better to find out sooner rather than later. Thanking the storyteller for the lesson, he also gets directions to the bar Emmett named, and heads there immediately. Though he keeps a careful eye out, there is no sign of anyone following.

Before long, the half-elf strolls in, looking almost dapper in a new outfit of his own. He looks around the room, spots Valarin and Hiro, and joins them at the table with a cheerful nod. "Emmett seems to think we have been duplicating our efforts," he says....

"So I hear," Val replies with a smile, inviting ibn Fadil to have a seat. He waves a server over to get a drink for the half-elf, while at the same time, he nonchalantly checks the common room to see if they are attracting undue attention, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

"Sorry," Val says with a heavy sigh, "but I should've gotten together with you and Nyala before running off like that. Probably would have saved some time and trouble." He runs his fingers through his bangs in a gesture of nervousness.

"Hiro helped me get a room, and somewhere safe to stay." He puts a slight emphasis on the conjunction, believing the reformed gambler would catch it and understand. "Emmett said you and Nyala have a room *together*...?"

"We do," he says, and with unwavering amiability continues, "What *have* you been doing, Valarin, rather than staying in your safe place?"

Val flushes as he realizes that he was expected to stay out of sight. "I couldn't just sit back and let you do all the work," he replies rather timidly.

"Besides," he continues, a little more assertively, "I've gathered a bit of information on *him*." Val relates the little he has gleaned from his trip to the market this morning. He knows it's not exactly impressive, but it is something that does not appear to have been done in vain...

The half-elf does not seem impressed. "You are the one he is most angry with," he points out, "as well as one of the few crew-members he and his men have actually seen. Do you realize that he probably thinks *you* are responsible for the lady's condition?"

"You mean there is someone who doesn't hold this opinion?" Val remarks sarcastically. He'd heard the talk on board the *_Cat_*. Of course, had anyone bothered to simply *ask*...

"Emmett seems to think I have some sort of plan to handle this," he says after a bit. Val looks off into the common room, though his gaze is fixed on nothing within sight. "Truth to tell, I don't. But I am getting tired of feeling like I did something wrong..."

He turns his gaze back to ibn Fadil. "I think it's about time I did *something* though..." The vacant look in his eye is now replaced with something else. Resolution, perhaps? "I think it's about time Victor knows that he's done something wrong."

Ibn Fadil chokes on his beer, attracting some attention from the nearer tables as he coughs violently and works to get his breath back.

"You," he begins, and stops, searching for words and quite unable to hide how appalled he is. "Listen," he says at last, leaning as far across the table as he can reach. "He has also seen *me* associated with this mess, and I *live* on that planetoid. May I request that you consider the effect such an action might have on others? Such as me?"

"Oh?" Val looks surprised by this revelation. "I was under the impression you didn't want to go back there..." He gauges ibn Fadil's reaction to this.

The half-elf blinks. "Why? ... Oh," he says, recalling his battered condition on boarding the *_Cat_*. His anger vanishes as quickly as it appeared. "I suppose 'want' is probably the wrong word." With an uncomfortable shrug, he goes on, "I am going back on the *_Cat_*. I hope the business with the giff will have blown over by then, and I should have enough money from this trip to pay my debts, or most of them. After that -- I will probably move on. Somewhere. Nyala does not like Bral.

"But if the Victor thinks he has a reason to be angry with me in particular, he could make even a short stay there very dangerous, even without the, ah, other issues. So I very much want to

avoid conflict with him, Valarin. I have been trying to help Nyala help the lady, in a quiet way, but you just suggested attacking him directly, and that is something I do not want to be involved in at all.

"And what good would it do, Valarin, really? Unless you kill him outright -- and I cannot countenance murder -- you would only get in trouble, and that would not help the lady at all. Please," he says earnestly, "let me see what else I can do, quietly, or think of to do. I will tell you what I have come up with, if anything, this evening. Just do nothing until then."

"I'm **not** going to rush in and challenge him to a duel," Val snaps back (even though the thought had occurred to him). His brow furrows in annoyance. "And I am **not** a murderer," he growls in a low voice, not daring to raise it and attract attention.

"Of course not," ibn Fadil interposes.

"And whether you want it or not, you **are** involved," he continues, "I didn't ask you to help. You're the one who made us stay on deck and get noticed." Val had not realized until now how much that still bothered him.

"Besides, you're concerned about what might happen to **you**? You're a grown man. What about her **child**? How dangerous is it going to be for the kid? I'm not being selfish here, my friend. I **am** thinking of others..." Val trails off as his temper robs him of anything else to say.

"If an attachment to my own life is selfish, then I freely admit that I am," ibn Fadil grumbles, but does not trust himself to say anything further. Why, he wonders, do people insist on thinking that indifference to self-preservation is the only way to demonstrate ... whatever it is that the man wants of him?

After an awkward silence passes, Val stands to leave. "I'll wait," he says quietly to ibn Fadil. "I do appreciate the help you're giving the lady. And right now, she needs all the help she can get."

The look the half-elf gives him is not very forgiving. "She needs all the help that is **possible**," he corrects. "I will do what I can within the limits of good sense."

Val stands there for several seconds, trying to read the Zakharan. It's like dealing with Zunali back home, Val thinks to himself. The same unflappable calm and smug indifference. And he's right, dammit.

After tossing a silver on the table to cover his drink, Val moves to depart. Ibn Fadil glances at Hiro, obviously (if unfairly) expecting some criticism from that quarter as well.

The native of Kara-Tur grips Val by the arm before the young man can leave The Golden Gauntlet. He raises his dark brown eyes to meet Valarin's shocked countenance. He says nothing but raises the index finger on his free hand to suggest that he wait for a moment. He then leans in close to ibn Fadil, drawing the provocateur near, before speaking in a hushed tone, that is difficult even for Val to hear.

"Water takes the shape of its container..." he says cryptically, trailing the statement with a pause long enough for ibn Fadil to recall the conversation the pair had when they first met on the ship.

Once he sees the moment recalled in the eyes counter to his gaze, Hiro leans back in his chair. He then stares at the Zakharan for a tense moment, recalling the time in his own life when he thought he could retreat from the Way of The Sword to no avail. He bows his head before using both hands to grip the bottom of his seat to move it back and stand. He then joins Val's side prepared to exit.

Ibn Fadil merely glares them on their way. He knows his anger is pointless -- Valarin and Hiro know nothing about his real motives, after all -- but silence is the only restraint he can manage just now.

When they have gone, it takes him some time to calm himself. Of course Hiro did not mean to imply that he would turn traitor; he has changed a great deal in these last years, but not that much. Apparently he even has retained a bit more pride than he had thought.

Trying to work out what Hiro *did* mean is nicely distracting, but ultimately fruitless. At last, with something resembling his usual attitude, he is ready to consider the question of what can possibly be done about the lady's problems.

Val is in a foul mood and intends to wander about the market area for a while. He is aware of Hiro's presence and is grateful, despite the feeling he is dragging the swordsman into this tangled mess. The Kensai's stoic calm, forbidding as it may appear, is a reassurance to the young rogue right now. It is one of the things Val admires most about Hiro, maybe even more than his skill with the blade.

After a bit of aimless wandering with the Kensai, Val manages to calm himself. It was pointless to remain angry with ibn Fadil over what has happened; the half-elf was only trying to help.

After giving Val some time to cool off, Hiro broaches the notion of watching the watchers, in hopes of seeing what kind of resources Victor had brought with him. Since Hiro for all his martial skill is not much for skulking, Val takes up the nearer position.

Over the course of the afternoon, they watch several men who are probably Victor's - they are not uniformed - wander in and out of the vicinity, pass gossip or play cards with nearby workers. Based on this, Val concludes that there are at least a half dozen men involved; they're not bad at it, but are clearly amateurs at this particular game. When Hiro eventually follows one, the course is a roundabout but not terribly complicated one back toward Victor's ship.

* * *

Meanwhile, Pham and Alais, whose interest was also caught by the muttering man, meet Emmett at the temple of Gond and are introduced to Aram.

"Pleased to meet you," the perennially cheerful artificer says with a smile, though he's clearly giving Pham a good looking-over at the same time. "Emmett here tells me you have reason to be concerned about what happened to this poor fellow?"

"Yes, it's a combination of concern for my fellow man and a healthy dose of self-interest. Emmett told me you discovered the man was a Hextorian. I follow a different sect of the same deity. While there is little love lost between the two faiths, it appears that right now there's something in

common - something rather disturbing.

"I'd like to question the man about his delusion if I could - I'd like to find out if I should reserve my own street corner to babble on now and beat the rush. Or, if the dreams truly were a sending from Hextor, I need to do everything I can to discern their meaning."

Aram nods. "I understand - though this is the first I've heard any alternate sects. The universe is constantly surprising me."

After a moment's pause in the conversation Emmett changes the topic. "Aram, are there any temples on Janik that would offer political sanctuary or asylum for a foreigner in trouble with a foreign power? Gond's, or the Contemplator's perhaps?"

Aram gives him an amazed look. "Friend Emmett, the most peculiar circumstances seem to attend you. I think I need to know more before I can give you a true answer."

"Yeah, I'm the axle about which all the trouble in the universe turns." Emmett says with a rueful grin, before continuing quietly. "A passenger on our ship is trying to get away from her husband, who's an oppressive jerk by all accounts, but a big wheel in one of the major trading firms. He managed to beat us here, and wants to drag her back or kill her out of pride and spite. Some of the crew really like her, and don't want this to happen. Right now we've got some glide time, since she's at the infirmary, but she needs somewhere to vanish to until he gives up."

"There are more details of course, but that's the blueprint I can give you without dragging the temple into this."

"Is that what's going on? My, what a ridiculous situation. But don't we have more important things to worry about right now?" Alais wants to know.

"Ridiculous, maybe, but lots of people are always ridiculous. And I doubt there's anything more important to the woman in question right now." Emmett gives Alais a look with his good eye. "If it isn't important enough for you, you don't have to get involved."

"I see." Aram looks very thoughtful. "I will think on this matter. It may be that we can be of some assistance, though I will need to know more. We can discuss the matter further after our errand."

"Thanks, Aram. That's all I ask." Emmett looks back up the road, seeing the building before them. "If that isn't the Contemplator temple, I'll eat my hat."

Alais knows the place from his previous night's wanderings. The large complex stands atop a slight rise on a sizeable piece of land. Overall it forms a circle consisting mainly of two low-slung, colonnaded stone buildings facing one another across a central garden. The scents of the herbs growing there are strong in the afternoon sun, and there are several small pools and fountains adding music to the air. At the point where the two arcs nearly meet stands a third building, slightly taller, which seems to be the temple itself. Raked gravel paths lead between the buildings, and the visitors can see a few people in hooded robes of undyed cloth moving here and there. Where the path meets the street sits a similarly robed figure, very upright but so enveloped it's difficult to tell anything about him or her.

Aram bows slightly. "Forgive me for interrupting your contemplations. We have an errand to visit an afflicted soul who came to rest here yesterday."

The robed person rises, returns the bow, and via a series of gestures indicates that they are to proceed to the building that forms the left half of the circle, then wait.

Emmett looks over the robed person carefully, taking in the advantages of the accepted vow of silence and enfolding robes if it became possible, or necessary to hide someone within the temple. In his mind, gears are starting to fall into place.

"Vow of silence," Aram explains as they follow the tree-shaded path up the little hill and on a somewhat winding course through the meticulously cared for garden. "Many Contemplators take them."

The one who meets them at the entrance to the building is not so hampered. His hood is pushed back, revealing him to be the oldest elf any of them have ever seen; it's disconcerting to be examined by eyes that have seen a full thousand years pass by. He bows slightly to Aram, who appears to know him, and more deeply to the other two.

"Serenity," he says in a soft voice, quite at odds with the aura of power and dignity he carries. "Through many intercessions, the one you seek is lucid at times. Because of his ordeal, his spirit remains but loosely anchored to the flesh. Do you wish to speak with him?"

"Yes, please." Emmett says, his voice uncontrollably dropping to a reverent hush in these walls as he finishes his return bow to the Elvish priest.

Pham returns the bow from the elder, being as gracious as his fishing-village upbringing allows. One thing his people got a lot of practice at was bowing to authority figures.

"Very well. I must emphasize that he is very fragile." His bare feet are silent on the sun-dappled stone as he guides them past a series of doors to one near the end of the building; it looks as if each room here has its own access to the outdoors. The old elf taps lightly at the door before opening it.

The room beyond is narrow and very spare, almost cell-like in appearance. However, the pallet is thick and comfortable, a window looks out from the wall opposite the door, and a vase of fresh herbs lend a clean and pleasant scent. The man from the square is lying on the pallet, his eyes closed. The grey robe he had been wearing before has been cleaned and lies neatly folded on a shelf.

"These people have come to speak with you. Are you willing to do so?"

The man's eyes open a fraction; a confused expression passes over his face. "I... think so. I don't know." His voice is soft but rough, perhaps still suffering from his days of wandering.

"Sir, my name is Alais Zeremin, a wizard and scholar. It's a pleasure." Alais extends a hand in greeting. The man stares at it in obvious perplexity.

Pham gives Alais a look of concern, then turns to the man. "Hello. You don't know us, but I think we may have something in common." Pham reaches inside his robes and pulls out the symbol of Hextor that lies on his chest and shows it to the man. His expression remains confused for a moment, then there is an appearance of dawning recognition before he flinches back sharply.

"My name is Brother Luc Pham. I am not one of the group that left you in the square to rot. But I've been having dreams that made your story quite interesting to me. I was hoping you could help me fill in the pieces.

"Please, tell me about the fire."

"F-f-f-fire? Covered the sea. Air. *We* were...." He trails off again vacantly.

Oh, great, Emmett thinks. _This is him lucid. I was hoping he'd be more together._

Emmett stays towards the back, trusting Pham to draw out the man as much as possible. He does turn to the Elf healer and whisper, "Has he been eating on his own? He wasn't when I found him."

"With assistance, he has taken some nourishment. As you can see, he remains greatly bewildered by his circumstances."

"Has he told you anything about his dreams? About what happened to him? Or the people who he came here with? You've seen him lucid longer than we have, and anything would help."

Ancient eyes stare into his for so long that Emmett wonders if he's going to get an answer at all, but it's merely that the old healer has a very different sense of time. "Of his companions, I know only that they were, for in his delirium he begged that they not abandon him. He seems to view his recent state as punishment for a crime against his god."

"Fire. Fire. Fire... Fire... forgive me!" the man cries suddenly. "I beg you, lord...."

Under Pham's patient and gentle questioning, the man slowly reveals more--enough to know that their dreams, though similar, were not identical. In the nameless man's vision, his point of view had been *behind* a wall of fire, looking down from a hill as it swept away from him. He had looked down at the blackened ground and seen something lying there--what it was precisely he was unable to say, but it had seemed precious, and he picked it up as the dream ended.

The others of his group had interpreted this as an omen to their advantage, but wanted more information. Hextor had been displeased by their impertinence--at least, this is what the rescued madman believes to have been the cause of his distraught state. The dream had consumed him.

As Pham is comforting and cajoling his fellow Hextorian, Emmett looks at the Elvish contemplator again, making eye contact and jerking his head to one side, hoping the man will take the hint to follow.

Able to speak more freely without interrupting Pham's conversation, Emmett starts talking again, but his voice maintains its earlier hushed tone. "Brother...? What's the contemplator temple's position on giving people sanctuary when they're in danger? I already asked Artificer Aram, "A nod of the head to Aram, "but I need as many options as possible, so...?" his voice trails off, the question in it obvious.

"Any who are sincere of purpose and wish to take up a life of contemplation are free to do so," the old elf replies. "To our previous lives, we are as the dead."

"Ah. Well, you see, I don't think she's looking to take up a lifetime's worth of contemplation. Is it possible for her to make, say, a couple of months of contemplation?"

A slow shake of his head. "Such is not our purpose."

Emmett nods, absorbing this while reining in his urge to just blurt things out. "Would it be possible for her to simply stay here for a while, a few days or a week? No vows, not joining the order, but just using this as a place of sanctuary as she contemplates what to do next?"

The answer is a simple, "No."

"Oh well. It was worth asking. We'll find another way." Emmett turns to return, then obviously thinks better of it. "Is it all right if I wander around a bit? While I care about that man's welfare, I'm not really good with scenes like that - i get antsy and make things more complicated. You have my word that I won't speak to or disturb anyone, or if you're willing to accompany me and explain your sect's views on contemplation and life, if you'd prefer I not travel alone."

"Serenity is not easily attained," he nods. "I will certainly accompany you if you wish to learn of us, or you may contemplate the garden in solitude while your companions are occupied, as you prefer."

"Walk with me for a while, if it does not trouble you to do so." Emmett starts heading off, trusting the Contemplator to direct him if he starts on an inappropriate path. His good eye swings back and forth, taking in the serenity of the architecture, the graceful columns, the placement of the windows, wincing at the noise his feet make on the floor and listening for an echo, fearful of disturbing anyone.

"How many people choose this path every year? and I know that to your old life you are dead - so I will not ask why you chose it - but I do wonder for how long you've followed it?"

"I founded this temple six hundred years ago. Approximately," he adds with such grave manner that it's hard to tell if there is humor there. "Some few each year choose to devote themselves to this life."

"Once they enter the temple, they never leave? Not even to visit other worlds, or even go to about the town?"

"We travel as need arises. This is our choice, not part of the Rule."

"What is the Rule?" Emmett asks, taking another turn, trying to remember the route back to the front door, but taking any promising looking paths to a laundry, showers, or any other place that might be near their kitchen. Surely they must have something to drink here...

There is little unusual about the order; they own no personal property, live simply, abstain from sex and intoxicants, give freely of their medical knowledge to those in need regardless of the person, and follow a daily schedule of meditation, study, and physical labor. The kitchens are located in the other arc, at one end of the building, so they pass through the central garden. At every turn something beguiles the senses to pause.

They have water to drink.

Emmett takes several long swigs, trying to rehydrate after the day and keep his mind clear for tonight. "So," he says, "If anyone had a medical condition and needed your help, you'd let them in as you let in our friend back there?"

"Of course."

He stands up straighter and extends his hand to the elf. "Allow me to thank you, on behalf of those who have been helped by other such orders. The Brothers of Gond took me in in the same fashion. Your temple does a wonderful thing."

"It is the least we can do," is the self-deprecating reply, but he does shake Emmett's hand.

He then mentally scratches off the idea of using the temple against their knowledge in his plan, and tries to set aside the information he gained from his recent casing of the building. Hopefully Aram will be able to suggest another path.

The two make their way back to the room where Pham is working with the other Hextorian, and Emmett continues to ask questions and lay out Ginevra's situation to the aged elf. "Can you recommend any order that would be able to help her, give her sanctuary? You must know Janik's religions pretty well, after all."

"At times I have difficulty keeping track - they come and go so quickly." He thinks for a moment. "Is it simply a place to hide that is required, or someplace that will be willing to defy pursuit on her behalf? The city is large, and there are places aplenty to shelter."

"Well, she hasn't committed any crimes here - she's just leaving her husband. He has no official right to go after her, and no real legal authority here, so a place to hide might be good enough. However, he's a vindictive jerk from everything I've heard, and may try and attack her or drag her back anyway, so I think having somewhere that would defy him would be better. I'm just thinking religious institutions because I'm associated with one, and have faith in them. If you can recommend somewhere better that wouldn't charge any money...?"

He turns away for several long moments, in thought or perhaps prayer. "There is - or was some fifty years ago - a community of women devoted to Hera. They may be of help to you, if they are still in the city. It has been long since I passed that way."

Emmett rubs his chin, feeling the stubble there. "OK, can you direct me to them? That's definitely worth a shot..."

The elf searches his long memory. "They had a house on a street south of here, with apple trees on the lawn..."

The half man memorizes all of the directions, hoping it's enough. By this point, the two men have made it back to the patients room. Emmett leans closer to Alais and Aram, whispering "How's he doing?"

"I think we have learned all we can for the time being," is the soft reply. "We can but hope for the mending of his soul."

* * *

Leaving the tavern, ibn Fadil again finds himself wandering along the street, keeping half an eye out behind and trying to think. Clearly, his usual slow and steady approach is not appropriate for this situation; he will have to come up with something useful by evening to prevent Val, and probably Emmett, from doing something rash. If possible.

What he needs, he muses, is a reliable local source of information. Other than bin Rashad; he would very much prefer not to have to explain how his troubles have become compounded. Someone who will not ask a lot of questions -- no, not likely to be found with ease. Someone whose questions he can answer without worrying much ... someone already familiar with the problem. Sister Mahal, who has already agreed to shelter the lady for a time? He turns the idea over a few times, wondering if a gnome healer would be different from other gnomes, and wishing he knew more about gnomes generally.

Jumok's inquiry yesterday (was it only yesterday? Gods!) suggested that she was not always at the infirmary -- not surprisingly, since she is probably a priestess of some sort. Possibly too exalted a priestess to have time for *him*, but he cannot immediately think of anyone else to try.

With a little more purpose, he starts toward the temple district, looking for religious folk in brown robes, with or without purple and white stoles, but has no luck in his search. He returns to the dockyard, scanning the area before approaching the infirmary door. It's easy enough to pick out Victor's man with a few minutes of observation.

There is a different youngster on door duty today; he looks at ibn Fadil quizzically. "Can I help you, sir?"

With some hesitation he says, "Is there a Sister Mahal here?"

The youth nods. "She is here. Is there an emergency?"

"Er, not exactly -- I could wait for a while." He lets a mixture of relief and worry show in his face -- lying without words, one of his teachers had called this.

"Come with me, please." He leads the way to the same room the group waited in last time. "Wait here a moment and I will see if she is busy."

There is a bit of a wait, but eventually the old gnome enters the room. She looks a bit surprised to see him. "Good afternoon."

Ibn Fadil stands and bows most respectfully. "Sister," he says, with genuine hesitation. "I am trying to work out how best to help the lady we brought here yesterday, but I know so little about Janik that I am quite at a loss. I had hoped -- if you can spare the time -- that you could perhaps help me there."

"What a number of friends the young woman seems to have," she remarks mildly, sharp black eyes scrutinizing him. "I'm not sure we've ever had such a fuss here; most of our days are spent fixing those who've had hammers dropped on their heads, or ran afoul of some unpleasantness in space. Straightforward work. What is it you'd like to know? I suppose I can spare a few minutes."

"Thank you, Sister," the half-elf says. "If this were my home, I would suggest that the lady hire a lawyer and begin a suit for divorce from her husband, but I have no idea if that is practicable here."

"Perhaps you could speak with her about that; I do not know the nature of their arrangement, what laws or gods it may involve. In any case, the lady has no funds," Mahal points out. "We care for those in need regardless, for such is our calling, however," her eyes twinkle slightly, "that has not been the creed of the lawyers I have known."

A smile quirks his lips. "Some of them *do* have friends and relatives," he protests mildly. "In any event, if Janik has lawyers, it must have courts of law, yes?" He waits for her confirmation before going on.

"Of course. This world is a place of business."

"So is Bral," he observes. "But things are much less, hmm, formal there. At any rate, if they have proper courts here, that is a start, at least. My other question -- but wait. Nyala told me they had told you something of the lady's situation. I have learned that the child's father should be returning here in about six weeks, if the gods are in a generous mood. Would you be willing to hold the lady for that long?"

Her wrinkled little face wrinkles further in thought. "Perhaps," she says eventually. "It may be six weeks yet in any case, and of course it is impossible to know how soon afterward she'll be ready for traveling. Does this man possess some resolution to her problem, then?"

"I do not know," he says with a sigh. "I think he does yet not know he is a father -- whether he will respond honorably to the situation, I cannot say." He thinks for a moment, frowning. "I do know where he is from, but I do not think he has many resources. If Janik prefers to wash its hands of the matter, I suppose there is not much he can do. It is unjust," he adds sharply, "but perfectly proper, of course." Irritated with the whole situation, he glares at the healer for a moment, then remembers his manners and looks away.

Mahal, unoffended, twinkles at him. "Where will want not, a way opens."

Baffled by her apparent unconcern, he stares at her while he tries to decide what to say next. "... I suppose I had better talk to the lady, if I may," he says at last.

"Bide a moment, and I will see if she wishes to speak with you." She is gone for a little while, then returns. "Very well."

"Welcome," Ginevra says upon their entrance, somewhat puzzled by his visit. "Is there news?"

"No," he says apologetically (and pretending that her visible pregnancy does not make him at all nervous). "I needed to ask you a few things about your circumstances." He pauses, hoping the sister will take her leave at this point.

"Call if you need anything, dear," she says. For her age, she moves quickly.

Still with a tone of apology for even risking distressing her, he asks, "Does your marriage contract say what he said it does, or does he only think that?"

She looks surprised. "What he... yes. Why?"

Even more gently, "Then why did you take that jewelry with you? Does the contract include terms for its severance?"

"Forgive me, but why is this of concern to you?"

He cocks his head, wondering which of them is missing the obvious. "As long as you are married to him, he has a substantial claim to your person. You need funds, or at least the possibility of funds, to attempt to obtain a divorce." He hesitates. "You did expect him to divorce you, did you not? And then you would be able to marry your, your friend?"

"I fail to understand why you would involve yourself in this business," she replies with a touch of asperity. "But since you ask, I was planning no such thing. Divorce is not a custom practiced on our world. Were there provisions for such I would not have needed to act as I have. I will never be free to marry Teague. Does that sufficiently satisfy your curiosity?"

Ibn Fadil reminds himself, firmly, that it would be foolish to pity the girl for her upbringing and then be annoyed with her for demonstrating it. All the same, his exercise of patience probably shows as he admits, "I would not take an interest in your problems, my lady, if Nyala had not already done so. As it is, I have spent some little effort in trying to think of a way to help you, without much result so far." He pauses to see how she takes this.

"Oh." She looks a bit taken aback. "Then I have mistaken you, and must apologize. I not know, however, that there is anything more to be done." For a moment she looks slightly bitter, then shrugs it away. "Perhaps he will grow bored of waiting and simply leave."

With a slight gesture, the half-elf dismisses any need for an apology (which is of course the only polite thing to do). "But what if he does not? My lady," he says, plainly hesitating to ask what could be construed as an impolite question, "I am unable to understand how it is that simply deserting your husband is ... preferable to divorcing him. My people consider divorce a last resort, but more --" another exquisitely courteous hesitation -- "honorable than some alternatives."

"It may or may not be *preferable*," she says more patiently. "Divorce is not *possible.* It is not done on our world, and was not considered when the arrangement was created. To change it, my father would have to be involved, for one, and I suppose someone from the company. If I had waited to get word to him and receive a reply, I would still be on Bral."

"I see," ibn Fadil says. "I hope you are not offended by this question, my lady, but would you feel compelled to inform a court here on Janik of this local custom of yours?"

"Lie?" She doesn't look offended, only puzzled. "To what end? I'm sure he brought a copy of the agreement."

"Ah. The agreement actually spells this out?"

"It does not include provisions for its dissolution. And I am not--what is the word... not empowered to change it. Else as I said, none of this would have been necessary."

"No, I mean, does it say 'this agreement may not be severed for any reason' or something like that?"

"Oh. I don't remember the exact wording, but the agreement was entered into for our lifetimes. And as I have said, even if it can be changed, *I* can't do so. I had no part in it."

"Your consent was not required? No, never mind," ibn Fadil says, rubbing at the slight headache that has appeared between his eyes. "My aunt's husband's brother used to say that any contract can be broken, but I think even he would back away from this one."

"Right," he says with a sigh. "So much for lawful options." He gives her a cautious look. "Would you happen to know any secrets he would not want revealed, to threaten him with? If you would even contemplate such a thing, my lady," he adds apologetically.

"Blackmail?" She looks quite scandalized.

"He seems to be a prideful man, and if it worked, it would make him go away," he says mildly. "Of course, if it did not work, it would probably make things worse for you," he muses.

"I will think on it," she says doubtfully. "Though I greatly dislike it, and I do not know if there is anything that would sway him from his course. He has already been far more tenacious than I expected of him."

"Unreasonably so," ibn Fadil agrees, shaking his head. "It is a very long journey ..." His thought trails off as he wonders if he has been underestimating the threat the man represents. "In any event, I am afraid I have no other ideas, my lady," he says. "I hope he *does* get bored and leave, and I am sorry to have questioned you so closely to so little avail." Giving her a slight bow, he takes his leave.

His visit has definitely been noticed; he is followed on his way out of the dockyards. Unable to think of any immediate avenues for further investigation, he returns to the square to find his juggling friend already spreading the word about the attack on Bral, concluding with an announcement that 3 Trees is offering a sizeable reward for Fang or for information leading to his or her capture. Confident that he has lost his follower among the crowds, he returns to the inn to collect Nyala before rendezvousing with the others.

* * *

Emmett separates himself from Pham and Alais for the afternoon, after getting assurances of seeing them later that night. He then makes his way back to the rooms he is sharing with Inez at high speed, hoping that he'll be able to catch up with her.

After a half hour of following her trail through the markets, being directed by one shop-keeper after another, he finally finds her. She's looking over some sturdy clothes, and carrying a few small paper-wrapped packages. Emmett doesn't bother to be stealthy, just making his best speed to her side.

"Hi. I hope you found yourself something prettier than that?"

"Oh, don't you worry," she grins.

After a brief hug and a longer kiss, he suggests they stop for a drink, and in a bustling open-air bar they sip some wine while he splits his time between bringing her up to speed on Ginevra's problems and explaining how he needs her help.

"Wow." Inez contemplates the whole mess for a few moments, shakes her head and finishes her drink. "Anything I can do, I guess...."

"Glad to hear it" Emmett stands up and holds her chair for her as she rises, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek to thank her for helping out. It's obvious that Emmett is 'at the reins' and even Inez's obvious charms won't keep him from keeping this thing aloft.

* * *

Nyala is napping when ibn Fadil returns to the Gilded Vine, though she wakes at the sound of the door opening.

"Good evening. You were out for a while," she observes curiously.

"Much too long," he says, stopping short of the bed and ostentatiously putting his hands behind his back. "We have to go out," he explains, "but I know if I touch you I will forget all about it."

"Oh?" She looks amused. "Well then, we shall have to take care of this business as quickly as possible, yes?" While speaking, she straightens her clothing, runs a comb through her hair, and checks her rapier. "Where are we going?"

"Emmett seems to have latched on to the lady's problem, I think because of Valarin's interest," he goes on. "He has suggested that everyone interested meet at this show, the 'Wonders of the Northern Woods,' this evening at seven bells." He is not pretending to be very happy about this.

"The woman has a remarkable talent for enlisting resources," she remarks. "Perhaps I needn't have worried at all. Let us then meet them; if nothing else some entertainment may remove that sour look. Although," she adds with a slight wince, shifting her weight, "I think if I am on this planet much longer my boots will need a cobbler's care - I lost track of the miles early today."

"Too much time aboard ship. But the only thing that alarms me more than what Emmett might plan is what Valarin might *do.* He seems to think that hiding her in a cellar somewhere would answer."

She shrugs. "That is not so alarming."

"No?" He stops at the door. "To me it seems dangerous and ... inappropriate. Well. It seems I learned my mother's disdain for such women, but not to be careless with them." He looks a bit perturbed by this insight.

"Well, compared to what he *might* have in mind," she amends with a twitch of her eyebrow. "What is your solution?"

"If only I had one!" he says, finally going out into the hall. "It seems there is no way to break his claim to her, so we can only hope that Emmett has thought of something workable."

Ibn Fadil leads Nyala along a circuitous route to the show (by which he is prepared to be unimpressed). Having paid his/their way in, he looks around for any of the rest of the crew.

* * *

As Val and Hiro make their way to the Wonders of the Northern Wood, the young sailor is lost in thought. His mind wanders back to his last business trip to Mercadur...

The associate Val was to meet with in Mercadur had turned up dead, floating face down at the docks; the merchandise Val expected to retrieve, gone. He didn't have much choice but to return to Driahn empty handed. Val's mentor, Circio wasn't very upset about it, but somebody else was. The morning after his return, Circio was dead. Their clients thought Circio and Val had cheated them out of the last shipment and word on the street said Val was next. With little hope of talking his way out of the deadly situation, Val had chosen to flee. He's been running ever since...

"I'm getting tired of running," he says finally, mostly to himself. Val knows the swordsman is listening, but continues his train of thought anyway. "I've been running from one thing or another since Circio died, and I'm getting damned tired of it. It's got to stop."

Before he realizes it, Val finds himself at the exhibition hall where his fellow shipmates agreed to meet. They expected him to have a plan. The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach reminds him that he still doesn't have one. Reluctantly, he enters the Wonders of the Northern Wood show...

Emmett and Inez are out front, talking to some other attendees. While Emmett doesn't acknowledge them in any way, Val can hear the half man's voice through the crowd "...Cats. I'd see it again and again."

A short time later the couple work their way in with the evening's crowd. Emmett is able to make out Val's tall form over towards the corner, and steers Inez over there, pretending to go admire one of the early exhibits. It's obvious that despite everything, the half man is enjoying the opportunity to play spy.

A few feet away but facing the other direction and apparently engrossed, Emmett pitches his voice low enough for Val and Hiro, but hopefully no one else. "Hey. I have the beginnings of a plan. How about you?"

The Kensai's body all but sighs. Hiro glances at Emmett with a wince and a head shake that suggests they've had thoughts but nothing even close to resembling a plan. He then shifts his gaze to Val to elaborate verbally.

Val looks over casually at Emmett and offers a half smile. "Not unless you consider the direct approach a plan," he mutters. The words may come out as a low growl, but the look in his eyes says he's half serious...

Ibn Fadil and Nyala join the group too late to hear Valarin's words, but his expression causes the half-elf to look worried and apologetic. "I hope someone has an idea," he says, "because none of mine have worked out."

Val nods just barely to ibn Fadil, acknowledging he heard. He smiles politely at Nyala before scanning the rest of the crowd casually for signs of anyone watching them or eavesdropping. He stands a little apart from the others, appearing to be interested in a particularly colorful display of flora behind glass. But for a brief moment, he could have sworn one of the vines in there had moved on its own...

"So, did everything go well at your temple?" Val asks Emmett quietly as he sidles up closer to the half-man. He gestures towards the glass, as if commenting on the display.

"Pretty well. Got some ideas. Let's wait till the next room - there's a spot in there where we can talk quietly and not be overheard."

Emmett indeed waits until they're ushered into the next room, where he stakes out a spot in an alcove for the others to join him. Once everyone's there, he begins talking quietly, making sure to not be overheard by outsiders.

"Ok, unless someone's got something better, I have a plan that will get Ginevra somewhere safe, and maybe even get Victor off Janik. It's safe for Ginevra, but entails a little risk for some of us."

"The core of the plan is that Victor is both watching us and a cocky, vindictive little twerp. Val, what do you think would happen if you and Hiro went into the infirmary, bundled Ginevra into a cloak and brought her off to 'jammer that you'd chartered to take the three of you off Janik?"

Val simply stares at Emmett for a moment. He hadn't even thought about that particular course of action, except as a last resort. He's been too preoccupied with other matters--

Then it dawns on him that Emmett seemed to have something else in mind.

"He'd likely give chase," Val says, stating what he hopes is the obvious answer. "But we won't be aboard that 'jammer, will we..." It was more statement than question. He waits patiently for the half-man to finish his plan.

Emmett nods, glad that Val is keeping up. "Not quite - you and Hiro my well be on that Jammer. Maybe with me too. And this lovely lady right here," He inclines his head to his female companion before continuing, "who will have openly and thus inconspicuously entered the infirmary hours before. It's Inez, wearing Ginevra's clothes, with her hair dyed to match - if we can manage it, with a wig if not - and some padding around her lovely narrow waist."

"Ginevra doesn't move until the men Victor has watching the ship have gone off after you - or us, if we think there's any chance of Victor trying something stupid. I don't want to leave Inez's side if we think that's possible. Anyway, once Victor's all up in arms about the fake Ginevra making a break for it, his eyes will be off the infirmary. Then Pham, Alais and Ibn Fadil walk her calmly out and deposit her with a local church. Aram the Chief Artificer at the temple of Gond thinks the Temple of Hera would be our best choice for a woman looking for discreet sanctuary from an abusive husband. None of us have any ties there, so Victor would have no reason for searching there to even occur to him - and even if it did, he has no authority to do so."

Emmett smiles a small smile. "The best part about this is that all we're guilty of is acting suspicious. You two make a display of renting a ship. Inez chooses an odd place to dye her hair and change her clothes. We go off on a brief pleasure cruise around the moon. If Victor tries anything against us, he's nailed by the law and we're in the clear. Ginevra has sanctuary and clerical help. And maybe the docking authority won't even give Victor permission to land again, since he has no real reason to be here and has been annoying the Three Trees people."

"What do you think?"

Hiro smiles. "A clever hawk hides his claws." The swordsman nods in approval of the plan.

Ibn Fadil frowns in thought. "Too complicated," he opines. "Did you plan to warn this 'jammer that an irate husband might pursue it? And who would pay for it?" He shrugs apologetically at Emmett. "If you have found a good place to hide her, then why not slip her out the back of the infirmary and be done with it?"

"There is a back door, but only one gate through the perimeter wall," Val mentions. "They only need to watch that one gate." He is still interested in the plan, despite Ibn Fadil's apparent reluctance.

Emmett nods, as if he'd thought of that. "Because with all of Victor's people watching the place, we *can't* safely get her out. Unless these guys are so stupid that they're only watching the front door, or we're going to try and get an 8 month pregnant woman out a window or across the rooftops. They need to be looking elsewhere - otherwise they'll just stop her before we get to the temple, which would leave her even worse off, or just start watching the temple, which would leave us right back where we started."

"As for the Jammer trip, we may not even need to take it. Val and Hiro put down a deposit, which would be much cheaper, and then do the hustling out. Making the rental under the watchful eyes of Victor's goons is just to add a touch of...well, to make it seem more real to him. It doesn't matter if they get on the ship or not, or if the ship leaves dock or not - what matters is Victor and his men are looking at Val and company, and not at the infirmary. Giving him any reason to think that it's really Ginevra with them will increase the chance of that."

"If we don't see Victor's goons run off to warn the boss or tail Val, than we don't move Ginevra out. Then we're out the cost of a wig and a deposit, but Ginevra's no worse off. She hasn't moved, and Victor still has nothing legitimate to complain to the authorities about."

Emmett looks at Ibn Fadil again, "Unless you have something better and easier with less risk. If you do, I'm all ears - I just think we're running out of time, and this is something we could run tomorrow if need be."

"I don't mind spending the money for a decoy," Val says into the pause. He gives Emmett an appreciative smile, relieved that they were not all relying upon his plan.

Of course, he may still get his chance if-- *when* Victor takes the bait... And this way, Ginevra would be still safe. He meets the Kensai's eye for a moment, and Val has the feeling the swordsman was thinking the same thing.

"The one gate is a problem," the half-elf admits. "But I still think it would be better if the Victor thought she was still in the infirmary. Having it watched would keep him occupied, and he would have no reason to try to make one of us tell him where she is."

He seems oddly unperturbed by that thought, but looks at the others for a moment to see if they understand him. "He has only four men with him that I have seen, though I suspect he has as many as six --"

"At least six," Val interjects.

-- and it should not be hard to keep them busy elsewhere while a rented carriage takes the lady off to these Heraites." He nods at Val. "If Valarin here is willing, I think the Victor and two or three of his men could be persuaded to follow *him* for a while, to start with."

Val stares at the half-elf for a moment, trying to sort out this revised plan .

"Waitaminute," he says with a trace of irritation, "I thought you just said you thought it better if he didn't have the chance to make one of us tell him anything. Now you want me to be the *lone* bait to draw him away?" He gives the Zakharan a suspicious look...

"We want only one man watching the infirmary," ibn Fadil explains smoothly. "A little sleight of hand should convince him the lady has not left -- I have a idea about that, but it requires the help of one or two people who are not part of the _Cat_'s crew and so cannot be recognized, but I think I can find them."

Turning to Val, he adds, "I have no intention of letting them catch you. I think Hiro should go with you, to discourage them a bit, and I will follow along in case things get out of hand." Which is only fair, the thinks, since he is the one proposing the plan.

"Too many captains will sail a boat up a mountain." Hiro seems to have some hesitancy to add outsiders to the mix....

Val thinks a moment about what that's supposed to mean. "No outsiders?" he asks, trying to interpret the swordsman's meaning.

"I would make them crew, not captains," ibn Fadil says dryly. "But if you all are comfortable with dodging the man until we can all get off this moon, we can drop that idea. We will probably have to dodge him anyway, after all," he adds in an irritated tone. "I would just prefer to keep his reasons for it to a minimum."

Turning to Val, he adds, "I have no intention of letting them catch you. I think Hiro should go with you, to discourage them a bit, and I will follow along in case things get out of hand." Which is only fair, the thinks, since he is the one proposing the plan.

"I have no intention of letting them catch me, either," Val responds to ibn Fadil with a half-smile to break the tension he feels building. "And you don't have to go. Don't want you recog-

nized if things *do* go bad." He says the last in an even tone, without spite. He doesn't want another row with the half-elf. Not here, not now.

"Basically," he sums things up, "it's the same plan, minus the pleasure cruise. Either way, we're agreed that a decoy is necessary."

Emmett's been watching the back and forth before chiming in. "No outsiders. We should be able to handle it, and anyone outside of this, or outside this meeting, just increases the chances of one of Victor's men figuring out that the decoy's a decoy."

"Ibn Fadil, I kinda like the idea of them still thinking she's in there, but if we don't use a fake Ginevra - which is pretty much guaranteed to get all of their attention and reduce it to one man watching the place - how do you intend on luring all the watches away in a less dangerous fashion. I don't want to break any laws, hurt anyone who doesn't draw on us first, or leave any of us off by ourselves."

Emmett takes in everyone with a glance before returning his gaze to the half-elf, "The fake Ginevra keeps the seven of us in two groups of three and four with single destination trips. You'd better have a hell of an ace up that sleeve to convince me we should draw attention to ourselves and then split up more than that just to add in a little more confusion to our ol pal Vic."

"I am not sure I understand you," ibn Fadil says. "My thought was to quickly hide the lady in the carriage while the watcher was distracted, and then have a couple of strangers openly get in and drive away. If you want no one else involved ..." He shrugs. "I suppose that if you flee back to the infirmary with the false Ginevra when confronted, that would also serve. A carriage would help with that deception, also."

"Well, if all we want is a carriage driver, that's different. All he has to know is where he's taking people. And if we're hustling her in during a distraction, we can just as easily hustle in You or Pham or Alais. That way she's with someone we trust who can defend her if the worst happens."

"But I don't think we want a carriage on the False Ginevra - Vic's men need plenty of time to see her and respond, which a carriage wouldn't give them. I suppose we could try to jump a carriage if they confront us, but there's no good way to time that. That just gets way more complicated - though they could try and head back to the Infirmary on foot if something happens, just on general principles."

Val's turn to listen to the exchange back and forth for a moment as he watches the crowd viewing the exhibit. "I think Emmett has a good point though," he says after a moment. "if we can get the whole lot of them to come after us, it's that much easier to move her without notice. Easiest way to do that is move that which he wants most. Or make him think we are..."

Of course, Val still feels guilty for dragging Inez into the mess further. He casts her an apologetic look.

"But if they catch the decoy, then they will guess that we have succeeded in moving the real lady," ibn Fadil objects. "Perhaps we should abandon the idea of making him think she is still in the infirmary," he says reluctantly. "I think it would be wiser, but it also seems to make the problem too difficult to solve."

"No, look," Emmett says, "the key thing is to get Ginevra out through the gate ..." He and the half-elf, with the occasional comment from Val, rapidly chew over the problem and proposed solutions and finally come up with a plan they can agree on:

Val and Hiro will arrange to be observed chartering a Spelljammer. The disguised Inez, accompanied by Val, Hiro, and Nyala, will leave the infirmary by the front door and go toward the docks, hopefully drawing off all or most of the watchers. Emmett will (reluctantly) stay behind at the front door in order to come out and distract any remaining watchers when Ginevra, accompanied by Pham, Alais, and ibn Fadil, slips out the side door into a wagon with a hired driver. The wagon will then drive out through the gate and Emmett will try to catch up with the decoy party. The decoy party will try to pretend to be driven back to the infirmary or come up with a pretext to return there so it appears that Ginevra is still there. Once the real Ginevra is safely on her way, ibn Fadil will double back to see what is going on with the decoy group.

"But I don't want anybody to be left alone," Emmett objects at that point.

"Do not worry about me," ibn Fadil says.

"Perhaps Inez can fake-it to look like she needs the healer again before we can get aboard? You know, something to do with the baby," Val suggests, thinking of a plausible reason why the decoy group would return.

"Of course," he continues darkly, "we may very well get intercepted if they see we aren't leaving. We should be ready for that."

Emmett and Inez will try to see the Heraites this evening; if they have no luck, Inez and Nyala will try tomorrow morning. Val and Hiro will hire the ship in the morning and, later, meet Emmett to see about hiring a wagon and finding a chestnut wig.

Pham arrived at the Northern Woods shortly after Emmett did, and listened politely as everyone discussed the plan. His eyes, however, showed an uncharacteristic distance and concern.

Near the end of the conversation, he hears his name mentioned and refocuses with a start. "Oh... yes, I'll be happy to help out in the group taking the lady to the Heraites. I'll also go ahead and get the carriage reserved. I suspect that Victor's men don't connect me with the rest of you yet, so I'd be a good person to take care of that detail."

"I apologize for not really paying attention - my interview with the poor madman has concerned me somewhat. I have a feeling that his vision is important, but I've no idea what it means."

Alais, having listened to most of the planning session without comment, shakes his head and wanders off. He'll be spending tomorrow at the library, working on something *important.*

* * *

After the meeting, Emmett leads the way back through the town, keeping a lookout for tails, and does his best to follow the directions given to him by the Contemplator to the temple of Hera. "If anyone's likely to help her, it's them. However, from what Aram told me, they aren't that...trusting...of male petitioners. I'm hoping that you'll do most of the explaining...here. Apple tree. That looks like the place."

The temple is in a converted manor house that has seen some additions over the course of the past fifty years, though it's still small compared to some of the others they've seen. Aram told him to ask for Lelia, who knows him. This entails something of a wait. A few women pass through on their way to other parts of the temple; Emmett is cheered by the fact that they wear quite distinctive robes, dark red with a closure like the "eye" of a peacock's feather.

A meal is cooking, somewhere off in the distance is a wailing baby and the thud of children's feet, and out back the birds who donated the feathers are making their customary ungodly racket. Not exactly serene.

"Yes?" A somewhat harried-looking middle-aged woman sweeps through the door into the front hall where they are waiting. "What does he need *now?*" She's apparently referring to Aram. The sword she's wearing somewhat spoils the matronly effect.

"Ma'am." Inez inclines her head respectfully. "Sorry to interrupt, but it's an urgent matter. We're here on behalf of a woman who traveled from Bral on our ship...." She lays out Ginevra's situation quickly, adding, "I was on the Rock for a while, and some of the stories about this guy would curl your hair. We have a plan, but it's going to require some help." She glances at Emmett.

"Let me explain...."

* * *

The next morning, the plan is set in motion. Pham has no difficulty in securing a carriage and driver for the necessary time, and after some shopping around Inez finds a wig that matches Ginevra's hair closely enough (and a few other things, of course).

Ibn Fadil wakes rather later than dawn today; Nyala is not the only one used to walking much shorter distances than he did yesterday. Contemplating the trouble he might get into later today, and the question of when he is going to find the time to report his new insight about Three Trees's loss to bin Rashad, he decides to put everything off for a while and enterprisingly begins to massage Nyala's feet and legs. As his enterprise turns out to be quite rewarding, there is some delay (increased by stopping for breakfast) before

Later, with a good breakfast [also] behind them, the two take the now-familiar streets back to the infirmary, to inform Ginevra and the healers of the plan and wait for everyone and everything else to be assembled. While the two show their ship tokens the guard, ibn Fadil spots one of Victor's men loitering about. There's another one watching the infirmary, as expected.

They are the first to arrive. Nyala explains the plan to Ginevra; ibn Fadil, restless and expecting his patience with the woman to be tried, excuses himself to wait for the others. After listening to the explanation twice, Ginevra agrees. The stress of the past few days has already taken a visible toll; she has noticed the watchers as well, and thinks her husband may have been stalking the infirmary staff as well as her allies from the _Cat_.

Next to convince is Sister Mahal, whose gnomish nature shines through in the clear delight she takes in the plan. She is not one to be led by her own enthusiasm, however, and spends several minutes in deep thought before giving her assent.

Meanwhile, Hiro and Val (sans disguise) stroll through the dockyard gate and past the infirmary on their way to where a few small mosquito ships are docked near a sign saying "For Hire - Reasonable Rates - Janik and Maekalan Only", picking up the expected tail along the way. Although the reasonableness of the rate is questionable, Val is certain that they've been seen, and that Victor will draw the expected conclusion.

"I hope this is working," Val mutters under his breath to Hiro as the two leave the charter behind. "I did notice someone following us as expected though."

Val casts a casual look around to take in the shadow, and to see if there are any more joining in, but only the man from the infirmary has followed them. He doesn't expect there to be any just yet. Not until they question the charter captain, anyway. Then there's going to be trouble...

Surprisingly, Val finds comfort in the task of drawing out the watcher. He's pretty certain things will get ugly, and soon. But for now he has a purpose, a goal, and he is focused and sharp. A cold fire is burning within, and he feels more alive right now than he has in a very long time... He mentally runs through his inventory of knives, tools, and sword, making sure each is at hand when needed.

"We'll get our things and head over to the infirmary?" Val confirms with Hiro after they've arranged things with the short, chubby captain of the Melhacen. The man reminds Val of someone he used to know who traded in horses of dubious provenance.

The plan was to make it look like they were getting ready to head offworld. That means gathering their gear (or at least their packs filled with non-essentials, in case they're lost in a scuffle) to make it look that way, and checking out of the boarding house. This will also give some time to Victor and his men to organize, perhaps getting all of them to come after the decoy. As they head back to the gate, Val notes that the watcher who first followed them has disappeared, and it takes a while for them to spot the new man.

Make that men. His suspicions that there are two this time is confirmed by the time they reach the room and gather their things to head back.

Meanwhile, Emmett and Inez have reached the dockyard and are on their way to the Lazy Cat, props at hand, maintaining the fiction that they have nothing to do with the group that Victor is interested in. Inez does a quite convincing shriek of pain as she "slips" and appears to wrench her ankle; the presence of one of the dock guards lends credibility as they, too, make their way to the plan's central point.

"They do have someone watching the gate," ibn Fadil says to Emmett once he and Inez are conducted to the untenanted room the group has been loaned. "I will go through after the wagon and if he is still there, lead him off and rejoin the wagon afterward." He seems to have managed to set aside his misgivings about the whole affair and is giving it his full attention.

"We've had two shadows since picking up our packs," Val mentions to the group once he and Hiro arrive, giving the best descriptions he can. To the Zakharan he adds, "Be careful..."

"Good." Emmett is pleased; they've got all the attention they could have wanted. Now it's up to Victor to do as he's expected to. "Time to change, hon." He gives Inez a quick embrace and kiss.

As the group runs through the plan once more, Val is distracted by other thoughts. He is ready to enact the plan, and knows the details quite well now. Having spent so much time with Ginevra during the last leg of the voyage, the last few days on Janik without her have been odd. It's just that it is slowly starting to sink in that he may not get to see Ginevra again after this. Soon she'll be ushered off to the Temple of Hera, and Heraites are known for their...distrust of men.

Taking a deep breath to steady his resolve, Val slips unseen from the room and heads down the hall to say his good-byes. Again...

* * *

Meanwhile, at the library, Alais is trying to find a source of information on sphere-scale elemental equilibrium. What little there is, he finds slow going, though the librarian on duty appears intrigued by the subject. Hip-deep in abstruse magical mathematics, he wonders once or twice how the others are getting on with the day's activities.

Alais flutters through the stacks, sampling here and there...and then stops.

Yes, of course! Why didn't he think of this before!?! This changes everything!
We have to leave immediately. And where are those fools now? Oh, yes. Spelljammer's gills!

Alais leaves the library to go find everybody.

* * *

Val hears voices behind the door and realizes that Ginevra is not alone.

Val hesitates just outside the door and listens for a moment. Once sure he can identify the voices as fellow conspirators, he knocks lightly upon the door.

The diminutive medicus opens it; behind her Nyala relaxes slightly from her wary pose.

"Is it time?" Ginevra asks nervously.

"Not yet," Val replies with a hesitant smile as he slips in the room and closes the door. "I just stopped by to..." he pauses a moment, looking briefly to the elf and gnome in the room, unsure of how to continue.

"I wanted to check on you," he lies as he runs his fingers through his hair. Val offers another smile, this one a little strained.

Val does notice Ginevra's nervousness, but resists the urge to hold her and comfort her. Barely. She's wearing the same look in her eyes that made him want to help her in the first place; the same look that once made him light-headed and helpless. How he longed to lose himself in those eyes...

She's counting on us, he tells himself, snapping out of his momentary lapse. With a bit of effort, Val slides behind his facade of casual cheer, intent on seeing Ginevra smile.

"Inez is getting ready, so it shouldn't be long."

She nods, looks around at the three of them with a slightly tremulous smile. "I hope this works. You're all taking a terrible risk... I can't thank you enough."

"Thank us later, after everything is over," Val tells her with a (mock) smile, as if there is nothing at all to worry about. Part of him, however, is actually looking forward to the risk...

Bolstered by his mask of confidence, he asks Ginevra, "May I have a moment alone?" He offers a rueful smile to the healer and archer in apology.

Nyala's look is slightly arch, but she leaves the room with Mahal.

Once the door is once more closed, the room is quiet. Val had been in such a hurry to see Ginevra again, possibly for the last time, that he had not thought about what he wanted to say. All he can do is look upon the woman that has made such an impression upon his life.

It is obvious by Val's uncharacteristic silence and solemn expression that something weighs heavily upon him. So many feelings for this woman kept inside for much too long, and he dares not give voice to any of them. But now, all of those feelings churn within him, threatening to burst forth in a torrent of uncontrolled incoherent babbling. For the briefest moment, a smile flickers across his face at the thought.

"Alone at last," he says finally.

She nods in response, her expression compassionate though somewhat distracted; his part in this story will be ending soon, but for her the most important chapters will come in the next few weeks--the child, the possibility of reunion....

Val sees that Ginevra is preoccupied with her own thoughts, and he realizes they aren't about him. How selfish he had been... His illusions are quickly swept away, and he swallows his own pride down like a bitter pill.

"You remind me very much of someone dear to me," she had told him aboard the *Cat*, after the bloodsacs attacked. He remembers how he felt when he heard those words; disappointment once more washes through him as he looks at her. Color floods his face as he is consumed with shame.

She doesn't love you, Val tells himself. *And she's got more important things to worry about than you, fool.*

Shut up, you.

He would still do this for her, to ensure her safety of course. He could do no less. And that thought rekindles the flame within, readying him for the task before them all.

This passes through Val's mind with lightning quickness; hardly a moment has passed.

"I... I just wanted to make sure you are okay, and to wish you luck," he tells her gently. Against his better judgement, he takes a step towards Ginevra and lays a hand upon her arm.

"May fortune favor fools today," Val says with a smile.

"I think she will," she smiles back, taking his hand tightly in her own.

There's a brisk tap on the door. "Time to raise curtain on this little show," Emmett announces. Pham has arrived with the wagon.

They join the rest of the group. Mahal offers all of them her blessing, and stands on a chair to hug Ginevra, of whom she's clearly become rather fond during the past few days. Inez practices moving in her awkward padding and cloak, nervous now that it's all become real.

No reason to delay, and every reason not to. At the front door, Val makes a brief show of scanning the area, giving no sign that he has spotted the watchers, and the four of them move toward the charter ship--slowly.

It is a hackle-raising experience, like walking through a serene forest and beginning to realize that you've been noticed by wolves. Val suspects that Victor has more than six men; several are trailing them openly now, perhaps to cut off retreat, and he spots a few others keeping pace beyond the ships to each side. Looks like they swallowed the bait.

Back at the infirmary, the coast appears clear. Ginevra is quickly bundled into the wagon with Pham, and with ibn Fadil shadowing them, they creak off toward the gate. Emmett maintains watch from the windows for a few minutes, but they seem to be away clear, and with a satisfied look he sets off at his own best pace to join the decoys. Who are slowly being surrounded....

"They're closing in around us," Val mutters quietly to his companions. "Looks like they don't want us going anywhere but forward." His left hand reflexively tightens around the pommel of his sword.

Outwardly, Val maintains a calm appearance, casually taking note of the closing circle about them. Inside, his mind is racing, trying to think of a way to get everyone out of this safely. Looking over at Nyala and Hiro, he takes some comfort in their quiet resolve.

"Are you okay with this?" he asks Inez quietly, unsure of how she is handling the situation. He acts as if he is fussing over her (not a hard act at all, since he is fussing), offering his hand to steady her ungainly walk.

"Yeah, let's just get it over with," she replies tensely. They can see the charter boat slips ahead now. Somewhere behind them, beyond their watchers, Emmett is still catching up with them. Val keeps a cautious eye out for Victor. If things go bad, he wants to be able to face the man directly.

* * *

At wagon speed through the crowded streets, it seems a very long journey to the new refuge.

Preferring caution to overconfidence, ibn Fadil continues to idle along behind the wagon, trying to avoid being seen by Pham (who might stare at him). As a result he seems to appear out of nowhere when the wagon pulls up at the Heraites' place. "No trouble at all," he says breezily, as if he is not worrying at all about those left behind at the port, and helps Ginevra climb down from the wagon.

"I hope so," she replies, looking anxiously back the way they came. Two of the red-robed women have come out to meet them.

"I am sure of it," he assures her. "Hiro is a match for those thugs all by himself." In truth, he is not sure of any of that, but all of this will become pointless if the lady worries herself sick.

Pham steps out of the carriage, and helps Ginevra down as well. "That went as well as could be expected." He turns to the red-robed priestesses as they approach. "Thank you for helping in this lady's time of need. Hera is truly the most gracious of hostesses." Worried that something may yet go wrong, he looks for any signs that these women are not as they appear to be, but sees nothing to alarm him.

"We do what we can," one of the two replies modestly. "Come along inside, my dear," she says to Ginevra. "And you two as well, I suppose."

The half-elf follows them, looking around with interest.

Once the wagon driver has been paid, they go on inside. It's a pleasant old building and hums with life, but from the looks of it running slightly ahead of the inhabitants in the upkeep department. A handful of young children career around the front room, pause for instant to assess the newcomers, and continue. Soup is cooking somewhere.

"Are you hungry?" one of the women asks, sidestepping a child adroitly. "I'm Maura, by the way, and this is Rae. If you're tired we can get you settled into a room, they were supposed to clean one out this morning so you won't be going up the stairs all the time."

"The soup smells wonderful," Ginevra opines.

"Yes, thank you," ibn Fadil says absently. There is a peculiar expression on his face, which might be read as a mixture of approval and wistfulness.

They troop through the kitchen, which is large, crowded, noisy, and very warm, and into another room that has been tacked onto the original building as the need for space grew. The visitors attract plenty of attention, particularly ibn Fadil; they are the only adult males in the place, and this appears to be a human-oriented order. About half of the women wear Hera's robe or some symbol of the group. Some of the rest are clearly recuperating from or preparing for childbirth, but others seem to be merely visiting with friends or helping with the meal. A toddler making his determined way across the room, bumps into Pham and topples over.

Not unused to curious looks, the half-elf accepts these cheerfully, smiling at one and all. This will, he concludes, be the perfect place for the lady to stay -- as long as the Victor does not know where she is.

Pham and ibn Fadil don't feel it wise to linger long, however, before they return to the rendezvous at the Cask and find out how the rest of the plan worked.

They each accept some soup and bread, and then politely excuse themselves. "Good luck, milady," ibn Fadil also says to Ginevra, with the sketchy bow that is all he can manage in these cramped quarters. "I think it may not be wise for any of us to visit you here," he adds apologetically, "but we will see what we can do."

Pham smiles at Ginevra, and says "Yes, I think it best if no one from our ship visit here again. I wish you luck lady - your story has made this trip quite a bit more interesting. I hope you find the happiness you seek."

Pham then turns to the hostess. "Thank you again. The lady and her child will do much better her under Hera's gentle grace than she would have under the thumb of her husband."

She inclines her head in response. "For what you have done, may her blessing follow you the length of your days."

Ginevra, looking very far away, nods distractedly, then seems to bring herself back to the present. "Please give the others my gratitude? I did not expect to find such stalwart folk in my journey."

Outside the house, the half-elf sighs and does not look back. "Do you ever want to go home, Brother Pham?"

"Home? That's an interesting question... I rather doubt my home really exists any more. Oh, the village is still there, of course. But my place in it vanished when I received my calling.

"Do you really miss Bral all that much? Or are you referring to wherever you were from originally?"

"Originally." He grimaces. "Bral is a poor substitute, but at least it never reminds me of home." He pauses at an intersection to look around for any threat, but sees nothing to raise his suspicions.

"So it is enough for you, to have your god and your work?" he continues.

* * *

Back in the house, Ginevra thanks the woman who has shown her to a room where she can rest, and when she has gone, looks around the threadbare space with a quiet sigh. Another unexpected stopping place in this journey, another unlooked-for reprieve. She does not even know who this goddess is, but her followers appear kindly.

Nothing, she thinks ruefully, _I have nothing but the kindness of others._ There is, however, something in the pocket of her dress when her hand goes there; the chit from the _Lazy Cat_. Once the ship lifts off she will need some other identification, but there are certain to be ways of getting that; she is beginning to learn to think of these things. One thing at a time; she will speak to these women tonight. Perhaps there is something useful she can learn to do while she is here.

For now, however, she is very weary, and rest without fear a welcome thought. "Be safe, my friends," she murmurs to the air before sleep finds her.

* * *

Val has to poke Inez - who is more nervous than she wants to let on - to remind her of the plan. She does a fairly good job of slowing, falters and sways slightly. Nyala catches her arm, and the two women turn around.

The three men behind them stare impassively from about twenty feet away. Off to one side, a quick motion is one of the men there sprinting away. Val pretends to be solely and *very* concerned about “Ginevra” until they’re close enough that it’s clear the men blocking their way are not going to move, no matter how good a job Inez is doing of looking like a woman on the brink of collapse. Hiro glances at Val, willing to give Guile a last chance before this becomes a matter for steel. Nyala is impassive as usual.

Inez, with the practicality Emmett so enjoys in her and a high C most bards would envy, screams. The sound carries over the general clamor of the docks, bringing the attention of a dozen or more onlookers. Some men move in their direction and pause, looking at the two facing groups uncertainly.

“We need to get her to the infirmary,” Val announces for the benefit of the audience. “Stand aside.”

“We have a healer on our ship,” one of the men blocking the way counters. “It’s much closer.” He takes a step nearer Ginevra.

“No, thank you.” He takes a step himself; to his surprise, the man backs off a little bit -- but not much, and Val realizes that they are trying to slow the four down.

“Leave her with us and *you* might get out of this alive,” the leader of the opposing men suggests softly.

There are several figures approaching from the direction of the *Pride*; one of them they recognize as Victor, another the man who ran to fetch him when it became clear that their quarry was not after all taking ship. Inez’s scream has also attracted the attention of a Three Trees overseer, however, and Victor’s men are forced to move aside as he pulls his horse up near the group.

“What’s all this, then? Has someone been hurt?” He eyes the lot of them with equal suspicion.

Val explains for his benefit that the lady is near her time and has been somewhat ill, and despite the kind offer of these men, truly requires the attention of the skilled infirmary staff, where they are familiar with her condition.*

“Well then, be about it,” the overseer tells them sharply. “You there, shift yourselves out of the way. What ship are you with?”

“These are my men, Overseer,” Victor announces, sweeping up to the scene. “I apologize if they have been giving any trouble.” He’s not quite fool enough to start a fight under these circumstances, though his eyes glitter disquietingly when he looks at Val.

The overseer grunts and gestures for Val’s group to move on and the rest to get on with their business. As they pass Victor, Val notes the intensity of his gaze toward Inez. Has he realized that she is an imposter, despite her heavy cloaking? In any case, Victor now knows very well where *he* is, and losing him again might be difficult...

For now, however, it only remains to get back to the infirmary to complete that part of the illusion, divest Inez of her disguise, and figure out the next move.

Emmett adopts a slightly perturbed expression when he sees Alais at the infirmary, having slipped in out of sight (hopefully) before Victor’s men could return to any sort of watch position. Still, dealing with the out of breath wizard gives him a way to diffuse his tension and nervousness over the others - especially Inez, who he dragged into this - getting back safely to the infirmary.

"What are you doing here. I thought you were going to be in the library all day?" Emmett is trying hard to keep the scorn out of his voice, and it comes across as more nervous irritation. While he did tell everyone that they could opt out with no repercussions, Alais's dismissive attitude towards Ginevra's plight still rubs him the wrong way.

"I came over to see if you were done with all this, but I suppose you're not. What are you doing now?"

"Pacing," is Emmett's succinct reply. He is prevented from going any further by Val and Company's arrival.

When the others walk in the door, Emmett carefully doesn't approach them or the windows until after the door is closed and they're safely protected from view. He then moves in and gives Inez a hug - a comforting embrace. "Thanks," he whispers in her ear, "you did great." She hugs back hard, clearly relieved that it's done with.

Once finished, he turns to Val and Hiro. "Think he bought it?"

Hiro recalls Victor's intense gaze at Inez and looks to Val for the answer to the half-man's question. At the very least, Hiro thinks, if Victor was aware of the subterfuge he would still be unaware of Ignorer's new location. Presumably.

"Honestly?" Val says, "I'm not sure. But he did seem to give up a little too easily..." He glances at Hiro and sees his own suspicions and hopes reflected there.

Emmett catches the look from Hiro to Val and grimaces. "OK, He didn't buy it. Still, he has no way to know where she is, and he probably can't be sure."

"Let's hope so," Val adds with a bit of concern.

"OK, we need to get out of here. Filter into the Cask when you can. Inez, let me help you with the disguise, and then we can put a bandage on your ankle and limp out of here as quietly as we can."

"I'll head out in a bit," Val tells the others. "I have a feeling Victor is going to be watching a lot more closely now..." He suspects Victor will likely single him out now, and he doesn't want to draw any more attention to his companions.

Up until this moment, Val had not considered getting back out of the infirmary, nor where to go afterward. He also realizes his disguise is stored back at the saferoom. He leans against a wall and thinks of how he's going to get out of here in one piece...

Emmett looks at the others, then nods. "Val, you and Hiro go out together in about an hour or so. If you can get our good gnomish doctor to visibly shoo you out, so much the better. Try and lose any followers and come join us at the Cask."

Val smiles and snaps Emmett a jaunty salute, not bothering to move just yet from studiously holding up the wall.

"Alais, why don't you come with Inez and I when we go. We'll be leaving in another quarter hour or so, limping together and heading for the Cask. With luck, Ibn Fadil and Pham are waiting for us there, and you can tell us what's got you running."

With that, Emmett leaves with Inez to help her back into her clothes and put a bandage around her ankle to keep the lie intact.

"I don't understand. Why don't we just leave now?" Alais asks.

"Because right now there are people watching the building, interested in what we're doing and probably wanting to do mean things to us. Inez and I are leaving in a way that keeps our illusion intact. If you want to head to the Cask now, go right ahead."

"But you see, the basic principle of the school of illusion is an obstruction to science--a ladeling on of false information and an obstacle to true learning."

Emmett turns and gives Alais a very...patient look. "Exactly. We're trying to keep 'them'" he points to the door with his hook, "obstructed from the true learning that 'we'" he swings his hook around to the assembled company, "just pulled one over on them."

"If 'they' do get that true learning, 'we' might get an intimate lesson on the end of a sword! Got that?!"

"Well that's not right."

Nevertheless, it is the situation in a nutshell. By the time Emmett and Inez leave the infirmary, watchers are scattered liberally around the place; two attach themselves to the slowly moving pair.

Val and Hiro receive the attention of at least three watchers once Mahal scolds them on their way (with every evidence of enthusiasm).

"Oh, well. I was hoping he'd be smarter than that." Emmett picked up the followers behind them with his good eye, and held Inez a little closer. "We've picked up a couple of shadows. I doubt they'll try something, but if they do, just met me handle it."

Once in the front door, Emmett scans the room quickly for his shipmates. If everything went well, the pair should be there.

The half man moves with speed over to them, directing Inez to get a table front and center, in full view of the bartender and the rest of the room looking at their faces for an indication as to how well things went. "OK, no time to talk. We picked up some shadows that followed us here. You guys need to either slip out the back or hide in the corner out of sight if you want to keep your cover on this. Inez and I will connect with the others somehow. There's a door out the back that I doubt they've covered."

Ibn Fadil shifts indecisively in his seat. "The deception failed? Is everyone all right?"

"We can't tell - he didn't rip Inez's wig off, if that's what you mean. But he's now either really suspicious or increasingly angry that we *tried* to ship Genevra off planet. In any case, he's got more men watching anyone who might even look suspicious. You're probably going to get a tail sooner or later, but Pham should still be free of suspicion."

Watching the door, he asks, "What do you propose to do next?"

"Get away from here, don't pick up tails - if you do, go to the Captain or the Three Trees offices and complain about Victor's men harassing you. That's what we're going to do if this keeps up. We'll wait here for Val and Hiro to pass the word that she made it off OK." Nyala will remain at the infirmary to await a more propitious moment to leave.

The half-elf contemplates his diminishing options with a gloomy expression. Avoiding decisions is a habit he is going to have to break, starting now ... he can either wash his hands of the situation, or accept that he is stuck with it whether he likes it or not.

Resigned at last, he fishes out a coin to pay for his half-finished beer. "I am going to slip out and shadow your shadows," he says. "With a little luck I may be able to find out what they want to do."

Suiting his actions to his words, ibn Fadil puts down his money and stands. "I like the idea of complaining to the company, by the way," he adds. "See you later." He slips out through the back door with practiced nonchalance and finds a place where he can keep an eye on the front door. He spots both watchers loitering about.

"Inez, honey, do you want to stay here or do you want to go with them away from prying eyes?"

She hesitates. "I'll stay."

"I'm sorry to have dragged you into this. It should be over soon." The pair take the chairs in the middle of the room and await the others.

Val and Hiro make their way to the Cask, content to let their watchers watch for the moment--it's broad daylight and a busy street, they're clearly not about to start anything.

Val enters the cask with shoulders hung low. The entire trip there is a bit nerve wracking, and maintaining a charade of defeat while trying not to give anything away leaves Val feeling drained. Once certain there are no watchers within the establishment, Val moves over to greet Emmett.

"So where is everybody?" Val asks the half-man by way of greeting. There is a glint in his eyes that tells Emmett that he is relieved to be here. "Has everything else gone well?"

"The dropoff went fine. Ibn Fadil is shadowing our newfound tails." Emmett leans in. "The hard part is done - she's as safe as we can make her. Next step is complaining to Three Trees about Victor's harassment and getting him booted off this moon and back to the Rock."

"If it works," Val mutters. He is not very fond of the idea of relying on Three Trees to send Victor off. Another thought crosses his mind and he asks, "Aren't we all planning on returning to Bral soon? Victor could be waiting..."

Val changes the subject abruptly and asks, "How would I be able to send something to her?" Everyone realizes he speaks of Ginevra, as he has that *look* upon his face. "I know it's probably not a good idea to go directly there, but I wanted to get some money to her..."

"Just wait, Val - we, and she, are going to be here a lot longer than Victor. Doing anything to draw attention to her not would just put her back in danger." Emmett was going to go further, admonishing his tall friend against taking a parting shot at Victor, but he didn't want to alarm Inez, who already looked nervous enough.

"I wasn't planning on walking up to the front gates and demanding to see her, you know," Val says with mock indignation. The smile he offers softens his words. "I was just wondering if anyone has any ideas."

Pham sighs and tries to relax. "It's been a tough night for all of us. I have no right to snap at you. But please consider what's happening. She'll be well cared for. Her caretakers know what they're doing.

"As far as getting her money - I would recommend you wait until Victor is gone. And even then, work through intermediaries. But there is time to worry about that later.

"In the meantime, let us relax for a little, and perhaps look for our next passage. I don't know about you folks, but Janik seems to be a bit trying on the nerves. Although... hmm, I should make one more try to reach him.'

Pham finishes the mug he had left in his hand, bids good night and blessings to his companions.

* * *

Outside the Cask, Captain Ian Baris examines the stallkeeper's goods with painstaking care and wonders what his chances will be if he jumps ship in this port. He'd hoped for a promotion after a few more years on Bral, but the costs of working for this particular Victor are starting to outweigh the benefits of connection to the family. _This whole thing is ridiculous, I know we've been spotted, and what does he expect us to do anyway? Easy enough for *him* to say he'll take care of any trouble._ He sighs and signals two of the others to get around the back of the building.

* * *

Ibn Fadil sees two of the men he has picked out as Victor's heading toward his position.

As the watchers move toward him, the half-elf slips out of their direct path, preferring to watch the street and the man he is almost certain signaled the other two to move.

After a few minutes the man notices ibn Fadil, or so the latter suspects from the look of weary resignation that crosses his face.

Sheer curiosity, or perhaps natural intransigence, prompts ibn Fadil to stay put and see what, if anything, the fellow will do now.

What he sees is another of Victor's men moving at a rapid trot down the street, clearly looking for someone. He spots the captain and, ignoring the other man's "not now!" glare, approaches directly. Reading lips at this distance is tricky, and he can only see Baris' half of the conversation, since the other man's back is to their interested observer, but it goes like this:

"You fool, what do you think you're--"

"What?! What are you talking about, man?"

The confusion is replaced by a stoic resignation. "All right, all right. I understand. Thank the gods he's come to his senses, though why he couldn't have...."

"Never mind. I'll collect the rest. Tell him--"

"Yes. Tell him we have enough information. We'll be along soon." His gesture clearly says some things are best left to the gods. The new man jogs back off the way he came. It looks for all the world like he's collecting the other watchers and leaving--although not without a venomous glance at ibn Fadil, as if all of this (whatever it is) was somehow his fault.

He returns a look of patently false baffled innocence, and watches long enough to see that they are indeed going away; if so, when they are mostly out of sight he goes back into the Cask.

Val looks over at the Zakharan and asks casually, "What's it look like outside?" One could easily mistake his question for commentary on the weather. Yes, getting money to Ginevra can wait. The young sailor is eager to depart the Cask and settle down for a much needed rest.

"They have all left, probably going back to their ship -- the Victor called them back for some reason. We must assume, though, that they know where at least some of us are staying." He glances around the table to be sure they understand his meaning, then rapidly takes off again.

Since it looks like Val has calmed down and gotten the hint, Emmett stands up casually, pulling out Inez' chair so that she can do the same. "Well, I'm ready to call it a day. We're heading back to our room, I guess. Maybe get a good meal. I suggest everyone else does the same."

The couple leave with Pham, and Emmett catches the priest's eye as they leave, "I gather you're looking in on the poor fellow again tomorrow? Let me know how it goes, and if you're

planning on meeting with his brothers so I can back you up. I'm the one who pushed you square into the gears on this one..."

"Yes, I feel I should at least try to talk to him one more time. Hopefully he'll be a bit more lucid given time. I'd hate to think that I'd misread a genuine divine vision. I don't know that I'll go after his brothers, though... that type are best left alone."

With that Emmett leads Inez back to their rooms, keeping the conversation light and keeping an eye out for followers. Hopefully there won't be any, but if there are, well, there are some nice restaurants near the Helm, and Emmett can register a complaint at the same time he takes the brave Inez out for a meal to thank her. She is most appreciative, and obviously glad the whole thing is over.

Emmett has nothing about which to complain; the watchers are gone, as ibn Fadil had said, though he keeps a careful eye out in case there is some attempt at subtlety in the offing.

Val and Hiro wait a while longer before returning to the safe-room, both at high alert, but for once there is no sign of anything amiss. It's almost eerie.

Ibn Fadil continues to follow Victor's men as they return to the docks and the *_Pride_*. They no longer make any effort at being inconspicuous. The half-elf lurks for a while, toying with the idea of the direct approach. The ship appears buttoned up tight, no activity on deck. As he watches, two men leave separately, moving with quick, purposeful strides.

With nothing of interest happening there, he wanders by the infirmary on his way back to the gate, resisting an impulse to go in and see Nyala. No watchers anywhere he can see.

Once inside the city proper, he picks a direction and ambles along, observing the city some more and chewing over his own predicament for perhaps the dozenth time. Still unable to guess how other people -- Uncle Karim, binte Akil, his parents -- will respond to his recent actions, he suddenly asks himself some new questions: What is **he** going to do? What **should** he do? How did he get into this mess?

Preoccupied, he wanders until, perhaps not accidentally, he finds the city's racetrack and spends the rest of the afternoon talking about and watching horses, his other thoughts still percolating in the back of his mind, among them what he's going to tell bin Rashad.

Meanwhile, Alais returns to the library. "You again!" the barrel-like librarian mutters. "Might as well set up a room for you here at this rate. Oh, all right, you can come in. What's it going to be this time?"

Pham returns to his rented room for the evening and kneels for his evening prayers, relating this tale to his god. At the end of prayers he sleeps, hoping to avoid dreams of fire.

* * *

"I have it." The man paced nervously about the ornate room, nearly knocking over a priceless vase with the violence of his passage. "They're in a tavern. Simple. All you have to do is cast a spell--that webbing one would do perfectly. Catch them like flies, ha! Baris and the others can go in and get them, and bring them back here, where I can deal with them at my leisure. It's perfect."

Nassor contemplated this plan for a moment, and contemplated his future in its light. He was a young man, still relatively new to his studies, and disinclined to spend the rest of his life in a Janik prison, or working off an indenture to some bloated 3 Trees bureaucrat. "My lord...."

Victor glared at him. "What?! What are you standing there for? Be about it."

"I think perhaps in your zeal you have overlooked one or two things," he began diplomatically. "One, there will no doubt be other patrons in this tavern, who will be able to identify us to the constables. Two, carrying a half dozen web-bound people through the streets of Janik in broad daylight would undoubtedly cause talk. Three, your family name is proof against much, but not I think open kidnapping and murder. Fourth--" he paused for breath, somewhat enjoying the stunned look on Victor's face. "Fourth, I quit!"

By the time the messenger reached Baris and he had brought his men back, the ship was in something of a state of calm, although he noted that parts of it had been rather radically redecorated since the early morning. One of the tables was missing, the paneling had acquired an assortment of scars, a long-suffering servant moved slowly on her hands and knees, picking glass shards out of the scarlet carpet, and there was no sign of the very... educational tapestry that had once occupied the left wall. Victor was sprawled in his favorite chair with a glass of wine, apparently entirely at peace with the world.

"Did you know that the wise have a saying about revenge, my dear captain?" he said slowly.

"What saying is that, my lord?"

"They say that it is best served cold." He nodded firmly, as if this represented the sum of truth in the universe. "Best served cold."

"Indeed, my lord," Baris replied, for lack of anything better to say.

"I'm sure they think they have outmaneuvered me. There has been a change of plans. We are leaving in the morning, or as soon as we can find a new pilot."

"New pilot, sir?"

"The last one proved faithless."

Bright lad. "I see."

"Best served cold... I like that, really I do," Victor continued musing to himself.

* * *

Nyala is relieved to see him the next morning, and anxious to hear about how the other parts of the plan went. The night at the infirmary was quiet.

"Not only was there no trouble yesterday," ibn Fadil tells her, "but this morning I went to look and their ship is gone! Back to Bral, I suppose." He pretends he is not troubled by the idea of the Victor reaching the Rock well before the rest of them. The sailors he had questioned did not know where the Pride was bound.

"Hm." She looks thoughtful. "I am glad there were no difficulties."

That night, in twilight's deepening shadows, ibn Fadil once more trots up the steps of the Zakharan trade offices and knocks on the door. He is recognized, immediately welcomed in as if he were a long-lost relative, and given refreshments while he waits.

"My apologies for keeping you," bin Rashad greets ibn Fadil. "I hope you've been enjoying your stay?"

He smiles. "There is sunshine, fresh air, and a chance to speak my native language," he says. "How could I not enjoy it?"

After a few more minutes of polite nothings bin Rashad indicates that they can discuss business.

"I have an idea, or a theory at any rate, about what Three Trees is so disturbed about." ibn Fadil pauses for any reaction. "I think the pirates stole some information about their trade routes. Probably the most common ones, or the most profitable ones, such as they might have on hand in their office. They are also sending two ships back to Bral from here, but I think they have no clear idea of what to do."

"Ah, she is bound for the Rock... most interesting." He spends a few moments in unhurried contemplation. "As for the trade routes--yes. This will no doubt have impact on their schedules for some time to come. A pity."

"Pirates are a nuisance for everyone," ibn Fadil observes. "You have an interest in the other ship? I am going back on one of them."

"We have interest in all things," he smiles.

"I also have a more tenuous theory about those pirates; I suspect the leader, Fang, is a woman." He shrugs. "Perhaps not an important detail, but collecting details is my work."

"One never knows when a detail will prove useful."

"At any rate, if I may impose upon your hospitality for a bit longer this evening, I am ready to write my letter."

"But of course."

Left to himself with a new pen, fresh ink, and a level surface to write on (luxury, compared with the last few years), he writes quickly at first. Then toward the end he pauses, debating his decision once more, before slowly penning the last few lines. He studies the letter while the ink dries, makes no corrections or changes, and folds and seals it with a few swift, decisive motions. Addressing the front takes only a moment, and it is done.

* * *

The next morning, Pham returns to the temple where the poor madman lies trapped in his own visions, hoping against hope to reach the man's spirit through the madness. Silent Contemplators allow his passage.

The man is somewhat more lucid today. That he remembers Pham is clear from the way his forehead wrinkles while he tries to remember.

"Who... are you?" There is a trace of suspicion in his still-weak voice.

"Hello." Pham keeps his voice slow and gentle. "My name is Luc Pham. My friend found you on the street, and brought you here. He thought you and I might have something in common. Are you hungry?" Pham slowly reaches into his robe and brings out a small loaf of fresh bread that he'd purchased on the way over. He tears off a piece, and offers the loaf to the madman, who stares at it for a moment and shakes his head. Perhaps it is still too soon. Or perhaps he doesn't trust Pham.

"What is your name?"

"Name..." His forehead wrinkles in concentration. "I had a name. I think. It doesn't matter now, I am no one." A tremor runs through him--a repressed sob? "Deserted, I am..."

"I don't know if you remember, but I came to visit a few days ago. We talked briefly, but you didn't seem to be doing well, so I left you be. Do you think we could talk a bit more now?"

"There is nothing to say," he replies tonelessly. "I am unforgiven, shamed, outcast." His expression is one of intense pain, but his voice remains indifferent. "I cannot atone."

Pham is persistent, and eventually teases out a few answers between the man's frequent fits of self-pitying recrimination. Although his memories of the time before his final vision are unreliable, it seems that his dreams began at about the same time Pham's did. He and his brethren had been on Janik for some time then. What they were doing there he either doesn't remember or simply doesn't want to say. There had been nine of them; none had been so favored by Hextor as to receive similar dreams, and he flatly refuses to believe that Pham could possibly have had similar dreams. Where his brethren might have gone, he has no idea.

* * *

Back at the Vine, Nyala stands by the window, looking down at the street as darkness solidifies its hold on the city.

"A strange place," she judges it. "I am almost sorry to leave so soon, and without seeing the planet and its forests, but perhaps we can return some day."

"Every place is strange, compared with home," ibn Fadil observes from where he is lounging at the room's small table.

"Can there be only one home?" she muses. "Or must all places always be strange, then?"

"Well," he says carefully, "I like to think not. I think it has to do with whether one is looking for a home, or only staying somewhere for a time."

"True enough," she acknowledges, still pensive. "Tell me more of yours? Or perhaps you would rather wait until we have taken off, when it can serve to distract us from the darkness."

He gives her a searching look. "Some things I would like to keep between us. Such as ..." He hesitates, failing to think of a way to not sound like he is bragging. "At home, I am not a poor man. I am my mother's heir, and she is a well-situated member of one of the leading families of the chief city of Zakhara. A lot of good it does me now, on my own out here among the spheres," he adds wryly.

"Indeed," she turns to raise an eyebrow at him. "Thus making your debt-ridden identity all the cleverer, hm? I wish I could say the same, but unless the gods are kinder than their custom...."

"I thought it would be more effective," he says, not sure how to take this response. "I was invisible, I talked to everyone, and it worked very well indeed. But it was harder than I could have imagined." His thought trails off for a moment as he remembers those difficult first months. "I have changed a great deal. Losing the arrogance was good, but ..." He shakes his head at himself. "I am still stubborn. I stuck at it longer than I should have."

She laughs almost silently. "I am not one to condemn another for that trait. But we were speaking of home."

"Yes," he says, brightening, and leaning back in his chair to put his feet on the table. "What else do you want to know about mine?"

"Hm... you could tell me more of your family. It seems rather extensive."

"If you count all the branches and cousins it is," he agrees. "But my parents have only two children, myself and my younger sister, Widad. My mother is active in the family business, which is trading in various commodities on and off Zakhara. She had two brothers and a sister. The sister married out of the family. One brother is the uncle who sponsored me to this career, and he has four sons, whom I have only met a few times. The other brother died in an accident a long time ago. My mother's grandfather had ten children, and I think I shall leave them for another time, which is why I have more second cousins than I can readily count."

“Now my father, he calls himself Hassan among humans. His elven name is Leaf. Yes, just ‘Leaf,’” he adds. “All he says about it is, ‘Why should I limit myself to just one kind of leaf?’ He is a bit strange.” Leaf’s son pauses, searching for words to explain his father. “I believe he is the most intelligent person I have ever met. He sees things ... Well, you will understand when you meet him.” A sidelong glance to catch her reaction to that, before he hurries on. “I said he gardens, which is true. He also owns a great deal of land, on which he breeds plants the way other people breed horses and whatnot. I find it rather dull stuff, myself, but the results are worth a lot of money.”

"I would like to meet him," she tells him. "And the others, though I may forget the names of so many people. Would I not be something of a scandal to your family, however?"

"Well, yes, maybe," he says uncomfortably. "... It has always been expected that at some point I would marry some woman carefully chosen for her family or trade connections. I am not ... content with that plan any more. But I think, perhaps, it is too soon to discuss such things?" His uncertainty and nervousness are palpable.

"Indeed," she agrees thoughtfully. "That is most like the case."

* * *

Over the course of the following day, each member of the *Cat's* crew is located by a messenger from Captain Barthelme. Late that afternoon most of them assemble at the ship, curious--a few couldn't be found, or had already taken ship for elsewhere, but most of the original group is there.

"That everyone?" the captain asks, looking over the small crowd. "All right. This way."

To a general chatter of curious voices, he leads them off the ship once more, a mother goose followed by a strange clutch of goslings. They are headed toward the construction yard, where shifts are changing; the diurnal crews are packing up and going home, leaving species that can work unhampered by darkness to their tasks.

Theo stops at a berth containing a spanking-new damselfly. "This is the newest of Oligarch Volant's ships. Not even named yet. I've spoken to some of you about this already, we're looking for crew to Bral for her shakedown, beyond that's possibility, depending how things turn out. *Cat* crew are getting first chance, thought it was fair to give you a look at her. There are nine berths to fill. Anyone interested, report back here at noon tomorrow. We're taking on supplies tomorrow and lifting off the next morning with as many as want to go."

"Nine?" Ulf mutters in a bemused tone. "Sweet little ship like that has a pilot, one man can run it half-asleep."

"Maybe in case Fang shows up?" Laszlo shrugs. "Beats me. I'm not out of money yet, I'm going nowhere. Plenty of ships heading out of here all the time."

"I'm in," Val says, surprising a few of his fellows. There has undoubtedly been talk of his staying to be with his Lady. Quite the contrary, he is ready to put this whole mess behind him.

That's not to mention it had been Val's intention to go on this next part of the journey all along....

"Count me in, too. That's too sweet looking a ship for me not to take a spin on her." Emmett says, moving over to Val as if to indicate that their part of the crowd are the ones going on the unnamed ship.

"Captain," ibn Fadil asks, "who will be captaining the new ship?"

"Delmar."

The half man speaks up again, "Is that nine crew plus pilots? and do we have pilots yet?"

"Nine including pilots." Theo looks pleased by all the interest.

Pham looks to the captain. "You have a pilot now, powers be willing. She looks like a fine vessel, and I'm ready to be off this moon. Count me in on the voyage."

"I'm going, of course," Alais announces. I've done all I can here, and we need to leave before the conversion reaches this sphere. It might be a week, it might be a few years, but better safe than sorry."

"Conversion?" Val can't help but ask. "What conversion?"

Emmett shares an equally curious glance at the young magus, but refrains from giving him the opening to expound. Unfortunately, Val has already opened the door...

Meanwhile, a few of the other crew members edge away, while others toward, curious to hear what he'll have to say.

Emmett takes the quiet moment to look around for the big purple bulk that is Yestin. "Strange that he hasn't volunteered," the half man thought. "Unless he's afraid of going back to Bral..."

He's there, looking troubled, but not speaking up for the time being.

"Yes, well, since arriving here I have been correlating various bits of information, such as the herd of astroceteacens we saw, the lunatic with whom Brother Pham and I spoke, and several of my own readings, to formulate a theory wherein the multiverse is on the cusp of a cosmic cycle, consisting of a resorting of the elemental balance of the spheres. For instance, the air content of this sphere might change to fire and vice versa. This is entirely natural and not to be feared, although a certain amount of animal panic is, I suppose, natural at the thought of the level of destruction. I would take it philosophically myself, but wish to pursue my work until the latest possible point. This sphere, due to its current elemental makeup, will be, I think, more

susceptible than most--hence the urgency.

"Granted, this theory is still in the early stages, but I give it a, say, 80% chance of being correct. Once we get to another sphere, I can perform further investigations, and be more exact."

Hiro, who had been drinking water from his flask, spit takes it on the nearest crewman.

Someone laughs nervously. Alais has become the center of attention, as the rest of the crew wonder what to make of his claim, and a couple of passers-by wonder what all the excitement is about.

Pham raises his eyebrows. "Hmm... you must have found much more interesting books in that library than I did."

Ibn Fadil, who has been standing quietly by listening, says, "How is this possible, Master Zheremin?"

Val wipes water from his face and spares Hiro a scathing glance. "How soon might this 'conversion' happen?" he asks Alais. The young sailor has more than a passing interest in the well being of this particular sphere, and those within.

"As I said, it's difficult to tell. Might be five years, might be five minutes. There's scarcely enough time to explain it now, and anyway we should be making preparations to leave. Someday when we have sufficient leisure I'll give you an overview."

Val simply stares at the young mage, somewhat startled by his indifference. Emmett simply rolls his eyes, and is beginning to expect things like this from Alais

Ibn Fadil wishes he had some way of telling when the mage is right, and when he is just crazy. "Someday, then," he says politely. Moving some distance away from the others, he asks Nyala, "What do you think? About the ship?" He can tell by the look in her eyes that she likes it; after a few moments of discussion they are agreed.

As the group breaks up again, ibn Fadil and Nyala join Emmett, Val, and the others, but not to discuss the new ship. "Victor has gone," he reports. "Or at least, his ship is gone. I dare say he will be waiting for us at Bral."

"Joy. At least he had the sense to get off Janik." Emmett shrugs. "Well, it's a problem for another day. At best, Val, when he does something on Bral you'll get your shot at him, eh?"

Val offers a simple tight-lipped smile in answer. After all, he'd already thought that Victor might be waiting for their return to Bral. Time enough for Victor to plan something if the return trip will take as long as the voyage here. Time enough for Val to plan as well.

"If you aren't sure he's gone," Val says to ibn Fadil, "then there's no sense in assuming he is. We'd still better be careful." The last is said to everyone with seriousness.

"No matter," he continues, ignoring Emmett's shocked look that Val would actually advise caution, "he'll look the fool waiting around for us to walk down the _Cat's_ gangplank." A mischievous smile curls Val's lip as he turns to admire the damselfly.

"He's up to something, that one," Emmett mumbles, and then smiles. "And damned if I'm not too." There's something about Victor's overt arrogance that gets the Half Man's gears all out of joint. He decides right then that if Val is planning something against Victor on Bral, he was getting in before the pans were drawn up.

Besides, it could be fun...

Shaking his head slightly, he heads over to Inez, who had not voted as yet to go on the Damselfly. "Hey, Hon. looks like I'm shipping out right soon, and I haven't spent near enough money yet. Wanna help?"

She laughs. "When have you known me to turn down an offer like that?"

"Never. That's why we get along so well -- I've never turned down those offers either! I figure we upgrade to the best hotel in town for the night, hit a bunch of bars and stop doing all this sedentary plotting stuff. Sound like fun?"

"Sounds fantastic. No more plotting for me."

"Great!" There's a brief pause as Emmett lets that gel with his recent decision. "Are you planning on signing on to the new damselfly, or are you taking the _Cat_, or what?"

“Well...” She hesitates. “I’ve kind of gotten used to the _Cat_. I was hoping for a long-term spot with them if this trip goes well. Pretty though she is, that one,” she nods at the new ship, “looks like trouble to me.”

She might be right. "Hang on, hon. There's something I need to check." Emmett moves to catch up with the giff before he can leave. "Hey, Yestin!" As the giff starts to turn, Emmett takes one of his loping strides next to him, "Are we rooming together this time out or not?"

“That remains to be decided, friend,” he replies. “The days have slipped by and I find myself uncertain of where to go.”

The half man recognizes the look of a procrastinator who has just run out of time. “You know where to go.” He points to the city of Janik. “In there is a company full of people who have decided to use you, and not recent events, as the guidepost to your people.”

He turns the larger giff around and points to the new ship. “Right there is a brand new ship that needs protecting. It’s going right to the heart of what’s troubling you, and it’ll be full of people who like, admire, and respect you.

“It just takes one man to right a wrong, Yestin. You’ve already started this. Now you have to see it through. And you have friends who’ll be there to help.”

Yestin stares at him for a moment and then nods. “You speak truly, friend. And I am in your debt once again.”

Emmett smiles broadly. “Weeeeeeeell, I have a way to repay that. The lovely Inez here,” a brief gesture at the lovely Inez, who curtsies neatly, “is going to be going back on the _Cat_, and I’m going to be going back in the new damselfly.”

He leans in with a conspiratorial whisper, “Now, I need a roommate who will graciously go on long, courteous patrols during the times when the two ships are linked up in wildspace. Do you think *you* could be such a roommate?”

When giff blush, their purplish-grey skin turns almost black. “Er, of course.”

Emmett slaps him on the back. “Excellent. Now Inez and I are going to paint the town on our last night here. At some point, we’ll be stopping by the Goose and Barrel. If you’re there, I’ll buy you a round or two. If not, the money will go to replacing your ink supply.” He waves his hook at the giff. “Choose wisely! C’mon, hon, Janik awaits!”

Yestin evidently deems it wiser to leave Emmett and his lady to enjoy their last night in port without potentially inconvenient hangers-on.

The group that reports to the new ship the next day for official volunteering consists of Alais, Pham, Val, Hiro, ibn Fadil, Nyala, Emmett, and a still-pensive Yestin. Inez decides to stay with the _Cat_, though she does promise a visit whenever she can, since the two ships will travel close together.

Delmar spends several minutes talking to each of them individually before leading them on a quick tour of the new ship. There’s not quite as much room as they had grown used to on the _Cat_, but while it’s true she’s a small ship when compared to a hammership, say, her keel is not much shorter than a tradesman’s. Everything smells of new wood and fresh paint. The hull is painted bright blues and greens, except for the stark white circle that surrounds the Three Trees emblem on the bow, and the fittings sparkle.

The ship is rather vertically oriented, unlike a tradesman, a series of relatively small decks stacked partially atop on another, angling back from the nose. The only exposed area on the ship

is the catapult emplacement, which sits between the wings, and even that is protected by a sliding hatch when not in use. The protected upper deck extends the length of the damselfly's "tail." The bridge with the ship's controls and the spelljamming helm sits beneath a slightly domed crystal port in the bow. The aft section, where the ceiling gets a bit low, consists of planted beds with a narrow walkway between them. Ports to each side let in sunlight. They'll be no good as food to anyone (except possibly Yestin), since food plants tend to be more fragile, but they will serve to keep the air fresh much longer than it would otherwise last. Forward of these and on the next deck down are the living quarters, storage space, and the miniscule galley. The lower decks are given over to cargo

There's enough of them in the crew for three watches, except for pilots of course. As the most experienced of the crew, Val is deputized as First Mate, leaving ibn Fadil with the remaining watch. Emmett is in charge of the military side; they can sort out among themselves who takes which watch, as well as who is going to room with whom. Delmar asks Emmett to teach others in the crew the workings of the single heavy ballista; if the ship gets in a fight, some of them will have to pitch in to work the massive weapon. Everyone will take turns cooking, unless someone wants to volunteer.

There remains only to get ready to leave. There are always last-minute things to buy, the pleasures of port to be sampled and savored one last time, things to wrap up.

For Val, this means verifying with his own eyes that Victor's ship is gone--not that he disbelieves ibn Fadil, of course, he simply can't resist going to look for himself--and finding a messenger to take a package to the Temple of Hera, both of which are easily done. That accomplished, he does his best to put the whole thing behind him, to look forward to whatever the future will bring.

Before leaving Janik, Val disguises himself for a visit the markets, looking for information on Victor's sudden departure, but all anyone can tell him is that it was just that: sudden. He'd bought supplies for a long journey and paid a premium for immediate delivery, and then gone.

Of course he kept his ears open for any additional gossip that might prove useful. There's no news of the *Silver Swan*, but a *Three Trees* ship is said to be a few days late coming in. No doubt the vagaries of wildspace, but people are already mentioning Fang. Its hard to tell if there are more reports of creature migrations, or if the ones he has already heard have grown past recognition over the course of a week (has it only been a week?). He ignores temptation and stays well away from the temple of Hera.

For Yestin, it is time to stock up on paper, ink, and candles. He looks forward to the peace of space as a chance to do some polishing on the verses he wrote on the way to Janik. Though no more certain than before where duty might lie, he has decided he must return to Bral to find it.

For Pham, it means a last chance to share stories for many months to come, and he makes the most of the opportunity.

For those with congenial company of the preferred sex, the opportunity for a last night on the town is not to be passed up. There is a message from Aram waiting for Emmett when they return to the inn. *"I'll let you know how things turn out with the wandering one,"* he writes. *"Gond's blessing on you, and if you're ever in this neighborhood again, look me up so I can see what trouble you're in."*

For Alais, it is mostly time to be endured before returning to space, and the mysteries of the Flow, and whatever strange event he is certain looms before the spheres.

For Hiro, it is a time for ghosts. Walking through the boisterous hubbub of the market that last evening, the noise around him seems to fade for a few moments. In its place are soft footsteps, and the murmur of silk, and what might have been a wind in the high grass or a whispering voice just beyond the edge of hearing. A moment later someone jostles into him, and the crowd again assaults his ears.

The following morning, the crew of the new ship having transferred their gear aboard, both vessels lift off into a lightly overcast sky. The only one seeing them off is Nahele, who doesn't say much and waves twice before his shrinking figure disappears from perception.

The first night they spend in space, Pham has another dream of flames.

* * *

It takes a little more than a week for everyone aboard the damselfly to get accustomed to the ship. There are shifts to sort out, cabin assignments, close quarters to grow reaccustomed to. Pham and Alais share quarters again, with Emmett, Yestin, and Val taking one of the remaining crew cabins and Nyala, ibn Fadil, and Hiro the other (the latter careful to give them as much privacy as they need).

In the absence of any threat, work is relatively light. Every part of the ship is on a slightly different schedule, given the numbers. Those actually sailing the vessel divide the day into three eight-hour shifts. Emmett works out four six-hour shifts, with each of them spending six on primary watch and six as backup. The two pilots once again work long days, though since there is less urgency in this journey the occasional break is allowed for.

Cooking duties settle out a bit. Alais is hopeless at it, Yestin not so much bad as alien in his tastes. Enough of them are competent enough that no one needs to be stuck with it all the time, although they come to sorely miss Nahele's spice cabinet.

Delmar is reserved as ever. As captain now he watches them all more closely than he did aboard the *_Cat_*; every couple of weeks the two ships pause and link up so he can talk to Theo and the smaller ship's crew can socialize a bit. The *_Cat_* has two new pilots and a full complement of sailors, experienced crew.

Val throws himself into his work as first mate, setting aside all thought of the past in favor of his old devil-may-care attitude when around others. The tight quarters make practicing his old skills something of a challenge. He spends some time pondering what do about Victor, but doesn't let himself worry about too much. Since the man does not appear to have been lying in wait for them to leave Janik, no doubt it will be months before they encounter one another.

In the second month of their journey, Val notices a bit of wood that doesn't quite match the rest in one of the cabin walls. It proves, after much careful investigation, to conceal a small wall compartment with a puzzle-box like mechanism. Within is a note: When we reach Bral, see me. It's signed by Theo.

Theo? Captain Barthelm?!...

Val isn't sure what to make of this note. How very strange... Was it meant for someone else? Was it meant to be found by Val in particular? It is somewhat accepted Val **is** the curious sort, and he **might** notice something like this. But why go to such trouble?

No, Val decides. It wasn't meant for him; that'd be far too much trouble to ask for a meeting. Wouldn't it?

Damn.

Val replaces the note and reseals the compartment after much fiddling about. It's not nearly as easy looking as he first suspected. Perhaps too difficult for a Giff with fingers as thick as Val's wrist... Maybe it was for Emmett? Would the half-man be able to open the compartment easily? He'd have to think about this some more...

Val decides to keep an eye on the compartment, to see if someone else discovers it later, but that doesn't seem to happen.

Everyone finds their own ways to pass the time. Hiro practices his calligraphy and his swordsmanship. Yestin reads, and works on his poetry. Emmett spends happy hours contemplating the intricate mechanisms that guide the ship, and giving the others enough instruction in the workings of a ballista that in case of attack they might be more help than hindrance.

Ibn Fadil begins teaching Nyala conversational Zakharan and trying to get Alais to produce a coherent explanation of his "conversion" theory. Alais is more than happy, and a few days out puts together a few odds and end to form a podium and beings to declaim to all willing to listen.

He begins with a brief examination of three centuries worth of astrophysics, including Glorzung's Theory of Spherical Trans-ordnungmigration and the implications of series helms operation on our concept of the interaction of the quasi-elements and primary elements. Then a necessarily high-level description of Janik's sphere's makeup and distinctive traits thereof. This segues into a rip-roaring connection of flow theory, history of local sphere metacluster, echo samples, mysticism, and elemental dynamics on the organistic and planetary levels, microcosm and macrocosm.

Essentially, Alais has induced that every few thousand millennia, the elemental equilibrium is rearranged. This will happen on a sphere-to-sphere basis, until eventually enough spheres go over that it causes unthinkable changes in the Flow and a transformation of our very idea of reality. The Great Dreamers were fleeing a sphere that had already gone over, and the madman was having visions of the future.

There is, of course, nothing any of them can do about it.

But he has to do some more checking first. This is all very tentative.

"Oh, and all of you should keep me posted on the state of your digestion. It should get worse as things progress. Any questions?"

"Dozens," says ibn Fadil, the only one who has stayed the course. "Beginning with, what madman?"

"The one on Janik, who turned out to be one of Brother Pham's less desirable colleagues," the mage explains. "Since that man's visions and Pham's dreams are so similar, they are obviously related to the same phenomenon."

"I see. Thank you, Master Zheremin. Do you mind if I think about this and ask my other questions later?"

"Not at all." Alais beams at his appreciative student.

Escaping, ibn Fadil buttonholes Emmett and gets a quick overview of the whole dream and madman business. "Worrisome," is all he says at this point.

Over the next few months, he spends a fair amount of time asking the mage more questions and trying to sort out the responses into something resembling logic. He does not, alas, have very much luck.

He is also happy to use the time to learn all he can about the ship, as soon as he gets over the shock of being third in command. Though he's far from expert on the topic, it is clearly a well- and beautifully-made vessel.

For many weeks, the journey is a quiet one. Near Janik's crystal shell the two ships pass a hurwaeti vessel and exchange news, and a few times in the Flow they see a solitary flitter hurrying about some elven business--they do not stop to talk--but that is the only traffic once they are away from the heavily traveled region near the moon itself.

Until the citadel hoves into view. It's a big one, a rough tear-drop shape moving slowly and silently through the Flow. From the extent of the exterior decoration that has been done, seasoned travelers guess that this rock is about half-excavated.* There are lights visible through some of the ports.

While the off-duty crew are wakened, an exchange of messages between tradesman and damselfly takes place.

"Acknowledge that," Delmar tells Val, watching through a spyglass as the *_Cat_* raises a series of coded flags. "He'd like us to check it out." Citadels in the Flow can be many things--including home to cheerful, busy dwarven communities. "We might be able to do some business here."

As the damselfly approaches slowly, the citadel raises some flags of its own, spelling out a message of greeting in Common. There is a flattened area at the narrow part of the teardrop, plenty of room for a ship to land. Alais brings the ship in to hover just above the stone, not yet committed to a landing. A hatch opens some distance away, with the sounds of some mechanism at work. A lift rises slowly, bringing a half dozen short, stout figures into view, heavily cloaked and hooded.

"Welcome!" a cheerful dwarfish voice calls over to the ship. "Welcome to *_Maija's Tear_*, I'm Gorn. Nice ship you got there. Three Trees is always welcome here; where you bound from?"

Delmar leans out the starboard port. "We've come from Janik. Is all well? Your ship is quiet." A citadel ship rings gently with the sound of hammers at all times.

"It's a holiday. Janik? Lovely, lovely, I don't suppose you have any timber you could part with? We're opening some new rooms, and it would be welcome."

"We may be able to help in that." More messages go back and forth. "May I speak to your king?"

"Of course, of course. We look forward to hearing news from other parts of space, I said it's a holiday? perhaps you'd like to join us for a meal while we discuss business? I hear ship fare grows a bit dull after a while, we of course grow our own and it's quite fresh."

"Bring her in," Delmar tells Alais. With the crew assembled on the main deck, he tells them, "Anyone who wishes to come is welcome to. Unless I misremember, we've done some business here before; they're all right sorts, for citadellers." Meaning, for members of a community by nature inward-looking and stratified.

Val frowns to himself, wondering if it's Flow-deprived imagination making him think there is something a bit odd here.

4 - Maija's Tear

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To no one's surprise, ibn Fadil and Nyala consult one another before deciding. "I have never seen a dwarf-king," he remarks, with a certain light of curiosity in his eyes.

"Nor I... Do you think some of us should stay with the ship?" she asks Emmett.

Emmett, still rubbing sleep out of his eyes, nods distractedly, "Yes definitely. Protocol for an unfamiliar port. Why aren't they moving, again?"

Val nods in agreement to Nyala's suggestion. "I've got a really bad feeling about this," he says to nobody in particular.

"I will stay," offers Yestin. "I suspect the ceilings within were not carved with my people in mind." He manfully refrains from showing his regret; as Emmett knows, he's quite fond of dwarven poetry, and had hoped to hear some.

"Captain, I'm with Val. Something about this is making my eye socket itch." Emmett looks the ship over for other windows or ports. "Maybe we should send down a small contingent to take a look around before we commit. An away team or something?"

Ibn Fadil observes this exchange of worries with interest (what could possibly trouble a cit- yful of dwarves?), and waits to see what Delmar will say.

Pham looks at the approaching pile of rock with his usual calm expression, but there's a gleam of anticipation in his eyes. "Captain, I'd like to be part of the party that goes aboard. I've visited other citadel ships briefly, and I'd love the chance to spend some time with these fine folk again. Dwarves may be abrupt, but they're usually honest and hospitable. I find it hard to believe that an honest invitation is anything other than that.

"And, if there *is* something wrong over there, I think I'd have a fairly good chance of fer- reting out what. Tales don't stay hidden from me for long."

"Yestin and Alais can stay here," their captain decides. "Anyone else?"

"I'll stay," Val volunteers, much as it pains him to do so. He had actually been looking forward to getting off-ship for a bit. "We'll want someone on board who can help the pilot launch us in a hurry if needs be..." he rationalizes.

He holds Emmett's eye with a meaningful look. "Be careful. And raise some hell if there's trouble," he adds with a grin.

Emmett leans against the crystal port, looking down at the citadel. There are some openings that look like windows along the sides, with geometric carving around them. Flipping his eye patch up, he mutters a word and a shaft of blazing light shines from his eye across the distance of space. The resultant circle of light plays up and down the stone, settling on one window. Emmett

peers across, trying to see any motion inside the citadel through the window, but it's a poor angle and there's nothing to be seen. "Alais, are those markings a language? So they say anything?"

"They're not any script I've ever seen. Just decoration, I suspect. Dwarves are known for such."

"Captain." Emmett turns back to Delmar, shutting his eye off before he blinds people with it. "I think we should leave enough people on board to be able to handle the ship in a fight. That means Alais as Pilot, Yestin and myself to handle one firing of the main gun and holding off boarders, minimum. Nyala's archery skill might be more useful here than inside the citadel."

"If there's something strange going on in there, Hiro can defend Pham, Val and Ibn Fadil are both competent bladesmen. They'll be able to get out. If there's nothing strange down there, I'll look like an idiot, but as the old saying goes 'better to look like an idiot a hundred times than look like a corpse once.'"

"You're the expert," Delmar says, willing to accept Emmett's decision in this regard.

Val is rather surprised to be assigned to the "away team," as Emmett called it. Oh well, at least he has an excuse to poke around and be curious now.

"With all due respect, "Val says to Delmar, looking for the best way to say it tactfully, "but you're sending *all* of the command of this ship down there?" He pauses a moment to let that sink in. "Maybe you should stay behind if we're going to all this trouble?" He looks to Emmett for some sign that he's thinking along the same lines.

Emmett looks away and whistles, knowing better than to give orders to his captain...

"We're already leaving half the crew here," Delmar points out. "They'll be fine."

Val accepts Delmar's decision with a crisp, "Aye, captain." Unfortunately, he can't help but think of his past dealings with merchant companies and the precautions they had demonstrated. Maybe he's overreacting. Hopefully, there *isn't* anything to worry about with these dwarves.

Ibn Fadil offers no objection to the plan, though of course he is disappointed that Nyala will be staying on the ship; he promises to tell her all about the citadel.

Emmett makes sure each member of the away team is armed before they exit. Martial sorts that dwarves tend to be, they'll likely take no offense at swords. He touches the brother lightly on the shoulder before they disembark. "Pham, I trust you have some combative prayers at the ready?"

Pham looks at Emmett and tsk's him. "Emmett, I've been in a lot of rough situations before. Be assured that I have enough prayers at the ready to handle a rough spot if I need to."

Aside from the long knife, Val conceals a couple of his own daggers under his vest, as well as his tools in their usual place. As an afterthought, Val also dons his swordbelt. This is business, he tells himself. No time to get sloppy.

Delmar disappears into his cabin for a moment; once Alais has landed the ship, he leads Val, Hiro, Pham, and Ibn Fadil down the ladder to the asteroid's landing area. Gorn and his companions come forward halfway to meet them.

"Welcome aboard," the hooded dwarf says again. "Hope your journey has been trouble-free, one hears about strange things in the Flow lately, something got the animals stirred up, haven't

seen anything like that ourselves, on our way to Trelspace,” which is one of the two spheres between Janik’s sphere and the Rock of Bral. “Visiting the home world, were you, how fares the company?”

“Quite well,” Delmar tells him. “Business is good, and things being generally peaceful always helps. There is word of a new pirate out there, someone calling him or herself Fang. If you sight a dragonfly named *_Audacity_*, there is a considerable bounty out on it. Of course,” he gestures at the massive ship beneath them with a chuckle, “you have nothing to worry about from pirates yourselves, I’m sure.”

Gorn laughs loudly. “Ha! Ha! Ha! No, no pirates trouble us. No pirates. Ha, ha.” They’ve reached the lift--a thing of mechanical beauty for Emmett, were he not back on the ship. Gorn sets his foot on a lever and it moves down slowly, into the rock. “There won’t be many people about at the moment, I fear, all getting ready for tonight, but I’ll take you to our king and you can talk some business if you like, the rest of your crew is welcome to join us of course, you traveling with that tradesman? ‘Nother nice ship that, never been on one like that myself, though, citadels all my life. Good solid rock here.” Above them, a hatch shuts over the lift shaft. It is now absolutely dark. Gorn slaps his forehead in dismay. “Argh! I forgot a light! Sorry, sorry, don’t get many human guests here. Bide here, I’ll go fetch one and please do forgive my --”

“Not to fret, my good dwarf,” Delmar assures him. “I brought one from our ship.” He takes the lightstone he brought from his own cabin out of its pouch (having experienced this problem aboard citadels before). Its illumination is steady although not overly bright, about three candles worth.

“Now that is preparation that is, wonderful to see, thank you very much and I do apologize again, he’ll have my beard for such discourtesy, I promise you that, forget my own head next. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

The lift stops after a brief descent, perhaps twenty feet. Before and behind them are metal grates; the one behind lets onto an unadorned corridor, the one before admits to an open area, beyond which is a slightly concave wall. In it are set a pair of heavy iron doors with more elaborate decoration of knots and figures, with some heavily stylized representations of spacegoing creatures. On the wall angular runes record the opening of this asteroid some years ago, the abandonment of the old in a distant sphere, and the clan connections of the inhabitants, which takes up a good ten feet of wall in fairly small runes.

Something is still bothering Val. Maybe it’s the silence of the other dwarves (although perhaps they’re simply used to not being able to get a word in edgewise around Gorn), or of the ship, holiday or not. Perhaps it’s the hoods and cloaks they have still not removed, hands tucked into sleeves. Perhaps it’s something in the air... he sniffs slightly -- it’s easy to tell if there’s sickness on a vessel, which would explain the quiet -- but that doesn’t seem to be it, either.

Or maybe, he thinks as five of the dwarves step out from the lift and slam the grate shut behind them, it’s just professional instinct warning him of a trap.

“What--” someone starts to say, cut off when Gorn, trapped with them, screams and lunges at the door. It shakes but does not give. One of those outside pauses while the others go on, and touches something on the wall.

“Believe me that we’re sorry about this,” he says in a thick voice, “but we have very little choice. You talk too much,” he adds sourly to Gorn. In the moment before they fall, those within glimpse beneath the hood a nightmarish face no dwarf was born with.

It's a short drop, fifteen feet at most, and no one is injured aside from some bruises on Val (who was on the bottom of the pile) and being generally shaken. They sort themselves out and stand up, and Delmar retrieves his dropped stone, the light of which reveals a very, very scared dwarf.

If he is a dwarf. As Gorn pushes himself to his feet, it is clear that he has an extra hand grafted onto each wrist, and all four have delicate, twiggy fingers -- and needle-like claws. It is unquestionably one of the more repulsive things any of them have ever seen.

The rest of him looks dwarfish, though, as his hood has fallen off. All four fists clench as he looks to the lift ceiling and howls something in dwarfish, then, "It'll be you someday! You think this will save you!?"

"What is this?" Delmar demands.

"Death, I hope," is the short reply. He kicks the floor lever; nothing happens. "Override up there, no way out." He mutters in his native tongue.

Examining the lift, ibn Fadil finds a wooden platform about ten by ten feet; the mechanism is either underneath or in the walls somewhere; heavy ropes, looking somewhat worn, go up two sides of the smooth stone shaft and anchor somewhere up top. Even as they all gather their wits after the fall, the dwarves are sealing the shaft at the level of the floor above with a hatch just like the one at the surface. There is a grate similar to the one above on this level; it does not appear to be locked.

"There's always a way," Val says calmly, even if it is just to steady himself. "The trick is finding one." He pauses for a moment before adding, "And if you can't find one, *make* one..." The young sailor studies their would-be prison carefully. He's spent hours upon hours in tight places aboard ships before, so he doesn't suffer much from his current confinement.

Over his shoulder he asks Gorn, "What...*happened* to you, anyway? And what in hell were *those*?" indicating the other hooded figures. He tries not to look at the dwarf's double hands, fighting back the revulsion that he feels at the sight of them.

"And more urgently, what are we locked up with down here?" ibn Fadil adds, just before he grabs one of the ropes running along the side of the shaft and starts climbing up, intending to evaluate the probably remote chance of being able to open that hatch. Alas, it is much too heavy, even if there was proper leverage available.

"Gods know," Gorn says with a fearful look at the grate. "We don't ask questions, sometimes he goes out collecting, we never know if he's here, watching, or if he's gone away somewhere. We don't come down here, could be anything now." There is a hint of motion out there, something rat-sized that vanishes into the shadows again. "As for what happened to me... to us, rather - say we made a bad bargain, how is that? Ha! Ha!" He holds up his unnatural limbs. "Oh, I do fine work now, I must say, better than ever I could before, he does hold up his end of a deal, if you live through it. We call him Blade, I can't say his name in xixchil."

"Stop laughing," Val tells Gorn grimly as he draws his sword. He does not turn on the dwarf, however. Whatever was moving around out there probably wasn't a rat, and he wants to be ready.

Pham looks at the dwarf with an expression of fury on his face quite unlike his normal calm demeanor. In a soft, cold voice he asks "Let me see if I understand this. You took this xixchil on

board, made a deal with him, let him *cut off your hands* and put those ... things there instead, and now you're going to quietly let him hunt us for... what? Sport? Food? Experimentation? What has this creature been doing down here? Explain it to me."

Pham stares at the dwarf with a challenge in his eyes, seemingly unaware that the symbol of Hextor that he normally keeps tucked within his robe is now laying plainly on his chest.

They wouldn't have thought it, but it *is* possible for Gorn to look even more panicky, and he does.

"Also, is this creature a spellcaster? Speak quickly - I must know."

He stutters for a moment. "Uh-uh-y-y-yes. Yes, he is. That's the problem, you see, we never know where he is, if he's here, what he's listening to, we thought once that he was gone and tried to get in there and - and he..." He trails off with a grimace and an evocative gesture. "After that there weren't enough of us left to try and get him, or to move the ship even if we did. And he can do things to your mind." He takes a deep breath. "Look, it's not like we had a lot of choice. By the time we figured him out a lot of us were dead and the rest of us had things like this." He holds up his hands. "You think these are bad, should see some of the others."

The half-elf climbs most of the way back down the rope, then pauses and glares down at Gorn. "What about our ship?"

"If they were smart enough to lift off immediately, they might get away."

Holding the rope with one hand, ibn Fadil draws his sword with the other, and points at the dwarf with the blade. "More information, less talk," he snaps. "If the rest of the crew were captured, where would they be taken?"

"We take them to the Bubble. I don't know where they go after that." He gestures aft. "That bulge is hollow, it's where we kept the forge when there were enough of us left to keep it going."

"Better," ibn Fadil concedes, leaving off threatening the dwarf, and drops down onto the platform. "Can you lead us there?" he asks Gorn, even as he joins Val to peer out through the grate.

"Go that way," he points with a spiritless shrug. "This was a food level, it's pretty open. Gods know what's out there now, or if the door's open. Bastards," he mutters at the ceiling. "They know it's only a matter of time. That's how we got to this state - turned us against each other. The last two left will do each other in out of spite."

"It is a large space out there," ibn Fadil says, stepping back from the grate and half-turning to look at Delmar. "Captain, I think we should look for the others, and another way out, at the same time. And not dally here much longer," he adds. He glances around at the rest of the group, wordlessly seeking opinions.

"Doesn't look like we have much choice," Delmar mutters. "Val, next time you have a bad feeling about something, remind me to listen."

"Aye captain," Val replies evenly. _If there *is* a next time,_ he thinks to himself.

Hiro nods his agreement. "The fallen blossom does not return to the tree." He moves toward the gate leaving space for Val and Ibn to take point to better allow them to search for traps.

Ibn Fadil looks at Gorn. "You are coming with us," he says flatly.

"Or what? You'll kill me? Ha, ha." He chokes it down to a nervous giggle this time.

The half-elf gives him a slight, cold smile. "Not yet. I will only want to kill you myself if some harm has befallen my lady, who was on our ship. I have no intention of dying in this stinking hole you've made of your citadel, you see. And if you help us get out," he adds off-handedly, "I might be persuaded to give you a running start before I kill you."

Gorn looks nervously through the grate. "Quite the convincing argument," he mutters. "Guess it doesn't much matter where he finds us."

So saying, he thrusts the metal aside. There is a quite incongruous smell of growing things; beyond the immediate area of the lift, where things are somewhat trampled down, a fairly thick thatch of plants covers the floor. Ibn Fadil and Pham recognize some of them as kin to those grown in kitchen gardens across the spheres, run wild and weedy now, largely dead and leaves pale for lack of sun. When everyone has had a chance to adjust, they realize there is faint light coming from somewhere to the right, just enough to distinguish the true darkness.

"Huh," Gorn says to himself. "Lights haven't quite died yet, we don't use this anymore, plenty of room up top for those of us are left." His strange hands twitch anxiously.

Stepping out of the lift, they can see that the room extends in all four directions, pierced by the shaft like a column. There is a rough stone wall perhaps thirty feet away. There seems to be a break in it somewhere to the left and to the right.

Small things rustle in the dead growth, as yet unseen.

Shadowing the dwarf, ibn Fadil now draws his knife to hold in his left hand, and consults Val and Hiro. "Forward to the wall," he suggests in a near-whisper.

Val nods, silently acknowledging ibn Fadil's recommended course. He keeps alert, stretching his senses in this cavernous overgrown "garden."

Oddly, Val is having some difficulty adjusting himself to the circumstances. He's used to working alone in situations like this (not that he's ever been duped by mutated dwarves before). The cold fire refuses to flood his veins, and he feels strangely out of place. Outwardly, he probably appears a little tense and uncomfortable. Damn.

With ibn Fadil keeping an eye on their reluctant dwarf in the lead and Val nearby, Hiro and Delmar take the rear points with Pham in the center. Old growth desiccated by the dry air of the Flow crunches beneath their feet.

They reach the wall without incident. There are clearly openings in it to either side. From here they (well, those of them who can see in the dark) can also see beyond the lift shaft, where the room narrows to a sort of point, deep in shadow; flowering vines have climbed most of the way to the ceiling.

Ibn Fadil silently points in the direction he thinks is the one they want, looking to Gorn for confirmation; then he signs to the others to wait and slips ahead along the wall, as quietly as he can, to the edge of the opening. There he crouches down and studies it, listening for all he is worth, before cautiously peering through.

It is another rough-walled, dirt-floored chamber, vaguely kidney-shaped with the opening through which he is looking in the outside curve. It is carpeted with more overgrown vegetation,

including several tall plants with brightly colored flowers, startling in the sickly garden. He sees something like a lizard with eight legs make its way across a clear spot and disappear, apparently intent on its own business.

A lift shaft pierces this room as well, at the far end and to the right; the faint light seems to be coming from that direction. There is another opening in the wall at the far left.

Returning to the group, ibn Fadil quietly reports. "More of the same. Flowers. Another lift, off on the right, another opening on the left, we enter in the middle." Immediately he turns and starts back again, letting Gorn fall back closer to Pham for the moment.

He leads them around the opening into the next room and along the opposite side of the wall for about half the distance to the next opening, then strikes out across the room, aiming to reach the right-hand side of the wall a short distance from the opening, avoiding the flowers carefully.

"That way," Gorn says in a normal voice, pointing toward the shaft. Everyone jumps except Hiro. "He knows we're here, just a matter of when he gets around to us."

"Quiet," Delmar snaps - quite unusual, for him, but he feels the weight of the situation even more keenly than the others.

Ibn Fadil seconds that with a vicious glare, and switches his planned course to the opposite side of this second room. Approaching the shaft, he slows his already cautious pace even more, looking the area over.

Pham stands beside the captain holding his staff lightly, ready to brain Gorn the second he decides to cause more trouble.

In a whisper, Pham says to Delmar "Captain, rest assured we will survive this. This is a tale that needs to be spread, to warn others against such foolishness if nothing else.

"I know a devotion that can render us silent for a time, but in this darkness I fear it would simply divide us, unable to find our way in the gloom."

Val, who is closer to the shaft, edges closer with ibn Fadil to take a look. He too is very careful and tries to move as quietly as possible.

The shaft is pitch black and empty. A couple of ropes remain, but they hang loosely; it looks like this lift is no longer used. Looking up with the aid of Delmar's stone, it appears that this one is blocked off somewhere above as well.

From this part of the room, they can see as well that the opening where the light comes from is a short tunnel that ends in a pair of very heavy-looking doors. The light source is another stone, set in the ceiling (closer examination of the ceiling shows similar stones regularly placed throughout the room, no doubt to provide necessary light for the plants until the spells on them failed). There is also a hairs-width of light coming from beneath the doors.

With a quick gesture, ibn Fadil suggests that the others place themselves against the wall at the outside of this short tunnel. Then he studies the tunnel for any possible dangers before pacing quietly down it to examine the doors and listen at them, Val a silent shadow accompanying him.

The dirt floor gives way to smooth stone, but there is nothing to suggest danger from their surroundings. The doors appear very solid, iron-bound oak with no visible means of opening them from this side. There is sound from beyond the doors, a screeching reminiscent of birds of prey.

And then another, much louder shriek from somewhere *behind* them - the lift shaft, they realize after a frozen moment. Gorn gives a little squawk of fright, stepping away from the wall with a wild look as if ready to run, but there is nowhere to go and he shrinks back, one set of

hands gripping the opposite wrist while the others flutter nervously. The sound is quickly followed by a second scream, different in timbre but from the same direction.

* *

They wake up. It is completely dark, and their arms are bound behind you. What woke Emmett and Alais is a disgusted-sounded grunt from Yestin and a squishing noise.

"Something bit me," he rumbles. "Hello? Is anyone here? What happened?"

The last thing they remember is being on the _Distraction_, perhaps ten minutes after the rest of the crew went into the citadel.

Testing of bonds proves that Alais is securely tied and Yestin all but mummified, but being much stronger than he looks comes in handy (again) for Emmett. After a few moments work, there is a quiet sound of snapping ropes.

"I so damn hate being right all the time." Emmett squirms out of the ropes that proved insufficient to hold his Gond-given frame.

Moving as quietly as he can he scans the room for any sign of light -- outlines of doors, windows, anything that might indicate a guard or watching presence -- before muttering the word that activates his gemstone eye, which casts a muted radiance through the eyepatch that will make it possible for him and the others to see without alerting any gaolers.

Taking a few seconds to open the trapdoor in his false arm, he unlatches the hook and replaces it with a short but keen blade, his remaining hand dexterously completing actions which were drilled until they became second nature. With the new tool he makes short work of the bonds holding Alais and Yestin, motioning both to be quiet.

"Where's Nyala?" he whispers.

It takes a couple seconds for him to make out her bound and battered form - the injuries she sustained stand out in stark relief to the others' more rapid, no doubt magical, unconsciousness.

Emmett severs her bonds too, taking a few moment to look her over for either life threatening injury or medical attention by their captors. Once that's done, he shakes her slightly, hoping to rouse her.

When that proves ineffective, he lays her back down and starts unravelling the rope from his leg, revealing the compartment there and pulling out the vial of 150 proof whisky. Hopefully the smell or taste of that will bring her around.

As he does so, he whispers to his companions, "Anyone else have a clear memory of what happened? And Alais, is there any way you can just magic us out of here?" Emmett is wary of pushing the young but puissant mage too much, knowing how the wizardly types of his own world disliked revealing their precious arcane potential.

"It would be rather selfish to leave the others, don't you think?"

Emmett shakes his head, "I mean out of this room, or back to the armory on the _Distraction_, not out of the situation entirely. You and Yestin take a look at the doors, see what you can come up with."

The whiskey does work. Nyala spends a few minutes coughing interspersed with curses in Elvish. As awareness returns, she scrambles to her feet in a defensive posture, looking around a little wildly. "Where is it?!"

Whatever it is, it's not there; they were alone in the room, and there's no sound outside to indicate someone there.

Guessing what she's looking for, Emmett tries to meet her beautiful elvish eyes, reflecting on how much less she looks like an angel when she's conscious. "They took all our weapons when we were captured, I guess. And whatever enchantment they used to take the three of us out didn't work on you. Right now there's the four of us, in this room on the citadel, with whatever we can scrape together. What happened?"

She's got some of her composure back, although still a little woozy from the poison. "You all collapsed. And these *things* came in -- they looked like dwarves, mostly, but they were all wrong. There was something with them, like a big praying mantis. Xixchil. It must have bitten me." The memory clearly revolts her to the point of nausea as she touches her bloodied arm.

"OK. Not-dwarf Dwarves, poisonous preying mantises, big old citadel. No problem." Emmett puts the flask back in his leg, taking a minute to extract his knee spike.

"This can work like a hiltless dagger. Are you comfortable with that?" he asks, moving to hand the blade to the battered elf.

"It is certainly better than nothing." She takes the spike.

"This is barred, I think," Yestin says. He is leaning cautiously against the door, feeling where the resistance is strongest, being careful not to hit his head on the ceiling.

"Where's the bar?" Emmett heads over to Yestin looking at where the Giff is pointing at the door.

"'Bout midway. Here." The door itself is made of some stout wood. The half man looks the door over, seeing if there's a crack that he could use to lever the bar out of place with his knife hand. Unfortunately, the fine dwarven construction makes that impossible. Yestin, who is remarkably unperturbed about all of this, looks at Emmett.

Emmett shrugs. "Alais, do you have your enchantments ready?"

"My spells are ready, unfortunately at the moment I can detect magic, read thoughts and generate light. I wasn't anticipating conflict today."

Emmett resists slamming his head into the wall in frustration -- after all, he knows nothing about how hard it is to learn or maintain spells, and certainly none of them expected this when they got up this morning.

"OK. How much light? Can you blind someone with it? How far away can you read thoughts, and for how long? Can you find the others?"

"Both are possibilities under the right circumstances. I want to save the spells until we can be sure they will effective."

"Nyala, you're the only one that can match the Dwarves' vision. Do you want to take point, or stay far enough behind to act as an ace in the hole, or should we cluster up and just take what comes?" It's obvious from the tone in his voice that Emmett is leaning towards the latter - with Nyala woozy and armed only with a makeshift weapon the idea of her being separated from any support, even for sound tactical reasons, is not one he cherishes. Not if he wants to stay on the second officer's good side.

"Let us, as you say, take what comes."

The comrades ready themselves and, on three, put their shoulders to the door. The bar holds; the bolts holding the mount to the stone wall outside do not, and the two part ways with a hideous screech that drowns Yestin's yelp as he bangs his head on the lintel.

Before anyone is in any danger of relaxing, another shriek splits the air - not near, and yet not far enough away for comfort, echoing through stone halls. Impossible to tell what it might be.

Yestin feels around for a moment, picks up the bar and swings it thoughtfully; it'll do.

Emmett stops, listening for echoes and movement, feeling and scenting the air for any evidence of wind or airflow that might give him a hint as to which direction to take. He's also running his good hand along the wall, trying vainly to feel for smoothness of construction or ornamentation, thinking that the residents would have done more work to the areas they'd been in longer. Hopefully, this will give him some advice as to whether they are further forward or back from the dock which hopefully still holds the *_TTS Distraction,_* and thus need to find stairs up or down.

There is no air movement. The wall is smooth, slightly dusty. There is a smell in the air that suggests rats or their kin are somewhere about.

"Nothing here," Nyala says in a barely audible murmur, describing what she sees. The hall, or tunnel, beyond is dark, stone, and deserted, stretching right and left. There is another door across the way, ajar, and immediately to the right a tunnel intersecting at right angles. "Any idea which way? Someone must have heard that noise."

There is a faint patter of verminous feet on stone, then silence.

Emmett flips his eyepatch up and explores the floor with the now bright light. Given how dusty it is, there's a good chance of some sort of discernible tracks, even to his untrained eye.

He can see rat-sized trails leading in all directions - well-traveled ones, at that, though they stay close to the walls. Broader ones as well, something about a foot wide. There is also more widely disturbed dust leading around the corner to the right.

"That way" Emmett motions, leaving his eyepatch up. Given Dwarfish sight, a lot of a little light isn't going to make a real difference, and better that they be able to see where the trail leads them. "Yestin, make sure Alais stays safe."

With that, the half man takes the corner, every sense alert to avoid an ambush.

Another dusty, empty corridor meets his gaze. There are a number of openings on the right, a shadow that might be one on the left, a fair distance away. The dust trail leads down that way.

A rat with two heads and six legs scurries out of a room and away, whisking around another corner at the end of the hall, chittering in harmony with itself.

Emmett blinks slowly, doing strange things with the light in the corridor, then turns and whispers to the others "Ok, Dwarf-not Dwarf. Got it. Is it too early to say I hate this place?"

The Half man continues to follow the dust trail, trusting the others to watch his back. When he takes the left hand corner, it's a short hall, maybe fifteen feet, and at the end is a set of large doors, hinged to open toward the cautious explorers. There is a tiny bit of light leaking from underneath it, and there are faint sounds - either the source is quiet or the door is very thick. The drag marks lead directly toward it.

Seeing the light coming through the door Emmett flips his eyepatch back down, hoping that no one saw the light through the doorway. In the now dimmed light he motions for Nyala to listen at the door and look through the cracks - her elvish senses were probably sharper than anything the others could offer.

She listens for a moment and shakes her head, frowning, tries to look but the doors are set too tightly for anything but the faint line of light.

Moving away she says quietly, "Can't really make it out. Sounds like birds."

"Like twittering birds or squacking birds? Could they be the praying mantises you saw?"

"Screaming birds. And there was only one mantis. It was enough," she adds with feeling.

There is a sudden sound from the door as of a mechanism operating.

Emmett curses softly and motions for the others to fall back to the corner - he and Nyala flat against the wall in the direction they came from, Alais and Yestin on the other side. He also shuts down the light from his eye, limiting the group to the illumination coming from the opening door.

The steady, magical light casts a strange shadow down the hall, that of an attenuated insectoid form. There is a brief silence - listening? some other sense at work? a series of quiet, rapid clicks**, and then the door begins to close again.

Emmett waits for the door to close and listens as best he can, trying to discern if the door is being relocked, and if so how complicated the lock is. There are the same mechanical sounds as before. He can't really tell much just from listening, but it does seem to take a while for whatever it is to work.

"Now where?" Yestin wonders.

Emmett jerks his thumb back at the door. "Through there, probably. Just not yet. Alais, can you read that thing's mind through the door? It's probably pretty close to in charge around here and would know what's happening and where the others are."

"I can try." He casts ESP and tries to home in on the being's thoughts, but senses animal minds only beyond the door. One of them is approaching it.

* * *

After a few moments of seeing and hearing nothing from the tunnel, ibn Fadil decides to set aside the question of what lies down the shaft for the moment, and goes back to find out what Valarin has found.

Seeing Valarin crouched down by the door monkeying with it, the half-elf hurries forward and grabs his shoulder. A glance down confirms his suspicion, and when the young man looks up at him he glares back and makes a gesture that unequivocally says, "Get your ass back there with others."

Val returns the gaze evenly, but does not move back immediately. The cold fire floods through his veins now, sparked by the half-elf's obvious ire.

"It *might* be a way out or through for us," he says in a hushed whisper. "At the very least, it might throw off pursuit."

For a brief moment, it seems that ibn Fadil might argue -- but this is not the time or place for an argument. He goes back down the tunnel again and urges the others to take up defensive/offensive positions at the tunnel's entrance. Then he quietly asks Gorn, "What should be on the other side of those doors?"

"That's where the Forge was, is, what's left of it unless he's spaced it all, it's where he stays when he's here, if he's not somewhere else of course, where he does most of his work, can't tell you what might be living in there now, it's always something new with him, last time I was in there was a few months ago, he was putting legs on snakes, ha, ha, now that's useful isn't it?"

Val halts at hearing this. That could've been bad if they were to go in there. Then again, if it meant they could put an end to the xixchil and what it did to the dwarves of this citadel...

Damn, I *am* starting to sound like some sort of paladin, Val thinks to himself. _Best to leave the heroics to the professionals._

Ibn Fadil chews on Gorn's information for a moment. "Does he keep these things in cages?"

"Sometimes. Depends. Look, we don't go in there, we just drop 'em at the door and get the hell out before he decides he wants another go at one of *us*." He shudders.

The half-elf sighs. "I had wanted to climb down the shaft to see what is there," he tells Delmar. "We might be able to escape trouble here by going that way. Or, we could swiftly invade this xixchil's laboratory and hope to defeat him outright ..."

Delmar pauses to weigh the situation. "Far be it from me to issue orders when I got us into this, but even assuming we *can* get in, it might be a good idea to see what else we might run into. This place at least seems fairly safe," he adds with a glance around.

"Oh, we can get in," he says with a glimmer of dark humour. "But if Valarin can be persuaded to wait ..." He peers around the corner and finds Val doing just that. "Then I can take a few moments to explore the other exit." He asks Gorn, "What used to be down there?"

"It *was* living quarters." He sighs. "There were a lot more of us back then...."

Ibn Fadil catches hold of the rope again and begins a careful descent. He has gone down another twenty feet, and can see the gaping opening marking the entrance to the shaft on this level, when he hears more sounds. Not the frightful screeching again but some other animal growling. Also rapid footsteps and voices.

Stopping to listen more closely, he hears what sounds like... a scuffle? Is that Emmett's voice? The bird noises are louder, but it's really hard to tell how close it might be, the way things echo in this place. Looking through the opening into the hall leading off the shaft, its grate knocked half off its hinges, he sees a short corridor that turns out of sight to the left. Somewhere down there is a fading light source.

Biting his lip, he conducts a brief but fierce debate with himself. Responsibility to those he knows are waiting up above wins out and he scrambles back up the rope and onto solid stone again.

"Something going on down on the next level," he reports. "Lights, growling, I thought perhaps I heard Emmett's voice." He hesitates, too conflicted to recommend any particular course. "Gorn, does the forge connect with the next level down? In any convenient way?"

"There is -- or was," he's careful to add, mindful of the danger from the _Distraction's_ crew as well as from whatever may lurk in these abandoned tunnels, "a door on all of the levels, coming and going at all hours, but who knows if they're still working. "I guess he must have some way of getting in and out of there...."

"Then if we entered the forge area up here," he says reluctantly, "the mage's attention should be divided between two groups ..." It is clear that he would much rather shimmy down the rope and possibly dash to the rescue. "We should do that," he concludes, referring to the plan he has mentioned aloud. "Quickly."

Hiro, without a moments hesitation, acknowledges his acceptance of the Zahkaran's plan by taking a point position out of habit. His rough-hewn hand rests lightly on the pommel of his

deadly blade. The band of gold on his finger blends neatly with the a similar ring lashed to the hilt.

Ibn Fadil joins him, drawing his own weapons again. Followed by Pham, Delmar, and the extremely nervous Gorn, they pace quietly up the tunnel to where Valarin is crouched over the stubborn lock.

"Quickly" is easier said than done. Val is painfully aware of time's passage as he probes delicately at the lock's interior for the next few minutes. Once a pick slips out of position, and for a split second he thought it was going to break. Disregarding the impatience of his companions, he pauses for a couple of steady breaths before trying again.

This time, finally, it yields. There is a soft series of clicks from within the wall as some mechanism is set into motion and the immensely heavy doors begin opening slowly toward them, letting noise and light into the densely shadowed hall. Gorn whimpers nervously. The shrieking from within echoes loudly around them.

They are at one end of a huge, vaguely ovoid chamber. The relative brightness is shocking in contrast to the rest of the citadel. About six feet before them the stone floor drops abruptly, repeated in a series of four terraces, each holding an entrance to this space from another level of the ship; there is one more such level above them. Ramps curve around each side of the large room, leading down to the main floor.

The back of the hall is occupied by a massive stack of junk - the forge equipment that had once occupied all of this space, driving the ship through the Flow, along with furniture and equipment from the deserted levels, all piled up to a height of about twenty feet in the center of the mound. Off to one side, incongruously, lies the delicately beautiful shape of an elven flitter, its wings ragged-looking as if eaten at by moths. Nearer at hand, to the left lies a row of heavy-looking wood and iron cages, while to the right is what might be the xixchil's living and work area, protected by a heavy canopy. The walls of the entire space are hung with a riot of colorful hangings that swathe the lowest ten feet or so of the walls. Directly before the intruders is only a wide empty space.

The shrieking sound grows much louder and its source becomes apparent: there are three skullbirds nested in the pile of trash, beating their wings and screaming, the sight of the monstrous birds of ill omen enough to give any spacer pause. Their new agitation sends a flock of winged rats (which explains where the missing bits of flitter went...) scurrying for safety, along with some of the eight-legged lizards, more of which crawl slowly along the walls. Some of the noise is also coming from the cages, but they can't see into those from this perspective. Despite the area's size, its inhabitants ensure that it doesn't smell particularly good.

There is no sign of the xixchil himself, however, and almost immediately their attention is drawn to the terrace below them.

* * *

For a few moments the creature that emerges snuffles audibly, then swings its head back and forth

towards Emmett and Yestin's hiding places behind the doors and wonders what to do. The door begins to close again.

The thing's general outline is that of a bear, but it has sharp angled teeth like a beaver's, a sinuous tail, and it's covered with scales. From the looks of it, it hasn't been terribly well fed and as it sniffs for them, would very much like to remedy that situation. With the door open - and it's a heavy one, nearly two feet of dense wood - the shrieking and croaking sound of the birds in the space beyond echoes around them.

Alais prepares for desperate combat. His eyes and magic detect nothing else coming through the door.

"Crap. Yestin, hold the door open so the others can get through. Alais, Nyala, get through there - the other animals are probably caged." With that, Emmett leaps onto the things back, trying to land astride and shove his blade deep into the things neck for both damage and balance.**

Amazingly enough, although this thing is nothing like a griffon he does manage to grab hold in mid-air. The scales are heavy but small, smooth and dry under his hand; the blade slips off without effect. The creature under him turns its head this way and that, but it can't bite very effectively in this position. The tail whips around Emmett's head but fails to catch hold of him; the fact that the bear wasn't born with the thing makes it somewhat clumsy. It gives a chuffing growl of frustration.

Yestin, as directed, grips the door with both huge hands, straining against the mechanism that tries to drag them shut. For a moment he's sure he heard more of that strange clicking sound; then it's gone.

Nyala pulls Alais along the wall, trying to stay out of reach of the massive animal and get to the door while it's still open.

Seeing no other way to improve his stability, the half man grips tightly with his thighs and leans down, wrapping his flesh and blood arm as best he can around the things neck. "No way I can strangle it with the armor, but there is something else..."

He places his knife hand against the creature's scaly head and slides it forcefully forward, hoping to drive the blade into the things ear or eye. Fortunately, this threat is coming to the creature's left side, which will hopefully distract it from going after Nyala or Alais as they get past this strange rodeo.

It sits down heavily, almost jolting him loose with the unexpected action, and tries to reach him with a back paw, but that doesn't work either. Emmett's strike misses the eye as he spends a moment concentrating on holding on while that dangerously spiked tail flickers in and out of his field of vision.

Meanwhile, Nyala and Alais have cleared the doorway. Yestin hangs on gamely, but the door is starting to drag him in with it.

"Er... Emmett...?" he says in a slightly strangled voice.

Seeing the others are past and knowing the window, or more precisely door, of opportunity is closing, Emmett leaps free from the things back, trying to time it so as to be clear of the things swiping tail. The wooden leg slides out from under him, resulting in an awkward and somewhat painful landing, not altogether a bad thing as the tail slashes by a few inches over his head.

Once down, he leaps for the closing door, yelling, "Yestin, get in and hold it off with that club of yours!"

The young giff does his best, but the makeshift weapon misses by a country mile, and the scaled bear charges him.

Emmett flings his strength against the door in turn to give Yestin a chance at safety

The bear's lunge knocks the giff over and sends the two of them through the door in a struggling tangle. He drops his club but gets in a ferocious head-butt on the weird bear. Their rolling takes them over an edge just beyond the door, and they disappear from sight with a thud and a yell from the giff.

Rushing to the edge, Nyala sees that the bear appears to have been stunned by the fall, and that Yestin is not moving; she glances up once to take in the rest of the space for other threats, her eyes widening slightly in surprise upon seeing Hiro up there. Then she tucks the makeshift knife into her belt and turns to lower herself over the lip of the terrace before dropping the rest of the way. At her height it's a good ten-foot fall, and she lands badly. The bear's spined tail and all four paws twitch spasmodically as it tries to shake off the impact.

Emmett follows Nyala's eyes to the upper level and spots the others, emitting a loud whoop of exultation. He then hears the bone-jarring thump of Nyala's landing and gets a more serious look on his face. "Val! Sword!" he yells, waving his good hand for the catch.

Val reacts immediately and throws Emmett his longsword, hilt first. It only occurs to him after the fact that he might need it himself... A pair of daggers spring into his hands quickly, and he keeps alert for whatever else might be a threat.

The blade's clatter against stone as Emmett fails to catch it is lost in the noise as the reunited friends take the offensive.

Ibn Fadil arrives at the edge of his level just in time to see Nyala drop over the edge of hers. He pauses barely long enough to sheathe his weapons -- it almost seems he is already falling before he finishes those movements -- and does the same.

"Kick his ass Ibn Fadil, but watch out for the tail!" Emmett shouts as the half elf goes barreling past him.

Said half-elf pauses for only an instant to assess the situation before leaping from the second level to land with remarkable precision directly *on* the creature, driving a faint grunt out of it from the impact before he dives to one side. From Nyala's slightly raised eyebrow it's clear that she thinks he's being a terrible show-off.

He gives her a tight grin before maneuvering to make any further contribution to the fight that may be necessary.

Pham calls out to his impetuous companions "Wait just a moment!" He speaks a quick prayer, then places his back to the wall, looking for the xixchil, but there is no sign of it.

Nyala looks at her makeshift knife, looks at the far-better-armed new arrivals, and backs off from the bear in favor of checking on Yestin. "I think the fall knocked him out." She starts trying to bring him around.

Delmar has drawn his short sword and stands for a moment irresolute, looking at the mound and its shrieking avians.

The birds appear to have noticed Delmar's regard. Two of them leave their nests and take to the constricted sky, perhaps hoping that something will die and save them some trouble.

Alais blithely ignores both the battle taking place on the level below and the threat from above, and takes the left-side ramp around the edge of the cavern, toward where the flutter sits, an awkward shape when grounded.

The Half man snags Val's sword from the ground and follows Ibn Fadil down after the lizard bear--point first, the sort of recklessly daring move characteristic of griffin-jockeys and other short-lived professions. The momentum of the fall provides enough extra force to finally pierce the thing's armor, although his arm isn't thanking him for the favor. The creature's roar sounds just like any other bear's as it twists under his blade.

Hiro begins walking. He shows no concern over the cliff's edge as his path takes him over the edge. The Saint of Steel lands with knees bent slightly, just enough to cushion the impact of the fall. The moment he reaches for the hilt of his sword passes so quickly that one could easily assume it was already in his hand when he landed.

He smiles at Emmett's bravado even as he nimbly slides past the thrashings of the xixchil-engineered beast. Making his way to the creature's hindquarters he raises his katana high over his head and holds it momentarily. _Best to put this foul thing out of its own misery._ The tail seems to move slower in his vision as he finds the perfect instant to strike.

Then he does, and it is. The creature is dead.

Meanwhile Gorn has one delicate hand clenched to his mouth to keep from making any sound, staying close to the wall and looking around as he tries to make up his mind which way to jump. Another shriek from the birds and he dives back toward the relative safety of the hall.

Val hazards a glance towards where the terrified dwarf went. They still might need his help getting back to the _Distraction_, and it wouldn't do if he ran off now...

"Don't go far," Val warns the cowering dwarf grimly. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to you if you found yourself *alone* all of the sudden..."

Nyala keeps shaking Yestin, finally slapping him sharply across the muzzle, but he remains stubbornly unconscious for the moment.

Emmett looks up at Delmar and Val with a jaunty wave of his blood soaked sword, "Howdy, Captain! Good to see you!" Delmar waves back, clearly relieved to have found them alive.

Moving over to Yestin, Emmett mentally curses the fact that his whiskey is so inaccessible - it would probably work on the Giff the same way it had woken Nyala. "Anyone know how to wake up an unconscious Giff?" he asks, keeping an eye on the birds to see if they're on their way over to feast on the lizard-bear carrion.

Ibn Fadil joins them, keeping an eye on the canopied area, and offers Nyala his knife. She accepts it and extends the borrowed spike to Emmett.

"Thank you for the loan."

"Next step," ibn Fadil proposes blandly, "attack the bloodthirsty xixchil mage before he captures or kills us."

"Nice to see you guys," Val calls out to the others. "Any chance we can get out of here soon?" He'll ask what happened to them later, though it's quite apparent they had a rough time of it. He remains ready for anything, keeping one eye on the skullbirds. He also scans the junk pile to see if there is anything in that might suffice for a weapon; under the accumulated encrustations from the skullbirds, he can see that the heap is full of all kinds of things--broken furniture, tools, anvils. If this citadel ever moves under its own power again, it's going to require a lot of work.

Emmett looks up at val, "What, this is a vacation spot - tropical birds, exotic fauna, what more do you want." Then he turns to the half elf, "I can accept that plan. Captain, why don't you bring Val and Pham down here so we can consolidate forces?"

He starts muttering to himself "Lessee, Captain, Val, Ibn Fadil, Hiro, Pham. Check. Me, Yestin, Nyala, Alais...Alais..."

"Where the hell is Alais?"

"It's a mage," ibn Fadil reminds the marine. Whatever relief he felt at finding Nyala has already evaporated, leaving only angry tension. "Two groups, two directions. Our informant says he may be able to become invisible, confuse the mind, who knows what else."

The marine nods, then amends. "Two groups, 15 feet apart, one direction. We don't get separated and we don't cluster together to make ourselves an easy target either."

The half-elf nods in his turn. As the others join them on the second terrace and the group sorts itself out, Yestin gives a faint, rumbling groan as he starts to come around.

One of the skullbirds gives a loud, croaking cry and settles on the body of the bear-thing, glaring balefully at the intruders nearby. Its huge wingspan covers its meal as it begins ripping at the tough, scaled skin with its beak. The one still above shrieks angrily; the one still on its nest joins in, and for a moment the place rings deafeningly with their cacophonous screeches.

The former stoops on Alais--the straggler of the herd--as he passes near the cages, their occupants hidden in shadow; in a rare-self preserving moment he throws himself flat and the fierce talons grip only air as the charnel-house smell of the creature overwhelms him. Heavy wingbeats buffet him as the skullbird climbs for another pass.

Somewhere nearby he's quite certain he just heard the rapid clicks of xixchil speech, but there's nothing anywhere in sight.

Emmett looks at the amassed group, then his own truncated leg. "New plan! Pham, you stay here with me, the captain and Yestin. Everyone else, go get that thing off our mage."

"All right," ibn Fadil says, looking down at the scene with narrowed eyes. With a quick glance around at the others (except for Val, still up above), the half-elf begins running down the ramp toward the prone mage and his airborne assailant. Hopefully, he thinks, it will not be difficult to convince the bird to feast on lizard-bear instead.

"You wait here," Val gives a warning glare at Gorn before heading off to help Alais. He heads down the nearest ramp between him and the beleaguered mage, hoping to get there in time. Instead of going down to the same level as the mage and his attacker, the young sailor stops his descent on the level above, hoping to come parallel to them.

The skullbird dives again with a shrill cry. Missing with both talons as its prey rolls desperately aside, it settles briefly to the ground to stab in with its deadly beak, eliciting a cry of pain. It dances back again as ibn Fadil races down to attack, although his blade slips harmlessly off the oddly greasy-looking feathers. Alais takes advantage of the thing's distraction to scramble out of immediate range of the grounded bird.

Val's knife spins through the air toward the creature, but misses. Of course, Emmett still has his sword.... Hiro, not suffering such a lack, glides down the ramp toward the new battle with his usual impassive unconcern. His blade flashes in the magical light; for an instant he seems to feel a numinous touch guiding his strike, before the steel bites deeply into the creature's body.

Nyala darts in dangerously near the thing to strike with the borrowed dagger, her expression calmly intent, but her blow returns only a feather; no blood.

Still hoping they can drive the creature off rather than wasting more time fighting with it, ibn Fadil darts in front of it, shouting some incomprehensible Zakharan slogan and threatening it with his sword, but not actually attacking.

Val sees the half-elf and wonders what the devil he is trying to do. Realization dawns a moment later, and he waits to see if the ploy will work. Alais continues his scramble, finally reaching the shelter of the flitter's wing.

The skullbird, unused to prey that fights back so savagely, gives its harsh cry again and takes off. It makes a half-hearted dive at the one perched on the bear carcass, which screeches angrily at this attempted theft, then returns to its nest, disappointed and restless. The third, which has not troubled to stir itself, busies itself with a bit of carrion it had laid by for a snack.

For a moment, the room grows quiet but for the sound of tearing flesh. Gorn peeks nervously out of the tunnel.

"Tk tk. What I could do with such materials," a xixchil voice muses; it's hard to tell where he might be. "I'm certain I know what I did wrong with the last elf. And tk, it pains me to see such primitive prostheses. I could be of help."

Ibn Fadil spins around, trying to locate the source of the voice. "Pros-what?" he asks a bit wildly, feigning somewhat more nervousness than he really feels.

Emmett whispers to Pham, "If you still got that paralysis spell, get it ready for when the little booger shows himself." He then says more loudly, "I like my prostheses just fine, thanks. What do you think you could do better?"

Pham has been looking around trying to find the creature, and making sure to find his back to the wall, and hoping there's no hidden trapdoor beneath his feet. He whispers back, "Emmett, I've got the hold spell ready - I just don't know if it'll work on a Xixchil. If nothing else, I can stop him from casting spells, which should even the odds a little." He takes cover at the far end of the row of cages, away from where the xixchil's voice seems to be coming from. Something stirs inside as he passes.

"The possibilities are endless! Perhaps a crushing claw, or fine manipulators like our friend Gorn?" The momentary sharpening of menace in the xixchil's voice sends the dwarf cringing back into his shadow. "Some sentients just don't know how to display gratitude. It would be difficult to match the original leg, but I'm sure we can come up with something given time."

"Or maybe you're just producing shoddy workmanship? Face it, a hand is pretty versatile on its own. Heck, even this," Emmett waves his mounted knife in the air, "can be quickly adapted for a variety of uses."

The half man shrugs. "A crushing claw, it does what, one thing? How often do I need to crush things? I dunno, buggy. I just don't think you're everything you claim to be. Outmoded. Overspecialized. Pity, that."

Val slowly moves himself away from the edge of the level he is on and concentrates on locating where the voice is coming from. He fingers the one dagger lightly as his other hand draws yet another, readying himself for whatever may come next.

Impressed by Emmett's baiting technique, ibn Fadil looks at him and waits for the xixchil's reaction.

"Kt kt. Of course you may have as many limbs as you like," the insectoid replies cheerfully. "Tentacles are quite versatile, if that is your interest. I believe I could fit up to four onto your upper

skeletal structure without requiring too many additional modifications. As for specialization... it serves its purposes." He's moving as he speaks, in the direction of the inner wall that connects this large room to the rest of the citadel.

Well, ibn Fadil thinks, if baiting it is not going to work ...

Emmett stops and looks down at his chest, a shocked look on his face. "Where? No, seriously, how the heck could you fit four more limbs on here?"

"Wherever they'd be most useful, of course."

... something more direct is called for; at least he is more or less behind the creature now. The half-elf looks at Nyala, not as a signal but simply because this could be the last time he sees her. Then, quickly but cautiously, he starts moving up behind where the xixchil seems to be -- hoping that as he gets closer, its voice or its footsteps will give him a better idea of its exact location.

It is a quite difficult variant of blind-man's-bluff he's playing; he can hear the faint scritch of its feet on the stone, the puff of aspiration through spiracles in its sides. There is a sudden skittering sound as it moves away -- not very far, but it's clearly aware of his presence. He realizes that it's headed toward the door in the lowest level of the cavern.

Emmett keeps trying. "No, I mean, well, I just can't see enough space on my torso for that many limbs. Besides, why have one crush, one grab, one fine manipulator? Why not just have one hand that does all of them a little and a bunch of tools to improve things. Your method just seems...clumsy."

"When one is accustomed to awkwardness, grace itself may seem alien. Kt. I look forward to discussing the philosophy of design with you, biped. Assuming there is anything left with which to speak. In my years of wandering I have found one design upon which I have been unable to improve. Though you may," he adds with a hissing laugh, "find it overspecialized."

"Hmmm," Emmett thinks, "Maybe I did manage to piss him off."

Several things happen in very quick succession. Everyone hears the hum of a door mechanism as the invisible xixchil manipulates the control. Ibn Fadil lunges blindly and feels his blade strike *something;* there is a high, angry chittering as the wizard lapses back into his own language. Above them all a swift scuttle draws the eye as Gorn finally nerves himself to leave his hiding place and begins climbing up to the top level, his double hands finding sure grip on the seemingly smooth stone.

Meanwhile, Alais squirms through the hatch into the flutter. Made for elves, he finds it something of a tight fit. It's been stripped of its helm, but still holds a few personal items belonging to the late pilot, who probably also owned the arm that third skullbird is nibbling on.

"Captain, I suggest we head further away from the corpse...Back towards the others so we can help them out, or over to the tent to see if there's anything there we can use?"

Most of the group has already either taken cover near the row of cages with Brother Pham, or is in position to do so quickly. Emmett remains nearest where they had thought the xixchil to be. Most of them are looking at him to see what they should do.

Seeing the Zahkaran's attentions divided, Hiro moves closer to where the unseen foe is most likely to be. He rotates his wrist slightly, spinning the katana in an almost hypnotic arc. He mutters something in his native tongue about "interfering clerics" and "magic-wielding-animals-that-

walk-like-men" as he strikes at a wheezing, bubbling sound near the blood that has spattered on the floor from the creature's wound. In a rare experience for the kensai, his blade touches only air.

Emmett gives orders. "OK guys, spread out, 5 feet apart, half circle, advance on Ibn Fadil's position at a fast walk. If you feel the little booger try and get past us, give out a yell and take a swing at him. If something comes out that door, we're gonna have to have the bugger to feed to it."

Pham follows with Emmett's plan, slowly moving forward towards ibn Fadil's position, staff held out in a defensive posture. Pham is also praying under his breath, looking for any sign of the creature's location. The intermittent drops of blood give him something to fix on, and with Hextor's blessing he begins his spell.

The half man advances, taking the position to the far left. He figures this spread minimizes their chance of getting hit by an area attack, and still gives them a chance of finding their invisible-but-bleeding opponent.

Pressing whatever advantage the lucky hit has given him, the half-elf pushes forward toward the door, sword-first, trying to reach the control and shut it again or somehow block its inexorable progress. Something brushes his arm and he nearly jumps out of his skin, takes a wild swing and misses as the xixchil bolts from the doorway with startling speed. Ibn Fadil looks at the wall and groans silently; of *course* it would be another key! Try to jam them? The doors are massively thick, to insulate the rest of the citadel from the noise of the forge at work. The xixchil must have the key on him.

Meanwhile, Val races closer, spares a moment to wonder what their quasi-dwarven prisoner or fellow prisoner thinks he's doing as Gorn climbs out of sight. He readies a knife to throw, reconsiders his chances, and takes a position in the half-circle Emmett has created, closing in with determined care on their mad captor.

The trail of blood has stopped moving, gathering instead into a still pool; did Pham's spell work? From somewhere behind the still-opening doors comes a heart-stopping scream.

Noting the absence of a helm in the flutter, Alais makes a frustrated sound and climbs back out. At least the bird seems inclined to leave him alone... for the moment.... Where did everyone go? He spots them over by the wall and begins to walk in that direction, when something nearer at hand catches his eye, one of the tapestries on the wall fluttering oddly. Above him, a skullbird screeches.

"Valarin!" ibn Fadil snaps. "Your tools!" Whether the 'sailor' throws them or brings them with himself, he cares not, but he wants to see this door closed again.

Val hears the shout and hesitates for a moment. He strips his left bracer off and tosses it at ibn Fadil, hoping the other did not mean for him to bring them personally. Val doesn't want to give this 'thing' an opportunity to run if he breaks the closing line, spell or no spell...

The half-elf catches the object, lays his sword on the floor and extracts Val's lock-picks from their clever hiding place. Hunching over the lock, he prays that his fingers still remember how to do this -- and that he won't be interrupted by whatever is behind the door. The lock is more difficult than anything he's worked on in a long, long time; it's immediately clear this is not going to be as quickly done as he would like.

Pham continues on, blissfully unaware of the perceived slight on Hiro's honor. Let Hextor worry about it - Pham is just the messenger.

What he *is* worried about, though, is if the xixchil is in fact held, or just faking it. "Emmett," Pham whispers, "I'm not convinced the hold spell got him - get ready to move when I poke it."

Pham waits for Emmett to set up close enough to attack, then pokes at where the creature should be with the end of his staff, hard enough to damage the xixchil. He feels the end strike something hard that gives way beneath his blow. More blood joins that pooling slowly on the floor.

"Right." Emmett has his sword at the ready, prepared to reduce the little bugger to chitin and ichor fricassee if he gets the chance. He has one ear cocked, however, to be ready of something does come through that door. Half attention is not good enough it seems, to strike an invisible creature, even if it's not moving.

Val also readies himself for Pham's attack, knees bent, prepared to spring. If he can just get a good solid hit on the thing... He hits it at least, although not terribly solidly.

Meanwhile, Alais examines the tapestry. A wide passage lies behind it, descending at a steep angle.

Delmar takes his turn swinging at the xixchil. Something crunches beneath his blade; everyone jumps back as the thing sudden flickers back into visibility--battered, half-dismembered, leaking some fluids that might as well be ichor, and very clearly dead.

Up on the highest level, Gorn scrabbles at the heavy door and makes the same discovery the others have. "Keys!!" he shrieks, looking around frantically.

Hiro moves to provide protection to the lone ibn Fadil in case something should come closer to the door. He notes with puzzlement a smell like salt water, very out of place in this mountain drifting in the Flow. Something moves sinuously in the darkness.

Alais peeks into the passage, hardly noticing any longer that he is wounded. Judging by the light reflected from the walls farther down, there might be a window or some other aperture down there.

At the silence following the xixchil's demise, ibn Fadil glances up from his efforts with the lock. "Keys!" he echoes Gorn, with no less urgency but far greater self-control. Praying that the keys will quickly be found, he starts putting away Val's tools.

Above, the cowardly dwarf hesitates between going below to look for the keys that can free them, and the prospect of being closer to whatever waits in the darkness.

Meanwhile Yestin strides over to the junk mountain, keeping a wary eye on the skullbirds all the while, and roots through it for something that might be used as a weapon. He finds a long pole of rough-forged iron and hefts it thoughtfully for a moment, nodding, then locates a second one which he passes to Nyala. It is a bit heavy and awkward for her, but at least it will confer more distance than a knife blade from whatever might attack them.

Val immediately starts searching the xixchil's corpse for keys. He focuses on the task at hand, ignoring the note of panic in Gorn's yell. The wizard's exoskeleton is elaborately inlaid with copper tracery and a number of gems, included a large black stone set into his chest.

Emmett watches the scramble for the keys while changing his position, putting the corpse between himself and the door. When Val needs to check the xixchil's other side, the half man stoops and flips it over for him, happy to help the process along.

There is also a small bag on a fine chain worn around his neck; feeling this gingerly reveals what feels like keys, muffled in something else to keep them from clinking while the wizard spied invisibly on his unwilling helpers. Val frees the bag and brings it over to the door, shakes the keys out. There are almost a dozen, long-barrelled and finely crafted. They are all clearly different, but there is nothing overt to tell which one might belong to this door.

Emmett then drives his knife into the chitinous hide while getting a good grip with his other hand. One smooth motion gets the creature over his head, and he takes a few steps forward, ready to throw the corpse at the head of whatever comes through the door.

He is also prepared to yell, "Lunch!"

It drips on him. Delmar takes up a position nearby, his expression grim.

Ibn Fadil picks up his blade and moves out of the way so Val can try keys, turning to stand with Hiro, facing the door and whatever waits there.

"Does anyone else smell salt water?" the Kensai of Kara-Tur says aloud. "I think the dead wizard may be the least of our worries...."

As Val tests the first key, there is again that slight shifting, and then something whips out of the darkness, faster than the eye can see, toward Hiro and ibn Fadil. Both nimble warriors evade the viciously spined tail that has attempted to knock them off their feet.

The thing emerging from the shadows is large--ogre-sized--and semi-reptilian, with four long, curved talons on each hand and foot and more teeth than anything should possess. It does not appear to have been well fed of late, and saliva drips from between the three rows of teeth as its tongue flickers, scenting for them.

It has no eyes, they realize in the split second they have to in which observe the thing. That does not appear to hinder its motion. Also, some of its hide appears to be missing--the source of the bear's unnatural armor? Another one must have donated the tail, for this creature possesses a similar limb, flicking about in a deadly, eye-defeating dance as it advances.

"Yitsan," Delmar says in a slightly strangled voice. Behind them, the skullbirds' shrieks set the entire cavern ringing.

Hiro veers to and fro like a mongoose locked in deadly combat with a cobra. He trusts to senses beyond mere sight to keep him away from the lethal combination of talons and teeth and tail. Emmett can tell from his vantage point that Hiro is advancing into a position to strike the creature's exposed flesh in the hopes of putting the beast down quickly.

Ibn Fadil somehow manages to both avoid the tail and stay more or less in place. "Too late, Val," he says tightly. "Take the keys topside and get our exit open. Hurry." As soon as Val starts moving, the half-elf backs up after him, until he is out of the creature's immediate range. Then he glances around to see where everyone else is and what they are doing.

Val hesitates only a moment before he changes direction and heads up the stairs. He looks for Gorn and the way out, covering as much distance as his legs will allow. Maybe the dwarf could get over his cowardice long enough to point out the right key. Hopefully the correct key is here, since he neglected to retrieve his tools from ibn Fadil.

"We have to g-g-get out of here!!" the dwarf wails.

“Do you know which key it is?” Val demands, skidding to a halt at the doors on the top level.

Gorn stares at them, paralyzed by terror. “T-t-t-try th-that one.”

It doesn't work. Neither does the next one. Val snarls and resigns himself to trying them all-as fast as he can.

While Val races ahead, Emmett issues a few terse orders, bringing the rest of the group into a defensive U ready to retreat up the ramp.

Hiro's expertly crafted katana sings as it slices through the air; dismayed, he once again has the impression that his stroke is guided, delivering a deep cut on one of the creature's arms. It screams in fury and hunger and leaps to retaliate. The horrific jaws close on nothing, the tail strikes air, but the claws bite--they are incredibly sharp.

Alais walks cautiously down the broad passage, though his spells detect the presence of no intelligent life. Behind him there seems to be a lot of shrieking going on. Before him, the passage widens slightly and grows much taller--there's more to the back part of the citadel than they had realized--big enough to park the slender shape of a mosquito ship in with the wing-sails folded down. All good wizards keep an escape route handy.

The skullbird seizes a haunch of bear in its talons and retreats to its nest. Hiro shifts his position in an attempt to draw attention from the others to give them a chance to get clear or to fire upon the thing without risking friendly fire himself. The Saint of Steel bites back the flush of pain to his body and pride. He has resolved to have a friendly discussion with his fellow native of Kara-Tur.

Emmett stands, still holding the insectoid body, having spent the last few seconds carefully timing the motion of the creature's tail. Once he has the pattern in mind, he steps in and throws the body, aiming for the tail and its deadly spikes. With luck, the alien's corpse will be the perfect tool for covering the spikes, hindering the creature and removing one of its prime weapons.

Once the corpse is thrown he snatches Val's sword back from his belt to defend the people behind him. The disappearance of Alais and ibn Fadil makes the organized retreat seem pointless, but this is his best point to be able to dart in and aid Hiro should he need it.

Emmett succeeds in hitting the creature with the wizard's body; although the tail is not incapacitated as he had hoped, the impact does serve to distract the yitsan as it writhes free and lashes out in response to the perceived attack. Chitin crunches as it tramples the body under all four sets of claws.

In a sudden streak of silk and steel Hiro leaps in the air and rolls across the creature's back. As he rolls off the carapace he drives a thrust into the exposed flesh. As Hiro springs free Emmett lunges in with Val's sword.

The yitsan is bleeding from several wounds now, but is far from dead, and it leaps off the wizard's corpse toward them as if determined to settle accounts.

Meanwhile, several levels up, Val is frantically trying each key, trying not to panic. "Note to self; if I *ever* decide to make a citadel, use one key for everything..." he mutters to nobody in particular.

Ibn Fadil keeps moving away from the monster (more or less towards Emmett's group) and trying to look in all directions at once, until he finally figures out that their own mage is nowhere in sight. "Zheremin!" he shouts.

Val hears ibn Fadil's call and takes a moment to look around for the wizard, who isn't in sight. Val continues to look for the right key, casting an occasional glance over his shoulder to see if Alais shows up. Where...? Finally, "Find the key," Val growls at Gorn as he turns to look more carefully for the missing wizard. The fact that ibn Fadil is dashing toward it makes the concealed opening easier to spot.

Looking more carefully toward where the mage last was, ibn Fadil sees the disarranged tapestry and immediately makes for it, scowling.

"Behind the tapestry!" Val shouts to ibn Fadil. "Looks like an opening behind it!"

Val's unnecessary advice hardly distracts him from his newfound irritation with Alais. He peers into the tunnel, then starts down it, staying close to the left-hand wall and gradually speeding up until he is almost running.

After Val is certain the Zakharan heard him, he turns to check Gorn's progress with the keys. "What's behind there anyway?" he asks the dwarf.

"Th-this is the inhabited s-section," he stutters, trying keys frantically, his extra hands almost blurring as he sorts them. "If we can get through, we're out."

Finally, one turns in the lock, beginning the familiar hum.

"It's opening!" the dwarf yells, pushing his stocky frame against the slowly widening gap as if to force it faster. "I just hope they d-don't try to kill us," he adds under his breath.

* * *

When ibn Fadil reaches the end of the tunnel he sees Alais disappearing into the ship. "Master Zheremin!" the half-elf shouts. "The rest of us are leaving!" And I thought *Valarin* had no sense, he adds to himself. Do I have to put a leash on both of them?

Within, the compact vessel appears stocked for any journeys the mage might have wanted to make on his collecting trips.

Heedless of his companion's presence outside the ship or the drama unfolding in the main chamber, Alais begins to investigate the ship's contents. The walls are shrouded in more of the hangings Blade seemed fond of. Among the barrels of water and crates of food and a couple cages full of the winged rats (they sing rather nicely) are smaller containers tucked securely into cranies. Some hold what is probably loot from other ships that have fallen afoul of the wizard's citadel, including some beautiful porcelain and a jade statue that even Alais can tell is quite valuable. Others are dwarf-made, including armor and weapons taken from the citadel itself.

Moving forward, the helm is of an unusual sort, more a bench shape, suited to the xixchil's body type. Bolted to the floor within easy reach of the helm is a small, locked chest.

* * *

"I think we've stalled as long as we can," Lotta reports. "They want to speak to one of the crew."

Gerik sighs. "Man the starboard bow catapult. We'll see if a warning shot gets rid of them." If it doesn't, the citadel's heavy weapons will make short work of the tradesman. They had tried surreptitiously signaling for help once, and paid dearly.

Another of the heavily robed dwarves appears in the doorway. "The door is opening." No need to say which door. There is a note of nervous surprise in his voice; usually the wizard takes more time with his subjects.

"Belay that," Gerik told Lotta. "Prepare the catapult, but don't fire. He may not be interested in this at all, but we'll see if he gives us any hints."

* * *

"Yestin! Give us a hand with that Pole-arm of yours!" Emmett yells, bracing himself in as strong a defensive position as he can against the rushing beast. Obviously far less agile than the Kensai, the Half Man relies on his bladework and Gond-given gifts to give his companions openings for attacks.

The giff rushes in, improvised weapon at the ready, but either his wounds or the yitsan's darting motions defeat his aim, and the pole strikes sparks from the floor as it skids harmlessly across the stone. The creature jerks back a step with an ear-shattering screech, blind snout swiveling as it pinpoints them all by scent and sound alone.

* * *

Outside, ibn Fadil chooses to give the touchy mage a few moments to respond to his shout (as opposed to simply storming aboard and grabbing him). After a controlled breath or two it occurs to him that leaving by ship might be a good or even essential idea, if the two of them become cut off from the group. He looks around the ship more carefully. Beyond it is an opening large enough to allow the ship to come and go freely.

Alais sits in the helm to see what happens, totally unaware of the shouting; it seems normal enough, and he knows he can fly her despite the helm's odd configuration. He lifts a foot off the deck experimentally; the ship is nimble and responsive under his control.

When the ship unexpectedly lifts, ibn Fadil hastens to scramble aboard and up to the helm. "Nice ship," he says, grudgingly. "I am going to go and see how the fight is going, Master Zere-min. Please be prepared to leave quickly. If you see a large, toothy, clawed monster called a yitsan before any of the rest of us, I suggest you leave immediately. Otherwise, please do not move the ship from here until I come back. Understood?" He seems annoyed.

"Yes, yes, whatever." Alais seems quite pleased.

Hurrying back up the tunnel, ibn Fadil peers out from behind the hanging with all due caution. Seeing the situation little changed, he calls out, "Captain! There is a ship back here, a 'mosquito'. I think we should go and try to warn the _Cat_."

"We've almost got this door open," Delmar shouts back. "You and Alais go, the rest of us will try to get back to the Distraction!"

"Yes, sir!" He meet's Nyala's gaze, snatches out his sword (now sheathed, but regrettably not yet cleaned) and slides it across the floor to her. By way of fond farewell he calls, in Elvish, "Do not trust these dwarves for an instant!"

She gladly exchanges the sword for her clumsy pole and gives him an abbreviated wave, unable to take her attention from the creature.

* * *

Hiro's eyes communicate his thanks to Emmett; the wounds the Steel Saint has received are relatively minor, but will no doubt be with him for some time to come. His morning routines will be all the more difficult because of them, assuming he ever has the opportunity to resume them.

Hiro races down the length of the polearm and uses its firm angle as a brace off which to drive his own blade, but it turns against a still-armored section of hide. The tail sweeps out again, viciously; it fails to entangle any of the three, and the many-toothed jaws snap on air, but the claws again bite home painfully.

Nyala darts in with a grim expression, but her borrowed blade misses its target just as Hiro's did, and Delmar's doesn't even come close. With the creature more or less penned in by blades at the moment, Emmett dares a lunge that strikes home deeply; the yitsan is looking much the worse for wear now, and backs off a couple of steps, hissing uncertainly.

Several dozen feet above the swirling melee, Valarin wishes he had more weapons. He also wishes these dwarves had been more interested in anything but sound-proofing as the door slowly edges open.

"I'll be right behind you," he warns the dwarf pressed against the opening.

"I certainly hope so," Gorn replies, giddy with terror. "There!" It is finally wide enough to pass if one doesn't mind a scrape or two. He bursts free and dashes down the hall, shouting at the top of his lungs in Dwarvish, "Help! Help! The wizard's dead and there's a monster loose! Help!"

Fifty feet down the corridor he takes a sudden turn and runs smack into a couple of other dwarves who had drawn the short straws and been sent to see if there was any communication from Blade. Axes leap to their hands, Gorn tries to hide behind Val, and for a moment things look very grim indeed, but Gorn's shrieking is finally understood. One of them accompanies the two back to the forge - behind them, of course - while the other runs off to inform the rest, mindful that this might be some twisted trap. Val's longer legs mean he reaches the door again well before the two dwarves.

* * *

The half-elf races back down the corridor once more and scrambles up onto the little ship. "Master Zeremin, I will raise the wings as soon as we are outside!" he calls. "Let us try to reach the _Cat_ as quickly as we may!"

Alais takes off. When they swing around the "bow" of the citadel they see the _Cat_ drifting within hailing distance, two robed dwarves on the landing area near the _Distraction_. There is activity around some of the citadel's weapons as well.

From his place on the smaller ship's deck, Ibn Fadil calls down to Alais, "Get as close as you can. Without getting in their way." The half-elf peers at the _Lazy Cat_, looking for Captain Theo but not waiting to see him before shouting out his warning. "Treachery, Captain! Back off! Move! Evade!" Running out of synonyms, he gestures urgently for the ship to get away from the citadel.

There are shouts from the other ship as they recognize him, and the tradesman's pilot draws the ship off a little distance.

"What's the situation?" Theo demands sharply, striding up to the rail.

"It may be over already," ibn Fadil answers. "Captain Delmar and the rest are trying to get back to the ship, but we cannot be too careful. These dwarves have become little better than pirates." He peers anxiously toward the citadel, trying to see if anything new is happening there. The dwarves appear to have scattered for cover as soon as they saw the mosquito.

Seeing nothing going on immediately, he begins explaining, interrupting himself at each full stop to look at the citadel again. "Sir, some time ago these dwarves took aboard a mage, a xixchil, who somehow convinced them that his, er, physical modification skills could benefit them. And then it seems he played them like a musical instrument, turning them against each other - I have no details but I understand that most of them are dead now, and the living ones gruesomely modified. This xixchil enjoyed experimenting on any creatures, and the dwarves had taken to turning over any visitors to him. But I am glad to report, sir, that trying this on *us* was a mistake, and we have killed the mage, though not before he set loose a dangerous creature called a yitsan, according to Captain Delmar. Master Zeremin and I came to warn you and the rest of us intended to get away from the yitsan and out of the citadel. I cannot guess how the dwarves will react to their liberation, but the worst I can think of is that they will try to cover up their crimes."

Theo, impressively, looks like he's actually absorbed most if not all of that rapid information stream. A few more quick questions suffice to paint the full picture for the captain. "We'll give them a few more moments," he decides, keeping his scope trained on the citadel's formidable weaponry. "Battle stations, all."

* * *

The dwarf with Val pushes back his hood in order to see--his revealed skin is covered with pebble-like scales and his eyes are an unnatural orange--and stares down at the carnage as if stunned. The yitsan, sensing new arrivals and perhaps realizing that it is doomed, abandons the immediate battle in favor of looking for a way out. It pauses near the cages, sniffing at whatever lies within, and tries the bars, but moves on defeated toward the tunnel where Alais and ibn Fadil disappeared. The others retreat in an orderly fashion up the ramp.

"Uh, yes. I see. We'll see to it." The dwarf looks worriedly at the xixchil's mangled body as if expecting it to move. "You will--"

"We will return to our ship," Delmar informs him bluntly. "Any unfinished business between us can be discussed there. I'm sure Gorn can show us the way while you deal with your late master's pet."

Fortunately, the dwarf doesn't have time to stand there and argue with a half-dozen larger, armed and understandably annoyed former prisoners, and with a hard look at Gorn he runs back the way they came.

* * *

Gerik's world is rapidly unraveling, and given the years-long nightmare it has been he doesn't mind in the least. No sooner had one come running with the news that nuisance Gorn is alive and claiming the wizard dead--sort of bizarre test?--than another came from the other end of the citadel saying that the Unpronounceable, as they called it, has taken off and is approaching the strangers' tradesman, suggesting that the wizard is quite lively. But then another said that the half-elf prisoner was freely manning the ship and had warned off the other, and another that he had seen the xixchil dead.

"Quiet, all of you," he snaps after a moment, calming the pandemonium. "All right. Marten, gather up everyone who can use a crossbow and get them down the forge to take care of that thing. Ragnvard, take Tora with you, find that little sniveller and get those keys you said he was carrying. Gods know what else is locked up in the lower levels that we'd like to keep that way. You two, get forward and disarm those catapults." He glares an objector into silence. "I'll be joining you shortly. Time to see if there is any way out of this."

A few minutes later, Theo and Co., who have been keenly observing the work around the catapults, are surprised to see a robed dwarf limp out onto the landing area holding a white flag.

* * *

Val is all for getting away while the getting is good, but he quickly realizes that the group is shy a member. Seeing the creature backing away, Emmett had moved to place himself between it and his wounded comrades lest it change its mind. Now that it is obviously gone--for the moment--he hunkers down over the insectoid corpse and starts rooting through it for tools of interest. "Spoils of war being spoils of war." Pham and Ibn Fadil deserve the lion's share certainly, but better to claim them for the group before the dwarves arrive in force.

The xixchil didn't carry much beyond the bag of keys that Val snatched, although there is another, somewhat larger bag as well. Like many of its kind, its battered exoskeleton has elaborate metallic inlays (now, alas, quite a bit less aesthetically pleasing); they look like copper. Aside from the large black stone in his chest, there is an emerald below each eye, like exotic tears. A few sharp blows suffice to shatter the chitin into smaller shards for pocketing along with the bag; the stones can be freed later.

Hearing a despairing wail from the yitsan, which has discovered that the tunnel is no means of escape, Emmett then hastens to rejoin his companions. The impatiently hopping Gorn leads them to the left - this level appears to have the same layout as one of those below, avoiding a half dozen heavily armed dwarves who are coming from the right to deal with the creature.

They pass the entrance to one of the broken lifts and continue on, and a short time later are back where they first entered this strange place; the carved iron doors are open, and they can see several dwarves huddled in close knots within, talking quietly. One of them looks out and sees them, does a double-take, and seems about to come out, but at a gesture from a companion remains where he or she is.

It is very difficult to step into that lift again, but a few moments later the platform deposits them on the citadel's landing area. An unfamiliar mosquito is hovering hard by but has not landed, and Theo is talking to a hooded dwarf, with ibn Fadil close by, scowling.

* * *

Figuring that it's logical for 'his' ship to be sent in to talk, ibn Fadil looks to Theo for such instruction. "Sir?" he calls, letting the captain know he's paying attention.

"Tell Alais to bring her in close as you can," the captain instructs, and turns away to give further orders to the rest of his crew. Through some delicate maneuvering, the ships are brought close enough for him to cross over to the mosquito. There is a further pause while one of the _Cat's_ men provides a sword for the currently-unarmed ibn Fadil. "Bring her down a bit, but don't land. What do you think about this?" he asks, glancing at the waiting dwarf.

"At best, they want to apologize and get us to leave them alone to cope with their folly, sir," ibn Fadil replies, also eyeing the dwarf. "At worst - well, I mentioned that already."

Theo grunts acknowledgement and jumps down to the deck where the dwarf is waiting. "Captain Barthelm," he introduces himself. "Of the TTS _Lazy Cat_. What do you want?"

"You may call me Gerik," the dwarf's deep and somewhat weary voice replies. "And I wish only to let you know that the remainder of your people will be arriving momentarily, and we are not in the least interested in hindering your departure--quite the opposite."

Just then there is a whirl as the lift operates, and Delmar and the others emerge, looking somewhat bloody and grim. The dwarf with them remains at the lift.

“Your belongings will be returned to you,” Gerik continues as they cross the deck toward the *_Distraction_*. “And indeed, you are welcome to whatever lies in that ship touched by his foulness, as you have freed us from the lesser part of our bondage.”

“Get on board and ready to move out,” Delmar tells them quietly, then moves to take up a position flanking Theo.

“The lesser?” Theo asks, sounding somewhat affronted.

“The greater will be ours for the remainder of our lives, body and spirit,” he replies calmly. “Too much of what we have done was done with open eyes.” The lift sounds again, this time bearing two dwarves. One of them carries the crew’s weapons in all three hands; the other sprint over to Gerik and looses an excited-sounding flood of dwarven speech.

“Huh,” Yestin says, cocking an ear. “It seems a cleric has been found, who was hostage. These xixchil and their drugs--I do not think I like them,” he says mildly, pressing a hand to his battered ribs as he climbs aboard.

Gerik gestures to the speaking dwarf to wait and speaks to Theo again. “Perhaps the gods will tell us what we may do to atone. We are adrift in the Flow, and shall remain so evermore unless others of our people come to our aid; there are two few of us to operate the Forge, even can we repair it. We may yet survive quite some time as we are. Though we can rightly ask nothing more of you visitors, I beg you to pass word of our fate to any who may find it in themselves to aid such miserable things as we.”

“There is a detachment of Imperial Marines in Bralspace, where we are bound,” Theo tells him, not without a glimmer of hard amusement in his eyes. “I’m sure they’ll know what to do.”

Gerik opens his mouth, shuts it grimly. Even in their straits, it is clear that it will be hard for them to accept that particular aid--should it be forthcoming. And of course there is the matter of the flitter’s pilot, who almost certainly met an unpleasant end. “As you wish,” he says at last.

There is not much more to say; Gerik appears to be feeling the weight of years’ exhaustion and is anxious for them to go so the dwarves can decide what to do next, and Theo appears willing to depart with an intact crew and an unexpected extra ship--the issue of what will constitute justice for the remaining dwarves is a thorny one best left to wiser heads, in his opinion.

The Three Trees convoy spelljams for a bit to get some distance between them and the citadel before stopping to take stock. As soon as they stop, Brother Pham tends to his injured comrades.

When Emmett examines the items he snatched from the wizard’s body, he finds a heavy ceramic bottle containing something that sounds somewhat viscous when he tilts it, and a small crystal one holding something amber-colored. Although it’s easy enough to tell that the black stone has some sort of magical properties, none of the ships’ magicians can tell what it might be.

There is also time to examine the contents of the mosquito. The rats are disposed of promptly, singing or no singing; the rest takes somewhat more time to catalog, particularly since Alais insists on doing most of it himself. The others haven’t seen him this excited since he last expounded his elemental shift theory.

Packed in among the odds and ends the xixchil wanted to take with him in case of a hasty retreat from his citadel is a small chest of gold pieces and a beautiful carved ivory box that holds a

scattering of gems. In a set of large crates are a half dozen sets of dwarven chain mail, short swords, and axes, as well as a human-sized set of plate mail, an axe and scimitar.

The chest bolted down near the helm is locked, and a somewhat self-conscious but resigned Valarin works on it for a while before it opens. Inside is a leather scroll case marked with what might be runes or might be “this end up” as far as most of them can tell, a clear glass bottle with a clear liquid in it, and a small velvet pouch with a ring.

By far the oddest thing on the ship is a largish crate that at first appears to be full of nothing but straw. Digging into it reveals a much smaller wooden box, which when opened also contains straw. Nestled into that is something Emmett recognizes immediately: a griffin egg. What was the xixchil doing with it, and why pack it so carefully?

Delmar tells them, “The usual way for the company to handle what they like to call ‘Salvage and Recovery’ work like this is for the higher-ups to inventory and take care of the actual sale, give the finders a cut. I’ve never been personally involved in, uh, salvaging a fully operational ship, so I’m not entirely sure how Mr. Volant will want to deal with this. At the very least, I’d say we’re all due some handsome bonus pay. It’s accepted that one or two small things might find new homes before the auditors can board,” he adds with a smile.

Upon being reunited with Nyala, ibn Fadil actually embraces her in public, a first. He then proceeds to fuss quietly over her injuries; when he learns the xixchil bit her, he looks very much like he wishes he had bashed the creature a few more times when he had the chance. A bit taken aback by the public display of affection, she does not however appear displeased.

In the discussion of the mosquito and its contents, ibn Fadil makes it known that he wants to name the ship *_Twist of Fate_*. It seems to mean something to him, though he refuses to explain. He looks at all the goods with interested curiosity but says he will be perfectly happy with part of their cash value.

"I was not showing off," ibn Fadil tells Nyala later on, half-jokingly, as if continuing a conversation that began aboard the dwarven citadel. "Jumping down and hitting the bear thing with my sword would have been showing off, except that is more likely to have made me look foolish."

"Foolish? How so?"

"Well, I probably would have missed, and hit the ground or something. Have you ever hit stone with a sword at full force?" He grimaces and flexes one hand reminiscently.

"Rather than hitting the... bear with your feet at full force?" There is the faintest hint of laughter around her eyes. "Given your skill in striking xixchil - invisible, no less - I am sure you would not have missed this easy a target."

"Mmm." He also smiles, just a bit. "On Zakhara we have somewhat more mixed feelings about luck." But he shrugs off whatever was troubling him. "My skills are rusty but adequate, I think; they are just not up to hitting invisible anythings without a dose of luck. Now, when we get to a place that has horses and we have some free time, then I will try to show you some *real* showing off."

"I look forward to it." She looks out the window into the pearly Flow. "I wonder where we will go after this return to Bral; I suspect our captain has some plan."

He eyes her uneasily. "I had hoped to start working our way toward Errinald - the only point of departure for Zakhara. A dull and smoky sort of place," he adds reflectively, "very urban but not very civilized."

"Sounds splendid," she replies dryly. "You have determined to return to your home, then?"

"Er," he says, realizing that he has somehow failed to bring this up before. "I had not really been thinking past Bral. I suppose ..." He stops to think, quite surprised with himself. "I am out of the habit of making definite plans. And I have never had to include anyone else in my plans before," he adds weakly.

She shrugs, amused. "As you know, I have had no plans at all since leaving Windhold. One direction is much the same as another. I am curious about what the others intend, however."

Relieved that she is not annoyed, he continues his own train of thought, speaking more quietly than before. "Back on Janik, I sent a letter to my uncle telling him that I was putting myself on leave and that I would report to him when I could make my way there. As long as I get there within a year and a half or so, that should be all right. I suppose there is no need to hurry just yet ..." Still, the thought of being out of touch with home for that long makes him uneasy.

She shakes her head, still a bit baffled by the nature of the duties that rule him, but says only, "Perhaps there will be news on Bral of what they wish for you?"

"It is just barely possible, but not likely," he judges. "But my uncle will be worried, you know. If anything were to happen to me - well, he would have to explain it to my mother. He would want me to report in as soon as possible. And there is another reason to go to Errinald," he adds diffidently. "There will be a good seven years' worth of back pay waiting for me there. If you do not want to visit Zakhara right away, we might be able to afford the Grand Tour of Everard."

"Ah, there is the accountant again," she smiles impishly. "If our captain speaks truly, money will be no difficulty for the near future. Are there spheres you long to see, then?"

He looks unsettled again. "No, not really. I -- have never given any thought to where I might go if I could choose."

"Having never anticipated the choice? There is at least no shortage of time for thought out here." She sighs faintly at the thought of the journeying still ahead.

"True enough. They say that Mwera is the most beautiful city in the Loop. I know -- cities are not your favorite. Let me see ... I have heard that the festival of the harvest gods on Mohala is worth seeing, and their horses too. The mountains of Leda are supposed to be spectacular but too dangerous to actually visit ..."

Many of the long hours of the rest of the trip are thereafter spent talking about the interesting places scattered across the Flow.

* * *

Val is prepared to pass off his meager skill with lockpicks as a legacy of the Taros shipping industry--stuck cargo locks, that sort of thing--but Delmar doesn't ask. He's not sure what to make of this.

* * *

Alais casts Detect Magic and hauls off everything in the hoard that gives off any aura. In his free time, over the next few days, he spends his time laboriously trying to determine what exactly they have on their hands. Having done so, he summons the party. The items are spread out in the galley on the table.

"Gentlebeings, after much work and spellcasting I have unlocked the secrets of most of the dweomered objects we have captured. The scroll and potions are easy enough. The scroll contains some spells, including the famous "Fireball." This potion here is Garshung's Oil of Resistance to Corrosive Liquids. The other is simple healing, but not from Bral's sphere or Janik's, because it lacks the hallmark smell of rosemary. I'm curious if it might be a xixchil formula--the color is quite distinct.

"As for the more interesting items: This ring is cheap silver and has a word engraved on its inner surface. This could be the command word or of course some kind of trap. I will have to continue my investigation when we return to Bral.

"The black gem is a complete enigma. My educated guess is that it is some sort of warding amulet. Again, I will investigate further on Bral.

"The armor, sword, and axe all radiate a small degree of magic. I think they are enhanced in some way. The sword has engravings on it; I'm not sure of the derivation.

"And then there is this..." He holds up the griffin egg. "The dweomer on this egg is oddly strong. Griffin eggs, to the best of my knowledge, do not naturally give off any magical energies. I look forward to puzzling out its secrets.

"Our finds are, I suspect, extremely valuable, and I am certain they will be most welcome by any competent museum. If anyone has any questions about any of the objects, I would be happy to answer them as best I can. "

Emmett, somewhat appalled at his own lapse in allowing Alais anywhere near it, takes charge of the griffin egg, although the question of what to do with it remains. He also takes the scimitar; although not his favored weapon, it seems too useful to let go.

On an impulse, Val plucks the ring from the table, glances at the lettering and says, "Pennyroyal."

"Hey...HEY!" the mage yelps. "Empirical experimentation is not called for at this stage in the research!" But Alais objects too late.

For a few seconds, nothing at all happens. Then Val disappears!

Hiro mutters something under his breath.

Val reappears in the corridor just outside the room. For the first time, a definitely acquisitive expression crosses ibn Fadil's face...

"You fool! You had no idea what could have happened there! You're lucky we aren't scraping bits of you off the oven! Now...was that an instance of teleportation or did you become invisible and walk out of the room?" Alais asks.

Hiro rolls his eyes and mutters some more. "Shiroi mahoutsukai no baka..."

Val sheepishly looks around at the others as he steps back into the cramped room. "Truth to tell, I didn't *walk* anywhere..." he says, a bit confused himself. "Maybe I *should* be more careful next time. I could've ended up outside the ship..."

He gazes at the ring a while before giving it to the mage, "Maybe you should study this some more, Alais. It could be quite useful, but it *might* be better to test it in a more...stationary place." It is obvious Val is shaken by the experience.

"I see. Well, that certainly seems to indicate teleportation. Did you send any signal of dislocation

intention?"

"Dislocational intent?" Val simply stares at the mage. "Er...no. I wasn't thinking of anything, really."

Pham looks on at the antics of Val and Alais with a wry smile. "Alais, sometimes deliberate action *does* get results in a way that contemplation and study cannot. And besides - would the xixchil have been carrying something that would have been blatantly harmful to himself? Most mages I've met are far too ... obsessed to be suicidal."

"Very well," Delmar determines. "Alais, please retain charge of the ring and the mystery stone until we can determine what they are. The rest I'm sure we can dispose of when we get to Bral, if no one wants it."

Yestin picks up the bottle Alais has identified as a healing potion. "If it's all right with the rest of you? Just in case my luck doesn't change," he adds with a grin.

* * *

Over the remainder of the voyage, Alais very carefully inquires into and records the state of everyone's digestion.

In response, ibn Fadil resumes his (probably fruitless) efforts to comprehend Alais's inversion theory.

"Digestion, you see, is the most experience most mortals have with elemental changes-food is broken down into component elements and reformed into the elemental structure of the body. As the parameters of elemental change are altered, everyone's digestion should go straight to hell," Alais explains.

"So it is not my cooking?" he inquires. "A joke, a joke!" he adds hastily. "I have not had any problems. But I am still wondering about how you would calculate the chance that a given sphere would experience this inversion...."

Although he is learning to follow Alais' style of conversation, the half-elf leaves this one not much wiser than he entered it, lost in a maze of references, asides, and commentary that further enshroud the already difficult subject.

"I wonder if that young human is crazy," Nyala remarks later. She does not particularly appreciate having her digestion inquired into.

* * *

One of the nights where the Distraction and the Lazy Cat are tied up, Emmett has, as usual, sent his long suffering roommate Yestin off on patrol to spend some quality time with Inez. The room is unlit, with only the light coming from under the door to provide the shadows any depth. There's a chair against the door, and the half-man's bedding is spread across the floor.

There are two lumpy shapes in that mass, curled together.

"We're coming back to Bral soon..." Emmett whispers. Inez can tell from the tone in his voice that this has just strayed into 'serious conversation' territory.

"Hmmmpph," suggests she's awake.

"That means we're heading right back into that whole Victor mess..."

"Oh." That sounds *much* more alert.

"Yeah, well, that means that stuff's gonna be happening. I don't know what the little twerp is planning on doing, but I'll bet big that he's gonna take a shot at Val." Emmett leans in closer. "I

told him I'd watch his back on this, and it ain't over yet. That doesn't mean you have to be anywhere near it."

After a quiet moment she admits, "I don't think I want to be. And I think you're kind of crazy for making an enemy like that, but then I already knew you had to be." She runs a hand down his arm.

Emmett breathes an inward sigh of relief. "Only kind of crazy? I happen to think I'm the best kind of crazy."

The half-man rolls onto his back, his voice losing the joking edge it had held just a second before "My only other option was letting a vicious little thug terrorize a pregnant woman, and leaving a friend in the lurch. I suppose I could have thought about it more, but I always just fly right into these things. I am sorry I dragged you into it."

"Vicious for sure, but little? And I could have said no...."

Emmett leans back into her, "Naaaah, I'm too charming for you to resist. And thanks for going along with it, if I haven't said it before. But I think you're right in not getting near it again this time."

"And that means staying away from me once we get back on Bral. He's going to be going after Val, and I'm going to be watching Val's back. I hate the thought of not seeing you for a while, but until he tips his hand, if you're near me, you're in it."

"I guess." She doesn't sound happy about it. "Maybe none of us should stay there long...."

"That isn't for us to decide - at least not for me. This Three Trees job is too good to for me to pass up, and I spent too long on that rock last time around. So I'm there until the bosses say it's time for the Distraction to move on."

"But this is still several days away, and our ships are only going to be tied up for another few hours..."

* * *

A long last, the blue-and-white bulk of Haven is visible to the eye, and the speck that is the orbiting Rock grows swiftly larger. The usual crowd is assembled on the docks, and the crews of all three ships line the rails. There are still giff guards on the Rock, though the *_Magnus_* is nowhere in sight. It's hard for the *_Distraction_'s* crew not to bristle a little when they spot the xixchil J'x'st in the crowd.

Ibn Fadil watches Delmar as the captain oversees the last pre-docking work. He has been curious about what the man thinks of his work, given his inglorious past on Bral and hasty departure therefrom, and what he might have said to Theo, but the man's close-mouthed nature has made it difficult to satisfy that itch. Nearby, Nyala leans on the rail and regards Bral with decidedly mixed emotions.

Emmett is sticking close to Val, wary of what Victor might try.

Val, unbeknownst to anyone else, has an errand to run; he watches the *_Cat_* depart for the oligarchal dock after off-loading most of her crew.

"Meet back here at noon the day after tomorrow and I'll let you know what's been decided about the *_Twist_* and the items aboard," Delmar tells them while doling out the pay. "Excellent work on this voyage, all of you."

5 - Shore Leave

Several people are informed at once of the _Cat_'s return.

One of them jumps up from a seat and says, "Finally!"

Another flings down a pen and says, "Damn."

A third smiles and says, "Delightful."

* * *

Ibn Fadil gives a last, regretful look at the _Twist_; he has been resolutely ignoring the proprietary feeling he has about the little ship, other than to insist on the name. He knows nobody is going to be giving him that or any other ship, and dwelling on the fierce delight he felt in so briefly 'owning' it (or at any rate a half-interest in it) is utterly pointless.

Leading Nyala down the gangplank, he scans the crowd of mostly familiar faces again. There is Mirabette, standing on an upturned half-barrel so as to be visible among the taller humans; J'x'st with its glassware; and a dozen others. The one he really wants to see is a young boy (or perhaps girl; ibn Fadil has his suspicions about that) called Kayan, always a font of information but not immediately visible in the crowd. For the moment he will settle for the candy-seller, and angles toward her, returning greetings from others and wondering if the kids will remember his habit of giving away half the candy he buys.

He notices immediately that there are many fewer childish faces than he had expected in the crowd. Kayan doesn't seem to be here. Mirabette looks at him, looks at Nyala, does a visible double-take, and waves cheerfully.

"How is business?" ibn Fadil asks the halfling, with equal cheer, and unseriously pretending there is nothing at all unusual about his appearance or company.

"Business is business," she shrugs. "Surprised to see you back here, after all this time. Lemon drop for your lady friend, perhaps?"

"I just went there and back again," he says, distracted for a moment by watching Val and his entourage make their way across the plaza. "But I plan to leave again soon. Nyala, this is Mirabette, purveyor of superior confections - of which I have been deprived for a whole year," he adds lightly. "It will take at least a bag full of them for me to recover."

When Mirabette turns out to have no news of interest to him, he pays for a bag of lemon drops and leads Nyala across the plaza to the inn he's thinking of staying at--several steps up from his previous quarters on the Rock. From the proprietor's expression, the man is trying to figure out where he's seen him before. The room is small but comfortable enough to soothe Nyala's somewhat ruffled state after Mirabette's evident curiosity; there are aspects to returning in ibn Fadil's company that she had not taken into account. From the window high in the overbuilt city, they can see a sliver of the docks and, at the moment, some of Haven's lapis serenity.

From there the two proceeded at ibn Fadil's suggestion to a tavern where he expects he can exchange a drink or two for some information. More than one person watches them go past, appreciative and envious; he has a hard time not feeling smug.

Once inside the ground-level establishment, Old Pete, like many others, looks surprised to see him. "Ibn Fadil? That you?! I'll be scavver-bait, it is!"

They garner quite a few looks as they make their way over; a frosty-eyed Nyala glances around, then rests her hand on her belt near her rapier's hilt. Most of them get the hint. Ibn Fadil cheerfully leaves that problem in her capable hands. "Mister Pete," he greets the old man, waving to the server as he takes a seat. "How are you?"

"Still alive, still alive," he wheezes merrily. "Didn't think to see you around these parts again, must say."

"Oh? Whyever not?" he asks, with a certain irony.

"Welllll, I did hear about a spot or two of trouble...."

The half-elf orders drinks for Pete, himself, and Nyala. "Only a spot or two? I suppose I take my problems too seriously, then!"

"Didn't say how big the spot was, did I?" he twinkles. "And a pleasure to meet you, miss...?" he hops up and bows to ibn Fadil's companion.

"Nyala."

"Lovely. I'm called Old Pete around here. Looks like you've been doing well enough," he appraises ibn Fadil's appearance slyly.

"Spelljamming pays better than dishwashing," he admits with a grin. "But what *did* you hear about my spot of trouble? And what happened after I left?"

"Weeeel, lot of folk surprised by your little adventure. Even more when you left. Vlad was hopping, you can bet on that - the little fish were a bit put out, too, but a bit tickled all the same to see him tweaked... he's disappeared, you know," he adds in a whisper.

"What?!" Ibn Fadil's astonishment is, no doubt, gratifying to the old man. He leans forward and matches the quieter tone. "I just walked off the boat an hour ago, I know nothing at all."

"Pfft. Vanished, couple months ago now. Anyone knows what happened to him, they ain't telling." He took a long drink before adding, "He ain't the only one, neither."

"No! Who else?"

"Joffe, 'bout the same time as Vlad. Shovan Lal. Balgop's kid, forget his name." Like Vlad, Joffe worked in Bral's less pleasant circles; the others were both names ibn Fadil knew vaguely as inoffensive sorts.

"Vanished ..." he repeats anxiously. "I wonder who took over Vlad's interests?"

"Now that I don't know," he shakes his head. "Not sure as I want to, if it's anything to do with all of this."

"What? You think someone moved in on Vlad? But what would Lal or Balgop have to do with that?"

"Good question," he replies darkly.

Ibn Fadil taps his fingers nervously on the table. "I just wanted to pay him off and say good-bye to some people and leave for good," he complains. "Now what do I do?" Not expecting an answer from Old Pete, he sighs and changes the subject. "Do you know if the Victor is in residence? Someone on our ship managed to really annoy him, and we would like to keep out of the way ..."

Old Pete laughs loudly. "Yeah, we heard a bit or two about that as well! Way he lit out after you all, we wondered if you were coming back - seems His Nibs doesn't like the look of horns,"

he grins. "Or maybe it was the poetry going around the Rock. He's been back a while now, but she ain't with him and he ain't talkin' so we figger your lad got away clean?"

"Huh," ibn Fadil says, exchanging a worried glance with Nyala. "The original culprit had already left Janik when we got there. It is everybody else who was on the _Cat_ who should be a bit worried, I would say. The Victor did not appreciate the way some people took her side in the matter of her leaving him."

In the interest of not adding fuel to that particular fire, he hurries on. "Anyway, have they caught those pirates yet, or has anything more been heard of them?"

"Oh, they're out there. No news these past couple weeks, but Greywing's got her cruiser out after 'em last I heard." He nods sagely and pulls at his drink. "But tell me, then, what happened on Janik? Must have been quite a to-do if you think he's sparking after the whole crew! And how's this now you left with one ship and come back with three?"

"Weeeeeeellll," ibn Fadil says, imitating Pete's draw-out-the-suspense tactic, "the damselfly is just a new Three Trees ship that the company sent back here - Mister Delmar got made captain of it, by the way. But the other one, the mosquito, Master Zeremin and I captured it." He pauses to enjoy Pete's reaction to that. "Not that anyone was defending it at the time, mind. Believe it or not ..." He launches into an overview of the circumstances and events on _Maija's Tear_, once again under-emphasizing his own contribution.

By the time he's done telling the story, they've accumulated most of the bar as a fascinated audience, all of them with questions and commentary.

He thoroughly enjoys the attention and the interchange with his audience (there is no need to maintain a low profile here any more, after all), but eventually decides to move along - and, not incidentally, avoid any more talk about events on Janik. A quick inquiry determines that there are currently no ships hiring to go in the direction he would prefer, and with Nyala still in tow he makes his escape into the corridor.

"Now, let us see," he mutters to her, looking around. "A visit to Alaya, I think." Alaya, the proprietress of a small restaurant catering mostly to locals, has a son who can usually be found at the docks - he wants to confirm his suspicions about why so few of the kids were there today. Like many of his closest acquaintances here, Alaya talks nearly as much as she breathes.

"Do not think my money troubles are over," he advised Nyala as they go. "Vlad may be gone, but somebody else may be holding my notes now. Or, with my luck, several will be claiming them," he adds, his mood dimming somewhat.

"Surely we will know soon, as word of your return spreads." She doesn't sound worried, but then she never does.

"And spreading the word is exactly what we are doing," he says lightly.

The restaurant is half-full, making it crowded by non-Bral standards. Alaya is there, as is her son, looking put-out as he helps clear and wash.

Ibn Fadil leads the way in, threading among the tables to a vacant one near the kitchen area, waving to the boy to catch his attention.

They get the now-familiar double-take from Rick once recognition dawns, followed by a delighted grin. He glances at his harried mother and edges in their direction.

Ibn Fadil grins back. "Rick, meet my friend Nyala. I missed you at the docks - you, and Kayan, and everyone else."

"Oh." He shrugs mopily. "Yeah, mom won't let me. Says she needs me here, but ever since Ash Balgopsson went missing everybody's been like a nest of wobbleflies around here." He glances over his shoulder again, intercepts a maternal glare, and wipes half-heartedly at the grease on a nearby table.

The Zakharan waves to Alaya, too. "I heard something about that," he says, with some sympathy. "He was not *at* the docks, was he?"

"You mean, the last anybody saw him? I dunno exactly."

"It is a worrisome thing," he observes, fishing in the bag he bought from Mirabette. He takes out a candy and flicks it into the air for Rick to catch. "Please tell your mother that I have money today, but who knows about tomorrow?"

"Uh, okay... sure." He looks a little puzzled. Takes the candy, of course, and his expression brightens. "Nice to see you back."

As the boy moves away, ibn Fadil quietly explains to Nyala, "There were a few times when I was broke that Mistress Alaya let me work for food, when she really did not need the help."

"A kindly human. Have you other visits to pay?"

"Not specific ones, no. Is there something you wanted to do?"

"The Silver Lotus," she smiles with that faint teasing hint. "No insult meant to your cooking, dear Yusuf, but a change would be pleasant indeed."

"I could not agree more. A little more talk here, and then we will go."

Alaya makes an appearance at their table shortly afterward, bringing ibn Fadil's cup of tea herself. "Well, look who's back after all these months, and my boy pestering me for sweets the whole time you were away." To Nyala she gives a warily curious nod, which the elf returns graciously. After placating her a bit on the issue of the candy, ibn Fadil turns the conversation without much difficulty to the recent disappearances. Alaya clicks her tongue sadly. "Terrible it is. Poor old Balgop sent the lad down to Zeremin's shop for some thread, but they never saw him there, and not a hair's been seen of him since. Hasn't been anything like it in at least ten years, and Ash is a sensible boy, not like those ones trying to get down to those tunnels what probably don't even exist. Weren't any ships that left that night, and everybody was out looking for him. Don't know what Balgop's going to do, that boy was all the kin he had on the Rock. Lesha's been looking after him, the dear soul..." The conversation drifts to the lives of other acquaintances, and general happenings since he's been gone. They learn that the Magnus and her treacherous crew cut loose soon after the Cat's departure, escaping only with considerable damage.

Pondering, ibn Fadil leaves much more than the tea cost on the table, and the two of them stroll off to their best meal since Janik. No one approaches him that night about the matter of his debts, but the next morning, as the two make their way toward a late breakfast, Parrak falls into step beside ibn Fadil. Since they're in public and daylight, it would seem he's about to be polite.

Hoping the effort will cause the dwarf injury, ibn Fadil glances around to locate any thugs and then gives him a wary look, just on the edge of being hostile.

"Well, this does complicate matters," Parrak says as if continuing a conversation.

"Quite. What is your position on them?" This comes out more sharply than the Zakharan had intended; seeing Parrak again is more unsettling than he would like to admit.

"Position? Me?" He sounds slightly offended at the suggestion he might have such a thing. "No doubt you've heard about my former employer."

"That he disappeared? Yes, of course. -- I take it you have a new employer?" He is watching the dwarf closely now, trying to read his manner and expression.

Parrak is doing the exact same thing, of course. There is the barest hint of a satisfied flicker, as if he knows more of the situation than ibn Fadil had said. "Indeed. He is the sort of man who pays attention to details." Like him. "You've done well for yourself since you left."

"Well enough, I believe. If you happen to have a number for me ..." He lets a trace of his discomfort and worry show.

"Well, you have been gone a year," he says meditatively, enjoying said discomfort. "That's a lot of interest. And while you used to be a good customer, I'm afraid your recent behavior has left some question about that. 25 all told, right? Being generous on the interest, for old times sake, I'd say you owe us about 300 by now."

"More or less," ibn Fadil agrees mournfully. "Shall I just give it to you, then?"

Parrak looks surprised for a split-second. "That would be splendid," he says gracefully, recovering.

During this little chat they have drifted into an eddy in the traffic flow, with Nyala watching silently and unregarded. Sighing, ibn Fadil extracts his purse and starts counting 30 of his hard-earned gold coins. "Who am I paying all this to again?" he asks, unobtrusively watching Parrak's face.

The thug looks slightly uncomfortable behind his smile. "My boss."

He stops counting and gives the dwarf a suspicious look. "Your nameless boss? An untrusting man would wonder if this person even exists."

"Oh, he exists all right. You don't want to cross him, or even to know him." He doesn't seem to be putting on an act; he's scared, and doesn't like that much.

"Really." Doubt is audible in his tone and expression; he pretends not to notice that it is now Parrak who is nervous.

He shrugs. "Right now, you're a detail. You want to be more than that, you're more of a fool than I took you for."

"Thanks so much," ibn Fadil grumbles, but he is convinced, resumes counting, and finally hands over the money. "Good-bye."

"Thank you." He tucks the money away. "Be seeing you."

"Not if I can help it," the Zakharan mutters under his breath, watching him go away and then watching the spot where he disappeared until Nyala interrupts his churning thoughts.

"I am grateful for the demonstration of 'interest' in action," she murmurs, "but I hope there are to be no further dealings with such?"

"Hmmm?" He almost seems to take a moment to recognize her. "Somewhere to sit down," he says vaguely, and leads her to a courtyard cafe.

"That was very strange," he finally adds, indistinctly, as he has come out of his abstraction with his mouth full of breakfast. He has reverted to Elvish; speaking Common seems too much of an effort at the moment. "I mean, Parrak was afraid of his new boss. So he must be responsible for his old boss's disappearance. And those others?" His thoughts are clearly quite distressing.

"A possibility, but not necessarily the case," she replies, spreading jam on a freshly baked muffin. "There is a sufficient unpleasantness in the universe for two individuals to be involved. Much may have happened during your absence here."

Hearing her speak so clearly (and in a very precise language) helps him stop and regain control of his thoughts - perhaps he has been spending too much time talking with Alais Zeremin. "Bral is a small place. Two of the disappearances were probably related: Parrak's former employer and that Joffe, who dwelt at the same level." The form of the last phrase indicates that he means a metaphorical level. "The other two, so far as I know, had nothing to do with that sort of thing. Of course, I could have missed something, or something may have changed. But still, it is a small place."

He shifts in his seat and sighs. "Of course, it is none of my business, and too dangerous to get involved in."

"Of course," she nods gravely. "I am beginning to see ways in which this place is like my home, those who remain here being somewhat... self-enclosed. It is difficult to keep secrets in such places."

Ingrained caution prevents him from agreeing too fervently. "Yes. Parrak will no doubt be upset if the salvage money from Three Trees turns out to be as much as it might be."

"Do you think he is likely to cause trouble on his own?"

"Only if he thinks he can get away with it." Ibn Fadil smiles and waves at someone going by. "Do you mind if we spend some more time visiting with people? And we can find out exactly what ships are going where."

The two spend much of the day visiting old haunts and finding out about the ships in dock. Aside from the Distraction there are three ships in. The tradesman Jessalee came from the Loop and is headed back that way in the morning

"Course, our schedule's blown all to hell," the Jessalee's second mate tells them moodily. "Locator's been acting up the whole way here, and we stopped in four different ports in Nuru sphere and not a damned Arcane to be found for any amount of money. That one here--Ormyx--they say it's not seeing anybody but I'd bet a month's pay it's skipped town, damn its blue hide. No way to treat good customers in my book."

The squidship Rover has come in a few days before after making the long journey from isolated Vilmos and will be spending at least a week in port after taking some damage from pirates--emboldened perhaps by Fang's recent success in the neighborhood; and the tradesman Rohana hopes to set course for Heromin in a few more days. The last lies in the same general direction as Zakhara, a bucolic, deadly dull place where ibn Fadil was once stranded for a bit.

* * *

"Yes? What do you want?" the man asks, glancing up from his work.

"Collection today, sir."

"I am unaware of any collections scheduled for today."

"This one came in late, due to some, uh, unusual circumstances." Parrak explains.

"I see. Excellent; always nice to see a detail cleared up. Put it in the strongbox." He returns to work and glances up again as he realizes that the other hasn't moved. "Is there something else?"

"Just thinking that we might be able to get a fair bit more out of this, uh, resource. I heard some things today..."

“Yes, yes.” He waves a dismissive hand. “Hardly secret. I’ve told you before, stop thinking so small. I have far more important business; there may be a very large commission in the works.”

“He seemed curious about you, sir.”

That gets attention. “Was he.” Plain brown eyes gleam in the lamplight. “Let me know if he remains so. I have many customers to please.”

* * *

Yestin looks at Bral without any expression humans can perceive, shoulders his belongings, and clumps down the ramp. A couple of off-duty guards are loitering at the back of the crowd, and he heads in their direction after a slight hesitation.

“Brencis. Fadey. What’s the news?”

“_Yestin?_ That you?” Fadey looks openly astonished. “What’re you--”

The other giff rams an elbow into his ribs and stares pointedly through the new arrival.

“Er.” Fadey falls silent, flushing almost black as he looks away. Yestin restrains a sigh, flicks his ears, nods courteously out of habit, and continues on through the square. He’d expected as much, and can probably expect it from every giff he’ll meet on Bral. He finds lodgings in the first underground level, where not many of his kind are likely to go if they can avoid it, and then heads for Aelfyr’s shop.

The elderly half-elf looks up from his work at the sound of the bell over the door, and looks briefly surprised. “Good day, Mister Yestin. Come for a book?” He says that every time, with the same gentle smile.

“I’ll see what you have. And I brought you some... some things to look at.” He coughs, blushes furiously, and hands over a sheaf of closely written paper. “I changed that one we talked about last time.”

“Ah. I look forward to perusing your lines.” He lays the papers gently on the desk and walks around it. “Let’s see, now....” He leads the way through the warren of shelves; the shop has grown over the years, so that what was once one small room has carved out additional chambers from adjoining buildings, some reached only by narrow stairs. Difficult space for a giff to navigate.

“I’ve been reading the Rangar and Isak sagas on the journey here. There’s some lovely bookshops on Janik.”

“So I’ve heard--beautiful cycle that, too, with everyone dying at the end. I’ve a few others in that style if you’d like to see them.”

“Perhaps something lighter,” he suggests with a faint sigh.

* * *

"Meet back here at noon the day after tomorrow and I'll let you know what's been decided about the _Twist_ and the items aboard," Delmar tells them while doling out the pay. "Excellent work on this voyage, all of you."

"Thanks, Captain. See you in a couple." Emmett waves with his good hand, watching Inez leave in another direction, looking a little sad and a little worried.

"OK, Val. What's our plan now." He holds up a hand to forestall the taller man's objection. "I'm in this. I just sent my woman away to make sure she doesn't get hurt, but I'm in this. Even if you don't have a plan, you have a shadow until we're off the rock in case the twerp tries something. So what are you up to?"

"Thanks," Val says after a pause. He is taken by surprise and studies his friend for a moment. Thoughts of Victor had been occupying the sailor for some time, and now that he was back on Bral it was difficult to think of much else. But there was something else more pressing at the moment. Should he tell Emmett about the message? It didn't specifically say to go alone. Then again, it didn't specifically say it was for Val, either...

"Actually, I was going to see Captain Barthelm," he tells the half-man, still somewhat reluctant to say much in front of everyone. "I'd appreciate the company on the way." He'll be at the Oligarchic Enclave, no doubt, reporting to Volant on the trip.

Emmett cocks an eyebrow, but decides not to press the matter. "You bet. You won't be able to lose me without trying on this trip."

Val chats idly with his other companions until they are ready to part ways. It is somewhat of a relief to be able to get away from them all after so many months in space together, but at the same time it is somewhat disconcerting. He had come to feel comfortable around them all (even ibn Fadil, who Val suspects harbors a dislike for the sailor) and it will surely feel strange to suddenly be apart from his shipmates. Not to mention how alone he would feel were it not for Emmett's insistence on being his shadow.

They see Yestin disembark and head over to talk to a couple of off-duty giff who are hanging around the dock.

Val also thinks it would be better to keep his distance from the rest of the crew, lest Victor try anything here. Being first mate aboard a Three Trees vessel may afford him some respect and/or loyalty, but he did not want others to get hurt because of his own actions.

"Noon, day after tomorrow," Val promises, waving to the last of them before departing towards the Three Trees offices.

Once the two are on their way, Emmett decides it's time to press the matter. "Meeting with the Captain, eh? Think they're making the first mate position a long term one, or something else?"

"Something else, actually," Val says, but does not elaborate just yet. He is being somewhat cautious still, and keeps his eyes open for any sign of trouble.

The pair work their way through Bral's crowds, with Emmett's new sword on his back and bullwhip on his right hip making him seem even odder and more threatening than he had last time on the rock. The half-man is scanning the crowd while walking, keeping his eye out for possible tails or threats. The walking arsenal receives a wide berth from the Bralians, and sees nothing he can identify as a threat.

Meanwhile following several paces behind the duo is the Kensai of Kara-Tur, the Saint of Steel. If Val's current errand involved the Victor then Hiro would not leave the young thief wanting for aid. He observes the crowd like a hawk searching for prey.

Val stops up short and turns to see who it is that has been following them. "Hiro!" he greets the warrior, somewhat ashamed he did not ask the Kensai to come with him. It is not as if he'd forgotten about the swordsman's commitment back on Janik, but Val did not wish to assume it continued. "I'm flattered," he tells Hiro honestly, offering a warm smile. "I've got an appointment to keep. Want to come along?"

He nods. "If trouble is afoot perhaps I should remain in reserve or move ahead?"

"Er... Honestly, I don't know what to expect," Val tells him. Not used to having to plan for things like this, let alone for a small party, he looks to Emmett for guidance.

"Fall back. There are spells with area effects, Victor is rich enough to hire a mage. Give us 20 feet of berth. Val will be constrained to my speed, and you can outrun me in your sleep, so you're not hardly far away." Emmett shakes his head. "Damn but I'm getting paranoid."

Val casts Emmett a startled sidelong glance before shaking his head and saying, "Actually, I'd better tell you what's going on first. I found a message aboard the *_Distraction_* that said to meet Captain Barthelm when we returned."

Paranoid or not, they reach the Enclave without any trouble. A somewhat skeptical-looking servant informs them that Captain Barthelm is still closeted with Master Volant, but he will inform the captain that they have arrived, if in the meantime they would wait here, and would they like refreshment....? He looks as if he expects a demand for ale and wenches.

Emmett fights down the urge to oblige him, but opts for water instead. Well, watered down ale. Val politely refrains from asking for anything, even though his throat suddenly feels dry. After a considerable wait in the elegantly appointed little room the doors at the far end open; a smiling Sidney walks Theo out of his office. "Very well, then, captain, if I cannot keep you longer. But you will sup with us tomorrow?"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure, sir. By your leave." He bows briefly and turns to the three waiting men. "If you will accompany me to my office, gentlemen, we may talk there."

Theo's office is, needless to say, not as nice as Sidney's, and it is furthermore almost a foot deep in paper. "Terribly sorry about the mess, I see no one has been in here while I was away. Just move that... there. Please, sit down, all of you." There is a certain glint in his eye as he settles behind the desk. "If you would indulge me for a moment by telling me how you came to be here?"

Emmett glances over at Val, a little confused. Hadn't Val been invited?

"Well sir," Val says cautiously as he catches the look from Emmett, "there was a message aboard the *_Distraction_* that said to meet with you upon our return..." He drifts off meaningfully as he waits to see what the captain's reaction is.

"Ah." Theo grins a bit. "I hope you will forgive the theatrics, but it seemed the best means of finding out certain things--I confess I wasn't expecting more than one of you. Something by way of a little test. We're looking for some people who take a certain... inquisitive attitude toward life, shall we say."

Hiro cocks an questioning eyebrow in the hopes of receiving more information.

Val is actually quite amused by the "theatrics," as the captain put it. Oddly enough, he is also somewhat flattered by Barthelm's indirect praise. At last, his curiosity has paid off!

"Delmar has been reporting to me throughout the journey on the crew's performance, and we're quite impressed with how you all handled yourselves, particularly during that business with the xixchil of course. We're looking for a long-term crew for the *_Distraction_*, people who would be interested in a dangerous but potentially very rewarding mission of exploration for the company." He pauses to gauge their reactions. "People who have proven their abilities, are comfortable operating without too many rules--and have the kind of instincts that lead them to pry into things others might ignore," he adds with a slight smile.

"You've certainly got **my** attention," Val says with a grin plastered across his face. Another opportunity! "What needs exploring, and what do you mean by 'very rewarding?'" he asks, unabashedly. Something in the back of his mind reminds him that the captain mentioned danger, but he ignores it for now...

"As part of ongoing operations we do our best to learn more about the spheres, their people - it's simply good business," he tells them. "There are many parts of the Flow that are barely explored, or not at all, and hence represent opportunity."

"So putting us on the Distraction was a way of finding out if we were the right tools for the job? I hope we qualified." Emmett smiles. "I'm a naturally inquisitive man, personally. Danger doesn't bother me much, either, when it comes down to it."

"So much we have noticed," Theo smiles.

Val gives each of his companions a long look before saying anything. Is this the opportunity he had been waiting for? It would certainly keep him out of Victor's way here on Bral. Is that what the captain was trying to do?...

Emmett matches Val's look, and indicates with a little shake of his head that he doesn't think this is connected with Victor. The thought had crossed his mind too.

"Who is going to captain the _Distraction_?" Val asks instead, keeping his previous thoughts to himself.

"And who's going to pilot it. Personally, I think Brother Pham'll be right mad if he's overlooked."

"Any of the current crew who wish to remain for the long term are welcome to, Brother Pham among them. You have worked well together for a considerable time, and have already been of considerable use to the company. As for the captaincy, Valarin, Delmar tells me he would feel comfortable entrusting the _Distraction_ to your care in a formal capacity. Informally, the long-term crew may make whatever arrangements you find congenial, including the hiring of temporary crew as needed if there are vacancies to fill."

While Val tries to erase the poleaxed expression from his face, Theo continues. "Without getting into the contractual intricacies, the general form of operation for these ships is that they are prospectors, of a sort, charged with finding new avenues of business for Three Trees, whether that be new items, new peoples, new routes of navigation, etc., or increased capitalization upon known resources. The contract runs five years, during which the long-term crew will accrue a percentage of profits from anything you bring back. If you like, some or all of those profits can be put toward eventual ownership of the _Distraction_."

"Of course we don't expect a decision right away--our shipwrights are looking over the ship to ensure it weathered the journey well, and of course she'll need resupply. Will you be seeing the others of the crew before the _Twist_ disbursement, to inform them of the offer?"

Emmett looks from Theo to Valarin and back. "Count me in. Definitely." He gives Val a hearty slap on the back. "Snap out of it and say yes, ya big dolt! Sorry - Captain Big Dolt."

Val recovers enough to mumble, "Of course, sir." It is obvious he is still dumbstruck by the offer. Captaincy! And a chance to possibly buy the _Distraction_!

"Of course," he repeats more firmly. With limbs weighted like lead, Val slowly stands to shake Theo's hand. "It would be my honor, sir."

"OK, Captain. Let's get on with what needs getting on with." Emmett stands up, the meeting obviously over. He nods to Theo, "Captain. I'd like to thank you again for this opportunity. I won't let you down."

Theo stands as well, shaking hands all around. "We have every confidence in all of you."

Emmett is also thinking that this further investment in their potential means Three Trees is even more likely to take their side should Victor do something. The hairs on the back of his neck are still prickling, and despite Alais' statements this time he didn't think it had anything to do with his digestion.

Emmett heads to the door and waits for the other two to say their good-byes, ushering them through and closing the door behind them. He walks quietly after them until they exit the Three trees building, then leaps into the air, yelling his bloody head off and no doubt startling several of the the locals.

"OK, now that has made this a damn fine day. The only thing marring it is I can't go find my lady and take her out on the town." The half man gets a little more serious. "This doesn't change our essential problem, which is dealing with whatever the V has up his sleeve."

"I know," Val says soberly, "I haven't forgotten." Much as he would like to forget, the Victor is still very much on his mind.

"Let's try and get a feel for what's been happening in our absence, shall we?" Emmett starts looking around at the crowds, trying to find a bard, Pham, or a bar that he knows has a good ear to the ground.

Meanwhile, Pham walks the streets of the Rock for several hours, occasionally stopping at a street vendor for a drink or something to eat. That nagging feeling of something wrong bothers him. Preoccupied, he almost doesn't notice as his feet carry him back towards the Three Trees offices and the docks.

Pham hears a familiar shout - Emmett! Perhaps the Victor ... no, wait, that was a happy shout! The brother hurries his pace, and catches up with the group just before they get lost in the normal crowds of Bral.

"Friends, it seems you've been hearing happier tales than I have. What's the good news?"

The quartet make they way through the streets back to the Wyvern, where, for he and Val at least, this whole affair began.

Once inside the Blue Wyvern, Val relaxes a bit. It has been quite some time since he could relax in the company of friends while not being restricted by cramped quarters or large crew like Yestin. Yestin...

"Hey Emmett," Val says to the half-man once they've taken a seat and ordered pints all around, "Didja happen to notice who Yestin was off talkin' to when we parted ways? I thought for certain he'd be avoiding them."

"Maybe we should look him up," Val suggests after some thinking. "He'd be a welcome addition to the _Distraction_, you know." Putting aside his own worries, the soon to be captain mulls over what to do about the young giff.

Other crew begin to come to mind as Val thinks about the voyage to come. He really should patch things up with ibn Fadil. That one was certainly a quick thinker. Sharp-tongued, but a quick thinker... And Nyala's skills with the bow would also be welcome on a journey of exploration.

But what to do about first mate? Up until now, Val hadn't thought of who would take his own position as he would take Delmar's. Someone with spacemanship skills would be ideal, but

most of those he could think of had little in the way of experience in that field. Maybe it wasn't necessary for a ship as small as the *_Distraction_*, either. The pilot controls the vessel in the flow, and a minimal crew is needed for traveling the spheres. And he could always **teach** someone the ropes, so-to-speak. He'd have to think more on that later...

Other thoughts come to mind as Val drinks with his friends. What **would** he do about Victor? It was time he looked up some old friends in the market and dig up some news... Val starts to form a plan on what he'd like to do later. First things first though, he'll need a place to stay and make ready.

Finding a place to stay is somewhat complicated by the presence of Val's two watchdogs, ready to answer trouble with trouble; he can't exactly slip off on his own. Then again, Val can also feel fairly confident that he won't vanish between the two ends of an alley. With cash in hand and the prospect of more--maybe a lot more--in the near future, there's no reason to be parsimonious, and the three find rooms at the Lion's Tail near the docks. It's kind of strange to be in among these prosperous sorts and think that they might soon be joining their ranks on a more or less permanent basis.

In the morning, Val disguises himself and slips out to wander Bral's crowds and see what information he can find. It's hard to adopt a new identity on Bral, where there are few ships in at any given time, the permanent inhabitants frequently know one another by sight, and he's had no time to form contacts on the asteroid's shadow side; in the course of the morning more than one person gives him an odd look and only vague answers, as if suspicious of what he might be about.

He can confirm that Samuel Victor is on the Rock right now, at least, and presumably busy after a year away from company business. A couple of leaflets penned by anonymous satirists are still floating about, speculating graphically on why the oligarch's wife might have looked beyond her marriage for satisfaction. The girl whose identity had been borrowed by her mistress for the journey had prudently left the Rock of Bral shortly after Ginevra's departure.

Over the course of the morning, however, as snippets of information collect, he becomes more certain that it is not in Victor's character to take this as a life lesson learned and forget about it. He'll want to do **something** -- but what?

* * *

Brother Pham, as always, collects stories as he walks the narrow streets, tunnels, and gangways of Bral. Ordinary stories for the most part, told by ordinary people. He gathers that the creature migrations they noted on their outward journey have ceased to be a matter for talk, although they are still not understood. He gathers that several residents of the Rock have gone missing in recent months, and that people are worried about it. He hears of the departure of the giff ship and the battle that followed. He hears many tales of Fang the Fearless--too many to all be true--and his or her depredations on Three Trees ships. He sees a couple of risqué leaflets regarding Simon Victor's vanished wife. He has a faint sense, as he walks through the market that afternoon, that something is wrong.

* * *

In the course of his morning, Val also asks about for information about the *_Silver Swan_*, hoping to get some news about her whereabouts, but no one on Bral seems to have any news of her. He still feels obligated to find Teague and make sure that Ginevra and her child are cared after.

Ginevra...

Back in his room at the Lion's Tail, Val relaxes and let's his mind drift back to the voyage out to Janik. It has been some time since he allowed himself to think about Ginevra, and it still hurt a little to know she wasn't a part of his life. He wonders what she'd think of his appointment as captain of the *_Distraction_* ...

* * *

The second morning it's hard for all of them to keep from showing up extra-early for the meeting aboard the *_Distraction_*. Although Delmar doesn't seem to be present yet, there is plenty of excitement as another ship comes into dock--a large, flattish, ungainly-looking thing with two large "wings" and an articulated beak, currently closed.

"Blood of the Huntress," Nyala mutters in a rare display of emotion--namely disgust. "Dohwar." The deck of the ship swarms with four-foot-tall penguin-like avians, all garishly dressed and talking a mile a minute. The giff in charge of the dock patrol takes one look and sends for reinforcements and the harbormaster. The vendors of Bral, who know when they're outclassed, have largely abandoned the square to the impending invasion, except for those few who are in the business of buying as well as selling.

"Dohwar?" Val asks casually, not overly familiar with the species. Nyala's tone suggested she was much more familiar with them, but she lapses back into her usual impassivity.

Ibn Fadil has interrupted his curious study of the Dohwar ship to ask Alais the new question he thought of the day before. "Master Zeremin, do you think the inversion would affect the function of ship's equipment such as locators, or even helms?"

"Well, that depends on helm method. A standard helm operates on the first vector principle, but series helms operate on the second, and death helms and the like on the Nullification Viteness..." After going in that vein for a while he concludes firmly, "It depends."

Flanked by a couple of extra squads of giff and visibly bracing himself for the coming encounter, Beinish the harbormaster appears. Two dohwar, with some long-suffering giff employees of their own in tow, come down the gangplank.

"Greetings to you honored / harbormaster of Bral we are / hoping and most fervently praying to offer your citizens / a chance or indeed as many chances as they wish to examine and purchase the / hundreds nay thousands of fine wares to be seen within our vessel and also / of course to allow our fine crew to disport themselves / provide additional sales / make purchases / among your community," the two say.

One of the many things other species find annoying about Dohwar is that mated pairs share a telepathic bond and frequently take turns talking. This means they never have to pause for breath.

An animated discussion ensues, interrupted soon thereafter by a very loud squealing sound from the dohwar ship. Penguins scatter for cover as a large, pig-like creature appears on deck and rushes this way and that, squealing anxiously and ignoring the dohwar on its back. A few moments later it seems to become aware of the open dock; it spreads feathered wings and flies over to the now almost empty square, where it lands and resumes running about--no doubt it merely wants for exercise after the voyage, but the discussion by the gangplank is rapidly devolv-

ing into a shouting match. It seems that space swine are absolutely not permitted on the asteroid. Repairing to the *_Distraction_* seems like a good idea, particularly as Delmar has now joined them.

Just another day on Bral.

Gathered around the table in the galley, they give their full attention to the man. "Two things," he says. "First, on behalf of Three Trees, I have an offer for you." He outlines the contract as it was explained to Val, Emmett, and Hiro. "Since Val has accepted, please let him know if you're interested in remaining with the ship for either the long or short term, so we'll know how many contracts to draw up. I'm at your disposal if you have any questions.

"The second matter is of course that of the *_Twist_*. I understand that Master Alais," he nods at the mage, "is still investigating some of the items found aboard, but the rest have been thoroughly appraised. I'm pleased to tell you that your collective share works out to 2,500 apiece in gold."

Ibn Fadil seems to be having trouble taking all of this in; the look he first directs at Valarin contains a rather unflattering amount of disbelief. As Delmar goes on, however, he seems increasingly fascinated by the proposal. The share announcement is equally jolting - he has never before had that much money at his personal disposal.

When no one else says anything for a few moments, the Zakharan asks, "Is Three Trees willing to bank some of that for us for a while, sir?"

"Of course," he replies with a faint smile, pleased and somewhat amused by their collective response.

At the first opportunity ibn Fadil draws Nyala aside for a private discussion (in Elvish, of course). "What do you think? Would you go?" His enthusiasm for the idea seems barely containable.

"It sounds agreeable," she says cautiously. "And five years is not long. I am surprised, however--were you not intending to travel homewards?"

He lowers his voice further, though he is fairly sure no one is trying to listen to them. "If I passed up an opportunity like this my uncle would strangle me himself. And my mother would probably agree."

"I see." She looks thoughtful but does not elaborate.

"Agreeable, then," he says, amused by her restrained response. "I could almost be grateful to those damned pirates for this." He looks around to see where Valarin has gotten to, and winds up hanging around on the *_Distraction_'s* deck waiting for him to finish talking to Delmar. When the new captain appears, ibn Fadil approaches him with a smile and a deep bow. "If I might have a word, Captain?" Nyala watches with interest from a polite distance away.

"Captain?" he asks in mock seriousness. Val is amused by the use of the new title. It will certainly take a while for him to get used to that. "Does this mean you'll be staying on?" He smiles to show his good will towards the Zakharan.

"If you will have me. Us," he corrects himself.

"Is there any reason I would not?" Val asks evenly. He has not forgotten the uneasiness that built up between them, and still feels the half-elf thinks him a fool. Better to get these things out in the open now, rather than pretend they did not exist.

Ibn Fadil seems perplexed. "My history of falling into debt? I believe I have overcome that ..." He can see from Valarin's expression that this is not what the man meant. "I am not sure I understand you."

"I think you do," Val tells him plainly, "and I would like to think we could put our...differences behind us." Why must this man be so difficult?

"Besides," he goes on with a wry grin, "I'm going to need *someone* who can recognize trouble when they see it, even if it *is* disguised and under an assumed name." Val gives the half-elf a searching look before offering his hand his hand.

For a moment ibn Fadil looks blank, and then: "Ah! You refer to our disagreement about the lady." He is pleased to have figured this out. "I cannot promise never to disagree with you again, Valarin, but I assure you I do not hold grudges. And I will do my best for you." Guessing that the gesture will reassure the other man, he takes the offered hand. He does not seem to have had a lot of practice at shaking hands, however.

That was *not* what Valarin was referring to, but he doesn't go into it. If ibn Fadil has apparently put everything behind him, so be it. Maybe he just imagined everything back on the dwarven citadel? They were *all* under a lot of stress.

"Life would be too boring if we all agreed about everything," Val says with a smile. "Welcome aboard," he offers his hand to Nyala as well. "I'm glad to have you both." She hesitates but accepts the gesture. Her grip is surprisingly strong from someone so delicate-looking.

Gratified, ibn Fadil moves on to the next topic on his mind. "Do you have any thoughts on what position I might hold?"

"I'm working on it still," Val replies truthfully. "Why? What did you have in mind?" he asks, interested to hear what the Zakharan would say.

Struggling a bit with his habitual self-effacement (putting himself forward this much makes him rather uncomfortable), he says, "I know I have less experience than you might want to look for but I, er, had hoped to at least keep the position I had on the journey here. And ..." He hesitates, then shakes his head. "Never mind."

"And?" Val prompts him.

He stares at the deck for a moment, then looks soberly up at the much taller man. "As a captain you may find yourself dealing with a different sort of people than you are used to. The sort of people I grew up with." He manages a wry half smile that does not reach his eyes. "It took quite an effort for me to become the dead loss I was a year ago."

Val places his hand on the Zakharan's shoulder and holds his eye. "If it took an effort to become a dead loss," he says somewhat seriously, trying to piece together what the other man meant, "then it should be no effort to be your best." He seems satisfied with his twisted logic. "And I never thought you a dead loss a year ago," he adds with his characteristic smile.

"We have need of a crew willing to do what is necessary on a ship this small," Val continues. "I see no reason not to have you keep your position, provided you keep an open mind when it comes time to learn new things.

"And speaking of learning new things," he says quietly, changing the subject, "have you learned anything new of the Victor since our return?"

"Nothing but that he is here and not saying much about things. I told one of the most talkative people I know that the real 'culprit' was not aboard our ship, but I doubt that will have much effect on the Victor's views. He is still not popular, but is also still powerful." He considers for a moment. "If he is rational at all, it might help to make this new arrangement with Three Trees as public as possible -- he should think twice about tangling with them, even indirectly."

"Thank you," Val considers the news, which matched much of what he had gathered. "Make it public, eh? Perhaps we need to throw ourselves a party then. To celebrate. Hm..." There is little joviality as he says this, but there is a familiar gleam in Val's eye.

"We'll gather our friends and talk about that later. Thank you again. Will you stay here to see who else signs on?" Val asks casually, as if speaking of the weather.

"I suppose," ibn Fadil says, glancing around to see who else is still here; no one appears to have left yet, and most of them appear to be deep in thought, contemplating their futures. Yestin looks troubled, but that's normal; he hasn't said yes or no yet.

It is some time before Val thinks to himself that ibn Fadil may have had reasons for wanting to leave the Rock of Bral other than a chance at exploration and a shot at owning a piece of the _Distraction_. He sets the thought aside, content to worry about it later...

Valarin's suggestion that the crew of the TTS _Distraction_ celebrate their new status is taken up with enthusiasm, and the next several days are taken up with preparations... and a few other things.

There is a tendency in all of them to spend their free time hanging about the ship, watching in a sort of dreamy unreality as men come and go, checking mechanisms and loading provisions. Once they leave Bral, the _Distraction_ will be on her own, but Three Trees will ensure that she leaves well-stocked for her mission. Those few Bralians with idle time are often there as well, eying the antics of the frisky space swine on the dohwar vessel and asking questions none of the _Distraction_'s crew can answer yet, foremost among them, "Where are you going?"

Eventually they group decides to hold a dinner at Valabar's, an excellent but unpretentious restaurant on a second floor near the center of Bral. For 100 gold coins they can have a private room, a pleasant meal, all the wine they care to drink and several trained and discreet staff on hand throughout. Another handful of coin secures the services for the evening of a trio of musicians ibn Fadil knows from his long residence on the Rock.

Aside from the crew, invitations are issued as a matter of course to Theo and his wife, Delmar, the harbormaster, and unofficially to Master Volant, in case he is minded to grace them with his presence. Although no official response is forthcoming, it becomes known that the restaurant staff will be assisted by Sidney's own chef from the Enclave. The oligarch is known to be particular about his meals.

* * *

Ibn Fadil keeps alert for signs that his less than loved superior on the Rock has heard of his return--if she hasn't, of course, she ought to be replaced immediately given all the fuss, but there is no indication yet that she is anxious to hear from him; perhaps she is merely waiting for things to quiet down. A cautious visit to his cache of tools proves it undisturbed despite his long absence. A visit to the dohwar in hopes of getting news from the chatty avians results in him barely escaping with sanity and purse intact after several pairs besiege him, each vying with the others to get him to buy something and talking so fast he is barely able to get a word in. After recovering from that he pays a visit to Dominic Halfear, the only jeweler on the Rock of any reputation (unless the reputation is one for cheating customers) and leaves satisfied that his commission will be carried out properly, and will be ready by the time the Distraction leaves, scheduled for two days after the party.

He is growing increasingly concerned about Kayan as the days pass. Everyone he asks shrugs and says of the orphan "he's around here somewhere" and directs him to someone else who may know but whom, it proves, has not actually seen the lad either.

* * *

"They dare." The words are a growl, barely to be heard through the sound of angry breathing. "They are flaunting themselves. Mocking me. Me!" He hears nothing but the blood beating through his veins, a slowly increasing tempo of fury. Eventually he notices the informant cowering near the door. "Go!"

A moment after the door closes he pulls the cord to summon a servant. The man appears in silence, waits in silence for his master to speak. Victor, meanwhile, has belatedly realized that he cannot send a servant on this mission but must go himself--galling though it is to treat that jumped-up shopkeeper as anything like an equal...

"Fetch my cloak," Victor snaps. His authority is such to carry him unquestioned across the Enclave's open spaces, into another wing of the complex and then to the office of the man he wants to speak to, who does not look pleased to see him. "I want to change our agreement."

"That is not done," the other replies firmly.

"They're not to leave Bral alive, none of them. I'll double the payment. Triple it. I'll have their shrunken heads as a billiards set if they think they can mock me!" And after them, a few others he had in mind.

"What's sealed is done." He spreads his hands in a helpless gesture. "What we agreed upon will be delivered, no more, no less."

"Don't play me for a fool," Victor snarls. "I know about your 'friends' in the underground. They could--"

"No." More sharply this time. "That is a senseless risk." There had already been too many disappearances; he really must finish their order and get them off the Rock before they became a liability.

Victor ground his teeth. "An accountant and a coward, I see."

"I am a businessman, Master Victor," the genial man corrects him. "And I do not take foolish risks. And if you are thinking of dealing with them directly," he adds, seeing Victor's thoughts without much difficulty, "bear in mind that you would be hardly considered an appetizer."

* * *

The day of the dinner Val watches as more crates are loaded into the *_Distraction_*'s hold. Along with supplies, the company is providing some trade goods they can use for bartering should they find themselves far from the known Flow, in hopes of garnering more customers for their wares. The little ship is already almost bursting at the seams. And there is still the question, where *_are_* they going to go? It's one thing to agree to explore unknown reaches of the Flow, it's another to point the bow away from the known universe and **do** it....

“Scuse me, you Valarin?” The man is off the newly arrived *_Yasar_*, and he's holding a sealed paper.

“I am.”

“Got a letter for you from Janik way.” He grins a little as Val can't quite keep his expression from showing his interest, and hands it over. “Long damn way, but luck was with us, none of these damned pirates. Bold as brass they're getting. Quiet elsewhere, though, I swear sometimes it seems even the sluk's been scared off by something, and I'd hate to see what could do that. You have a good day, sir,” he touches his forelock and glances at the *_Distraction_*. “Beaut little ship there.”

It's from her, he's certain of it even before he opens it, as if a trace of perfume lingers even after all these months. *_My dearest friend_* it begins in an elegant hand. *_I pray this finds you well..._*

Counting back the days as best he can, Val figures the letter was written two or three weeks after they left Janik; the delays brought on by the encounter with the *_Tear_* and shepherding the *_Twist_* to her new masters had allowed it to catch up. He skims it rapidly, reading of the kindness of the temple dwellers, the safe delivery of a daughter they have named Constance Valerian--they, for she has been reunited with her beloved. The future is uncertain and Val's parting gift all the more welcome for that, but she is happy, and hopes that he is so as well. *_Never fear that you are forgotten,_* she writes. *_For I fear that I cannot repay even the least of the gifts you have given me, but I hope someday for an opportunity to so attempt, even as I hope to hear news of you soon. Ever your friend, Ginevra_.*

After reading the letter, Val experiences mixed emotions. There is of course happiness for Ginevra and their daughter, but there is also a bit of melancholy over the whole thing. She is reunited with Teague.

But they are safe. He will be satisfied with that...

He puts on his best façade and continues inspecting the cargo.

* * *

Taking a shortcut through a pair of storage buildings on his way to the celebration, Pham is again arrested by the sense of wrongness he had once before as he wandered the byways of the Rock. Almost a smell, one that takes him back to his homeworld and his wanderings with Marcus.

Yes. That village they stumbled across one day. Most of its poor souls had been carried off by sickness, and those that remained huddled in one home as they fought to stave off the ghouls that had come to feed on the dead. The people's gratefulness had been short-lived, he remembers ruefully.

He stands stock-still in the quiet way, as if listening for something. That sense... it is not so strong as it was in the village. Whatever it is, is very small, very weak, or perhaps something that was once here but is not now, and he continues on his way, deeply troubled.

* * *

The room is brightly lamplit. The musicians tune their instruments in the corner. Mouthwatering smells waft through the air, along with a faint murmur of conversation from the main room. Wine is opened. Flowers --an expensive touch on the crowded asteroid--are adjusted slightly. A man sweeps in, surveys the preparations, nods, and sweeps back out.

Val of course arrives early for the celebration. It would not do if the Captain hosting this party were to be late. He dresses in his best outfit and the new captain's coat recently purchased. Though he has no real intention of getting drunk, he enjoys a glass of wine as he waits for his friends and the guests to arrive. In particular, he is looking for Emmett...

Emmett shows up a few seconds after Val, wondering again how the captain managed to slip away from his watchful eye. Promotion or no, Victor probably still has a price on his head. He may have increased it when discovering the news. Still, Emmett feels certain he and Val can handle any set of footpads Victor might have hired on this rock.

It's only if Victor has gone for outside help that Emmett has any concerns.

"Val! There you are" Emmett hops over, snagging a drink on the way past a waitress. "You look troubled, captain. What's up?"

"Not troubled at all, actually," Val says with a welcoming smile. "I was hoping to find you. Can I have a moment of your time?" The two of them have time for a conversation while waiting for the others arrive. "I've been thinking about the crew of the *_Distraction_*, and it has occurred to me I still need a first mate," he explains after steering the half-man off a bit. "I wanted to have your...input on the matter," Val says with mischief in his eyes.

Emmett gets a look of concentration on his face before responding. "Hmmm... If it were me, I'd go with Nyala. She knows her way around the ship, she's experienced and it will keep Ibn Fadil in line without obviously keeping Ibn Fadil in line."

"An interesting thought..." It takes Val a moment to hide his amusement before speaking again. "Actually, I was thinking about asking *you* to be first mate," he tells Emmett soberly, studying the other's reaction.

"You're joking, right? You're not joking." Emmett shakes his head. "Nope. Uh-uh, no way. I have responsibility enough being in charge of the ship's security. I don't know the first thing about how to use a ship other than how to fight with it!"

The expression on Val's face clearly shows he was not expecting this reaction. "And you think she knows more about handling a ship than you?" he asks, keeping his voice low, his tone conversational. Val sips at his wine as he thinks of what to say...

"Okay, I understand you'd rather not," Val says at last, "but I need your opinion on something then. You mentioned keeping ibn Fadil in line? What do you think about him being first mate?..."

"You trying to force me to take the job?" Emmett laughs. "I think ibn Fadil is going to be a problem no matter where you put him. He has real problems with responsibility - dodging it when it's offered and claiming it and authority when it suits him."

Emmett apparently sees nothing ironic in his making these claims about someone else.

"He's good at what he does, no doubt, but he's not even a square peg - he's an octagonal spiky peg that goes to a different piece of equipment all together. My advice? Leave him as ship's cook, put him outside the regular chain of command and then consult with him as needed - he'll

come to you with his opinions, and they'll generally be worth listening to as a different viewpoint at least.

"I think he'd turn down the position if it was offered to him - remember how he didn't even want to get classified on the _Cat_ 'til he ended up adhering to Nyala's brother as assistant cook?"

"Good point," Val says, nodding sagely. He remembers, but keeps to himself how he believes ibn Fadil **would** accept.

Emmett stops, taking a sip of his drink and obviously mulling something over. "No, wait. Still not first mate, but make him quartermaster or tradesman or something. He's gotten a lot more responsible lately, he has a good eye for trade goods and he makes friends easily. He's bi-racial, which may give him an edge with some people, and excuse with others. We're supposed to be looking for new trade routes so it's an important position, but not one that lets him second guess you at every opportunity.

"Plus, while we're in the Flow his duties will leave him some free time to continuing doubling as cook - and he'd have to watch the ship's stores anyway." Emmett smiles. "I think that would best take advantage of his good points while minimizing his bad ones."

Emmett is obviously engrossed in the logic puzzle he's been presented, "Let's see - Pham and Alais will both be spending too much time piloting. I don't see Pham as the command type, and I honestly fear Alais giving orders."

Val stifles a chuckle at this.

"Hiro would be good at it but he wouldn't take it. Yestin would take it but he wouldn't be good at it. Nyala's still a possibility, but you're right, she doesn't have much more ship knowledge than me..."

"Crap." He looks at Val with a rueful grin. "Did I just promote myself?"

Val laughs to himself at his friend's epiphany. "No, you didn't. Yet. But you have given me some things to think about. Yestin actually has some ship skills that **could** be refined..." He trails off thoughtfully before taking another sip of wine. "If you don't mind losing a marine under your command," he adds with a grin.

A quick glance around reveals that the giff in question has arrived and is surveying the table appreciatively; Val waves him over to where he and Emmett are having their impromptu conference.

Alais, having arrived at the dot of the announced starting time, makes a beeline for the food and begins consuming quite a bit of that and drink, not intending to stay long but interested in the meal.

When Val poses the question, "Me?" It's physiologically impossible for a giff's voice to squeak, but it would have if he could. "I. Um. Well, I'm... I'm honored, of course, but," he casts a sidelong look at Emmett, "are you sure? I mean, I'm certain there are better qualified members of the crew..."

Val is amused by the giff's apparent modesty. "I'll need someone I can count on," he says, brushing aside Yestin's uncertainty. "I **can** count on you, can't I?..."

"Of course! I'm just, well, a bit surprised. But I would certainly be honored to serve in any capacity for which I would be considered." He all but salutes.

Emmett leans over and slaps Yestin on the back. "Good man. Ya'see, Val and I were just discussing this and he thought you'd be perfect for the job. The giff have a reputation of honesty and

skill, which you embody." Yestin winces slightly. "Those are things we'll need make a good impression on people. You're stalwart and trustworthy, you keep your word and you do the right thing. You had to know you'd get rewarded for that someday. "

Emmett smiles at the young giff and continues, "You're literate and dedicated to your duties. The crew respects you, and you're not on bad terms with anyone, which will make passing along orders easier."

"Given all that, who else would you pick? Certainly not me - I'm too stuck in my ways as marine captain." Emmett toasted the big purple hippo of a newly minted officer "Face it, you're perfect."

"I will do my best, sirs." This time he does salute.

Delmar and a lady friend who works in the Silverstream consortium arrive and appear intent on having a very good time.

Ibn Fadil returns to his room from another fruitless effort to find Kayan, just barely in time to dress for the dinner. "I would have thought he would have heard I was looking for him by now," he broods to Nyala, hastily pulling on his freshly laundered outfit from Janik. "I liked that kid ..."

"Another vanishment, perhaps?" She looks troubled herself. She also looks, frankly, stunning in a gown of blue-green silk. Sufficient cash had inspired the seamstress to a heroic effort despite the short time.

"Maybe. Or else he is avoiding me for some reason." Tidied and even brushed, he allows himself a moment to be stunned by his love's appearance. Thoughts of not attending the dinner at all cross his mind (and are promptly ushered out again). "Well. Shall we go?"

They're not late, but by the looks of it some of the others have been there some time now. There is an impressively wide selection of food, catering to the disparate origins of the ship's crew. Sidney's chef certainly knows his business.

Brother Pham arrives at the late end of late, comes in to the restaurant, and greets his friends and shipmates. His face shows little pleasure at the meeting, instead being lined with worry and concern.

"My apologies for being late, my friends. The last few days have found the Rock, and myself, rather troubled." He finds himself a glass of wine, sits, sips. "I have been collecting and sharing tales, as is my usual habit. Many of the tales on the Rock these days are of friends and family vanished. And earlier today I caught a sense of foulness that I hoped I'd never feel again."

Pham shudders at the memory. "There were, and probably still are, ghouls on Bral. Probably somewhere in the lower caverns."

Dismayed, ibn Fadil protests, "I have only heard of four people missing, and two of them ..." He stops, disliking the obvious conclusion. Surely it is merely coincidence?

Aware of the others' attention, he goes on, reluctantly. "I have learned that a few months ago my chief creditor mysteriously disappeared. His replacement has been going out of his way to hide his identity ... and the subordinate I spoke to was frankly afraid of him." It is pretty clear that he does not want to think this has anything to do with any ghouls.

"Ghouls?" Val had been sipping thoughtfully at his wine, listening to the two talk. "Is that what you were talking about the other day, Brother Pham? What do you suggest needs to be done?..."

Pham looks at Val and sighs. "What needs to be done? Well, ideally we send a platoon of elvish paladins into the lower levels to burn them out. But I rather doubt that there are many of *that* type on Bral right now. I, and others chosen by the gods, can at least force them away, and make it easier to deal with them. Somebody needs to root them out before they begin... reproducing." Pham shudders again from unpleasant memory.

"My real question is this: where did these creatures come from? SOMEBODY brought them here - I can't imagine that they're native. Ghouls come from other ghouls. Find out that answer, and I think many things will become clear."

Pham takes another sip of wine. "They need to be destroyed. But I am ashamed to admit that part of me would be very happy to get aboard the *Distraction* and leave this place behind."

With great sympathy for that feeling, ibn Fadil says, "Favored clerics like yourself are at least as rare as elvish paladins. ... It should be possible to find out who brought them here, but I cannot think of a better way to get into a lot of trouble quickly." With a visible effort to lighten his own mood, he adds, "Except perhaps dropping by the Victor's place for tea."

Val chuckles nervously at ibn Fadil's comment before lapsing into silence. He sips thoughtfully at his wine as he ponders the origin of the ghouls and what Needs To Be Done...

"Maybe we can invite the ghouls to have tea with the Victor?" he muses, half to himself.

"Probably hid out on one of the larger local cargo ships," Emmett hypothesizes. "The little buggers don't give off heat or use up air - if they manage to tie themselves onto the bottom of a ship they can go unnoticed for shorter hops. They'll land in the port hungry as anything, but they don't really need the food."

Val makes a mental note to check the *Distraction* stem to stern before they depart...

"Have you told the local authorities yet?" Emmett asks Pham. "Sure, its a problem, but is it *our* problem? And if we go running off to deal with it, will we get into trouble with the Rock police?"

Ibn Fadil gives a snort of amusement at the concept of police. "What authority there is on Bral tends to stamp out trouble first and ask questions later. But generally the trouble they deal with is fist fights, the occasional murder. And pirate raids, now, I suppose. Ghouls, or conspiracies to import ghouls, may be a bit out of their league."

He shrugs. "If we were to start roaming around the Rock and looked like we were starting some sort of trouble, we would probably be stamped on. We also might annoy the fellow in charge down below, that I was talking about before, which could be worse."

Just then Theo arrives with his wife, Elena, a willowy brunette with a beautiful smile who is obviously well-trained in putting others at their ease. Val makes his way over to meet with the couple, glad for the distraction from the talk of ghouls and elvish paladins.

"I'm glad you could make it, sir," Val greets Theo and his wife, thanking them for coming.

“We’re delighted to be here,” Theo replies, seeming genuinely happy about the way things have worked out since the _Cat_’s journey. “But come, there seems little cheer in this company...?”

Val hesitates, not sure what to say, but is saved from having to decide by the arrival of Sidney and Constance Volant, who naturally require considerable attention. A bit nervous about this, he trips on his tongue at first but quickly manages to smooth over any unintended offense.

More food arrives, more wine is served, the musicians play skillfully in the background, and the evening shows great promise.

* * *

There is more to Bral than most people realize, even those who have lived there many years. Tunnels under tunnels, a maze of rock never entered but by squealing vermin, never touched by light but from coarse decaying molds in the damp places.

Until recently, that is. Lamplight wavers through the fetid gloom, footsteps sound confidently on stone.

From the darkness, something hisses softly.

* * *

Making a determined effort to regain their cheery mood, the party goes on into the night and eventually winds down with no decision being made on the matter so troubling to Pham. The Volants prove very pleasant guests, although Sidney tends to go on a bit about his insect collection.

In the morning, Val has done some asking around after an item he’s thinking of purchasing. It raises a couple of eyebrows, but he is eventually directed to the Silverstream offices. If he wishes to make enquiries there, it is likely they have what he seeks, and maybe even a good price.

That afternoon is Alais’ talk. Of the crew, only ibn Fadil and Nyala (who is very bored on Bral) attend, as does Yestin, the latter out of politeness and also because he’s (gulp) First Mate now and thinks he ought to learn more about both Alais and his theories.

The small lecture hall of the Bral Unified and Licenced Astrophysical and Theosophical Society is filled with wizards, philosophers and assorted interested parties of all species. Melkin is there, and Master Stormcloud from the Brighting Consortium (he’s known to have ambitions toward being a wizard), and Aelfyr who runs the bookstore (not a wizard, but one of the most learned people on the Rock), and Alais’ parents. There is also, ibn Fadil notes, a man he does not recognize. Some observation eventually reveals him to be Garrick Jonte, the new pilot Victor had been forced to hire for the trip back to Bral after his old one quit.

“Wasn’t expecting I’d be able to attend, actually,” Garrick was saying to another attendee. “Though it’s such an interesting topic, it would have been a shame to miss it. But Master Victor actually gave everyone the day off! I haven’t been with him long, but I gather that’s not common. He seemed to be in a very good mood today, better than last night at least. Perhaps he’s finally had some good news.”

Alais runs to the podium several minutes late and begins filling the chalkboard with diagram after diagram, hastily ill-erasing until it’s almost impossible to tell new marks from old. He has obviously been doing a great deal of reading since he got back, and has connected his previous sketchy theories with large amounts of both established and fringe cosmology, along with half the unexplained events of the past five decades. Suddenly he’s discussing the intermingling of Rasselian prophecy and the rumored destruction and even more rumored reappearance of the Spelljam-

mer, and then it's back to the Conversion, with a side theory on the implications of the theory for ideas of the Spelljammer's hull composition (the current consensus position is, of course, wrong).

Rising to a climax, Alais triumphantly announces that the imminent destruction of the universe will reveal certain basic data that will conclusively disprove Shrende of Astheson's theory of elemental order (the cornerstone of mainstream astrophysics) and prove that the 8fold Lily theory (the one that Alais and his late mentor favored) is indeed correct. That no one will be around to appreciate this newly proven truth is one of the tragedies of science.

He surveys the room with a wild look of triumph and contempt. "Questions?" he asks, steeling himself for intellectual combat. Although he made it plain early in the lecture that this was a tentative working hypothesis, by the time he's finished that disclaimer has been all but forgotten.

Ibn Fadil sits near Yestin, and pays close attention to Garrick's conversation, but the man has nothing more of interest to say. Halfway through the talk, ibn Fadil has abandoned any hope that Alais might have achieved some sort of clarity for this presentation, and is absently scanning the crowd, but nothing catches his eye.

Being a roomful of wizards and philosophers (well, mostly; Alais' parents look distinctly confused and a trifle upset), they're willing to give the idea of the immanent destruction of the universe due consideration. An argument promptly breaks out between Faustine, a gnome from the Emporium, and Abayomi, ship's mage on the *_Yasar_*, about whether or not Shrende's final published work actually used the word "carrots" or if that was a printer's error and it was intended to read "carbinium," and then over whether if the latter, what sort of material exactly he'd been referring to, if the former, for what use they had been intended.

"While your theory is quite diverting, Master Alais, don't you believe there could perhaps be a... simpler explanation?" Melkin, as usual, looks like the word is particularly annoying to him. Probably anxious to get on to the refreshments, Alais knows.

"I suppose there could be. It depends on how simple is the person proposing it."

"It is indeed, as Master Melkin says, diverting," Aelfyr says, smoothing over any reply the increasingly annoyed mage might make, which contains some words about insolent children and rag-tag charlatans. "Are you certain, however, that there is nothing that can be done to prevent this occurrence? Some sort of defense or escape?" It's hard to tell if he's merely humoring the young wizard.

While Alais explains the impracticality and indeed impossibility of such, ibn Fadil glances up at Yestin. "Did you follow any of that?" he asks in an undertone.

"About as much as I expected to," the giff chuckles. "Clearly I need to expand my reading." Given the unexpected windfall of their first voyage, his cabin on the *damsel* is already all but bursting.

* * *

Pham walks the streets of the Rock. He starts at the place he got that... scent is a good a word as any. Investigating, he tries to find some of the locals who will talk to him, but doesn't have much luck.

He returns to the rest of the crew as Alais's lecture breaks up, and seeks out ibn Fadil.

"Friend ibn Fadil, may I have a moment? You know more of the people of Bral than I do. Could you make some suggestions on how I might find some to talk to me? I need to warn them

about the threat, maybe try to, well, do SOMETHING about the creatures preying on them. If then know what they're up against, they can take some precautions at least.

"And maybe we can find out who brought those things here in the first place. Or at least an idea."

"In truth, I wanted to try to bring this up with Sidney Volant last night," the half-elf says slowly. "Though it probably was not the best time. You see, only the oligarchs have the authority to do anything really useful here, or at least the potential to. They could tell the giff or the other soldiers to patrol more often, for example. Or ask the Navy for help if they become truly desperate."

"Most Bralians are just ordinary crafters and shopkeepers used to minding their own business," he sighs. "I am not sure that they *could* organize a response."

Pham thinks for a minute. "Well, we could simply force the issue. If we find the nest, we can force the creatures out into the light and FORCE the oligarchs to deal with the issue. Rampaging ghouls in a small area like Bral would be very, very bad for the shipping business, wouldn't it?"

"Er, we have not even *tried* to interest Mister Volant in the problem," ibn Fadil points out. "If we are going to cause a, a ruckus of any sort we should at least warn him in advance, Brother Pham. We work for Three Trees and so our actions reflect on the company. And I do not want to risk getting arrested for causing a disturbance and have to explain it to him afterward."

"Please do not think I am not concerned by this problem," he adds anxiously. "I hate the thought of ghouls preying on my friends here. I just think we should eliminate as many potential problems as we can in advance before, ah, charging in."

* * *

Before the party broke up the previous night, Val called for a crew meeting the following afternoon to discuss a variety of subjects, and also asked Mr. Volant for a moment of his time the following morning.

The next day, he waits patiently for the crew to assemble aboard the Distraction the afternoon after the big party. His meeting with Three Trees earlier in the day proved useful to a point. It was now up to him to decide what to do and where to go. Though he does have a few ideas, he wants the crew's input on the matter.

He goes through the roster and rechecks assignments and watch schedules. Not much will be changed from when Delmar was captaining the ship. As each crew member arrives, he will greet them and ask them to be patient until all are assembled. He pulls Yestin aside to give him his first order; he is to go over the roster with the crew and give everyone their assignments after the meeting.

"Thanks for coming," he finally addresses the crew when all have arrived. "I'm sure we're all pretty excited about this opportunity before us, and there are a few things that we need to discuss before we set out. Most important of those things will be 'where are we going?'" Val can barely conceal his own excitement at the prospect.

"We have been given an...*open* choice of where to go," he continues after a brief pause. "Ultimately, the decision is ours on what we'd like to do. I have a few ideas," he gives Emmett a glance that touches on what was mentioned earlier, "but I want your input. I'm new to this type of situation, as I'm sure we all are, and I want to get an idea of what we all would like to do."

He briefly explains what was passed along to him regarding their choices and their mission guidelines. Explore, map, and bring back business is the gist of it, but the option of where to head remains open. He'll elaborate as much as possible, being as confident as he can while presenting everything to his friends.

"So, do we head straight for the unknown?" Val continues, "or do we take a safer approach and skirt the little-known territories exploring possibilities there? Any ideas or preferences?" He offers his most sincere expression to let the crew know he *wants* them to speak up.

Emmett decides to get the machine in motion, having discussed this earlier with Val in private. "I think we have a perfectly good first destination that kind of fits both - Ginevra's home world. From the gist of what Victor said, he's got some sort of exclusive trade route on it, which sounds like it has something valuable that we could horn in on. He also implied it was out of the way, so we'd have a chance to find other things en route.

"It's not quite wandering into the unknown, but it isn't skirting the safety zones either. Plus, we know there's a market there."

To himself, Ibn Fadil wonders why these people cannot seem to stop looking for trouble. Aloud, he says, "Whatever they are getting from there must be quite valuable, since it seems Victor & Sons went to the trouble of an alliance-marriage to get access to it. But do we know how to get there?"

"I know the name of the system," Val adds casually, a blank facade firmly in place. "We can find it if we look." He is trying to appear indifferent in this discussion, though he is very much in favor of Emmett's idea. Not so much for revenge upon the Victor, but perhaps as something they could do to help Ginevra's family.

"This reminds me," the half-elf says, "just before Master Zeremin's talk, I overheard the Victor's new pilot saying that his employer was in such a good mood today, he gave all his employees the day off. We might want to watch our backs even more until we get off the Rock again."

After a brief pause to let that sink in, he goes on, "As to the proposal, I suppose it is as good a choice as any. And we might want to visit Janik again on the way, to perhaps learn more about the place from the lady."

"Thank you for the warning," Val offers, genuinely grateful. He pauses for a moment to study the others' reactions to the odd news before getting back to the matter at hand, "I do not think a return to Janik is necessary or warranted at this point. Besides, it would be a bit...odd that an exploration team would head straight in to the Three Trees corporate home-world, no?"

"Who would care?" He looks puzzled, but he is wondering if their lock-picking captain is perhaps too used to worrying about being watched ...

"I do not believe a six month detour would be beneficial to the interests of our mission for the company," Val explains patiently, calm facade still in place. "If you wish, we could discuss that part later when we've agreed upon an ultimate destination and confirmed its location."

"Any other ideas?" he asks of the others, as if to say that part of the conversation was over. For now.

Miffed, ibn Fadil sits back and keeps several possible retorts safely behind his teeth. _Sometimes I think I understand *Five* better than this man ..._

Pham sits up and clears his throat. "Perhaps, a bit of a break would be in order? This discussion is getting a little heated.

"I am inclined to agree with Val... I mean, Captain." Pham nods his head apologetically. "A six month detour to Janik would be a bad idea, just in cost of supplies if nothing else. And if I am piloting this ship, I'd much rather be headed somewhere new than somewhere old."

"I have held my counsel for now because, quite honestly, I have no real opinion. When exploring the unknown, one direction is as good as another. But, may I remind everyone - the goal of this expedition is to open up **new** markets? I suspect Three Trees would much rather find completely new spheres than to have us open up a market which already has an entrenched competitor."

"A very good point," Val agrees with Brother Pham's observation, "but the decision is ultimately ours. We just have to make sure our efforts prove to be worth our costs to the company." He pauses to make sure his words sink in. "If that means us opening a market in a little known sphere to bring in business, or if it means discovering something new all together, we'll do it. Which is exactly why I wanted us to have this discussion. We're in this together." He puts a slight emphasis on that last word.

Emmett turns to Pham, "I see your point, but look at it this way: from the discussions we overheard on Janik, we know that right now the Victor's have some sort of exclusive deal with Genevra's world. We also know that her world is fairly distant, or at least out of the way.

"With monopolies like this, the world is going to be eager for another source of trade, so they aren't getting dominated by one trading house. They'll be happy to see us. We know there is something there to trade, otherwise someone else wouldn't have opened the route and felt it important enough to secure with an arranged marriage. There's profit there. Given those, we'll be able to set up a Three trees house there, and use that as a jumping off point for a whole other section of wildspace."

Emmett turns to the group at large, "I, for one, don't want to have to haul our butts back to Janik at the end of every trip."

Hiro indicates that he is not averse to the notion of locating Ginevra's world. Nyala's expression is diffident as usual; she doesn't particularly care one way or the other. Yestin is clearly thinking very hard.

"There is no certainty that anything we do will bring results. At least we know there is something there," he says hesitantly.

As Emmett explains his ideas to Pham and the rest of the crew, Val thinks about the letter from Ginevra. Was this the best course of action? Would going to Rigol and trying to oust the Victor monopoly bring down more wrath against Ginevra, Teague, and their daughter? Surely by now they would be safely away from Janik and out of Victor's reach. Wouldn't they?...

Not everyone agrees on going there for several different and equally valid reasons, Val thinks to himself. He even has his own reservations about it. But as Captain, he has to make decisions. Of course his first one **would** have to have such serious consequences. Not only for the crew and himself, but for others he has come to care about... Best to get some more ideas before making that decision, however.

"Okay," Val rouses himself from his thoughts, "so we have one idea so far. It's not without complications or possible repercussions, but then again, nothing we do is going to be without risk. Do we have any *other* suggestions?"

Ibn Fadil looks thoroughly demoralized by the unanimous objections to his offhand thought about Janik, and just stares at the floor.

"Inasmuch as heading for Ginevra's world is a triumph of the empirical over the theoretical, I vote for going there," Alais announces.

Brother Pham looks as if there is something he wants to say. "Friends, I have another concern. You all know what I'm talking about. I cannot sit by when creatures like that are wandering free on Bral. I know that I cannot destroy them on my own; I also know that it's not really our job. But I have a duty to help.

"If the oligarchs are aroused, they'll *have* to do something or ships will stop coming to Bral once they hear. But the oligarchs are not going to be convinced by the feeling of a priest of a, *ahem* minor sect.

"So, I need proof. The easiest proof would be a ghoulish body. Would any of you help me on a little hunting trip before we leave?"

Val studies the others for their reaction to Pham's dilemma before speaking up.

"Well, you're one of my pilots now," he says after a moment of obviously deliberate thought. "And a good captain shouldn't just stand by and let his pilots walk into danger like this," he raises his hand to forestall any objections Pham might have of him pulling rank like this. "So I'm going with you," he adds with a grin.

"Now then," he continues hastily, "I can't speak for anyone else here, nor can I order anyone to help or not. I'm going because Pham is a friend." He looks to both Emmett and Hiro as if to tell them they do not have to go because of him, even though he suspects they might...

Emmett shrugs. "I'm in. A good craftsman doesn't ignore little problems until they become big problems. We don't want to come back to Bral at some point and find it a ghoulish outpost. Be warned, though. The little suckers are a bitch to kill."

Hiro slyly smiles at the challenge.

Ibn Fadil revives enough to say, "I also will go along."

"Of course I will accompany you, Captain," Yestin says, sounding fairly cheerful about the prospect of ghoulish-hunting, although not so much about the prospect of doing so in the lower tunnels.

"It has been some time since I had any opportunity to hunt," Nyala observes laconically.

Emmett smiles, wondering what has the half elf so down. Surely not just because Val tabled the discussion on visiting Janik before heading somewhere else? "I'm glad to hear it, we're going to need your bloodline."

Emmett turns to the assembled "Last time I ran into these things I was working crew on an elvish vessel. For those unaware, unless you've got High Blood, these things will freeze your muscles with a touch." Emmett painfully recalls the moments of paralyzed helplessness after he dropped his guard on one encounter.

Nyala's raised eyebrow at the term "High Blood" goes unnoticed.

"They hunt in packs, and will drag off frozen victims, so we have to engage them at range as much as possible, and watch our buddies backs constantly. Just in case I'm not making this clear, Pham is not asking us to get involved with a lark. These things are dangerous and deadly. If that's not your brand of whisky, no one will think less of you for not bellying up to the bar. The captain has made it clear this is a friends play and not a ship play, so vote with your gut and don't worry about your job."

"Speaking of jobs," he looks over at Pham, then glances at Ibn Fadil. "Has anyone talked to Volant about our making this play?"

Ibn Fadil shakes his head slightly, looking to Pham to explain.

Pham replies to Emmett. "No, I haven't approached our employer yet. To be quite honest, the resolve to face these creatures only solidified itself yesterday. Ibn Fadil also suggested I tell him my concerns before attempting this. If you wish, I will approach him before we do anything."

Pham gives a wry smile. "Members of my order are not accustomed to having those in power listen to much of anything we have to say. We usually just do whatever we are called to do. I'm not used to having to worry about consequences from the ranks above.

"I'll go talk to Volant first thing tomorrow morning and bring my concerns and plans to him, unless any of you would like to go in my stead."

"I'll go **with** you," Val tells him. "Maybe if your captain shows support, he'll listen to what you have to say." He stops and furrows his brow in thought.

"Then again," he says after a moment, "he may very well not want us involved... Let's make sure we have a contingency plan in that event, shall we?"

"In the meantime," Val continues, "it seems we have a basic agreement that we'd all like to go the Ginevra's home to try and make a deal. At least we don't have any major objections about this. So be it; that will be our first goal." To Alais and Pham he adds, "We'll need to research the best and safest route to get there. I'll give you what I know so we can do just that.

"I'm sure I don't need to remind you all what trouble the Victor may be," Val says, quite aware of the irony. "Keeping that in mind, our destination is to be considered secret. **Tell no one.** We don't want any unnecessary trouble, nor do we want the Victor showing up there to ruin what we're trying to achieve. We'll have enough trouble with his people that are already there."

"Thank you, Val. I appreciate your support, and," Pham looks to the rest of the room, "everyone else who's volunteered to help me. Emmett is right - these things are dangerous. I've personally seen a small pack of them wipe out entire villages. I don't want to see that happen again here. It's very ... heartening to have friends."

"I'm not sure I see a need for this anti-expedition. Hat should be the domain of the proper authorities, and takes up valuable time," Alais judges. "I would prefer we leave as soon as possible. But in the meantime I'll start the research on our future course.

"As for the ghouls, if you all insist on going, I shall come along and use the occasion to experiment with our new magic items."

Val takes Alais and Pham aside to give them the information he has on Rigol, which does not amount to much. From his talks with Ginevra he knows that it is a flat world with a single moon, in a sphere that lies along an offshoot of the Flow farther down the Loop than Janik. Their employers have stocked them for an extremely long journey, given their mission, which is all to the good.

After the meeting, Emmett hangs around, motioning for Ibn Fadil to do so as well. Once Val has finished with the pilots, Emmett pulls him aside with a whisper. "You told Ibn Fadil you were tabling his request to go to Janik because it wasn't a new sphere destination. Well, and good, but tabling it then means you have to find a minute to hear him out now."

"I know," Val says with a shrug. After a moment, he hands a carefully folded letter to Emmett and says, "I don't think she'll be there any more."

"It was hardly a suggestion," Ibn Fadil says uncomfortably. "More of a thought spoken aloud. I feel that the more we know about the people of that sphere, the more likely we are to succeed in our goal. But if no one wants to take the time, and the lady is no longer on Janik in any event ..."

He shrugs in his turn and changes the subject. "Captain, may I look over the ship's manifest, perhaps this evening or tomorrow before we go hunting? I would like to be familiar with what we are carrying and see if there is anything I might want to add."

Val exchanges a look with Emmett at the request, but nods his assent nonetheless. "You can go over it with Yestin," he tells Ibn Fadil. "Make sure he writes down whatever you think of so we can get it." He reminds himself to speak with Yestin about this later, too.

"As for going to Janik..." he continues, changing the subject back once more, "I don't want you to think I'm totally opposed to going there, but I currently see no real need to. At least none yet. On the other hand, you seem awfully disappointed for it to be just a thought spoken aloud. Is there something you wish to do there? I would like to think you can tell your captain what is really on your mind." He says this evenly, wearing a mask of indifference despite the feeling in the back of his head that something seems amiss...

Facing suspicion when he is actually telling the truth throws the Zakharan off-balance. "Do? I would have liked to visit the forest outside the city ..." He stops, tries to start over and obliquely address Valarin's unspoken accusation. "Sir," he says with a certain formal stiffness overlying his perfectly real distress, "I am overreacting to having everyone but the chairs contradict me." Reluctantly, he adds, "Perhaps you do not understand how much this opportunity means to me, or how much afraid I am of failing."

"More than you may realize," Val says, softening his tone a bit; he is not really surprised by the half elf's reaction. "But if you're going to act like a sulking child every time you can't get your way, it gives me pause to reconsider all our success." He gives the Zakharan a moment to cool down after that, studying his reaction. "I think more of you than that though," he adds simply, truthfully.

Ibn Fadil looks, not angry, but merely perturbed at being described as "sulking."

"Forgive me if I seem... overly cautious about Janik," Val says, changing the subject. "After our last visit there and all that occurred, I feel it might be safer to avoid the place for now. However, if you **really** want to see the forest again..." he trails off with a mischievous smile.

"As for feeling that all are contradicting you," he continues as he places a friendly hand on ibn Fadil's shoulder, "I wouldn't let it bother you. It just means that not everyone agrees. And I have not simply dismissed your ideas outright. I did ask everyone for their opinions, **not** for everyone to gang up on you. Besides, as Captain I **could've** just given an order to go without asking anyone's opinion," Val says with mock severity before softening his expression again, "But I think too highly of everyone aboard to start out that way."

"Thank you, sir," he says gratefully. "I hope to prove worthy of your good opinion."

Afterward, Pham makes an appointment to see Volant first thing in the morning. When asked for the reason for the visit, Pham says, "I need to discuss some civic improvement activities I would like to undertake here that may reflect on Three Trees."

After the meeting aboard the *_Distraction_* breaks up and the crewmembers begin to go their separate ways, energized by their newly made decisions, Val pulls aside Emmett and Hiro a moment.

"I know you two insist on watching my back," he tells them, "and I certainly **do** appreciate it, so I thought I'd let you know where I was going to see if you were interested in coming along. If not to watch my rear, then perhaps to look around for yourselves." He remembers the stern look Emmett gave him the last time he snuck off to do some personal business.

Hiro's deep brown eyes answer, Yes.

As does Emmett's mouth. Emmett, unlike Hiro, uses words. Useful tools, that. "Sure," the Half Man grins. "After all, that's where your back is going..."

The three of them leave the docks and cross the open square. The Silverstream offices are in the third street back, being a relatively young company, its leader still the newest of the oligarchs. The tall, narrow building of brick and stone faces onto its own miniature square, in the center of which is a set of stairs giving access to the underground. More stairs lead up to the main door to their destination.

A man attired in elegantly simple yet clearly expensive clothing greets them at the top of the steps with a bow. "Good evening, Captain, and be welcome to these our humble offices." With impeccable courtesy he escorts them into the vestibule, relieves them of their coats, and then precedes them into the next room.

The bottom floor of the building is one large room, a showroom in fact for Silverstream wares, the fabrics of a hundred worlds. Carefully shielded light sources gleam through gauze, slither from silks and satins, call echoes from brocade and velvet and are lost in sable furs. A middle-aged woman of severe appearance looks up from a ledger book at their entrance. As if they had an appointment, the man announces, "Captain Ehrendrin and companions, miss."

Well, Val recalls, he **has** been asking around a bit.... And even if he himself doesn't stand out in a crowd, Emmett at least is quite easily recognized.

The woman comes forward to shake his hand and Emmett's, and bows correctly to Hiro. He almost fails to return the courtesy, thinking for a moment that he hears the silk shifting as if some-

one moved on silent feet, but a glance around proves all to be still but the faintly dancing flames behind their glass.

“A pleasure,” the woman says crisply. “I am Selina Arden. If I might inquire as to the nature of the business you wish to conduct?”

The half man does his best to make his face impassive and somewhat bored, so that they won't suspect that *he* isn't really sure what they're doing here either. While there is little chance of an ambush inside these offices, he fills his moments keeping a careful eye out on how one might

attack from within this room.

"Thank you for receiving us," Val tells Selina with a smile and a half bow, stepping into his business-mode. "I have been told that you may be able to provide something I seek; something I have heard of in my travels and seen once on another. A cloak of Elvenkind."

A certain light springs to her eyes, and he braces himself for a session of hard bargaining. While his companions stroll about admiring the displayed wares, they play the game, eventually concluding that while there is such an item available, he cannot bring her price below 1900, and that “as a favor to the good captain.”

* * *

Ibn Fadil is up before dawn the following day, leaving Nyala to burrow sleepily back into the blankets while he runs some important errands. First is to collect the equipment he left in his cache before leaving on the *_Cat_*, including pens and paper with which to write a message, which he leaves in the usual place. Written as usual in Zakhara and that in the code he memorized years ago, it says only, "Regret departure seemed necessary. Full report filed from Janik. Opportunity too good to pass up." It is not signed in any way.

After that he can relax a bit and do some shopping, enjoying the opportunity to spend freely despite the occasional verbal dig from a shopkeeper. At Bogdana's armory he purchases several knives and a set of light bracers. The cheerful dwarf tries to persuade him to spend more-- “Company you're keeping these days you might be wanting for more, and you'll want it most when you can't get it,” she warns with a grin. “Now that giff crewmate of yours, he's got it right, finished up a beaut set of mail for him just yesterday. You won't find any as good as ours for at least two spheres, and none better.”

“I'll think about it,” he promises sincerely; that's a point he's been thinking about himself.

* * *

At the Enclave, Pham and Val arrive for their appointment and are ushered into a beautifully appointed little room where a table is set for breakfast. A servant pours tea and informs them that Master Volant will be with them shortly, which indeed he is, seating himself at once and waving to them to join him.

“Apologies for the format of this meeting, but the day was full, and I know you're scheduled to ship out shortly, so.... We very much enjoyed your little gathering the other night, by the way. Well done. Now what's this about ‘civic improvements’? Most people think the best way to improve this place would be to chuck it into a sun.” He chews on a scone and looks at the two of them curiously.

"*That* would be the contingency plan," Val mutters quietly to nobody in particular, though he is inwardly pleased by Sidney's praise for the party. It is otherwise apparent, however, that he will be content to let Brother Pham present their argument to Master Volant.

Pham smiles at Master Volant's joke, then dives right in. "I apologize for the somewhat opaque message, but it seemed the best way to get in to see you. The 'civic improvement' is actually a hunting expedition.

"As I was wandering the streets of Bral after our return, I caught, ... well, a scent. This was something that I hoped never to see again. Somebody has brought ghouls to Bral, and the problem needs to be dealt with now before they spread.

"I have a duty to help and destroy such things. I cannot get rid of them all myself; the authorities need to do that. But given the political situation here on Bral I didn't see any other way to force the oligarchs into action without proof - the best proof I could think of is to hunt down and bring back a ghoul body and make a big public display.

"This plan is completely of my own devising; friends have agreed to help but I have no intention of interfering with our departure. But, again, due to the politics on the Rock that I am not privy to, I was told it would be best to inform you of our plans."

Volant's expression changes through surprise to concern to something approaching incredulity. He sets down his scone. "I'm certainly glad you decided to inform someone before going ahead with--what exactly were you planning to do?" he inquires dryly.

"Hunt down a ghoul. Bring it back dead... well, dead again. Try not to get killed in the process. If I have a body, then the people will know why there have been so many disappearances. They can then prepare. And hopefully the oligarchs will be forced to send in troops to clear them out."

"I see." Rather than seeming annoyed by this somewhat manipulative revelation, Volant merely looks thoughtful. "Well, if nothing else it seems Theo was right about this crew," he murmurs before going on, "Of course this is a very serious thing, if indeed there are such creatures here. It should be relatively simple to locate them, however, and then our forces can take care of them. Where is it that you came across this... scent?"

Pham gives directions to the point where he noticed the spoor, a narrow street between a couple of nondescript warehouses.

"Then we shall investigate at once," is the brisk response.

"Does this mean you wish to assist in my hunt? Or would you prefer I stay out of the way?"

Sidney shakes his head. "Let our security earn their pay for a change. No reason to delay your departure. I am puzzled," he admits. "One would think ghoulish depredations would have

come to our attention immediately, as they are not known for restraint... no doubt we will uncover the situation in due time. There has been a rumor or two of people gone missing, but these things happen--a child falls into a sub-basement, or some fool gets lost looking for those tunnels they insist lie in the depths of the Rock." He makes a tsking sound. "I will inform the others at once, and we will organize a search. Thank you, Brother Pham, for bringing this to my attention. You are certainly a credit to your... tradition. And my thanks to you as well, Captain. "

* * *

Emmett keeps an eye on Val's back until he's well inside the enclave, then departs, heading back to the docks that hold the Lazy Cat. It should only take a few minutes to track Inez down, he thinks, and in fact a few quick inquiries serve to point him in the direction of her inn.

"Inez," he says when she opens her door to his knock. "Hi."

"Hi!" She jumps up to give him a quick hug. "Was starting to wonder if I was going to see you before you left."

"OK, I'm sure you've heard about what's been happening with the Distraction." He gives her a moment to interrupt if she wishes to, then continues "We're leaving tomorrow, for parts unknown. It looks like Victor isn't going to do anything against us, and that means I've wasted a week spending all my time with the wrong person..."

"Anyway, we're leaving. Right now We is me and Val and the rest. I was wondering if you wanted We to include you too? I've been keeping a space open for you if you want it. No obligation. No pressure. It's a bit of a risky cruise, but the pay's good, and I hope you like the company..."

Inez looks a little bit taken aback. "Really? You mean it?" She's clearly conflicted. "I guess I wasn't really expecting this. I don't know. I mean, I like you guys... five years is a long time. Do you even know where you're going?"

"We've picked a sphere out and Val has the pilots doing some research. Looks like a good trading opportunity..." Emmett answers, not looking her straight in the eye. "Oh, I almost forgot."

The half-man pulls a bundle out from under one of his belts. "I picked this up for you. I thought it matched your eyes..."

He hands her the package of brown cloth, tied with twine. Inside is a skirt and blouse of the same cut as she wore on the Cat during the parties and dances on board, but made from fine, durable Silverstream silks.

"I meant to give this too you before I asked about the Distraction. This isn't a bribe to get you to come along, it's a gift."

"It's beautiful! Thank you." She admires the present for a moment, then looks at him uncertainly. Her thoughts are not difficult to guess; it's been a fun time, and she's not immune to the lure of potential rewards, but this is something of a risky commitment.

Then again, she's not one to spend overlong pondering before making a decision. "Sounds like it's not the middle of nowhere, at least? Tell me about it while I pack...."

Emmett takes a seat, knowing to stay out of her way while she stows her gear. He's glad to have her along, not wanting to give up the pleasurable relationship the two have shared. Inez is nice, competent and...uncomplicated. Having her along will make the trip much more enjoyable, and make it easier to tolerate seeing Nyala with ibn Fadil.

"Well, it's off the beaten track, but not middle of nowhere. From what was said, there's stuff there worth trading for, and right now only one company even knows its there to trade with. This is a little run-jumping, but if it works, we'll have a friendly port to work from for investigating a whole

new sector of wildspace." Emmett considers not telling her everything, but then pushes forward.

"It's Ginevra's homeworld," he states, wondering if this will change her decision.

She turns to stare at him for a second, sees that he's not joking. "I don't *believe* you. Val still moping over that silly bit?" She rolls her eyes with a groan. "Well, from all I hear, Victor's come to his senses, so maybe it's not *that* bad an idea. And there must be money there, if V&S is in it...."

"It wasn't Val's idea. It was mine." Emmett looks around the room, seeing how much she'd managed to pack already "I figured like you did - if V&S are making runs there there must be something. Plus, he was so irritating about lording it over her, now that she left him no one would go there, that I felt compelled to move in and seize the opportunity."

"Ibn Fadil wonders why I want to keep tweaking Victor, but there is profit there." He shrugs. "and I just don't like bullies. But I did want to let you know that this may end up with another mark in the little twits black book."

"If it does, I'm telling him it was your idea," she grumbles. "You know me - I'm a decent sailor, but I leave rough stuff to the professionals."

Emmett stands up and takes her in his arms. Looking up at her, he says, "I don't expect any rough stuff - at least no more than what any crew faces. Besides, Hiro and I will be on board, so you have your professionals close at hand.

"I'm serious about this. It's a good job on a voyage with the higher than average amount of risk, but a much higher than average amount of pay. Volant was talking about our buying the Distraction eventually, and that's a lot.

"You're a great sailor and you deserve this chance to get in before the machine starts up. But if the risk is too much, you don't have to take it. I'd like you along, but not if you aren't comfortable with the job."

"For that kind of payout, I'll risk a throw," she grins at him. "Hasn't hurt yet."

"That's the spirit." Emmett moves his head to glance out the window. "I figure our esteemed captain's going to be safely locked in that meeting for a little while yet. Got any plans for the next hour or so?" he asks with a wink.

* * *

As Val and Pham leave the Enclave, Emmett is running back to the door as best he can, looking a

little ruffled and out of breath. "Val, good, I got..er...caught up in time." He nods at the cleric. "Pham. How'd it go? Are we on?"

"Mr. Volant would prefer that we, umm... let his security services earn their own keep. We are NOT on. But he seemed very interested in my report and promised to investigate. I have to say, it feels strange to let somebody in authority actually do their job for once. It never seems to work out that way normally."

Emmett nods again. "OK, then. And Pham, it happens that way some times. You did what you wanted - you convinced someone in authority to look into it. Ya done good.

"Oh, Captain, I wanted to let you know I extend the offer of that berth to Inez, and she said she's in. I trust that's all right?"

Val cannot help but smile as he claps Emmett on the shoulder. "Of course it is," he says, grateful that Inez would actually be coming with them.

"Glad to hear it. She's a good, reliable sailor," Emmett says, knowing full well that this is merely a polite cover that doesn't include all of his reasoning. "Plus, I already told her she was in.

"It does look like Victor isn't going to bother us. We'll be gone tomorrow, so as long as we all stay on our toes tonight, we're primed." Emmett frowns, "Of course, this means we **really** have to be on our toes tonight. Pham, you want to stick around with us, or stay out of the line of fire?"

"I think I'll stick with you. I have this feeling that if I don't, the ship will end up leaving without at least one of us tomorrow morning."

"You've got that feeling too, huh? After that bit with the booger, I'm trying to trust them more often."

* * *

While Pham and Valarin breakfast with the oligarch, ibn Fadil and Yestin examine the _Distraction_'s cargo hold. Slightly paranoid by both nature and training, the half-elf keeps his nebulous suspicions regarding Seven Suns to himself, as well as his worries over the Victor, who has yet to make any open move. While making himself familiar with the stores and their locations, rearranging a few things as he sees fit and with Yestin cheerfully providing heavy lifting as required, he undertakes to search as best he can for any sign of something amiss, not entirely sure what he is looking for but uneasy nonetheless. He takes his own notes, in Zakharan, something his assistant gracefully overlooks without comment. The chore takes the entire morning, and uncovers nothing suspicious, though this does not give him a great deal of comfort.

Afterward he makes a quick trip to Dominic's shop to pick up the item he commissioned, which he finds entirely to his satisfaction.

Ibn Fadil finds Nyala lounging boredly in their room; he grins and presents her with the little velvet-wrapped package with a flourish. "A small gift for you, my love."

She accepts it, curiosity alight in her eyes, and unwraps it very slowly, prolonging the moment of discovery. She holds the silver bracelet with its alien script to the window's light, then looks at him with a smile more beautiful and eloquent than any words.

* * *

Sidney glances around the table at his fellows, noting the empty chairs. Greywing of course is not there, out chasing pirates and having a lousy time of it, he hopes. The Arcane, Ormyx, is another expected absence; no one has seen him in months. The rastipede known as Five by those without mandibles is chatting with McFadden. Sam Victor stalks into the room, takes his seat, and appears to sink into contemplation; Volant keeps an eye on him, somewhat discomfited by the man's slightly vacant stare. Since apprised of the events on Janik he has been keeping a closer eye than usual on the man--watching one another is often all there is to do on the Rock. These past few days it seems his lingering rage has died or found other outlet, for he has been unusually

quiet, even well-behaved, but Sidney is disinclined to trust this. Evantha drifts in as if on a breeze carrying some subtle perfume. Unusually, Brighting is not puppying along after her.

In fact, he never does appear that afternoon, while Sidney tells his fellows what he has learned. "We've confirmed that there is some sort of undead presence in that part of the Rock," he tells them. He'd never seen the old gnome so serious. "What precisely it is, and where, remains to be seen, but I don't think we can afford to wait long before taking care of the problem--it can only grow worse."

"Absolutely not," Farley agrees with a shudder, and, "Hear, hear," Victor mutters amiably.

Gratified by their lack of opposition, he continues, "If we are in agreement, I think it would be well to summon the duty captain at once and plan for the search, and how best we may counter whatever danger it presents."

* * *

In the morning, the final last-minute items are brought on board, including a crate of three clucking chickens--and the crew. Yestin clanks onto the ship, resplendent in his brand-new armor and toting several heavy chests, then trots down the gangplank again to help Alais. The wizard has several bulky but apparently rather light crates, two stamped with J'x'st's glyph and others anonymous, and a heavy sack of books; he stows all of it in his quarters.

It's the usual controlled chaos on the dock and ship both as everyone gets themselves sorted out, particularly with the last-minute addition of Inez, who shows up promptly on time with a duffel of belongings over her shoulder and a grin for Emmett.

Theo and Delmar both put in an appearance, shake everyone's hand, and then stand back, amid a crowd of other well-wishes, most of them crew from the Cat, some of ibn Fadil's friends, Alais' parents, some others perhaps in the pay of other oligarchs, and a few bored giff keeping an eye on everything while their fellows prepare for what will surely be a most uncomfortable hunt.

Before departing, Val makes it a point to check the Distraction stem to stern for any stowaways, live or otherwise. After what Emmett mentioned about what ghouls could do, he does not wish to take any chances.

It's hard to miss the fact that there have been a few modifications made that he was not previously aware of -- namely, the ballista is now mounted on a heavy turret, giving it a 360-degree field of fire. That can't have been cheap, but none of the Three Trees people mentioned having anything like that done....

During loading, Emmett lends a hand as well, taking the moment to complement Yestin, "Hey, first officer! Nice suit!" Emmett is likewise armored, wearing his new chain shirt at least until they've left the Rock and he's finished the security sweep.

It's the usual controlled chaos on the dock and ship both as everyone gets themselves sorted out, particularly with the last-minute addition of Inez, who shows up promptly on time with a duffel of belongings over her shoulder and a grin for Emmett.

Again, the Half-man stops what he's doing to help out with the carrying - in this case picking up Inez, duffel and all, and carrying her laughing and complaining form up the gangplank and onto the Distraction.

As the ship moves once more into wildspace and the watches change for the first days of the journey, a pause for dreaming:

Hiro dreams of her again that night, the steps he will not hear again tracing familiar rooms, the whisper of silk and of silken hair heard but never seen. He does not wish to continue this; taking command of the dream, he turns to leave the house. There is a woman there. He recognizes her from painting and story as the goddess Ama-No-Uzeme, whose comically obscene dance once enticed the sun from hiding to see what everyone was laughing about. She is laughing now herself, as if at some great joke--laughing at him, he realizes.

Pham stands on a high hill overlooking a town and harbor, sails scattered across the sea just like the fishing boats he knew at home. He knows what will happen, but he cannot move to warn those below of what is coming as the water leaves the harbor and the blue-to-blue horizon moves, humping itself higher as the wave rushes toward land, scattering the distant ships like toys, hanging ready to smash the entire town to splinters--Then the sun goes out.

Nyala rides alone through the forest she knew so well, the heavy fall of pine needles silencing her mount's hooves and perfuming the air. Birds sing, undisturbed by her passing, and a clear trail lies before her to be followed... memory of a simpler, more pleasant time.

Emmett's dreams are of flight and fire and darkness, but soon take a more pleasant turn through a half-waking awareness of pleasant warmth that continues into the dream once again, and a sound... a heartbeat loud in his ears, seeming to echo faintly. The steady boom grows slower and slower until the pause has become infinite.

Alais flies through the warm and gently glowing phlogiston, skin as alive to its motion and currents as that of a fish is to the water of its home stream, contentedly following a thread of current that will take him somewhere he knows he would like to be.

Ibn Fadil is lost. He is in a city he does not know, walking down a street he feels he has been treading for days. Around him strange languages ring senselessly on his ears. He was looking for... something? someone? He wanders through street after street, occasionally accosted by people selling items whose names he does not know. An icy wind sweeps through the street. A man steps out in front of him, smiling, saying something as he points to himself, an introduction. When he opens his mouth to reply he finds that he has lost his own name as well.

Yestin can't sleep, wondering if his letter from Janik has reached his family yet. He cheers himself somewhat with the thought of adventure to come and knowledge of a solid crew to share it with. Eventually he rises from his bunk to move with surprisingly soft tread into the galley, where his candlelight and scratching pen will not disturb others from their sleep. He is having a very difficult time with the events from the *_Tear_*, and pauses for a distracted moment, wondering where that sad ship now drifts.

Val can't sleep either, wondering what the journey will bring, and wondering as well despite himself where *_she_* might be. How will they proceed on Rigol, assuming they can find the place? From the estimates he and the pilots were able to cobble together, it will be about a nine month journey (assuming the universe doesn't end, of course, as Alais expects). He certainly hadn't expected any of this when he jumped on board a ramshackle galleon a little more than a year ago....

* * *

Meanwhile, in a sphere far, far away.

"Do you know what I liked best about that job on Tanton?" Shane asks wistfully.

"The soul-searing boredom?" Fang guesses, glancing at him. They are standing on the *Audacity*'s top deck, looking aft.

"*Not* running for my life every few months!"

"They won't catch us." She points forward, away from the pursuing ship. "Look. An asteroid field..."

6 - In the Flow

Underway, having awakened from his dream, his one eye snapping open, Emmett quickly checks the sleeping form next to him, making sure that the ominous cessation wasn't triggered by some external event. Seeing that Inez is still safely breathing, the half man slides out of bed as quietly as he can, pulling on breeches and a shirt before heading for the door. He stops, pivots back and grabs his cutlass, chain shirt and scimitar.

In the hall and outside of Inez' immediate hearing he dons those as well, strapping the shorter blade to his hip and the longer one across his back. If memory serves, Alais should be at the helm, which means Pham should be in the pilot's chamber.

He knocks softly but insistently on the Brother's door. "Pham, you up?"

There is a sound of muttering from behind the door, then a rather dishevelled cleric opens it. "Wha..." Pham's sleepy eyes finally open as he focuses on the marine's face. "Emmett? What's the matter? Is my shift up already?"

"Nope. There's something else. Can I come in?" Emmett slips in through the open door and closes it behind him, and there's no way Pham can miss that the half man is armored and bristling with weapons. "You remember how you had that nasty fire dream on the way out to Janik, and we went through the whole ship looking for a potential problem? Well, I just had a nasty dream, and it's time to go through the whole ship. Given what I'm worried about, I'll need your help."

"Oh, I see. And to think I was glad not to be dreaming of the inferno again. Still, destruction is destruction. And now you have a disturbing dream as well?"

"Yeah. First it was just the usual 'get hit by a fireball at 1500 feet and plummet to your death' dream, but then it got quietly nasty, with a steady, calming heartbeat slowly giving up, with longer times between each beat before everything stopped."

"You worship Gond, correct? Tell me... was it the pulsing of a heart, or the ticking of a clockwork winding down?"

Emmett nods, looking surprised. "Yeah, it could be that. It hadn't occurred to me, but that could be it." He chews his upper lip thoughtfully before continuing, "However, dream analysis isn't what I need from you. Remember at the dedication party, where we got to talking about how ghouls can hide out on ships to jump from sphere to sphere? Well, I woke up and got to worrying about that. I didn't find any stowaways on the regular security sweep, but, well, ghouls ain't your regular stowaways.

"Maybe I'm being paranoid, but, they could have slipped on board, and I'd rather make sure they aren't rather than just assume. Could you outfit yourself for an undead search and give me a hand?"

They do so, and with scrupulous care, but there is no sign of undead, or of anything amiss at all aboard the ship. Whatever the dream's meaning, if it has one, that does not seem to be it.

* * *

Farley McFadden, oligarch for Seven Suns on Bral, universally acknowledged as a hard-working, decent family man with a refreshing streak of roguish humor, and secret smuggler of decidedly unholy items, breaths a sigh of relief as the search party disperses at long last. He'd been warned in time by that fatuous twit Volant's self-important meeting-holding, and while every priest on Bral it seemed had sniffed round his place--and everywhere else--he'd gotten everything that might have sent the righteous busybodies into a flutter well and truly hidden. Most of it was on consignment for his special customers in any case, and they will be on their way in a night or so now that the last of it was stowed. He wonders in passing what they planned to do with all of it.

He's also made some inquiries about the young man who'd nearly ruined things--Victor had done a good bit of work on the whole lot, it turned out, so he was good for something after all--and snorted in amusement. _Priest of Hextor; surprised he wasn't banging on the door to do some shopping._ He has a number of them on his customer list these days; the sect seems to be doing well. _All this 'end times' nonsense brings in money._

All in all, he has to pat himself on the back for bringing off a potentially sticky situation in high style. He's tightened things up enough there will be no need for further disappearances. The licit side of the business is going well, the illicit even better, and he'd been shocked to find out first how much money was to be made on Bral's shadow side and second how shoddily it was all being run.

Really, the only problem now is what to do with Victor. Eventually the spells his clients have laid on him are going to wear off. But then... he does some calculating. By then Victor's little problem might be resolved, which will with any luck satisfy him. A bigger problem is that he is an idiot, of course; that, McFadden is happy to leave him to suffer from.

* * *

The _Distraction_ is two weeks out from Bral, her crew well settled into the rhythms of shipboard life once more, when the alarm bell rings--Hiro is on watch at the moment, Brother Pham at the helm. On a rapid closing course with the ship is something that looks like nothing less than a forty-foot-long giant squid--a krajen--and the ship is forced to slow for maneuvering.

"Keep us clear of it. Evasive maneuvers," Val tells Pham, trying to appear calm. "Maybe we can slip under it... Any chance we can outrun it if we need to Brother Pham?" His mind races trying to remember everything he can think of about krajen and what to do about them. The _Distraction_ could be torn to splinters if they don't act quickly...

Pham immediately concentrates on getting as much speed out of the Distraction as possible. With little to dodge around out here, he puts a priority on speed. Using everything he has learned about this ship and about spelljamming over the course of the past year, he tries to coax more speed from the vessel, feels a slight surge then a hesitation as man and magic reach their limit.

"Captain, I'm making best speed. I can't see - are we gaining?"

They are, much to the relief of the crew. Alais rushes onto the deck with his wand out.

"Alais, Pham, what do either of you know about these things?" Val asks when he sees the wizard appear. He is hoping the urgency of the situation will keep Alais' response short and to the point.

Meanwhile, Emmett is busy setting and loading the ballista, getting it ready to fire before Val orders the shell dropped - no point in giving the beast any warning - and cursing the fact that the overlarge crossbow could not simply be kept loaded without damaging its tension.

Once prepared he yells out, "Ready to fire when the shell is dropped. I recommend we hit it as often as possible to warn it off." He's never faced a krajen before, but he hadn't heard of them being smarter than large animals - a few painful hits should direct it to find other food, he hoped.

Val is silently thankful that Emmett has already prepared the ballista and is standing ready. After a slight hesitation, he scrambles back to the turret himself to lower the shell, which simultaneously raises the weapon into position clear of the hull. "Ready when you are," he tells the half-man as he runs his fingers through his hair, an obvious nervous habit. At Emmett's nod, he begins to open the dome, as ibn Fadil and Nyala, who had been off-duty and asleep, arrive ready for anything.

Emmett starts to spin the turret as needed, taking aim on the krajen as soon as it's visible, but holding his fire until he hears advice from the wizards and the order from Val.

"Pham, you got any blessings you can lay on us before this thing gets too close?"

"A little busy here, Emmett - the helm's taking all I've got!"

"Fire!"

The bolt leaps away, only to be shunted harmlessly aside by the massive creature's thick hide. No matter; the *_Distraction_* is pulling away from the threat, leaving the krajen's tentacles waving angrily at the loss of even so small a meal.

A few days later they encounter another ship, the rastipede vessel *_Profit_*, inbound toward Bral. The two ships exchange news. Ibn Fadil notices a peculiar atmosphere about the vessel, suggesting that the journey has been made in a state of some tension, and suddenly recalls the rumor heard on Bral about the Arcane being difficult to find these days; rastipedes often work closely with the tall, blue-skinned people. Attempts to question them on this result in the rastipede suddenly forgetting how to speak Common with any clarity.

Ibn Fadil politely forgets he asked any such question, thus allowing the conversation to resume as if nothing had happened.

Val notes the change in tone and conversation after that, making note of it for future reference in his log. Curious... He also warns the rastipedes of their encounter with the krajen and the approximate area it happened, in case the beast is still lurking about.

Some weeks after that, as the *_Distraction_* prowls along the edge of the sphere looking for a portal into the Flow, the alarm sounds again, alerting the small ship to a far greater danger this time.

"Oh hell. I just got to sleep," Emmett mutters, dragging himself out of his bunk and pulling on not just his clothes but his armor and cutlass. Operating on a premonition, he grabs a javelin as well before clambering onto the weapons deck.

"Hammership aft, closing fast, captain," Yestin reports grimly, his gaze fixed out the rear port on the weapons deck. "Alais is on helm," he anticipates the next question. "I think it's the Magnus."

"The Magnus?" ibn Fadil asks in astonishment, having arrived on the scene in good time to hear this. He edges in to peer out the rear port too, obviously thinking hard as he tries to fit this in with everything else he knows.

Val sees the Zakharan's expression and his curiosity is piqued. "What is it?" he asks, trying to remember the significance. It takes him a moment before he recalls the name. "Oh damn," he says as realization dawns. Val looks at Yestin to see what the giff's reaction is. The broad, purplish-grey face is hard to read right now, his small eyes tight. "Okay everyone, stand ready in case this gets ugly!" Val says as he checks the gears and lines for trimming the sails and wings. "Yestin, man those cranks and lines, and be ready to do what Alais instructs," he orders the young giff. Best to keep that one out of sight for the moment, he thinks to himself.

"Oh, that's just great. How long have they been following us?" Emmett wonders aloud, setting up the ballista to fire on the ship who, judging from their history, is not here to share tea.

"Let's see what they want, shall we?" Val says as he readies a standard hail on the flags. He has a feeling things will start to move quickly once he runs the signal line, so he pauses to make sure everyone is ready...

Before Val s can start a hail, Alais turns the ship into the steepest 'dive' he can get. "If we're under them," he surmises "they can't use their weapons, and we're more maneuverable although I suspect they might be faster."

As Alais swings the Distraction down to try to get under the approaching ship, Emmett struggles with the ballista, and Valarin messes with the flags, ibn Fadil can be heard muttering angrily to himself in Zakharan as he tries to keep his eyes on the Magnus.

In response to Alais' maneuver, the pilot of the other ship puts into a slow roll, trying to get you back in their sights.

"Ah, to hell with this," Val mutters, casting the flags aside as he scrambles to give a hand to Yestin with the lines. The hammership's maneuvering answered the question of intent as far as he was concerned, and it wouldn't do to snap a mast while trying to evade the larger, heavily armed vessel.

"Alais, keep at it, they've changed course to follow!" he bellows. "Emmett? How're we doing up there?"

The ballista loaded and ready to go, the Half Man now stood ready to raise the read shield. "Give the order and I'll raise the shield and open fire. I think it's pretty obvious they mean to ram us. Alais," he yells out to the pilot, "The turret on this thing gives me a full arc of fire - as long as we're level or below them, I can find a shot!"

"The problem being that their midships catapult is also on a turret, and can do the same.

Do we want to run or fight? I'm going to need a decision fairly soon. I suggest running, myself.

With the right maneuvering I should be able to get us far enough away to jump back to spelljamming speed."

Alais straightens out the dive and banks in the direction the hammership is rolling, trying to get

their bottom above the smaller ship again.

Val looks sidelong at Yestin, trying to gauge what the young giff might be thinking about all of this. Decisions, decisions...

"Emmett!" Val hollers back while securing a line, "Can you disable the hammer from underneath? At least enough to buy Alais some time?"

"Disable? No. Give them something to think about? Yes. I'm raising the shield now!" Using the winch one handed, the half man quickly clears the ballista's field of fire, getting ready to take a shot as soon as one opens...

And it does, and he does. With the advantage of a much larger and slightly slower target, the bolt thumps into the hammership's hull.

A dozen more hits like that, and they'll be getting somewhere. The Magnus' return fire flies off harmlessly into space as the battle continues; Emmett and the others can see motion on the bigger ship as it corkscrews after them.

"Val, I just can't hit them hard enough to quickly disable. I think they're going to try and board us!" Emmett yells as he preps the ballista for another shot. "Pham, I got a tricky shot ahead. Can you help send them a message?"

Pham nods at Emmett, and invokes Hextor's blessing on the crew of the Distraction. He then moves amidships. He can't really help with the ballista, so he positions himself to move as quickly as possible to tend to the wounded if needed.

Ibn Fadil, who has been busy staying out of the way of the people with real 'seamanship' skills, makes his way over to the winch and stands ready to close the shell again if (when) it becomes necessary. He very much hopes that it won't come to boarding, since the Magnus's crew undoubtedly outnumbers them considerably.

"I suppose the best thing would be to make sure they don't board us," Val mutters to nobody in particular. "Emmett," he calls over his shoulder, "Can you take out their ballista?" If only there was a way to disable the hammership. Or to use up their breathable air...

An idea starts to take shape in the back of Val's mind. An old sailor that taught him the ropes of sailing on a spelljammer once told him that the envelope of air around a ship is all she's got; that's why they carry plants to replenish the fresh air. But if all the air were to be used up, or **burned** up, the crew would be in danger.

"Emmett! Fire!" he yells back again.

The Half-man does so, the twang of the giant string echoing chromically across the Distraction's weapons deck. It's a good shot, scattering giff like tenpins; though at this distance it's hard to tell how much actual damage was done, it has gained the Distraction time while their pursuers regroup around the main weapon.

"Not **that** kind of fire," Val hollers as he scrambles over to the turret. "**Fire** fire. What do we have that can burn their air out?"

Rum! Of course... Now, how to get it over to the hammer and make it ignite. Val thinks for a moments and calls for someone to grab a keg of rum from the hold and for Nyala to bring her bow. As Val explains, the elf's pale eyebrows twitch upwards, suggesting incredulity, but she stands ready to do her part, one hand caressing the smooth wood of her weapon for a moment before she takes her position.

Ibn Fadil is similarly not moved to optimism by this idea, but he does vanish in the direction of the hold and shortly return with a small cask of rum.

Aboard the *_Magnus_*, Gustan's trained and disciplined crew bustles about in a flurry of barked orders, seeing to those who were wounded in the latest exchange of ballista fire. The catapults are impossible to aim with any accuracy in this kind of twisting chase, so those crew are prepared to act as a boarding party. They are, as always, prepared to carry out their orders: take as many as possible alive.

On the bridge, Gustan watches the little damselfly run, keeping one eye on his own pilot the meanwhile. The humans had not been part of Fang's scheme, and although they had gone along with the ship's flight out of pragmatic regard for their own skins, he had never been quite sure what they were thinking, fuming against the accident of fate that left his own people unable to operate any magical device reliably and forced them to depend on other species.

Now he leans forward as if he can thus compel more speed out of the hammership. *_It appears that young Alais is not a bad wizard, for a crackpot._* He notes another flurry of activity on their deck and squints his tiny eyes, wondering what they're up to.

Meanwhile Hiro moves calmly and serenely but with a speed to the cargo hatch. Along with the opening of the weapons deck it is the most likely approach to boarding the *_Distraction_* that the malevolent minions of the *_Magnus_* would take. His departure signals to both Yestin and Emmett that they should be ready to bring the hull back into defensive position over the exposed deck.

Back in the hold, he studies the configuration for a moment, then arranges some crates to block the path of any invaders. Some oil and caltrops on the floor complete the welcome.

Meanwhile, Alais continues to press the ship to its limits in its desperate flight.

On the weapons deck, ibn Fadil returns with the cask and steadies it on the aft edge while Nyala prepares her arrow.

"Now!"

The physics of wildspace are a strange thing. Rum from the open cask slides down the smooth hull, reaches the ship's gravity plane and streams along it until it reaches the edge of the air envelope and freedom, after which it spreads uncertainly, hanging in threads and globs. At Val's order Alais turns the ship once again, diving sharply to put this frail curtain between the *_Distraction_* and her pursuit. Steady-handed, Nyala watches the hammership's progress before losing her shaft. The curtain becomes a veil of flame just as the hammership dives through it.

Its passage is too swift for the heavy wood of the vessel to catch fire itself, but from the *_Distraction_'s* deck ibn Fadil and the others can see quite a few badly singed giff running about. Unfortunately the pursuing pilot is not inconvenienced, but the *_Magnus_'s* greater size is beginning to tell, losing a small bit of distance as the chase goes on.

"Excellent shot, Nyala!" Val is quite pleased it went as well as it did.

"We have three more casks," ibn Fadil observes.

"It'll only work so many times before they get wise," Val observes, "but it's worth at least *one* more try to suck up some more of their air. Another round, bartender."

The _Distraction_ shudders at the impact of a bolt as the bigger ship's crew sorts itself out after the latest attack, but it does not penetrate.

"Yestin? Where's the helmsman sit on one of these buggers?" Emmett yells out as he loads another round into the ballista.

"Forward lower deck," the giff replies, lending a hand. "Though if they still have a full crew they have a backup helm as well." He sounds very calm.

"So much for that. I suppose I should have counted on decent engineering. OK, another shot at their weapons." Emmett takes careful aim, focusing more on their equipment than the men. He has no idea how many Giff there are on that ship, but he can count the armament, and that's his current problem. All the while, he's thinking about designing a shield wall over the front of a catapult to prevent exactly what he's doing and take the best advantage of the weapon's indirect fire.... More giff tenpin ensues, though it's difficult to tell how badly the ship itself might be damaged.

"Captain, we can harass them all day, but we don't want to get boarded and we can get away. Let's clear some distance and get out of the sphere."

"Sounds like a plan to me!" Val agrees. "Let's just keep 'em busy while Alais looks for a way through." He relays the order to Alais as he waits for another barrel of rum to be brought up.

Ibn Fadil ducks below once more to get the rum. On the way down, he stops by his cabin to grab the extra knives he bought on Bral. In the hold, he informs Hiro, "We seem to be a bit faster than they are." Otherwise he returns to the deck as quickly as he can.

Alais goes full speed away, hoping to hit spelljamming speed. "My, that was exhilarating."

It becomes more so. The second "brandy bomb" goes off without a hitch, but the giff are better prepared for it this time, and it causes less consternation in their ranks. The gap between the ships grows too slowly; soon the damselfly absorbs another shuddering blow, this one with a far more worrisome component - the rattle of chain transmitted through the hull plating. Despite Alais' efforts, the ship slows, then stops. The _Distraction_ has been grappled. A few moments later, Hiro can hear the sound of people working at the cargo door's locks, and those on the weapon deck have an excellent view down onto the upper deck of the _Magnus_, where it certainly looks like they're about to be boarded, by a dozen or so armored giff.

Nyala snaps off a shot at one of the attackers, the arrow piercing his leg, before a volley of crossbow fire forces her to take cover, blue eyes smoldering.

"Cargo hatch," ibn Fadil mutters, and bolts for the hold. Inspired by Valarin's creativity, he hastily roots in the stuff piled near the base of the ladder and produces another small cask. When he pops it open in front of the cargo doors, it proves to contain cooking oil. He grins wickedly at Hiro and then fades back to lurk in the shadows among the cargo -- looking for something else, and waiting for the first invader to happen to turn his back to him.

"Yestin! See what you can do about that grapple!" Val yells as his mind races. "Alais! Stand by to get us out of here! Everyone else, prepare to repel boarders!"

Yestin, who being a giff tends to a literal turn of mind, ponders for a moment, then climbs over the edge of the weapon deck and drops down to one of the ship's legs, where he can get at the

bolt and chain. He does not appear concerned about being thus exposed to the crossbows of a half dozen of his former comrades, even as one grazes him. Balancing gingerly, he uses his sword to hack at the dart holding the damselfly captive.

Nyala sends a shaft into a second of the attackers.

Val mutters a string of invective in several languages as he scrambles aft. Knowing it will be better for close-quarter fighting, he draws his short sword as he slips into the hold. Val takes note of Hiro's surprises before melting into the shadows on cat's feet...

The lock on the hold gives way, and the door crashes in. There are six giff there, lightly armored and carrying swords, and they come in a rush, determined to overwhelm any defenders. There is a brief, wobbly moment as they encounter the oil and caltrops and see only a lone human with a sword waiting.

Above, Emmett calmly loads another bolt in the ballista before taking careful aim at the point where the boarding chain exits the Magnus. "One or two good hits might break their winch and free up the chain. If nothing else, the shock will give the boarders something to think about..."

"Forget the deserter, get that damn elf!" one of them yells as an arrow sinks into a giffish eye.

They change their aim, but their accuracy does not improve. Nyala hisses as a bolt creases her side, but does not appear significantly wounded.

Emmett lets the ballista loose; he can't exactly miss, lashed together as the ships are, but the blow is not powerful enough to free the Distraction.

Out of his several options, ibn Fadil chooses to throw one of his new knives at whichever frontmost giff looks least well-balanced. It strikes a chink in the giff's armor, eliciting a gruff sound of both surprise and pain.

Pham moves towards the hold, ready to block the exit if the giff get past his comrades below. He also starts praying under his breath.

Val, too, moves into position to attack one of the intruders, trying to remain unnoticed while doing so. The giff he has targeted moves unexpectedly; his blade turns harmlessly on the giff's armored back, and it whirls to face him.

Hiro draws his sword and becomes his usual blur of motion, dealing a deep wound to the first giff to enter the hold, although the second raises his own sword in time. The giff seem to be setting themselves for a charge toward the ladder, no doubt in hopes of taking the bridge. Once the damselfly is secure from flight, there will be plenty of time to deal with the crew.

Meanwhile, above: "Oh, bugger. This'll take too long." Emmett hops up from the ballista, lashes a tied-off line around his hook while measuring distances and dives overboard. He lands on the leg next to Yestin, loses his balance, and if not for the rope would have been lost. Yestin does a little bobble himself at the unexpected arrival and grabs onto the chain he's been trying to loosen. With their combined strength working at it, the chain seems to give slightly. One more good heave might be all it takes.....

"Humans." Nyala shakes her head and takes a glance over the edge of the battle deck, picks off another giff. She's a little too slow in ducking this time, however. Three quarrels hit home.

Knowing he's no match for an angry giff in a fair fight, Val's mind races for a way to make the fight unfair in his own favor. Switching the sword to his off hand, Val quickly draws a dagger, hurls it at the invader's face and readies himself to move quickly.

The giff ducks, the knife spins off into the darkness, and the big mercenary's sword shatters a barrel; a cloud of flour fills the air chokingly.

Ibn Fadil moves forward carefully but quickly, climbs up the back side of a convenient stack of crates and (now at giff eye level) targets the nearest invader for his handful of discomfort. He has recognized several of them by now--Lev, Matvey, Yerik. Lev now receives a faceful of pepper and bends over, coughing, tiny eyes streaming with tears.

"Never did like you," the knife-wounded Yerik grunts, but his blade bites air as the half-elf moves adroitly out of the way.

Observing his companions' actions, Hiro springs lightly to a better vantage, finely-crafted blade held high as he prepares to bring down the "pear-splitter" upon another of the enemy, but this giff catches the blow on his shield and stands firm, and his comrade actually manages to reach the kensai with his own blade.

The fight is taking place in a long, narrow corridor between stack of supplies. The boarders are disposed as follows: Two at the inner end of the fight, facing Hiro. The one he wounded has fallen back behind this action. Then Val and his opponent, then the one who got the pepper, then the one facing ibn Fadil, closest to the door.

Pham looks into the hold from the top of the latter on the second deck. He waits patiently at the top - hoping his friends below can hold off the boarders. Hiro is still blocking their path of advancement, but he is now wounded....

Meanwhile, outside: "Yestin, on three and let's get this thing off of us. Ready? One... Two... THREE!" The Half-Man's muscles strain as he pulls with every iota of his god-given strength to get the grapple off the _Distraction_ so they can make their escape.

They heave in concert. The chain goes slack; Yestin loses his balance and would have fallen off did Emmett not grab hasty hold, and the two scramble back up the rope to the relative safety of the deck while the giff on the _Magnus_ reload feverishly.

Sensing that the ship is no longer bound, Alais bends his attention to the helm, moving them away from the hammership at best possible speed--which feels agonizingly slow--feeling himself becoming one with the ship to a degree only rarely felt before. It's obvious when they've reached the limits of the _Magnus_' influence on local space; the bigger ship, slower to accelerate as its prey flees, falls behind so quickly that it seems to vanish.

The _Distraction_'s crew is not yet free from danger, however; once she gets moving again, her pursuit might yet catch them up. And there are still six giff in the cargo hold, with nowhere to retreat.

"And I try so hard to be likeable," ibn Fadil says sadly, snatching up his sword from the crate behind him and aiming a vicious slash at Yerik. Even as he does so, he feels the change as the ship suddenly begins to pull away from the _Magnus_. Perhaps we will get out of this after all, he thinks with some surprise, although Yerik ducks aside with surprising agility for something his size and returns the thrust, connecting lightly. He, too, can feel the ship moving, and there is no disguising the expression of alarm that crosses his broad, tattooed face.

Hiro drops his arms into a low sweeping stance. His nostrils flare, his mouth and eyes open wide, an almost animalistic display of rage seemingly boiling across his face. Howling orangutan's terrible technique is a form his shipmates have yet to see the Saint of Steel use and some are as

surprised as the marauding man-hippo. In the moment the giff is thrown by the oddness of it Hiro quickly raises the sword and strikes the creature dead in one blow.

Val wipes flour from his face to clear his vision attempts to plunge his shortsword into the invader, but misses, taking a wound of his own.

Emmett steps into the cargo door, rapping the hilt of his cutlass on the wall. "Gentlemen! That dropping sensation in your stomach is the acceleration as we pull away from your ship. It's also a reminder from your guts that you've lost. You're outnumbered, cut off, and unless you surrender, soon to be dead."

"If you do surrender, we'll drop you off with a big enough air envelope to be picked up by your ship as it lumbers after us. If you don't, well, at the top of the stairs is a Hextorian priest who we like to keep away from fights, so his image in neutral ports stays intact. I really don't want to have him come down here, because blood is a bitch to clean off of the hold's ceiling." He glances at the giff. "Take a minute to think about it. After all, you're not going anywhere."

They are clearly thinking about it. One of their number is dead, another badly wounded, but the defenders have taken damage as well. They are keenly aware of being outnumbered.

"The odds do seem to be in your favor," the nearest giff admits grudgingly.

Ibn Fadil tries to help their thought processes along by pulling another knife (in addition to the sword still in his right hand) and looking at each of them as a potential target for it.

"If you'll sheath your weapons, Ibn Fadil will grab you a long spar and a length of netting. That, combined with your own mass, will give you a large enough envelope to survive till pickup. You leave now, we let this end peaceably." Emmett glances down at the corpse of the dead giff. "Better to see another battle, I'd think."

"I'm sure we shall," the spokesgiff agrees grimly.

Emmett has stepped into the hold at this point, his back to the wall, leaving a clear path for the giff to get out. "At this rate we'll be at the gate soon, and your odds in the phlogiston are much worse. If you're going to leave, sheath your weapons now."

They do so.

As the giff line up to leave, ibn Fadil inquires of the leader, without mockery, "So how does the pirate's life suit you? Overall, I mean."

He may have meant it without mockery, but it is received with flattened ears and no audible reply.

A few minutes later, the raft of giff has dwindled to invisibility in the distance behind the damselfly as the *_Distraction_* races along the shell toward the glimmer of the portal and the relative safety of the Flow. There is no time yet to rest or tend properly to wounds, though Val and Pham conduct the vital check to make sure all open flames are extinguished before their passage, leaving ibn Fadil to fuss over Nyala. Yestin keeps watch astern, somewhat disappointed that he did not get an opportunity to battle any of his former shipmates directly.

The pearly light of the phlogiston surrounds them; the Flow catches the ship's sails and bears them away from Bral's sphere, toward new adventures.

Emmett lets out a loud Whoop of joy, snatches up Inez and twirls her. "Waaaaa-Hoooooo!" Afterwards, his face buried in her hair, still caught in the adrenaline surge of an unalloyed victory of chutzpah, he murmurs, "I just love being alive. It's so damn much fun."

* * *

Gustan merely grunts when the leader of the boarding party finishes giving his report. After giving orders for their return to Bralspace, he retires to his cabin to brood. _I'm going to snap that Farley's neck. A few more details might have helped. Hextorians again, too._ As she lurked and preyed about the space near Bral, the _Magnus_ had heard rumors; though the flow of news was necessarily uneven, it is clear to him that things are moving across the spheres.

* * *

Emmett, his leatherwork finally complete, borrows several sheets of smudged, scratched out and otherwise abandoned of Giffish poetry. With the weapons shield raised and the opalescent phlogiston as a backdrop, he starts tossing out quarter sheets of paper and endeavoring, with some success, to cut them in half with his bullwhip before they float away.

Emmett also spends a sizable amount of his off time in his chambers, looking over the griffin egg salvaged from the 'booger' on Maija's Tear. "It seems like you aren't going to hatch on your own, my friend. So what's keeping you cooped up in there?"

The half man makes a thorough examination of the egg, calling to mind his own not-inconsiderable experience with these creatures and their life-cycle. There's nothing obviously abnormal about it. But given how long he's had the thing, and with no way of knowing how long it was in Blade's possession, a normal egg should be either hatched or dead. Hefting it thoughtfully, it doesn't **feel** dead, but he's not sure what it does feel like. That brings to mind Alais' judgment that some sort of spell is involved....

About a week into the Flow, with a definite air of having nerved himself up to this, ibn Fadil asks Hiro if he would be willing to spar with him.

Hiro's smile acknowledges ibn Fadil's chutzpah. It may even contain a hint of pride as well. He pulls two bokken from the wall of his cabin. "Follow me."

A bit nervously, the half-elf does so; he is already carrying his sword - and less obviously, his knives.

Hiro leads the Zakharan to where the kensai trains daily. The light from the Flow is pleasantly distracting. Hiro hands one of the wooden swords to the thief....

... who hefts it experimentally, first in one hand and then the other, while unobtrusively contemplating the utilities of the deck-space around them. When he feels comfortable with it, he looks expectantly at Hiro.

Who looks back at him; always, it's next to impossible to tell what is going on behind those dark eyes.

Ibn Fadil tries an experimental thrust, just to get the feel of the weapon; Hiro sort of leans aside and it doesn't come anywhere near him; a moment later the bokken is twisted out of his hand and hits the wooden floor with a clatter. The kensai gives him a moment to recover his weapon.

The half-elf's second attempt comes much closer; Hiro actually has to parry it. Small solace as the wooden blade gives him a solid thump on the side. After a couple more of these exchanges ibn Fadil manages to connect--and Hiro misses! The two fence a couple more passes, neither touching the other, before both connect bruisingly.

After a few minutes of this, ibn Fadil is moving more freely than at first (despite newly acquired bruises). Hiro can tell that it has certainly been some time since he did any training, yet not so long that his body has forgotten how. He is not up to Hiro's standards, of course, but he is probably not completely hopeless.

Then the Zakharan signals for a pause. "Now," he says seriously, "what I would like to do is try devoting all my efforts to keeping you from reaching me, while you try your best to do so." He smiles a bit. "Just try not to break anything, please; that could prove inconvenient."

What ensues bears little resemblance to a normal swordsman's bout. The half-elf jumps, twists, and even tumbles across the floor as if having his feet planted on it is quite unimportant, and uses not only the bokken but a variety of loose objects that he picks up and sometimes throws in attempts to unbalance the attacker. The result is unpredictable and frequently effective -- though far from completely. Ibn Fadil does not call another halt until he is out of breath and gets another solid thwack across his shoulder.

"Enough!" he says, grinning and rubbing the soon-to-be-bruised spot. He is sitting on the floor, looking up at Hiro. "Very helpful," he goes on. "I should do that more often than every six years or so."

"Interesting. In my homeland such a fighting style is typically employed by spies and assassins."

"Really?" the half-elf says easily. "I simply do not care for staying in one place while larger, heavier opponents come after me." He gets up and wincingly stretches a few sore muscles. "Also, I had an opportunity to learn acrobatics from a professional. Adapting that to fighting is not easy, but I consider it worthwhile."

Hiro nods. "Impressive."

"Oh, it is more a frame of mind than anything else. An acrobatic performance is always timed and practiced to perfection. Learning to improvise with the same skills was the hard part. Ouch," he adds. "I should have remembered I would get no hot bath out here."

"Perhaps Brother Pham has a balm...?"

"I can hope. Of course, my aggravating aunt used to insist that the best treatment is more of the same."

"Aunt?" Hiro lifts the sword again and motions with his hand for ibn Fadil to begin anew.

"My father's sister," he says, raising his own wooden blade and finding his balance. "One day she decided I should learn to ride 'properly,' and that was the end of a lot of my free time." Several nimble dodges later, he adds, "I was clumsy in my teens, but elves are nothing if not patient."

"And how many moons have passed for you since then," Hiro asks as he surprises ibn Fadil with a feint and a snap kick.

The Zakharan suspects he will have a footprint on his ribs after that, and takes a moment to catch his breath. "Which moons?" he asks humorously. "I count it as twenty-seven years, more or less. And about twenty since I left. How long have you been out among the spheres, yourself?"

"Not long enough. Kara-tur still haunts my dreams. Or perhaps too long, since I still draw breath."

"I miss home too," ibn Fadil sighs. "I think it about it more and more, of late." He ducks hastily. "That may have something to do with getting myself into *this*!"

"I think you misunderstand. I do not wish to ever see my homeland again."

Hiro's subtly dire tone causes ibn Fadil to pause. Then he recalls Hiro's mad eyes and dangerous charges in battle. Does he have a death-wish?

"Oh," he says. "What --" gets out before his common sense manages to pin his curiosity. "I am sorry." Whether he is sorry for bringing it up or for whatever happened is not clear even to him.

Meanwhile, having reluctantly realized that he can make no further headway with the egg on his own, Emmett approaches Alais to take a look at it.

"Of course," the young wizard nods upon hearing his explanation. Under Emmett's anxious eye, he then conducts a battery of tests on the egg. He weighs it, listens to it, taps it gently with what looks like a hammer made of amber, looks at the shell through a variety of lenses. Detect magic once again reveals a strong aura; continuing to study it with unwavering concentration, for such a length of time that Emmett is getting very nervous, at last he looks up and says, "I do believe that this egg has been placed under a spell that suspends the effects of time's passage. Why anyone would wish to do so is of course a considerable mystery in itself."

After months of quiet travel, the *_Distraction_* changes heading to follow a narrow band of Flow that will, if their information is correct, lead them to Rigol's sphere. It is slow and disheartening going for a long time, enough to explain why few venture in this direction.

At long last and thanks to Alais' navigational abilities the *_Distraction_* reaches her destination--or so the crew hopes. There is a sphere roughly where they hoped to find it, at any rate. Of the *_Magnus_* or other pursuit there has been no sign; the phlogiston is now eerily empty of life.

Passing through the crystal shell, they find an ordinary-looking sphere, peppered within by brilliant stars that cling to the inner shell. Almost lost in the immense distances is the system's sun.

The first world they reach is flat, a vast variegated disk tumbling slowly through space -- too far out to be Rigol, but an encouraging sign, since Ginevra's homeworld is also flat, though it is supposed to lie farther in-system.

Emmett looks down at the flat world with some interest, but turns to Val and says, "Captain, I think we should press on for Rigol. If Victor's people have been coming through here, they've likely mapped the sphere already, and we have a two in three chance of getting that map when we reach our destination. I don't want to duplicate effort..."

Alais disagrees. "While the ruffian may have put together some bare degree of rutter, I would be altogether shocked if the work had met even the barest standards of science or scholarship. Surely we have a duty to start the task of mapping according to the highest intersphere cartographic standards."

No one else seems to be any particular opinion on the matter. Emmett allows himself to be persuaded by Alais' argument, and adds the suggestion that the crew set down and look around on each of them; you never know what you might find. As this is in line with Val's own inclinations, so the *_Distraction_* prepares to do just that.

Spending only several days per world, they will not be able to do more than make a brief survey of the system. The next two worlds they find are not suitable for human life - a burning sphere like a second, smaller sun; a vast airless rock.

The world nearest the sun is a water planet; the *_Distraction_* cannot land there, and scouting under the waves will require considerable preparation. Next out lies a thin disk of dying fire thousands of miles in diameter, turning slowly like a huge and darkly glowing eye that now looks ahead, now behind. The third is one of the most impressive things any of them have seen in space; an airy world or series of worlds that circles the star like a strand of perfect pearls, echoed on its outer orbit by icy rings.

The next out is rather startlingly a cube, and as the ship passes over it the surface of the many islands that dot its surface appear densely jungled; if there is civilization there, it is hidden beyond their quick survey's ability to detect. Then a simple sphere of air like Bral's Haven, and then another flat planet: Rigol.

Alais is clearly excited about their findings, and wants to spend considerable time on each world. "There are tests to be done! We must enter all possible atmospheres so I can cast Spectrometer and record the readings! Natives must be contacted, or at least sighted! Major features drawn! For science!"

Needless to say perhaps, most of the others are not quite as enthused; only Yestin appears to approach the wizard's keen pleasure at the advent of the unknown. Val concedes that there should be **some** detail in the mapping, but not at the cost of depleting supplies and/or the patience of the crew. He is somewhat listless while the surveying takes place, but he does his fair share of exploring and mapping as well. Val charges Yestin with drawing up a duty roster to split exploration duty to help things along, which the giff does with good cheer.

Skimming the surface of the water world, with off-duty crew crowding the bridge to watch the light sparkle on the waves and occasionally venturing onto the opened to deck to enjoy the air, much as Val may miss the ships of his home it is difficult not to feel at least a little caught up in the thrill of a new place. For all anyone in the crew knows, they are the first spelljammers to visit this place. Curious dolphins follow the ship's shadow on the water, and vast schools of fish shimmer like abandoned silver hoards.

After several hours of searching, everyone is somewhat startled to see the horizon broken--there is a solid component to the place, after all, a series of tall spires of some dark rock thrusting up toward the sky, with a pebbled shelf of beach sloping down to the water all around. The tops of the spires are solid with bird nests, some variety of albatross, which can spend nearly all its life on the wing. They're rather shockingly noisy after the predictable, quiet months aboard ship, and show absolutely no fear of either the ship or its crew.

Though the ground is rough, there is enough room to set the ship down amid the spires. The water is quite cold, and quickly grows deep when Yestin ventures into it. Alais casts his spells on a sample and finds that it is not very salty compared to the seas most of them know, though he advises them not to drink it just the same. The spires are perhaps volcanic, remnant of some ancient convulsion of the world's deep-buried core. Bones of fish and birds and something that might be a kind of seal litter the beach, but there is no sign of anything very large in the vicinity. There is also no driftwood at all, but large desiccated humps of seaweed at the high tide line.

The crew is happy to seize the change for a meal of fresh fish--Nyala does not think it sporting to kill birds at their nesting ground--and a night of real rest with only a brief turn on watch. Just before sundown the birds fall quiet. The remains of the cooking fire die rapidly, leaving only the stars, as this place has no moon.

Shortly after sundown, the world starts to sing.

Or at least, that is the first thought to run through many minds, as the sound seems to be coming from all around them, an eerily beautiful chorus of human-seeming voices. At times clearly wordless, at times the song hovers tantalizing on the edge of understanding. Wound around it is a decidedly inhuman but harmonious series of whistles, groans, and less identifiable sounds. The spires all around them ring with whalesong and mer voices, the sound carried up from the deeps by the stones.

“So much for getting any sleep,” Emmett grumbles, but no one suggests they leave. Inez puts her hand in his. There is no compulsion in the song, nor even it seems any awareness of the visitors, only beauty that partakes equally of joy and sadness.

Continuing their survey the following day, the *_Distraction_*’s crew finds more vast stretches of ocean broken at wide intervals by small, abrupt scatterings of islands so far apart that to map them is nigh-impossible, having no points of reference. From the continued lack of wood or any creatures that look primarily ground-based, it seems likely that there are no large land masses anywhere, discounting the polar ice. They fly for hours over an immense sargasso where hordes of birds and other small things have made a home in the floating wrack, while in the distance a storm darkens the horizon.

Later, “What’s that?” Nyala wonders, pointing over the side at a lighter green, barely visible shape either on or just under the water. It seems to be getting bigger.

“More kelp?” ibn Fadil guesses with a shrug. He’s a bit distracted by how beautiful she is under real light, with the wind in her hair.

“It’s moving.” A few moments later they have their answer as far below the sun glints from silver tracings and gold spines and what is quite undoubtedly a large dragon turtle surfaces. At this distance, it is possible to appreciate its beauty--and to be grateful that they are not in a surface vessel.

Knowing now that this world is inhabited by at least two intelligent forms of life, and having some idea of its landscape and creatures, the ship moves on.

Passing the dark ember of the flat fire world--Inez dubs it Sleepy--the *_Distraction_* moves on to the next orbit. Thoroughly exploring a world that almost completely circles the sun would of course take years, and mapping is quite difficult where there is no ground; the damselfly vessel must content herself with a brief look about while passing through. Everything seems massive in scale; they see towering cloud formations, tangles of floating plant life the size of a city, wandering mountains, vast pieces of ice that may have floated in from the world’s rings or be on their way out to join them through some unknown process. Given the size of everything they’ve seen up to that point, Val orders caution when some flying creatures are sighted in the distance, and they are never near enough to identify.

There is no night on this world. Passing at last beyond the outer edge of the atmosphere, the rings glitter, far brighter than the distant stars.

Next stop is the jungled world, where Alais can map to his heart’s content, as this place at last has decent land masses. It is also **very** warm and stickily humid, and there are insects. Lots of them. Also other animal life, it is quite clear from the variety of cries echoing through the sticky air. All in all it’s quite a change from anything the crew has seen recently, or for that matter anything they’ve seen at all except for Pham, who is reminded of home. It is hard to tell if they are flying over a river delta or a hundred tiny islands separated by narrow channels, but at last the ground seems to grow more solid, a heavy green carpet half-shrouded by mist as the day wears on. In the

afternoon it begins to rain, not terribly hard but steady, as if to say that it means to keep at it as long as it can. Following the course of a river inland, the ground begins to rise slowly and eventually snow-capped peaks of staggering height appear in the distance. They are approaching one of the corners of the world, still many long hours if not days of travel away, but so large as to dominate regardless.

In the end they spend several days on this world, mapping the continents to a rough extent and finding that the lands on the pole sides are drier, almost steppe-like, but there is no ice. Many kinds of folk could certainly live in this place, and there are hints here and there that some do--breaks in the jungle that do not look entirely natural, tracks across the steppe that may have been laid by travelers.

The Distraction is at this point already becoming rather cluttered with weeds, leaves, nuts, shells, fruits, bones, butterflies, and rocks gathered as souvenirs or samples by the intrepid crew. Yestin's paper supply is raided for notes, sketches, and maps. Nyala adopts a small lizard after observing its appetite for insects; some pest control might be useful once they get back into space. Emmett finds himself adopted by a bright red bird that seems irresistibly attracted to all the metal gear about his person. Every time he turns around he finds it perched on his shoulder, sidling down his arm toward the hook with a gleam in its beady little eyes and a sort of cooing croon in its throat. Having stowed away for their departure, it adapts to shipboard life in a matter of hours.

Emmett names the red parrot Cog. It seems fairly bright, and within a few days seems content to spend most of its time perched on his left shoulder, being fed the occasional treat. Ibn Fadil solemnly presents Emmett with a bucket and some cleaning rags, for use in cleaning up after his pet.

With the disk of Rigol looming still out of sight but not out of mind, one day ibn Fadil leaves off wiping down the galley table and curiously asks Valarin, "So, what is the plan, Captain?"

"Plan?" Val looks over at the half-elf, snapped out of his reverie. "I suppose the plan is to make contact with those sympathetic to our position and work out some sort of agreement," he says after a moment's thought running his fingers through his hair. "It would be nice to see if we could contact Ginevra's family directly, but I'm not sure that could be done so easily. Or safely."

Val pauses to pick up a rag and starts wiping down the galley where ibn Fadil left off. It isn't really uncommon for him to do such a thing, as ship duties belong to everyone aboard. "We've got to be careful," he says after a bit. "There might be some of the Victor's people here, either by chance or design, and they might be looking for us. There could be trouble. It might be best to even slip in as unnoticed as possible until we can sort things out first..." A ghost of a smile flickers across his face.

"Any ideas of your own?" he asks after another thoughtful pause.

"What do you mean by 'those sympathetic to our position'?" the Zakharan says carefully.

"As Circio, my mentor once told me," Val explains, somewhat lost in thought, "An enemy of my enemy does not make them a friend, but it *does* make them a potential client." A wry grin twists the corner of his mouth.

"And that's not to mention there may be some sympathetic to the Victor," he adds after a pause to think things through. "A friend of my enemy doesn't necessarily make them an enemy either, but you should always watch your back just in case."

Ibn Fadil smiles a little to hear these familiar adages from such a different source. "I thought," he objects more carefully still, "we were coming here to offer the Rigolense another market for whatever Victor & Sons considers so valuable. You make it sound like we are diving into some sort of a war already in progress."

"All business is war; the markets are our battlefields," Val responds absently, quoting Circhio once again. "We're just providing...alternatives to them," he says, a little more cheerfully.

"But we are bringing our own problems-- *my* own problems with us. It'd be nice to think they don't matter in this, but I'm afraid they do..." Even to his own ears, Val sounds weary.

Relieved to learn that Valarin was only speaking figuratively (and leaving aside his own quibbles with that hoary metaphor), ibn Fadil hopes that his next remarks will not start another argument. "How so? There is no need for them to know of our involvement with the lady's, umm, departure from Bral or escape from the Victor. This is not even the same ship that was involved in that." He pauses to see how Valarin is taking this.

The young captain stares off, appearing almost inattentive. In truth, he has already thought of these things, and is somewhat comforted by ibn Fadil's words.

"I think," he goes on, "we should admit to knowing of her departure, as it was the talk of Bral for some time and pretending ignorance would be suspicious. But we do not have to tell them anything else, and I believe we certainly should not."

"Good point. If they do not already know we are involved, *I* will not hastily bring it up," Val remarks with a flicker of amusement. "Thank you," he adds, gripping the Zakharan's shoulder meaningfully.

"How goes your training with Hiro?" Val changes the subject, as if picking up on a conversation that was left off. He listens attentively to the half-elf, and in fact is very interested in learning more swordplay himself, but any attempts to get back to the previous subject seem to get brushed aside for now...

"I think I am getting better," ibn Fadil says agreeably. "But then he is, too, I think, which makes it hard to tell for certain."

The intervening air world being clearly and thoroughly dull, Rigol lies ahead.

Over the past several months while the *_Distraction_* was in the Flow, Val has been growing steadily more quiet. He practiced dutifully with the shortsword, remembering the wound he received at the hands of the boarding giff. He has practiced other skills as well, brushing up on his lock-picking and whatnot as often as he can. The exploring has given him a chance to stretch his legs a little, even though he feels more at home on the damselfly. It seems the closer they get to Rigol, the more silent he has become.

Now it is finally in sight.

Memories of the journey to Janik have weighed heavily on his mind, and he looks now at the disk of Rigol. This is where Ginevra came from. This is where the Victor has a hold over her family. This is where he could do something more for her... A smile slowly spreads across his face.

With an unusual cheerfulness, he sets about preparing the ship for landing. His sudden change in mood a mask, he throws himself into his work. The devil-may-care Valarin has returned as he climbs rigging to secure lines and ventures about the ship bow to stern to inspect everything. Anything to take his mind off the task ahead....

The planet lies below, three continents whose main features appear to consist of mountains and ice. It is winter on this world. In scattered places they can discern the patterns typical of cities, mostly on the shores where rivers twist down out of the higher lands.

Val gathers the crew to discuss landfall and their plans. He takes a deep breath and runs his fingers through his hair, belying the facade of calm and collectiveness he has in place.

"Okay everybody," he addresses his friends once they have all gathered, "we need to talk about Rigol and how we want to approach things." He takes a moment to gauge reactions and chooses his next words carefully.

"We know very little of Rigol and its cities," he continues. "What I do know was told to me by Ginevra, and the rest has been gathered by Alais and Brother Pham. I'd like to think we could just walk in and be accepted without a problem, but that'd be wishful thinking. I think a little bit of caution should be used still." He has not forgotten the conversation with ibn Fadil as he tries to find the right words.

"I propose we set down quietly somewhere and do a little reconnaissance." Val looks towards the disk of Rigol and tries to recall what Ginevra had told him of the place. "I think we should set down in small to medium sized settlement and try to get the feel for the place, and a feel for what kind of reception we should expect elsewhere. If we hit a port town, we could also see what kind of business is being done and maybe get an idea of commodities." _And I can see an ocean up close again,_ Val thinks to himself somewhat indulgently.

"Whatever we do, I want to be sure there are no problems. Yestin will to draw up a roster of teams for our forays. That way, we'll have someone to watch our backs and catch what we may have missed when talking to the locals." Memories of their incident with the Tear have made an impression on Val, and he doesn't want to make any mistakes.

"Okay then, any other suggestions or ideas for landing?" the young captain asks, leaving the floor open to discussion.

"Do we know if they have any non-humans here?" ibn Fadil inquires. "Or any experience with them?"

"She mentioned dwarves--there seems to have been some trouble with them. Other than that, nothing came up, so we should assume that if present they don't mingle with the human population very much."

Discussion ensues. Emmett is willing to keep quiet on the Ginevra thing at first to see how things go, but he sees it as more of a bargaining chip, depending on what their responses are; ibn Fadil is opposed to bringing up the group's involvement under any circumstances.

"I got the impression that her people are rather rigid about oaths and contracts and such, and may disown her on the spot when they find out her, umm, departure." He has trouble picking the right word; he's actually thinking "treachery" but guesses that won't go over well with his crew-mates.

The group is in agreement that a seaport will be the best place to begin; the dwellers there will know about trade, and strangers will be less easily noticed.

Pham listens quietly to the various discussions. "Emmett's suggestion sounds quite reasonable. I would suggest we land at night if possible - assuming there is night in such a place. If there is, then we can get fairly close to a major city. Seaports are usually quite busy and used to the idea of trade"

The *_Distraction_* cruises at high altitude along a coastline. The sky is grey and heavy, and it's considerably colder than any of them are used to. Below, snow-blanketed forests march toward distant mountains and only slowly give way to a gentler landscape in which the occasional plume of smoke suggests habitation. Eventually a harbor is sighted, with a frozen river flowing into and and what looks to be a city of some size nearby. Evening is coming on and the wind picking up as they turn the follow the path of the river away from the coast, looking for a place to land the ship. While the failing light and worsening weather make it less likely they will be seen, they also complicate navigation; eventually Alais sets the ship down in the lee of a wooded hill.

The wind is loud in the trees, and chill seeps into the ship; the world beyond the bridge viewpoints is entirely dark. Cog fluffs his feathers and squawks sadly. They have arrived.

7 - Myrr

In the early morning--by their best guess, at least, as it's still quite dark--Nyala goes scouting while a light snow continues to fall. The *_Distraction_* is sheltered behind a low, wooded hill that stands between it and the river.

"Not much out and about," the elf reports upon her return. "There's a village about a mile up-river. No human tracks since the snow started."

"Snow," ibn Fadil repeats morosely. On Nyala's advice, he has put on both sets of clothing he owns (the better one on the outside) and is busy wrapping his feet in strips of cloth he's scrounged from somewhere. Hopefully this will keep his worn shoes together long enough to reach the city, where he intends to buy a pair of boots at his first opportunity. "How far do we think it is to town again?"

She's already loaned him her extra cloak, the fur somewhat worn but still serviceable. "Ten miles at most; there is a track that runs along the river."

The members of the away team discuss possible destinations.

"If I may suggest, gentlemen (and lady)," Alais says, "we appear to be floundering in our decision, without benefit of reason and wisdom. Lacking these, we must search for them. In my opinion, the best methodology for entrance in a new and unfamiliar place is that given by the sage Ebreus of Ze, to wit: 'Travel in the younger sort is part of education; in the elder, part of experience. He that travels into a planet without some knowledge of the language goes to school and not to travel. The things to be seen are: the courts of princes and similar potentates, the courts of justice, the religious establishments, the monuments, walls and fortifications, places of enchantment or dweomer, harbors, antiquities, ruins, and libraries, colleges, shipping and navies, houses and gardens, armories and arsenals, exchanges, warehouses, displays of magic, exercises of beastmanship, fencing and training of warriors, comedies of the better sort, treasuries of jewels, robes, rarities and magic items, as well as triumphs, masques, feasts, weddings and capital executions.' It behooves us then, to go into the city and, first ascertaining whether we know the tongue and

therefore are there as school or as travel, present ourselves to the local potentate, governor or ruling body. I shall get my notebooks and we shall depart at once."*

"Three days," Val tells the others with his familiar nervous gesture. "We should be able to get an idea of the place in that time."

Nyala goes with them as far as the river, planning to conceal the tracks they make from the ship to what in warmer days might be a road. Right now it is a narrow beaten path through the snow, showing evidence of the passage of men and animals, although as she has noted none very recently. They turn right and follow the course of the river. It is not bitterly cold, but they are far from comfortable, and the snow keeps up with quiet persistence. The river is frozen over, the reeds on its banks and the trees of the wood bent and sad.

They see and hear little moving other than birds during the long walk until after about four miles hard, tiring going there is smoke--the tame smoke of hearth fires--rising on the other side of the river, from behind the walls of a sturdy wooden stockade.

Later that day, they are passed by a pair of men leading a heavily burdened mule. The men themselves are swathed in furs and stare openly at the four for a moment before averting their eyes and moving aside on the trail.

It is midafternoon when the woods fall away and the land begins its run down toward the sea, and the walls and towers of the city rear up before the travelers. The wind is coming off the water, brisk and raw. It bears the smell of the ocean, the sound of birds, and the occasional desultory snowflake.

That this place takes its walls seriously becomes evident as they grow nearer, passing by another small settlement and joining what is now a very thin but present trickle of traffic, all on foot and all of whom give the four strangers wide berth. The city walls are about twenty feet high, the many defensive emplacements dripping icicles; there is an occasional movement on the height. The still higher walls of the castle dominate the city.

On this inclement day a half dozen guards are hanging about near the open gate. Like everyone else seen so far, they are wearing heavy cloaks and hats--one thing the Victor family might be trading for, they're known for exotic furs--and are clustered around a low brazier, occasionally stamping their feet and casually eyeing those who enter.

There is an exchange of puzzled glances at the sight of the *_Distraction_*'s crew--who are very lightly and hence oddly dressed by what seem to be the local standards--before one of their number detaches himself from the warmth and approaches hesitantly, leaving his quarterstaff leaning on the wall.

"Be welcome to the city, my lords. Is there anything I can do to be of service?"

To their ears his speech is accented, but understandable. Travel rather than school, then. After a split-second hesitation in which he assesses the young man's cautiously respectful bearing, Val straightens his shoulders, smiles at him and says, "Not just at the moment, but perhaps later today. Your name?"

"Tomek, milord," he replies with a very slight bow.

They can feel the curious eyes of the guards as they pass through a brief tunnel of gate, observing the two heavy wooden portcullis, and enter the city. After months of seeing no one but each other, it's almost dizzying. The streets are narrow and well-trodden, the weather appearing

little deterrent to the dwellers, most of whom seem intent on their own business in the way of city folk everywhere.

* * *

“What was that?” Brunon asks.

“Dunno,” Tomek admits, looking back at the strangers as they pass through the gate. “Bit of an odd way of speaking... from Ferran, could be. Maybe they got robbed on the road.”

“Robbed of all but steel?”

“Maybe it was a washerwoman what did it,” the young guard grins, to general chuckles.

After a thoughtful moment, “Trot on up and tell the captain, eh?” He, too, looks through the gate. “Not as if they’ll be hard to find.”

* * *

As they make their way toward where they estimate the docks must be, it is not very long before those who care to observe such things notice something that may explain the curiously differential reception they have received from the natives: **no one** here is wearing a sword.

In fact, having noticed that, they soon realize that there is very little metal of any kind in evidence, and most of what they do see is bronze. The buildings are wood and stone, usually one story surmounted by a steeply pitched roof, and ornamented by intricate carvings. Windows are narrow and boast heavy shutters. The conversations around them are those of ordinary people tending to their day to day concerns, complaining about minor ills, the price of goods, and the ingratitude of relatives, while looking forward to a bear-baiting and an upcoming festival, which from the sound of it will involve a great deal of drinking and a number of fights.

They pass through a prosperous-looking area largely populated by tradesmen’s workshops, and then another gate, this one unguarded and indeed barely existant. It looks to be part of the decaying remnant of a wall built in the city’s younger days; to their right, a crumbling watchtower looms, gulls screeching about its higher reaches.

Beyond this lie the docks. They mark the only break in the outer wall, and even here it is possible to see how the closely-set buildings and the ways between them provide for a defensive zone in case of attack from the water. At the moment there is very little activity, and the wind bites sharply. Small, sturdily built ships equipped with sails and oars ride among whitecaps and chunks of ice in the harbor. One such vessel is being unloaded, a stream of laboring men carrying sacks of something to waiting wagons, which when full go off toward what they assume to be a storage building. The horses are the first they have seen here, heavy, powerful beasts.

There are also a few men hanging about a centrally placed building with a beautifully carved and painted miniature ship hanging near the door. It does not appear to be a tavern--those seem to be marked with a mug and some other symbol, a simple form of pictograph suggesting literacy may be rare here--so perhaps this is an office. Beyond the docks lies a long, narrow market stretching, as far as they can tell, from the city wall on the water to the inner castle. By this time of day there are few people about.

Walking to the end of the market, the explorers come up against the castle wall. Following it around to the right they find the gate, a space before it marked off by tall torches in the fading light. There are guards there, too.

They have seen no one who does not look human, although given all the muffling clothes it’s a bit difficult to be entirely certain. Ibn Fadil hasn’t felt this self-conscious in decades.

Between oncoming darkness and their tired, cold, and footsore state it seems wise to leave further exploration for the morning, and to retrace their steps to the artisans' quarter. Shops here appear to be clustered by their trade; after some exploration, a side street reveals a row of places with shoes above their doors.

They enter one where light still glows behind the narrow windows, and find themselves in a small room. To the left is a narrow table against the wall, on which are scattered shoes, boots, and samples of leather and fur. Before them a counter runs the length of the room; behind it is a curtained doorway. To the right are a couple of low-slung wooden chairs and a stone brazier; its coals don't do much to warm the room, but it's better than nothing.

Their entrance triggers some device on the door; it announces their presence with a muted clapping sound. The curtain is brushed aside by a tall man in plain brown clothing, who looks Val, ibn Fadil, Alais, and Pham up and down. Then he looks puzzled.

Mumble, mumble, mumble, "help you?" he says.

"Greetings, good sir," Alais says. "We are from outer space. Could you kindly take us to your leader?"

This earns him a considerably startled look, but the man is distracted before he can figure out if the visitor is actually mad.

"Yes," ibn Fadil says pleasantly, trying to imitate the local accent. "I need to remedy a mistake I made some time ago, which was not purchasing new boots when I had the chance." With a pained expression, he shifts his feet a little, inviting a look at their sorry state.

The man looks mildly appalled. "If you'd" mumble, he gestures toward the displayed samples, "soon have" mumble. He turns back to the curtain and claps his hands sharply, summoning a pair of apprentices with almost magical speed; they hover attentively behind him. "And" mumble? He looks at the rest of the party.

Ibn Fadil drifts over to look at the samples, presenting his best face of calm amiability as he tries to get the shoemakers to compare the different kinds of leather and fur so he can listen to them talk and get a better feel for their accent. At length he settles for warmth and sturdiness over fanciness.

There is a definite emphasis on the practical, but some elegant examples as well. Some of the leathers are unfamiliar. The cobbler's persistent mumbling doesn't make him a terribly good accent teacher, and he does at least half of his communication through gesture, but ibn Fadil does begin getting a better sense of it.

Mumble, mumble, "please," mumble. He gestures toward one of the chairs, where an apprentice - a boy of perhaps twelve - is waiting to take measurements. The master makes a few notes, nods to himself, and mumbles what sounds like a suggestion that he return tomorrow evening.

The Zakharan digs out several silver coins to display as he asks hopefully, "Any chance of tomorrow by noon?"

Mumble "see what" mumble "very" mumble. He seems to be saying he'll do his best.

Outside the shop, ibn Fadil's pleasant expression becomes rather fixed as he glances up and down the now-dark street and says, "Master Zeremin, please try to remember that we are not here solely for your amusement."

"I'm not sure what was supposed to be amusing, sir. I suggest you pursue your own purposes and I mine."

In the light from the shop windows the Zakharan's eyes flash dangerously, reminding Val of the last time he saw him really angry. But he only looks away from the mage, scans the street again, and mutters, "I hate being so conspicuous." Ibn Fadil then looks to Valarin and says, "Shall we choose a place to stay, then?"

After minimal discussion, the three retrace their steps toward the gate. There are fewer people on the darkening streets now, and the wind is rising. The inn they select has a sign of a leaping deer-like animal and one of the ubiquitous wooden mugs.

Everyone looks up when they enter, stamping snow from their numb feet; the long, low-beamed common room is dimly lit by a fireplace at each end, supplemented by scattered lamps. The air is thick and warm, smelling of garlic, onions, cooking meat, wood smoke, and humanity. The place is busy but not quite full--all men, they quickly realize, as they move into the room and look for room at one of the several long tables. The hush has still not lifted. A couple of people make room at an end, near one of the fireplaces, looking at the newcomers with open interest as conversation begins to pick up again around them. A serving lad comes by and, without asking, deposits three mugs.

"Soup?" ibn Fadil says to him hopefully, chafing his cold hands together. There is no sign now of his ill temper, or his unease. He seems determined to pretend there is nothing at all unusual about himself.

The boy bobs his head in acknowledgement. "S'a roast on, and there's a goose, too, sirs."

The others request soup as well. A short time later their server is back with a laden tray. The "soup" is almost solid, heavy with potatoes, onions, and some sort of fish, accompanied by a dense rye loaf. The beer isn't bad, either; for a moment it's pleasant to sit, thaw, and eat before taking more of a look around the place.

When an opportunity arises, Alais asks the serving boy, "Excuse me, what political authority is over this place and where might its local seat be?"

The boy gives him a funny look and spends some time performing a mental translation. "Well, his lordships' up t'castle...."

"And who might you be, friend, that you do not know whose lands you are in?" interrupts one of the nearby men.

"Lost, of course," ibn Fadil puts in humorously. "But not to worry; I have been lost before, and managed to profit from the experience."

Reflecting that they really should have discussed their approach beforehand, and hoping that the half-elf can handle this, Val lets him handle it for the time being.

The man across the table, to whom he is speaking, meanwhile, raises a skeptical brow. "I asked *who* you are." The kid scuttles out of the way.

"As you like, friend townsman," ibn Fadil shrugs. "I am Yusuf Fadil's son, this is Master Zeremin, and this Captain Ehrendrin." He takes a drink of his beer, watching the man's reaction to the (of course) unfamiliar names.

Before any reply can be made, the door opens again, and three men enter. They pause for the usual moment of adjustment, scanning the room. One of them comes over to where the strang-

ers are sitting and says, "You three, with me. Captain wants to see you." The stance and tone of Authority are in clear evidence, and the man with the questions across the table looks like he's hoping they'll start something.

Ibn Fadil, entirely unsurprised by this, just nods and gets up from the table, saying, "A good evening to you," to the man he's been talking to.

There are three more men waiting outside, two of them with torches. The strangers are watched carefully but escorted with relative courtesy and through the dark streets, toward the castle. They all bear staves and, it can be seen now, long knives in their belts.

The walk ends at a small building in the square that faces the castle's gate, where their escort's leader shows them in to a sort of office, where a heavy-set, thickly-bearded man of middle age is leaned back in his chair, as if he has been waiting for them (which he probably was). He looks them over thoroughly before speaking.

"You are not from the city. No sane man travels in such gear, and no fool is given care of so much steel. I am told your speech is strange, but you are not emissaries, and if you are spies you are most inept. Who are you, from whence do you come, and what are you doing here?"

Val grew up where it snowed each year and he rarely owned anything warmer than his current attire, so the comment about his attire takes a moment to click. As for the steel, he'd have to remember that in the future...

"We are definitely no spies, Captain," Val replies calmly, slipping into the familiar role of his past vocation; he's talked his way out of worse before. "We are...lost, and in need of boots for my friend here," he indicates Ibn Fadil, sticking to the original story. Must remember to plan better next time...

"We work for a merchant and are long way from home. Of course, traveling can be dangerous," he says, glancing at his sword but making no moves towards it at all. "I am Captain Ehren-drin and these are my companions, Ibn Fadil and Zeremin. The Mad." In a hushed tone, he adds to the bearded man, "He's a good man, just a little...strange." He gives the man his best helpless smile.

Ibn Fadil nods politely when introduced, cultivating a calmly interested expression while thinking Valarin's answer was a touch too evasive to get past this man. More information, less waffle, that would be his own approach, but Valarin is still in charge ... and he'll learn. Probably.

Alais is displeased by the libel, but obviously the unscholarly members of the party are playing one of their little games again, so he won't interfere just yet.

"Indeed." He looks skeptical. "Captain?" His tone invites further explanation.

"Of a small vessel," Val replies matter of factly, "she's grounded some ten miles away, so we walked."

Changing the subject, he asks, "Listen, are we in some sort of trouble here? We come seeking to buy goods and warm ourselves by a fire. Is this too much to ask?" Val does keep in mind the spies comment, however; is there something worth spying on here?

"Not yet," is the -- relatively amiable -- reply. "Your ship ran aground ten miles from here, eh?"

"We put in, yes," Val tries not to take offense at the presumption they ran aground. "She's small enough," he says by way of explanation.

"So now you know us," he continues in a friendly manner, "and you know that we intend no trouble. Who might you be, friend?"

"You may call me Captain," he says with a thin smile. "As I am charged by His Lordship with the maintenance of order in the city. So you put in ten miles from our harbor and walked to the city to buy goods for your employer, as if on a summer's outing and with a madman in tow." Beat. "And I'm the High Queen." He reaches an arm out and thumps the wall twice.

Well this is going swimmingly... And people call Val dense?

"We put in because of the weather, and we are here to buy boots for my crewman," he repeats calmly, keeping alert for whatever is to come next. A thump to the wall would surely summon others... "And we would not seek to warm ourselves by a fire in summer." An edge of exasperation is starting to creep into Val's voice. He casts a glance at ibn Fadil and Alais to see what their reactions are.

And it does, in fact, cause the door to be opened behind them, with a few of the guards there.

"If you truly mean no trouble, you'll hand over your weapons and spend a night here as guests," the captain says pleasantly. "And if you speak truly, in the morning you will have my apology, but I'm sure you'll agree that in these times one cannot be too careful."

"Well," ibn Fadil says sourly to Valarin, in Elvish, "that could have gone better." Hopefully Val does not understand Elvish well enough to grasp the depth of disgust expressed in those apparently simple words. Careful not to make any sudden movements, he hands over his sword.

The foreign words earn him a **very** hard stare from the captain.

"Sorry," he apologizes for his rudeness. "I only remarked that this visit could be going better." He starts fishing out and giving up the three knives he's carrying, including the two hidden ones. There are a couple of surprised glances exchanged between the guards.

Val hands over his sword belt as well, careful to handle only the belt itself. He understands ibn Fadil's words, but the expression on the Zakharan's face is somewhat elusive. He can't be taking it this well, can he?

"Times like these?" he asks the Captain innocently enough.

"Indeed."

The three are conducted to a small room on the same floor. It has no windows and the door bars on the outside, but it's clean, there are pallets and blankets and a stub of candle stuck in a holder on the wall. They don't seem particularly worried about anything the three might do.

"An orderly sort of people," ibn Fadil remarks, sitting on one of the pallets and wrapping blankets around his still-cold feet. "So tell me, Valarin, how is that you never learned the first rule of negotiation?"

* * *

"What do you make of that?" the captain asks one of his men when the three... visitors have been removed and the details related.

"Smugglers," Stian shrugs. "Or else they **are** spies. Could be they thought they could slip in through the gate without being noticed."

“Carrying all this? May as well have a brace of heralds. And giving up just like that? They must know what’ll happen. Unless there are more of them out there, but for what...” He looks at the collection of weapons on his desk, wondering what to do with the damn things for the night. He’d noticed more than one covetous look among the men. He picks up the mysterious “captain’s” sword, draws it a few inches and grunts in surprise. “Ever seen this mark?” He indicates the maker’s stamp in the steel.

Stian shakes his head, puzzled. “Not one I know, sir.”

“Odder and odder this becomes.” He sits back in his chair, thinks for a few minutes, sighs. At this time of year, it’s rare for the guard to have more to do than break up fights between bored townsmen, and that’s fine with him. “All right. Send out a few men, see if you can find out where they **actually** came from and exactly where they were today. I’ll update His Lordship in the morning, and we’ll keep an eye out, in case they have friends out there.”

“Aye,” Stian nods. “I’ll put Tomek to it, with your leave. He’s keen,” he adds with the mild dismay of the middle-aged surveying youth. “And he got a good look at them this afternoon.”

“That’ll do.”

* * *

Meanwhile, as evening falls...

Pham: "Got any fives?"

Hiro: "Go fish."

Something rattles off the hull.

It **could** be a pinecone....

Hiro lays down his remaining two playing cards face down. He raises a finger in a "shhhhh" gesture to Brother Pham. His eyes dart over to the general direction of the noise as Emmett makes his uneven way down the hall to join them. A brief conversation is held via glances; in the silence seconds crawl past like minutes. And then, another rattle.

Hiro moves as quietly as possible toward the source of the sound, the upper hull near the midsection; he can see nothing from this vantage. He then makes his way to the hatch and opens it just a little.

Rattle.

There. It **is** a pinecone, but thrown, not fallen. As he swings the aperture further open Hiro can hear someone making a dash through the brush.

Hiro vaults to the ground and takes off in pursuit. The light is dying, but whoever it is, they're making enough noise that it's not difficult to tell which way they're running. And it is "they" - there's two of them, running upriver. Probably from the village there.

Although the snow makes footing treacherous, he catches up easily enough with the slower of the two.

Emmett is too slow to stop Hiro before the nimble kensai is out the hatch and in pursuit of their watchers. "If it runs, chase it," he mutters, considering yelling for Hiro to stop before changing his mind.

"Hiro, invite them to come out," he calls after the rapidly vanishing figure "Let's just talk to them!" To Pham, he adds "Giant bug lands in their woods, I think they're going to wonder. We need a way to hide this thing. Crap! It's cold out there."

Hiro can see that the two are human and apparently male, dressed heavily for the weather but not obviously armed. He tries calling out, "'Please wait! Do you have need of us?"

"AAGGH! Demons!!" They try to run faster.

Still behing them and beyond their gaze, Hiro discreetly draws a knife. He then bolts in front of them. Making his way in front of them he stands stock still. The shock of being cut off gives him the moment he needs.

"We are not demons! We are men." He cuts his own palm slightly to prove his point.

One breaks left and keeps going. The other stops rather than run into Hiro, and yells in half-surprise, half-fear, staring at him in confusion and some panic.

"Hiro! Any luck?"

Hiro sheathes the dagger and extends his other hand in greeting.

"Who-who are you?"

"I am a sailor. If you sought our attention you have it." The man still looks as if he expects to die at any moment, so, "I mean you no harm. Did the quiet night stir your idle curiosity? If it was nothing more then we shall part ways amicably...." Hiro steps to the side, allowing the man a path to escape. "...If it was something more then know our ears are open."

He takes off running again.

Hiro returns back to the ship. "Idle curiosity. Nothing more." He says to Emmett before retrieving a bandage for the slight self-inflicted cut on his hand.

"You let them GO!?" Nyala says.

Emmett stifles a laugh at Nyala's indignant expression. "Hiro, did it occur to you that we might have asked them some questions?"

"They were very uncooperative."

She gets her expression back under control and glances at Emmett. "I'll go out and have a look around, shall I? If they're coming back...."

Emmett smiles, "Yeah, a guard might be a good idea. It's damn cold out there, though. Dress warmly."

Congratulating herself for picking up a new cloak with part of the windfall on Bral, she picks up her bow and leaves the ship. The tracks of everyone involved are plain to see; they're headed back toward the village. She keeps her sigh silent and looks for a good place to keep watch.

Once Nyala is out of the room, he turns back to Hiro. "Like, taking a shot at you uncooperative, or just panicked beyond all reason uncooperative?"

"The latter."

The half man shrugged. "Nothing to be done for it then - it wouldn't speak well of us to our future trading partners if we 'kidnapped' their folk and 'held them at swordpoint', which is too easily how that would be seen. They might just run back to their homes, but if they run to the city it might let the authorities know that the Captain and co. aren't what they seem."

Indeed, about an hour later Nyala comes in to report, tersely, "Someone rode off toward town. We can probably expect company, if anyone believes him. Haven't seen anyone coming this direction again from the village, but I'll keep watching."

* * *

"An orderly sort of people," ibn Fadil remarks, sitting on one of the pallets and wrapping blankets around his still-cold feet. "So tell me, Valarin, how is that you never learned the first rule of negotiation?"

"And which rule would *that* be?" Val asks tiredly. He slumps down with his back to the wall and hangs his head. Anger and fear are just barely in check right at the moment, and he is in no real mood to argue with the half-elf..

Ibn Fadil hesitates, surprised by a trace of sympathy for the unhappy young man. Sentiment, he thinks irritably. Uncle Karim would be appalled. Still, when he speaks again his voice lacks the censorious tone it started out with. "According to my grandfather, it is 'Never tell an unnecessary lie.'"

A brief flicker of a smile crosses Val's face. "And here I thought you were going to say it was 'discover the needs of the other person without disclosing your own,'" he says without looking up. There is a hint of bitter humor in his voice; the joke of course being on himself.

"There are times when the closed hand is preferred," the Zakharan replies seriously. "And other times when the open hand is best. I suppose you have only been taught the former way?"

"Something like that."

Val looks across at Alais to see what the mage is doing. He's been awfully quiet; welcome as that may be at times, it is unusual and more than a bit worrisome, but Alais is merely looking around the room curiously; Val does the same. The place is all of wood, with no lock on the door (but a bar on the outside).

The building is not a large one, a rectangle possessing a single L-shaped hall. They had come in through the front door, seen a closed door to their left, and gone straight to the captain's office - those two rooms were the short part of the L. The room they were in now was on the right side at the end of the long part. They had passed another door on the way, and across from their quasi-cell must be where the rest of the guards were, who had entered at the summons.

Ibn Fadil sighs and glances around the cell. "Tomorrow," he says, "I would recommend trying the open hand."

"Tomorrow," Val agrees, "open hand..." After a moment, Val waves at the Zakharan and pantomimes his intent to listen at the wall; he can hear people moving about.

Ibn Fadil watches him listen for some time before courteously saying, "Perhaps a plan of some sort would be in order?"

Val nods agreement. Hoping ibn Fadil has learned some of the same 'cant' that he has, he pantomimes that others may also be listening in.

Ibn Fadil shrugs his indifference to listeners. "May I suggest, sir, that we simply tell them as much as they are likely to believe without substantial proofs?" With a glance at Alais, he adds, "The ship itself would explain much, I am sure, but it is not available to us right now and I would prefer to be believed." He seems to mean exactly what he is saying.

"Agreed," Val says after considering this.

"Perhaps we'll make a plan *first* next time?" he says with a wry smile. "And stop calling me 'sir,' would you?"

"No. Sir." He smiles to take the sting out of the refusal. "Persons in authority will respect other persons in authority. But authority must be demonstrated by your actions and also the actions of those around you." He looks meaningfully at Alais. "You will not be taken seriously unless we treat you with appropriate respect and obedience."

He watches Valarin think this over for a moment, reading the anxiety that being "in charge" causes the young man. "Or," he says tentatively, "I could make the attempt to salvage the situation, instead."

Persons in authority.

Val ponders this for a moment. Tempting though it is to let ibn Fadil 'salvage' things, it is the captain's responsibility to do so. Damn, if only he'd planned things better....

"No, you're right," he says, almost wearily. "I'm the captain, and I've got to deal with this. Otherwise it's all just a joke, isn't it?"

The last is more rhetorical, and he immediately hopes the Zakharan does not answer. There is a touch of indignation that ibn Fadil does not think he is capable of salvaging things, but Val tries hard not to show it.

"So," the Zakharan says, ignoring Valarin's storm of conflicting emotions, "hopefully, sir, when we apologize for the misunderstandings today, and explain that we are simply exploring this area in hopes of establishing a trade in something worthwhile, they will let us go. But what if they do not?"

"I don't know," Val answers candidly. "If not, then I suggest we think quickly..."

"I do not know enough about them to guess what they will do," ibn Fadil muses, "or more importantly, why." He sounds unhappy. After a while he shrugs and settles down to think and try to sleep without offering any further ideas.

While they're thinking, time passes. There are occasional sounds of footsteps and a low murmur of curses and chaffing as men come and go from the building. At some point deep in the night the sounds take on an overtone of urgency that catches the attention of anyone still awake. Not long after that, the striking of massive drums comes like sudden thunder.

* * *

The captain--who has had better nights than this--listens impassively to the account related by the shaking peasant. He's found that having an expression as friendly and readable as the cliffs at Highfang served well in his position. When the man has finished and been taken away he sits back and thinks. It didn't take much even for an unimaginative man to connect the day's two entirely inexplicable events, especially since so far it looks as if their mystery prisoners didn't come along the coast at all. And since dragons, according to legend at least--there hasn't been one around the city since the days before there was a High King--are unlikely to leave witnesses and equally unlikely to bear oddly-behaving human cargo, he is left with the assumption that the entire business is some dwarfish feint or other, using human allies. Perhaps they hope to draw off the city's defenses while they carry out other mischief? There's been no hint of trouble in recent years, but isn't that just like the treacherous little buggers?

You can't be too careful. Drums boom out the alert over the slumbering city, the captain sends a messenger over to the castle to give Lord Tesfaye time to prepare, while sending six men

on horseback out to see about this “dragon.” As an afterthought, he doubles the guard on the prisoners. If they are quislings, the festival will have far better entertainment than any bear-baiting.

* * *

Emmett looks at Yestin to see if the Giff wanted to override and claim authority at this point. Seeing no direct implication of that, he answers her, "Yeah. Good thinking. Hiro, why don't you get some sleep and take over for her in a few hours?"

"If either of you see anyone, just come back and let us know. I don't want to go blundering without a plan here, and I certainly don't want us to get separated or away from the ship. Pham, we probably have a few hours. Why don't you catch some sleep in case we need to move the ship - which we should do as soon as the Captain and the other get back." The half man shrugs. "I think that about covers it. I'm going to catch a few myself."

Pham lays out a mat and blanket next to the helm. "I think it would be best if I didn't have to climb any ladders suddenly." He then curls up and tries to rest while he can.

Time passes slowly. Hiro and Nyala trade watches--Nyala still seems annoyed with him--and then again. Some time before dawn, she returns to report that a small group of horsemen have passed, apparently headed toward the village.

A short time after that, "They're headed this way. Six horsemen with spears, could have other arms I didn't see. A couple of dozen villagers, they're carrying staves. Shall we try talking to them again?"

"May as well" Emmett says. He glances around the room - if they're all human, Nyala and Yestin would stand out to much. Hiro isn't exactly a diplomat, Inez isn't good in a fight if things go bad, Pham needs to move the ship if things go bad. "I think I better talk to them. Not that I don't stand out, but Hiro's already put a fright in them and - no offence Nyala, Yestin - you might not be what they expect."

Emmett waits for a reply; she nods tersely. "I'll go above and keep an eye out from there." She heads toward the weapons deck, bow in hand.

Emmett then pulls on his chain shirt and as heavy a tunic and boot as he has. He is quickly reminded of why they had to wear the heavy hooded woolen tunics in flight, and how much a chill can dull your reflexes. "Hopefully I won't be out here long."

With his armor well covered and his cutlass strapped for a reverse draw from his back, he hopes he looks non-threatening enough while still being ready if things went wrong. He heads out a distance from the ship in the direction Nyala indicated in hopes of making polite contact with the natives. His real hand is open and raised in friendship, his hook is lowered but still visible.

It's not long before he hears the sounds of harness and hoofbeats, and soon he can see them winding through the trees, followed by the villagers Nyala reported. The single column pulls up - in fairly good order, he notes - upon spotting him, after which there is a quick exchange and four of the men ride continue toward him at a slower pace, fanning out to form a half-circle that hems him in and allows them to keep an eye on the _Distraction_'s distant bulk.

"Identify yourself," one of them orders.

"Name's Emmett. I'm a sailor on the _Two Trees Ship Distraction_," he indicates with a jerk of his head to the ship. "We put to ground yesterday, and I'm afraid the ship scared some of your folk last night."

"Anything I can do for you?" he says with an endearing grin.

Pham, meanwhile, has positioned himself next to the helm; not yet seated in case some of his magic is needed. He tries to listen in Emmett's conversation.

There is some muttering among the peasants in the back.

"What manner of creature are you?" the apparent leader wants to know. "Man, dwarf or... other?" There is the barest hint of superstitious dread to the question. "Are there more of you?"

Emmett smiles, "Man, though my friends call me Half-Man. I got caught in a fire once and this," he gestures with his hook to his peg-leg, "was the best they could do with what was left. Lucky to be alive."

He looks thoughtful for a minute. "Are there any more of me? I'm one of a kind." Another big smile. "But there are other sailors on the Distraction." He gestures back to the ship again. "I know, I know, she looks like a giant bug. I didn't design her, but she does handle real well. We don't mean you any harm, and we are sorry about scaring your folk earlier. Didn't mean to cause any trouble."

By the looks they're exchanging, he is not exactly what they expected. They had come out from the city expecting to find, probably, a monster; now the general air is one of perplexity. Emmett can almost see their leader thinking, I don't get paid enough to deal with this kind of weirdness.

"You will return with us to the city," he decides. "All of you. And... that," he nods at the ship, "will be searched."

Emmett shakes his head sadly. "No, I'm afraid that's not how it's going to go. Our captain is in your city right now. He may well be talking to your lord right now," Emmett is pretty sure that this is not what's going on, but their cover has been blown by the Distraction being found and he needs to buy some time. "It'd probably throw a right spanner into your lord's negotiations for opening up lucrative trade routes to find out that you've imprisoned the traders and impounded their ship."

Emmett holds up his hands in a placating manner, "Now, I know that you aren't looking to start a diplomatic incident, and you're just trying to do the best in an unexpected situation, but if you take our crew away from our ship, that's how this is gonna be seen by my Captain's superiors."

"I can give you a counter offer -- you and a couple of your men can come on board and do your search right now with us. You can even leave a contingent with us while someone rides back to the city and delivers a report to find out what your lord wants you to do next. But I'm under orders from my captain that our crew stays with our ship."

"I've got specific orders, you've got general ones. I think giving you a tour and some hospitality while higher ranking people than us work out what to do next is the best way to see that both of our orders get carried out. Deal?"

"Describe this captain of yours," he parries--suggesting to Emmett that the away team might already have been found out. Hell, maybe they really **are** talking to the local lord.

After a thoughtful moment, he nods shortly. "Very well." He dismounts.

Someone hisses, "Sir, it's a trap!"

He is ignored. "Albin, head back and report to the captain." With a few economical words he disposes the remaining men, overall giving the visitors the impression that they have stumbled into a rather martial culture here. One of them remains with the leader, while the remaining three

and the peasants draw off some small distance, prepared for whatever might issue from the strange "ship." The words "infernal dwarfish device" are muttered.

"Well, 'Emmett,'" the leader says when all is ready, "I am Sergeant Brunon in the guard of His Excellency Lord Tesfaye, whose lands you are in. Let us then examine this... vessel."

* * *

Startled awake, ibn Fadil blinks at the ceiling and listens. Signals? Yes, he can pick out non-musical rhythms in the sounds, though of course they convey no meaning to him. So much for resting up for tomorrow.

"That can't be good," Val says as he tries to listen for activity in the hallway. "Have any idea what *that* could mean?" he asks the others. Unfortunately, he has a bad feeling he already knows...

"Maybe they are being attacked," ibn Fadil offers. "It does seem the place is not as peaceful as it first seemed."

They are left to wonder for a couple more hours; the silence when the drums stop is almost worse than the noise. Dozing off again eventually, they are awakened by the sound of many feet in the corridor outside, and voices.

"Captain said to bring 'em over."

"Any signs of trouble?"

"Not so far, but the alert's not off yet."

The door is unbarred, and a couple of guards loom in the doorway. "You lot, with us."

Ibn Fadil, already up and trying vainly to brush his clothes into something resembling tidiness, looks to Valarin to take the lead, but covertly studies the guards in an effort to gauge the general drift of their thoughts.

Val stretches after standing and does the same, trying to get an idea if the guards have any malicious intent. They don't seem particularly pleased with their lot, expressions ranging from indifferent to hostile.

"What was all the noise last night?" he asks innocently enough, moving to stand by the door as he was told.

"Quiet. This way." There are six of them, the big, bearded types this place seems to grow, carrying spears.

The... guests are escorted out of the building and across the square toward the gates of the castle. There are a number of guards and a general sense of subdued activity, but everyone watches as the trio are escorted into the heavily walled core of the city.

"Oh, good. Now, maybe, we'll get to see something," Alais comments.

"Quiet." The word is accompanied by a threatening glance.

Ibn Fadil decides that perplexed worry is definitely called for, and starts exhibiting it.

The three are escorted under careful watch through a dimly lit antechamber and a short hall that ends in a guarded set of tall double doors. A brief conversation, and one of the doors is opened, allowing the entire group entrance.

The great hall is impressively scaled, given the rest of the city; about thirty feet high, slightly rectangular, hung with banners that can't be read in the dim light of torches on the walls and banks of massive candles near the far end, flanking the lord's chair, which is made of dark wood generously inlaid with ivory in intricate patterns. The captain is standing to one side, scowling. It's not much warmer in the room than it is outside. The man in the chair is older, fifty or so, wearing an impassive expression, a narrow circlet of what looks like iron, and a heavy fur cloak over robes. He is also wearing a heavy sword, as is the captain. The escort salutes their captain briskly and stand back a bit, but continue watching closely.

"So this is the cause of all the trouble, then. Who are you?" The older man's voice is somewhat raspy but strong; he does not seem a man to brook any nonsense.

Time to be the responsible one. Val runs his fingers through his hair, the only outward appearance of nervousness, as he slips behind his business façade.

"I am Captain Ehrendrin of the spelljammer Distraction," he says respectfully as he steps forward. He pauses briefly to study the reaction to what he said before continuing. There is a subtle increase in the tension level. The captain frowns. "These are members of my crew: Yusuf Fadilsson and Master Zeremin. We are exploring this region in hopes of establishing a trade route for our sponsor. I apologize for any misunderstandings that may have occurred."

Behind him, ibn Fadil winces and hisses, "Sir! You call him 'my lord'! Or maybe 'your highness' or 'your majesty.'" His strangled whisper is not quite audible enough to be intrusive.

There is puzzlement on some of the faces, but the lord remains difficult to read, aside from a faint, not-quite smile. "My lord' will do. Tell me of your vessel and this... 'sponsor.'"

"My lord," Val concedes gracefully, lowering his eyes momentarily to show respect. "Our ship is very unique, a modified 'damselfly.' Small but very capable, we use her to travel the 'spheres. She is the property of the Three Trees Company, our sponsor." Again, he looks for any sign of recognition in the faces before him.

There is again some increased tension, but the guards stand down a bit at a waved hand. "Spheres," the lord muses. "So these are Durrell's sky-folk? You are far from his lands. And that is, then, your... vessel which has caused such disturbance among my villagers to the north?"

Disturbance? Oh boy... He recognizes the name of Ginevra's father, as does ibn Fadil.

"Quite possible, my lord," Val replies apologetically. "We thought to set down somewhere secluded and get our bearings. This is **our** first time here. I hope the disturbance was not too great?"

"It has certainly been sufficient," is the laconic reply. "Captain," he addresses the man beside him, "keep the alert until your men return."

"My lord." He bows, nods to one of the guardsmen, who salutes and heads off to spread the word. They are indeed, as ibn Fadil noted, an orderly people.

"And you," he says to Valarin and the others, "I would know more of yourselves and your mission. Your ignorance of our ways is perhaps understandable, but know that we do not look well upon liars."

I could have told them so, Alais whispers to himself.

Under this prodding Valarin adopts a respectfully business-like attitude and tells the man about the Distraction, her crew--some of whose appearance may otherwise alarm--and in general terms her voyage, without mentioning Victor. At this point another messenger is dispatched,

and the escort dismissed--although no doubt they will remain close at hand--so that his lordship can question the strangers more privately, with only the captain present.

The three aliens learn that they have arrived in the city and lands of Myrr, held by Lord Bogumil Tesfaye direct from the High King. The captain of the guard is introduced as Feliks. Lord Tesfaye seems skeptical but intrigued by their story. Durrell has clearly not kept his access to off-world trade a secret, but it seems he has put out as few details as possible; his lordship wants to know if the visitors are part of the same consortium, and if not what relationship there is between the two and if there are more such, what sort of goods Three Trees deals in, whether more contacts can be expected and what has prevented them in the past.

He invites the three of them to ask questions as well, no doubt operating under the same assumption that what they ask will provide him information about them as well....

Once Valarin has explained that Three Trees is not the same as Victor & Sons, he nods to ibn Fadil, who cheerfully provides capsule descriptions of those two and another half-dozen or so of the major trading companies (including some that aren't really involved on Bral, but are big elsewhere). "As to the absence of contact before now, my lord, this place - we know it as 'Rigol,' incidentally - is a bit out of the way, and Victor & Sons has kept very quiet about whatever it is they have found valuable enough to trade for here." That last is a leading remark if anyone there has ever heard one.

"He has not been forthcoming about his dealings," the lord shrugs, studying the three of them before adding, "he has been buying iron, that much is known to all, but what he sells in return.... I am sure these things can be discovered. Furs, ivory... there are possibilities. There are timbers that grow in our mountains which make strong ships."

"Of course we will be interested to know about that, my lord," the half-elf says smoothly, making a mental note about the iron. V&S doesn't normally deal in anything so prosaic; he wonders who they're buying it from.

"But there could be any number of other things of interest here. At the moment we simply do not know enough; only what we have seen so far. If we had known, for example, that you had some reason to be, er, alert about security, we certainly would not have tried to make a quiet visit before making a formal arrival, ship and all, if you see what I mean, my lord. And," he adds, with a trace of unhappiness, "is it always so cold here? You must understand, my lord, that the place I was born, on Zakhara, almost never sees snow, while my most recent home, the Rock of Bral, has no weather at all." Standing in one place in this frigid hall is indeed making his feet numb again, but what he really wants to know is whether these folk have heard of Bral.

The name elicits no sign of recognition, and indeed a deeply puzzled look crosses both faces at the idea of "no weather."

"Always? No. It is winter. But we are indeed, as you say, 'alert.' Always. Better it would have been to announce yourselves directly. Subterfuge is a tool of the weak. Still it will do the men good to have the drill." The sky is beginning to lighten, and the occasional dimly heard sound from beyond the room suggests that the household is waking up. Tesfaye appears to make a decision, and stands abruptly. "Come. Let us break fast, and continue our conversation privately."

At the back of the hall is a door leading to a smaller room. It is dark -- this side of the building is in the shadow of the castle wall -- but there is a massive fireplace, which when poked up by a boy cheers the place up immensely. The walls are layered with tapestries that keep drafts to a minimum. The main furniture is a long table, with room for about a dozen people. The lord of

course sits at the head, with the guard captain and Valarin on his right and the others on the left, and in a short time a couple of women servants come in with platters of dark bread, butter, sausage, bacon, and kidneys. From this the visitors conclude that their story has been accepted, although perhaps with reservations, and the captain still seems a bit dubious.

"Is it common in your lands for folk to carry such array of armaments?" he inquires at one point.

Ibn Fadil answers, "We are engaged in trade, sir, which attracts bandits as meat attracts flies. We have encountered pirates twice in the last two years or so -- three times if you count the mad wizard -- and found our armaments quite useful. But ordinary shopkeepers and farmers have little need of such things in most places." It does not even occur to him to mention that iron is not so rare in other places as it seems to be on Rigol: that would reduce the potential profit to be gotten here.

"Pirates and mad wizards? It sounds as if your adventures have been considerable. Is there none who takes it upon himself to ensure the safety of these seas between the worlds?"

"Ah ..." he says, trying to work out how to answer that and not laugh at the same time. "The known universe is vast, sir." His expression straightens out. "Some of the elves try, but their efforts are not always well received. My own grandmother once referred to them as -- how would it translate? -- 'A batch of meddlers who always think they know what is best for everyone.' There are so many worlds, so many different interests, so much plain *distance* -- it would take inconceivable resources to protect more than a small portion of the whole."

"So it was once thought here, until a strong enough hand emerged," the lord remarks. "You are very strange to us, of course, but I am intrigued by what you have told me. Should all go well, what is it that you would expect to do now? Other than picking up your boots, of course." He smiles slightly; he doesn't look like a man who does that too often.

Ibn Fadil's friendly expression does not even flicker as he resolves to keep treading *very* carefully here. Glancing at Valarin for continued permission, he smiles back (looking like a man who does that easily and often) and forges on. "My boots, definitely. I will not forget to pack for all weathers again," he adds ruefully. "I like to learn about new places, so what I would like to do is wander about and talk to people ... but I suspect, my lord, that you would prefer if we confined ourselves to talking with yourself or someone knowledgeable about the trade and products of your lands, and about the goods we brought with us or could procure.

"And we would send for our ship, of course, so that you can see it and meet the rest of our crew."

"That strikes me well," he agrees. "We should receive word from there soon."

"Many spelljamming ships do present a rather unusual appearance," the Zakharan says apologetically. "I have asked quite a few people why this is, but the best answer I have gotten comes down to 'tradition.'"

* * *

"Sergeant, if you w two will step this way." Emmett motions back along his tracks to the Distraction. "I do have to warn you, you might find some of crew a little...odd looking."

If someone on the inside hasn't opened the hatch by the time the pair reach it, the half man yells up "Ahoy. We have visitors and I'm freezing. Open the door!"

Emmett makes a quick judge of the Sergeant and decides the man would rather forego courtesy and *follow* Emmett rather than have a possible threat at his back as he entered so strange a place, so he motions for the pair to follow as he enters the _Distraction_.

"As I said, this is the TTS _Distraction_. And this is some of the crew."

Yestin is looking rather more imposing than usual in full mail. The two Rigolians freeze for a moment. The giff nods politely to them and says, "Welcome aboard," doing his best to appear harmless - which isn't much, but when he makes no movement they relax a fraction.

Emmett gives the Giff a formal salute, "Sir." He turns to face their guests. "This is Yestin, our first officer. And this is Pham, our cleric. Nyala and Hiro are also on board - Hiro is the one who tried to talk to your people earlier."

Emmett guides them through a quick tour, giving away as few specifics as possible while--he hopes--whetting their interest. The inspectors are visibly reassured to some extent by the sheer ordinary "ship-ness" of the place - the galley, the dirty socks, the crates of mostly-identifiable things in the hold.

On the other hand, they are visibly unnerved by Nyala, and almost as much by Inez' presence, shocked almost to the point of revulsion. They both do their best not to even look at either of the women directly. Pham takes note of the reaction. {Hmm}, he thinks, {a segregated society. That would fit with Ginevra's status as a trade good.}

When the tour has moved on, the two females exchange a glance in a rare moment of shared thought. "Hmph," Inez sniffs. "First man I've ever seen look at me like I was pond scum."

"Human pond scum, at any rate," the elf replies dryly. "I think that if any of my people dwell here, these at least have never met one of us. This could be... difficult."

Relieved of female presence, it turns out that the two inspectors do want to know how the ship *moves,* looking for levers that might move the legs, or hidden sails, or wheels, or who knows what as they poked around the place.

Emmett holds off on the question until the second time they ask, while they're in the galley. Then he shrugs. "Magic. I'm afraid our expert on magic is with our captain, but you can ask him. Mind you, I've been flying on these ships for years and I still don't understand a good half of what comes out of Master Alais' mouth."

"The one your captain calls 'the mad' is a magus, then?"

"Oh, you've met him? Care for some tea? It's pretty cold out there, and we can't have fire when we're off a planet, so this is a double luxury." With more deftness than one would expect he manages a to pour half a mug of tea and pass it over with his hook.

Trusting that he has thrown them off into a tangent, Emmett moves on with the tour.

"No fire?" the sergeant asks. "Why should that be?" And, "Er, what... is this?" glancing at the mug.

Until now, Pham has been quietly following the group of them, helping with hatches, and letting Emmett take the lead. At this question he pipes up. "It is called tea. A drink made from boiling leaves of particular plants. Quite refreshing and relaxing. There are many different kinds; of course, on as small a ship as this one, we take whatever is left in supplies."

Brunon tastes it cautiously; hard to tell if he likes it or if he's just being polite, but he does finish the cup.

"As far as the fire goes, well, the nature of the universe is very strange. What you see in your skies is only this sphere. Other worlds exist in their own spheres. Between the spheres exists the phlogiston, which is unfortunately quite volatile in the presence of open flame. One spark in the phlogiston could easily destroy a ship."

"This is the ballista turret. This is an advanced model, which comes in handy when we're attacked by hundred yard long Krajen." He looks up at it with some pride before looking back conspiratorially "But it's better just to outrun the things. I still think they chase us because we look like a giant bug."

They are suitably impressed by the ballista -- especially since the crew didn't try to use it on them -- and look skeptical about the krajen. "What sort of speed does she make, then?" the armsman inquires, in a rare moment of speaking up.

Emmett shrugs again, "That's hard to say. Faster than any water ship, as fast as a Griffin or Eagle when we're over a world. Faster when we're off world, faster still when we're between spheres. But for on a world, I don't have any good way to measure, and there are a lot of strange magical things that cause our speed to fluctuate. It's too complicated for a military guy like me."

The two inspectors exchange a faintly amused glance.

Meanwhile, a couple of messengers are meeting midway between city and town. Even on horseback, the trip takes some time in the snow, but by early that afternoon it has been sorted out that His Lordship would indeed like to see the flying vessel and the rest of her crew. Word is put out, so that the people of the city won't panic. The sergeant and his second agree to stay aboard while the rest of the men return to the city and the confused peasants--who of course still have no idea what this is all about--to their village.

When the time comes, Pham asks "Please, everyone, if you could stay clear of the pilot's chair, I need a clear view. Nyala, you have the best eyesight of the lot of us, could you please go forward and navigate for me?" He takes his seat in the helm, and the ship begins, slowly, to rise.

Emmett leans in towards the armsman "Not to worry. Pham's the best pilot among us."

"Truly, a fascinating means of travel." He glances forward, as if considering what the view from there would be like, but that would mean standing near Nyala.

It is a very short journey, of course; it almost no time Pham is landing the ship in the specified place, on some bare and open ground between the city wall and the sea--on the opposite side of the city from where the others had entered the previous day. From the bridge they can see the faces of the men guarding the wall. There is an escort waiting outside the Sea Gate, another half dozen of the soldiers, with a considerable civilian crowd pressing close behind them.

Brunon nods approvingly as the ship sets down, and also relaxes a fraction. "Impressive. If you will excuse me, I must have some words with my fellows before we may proceed."

The crowd gives a collective gasp, then a little cheer upon seeing Brunon emerge from the bizarre device. He speaks with the man at the head of the escort for a few moments, then returns to the *_Distraction_*. "All is in readiness; His Lordship awaits you, as do your captain and fellow crew. His Lordship has made it plain that this... 'ship' is under his protection; it will not be molested while you are away. Your women will remain here."

"And will not be molested while they're away?" Nyala says in an amused tone, mostly just to see what his reaction is--as it happens, a sharp frown and a visibly-bitten-off retort. She smiles sweetly at him and leaves the bridge.

"Come. They are ready," he says to Emmett, Hiro, Pham, and Yestin. They descend to the ground.

In an attempt to look less menacing, Yestin has doffed the mail, though he still wears his massive two-handed sword; there are gasps and a couple of shrieks from the watchers, and the giff heaves a slight sigh as he resigns himself to hysterical reactions for the duration of their stay. He has never in his young life been among groundlings, and now determines to do the best he can, given his disgrace, to be ambassador for the giffish species to this world. He wonders what their songs are like.

They walk a relatively broad street through straggling outliers of the main marketplace-- which they soon pass through--and thence to the square and the castle gates, the curious crowd following close, only to be replaced within the walls by one composed of everyone able to manufacture a duty that brings them outside to idle until the strangers have passed by.

In the main hall they are reunited with the others of their crew, introduced to Lord Tesfaye, Captain, Feliks, and the chamberlain, Master Cengiz.

"He will see to arrangements, while you remain as guests here," the lord tells them. "Other duties await me, but we will speak again at the evening meal, and perhaps tomorrow I shall visit your ship." Nobles here clearly don't go rushing out to gawk at any old starship that happens by the place. "You may do as you will, but I suggest that if you are to spend time in the city you will take one of the men with you, to see that there is no... confusion."

Val is immensely relieved to see his crewmen, but is bothered by the fact that two are not present. He gives Emmett and Yestin a significant glance to inquire about their whereabouts. Since they appear calm enough for the moment, he will assume no harm has occurred.

Ibn Fadil is pleased to hear the word "guests" at last, but is also very interested (and a bit concerned) by what he doesn't see among the new arrivals, and doesn't look to Val before he says, "But my lord, two of our crew are missing."

Val is also quite curious as to where Inez and Nyala are, and why they have not been offered hospitality. Unless they had insisted on remaining behind. He waits to see what the response to ibn Fadil's query is before speaking.

The lord gives Val a bemused look. "Were there others of your crew who were with the ship?"

"Yes, m'lord," Val replies politely. "Inez and Nyala are valued members of our crew. We are curious as to why they are not here as well."

His lips twitch sardonically. "I am sure they are... valued. However it is quite absurd to suggest they should come here." His look has gotten a bit stony. "Much presumption can be overlooked on the grounds that you are strangers, but have a care. Good day."

That is, quite clearly, a dismissal.

Ibn Fadil's twenty years of practice at self-control and experience dealing with foreigners permit him to merely clench his teeth and assume an equally stony expression. Apparently, he tells himself, these people do not have a tradition of avenging insults to their women. How peculiar. How amazing to find that I am still so Zakharan at heart.

The chamberlain is of middle height, middle age, and somewhat portly build, wearing the thick robes that seem to be the usual indoor garb for the higher reaches of the hierarchy. There is a

hint of panic about his eyes--entertaining a half dozen sailors and a... thing lies somewhat beyond the borders of his training--but he rallies and says, "We have rooms prepared, if you would care to inspect them?"

"Excuse me," the half-elf says, with a courtesy that is at least as frigid as the air outside. "It appears that I have been told that my woman must stay in our rather cold ship, outside the safety of this city's walls. Can you explain the reason for this ... behavior?"

He seems nonplussed. "Where... well, I suppose a room in the city might be arranged for. Which of you would be staying there, then? I shall have to explain to His Lordship...."

"You have not answered my question, sir."

"I'm afraid I don't understand the question, then," he says with a worried look. "We can certainly send over some firewood and blankets if the cold is a concern."

Val lays a hand to still the half-elf before this can get any worse. "Perhaps they can stay here in **my** place, and I will gratefully accept blankets and firewood to stay aboard the ship," Val says evenly, his face betraying no hint of jest.

Ibn Fadil, his anger already blunted by the chamberlain's obvious incomprehension, blinks uncertainly at Valarin. "I think that idea will not go over well, sir."

And he's right, too. The man stares at him, boggled for a moment. "Are you... are you seriously suggesting that Lord Tesfaye should bring--bring women of that sort into his house? It is out of the question. I realize you are simple sailors and that, well, perhaps on a long voyage propriety is... relaxed a bit, but come now, this is absurd."

Emmett wanders as casually as he can over to this obvious flashpoint. I don't think the captain has caught on yet... he thinks before saluting. "Captain, if I could have a word with both of you about the condition of the ship?" He also gives the chamberlain a little look that indicates that he should take this opportunity to step aside.

Once the three of them are more or less alone, he continues in a low voice. "Val, something you might not have gotten here: these guys don't think of women as people. Keep pushing this and we're going to lose whatever good graces we have with them.

"So stop and think about our job here. It is not to make their look look plainly at the strengths of the fair sex. It is not to reform an entire culture. Our job is to open a trade route. That's it.

"If that isn't a good enough explanation for you, I'm offering a suggestion as chief of security - Captain, I want one warriors and one experienced sailor to stay on board the ship to make sure no one attacks and nothing gets broken in case we have to leave in a hurry. And I damn well wish that we had a female pilot, too, because that way we could really be in a position where the ship isn't threatened without raising the slightest suspicion."

He glances at the half elf "When your opponent has a blind spot you don't point it out to him - you use it. I expected you to know that, Ibn Fadil. Or do you think Nyala can't take care of herself? So I suggest you take up the chamberlain's offer to send blankets and firewood over, let the Lord worry about main safety of the Distraction, since they'd no doubt be humiliated if something happened to it, and let our crew protect it from the lord's men if need be."

Still simmering a bit, the Zakharan nods once. "I do know better," he mutters. "But to hear her insulted so ... I am not at all sensible about her, not at all." He shakes his head then, and almost

smiles. "And it is foolish, since from a certain perspective their opinion is correct. I am tempted to remove to the ship myself, since they are so concerned with their guests' moral rectitude."

Emmett shakes his head. "I think we need you more here. And..." Emmett hesitated. It's obvious that neither one of these men had really caught on, and he hated to see ibn Fadil's temper when he pointed it out. "Didn't you hear their boss just now? And the Chamberlain? OK, if you absolutely know that women don't have any meaningful skills, what reason do we have for keeping two of them on a ship full of men? What's their job?"

Before the other other men can interrupt, he pushes on, "Now, what does that say about us that we see our whores as, what was it? 'valued members of the crew' and consider our time with them so important that we want them inside a nobleman's house with us? Or that we'd leave the lord's gracious hospitality in because we'd rather spend time with them?" Seeing the anger in ibn Fadil's eyes he asks his a sharp, direct question: "Quick! How insulting have we just been to these people? How much would that help our cause?"

"*Thank* you for putting in words what I was trying to not *think,*" ibn Fadil snaps, but quietly. At least this seems to take the edge of his temper. "Back home," he explains tersely, "a host is supposed to pretend not to notice such things, lest he accidentally offend someone. Feuds over insults can last for generations.

"So," he adds with a sigh, "I definitely see your point, Emmett. Thank you." This time the thanks are sincere. "I shall apologize to the chamberlain for making trouble, and content myself with imagining Inessia Greywing's reaction to such treatment."

Now appearing perfectly calm, he suits actions to words and goes over to the still-worried chamberlain. "Thank you for explaining the problem, sir," he says. "I am sorry that we did not immediately understand what it was. Additional supplies for the ship, especially firewood, should suffice. And I think we are ready to see those rooms now."

The man visibly relaxes, though he still seems a bit concerned.

Seeing that Ibn Fadil had his temper under control, Emmett waited to see if Val had anything to add, but he too appears to reluctantly accept the situation as it stands. Perhaps this can be worked out later.

After that, a sharp salute is given, followed by a silent communication with Hiro - glances and head nods indicating that it would be a good idea for Hiro to give Ibn Fadil some backup outside, and that now would be a good time for a drink. Hiro would let Ibn Fadil be diplomatic and could end any fight without killing someone. _Both of which seem like good ideas,_ Emmett thought, making his way over to Brunon.

"Sergeant. Mind if I ask you some questions about local security? I trust your men to guard the _Distraction_, but I have a duty to find out what they're guarding it *against*."

"The curious," he shrugs. "Otherwise some folk would be bound to come around and poke into things. Never seen anything like it, and even if it is magic there'll be a few that won't let that stop them."

"Any large dangerous animals out there? It's been a long time since I got to do any hunting - I'm better from griffinback, of course, but I could still use some practice..."

"No shortage of them," the sergeant avers, giving Emmett that quizzical look he occasionally does. "If we get a spell of good weather after the festival His Lordship'll probably be wanting to go out."

At further questions he talks a bit about the castle and the city. About how a dozen generations ago there was war among men as well as between man and dwarf, until the first of the High Kings united all men beneath his banner. How Lord Tesfaye's father was granted the fief--stretching many miles along the Narrow Channel and inland as well--as a reward for bravery in battle when the previous lord thought to rebel. In hushed tones, about the things that live in the forests and ate cattle only when they could not have man, or would steal away his soul, or turn him to wood.... At great length, about the treachery of dwarves.

Emmett files that away, filling in his half of the conversation with discussions of his voyages and the battles on his homeworld. He does ask several questions designed to reveal the presence of greys on this world; there's no definite sign of them, although some of the stories hint at things that might be them. He also asks about the prospect for getting a mount and looking around outside of town.

The sergeant seems amenable to the idea--pending the captain's approval--but suggests that perhaps in the morning, as by the time they could set out the day would have grown late, and there are ominous clouds building in the distance.

"Snow?" The half man says, "Or do you often just get ominous clouds?"

"Snow. Plenty of that before we see spring."

He also shows the sergeant his sword, trying to get a feel for the quality for the local weapons work and toolmaking.

"Your ship must be quite successful to afford so much," he comments. The metalwork on his own dagger is quite good. Not a shortage of skill, just raw materials?

"Moderately so. And I've worked on other ships before this, and tend to spend most of my money on more equipment. What more does a soldier need? The scimitar back on the ship is actually booty from overthrowing an insect tyrant and his dwarfish subjects...."

Brunon seems downright disturbed by the idea of dwarves in space, and listens the story with an expression that suggests he thinks Emmett might be putting him on, although no less enjoyment for that. Emmett interrupts himself halfway through to suggest that they make a trip down to the market so he can look for some heavier clothes. Things that actually fit will take some time, but he is happy for the time being to make do with an oversized cloak etc.

* * *

Val gives his apologies to the chamberlain, supervises the collection of the promised blankets and firewood, and a short time later heads out to the _Distraction_ with a small convoy of servants and one of the guards. No one seems to think anything of him going with them; it **is** his ship, after all.

Along the way he tries to think of a way to get more information about the social structures followed here, but after the way the chamberlain reacted it seems any overt queries would be likely to cause offense, so he settles for observation for the time being. At least this explains some of Ginevra's behavior... Bral must have been a terrible shock to her if her home is anything like this.

The two guards keeping an eye on the _Distraction_ bow politely, and everyone trundles up the plank with their burdens. While the servants are stowing things, Val calls Inez and Nyala to the bridge and, not without some difficulty, explains the situation as the locals understand it.

Inez's response is a strangled screech of outrage. Nyala sighs and shakes her head. "It would take a human to come up with something so foolish. Are we to remain pent here for the duration of our stay on this world, then?"

"I don't know about that--the chamberlain said something about finding a place in the city, but gave the impression that one of us, er, men, would have to be there to keep an eye on you."

"Dammit, captain--" Inez starts, red-faced.

"Just wait a while," he tells her. "We'll see how things go with their lord, and maybe we'll be able to work something out."

She's not pleased, and Nyala's annoyance is clear through her resigned air, but there's nothing to be done about it right now. At least they won't freeze.

Leaving them there, he returns through the gate and spends some time in the market, looking for needs Three Trees might fill.

* * *

Meanwhile, ibn Fadil is similarly occupied. First he picks up a minder and stops at the guard-house to see if he can get his weapons back. There is a certain amount of confused back-and-forth, as it turns out that the captain had the visitors' weapons taken to the castle armory, for lack of any better place, and must now be tracked down to have them released. He's not completely happy about it, that much is clear, but of course now the lord has recognized the visitors as guests there is no reason to do otherwise.

Once he is rearmed (and much more comfortable for it), ibn Fadil leads the way back toward the shoemaker's shop. The cobbler seems a bit nervous, but provides the requested items, which are indeed quite fine and considerably warmer than what he's been making do with. The mumbling man looks curiously at his coins but accepts them, perhaps reassured by the guard's presence.

As they walk, he finds out the soldier's name and peppers him with interested questions about the city, the buildings, the guilds, and the temples. The guard's name is Pawl, he seems to be in his early thirties, and he willingly answers questions although he does not often volunteer information.

The guild halls occupy a part of the city the visitors had not yet been to, where the buildings are larger and the streets slightly wider, definitely the upscale section of the city. On the way to it they pass what is identified as the main temple, a rather large enclosure actually abutting the castle wall--this is in fact Alais' destination, as he has inquired after maps and archives, which it seems are kept by the priests here. Pawl is reluctant to speak much of the gods; it seems there is a pantheon with a very clearly defined structure.

"I don't know much about Marek's mysteries," he admits. "I mean he sends the storms, everyone knows that, and there's the ritual before a hunt or a battle. There are others... a priest could say better than I. Festival just a few days away," he adds with a rare smile. "Be a good one."

"What sort of festival? I mean, what do your folk do in such celebrations?" ibn Fadil asks, absently wondering what it means that the leading deity here is a storm-god, and that the man seems to know so little about the others. Pham might have an idea.

"Food, drink, fights. There's the big procession, of course, and the games. Hope I don't draw duty."

"Fights for entertainment? Well, I am partial to horse-racing, myself."

"In the summer," he shrugs. "This time of year, well... people get bored. Kind of lets off the tension a bit, at festival."

The guild halls are clustered around a narrow square full of men hawking things from carts, beggars, and people hustling about their daily business. Many of them pause to stare at ibn Fadil; they all seem to recognize his "minder" but in a place this size it would not be difficult to know virtually everyone. It is somewhat like Bral that way. The halls themselves are decorated with painted carvings, their bright colors somewhat dulled by exposure to the elements, which identify their business.

The Zakharan responds to stares with a pleasant smile, and looks at the halls to try to get an idea of what this place's major areas of commerce are. As he walks about, he fishes out a copper coin and gives it to one of the more alert-looking beggars.

He accepts it gratefully, though not without a glance at Pawl. Noticing that, ibn Fadil wonders how easy it really is to set a foot wrong here. He explores the market thoroughly, unobtrusively listening to conversations and trying to get a better feel for how things work on the street. Actually talking to the guildsmen is something he probably ought to do with Valarin, since he is taking the trouble to support the young man's authority as captain. He keeps his eyes open for unusual lacks, and also for possible markets he's more familiar with, as well as for displays of particular artistry; and any unusual or unfamiliar materials in use.

Garlic and herbs seem to be plentiful but there aren't any spices in the air. Hiro shares a shrug with Fadil. Both men come from cultures that thrived on spices. A walk through any Karatur or Zakharan market place would have been an aromatic adventure. Hiro pities the palettes of the Rigolians.

Ibn Fadil amuses himself for a few moments wondering if he'll be able to talk His Lordship into letting him cook something for him to demonstrate some of the spices they have aboard. Then, seeing a vendor selling hot apple cider, he is struck by inspiration - ask the servants at the castle to mull some wine or cider 'for their group.' He even has some packets of spices made up for the purpose in the *_Distraction_*'s galley. Pleased, he stops to buy and drink a cup of the vendor's cider, offering to get one for Hiro and Pawl as well.

Hiro bows his head in acceptance. Once Ibn Fadil has paid the vendor Hiro passes the cup to their minder before letting his own warm his hands. He wafts the steam and scent and breathes deeply. Pawl demurs.

Continuing their rambling tour, ibn Fadil observe that cloth seems to be mostly wool, and a brush past a market stall suggests not terribly fine wool at that. The animals here do grow very fine pelts, and a surprisingly common form of decoration is small, carved ivory figures sewn as a sort of fringe to a garment. There is a spectrum of wealth evidenced by quality and ornament, as he saw in the cobbler's shop, and certainly some houses are far grander than others.

It is too late in the day for the clothes shopping he hoped to do, so they make a trip back to the *_Distraction_* to pick up the spices (and ibn Fadil's tools), and to say hello to a coolly amused Nyala and the still-fuming Inez.

"We will be fine here," the elf assures them dryly. "I believe our only danger to be dying of boredom. Assure Emmett that we will keep watch on our guards, as they do on us."

"This trip had better be worth the effort of not starting an incident," the Zakharan gripes, shaking his head. "I clearly recall the last time I was so angry ... but we still need to discover what

they have here that is worth shipping iron between spheres to get. That cannot be too soon for me."

Although, it occurs to him, it may be the other way around. If the metal is rare enough that selling it here brings them particularly good profits, whatever they can export for sale elsewhere would be a bonus. Not their usual *modus operandi*, but....

On the way back to the palace, he remembers to ask Pawl, "Your lord mentioned that other spelljammers are trading with someone named Durrell. Do you know who that is?"

"Lord Durrell?" He seems surprised. "Of course. Most everyone knows *of* him, I think." He waves vaguely inland. "Long way from here. His family is very powerful. These past few years there have been rumors...."

"What rumors?"

"They get pretty strange. News isn't, well, not always reliable. But some say he's got a deal with the Deep King. But you say he's working with, er, people like you?"

"So we have heard. Or rather, he is supposed to be trading with another company somewhat like ours. In fact, if our information is correct, he married a daughter to a member of the family that owns the other company." The response to that news, he thinks, could be interesting.

"Could be," he shrugs. "I didn't hear nothing about that, but then I don't know too much about politics. F'I remember aright he'd a whole handful of girls. Have to do something with 'em, even if you're a lord, I suppose."

"What rumors have *you* been hearing? Who is the Deep King?"

"King of the dwarves. But they say he's been--Lord Durrell, I mean--buying all kinds of things, and the dwarves is the only ones he might get them from, though if it be he's got these other sources...." He shrugs. "And he's got a wizard now, or more than one. Way in the backcountry like that, who knows what kind of things go on? Would hardly be the first time some lord decided to strike out on his own. Not," he adds hastily, "that I'm saying he is. Just idle talk, is all it is."

"He's been buying all kinds of things? Such as?" Ibn Fadil makes a mental note to (try to) find out from Alais what the magic here seems to be like.

"Weapons, gems. Maybe magic things, too."

Hmm ... gems for off-world iron? Magic things? All being acquired by some backcountry lordling? The Zakharan knows how his own caliph would react to that sort of thing; he suddenly sees a visit to the "High King" in their immediate future. Assuming Tesfaye does not decide to keep them to himself ... "If I had a suspicious mind, I would say all that does not bode well. Tell me about your High King, please."

Pawl shrugs at the idea of boding. "Storms and wars, they come."

As they converse on the way back to the castle, ibn Fadil learns that the king's name is Roald (the II) Daray; he is relatively young and has been four years on the throne. He has a couple of young children but no designated heir. This dynasty has been in place for roughly two centuries, although the system of High Kings dates back about twice that far.

* * *

Alais has inquired of the chamberlain about maps, archives, and similar stores of information.

“Ah, you will wish to speak with Artur, at the temple,” the chamberlain replies. “If you will allow me, sir, I will conduct you to the temple and make introductions myself.” These people seem to treat wizards with very great respect.

Yestin coughs slightly. “Might I be permitted to accompany you, sirs?”

“Er.” The chamberlain is still palpably nervous about the big sentient. “Of course, of course.”

The three of them and one of the ever-present, patient guards leave the castle, turn left, make a turn around the wall and there see another gate; the walls of the castle and of the temple merge with one another.

The buildings in this enclosure are all round, and many of them are connected by bridges at the second or third story. Ereik bypasses the central structure and heads toward a narrow three-story cylinder to the rear of the complex.

“Good day to you,” a voice growls from the shadows, and for a moment the visitors think the aptly-named Artur is actually a bear, before the shape resolves into a short, heavy-set man wearing a fur cloak. The paws of the beast have been left intact, including claws; it was clearly an impressive creature in life.

The chamberlain explains their purpose, and leaves them in Artur’s care for the remainder of the afternoon. On each of the first two floors books and scrolls are chained to their shelves, purporting to contain the wisdom of the ages. Alais inquires firstly after maps and, while Yestin pokes aimlessly about, is able to deduce quite rapidly that these people do not know much about mapping, perhaps because they lack the benefit of an aerial view. Still, it’s a beginning, and he can get some idea of what’s where.

Having thoroughly examined the maps, Alais turns to the rest of the library. There are chronicles reciting the deeds of men of renown, records of harvests and catches and taxes, of births and deaths stretching back into bygone centuries, astronomical observations and mechanical theories and bestiaries, philosophical tomes and books of advice.

What there do not seem to be are any overtly religious works, outside of a few inspirational biographies; perhaps they’re stored by themselves?

Looking up from his work at the sound of a cleared throat, he sees that the sky is growing dark, and it is time to return to the castle.

* * *

That evening, as the storm gathers, they assemble again at the castle. The chamberlain fusses over them, asking how they find the city so far, and shows them to the castle’s main dining room, a vaulted chamber almost the size of the main hall where they had started the day. It appears that everyone in the castle not actually serving food is gathered there for the meal. At one end the head table sits on a low, raised platform, with the other tables stretching perpendicular away from it.

Ereik sees the Distraction’s crew settled at the head end of one of the long tables, among some of the guards they recognize and other men they don’t--Val gets to sit with the important people. Everyone seems to brought have his own, rather large, tankard, but this lack has been foreseen by Ereik and the visitors have been provided their own drinking vessels, which are filled by

servants who are staggering around with massive earthenware pitchers of beer. Most of the dishes and utensils are wooden, although it's a very hard wood with which the visitors are unfamiliar. Of course everyone has his own knife.

There are women in the room, most of them at their own table near the back of the hall, but some sitting quietly among the men on the long benches, perhaps beside their husbands.

A bit after sunset the lord and (presumably) lady arrive. Magnificent in fine wool and white furs, his cloak is clasped with a chunk of amber the size of a man's fist, and he wears what looks like a plain iron circlet, while her ornaments are silver. They are trailed by another, younger woman in plainer dress. Both women sit to the lord's left, while at his right is a large, glowering man with a massive grey beard. The latter stands; the hall falls silent as he speaks briefly in a dialect none of the visitors can follow. And then the food is served.

A vegetarian will probably starve on this planet. The mainstays are meat--not all of it identifiable--and fish, with some half-hearted root vegetables peeking timidly out here and there. Afterward, the chamberlain finds them again; His Lordship will receive them in the council chamber to see how they find Myrr thus far.

After dinner and assuring Lord Tesfaye that all is well, the visitors retire to their rooms. There are two rooms side by side, which from the looks of them are normally expected to house fewer people; it's a castle, therefore slightly cramped under the best of circumstances, and the place clearly wasn't designed with entertainment in mind. The beds are high and well-heaped with furs. Everything is sturdily built, despite the absence of metal fittings, and there has been attention paid to comfort where possible, so while not luxurious by any of the visitors' standards it is quite passable. Indeed, most of the furniture has been heavily carved and ornamented, and carved ivory faces and figures lurk among the eaves--although whether their presence is prophylactic or merely decorative, none of them can say.

A wind has come up along with the storm Brunon noticed on its way, and it howls relentlessly around the castle walls all night. By morning six inches of new snow have fallen, drifting heavily in places, but the clouds are breaking up. The day promises to be windy and cold.

Breakfast is served in the large hall, a buffet affair where guards and servants wander in and out, grabbing a bite between attending to their duties. The lord is nowhere to be seen, but as the visitors are finishing Erek bustles over to them with another man in tow. The latter is introduced as Luiz, His Lordship's tailor, and if the guests wish he will measure them for clothes more suited to the Rigolian climate.

"Captain," the chamberlain addresses Val, "His Lordship wishes to inspect your ship this afternoon, if you would."

After their fitting session, the group splits up for the day again. Alais returns to the library, this time looking for references to the Spelljammer in any of its possible guises, and also for information about what kind of magic is practiced on this world. On the former he finds nothing that can be certainly said to be evidence.

For the latter, it seems that wizards here do not commingle much with ordinary society, preferring a solitary life in distant retreats or small communities of learning. Some of the most accomplished attach themselves to the courts of great lords, providing or withholding aid in their endeavors as the humor takes them. They are traditionally much concerned with the movements of the stars and other divinatory arts, and with elemental manipulations, although tales of necromancy are not unknown....

While the young wizard pursues knowledge through the dusty books and scrolls, Val and ibn Fadil go out again to explore the marketplaces and look for items of trade and general interest before returning to conduct the lord on his tour of the *_Distraction_*. Poking in and out of shops and pausing at stalls, followed the while by a clearly bored guard, by noon they feel they have something of a grip on the local economy. There is certainly a market for fabrics and spices and possibly alcohol (though their beer is pretty darn good), while exotic furs and hides are to be had for the asking, as are ivory and some kinds of gems (amber among them), although others seem to be rare. There is also the matter of wood; some varieties, unfamiliar to the visitors, are employed here in place of metal. They may have properties the company could use to advantage. And Lord Tesfaye did mention their shipwrights; if last night's weather is anything like normal, as it seems to be, they must build very well.

One large, clearly well-off place turns out to be a metalsmith. With prices averaging from five to ten times what similar items would cost elsewhere, it is clear why even guardsmen carry only daggers most of the time. Even bronze goods are considerably more expensive than any the three of them have seen. The *_Distraction_* is not carrying much by way of metal goods outside of those necessary for repairs, but the few dozen swords, axes and so forth in her cargo would apparently fetch a handsome amount.

Val also notices what he suspects to be thief-sign here and there around the city, though of course it uses a completely different "language" than the ones with which he is familiar.

Having had his fill of the library the previous day, Yestin passes the morning with the off-duty guards at the castle. After some initial nervousness the men relax somewhat, and he spends most of the time answering questions, which seems to him a good beginning.

Meanwhile, Brother Pham also wanders the city, alone but for his quiet guardian. The common people here are somewhat reserved, or perhaps it's only that he is so clearly a stranger. He has seen the great temple, and the smaller shrines that occupy small niches along some streets, decorated with carved wooden and ivory animals, and sometimes with impressive antlers, tusks, or skins. Occasionally he sees a passer-by pause in front of one of these with a gesture of respect.

Late in the morning, walking through one of the city's markets, Pham is startled to find himself suddenly pulled to one side by a hand on his shoulder, but it is only his guard moving him out of the way--of someone important, he must assume, who is hurrying along the narrow way. The man glances at Pham in passing, and for a moment his eyes are wide in startled recognition as he sees the symbol of Hextor. No one else so far has shown the slightest sign of cognizance, and when Pham casually inquires later that day, his watchdog says he's never heard the name.

Emmett meets up with Brunon and another of the guards at the stable, as arranged.

"All right, friend Half-Man," the sergeant says, reasonably impressed with Emmett's facility, given his handicaps. They've given him a quiet horse. All three mounts are tall, sturdy creatures. Not speedy, but they look like they can handle the snow. "Whither shall we ride?"

"Where danger lurks!" Says the Half Man with enthusiasm. "No, on second thought, how about somewhere with some game?"

"We can but search," the sergeant shrugs, "and if we are in luck, we shall find only what we seek."

"Men make their own luck, then thank the gods for letting them." Emmett says, then spurs his mount forward. Being in the company of all soldiers - regular soldiers - again is bringing his elite forces attitude back to the fore, not that he is self aware enough to notice.

He probably also doesn't pick up on the somewhat bemused look the two locals exchange. Emmett just doesn't act the way they expect him to, and there's a faint undercurrent of "Is he putting us on? No, I don't think he is..." in their thoughts.

Emmett spends some of the time talking looking at the local defenses and plying Brunon with questions about battles in the past, specifically those in the last war. There hasn't been any serious fighting here in recent years, but Brunon tells of caravans and barges attacked on their way to or from the mountains despite their guards, and the skirmishes that result from those.

As far as the castle itself, there are plenty of tales of the late, unlamented Lord Baris (spit), who wanted to be a king fifty-odd years back and was quite vehemently shown the error of his ways by the current king's father. They say there are still pieces of him on display in the capital.

"Well that's...thorough." Emmett's eyes are raking the woods looking for signs of game, but he keeps up a stream of talk "How are the caravans moved? Land, sea or air?"

"Air?" He sounds startled. "Ship to our port here, then they go up the river usually, overland when they get far enough up."

Emmett files that for a moment. "What's the local beer like? What's the brewing process?" At the men's explanations, Emmett nods. "Oh yeah. Had some of that last night. Hard to remember how much..." He shakes his head, as if clearing cobwebs. "Anything else? Wine, Whisky, Gin?"

"Wine, whiskey," Brunon agrees. "What's gin like?"

"Warming. It's got a kick. I think I have some somewhere. I'll give you a sip later."

After some further discourse on beverages, "Any followers of Gond?"

"Who?"

The half-man takes his amulet out from under his cloak. "Gond. He's the master craftsman, the worldsmith, the watchmaker. He's the god of technology. It was his power that put me back together after getting fireballed 3000 feet up. I'm not a cleric or anything, but I spread the things he teaches."

Emmett shrugs. "That came out wrong. OK, look, when you put your hand over a fire, you know how you can feel the air move up away from it?" At their nods, he continues "Air moves straight up when it gets too close to flame. So you can harness that by putting a big lightweight sack, a balloon, over the flame. The balloon fills up with the hot air, and then when the air has nowhere further to go, it pushes the balloon up into the air. If you tie things to the bottom of the balloon, they'll go up too. That's how you can move those caravan goods by air, where the bandits can't get to them - we did that on my homeworld - that and put surveyors and troops in them to get a good look over battlefields. And that's the sort of stuff Gond teaches you to do."

The two men again exchange a glance. "That's wizard talk, sounds like," the armsman Jack ventures after a moment. "Moving stuff around with air?"

As they discourse on Gond, Emmett looks at Jack "That's the whole point - it's not Wizard talk. It's just the way the world works, and anyone can use it. If someone told you that they were using fire to fuse earth with iron to make a substance that's almost impossible to break it would sound like Wizard talk too, but in the end you'd still have a sword."

"Are these... 'balloons' proof against dragons, then?" Brunon wants to know.

Emmett scans the skies. "You got a lot of those around here?" He chuckles "Well, you could put a lot of bowmen on one, or a wizard or two if you've got them. But how common are the dragons compared to the bandits?"

"More in the mountains, but that is where the caravans go... and they do come down once in a while. Must be twenty years since we saw one in these parts. But if you're up in the air, they might show a bit more interest." He shrugs a little. "Perhaps you should speak with the Guild of Artificers--I've a nephew apprenticed there. They are jealous of secrets of course, as guilds are."

The three men ride inland, along the river, but turn off into the woods before reaching the village where the Distraction first set down. Under its heavy blanket of snow, the world seems fresh-created, the crunch of hooves, creak of leather and steady huff of pluming breath the only sounds. Through the course of the morning they spy quite a few new tracks--rabbit, fox, ermine and lynx--and Emmett learns that many of the animals on this world change their coats for winter, even the deer. In the afternoon they spy a small herd of those, but a shift in the wind betrays them and the tall, spindly-legged creatures bound away, pale grey ghosts in the shadows among the trees.

They follow a few trails, more for the pleasure of the ride than in any real expectation of finding game, startling rabbits and birds here and there. The fourth time this happens Emmett goes up considerably in the estimation of the two guardsmen--three brown and gray birds the size of a grouse startle up out of a thicket almost underneath their horses' hooves, and even to his own surprise (not that he would ever admit it) Emmett's whip actually knocks one out of the air.

"Excellently done!"

Emmett smiles broadly, but says only "Dinner tonight!" The contribution is well appreciated, and the story is told several times that night.

Before the day can grow too late, they turn their horses homewards, talking now mostly about hunting. The simple cottagers have their snares and pens, of course, and lone huntsmen roam in search of meat in despite of the many dangers, but a proper hunt is held several times each autumn and winter, and half the castle packs up to follow the court into the forest for up to several weeks.

* * *

On the Distraction: "You know, this is *really* boring. Worse than being in space. I can't believe these people are so stupid."

"Quite. What shall we play next?"

"Dominoes?"

"Very well."

* * *

In dealing with the tailor, Val endeavors to ensure that something is provided for Inez and Nyala, and is assured that they will be provided for as well. As long as everyone maintains the appropriate social distance, it seems no one is concerned about the two women.

Ibn Fadil hesitates, not really wanting to owe anything more to these people, but it would be even more rude to refuse and he finally agrees.

"Captain," the chamberlain addresses Val, "His Lordship wishes to inspect your ship this afternoon, if you would."

"It would be my pleasure to give him a tour," Val replies in a friendly manner. Despite his outward appearance of cooperation and acceptance, these peoples' social conventions still rankle him.

Ibn Fadil will come along, and slip ahead to warn Nyala and Inez. "His lordship is coming to see the ship," he says. "Might be best to stay out of the way," he adds sourly.

"That we shall, most certainly. We had a visitor from the castle this morning--a seamstress, and no doubt what passes here for a respectable woman, for she would not say one more word than was necessary." There is an ironic glint in her bright eyes. "I hope you others are finding success."

Later that day, the tour goes on as planned. His Lordship appears surprised by how small the ship is, and seems to be deep in thought for much of the time.

"Captain," he says at last, "you may have heard, two days from now is to be the midwinter festival, which I hope you will all enjoy. If you wish to go masked, Erek will assist you. It is the tradition that afterward, the guild leaders hold a series of banquets. This may be a propitious time for us to ascertain what dealings there may be, now that you have seen somewhat of our city."

* * *

Meanwhile, Alais finds himself in a rather curious position--that is, as the object thereof. Word has obviously gotten around that he is in fact a wizard, and outside of travellers who may or may not be charlatans, the only one most of these people have ever seen in the flesh. Everywhere he goes a group follows at a discreet distance, whispering among themselves, fascinated but (so far) too nervous it seems to approach him directly.

Ibn Fadil is also being shadowed, but by a single person, he realizes as he continues his walking and observing. Relatively short and slight under the muffling, anonymous furs, probably not a woman given the way these people think. Ibn Fadil is curious, but with his "minder" tagging along he doesn't want to try to confront this person. Perhaps if he's still at it during the festival ...

Meanwhile, noticing his own little clutch of followers, Alais has no intention of letting them lurk about; he approaches them and opens conversation, much to their surprise. When they prove willing to respond--albeit nervously and with a great deal of overt respect--he starts telling them all about spelljamming, and the universe around them, and the history of the spheres and races, and stuff like that. Coincidentally enough, these lectures focus almost exclusively on theories that Alais likes, which tend to be out of the mainstream.

His listeners don't dare ask many questions, but they listen intently and he soon has quite a crowd standing around him in the square. Many are interested in what he can tell them about the other peoples of the spheres; interstellar geography doesn't make a great deal of sense to them, but the idea of neighbors does. A couple of guardsman walk by, pause, shrug, and walk on, baffled.

* * *

Making inquiries about the man who almost ran them down, Pham finds that his name is Telek Cenon, and his father heads the Guild of Artificers, makers of locks, clocks, jewelry, and musical instruments (except drums). They are one of the wealthiest and hence most powerful in the kingdom (guilds are linked between towns, it seems); they carry on contact with dwarves and wizards, and their secrets are legendary. Master Cenon has a reputation as a bit of a touchy sort. Pham locates the house easily, a formidable place in the better part of town, and of course the

guild hall on the square with the others, seeing a great deal of bustling traffic in preparation for the upcoming festivities.

In the evening, he finds a tavern, buys a cup of ale, and gets back to the business of trading stories. The forest looms large in the minds of these people; their depths hold horrors and wonders, gods and demons in equal measure, and in many a tale does the hunter become the hunted....

* * *

The following day, people begin arriving from the villages beyond the walls, packing into inns and homes, lofts and stables. Dinner at the castle is frugal, but conversation is animated and goes on far into the night as the men recount stories from previous years, and there are distant sounds and smells suggesting that work is well under way for the morrow.

Everyone is up early the next day. The visitors find themselves well-clothed at last, and Ereik remains at their disposal; this morning he is wearing a mask like an otter, and sleek brown pelts cover his robes.

Before dawn the drums begin and torches are lit across the city. People line the roads and peer from windows or perch on the treacherous rooftops to get a view as with a roar of fireworks the procession emerges from the gates of the temple, where the priests have been occupied in the private portion of the rituals all night. The highest priests are splendid in hides and furs, masks complete with claws and teeth--bears, wolves, magnificently antlered stags, boars, and a creature with an elongated snout and huge swooping tusks--surrounded by more simply garbed men chanting in an ancient language. The creatures enact mock battles, the watchers shout and stamp their feet and the drums boom on the walls. Everyone is brightly garbed and masked, the men like the priests as the animals of the forest, the women as birds, butterflies, or (rather startlingly) spiders. It's bitterly cold and no one seems to care.

Slowly the procession moves through the streets, snow melting in its wake under the heat of torches and the press of hundreds of feet. The battles are done; a bear has assumed the leadership, and as the sun rises they dance the completion of a circle, back to the plaza at the castle and temple, where those who drew the short straw have spent the entire time setting up tables groaning with food and drink (while those who have been tending the ovens and spits since midnight finally have respite). A platform has been erected in the center; the leading bear stomps and whirls his way up to it, grabs a flagon from a passing man and with a final spin flings its contents out over the crowd, which roars approval.

Every door in the city seems to be open, warming fires burn in the squares, jugglers, actors, singers and storytellers ply their arts, and contests are held for everything from wrestling to weaving. Given the freely flowing drink, the predicted fights are not long in erupting, and the crowd has the additional entertainment of watching guards toss hotheads head-first into snowbanks.

Emmett gets caught completely in the closing parts of the ceremony, stunned by the exuberance these people now display. After a drink or two he strips to the waist - reveal the broad stretch of leathern skin that might in the masquerade for once go unnoticed, jams a sturdy piece of wood over the point of his hook, and offers to wrestle all comers.

At first there is laughter-- "Don't hurt the little guy!" "What if he gets lost in the snow?" -- but eventually one young man decides to humor the visitor and promptly gets knocked on his butt. After doing that a couple of times the "cripple" is taken more seriously--which is to say, people start betting--and the crowd gets larger and more enthusiastic. It doesn't take too long for him to meet his match of course; the surprise of his strength can only work so many times, and size, skill,

and two functional hands do play a role, but everyone is decently impressed and there's toasting all around. Much of the afternoon is a blur of tales told, drinks drunk, and at some point Emmett being dunked head-first in a wine barrel by one of his erstwhile opponents.

Having made his request the previous day, ibn Fadil also receives a mask in the shape of a fox. He sticks to the quieter parts of the main crowd, feeling properly anonymous for the first time because of the new clothes and mask. He wishes he had dared to bring Nyala along, and keeps an eye out (as best he can with the mask on) for his shadow of the other day, but either he's not there, or he's just too hard to spot in the masked crowds.

Since there's no way for him to enjoy the party unobtrusively, Yestin makes himself popular with the guards by helping break up fights, sometimes just by doing a bit of looming. He also listens to all the poets and singers he comes across, and regularly shakes his head in amusement over the inability of humans to hold their drink.

Meanwhile, Alais is having a **fine** old time: 'Excuse me-what is the origin of this custom?' 'Could you explain the motifs used in this costume?' 'What language was that? Could you repeat that last stanza you chanted--I would swear I heard a grammatical construction of Old Elvish.' Eventually a junior priest wearing a cat mask is assigned to answer his questions just to keep him from bothering everyone else, and the young man has a hard time of it! It's a chance to learn about the gods here, and the early battles that shaped the world

As the sun sets things quiet down (a bit), if only because the most determined celebrants have already collapsed and been taken home; there is more singing and less shouting as the fires are allowed to die down. As darkness spreads people gather once again in the main square, where dozens of small wooden casks are being broached.

The liquid in them is measured out carefully into wooden cups, and no one drinks immediately, but instead waits for the bear-garbed high priest to climb the central platform and lead them in a toast to the king and to their lord, and the crowd then toasts the bear.

The drink is not quite like anything the travelers have experienced before; cold and somewhat sweet, like drinking starlight, and it considerably gives the drinker several moments to savor the experience before kicking him in the head. It's no wonder they save it for special occasions.

This is the end of the festival proper, but there is still a week's worth of feasting to look forward to as the local guilds display their wealth and generosity, and rumor says that after that His Lordship might order a hunt.

Alas, Emmett's taste buds are so deadened that he barely recalls this experience. A shame really, but what can you do?

Ibn Fadil, on the other hand, resolves to find out what the stuff is and whether he can buy a cask or six to bring back aboard the *_Distraction_* (but does it have to be kept cold, he wonders?).

* * *

The following morning, the visitors--variously bruised, hung over, and tired--are awakened by a considerable commotion that seems to be sweeping through the castle. It appears that some time last night, four bodies were left in the square, hidden enough by the snow that they were not discovered until dawn. The word "mutilated" recurs, and although there is a certain excitement about this there is also a sense that no one is really **surprised** about it. One of the bodies is that of the young man Pham noticed the other day.

Emmett, having cleverly consumed his weight in water after returning from the festival, is in better shape than one would credit - despite having gotten very little sleep. When the commotion drags him out of bed, he quickly tracks down Brunon and assumes an air of 'place' as if he belongs in any sort of inquiry to these events. He also checks around to make sure none of his friends are among the missing.

Ibn Fadil tags along in Emmett's wake, looking unwontedly gloomy even though he didn't drink much at all last night; this news reminds him of Bral and his worries about the friends he left behind there. Following Emmett's lead, he tries to fade into the other man's shadow, like a self-effacing assistant.

None of the visitors are missing. When Emmett and ibn Fadil track him down Brunon is heading out of the square and looking harried and, lacking Emmett's foresight, more than a little hungover. "What?" he demands.

Emmett has already been glancing over his shoulder, wondering what the half-elf is doing following him, when Brunon barked. "My crew's been accounted for, I was just wondering if there was anything I could do to help. Figure something like this, you'll need all the help you can get. "

"Not unless any of you saw anything last night." He stalks along for a few moments, muttering something that sounds like, "four months... last time."

"Right. I won't get in your way. You need help though, just ask." Emmett gives Brunon a sympathetic look, then starts planning out a better guard rotation for the crew members and the ship.

The sergeant's destination is one of the other guard posts, where he gives his fellows the news and makes inquiries; none of them saw anything.

It is clear from their reactions that this is not the first time this has happened, but it is the first time with multiple victims. All four were male, all like Telek upper-class and young. It is possible to almost see the waves of superstitious dread spreading through the city with the news.

Emmett shrugs, gives a jerk of the head to indicate to ibn Fadil to look around and heads back to the castle. There he visits the ship to check on the women and keep them up to date.

"If this thing is only killing men, then these yahoos probably suspect women. And even though this was going on before we got here, it's probably not a far leap to blaming us," he thinks on the way.

"What's going on?" Inez wants to know. "Heard all the noise yesterday, but Miss Fussy-Britches here didn't think it would be a good idea to sneak out and go to the party. I hope *you* had fun."

Nyala ignores this in perfect, frosty silence. Being here with no other company is clearly taking a toll.

Emmett looks from one to the other, realizing that things here probably have not been good.

"Town festival, and yes, it was exciting." He shrugs. "Everyone there was masked, and they let their hair down a little I'm sorry they didn't give me any warning about the masquerade part or I would have come to get you." The next words are out of his mouth before he can stop them, "Ibn Fadil had a mask made. I'm surprised he didn't come let you know...."

It's already pretty cold in the room, so it's hard to see how it can actually be getting colder...

"Anyway, last night some sicko cut up four townsfolk. All men, some sort of mutilation murder. I don't have much information yet - I have ibn Fadil looking into it, and I think Val is talk-

ing to the local lord. The Sergeant told me he'd keep me up to date, but I wanted to let you know as soon as possible. Apparently this isn't the first time this has happened, so we're not suspects at all. Still, be on your guard at night."

He glances between the two. "I'm also here to give one or both of you a break from isolated guard duty. I have a horse out front, and enough heavy furs to keep you both warm and comfortably masculine, or at least not feminine.... So the question is, do the two of you want to leave me here and go off together, Inez, do you want me to take you for a ride, or Nyala do you want to go off for a ride and leave us here? Wandering into the town is probably questionable, but this will at least give you some new scenery."

"If I may, I'm sure you two have lots of catching up to do," the elf says coolly.

"Be my guest," Inez replies, imitating her tone, and ignores her stalking out. "So...."

"Whew." Emmett sits down in one of the chairs. "I've been on battlefields less tense. What the hell is going on out here?"

"What?" she shrugs. "We're *bored*. Ran out of games, the ship's cleaner than she was before we launched her, and it's not like we've got a ton in common."

"Well, we're making nice nice with the locals, and hopefully we'll be able to hop up the chain soon and get to see someone with even more stature to make trade agreements. They have a lot of stuff that would see (sic), and they're metal poor, which gives us something to sell back.

"Hopefully this'll go quick and you won't be stuck out here much longer. A larger city would have to be more accepting than this place - at least enough to get you in the city."

"You could do that here, couldn't you? I mean, as long as I had an escort and wasn't wandering around on my lonesome? The captain did say that it would be all right with them as long as we had a man along to make sure we didn't get into trouble...."

Outside, Nyala keeps her head down as she passes the guards, and is soon riding south along the coast, enjoying sun, air, and *silence*. _The woman chatters more than Cog. Odd name for a bird. We truly must find some other arrangement soon, or the ship will be short a crew member._ She's somewhat surprised (perhaps uncharitably) by Emmett's thoughtfulness in arranging a means of temporary escape. She would have very much enjoyed a chance to explore further, or go hunting, and if there had been any of her own people on the planet, she would have been seriously tempted to not come back, but as it is, she gives them a good hour to get reacquainted before returning.

* * *

Meanwhile, the Zakharan's enthusiasm for looking around is almost nonexistent, but it's better than sitting in the castle letting his dislike of this place fester, and for that matter better than going out to visit Nyala and maybe deciding to stay out there ... he shrugs in his turn and wanders off in the general direction of the square. The visitors no longer have guards attached at all times--either they've been judged harmless or everyone is just too busy right now--but he notices the figure he saw the other day--or one very much like it--dogging his heels as he returns to the square.

Yestin is there, and visibly relieved to see him. "Where did Emmett go? The captain said to tell you we should try to stick together a bit until we know what's going on. He's going to try to see His Lordship," he adds, "and get some information, and Hiro's with him... they're not exactly first in line though. And I don't know where Alais and Pham are. One or the other of them might want to take a look at this." He leads the way around the guard house to the small yard--his efforts

at amiability appear to be paying off, as no one stops them--where the grisly findings have been laid on the snow and covered with a cloth. "I've never seen anything like this, was wondering if anyone else had." From the many shallow wounds it seems the killer or killers were interested in prolonging the event as much as possible. Some of them seem to form runes or arcane symbols, and each of the bodies has also been branded on the forehead with an unfamiliar mark.

"Konrad Iyasu, father owns a couple of ships; Telek Cenon, up and coming in the Artificers' Guild; Walter Rehema, similar; Gerard Negasi, family owns a lot of the land around here I gather. Of course it's pretty impossible trying to track where anybody was yesterday." The giff looks worried. "From what I can gather, people think someone was trying to put a curse on the town, doing it during the festival. I don't know what to think," he admits.

Ibn Fadil is no stranger to violent death, but this is something else again. He takes looks at the bodies just enough to get the idea and then moves away again as quickly as he can without actually appearing to flee.

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"Worshippers of certain kinds of gods do this sort of thing," ibn Fadil muses. "I was warned about it once. Possibly more has been imported from the other worlds than just iron, if the locals really do not know what it is." He glances around the square, avoiding the area where the bodies are. "Pham should certainly see this. He was still at the castle when I left. Shall we go back and bring him? And someone is following me. Back me up on trying to speak with him, will you?"

"Of course." He, too, looks around. "Is he here?"

"Somewhere. Let us try not to scare him off, please; I am curious."

The half-elf takes off from the square at his usual pace, apparently leaving Yestin behind, then speeds up to make the follower have to hurry, and waits around a corner for him to catch up. "Did you want something?" he asks the person, in a mild tone.

"Me sir?" The voice squeaks a little. "No. Uh, no."

"Then why were you following me?" He moves a step or two, to partially block the person's forward progress.

"Follow... uh, excuse me?" He backs up a step. At this point ibn Fadil can see that he is confronting a youth. He can also see Yestin hovering at the corner, ready to move.

'Young' does not necessarily mean 'harmless,' of course. Ibn Fadil lets some impatience show. "I have been followed by *much* more talented individuals than you, lad. Just tell me what you want."

"Um. Well I just... uh, was curious, is all. I mean, I guess you guys came from really far away?"

"Not far away enough," he says sourly. "Look, I would be happy to talk with you some time, but I really dislike being followed around, all right? It makes me nervous. Especially what with people being murdered and all."

"Right." Vigorous nodding. "Um... okay." He backs up another step.

He comes up with something that at least resembles a smile. "Good. See you around, then. Nothing to worry about after all, Yestin," he adds, turning to continue on his way. He lets the giff catch up and walk along with him.

Left behind, the boy heaves a relieved sigh, shakes his head. "He's gonna kill me."

"This place seemed so tame ..." ibn Fadil comments to the giff as they return to the castle. Finding Pham already gone when they get back, he looks up Valarin instead, to get the latest news and trade Yestin for Hiro. He feels that perhaps a good sparring session with the kensai (which he has not done since they got here) will improve his mood a bit.

"Haven't been able to speak to His Lordship yet," Val tells them, looking distracted and to the half-elf's eyes somewhat aggravated at spending half the day waiting. "Word from those who have is that it will be business as usual while the Guard and the priests look into it. Even better, there's company coming--one of Tesfaye's kids is due in any day now, so they may need the guest rooms for his people." He runs his hand through his hair in the familiar gesture. "We need to stay long enough to talk to the guilds, at least... crew meeting tonight, tell the others if you seem them? Damn," he remembers the problematic local customs. "Hm. No, we'll meet on the ship, they can think what they like. And I'll let you all know what else I've been able to find out. Keep your ears open." He grins a little, knowing the advice is unnecessary.

Upon hearing ibn Fadil's request, Hiro simply nods; he hasn't had a good workout in a while himself. The two men go down to the castle yard, where there is an area near the barracks set aside for just such use.

The two begin slowly, warming up (literally) and work up to full speed. The bout soon falls into a rhythm of fast exchanges punctuated by pauses for the mock combatants to regain their breath.

Within a very short while a dozen people have gathered. The guards and messengers hurry-ing this way and that as a result of the morning's events slow as they pass and linger for a moment, watching. Even Feliks spends a few moments observing.

Clearly they appreciate Hiro's skill--and perhaps the distraction from the morning's horror--and there are occasional exclamations of surprise at ibn Fadil's quick moments. Hiro is, if anything, more stoic and silent with an audience than he is without. There is scattered applause when they finish up.

"Full of surprises, aren't you," the guard captain comments to no one in particular, and goes on his way.

Others of the crowd hang around for a bit, some of them asking questions, most of which are turned aside by Hiro's taciturn countenance. Some of the guards display a practical curiosity, wanting to see a particular move, others are interested in the cultures that produced ways of fighting so different from each other and from that practiced by the Rigolians, and nearly all of them want a closer look at the strangers' weapons.

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His good cheer more or less restored, Ibn Fadil is happy to answer questions, in his best self-deprecating manner: "You may have noticed, friends, that I am rather short ..." He has a few

comments about the origins of differing styles, such as, "Zakhara tends to be very hot, which discourages the use of armor except among those who enjoy heat-stroke ..." He knows a bit about Kara-Tur, as well (generally and from talking to Pham), not to mention the weird mix that could be called the Spelljamming culture.

If anyone asks him about his own training (as they probably will), his apparently careless answers will make it fairly clear that he started with private tutors. He seems blithely oblivious to any effect this revelation of past wealth and/or noble status may have on these rank-conscious people. All his training after he left home (he seems to claim without actually lying about it) was informal, like these practice bouts with Hiro. "Making it up as I go along, you know ..."

Mostly, they seem intrigued; on the whole it looks as if at least some of the natives are growing comfortable with the idea their visitors represent.

* * *

Alais wanders down to the yard eventually. "Here now, what's all the commotion--oh. Oh dear. What are those symbols? They look familiar..."

And they do in fact strike a vague bell in the eclectic archives that fill the back of the young wizard's mind. He has not seen these before, he decides, but ones like them, much as different calligraphic hands can render a letter almost unrecognizable. They ring of destruction and chaos, and as he kneels in the snow seem almost to form words, tantalizingly on the edge of comprehension.

While he's trying to decide whom to tell about this, Pham arrives. He had spent much of the festival going from group to group, trading tales as is his calling. Of course, such social environments require one to follow the local customs. In short, Pham has been doing a very pious version of bar hopping.

The tales were marvellous, both the telling and the listening. The tale of the foolish dwarf citadel played to crowds in turn both amused and smug at the dwarven duplicity, and horrified at the end result. Pham collected tales of hunting, of the crowning of the high king, fighting dragons and bandits in the mountains... at least, he thinks that's what they were. No matter; Hextor heard them, even if Pham's poor mortal brain can't sort them all out at the moment.

So it's not surprising when a rather haggard looking Brother Pham arrives late at the scene of the murders. He takes a look at the young man he'd been trying to find, swears softly in a language none of his companions except Hiro understands, and looks at the marks on the bodies.

He recognizes some of them from old texts his mentor carried--not for use, but for warning. Symbols of ill omen, of death and misfortune, not necessarily magical in themselves, but they could have been used as part of a ritual, if only to amplify the victim's fear and heighten the alarm of the townsfolk. And they are alarmed, make no mistake. The guards present eye everyone--including each other--extra carefully this morning.

As he ponders, a discreet cough sounds behind them. "Pardon me, sirs." It's young Tomek, looking decidedly less keen than usual. "There's people from the temple come to take them away." Two wagons and a half dozen somber junior priests are waiting; some of them don't look terribly happy about the outsiders examining their dead.

That evening after supper the visitors gather in their chamber to discuss plans and hear what their captain has to tell them.

"Well, it wasn't easy but I got a few words out of His Lordship about what's been going on. They've had this sort of thing before, and they don't seem to suspect us of anything. I don't know that this is anything we want to get involved in, to be honest, although," he looks at Alais, "he did seem to be suggesting a few times that given our mighty magical resources, if we should stumble across anything they'd be happy to hear it.

"In the meantime, it looks as if they're determined to keep things as normal as they can. The blacksmiths' banquet is tomorrow night, some of us ought to put in an appearance. After that," he spreads his hands questioningly, "I really don't know. We seem to be making progress, and it seems that the company can do business here, even if the people are a little... odd. But we haven't really discussed things since we landed, so I thought it might be a good idea to talk about it."

Diffidently, ibn Fadil says, "I think, sir, that we should angle for an introduction to the High King. Our presence here has political implications that no one is likely to overlook, and opening relations with him should quiet any concerns about that." He wonders, looking

around the table, whether any of his crewmates understood that. "I think I mentioned," he amplifies, "that according to rumor, Victor & Sons seems to actually be arming some back-country lordling?"

Val nods. "That does seem to be the case, and I expect we'll get that introduction. Tesfaye can't exactly keep us a secret, but he'll play things to his own advantage as far as he can. I'm pretty sure one of the ships that's gone out in the past few days was headed for the

capital, with any luck it won't be too long getting back." He looks at the others to see if they have anything to add...

"Ibn Fadil, would you go out to the ship and let Nyala and Inez know, and see if they have anything to add? I hate to leave them out of this, but it might look odd if all of us went out there. Only one, they'll think up their own explanation." He grimaces in some distaste.

The Zakharan stifles an recurrence of the anger that so nearly got him in trouble before, and just nods.

The night is very quiet. The guard at the castle does ask where he's going, but appears satisfied with the half-elf's terse reply. There are lights aboard ship; another bored guard nods a greeting.

The ship is quiet; a clatter from the galley and familiar footsteps suggests Inez is there alone.

"Hello!" he calls, to the ship in general.

"Hey," a cheerful voice calls back from the galley, and there are also quiet steps from the rear deck where the plants are kept.

"Good evening," Nyala greets him, a trifle coolly. "News from town?"

"You could call it that, I suppose," he says, flinging himself down at a table in the galley. "His lordship seems content to look for culprits among the locals. The blacksmiths are holding some sort of party tomorrow evening and I suppose I will go along with Valarin. Hopefully it won't be long before we manage an introduction to the High King and move to his city. Where," he adds, glancing around the cold, cramped room, "we'll have to work out a better place for you to stay - either with the rest of us or at an inn or something. We still cannot be sure when we will be leaving this ball of ice," he concludes.

"A change of scenery would certainly be welcome."

"Definitely," he agrees. Despite his best intentions, the knowledge of the whole uncomfortable reason for the ladies' being out here preys on his mind and he can't really relax. "Umm ... round of cards or something?"

"I think we have had enough of cards. Perhaps a walk," she suggests with a barely-noticeable glance at Inez, who looks slightly smug.

A walk? In this weather? he doesn't say, not being entirely devoid of sense. "All right," he says agreeably, getting up again. "Where to?"

"It seems they would not object to our presence within the walls so long as we are duly chaperoned, and I have yet to see any of this place...."

"I suppose there would be no problem with that." As they make their way out of the ship he adds in Elvish, "But I cannot claim to really understand these folk. The matter makes me too angry to talk about it, so I have not learned as much as I should."

She shrugs. "Surely you have encountered stranger in your travels?"

They begin walking through the snow, toward the city walls.

"Huh. Stranger, yes." He kicks an unoffending patch of snow. "I have never been so thoroughly insulted, however. I know it was not precisely intentional, but ... the sooner we get off this place, the better."

"Even human bureaucracies operate slowly; I would not expect too much, particularly if as Emmett says they have troubles of their own. I do not mind the insult half so much as the confinement."

The gate guard checks them, does a bit of a double-take upon seeing Nyala, and passes them.

They wander without much aim, talking little. The quiet sounds of their boots in the snow, an occasional clump falling from a roof, a snatch of voices from a room as they pass--these seem to only deepen the quiet.

So the sound of someone beginning to follow them as they move through the narrow streets is not at all difficult for ibn Fadil to pick out. He is just beginning to get annoyed about this when he realizes that the sounds are coming from both directions, and with some speed now.

And then someone needlessly yells, "Look out!"

It would appear that they are about to be under attack.

* * *

After the meeting breaks up, Val ponders for a bit, then goes out into the town to look around the blacksmiths' square. He notes that either their hosts are feeling more trusting, or their chaperones are being far more discreet than they used to be.

From talking to the city leaders over the past few days, he knows that the banquets are half celebration, half-political affairs to show off the wealth of the guild. Junior members will be advanced, apprentices sponsored, the masters will show off their best work, the gods will be honored and gifts made to important people. Under the circumstances, most people agree that going on is the right thing to do, but they expect the event to be more subdued than normal, and there have been murmurs of dissent, primarily from those connected to the families who lost sons.

There are five smithies in town--fewer perhaps than he would have expected in a place this size--each presided over by a master (or several working in partnership) and employing a dozen or

so journeymen and apprentices. They do very well, being in the enviable position of selling a highly-priced necessity, while the guild structure ensures that business is distributed relatively evenly. The dead of winter is generally a slow time, and indeed all seems quiet as he walks past the elaborately carved buildings.

* * *

Ibn Fadil finishes drawing his sword and ducks out of the immediate line of attack, Nyala's reaction a mere half-moment slower than his as he assesses the situation. There are five attackers, nondescriptly dressed and wearing rudimentary masks; no obvious room to retreat here. He draws and throws a knife at the threesome, not really aiming but hoping to slow them down a bit, telling Nyala "Follow!" in Elvish, then charges the lead man of the smaller group -- while giving voice to an alarming Zakharan war cry.

There is a shuffling sound and a brief cry of consternation from the party toward which the knife was thrown, but ibn Fadil's main attention is focused on the group in front of him--though he does wonder who shouted the warning, there is no time to look for the source of the voice. Presumably not one of these two rather large humans blocking his way, apparently unintimidated. They carry heavy staves at the ready, and long knives in their belts. A quiet sound behind him indicates Nyala has drawn her rapier.

The war cry does echo through the otherwise quiet streets. "Oh gods," Val mutters under his breath, recognizing the half-elf's yell. He quickly makes his way towards where he heard the sound, hoping he won't come upon an angry crowd trying to torch the Distraction. Or possibly something worse...

As the fight continues, ibn Fadil inflicts a cut on the arm of one of the men, but they stand firm in the way, and in fact the other man delivers a solid and quite painful thump with his staff, sending the half-elf badly enough off balance for his next thrust to miss.

After a couple moments of dodging about he has badly wounded both of them; he has the advantage of being able to see considerably better than they can, and the two men are retreating. Judging from the yelps and curses behind him, Nyala is doing well on that side of the business--though a number of the curses are hers.

"Give it up already!" he says to the men - irritably, as if this is no more than an inconvenience. He also gives them a little room to run off, should they choose to do so.

This they do, limping but with some alacrity.

"I do not *believe* this," an aggrieved voice complains from higher up. Ibn Fadil now recognizes the voice as that of his young stalker, who had given the warning, and who is leaning out from an open third-floor window, watching events. "You let them *go*?"

The Zakharan looks up at the youth, his eyes narrowing into angry slits. "Dead men cannot answer questions," he says; by his tone there can be no doubt that the men would be dead if he wanted them to be.

He ignores whatever response the boy has--

which is a muttered, "All well and good for *you*..." and the sound of the window closing --and speaks quietly to Nyala in Elvish. "I recall you said you were an indifferent sword-fighter," he remarks.

"They were worse," she replies with a shrug.

He gives her a quick, pleased grin before turning his attention back to their surroundings.

More running footsteps turn out to be those of Valarin and several guardsmen. Nyala prudently sheaths her weapon and redrapes her cloak to conceal its line somewhat.

Ibn Fadil puts his own sword away a little more slowly and meets Valarin's eyes. "Bit of trouble with the locals, sir," he says blandly, though his posture still betrays a certain tension.

"Who is that there?" one of the guards demands. A torch is brought closer. "Oh, you. What's all this about, then?"

"Ambush, assault, and mayhem," the half-elf replies. "If you look, you'll find at least two wounded men..." He describes the wounds he dealt his two quite matter-of-factly, then turns to Nyala. "And how did you mark yours?"

"Me, my lord?" Her fluttered lashes are alas, most likely wasted in the dim light. "I fear perhaps these ruffians have dealt you a blow to the head. They ran off in that direction."

"Oh, very funny. As if I could run off five thugs by myself."

"*Clearly* they were a cowardly lot of criminals," she says, giving him a quick warning look.

"Glad you both didn't get hurt, then," the guardsman said, looking a trifle confused by the byplay. "Don't get that sort of thing in this part of town, generally. And five of them, you say? I don't suppose you saw anything that might identify them?"

Val attempts to catch ibn Fadil's gaze long enough to imply "Go along with Nyala."

Not quite grinding his teeth (what is Nyala *up* to?), ibn Fadil describes the two men in some detail, and the other three with rather less, knowing as he does so that there was nothing distinctive about them; and repeats the description of the wounds two of them are suffering. And he wonders if not mentioning the youth will bring him any benefit in the long run...

The young captain keeps alert for any others in the area, anything out of the ordinary as ibn Fadil talks to the guardsman. Val relaxes a bit and begins to pay more attention to his crew, trying to figure out why the two of them got ambushed, and what is going on. Why were they out here in the open? What were they thinking? At least neither of them seems to be in serious need of medical attention.

Of course, Nyala and Inez *have* been cooped up in the Distraction for a long time. Maybe it's time we all got out of here and had some room to stretch our legs, he thinks to himself guiltily.

"I think we'd best get back now," Val says sliding behind a facade to deal with the guardsman in a professional manner. His tone suggests he isn't in the mood to be contradicted.

The leader of the guard squad hesitantly offers an escort, but there's really no need. There is more noise, lights, and people around now -- guards fanning out to look for the attackers, a few awakened residents wanting to know what happened now that things seem safe.

"I am sorry," Nyala says when they're out of earshot, "but on this at least Emmett is on the mark; if they think I am useless, they put themselves at a disadvantage -- as did these three men tonight -- and of course their estimation of your own prowess will rise." She gives him a little smile and a faint wince. "Truth, I was perhaps not *so* bored as all that, but this has certainly been an exciting evening."

Ibn Fadil mutters something uncomplimentary about the locals, but he is paying more attention to their surroundings, trying to see if that nosy youth is by chance lurking in the background; there is no sign of him at the moment.

Val also shows signs of unease as they return to the women's "accommodations."

"What, or whom, exactly are you looking for?" he asks ibn Fadil in hushed tones as they continue along. "Think there will be another attack? And while we're at it, what *was* that all about?!"

"No idea," he says, answering the last questions first. "I think I have met someone who knows, but I will have to find him again."

"That may present something of a challenge," Nyala notes.

"Not necessarily," he answers blandly. "He was watching our set-to from a third floor window. In a few moments I will double back and find out if he is still there. If you have no objection, Captain."

Unsure of the situation still, Val looks to Nyala for some indication he should not let ibn Fadil do this, then reluctantly, he nods assent. They do need to know what's going on...

"Be careful," Val says quietly, continuing on without looking at the Zakharan.

In a particularly shadowy street, the Zakharan peels off and vanishes. He circles back, as quietly and invisibly as possible, to the street where the episode took place, and approaches with caution, watching and listening to see what is going on.

It's still kind of crowded and noisy, with guards running around looking for the attackers and not doing much but get in each others' way. Eventually they seem to have satisfied themselves that the men are not lurking anywhere about, and gather into somewhat larger groups to make a foray into a corner of town the visitors have so far largely avoided. Quiet descends once again.

He watches for a bit longer, watching the building the youth was in, just in case he (or anyone else) was waiting for the fuss to be over before coming out, but that does not seem to be the case.

He ease's up to the building's door and finds it firmly barred. Looks around once more, gives a small sigh, and knocks on the door.

Response is quick; no doubt the dwellers were awakened by all the ruckus. "Who's there?" a gruff voice wants to know.

In for a penny... "Yusuf ibn Fadil Marwan. I would like to talk with the young man who spoke to me through the window not long ago."

"What? Ye're drunk, man, be off home." The confusion sounds genuine....

"Listen," he says patiently, "being attacked in the street outside your door was annoying, but not quite enough that I told the guardsmen this young man watched the whole thing. But I would like to speak with him myself."

The door opens a crack. A pair of wary eyes regard him for a moment; their owner grunts. "Ain't nobody up there. Not supposed to be.... Bide." He slams the door; ibn Fadil can hear aggravated muttering and heavy footfalls making their way up through the house, then returning. "As I said, ain't no one there. Now off with you or I'll call the watch."

"Hmm. Well, thank you for your time all the same." He nods politely and walks away. If he had known it was going to be useful, he reflects, he could have tried to get the lad's name the other day. He resumes inconspicuousness and finds the back of the house in question, just in case there's some obvious sign that the youth left that way. There is another window on that side. And though it's a bit hard to see given the angle and the darkness, he thinks it would be possible for someone agile to have gone out it, and over a couple of roofs.

Then, in the absence of any useful ideas, he drifts quietly along to look for trouble - that is, going in the direction the guardsmen went. Does this town even have a nightlife, he wonders?

There are some taverns open, and a couple of fights going on in them. Not much by way of high culture. He is making his way into a part of town where the buildings are in poor repair and the street side shrines few. The streets here meander randomly, and are narrower as well; he can reach out his arms and easily touch the buildings on each side.

From what he can see, the guards don't seem to be having any luck; not surprising in this warren. Someone else is, though; he can hear a single set of feet squeaking their way through the snow behind him -- it is hard to move quietly in all this.

"Hullo again. Change your mind?" the now-familiar voice inquires.

He turns to face this increasingly interesting person. "About not mentioning you to the guardsmen? Not yet."

"Well, that's some thanks. You needn't bother, I was just leaving."

"Eh? I meant that I had not mentioned you, and have no plans to do so."

"Oh. Well actually what I meant was, change your mind about getting rid of that lot. It's a little late if so, I don't know where they went." The figure stopped a wary distance away.

"At the moment I just want to know *who* they are. Maybe even what interests they represent. Then I can decide if they need killing or not." He is wary but not showing it.

"Oh, that. They work for Stoa. He sort of runs a lot of this." He gestures around at the decrepit neighborhood.

Ibn Fadil edits out an ironic remark on that. "Do Stoa's people usually go around in groups of five attacking people?"

"Not usually five, but you're pretty well-armed." The young man, or boy, it's hard to tell, is wearing a pack.

He thinks for a moment, using the pause to listen for any other people nearby. "I would not have guessed that your city had a problem with robbery."

"Well, I've noticed that a lot in life depends on where you are. Some do, some don't."

There's no one approaching, although there are distant noises of various sorts, some possibly the still-searching guards.

Not sure what to make of that remark, the half-elf redirects the conversation. "Do *you* work for Stoa?"

"In the most nice and accurate sense of the word, no. I think he's going to be more than a little pissed off at me, actually." He sighs a little, shakes his head, and flashes a bright smile. "Ah, well. The world awaits! Good luck to you and your comrades."

"Traveling on foot in winter is dangerous," ibn Fadil observes hastily.

"So is staying here."

"How would you like to visit the castle? I think I should like to talk to my captain before you disappear."

"I'd love to, but ever since I was small I've had an irrational fear of being surrounded by heavily armed men...."

"Do they have any reason to detain you? That they would know of, that is."

"Not that I know of, but I've already done a few stupid things today, I think I'd better quit while I can."

"Either I am being too obtuse, or you are not so clever as I thought," the half-elf remarks. "Would you like a chance to travel among the spheres, by which I mean to other worlds, or not?"

"Er... I beg your pardon?" Upon repetition, "That's what I thought you said. That's certainly an... interesting thought." He hesitates. "Worth talking about, no doubt."

"We can talk some place warm," ibn Fadil says firmly. "Like at the castle, where Captain Valarin is, who is the one who gets to say yes or no to this idea." At the very least, he reflects, they might be able to learn a bit more about this Stoat and his connections. "If he says no," he adds, "I think I can talk him into taking you with us as far as the capitol." Can the lad resist a good chance of a trip in a flying ship?

"That does have several clear advantages over walking...."

"By the way, do you have a name?"

"Michal. And I believe the castle is this way...."

* * *

Meanwhile, as Emmett considers the situation, he can't help but become aware of a looming giffish presence in the room.

Yestin coughs uncomfortably. "Sorry. Could I get your advice on something?"

"Of course," Emmett smiles "You are my superior officer, after all. What can I do for you?"

He leads the way downstairs, to the large dining chamber, where in the whispery glow of the fires young Tomek appears to be busy drinking himself glassy-eyed.

"He *says*," the giff says quietly, "he knows what killed those men, but that no one here believes him."

Emmett's eyebrows raise at that. "Well now...that's interesting." He gives Yestin a look "And you think he'd be more willing to chat with me than you? The boy has no taste. Yeah, I'll see what I can find out."

"He told me, but I'd rather you hear it from him and decide what you think."

Emmett wanders into the room, grabbing one of the chairs in his good hand and hooking a mug with his other. A casual flick spins the chair around so it's facing the young man and the hearth, and Emmett settles himself in it before holding his mug out to get some of whatever Tomek is destroying his liver with. "Spare a drop? It's been a hard couple of days."

He pushes the jug over without a word.

"Ya'know, the last time I saw someone doing exactly what you're going, it was back home. A guy had gone on a patrol and come back convinced that no one would believe what he saw up there - a cyclopean tentacled monstrosity of some sort - and was busy drinking to the point where he didn't half believe it any more either." Emmett knows he's being more blunt than usual, but given Tomek's obvious degree of inebriation, he's wondering whether even this sledgehammer method would be effective. "Course, the next time some other guys ran into it they hadn't be warned it was up there. Messy stuff. Maybe he just didn't know who to talk to."

After a moment he says, only a bit slurred, "There are things in the forest. Everybody knows that, knows the stories. Most don't believe them. I've seen them. Told him," he nods at Yestin. "Maybe you've seen things, too, out where you come from. Seen them."

His story is a bit disjointed and tends to ramble, but it goes like this: several years ago, in the late autumn, Tomek had been out in the forest with his father and a few other men, hunting. They had been traveling for several days at this point, and he had been lagging behind, his mind not really on what he was doing, he admits conscientiously, but he's still not sure how he managed to lose sight of them entirely. They were much deeper in the forest than he had ever been before, and he wandered in the gloom under the trees for what seemed like hours before he saw a small light in the distance. It seemed to move around, to move away as he went toward it, until finally he had stopped, exhausted, at the edge of a little clearing. He had woken at the sound of hoofbeats and a deer's bleating, and something on the edge of hearing that may have been laughter. The clearing was now full of things, barely visible, all of them smaller than a person but some larger than others. Some had wings, others didn't, some had claws and fangs, and they were killing the deer very slowly, just as those men had been killed.

He wants Emmett to be absolutely clear on the fact that he did **not** faint. There was a bright light, and a lot of sudden noise, and he doesn't remember anything else but waking up to find the clearing empty, with no sign of what had taken place. But it had happened, and with the help of the gods he had managed to find the others again that morning.

* * *

Alais heads over to the temple to investigate the remains. It takes some fast talking to get access, as funeral preparations are underway in the temple and the high priest is dubious about this entire idea, but between Alais' status as a wizard and the archivist's vouching for him, he is eventually permitted into the main building.

It's a large, open space, heavily decorated in dark wooden carvings and barely lit by occasional candles, the whole of it evoking the nature gods the Rigolians revere. The bodies are laid out on biers before an altar depicting a wolf, and covered by a red cloth. Two

priests hover nervously as Alais goes about his tests, preparing himself for a long night.

The bodies are not currently under any discernable enchantment. By dawn the Spectrometry spell turns up some results, however--there are very faint metallic traces in many of the wounds. Copper, silver, bronze, iron, and more.

In the course of his investigations, Alais notes that each wound contains traces of a single metal, but there appears no pattern of distribution beyond that; he hypothesizes that a variety of edged implements were used to effect the killings.

Having completed his spellcasting around midnight, Alais thinks about going to the city fathers and making loud accusation about the possible profession and skills of the murderers. Then he thinks better of it and goes to his fellow crew members with his findings. He's not asleep, no reason they should be.

"We need to look for someone with a collection of edged weapons made from a variety of metals," he informs the slightly groggy company. He adds, "I suspect a smith, black, white or orange, or perhaps an antique collector of some kind. The killing may also have some kind of ritual significance."

"Master Alais, what, pray tell, is an orange smith?" Pham wants to know.

"A smith that works in brass or bronze."

Emmett leans back in his chair, pushing it almost to the tipping point. "He may be right about that. Yestin and I got a blood-curdling little tale from one of the locals about seeing some

sort of animal slaughter in the woods that has all the wheels and spokes of a ritual activity. He described the figures as being inhuman, but we already know this city has a storehouse full of animal masks and costumes."

"This place may look like it's functioning on the outside, but there are rats in the gears, and no mistake." He lets the chair drop back forward. "The question is, what do we do about it? Who do we tell - our drinking buddy said no one here wanted to listen to him, and it's not like we have any authority."

"Is there a way I could talk to the person who mentioned the sacrifice?"

There doesn't seem to be any reason not to, and the lad in question is quickly roused from the barracks. Bleary-eyed barely begins to describe the young man, and it's clear that he's still suffering the immediate effects of his binge -- never mind how he'll feel in the morning.

Emmett produces the waterskin he had prepared for this purpose, offering it to the young man "This'll help. Trust me."

As Tomek is gingerly downing a few swallows, Emmett whispers to Alais 'Go easy on him - he's had a rough time of it and you can be a little...intense."

"Look, Master Alais, the wizard, is looking into the recent deaths. Why don't you tell him what you told us, to give him a better picture of what we're dealing with?"

Somewhat astonished by all these attentive listeners, Tomek retells his story. He doesn't seem to be embellishing it beyond what he had previously said; whether or not he saw what he says he did, he certainly **thinks** he did. But he is also certain that the beings he saw were much smaller than a man.

Brother Pham listens intently as well. "In many spheres there are stories of fey creatures that behave in ways similar to what you describe. I've never heard that precise combination before, but each sphere is, of course, its own. Tell me young man, when you were looking at the creatures, was there ever a case where you thought that they are for one moment small, then for another man-sized?"

He frowns, shakes his head. "I... I don't know. I could barely see them at all, most of the time."

"Still, normally such creatures would stay well into the primeval forest, for they fear the cities of men. They fear the..." Pham strikes his forehead. "Of course. Master Alais, you know this - what's the biggest fear that the fey have?" Pham looks to the mage expectantly, but then before he can get the answer out "Cold iron of course! On a rockball like this there would be little to contain them!"

"The question remains, though - why these men in particular, and why now?"

"It's possible, but let's try to get some more evidence before we go chasing after unsupported theories. We must get closer to the scene of the evidence. Tomek, tomorrow you must lead Brother Pham and I to the site of this murder."

He blinks. "Sir, that's several days travel in summer! Even assuming I could find it again."

"Not a problem," Emmett assures him. "See, we've got this ship."

He looks a little green at the thought, but says, "If you really think it's worth it... I'll ask the captain."

And so, at a thoroughly unholy hour of the morning, plans are made. Val isn't thrilled, but assents to their use of the ship for a couple of days to check out Tomek's story. If they can solve

this little problem, or at least turn up some useful information, that might be just what they need to expedite moving up the chain of authority here. "Take Hiro, too, in case there's any trouble," he adds. "Yestin, ibn Fadil and I should be able to manage here. I'll get things sorted out with His Lordship."

Having arrived at the tail end of the meeting, ibn Fadil listens to Val's synopsis and introduces Michal.

"Michal. Fellow who was following me the other day. Incidentally, why were you doing that?"

"Just trying to learn more about you." In better light he turns out to be a quite unprepossessing young man--in his early teens, as best as ibn Fadil can judge, short for these parts (still a bit taller than the half-elf, of course) and painfully thin. Ibn Fadil can only surmise that he's survived here on a combination of wits and charm; certainly not muscle.

The half-elf wonders about that, but his strenuous day is finally catching up with him. Upon finding out why everyone else is still up, he puts on his best 'who am I to criticize' face and shrugs. If they want to go looking for beings that would rather remain hidden, that's their lookout; he just prays they don't get themselves killed and maroon him here.

* * *

The expeditionary force is quickly equipped for several days in the wilderness and--to the surprise and renewed awe of the townsfolk--the *_Distraction_* lifts off on her mission, with a distinctly pale Tomek on the bridge trying as best he can to give directions.

With the passing of years, the change in seasons, and the different angle of air travel, it is unfortunately not as simple as "Thataway." The ship spends most of the day on a meandering course, landing occasionally to gain the benefit of a more familiar perspective, and by early afternoon is over very deep forest, the plumes of smoke from farms and villages left far behind.

"I *think* it was around here," their guide says, squinting at the distant mountains. "That angle looks right, and this lake is where I remember it."

"Seeing things from the sky will do that to you." Emmett says to the nervous young man. "But this is as good a place to start as any. Pham, can you bring her down over there?" The half man points to a small natural clearing near the lake. "I'm going to go out and take a look around for recent travel and other movement. Anyone else coming down, don't wander off alone, keep steel on hand in case Pham's right. Tomek, you're coming with me. Carry this knife - it's good steel, and I borrowed it from the Captain for just this purpose."

He meets Nyala's withering glance with a shrug. "What? He's got about thirty of them."

This is most likely true. She sighs silently and checks her weaponry, wishing she had done better the previous night; some of those bruises are still painful. She's also keeping half an eye on Tomek, who clearly has no idea whatsoever how to react to the two women now that he's spending more than a few minutes in their company, and appears to have settled on ignoring them as much as possible. Inez has been making this difficult for him, with no little malice on her part; the elf has adopted a more compassionate attitude. She's glad to be out of the city as well, though concerned that ibn Fadil might be in danger from the local thugs.

With that the Half-Man is out of the ship, sliding down a rope from the hatch by the expedient of wrapping it once around his hook and using that as a brake to slow his descent. Once at the bottom he moves out of the way of others with his usual springy step--insofar as such is possible

in two feet of snow--taking in the chill with several deep lungfuls of fresh air. It's been years since he was on foot in deep woods, and while he swore at the time he would never miss it, it's obvious that a little part of him has.

Still, it's a pity there wasn't room for a mount on the ship - it would make the hunt easier. Dredging up what he remembers from his youth and applying what he knows about land tracking from altitude, the former griffin flyer bends his eye to the task of seeing if anyone has been in this area of late before the others come down and muddle the snow. Shadows under trees fall prey to the arcane light from his crystalline eye, and from the ship he looks a little ridiculous - a character detective from a penny drama hunting for clues.

There's nothing to suggest a human being has ever been here before. From what Tomek has said, and what they saw during the flight, towns and villages cluster mainly on waterways, and while people do go into the forests in the winter--hunting for food, or on less innocent errands--few who cannot muster a large and well-armed party venture far into their depths.

Fortunately, Emmett is sure that they constitute a well-armed if not large group. He glances back to the ship, glad to see that Nyala has taken the precaution of getting on deck with her bow. He trusts the elf's aim and eyesight to prevent anything from clambering onto his back during his little forest jaunt, and he does what he can to keep a clear line of fire between them. He is also, admittedly, showing off for the women.

"Pham, Alais, anything you can contribute about what these things might be? or where they might be?"

Drawing on the stories he has heard from a hundred spheres' travelers, Pham says, "Many tales suggest they might dwell in caves, or trees." He looks around. "Given their apparent size, we might be looking for something that would seem to us quite small... I suggest we look for rocky outcrops."

Once Tomek has caught up with his flamboyant exit, Emmett turns to him. "Still look like the place? If not, which way should we go?" He realizes that re-living these events could be hard on the young man, but it's probably for the best - if he can put these things behind him by dealing out some violence on the perpetrators, Tomek will likely sleep better at night.

Tomek looks around, brow furrowed as he casts his mind back to a different season several years ago. "That way. I think." Deeper into the forest.

"Hmmm... Could I get a couple of people to come down here with us? We'll follow on the ground, the rest of you keep your eyes peeled from the air and be ready to either pick us up or provide air support if something jumps out at us?"

Hiro and Alais join them on the ground, and Emmett indicates to Tomek to point the way, staying parallel and close to the young native - both to bolster his nerve and to keep his advance passage from altering the landscape. His eye is focused more on tracks and other signs of life, trusting his shipmates to keep a look out for attackers or other threats.

Alais trails along behind the two of them, Hiro keeping close by, inspecting the area thoroughly for metallic deposits or tracks, also for any signs of corpses or the like.

Again, the shadows of the forest are split asunder by the eldritch glow emanating from the Half-Man's prosthesis, but once in the woods his affected stride slows and the terrible reality of being surrounded by a deep and possibly dangerous woods envelops them.

"Tomek, how big were these things again?" Given the descriptions he'd been given, Emmett is unwilling to let any sign of passage go unmarked - these things could have the feet of stags or wolves or men, judging from what Tomek had mentioned.

"Some of them maybe a few feet tall, others smaller." He scans around the shadows, frowning, and almost seems to be listening more than looking.

There are plenty of animal tracks about, from the delicate trails left by mice who braved the surface to something the size of a moose. On a sudden though he stops short and looks up, to see if there is any sign of passage through the trees - any areas where the snow has been knocked down by something moving across the evergreen canopy. Nothing up there looks out of the ordinary. But small winged creatures might well leave no trace.

Continuing the pause, he sheathes his cutlass and quickly draws his scimitar. The woods seem to have an almost unnatural barren silence, as if the Gods had left them unfinished until just the last moment and other *things* had crept in. Assuming Pham is wrong about the Fey vulnerabilities of their prey, better to be armed with a blade that is both steel and enchanted.

Picking the right tool always helps. "Besides," he adds in a whisper, "maybe this has other properties that Alais couldn't detect. One can never tell about strange swords found in dwarfish caches."

He takes a couple of long (well, longer than usual for someone as short as he) strides to catch back up with Tomek, being careful not to lose his balance in the snow and ice. "See anything familiar?"

"Yes..." He seems more confident now, looking around with a stronger sense of familiarity in these surroundings. "This way."

Slowly, the four of them climb a low ridge, paying careful attention to the rocky places, but the enormity of the search is quickly apparent. They are in the middle of hundreds of square miles of forest, and not entirely certain what they're looking for anyway. The only sounds are those of their own feet in the snow, their own breath in the biting air, an occasional distant birdcall. The thick pines make it quite impossible to keep the ship in sight during the climb.

Emmett notices that there seem to be no animal tracks at all up here, and his guard sharpens.

When they reach the top of the ridge and can see into the next small valley, Tomek stops short, disconcerted. "This can't be right! I don't remember this at all."

The valley before them is filled by a swamp. Dead trees stand in the ice, a stark black and white landscape, shadows stretching as evening comes on. Skeletal reeds rattle in the wind. The Distraction stands by overhead, surreally large and soundless.

"We must have come the wrong way," the young guard says, crestfallen. "I'm sorry, but now I have no idea if we're in the right place. I suppose this could have formed since I was last here, but..."

Alais walks unconcerned down the slope, still looking for signs of their quarry, and taps at the ice along the edge with a branch to see if it is solid. He pauses and pokes again, more cautiously, then looks up with a startled expression.

"Oh my."

"What is it?" Emmett asks, catching up with him

"This land is under an illusion. Do you see?"

And with some help and effort, they do, and stand staring until Inez yells down to find out what's so interesting about a bloody swamp?

They are looking at a recent battlefield, centered on a small meadow. The trees for some distance around it are dead or dying, and a strong chemical odor fills the air. Downslope lies the wreckage of a dragon, its scales a brilliant green in the fading sunlight, standing out against the snow and the brown and black of dying vegetation. It is too far away to make out details. On the upper part of the field is... a cairn? Head-sized stones are heaped into a long pile almost as tall as Emmett.

The snow and bare earth of the meadow is full of the tracks of many small boots.

"Who are you," says a voice from the air in their midst, "and what do you seek here?"

"Oooooohhhh blast." Emmett whispers to himself before speaking "I am Emmett Half Man, crewman of the ship *Distraction*, and not of this world. My companions and I were exploring...looking for new trading partners."

That much was true enough, he thought. See how they respond to it before going into any more detail.

"You are not *here* looking for trading partners, I think. We see to it that humans do not venture here."

"Not necessarily - we're willing to trade with almost anyone. Why do you make sure Humans don't venture here?"

"Their own safety, and ours." The voice speaks with an odd, slightly stilted cadence, as if unused to this language, and there is a timbre to it that Emmett finds distantly familiar. "Now please - explain yourselves. You are, you understand, in some danger," it warns.

Emmett scratches the top of his head with the blunt part of his hook, looking mildly confused. "Why? If something's about to attack you, we'll help you fend it off, if that's what you're worried about." He glances around, as if looking for threats.

Of course, he doesn't see anything, though there are some rustles in the bushes. Probably just the wind, though.

"Otherwise, we're not about to attack you, so you're safe, and if we aren't going to attack then you have no reason to attack us, since your safety isn't threatened. Now, like I said, we're not from this world, and we're on this world looking for civilized peoples to have as reliable trade partners."

He holds up his hook, "Now, I admit, we thought to come out here because of some murders in the closest human settlement, and some rumors that your folk might have been responsible. The local crime was threatening to disrupt trade negotiations, what with the guards and the calls to arms and suchlike, so we thought we'd look into it the killings to see if we could calm things down and get back to business. That meant coming out to this lovely place, " He waves his hook moderately broadly, but neither so wide nor so fast that it could be construed as an attack on the invisible person, "and coming across your settlement."

"But, since you only keep humans away for their own safety, I can't think of a reason why you'd travel into their city on festival day to kill some of them. Do you have one, or can we talk about trade?"

"Tell us about this killing." The voice is now sharp and commanding.

Tomek speaks up; he seems calm and focused now. "Two days ago four men were tortured to death in my city, cut many times. Some years ago I saw an animal killed the same way, in this area, and the creatures that did it. If you are responsi--"

"Where is this city?" the voice interrupts.

"As you must know, it lies near the sea."

After a brief silence, "Wait." Then further silence, for what seems like a really long time.

Emmett starts whistling a ditty from the "Wonders of the Northern Woods" traveling show.

Everyone jumps a little when the voice speaks again. "Come down the hill--towards the dragon. It is quite dead." The voice sounds grimly amused. "And speak if you would more about the murders you say happened--every detail you can."

"It looked it. I was just thinking, 'wow, that's one dead dragon'." Emmett heads down the hill, indicating with his head that Hiro should take up the rear. "Fortunate for you that we have an expert who examined the bodies with us. Just one of the ways we try to help potential partners."

"Ah-what? Oh, yes, me! Just let me get my notes out here..." And Alais launches into Amateur Coroner Hour, with all the detail involving the Spectrometer results, placement of wounds and bodies as far he can tell, and then launching into the various verbal appendixes: to wit, why this might have been done, and parallels to various religious and magical practices across the spheres.

He is in full-on lecture mode and will continue until stopped.

Emmett gives Alais his head, curious to see how long the locals will let this continue before interrupting. If they haven't said anything after a minute or two of cross sphere magical practices (let them sit through the religious ones) he finally speaks up.

It's hard to tell whether an invisible voice is listening intently or what, but it doesn't seem inclined to interrupt as the group treks down the slope.

"I suspect this is what you seek," it says as they near the hulking corpse. Around it are scattered smaller bodies; odd little beings, no two exactly alike, fanged mouths gaping and misshapen bodies twisted in their death throes.

"Yes," Tomek says, staring at them and trying not to choke on the stench. "These look like the... things I saw. What are they?"

"There is far more to this world than you know, young human. These small ones are kin to yon monster. It was these no doubt that you saw at their sport when you last wandered in our forest. While I see why this event brought them to mind, I think it is unlikely that they did these murders in your city; they do not kill so precisely, or so few when they are on the hunt. The bodies would have borne bites as well as cuts, and perhaps have been eaten. You did not notice any odor? But of course if you had you would have mentioned it," the voice observes dryly.

By now Emmett is quite certain they're talking to a gnome.

Emmett nods to the air, "Master Alais would certainly have mentioned it, yes. I had begun to suspect that some human element was cloaking their activities to distract attentions into the woods. Glad to see it confirmed."

"Now that that's settled, are you interested in," he pronounces the gnomish equivalent of "trade" with care.

The voice corrects a couple of syllables and adds, "Self-sufficiency has its advantages."

Emmett glances around, looking for any technological evidence of this self sufficiency. He finds that he is still looking at a few-days-old battlefield surrounded by forest. Then again, ten minutes ago he couldn't see any of *this,* so who knows what else there might be....

Alais says "Master Emmett, do you know with what realm of being we are speaking?"

"Master Alais, we are in the company of Gnomes. But it looks like they don't want either trade or company." He turns back to their unseen hosts. "if you change your mind, we are always interested in opening communication. Blessings of Gond on you."

"And upon you. It has been... interesting speaking with you."

"It always is. Thanks for the information." With that the Half-Man sheaths his sword and heads back to the Distraction, ushering the others before him.

The ship lowers at his signal, and the four of them rejoin their companions.

"There is more to this world than there appears," Hiro remarks, and explanations are made to those who remained aboard while darkness falls over the world. A violent storm is approaching, and after some discussion the group decides that it would be better to spend the night where they are than to attempt to fly through it. No one is expecting them back right away.

"Fascinating," Pham opines, a bit disappointed that it seems his theory was incorrect, but intrigued by what they have learned about the world and also a by the puzzle before them. "But if they were then killed by human agency there should be some reason to it. A ship-owner's son, two artificers, and a land-rich heir... Oddly enough, I encountered young Cenon in town, several days ago. He appeared to recognize this." He indicates his symbol and sighs a bit.

Emmett, who has been sharpening his sword and thinking nasty thoughts about Gnomes in general, perks his head up. "He what?"

Pham nods and continues. "This troubles me. I have spoken to many of these people since we arrived, and from none of them did I hear anything to suggest the order is known on this world. Their gods are their own, all strange to me, but this suggests... I know not what, but perhaps there has been some sort of contact, via one of the Victor ships or otherwise. And now he is dead, along with these others."

Emmett does a double take back over his shoulder. "Hey, wait. Those Gnomes identified Gond, but Brunon and the other guards didn't have the slightest idea who he was either. What sort of machine is running here?"

Once the rest of the company has gone to sleep, Emmett slips from his bed with more stealth than one would imagine. Hiro is on guard on deck, but with a brief exchange of facial expressions Emmett is able to convince the saint of steel to guard the door and not mention Emmett's sudden midnight departure.

With the storm still blowing outside the path is treacherous, but the Half Man perseveres with his Gond-given endurance, making his way back through the snow to the draconian battlefield. His eye providing him with light and making no effort to hide his presence, he makes his way to the cairn, hoping that their hosts of earlier have not yet quit the place - and that they are of a mind to talk.

"Hello. Is anyone still here. I think we should talk..."

"Talkative sort," the unseen observes; it a dry voice that speaks, carrying an impression of age and wisdom, and it sounds different from the one he spoke to previously. "Of course we are

still here. You do not believe we would leave your vessel unwatched?" He is almost visible now, a shadow without a caster in the light from Emmett's "eye."

"You recognized the name of my God earlier, when we spoke. How? To my knowledge, there haven't been missionaries to this world. And if there were, well tenet four says that no pieces have been placed in the great machine without reason. I've met Gnomes before, off world, and they followed Gond too. I was wondering if you knew why our gears are meshing now. Is there any way that you need aid, or any aid you can bring?" The half man waits for an answer, his light sweeping slowly back and forth through the night.

"How? We were travelers once, ourselves... long ago, ages upon ages since we came here but we remember still. So while your ship is a surprise to us, it is not entirely strange, as our oldest histories speak of such things. Is there then traffic to and from this world now? Or have you been stranded here with your vessel?"

"Limited traffic. We're only the second trading house to visit, and I sure hope I can leave this mudball...No offense. You guys are fine - it's the human locals who are getting under our skin."

That nets a bit of a chuckle. "As for why, I am no priest, but it may well be that you are here for a reason yet to be revealed. Does a gear know why it turns? And much may depend upon the smallest part. I do not believe us in need of aid, but I am not all-knowing." He laughs again. "And I do not know what aid we might do you, as I do not know what might have killed your people."

"I wouldn't ask, except that I just learned that agents of another off-world god, Hextor, have a presence on this world as well." He shrugs inside his furs. "In general, agents of this god are not harbingers of peace. I've starting to feel like the workings of this world are very deep and complicated, and I need to know more so as to do my part - especially since I might break it in a way that would damage other Gondians."

"No more so than any other, surely... I do not know this name," the gnome says thoughtfully. "Perhaps it was once known, and we have forgotten it. But there have been omens aplenty this past year and more, that seem to speak of some great event in the offing--more battles among humans, or between the humans and dwarves, we thought. If there is some new war god seeking to make a place, it may be more serious than we expected. We may," he sighs, "become involved whether we will or no, if gods struggle here."

"I know you place high value on your privacy, but if war erupts it will be harder to keep. And if you are already in a war I haven't seen, maybe I can help. One of the boys killed knew about the Hextorians, If they're trying to blame creatures in the forest, hunts will come out here. "

"They do so already, as your young friend from the city discovered some years ago. We do what we can to ensure that they come to no harm if they do not intend to cause it. I suppose there will be more if he reports our presence--and is believed--but we will deal with that as need dictates. Our own war is as it has long been with the worms of the mountains and their offspring.

Emmett smiles. "Don't worry about him. I know his bosses, and I think I can make sure that his story isn't followed up on. It's enough for them to know to look to the locals to find the killer."

"But if you have evidence of these--Hextorians?--presence among the humans, and this young man knew of them, are they of such a kind to have killed him for this knowledge, and perhaps the others? The manner of their death certainly suggests to me some ritual of ill intent."

"Er, yeah. Certainly ill intent towards the dead guys." The Half Man shrugs again. "That's not really my field, but I'll mention it to Master Alais. You remember him? Kid genius, big words?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. If I find any way to aid you, I will. And if you want this kept secret, I'll do that too."

"We would appreciate that, but will not hold you to it. It may be the times have changed." With a sigh the gnome falls silent.

With that the Half Man turns and works his way back along the trail, trusting Hiro to open the door for him with as much stealth as he closed it behind. "This is a strange world. Maybe Inez was right in not wanting to come here. But, if it tweaks Victor, it's good."

* * *

In the morning ibn Fadil introduces the rest of the group to Michal and keeps him in their rooms, asking the others to bring up some breakfast for them both. After the others have finally gone off on their expedition, and he has watched the boy put away an astonishing amount of food, he starts pleasantly asking him questions about Stoa and his organization, seeking to draw out whatever information or speculations he may have, looking for any hint of outside influence on Stoa and trying to find out why he thought attacking Lord Tesfaye's guests was a worthwhile idea. He expects to learn a fair amount about Michal as well. It like a friendly conversation rather than an interrogation, and he encourages Michal to express himself freely.

And he talks quite a bit, though most of it comes as no particular surprise given ibn Fadil's experience. He's vague about his own past, but the half-elf suspects he was born to a prostitute and has spent his life on the fringe.

Stoa, meanwhile, is the sort of person cities seem to generate out of their own shadows, director -- by virtue of strength and cunning - of activities the legitimate authorities don't want but can't get rid of. He is currently uncontested in his authority over the poorest quarter of the town, but it seems there are people even there he avoids conflict with; some of the priests spend time there, for instance. And there are, somewhat surprisingly, rumors that one old widow is actually a witch.

As for his motive in the attack, Michal shrugs. "Money, I thought, but it's not like I get told."

"Does it make sense to you that he would target people who are guests of Lord Tesfaye?"

He shrugs. "You'd have to ask him, I dunno. Everything else going on, maybe he figured no one would care as much."

"Oh? Which other things that are going on?"

He gives ibn Fadil a raised-brow look. "Uh, like people getting cut to bits in the middle of festival."

"That is only one thing." He slouches further down in his seat. "Do you get many visitors from other towns here?"

"Summer, sure. Not at this time of year. Too many storms." He looks curious about the question.

"Many from inland, near the mountains?"

"Not so many. Some. Why?"

He smiles faintly, and answers as much for the benefit of Yestin and Valarin as for young Michal. "We must consider the possibility that this Stoa was put up to attacking us by someone

working for our competitors. Who, we understand, have been trading iron to some border lord near the mountains."

Michal looks a little stunned, but also curious. Yestin and Valarin look thoughtful.

"Not something that can be ruled out," the giff allows. "Though of course we've no idea if Lord--if that person has agents here who could carry out something like that."

"Quite," ibn Fadil says. He straightens in his chair and addresses Valarin. "Captain, I took the liberty of suggesting to Michal that he consider the idea of signing on with us, and that at the very least we might give him a ride to the capitol. As he was preparing to skip town when I met him again, that seemed like the only way to get a chance to talk with him further."

Val looks distinctly annoyed, but says, "We'll talk later."

"It is entirely up to you, sir," ibn Fadil assures him. "I did explain that."

Val doesn't comment on it any further. If ibn Fadil offered such a thing to the young man, there's probably a very good reason that Val himself could certainly understand. Besides, better to ask than to stow away...

The day is a busy day in Myrr. Shortly after dawn, the bodies of the murdered men are burned on massive pyres. Most of the town turns out to witness the burning, but there is little evidence of emotion; the actual funeral ceremonies were conducted privately, earlier in the morning. Because the dead were from wealthy families, the ashes are placed in brass containers sealed with iron, and taken to an inner recess of the temple.

Ibn Fadil keeps away; he no longer trusts the authorities' control, and spends much of the day talking with Michal. - his life, any gossip he's heard, etc., just trying to get a better feel for the place. Michal certainly likes to talk and is happy to recount stories of his escapades, most of which are certainly exaggerated. Ibn Fadil does learn a lot--anecdotal, of course--about the people who operate in Myrr's shadow society, and something about escape routes in case he should lift a purse in the marketplace and get chased any distance... Aside from some charitable efforts by the temple, the poor are virtually ignored here, particularly old women, who have no choice but to beg for their sustenance and are liable to have that taken away from them. Although judging from Michal's contempt only the absolute lowest of criminals is so reduced in pride as to steal from women, and Stoa's folk generally stalk more rewarding prey. Michal's role since he was old enough to be useful has been one of watching and listening, in return for which he received an occasional penny and occasional pain, but was mostly on his own when it came to actually providing for himself. Stoa apparently takes a sink or swim approach to apprenticeship.

Val attends the cremation out of courtesy. One thing certainly caught his attention though; brass urns sealed with Iron? Odd. Strange use for the metals if they're short on it here... It must have some significance that escapes the sailor.

Late in the afternoon, drums beat around the city, announcing a column of mounted men approaching. Their banners are similar to that flying over the castle; His Lordship's eldest son has arrived, with a small retinue. They had planned to be in the city much sooner, he explains, but one of the horses threw a shoe and another came up lame that morning... townsfolk nod their heads. The curse is already at work, it seems, blamed for everything from dry cows to dropped plates.

Dorek's arrival also means that, with many apologies, the starfarers have to find some new lodgings.

With a little help from the castellan, the abbreviated group finds an inn with enough room to hold them all (except those who'll stay, in shifts, on the ship). There are many visitors in town for the festival, and rooms are scarce, but the travelers are both wealthy and in favor with His Lordship, and eventually they do find a place that has three rooms all together on the second floor, two of them adjoining and one on the other side of the narrow hall. As seems to be the usual fashion here, they are small and rustic rather than luxurious, but decently comfortable. These people do take keeping warm seriously, at least.

No questions are asked about who will be staying where; as with so many cultural norms, unless it gets broken everyone assumes that everyone else does what is, well, normal. That settled, and with Michal somewhat nervously ensconced with Yestin--the giff doing his best to be friendly and reassuring--the two prepare for the banquet.

It is, as expected, a somewhat subdued affair given all the goings-on, but not uninteresting for all of that. From a place at one of the lower tables, enjoying course after course of very good (if somewhat heavy) food and trying to avoid consuming too much wine, ibn Fadil and Valarin can see the high table quite well. Lord Tesfaye, his lady, and the newly arrived son all have places of honor. The pretty younger woman who acts as their servant is apparently the lord's concubine, and also the most interesting thing in the room to said son, a fact which occasions some whispers among the guests.

After dinner, more of that delightful wine is served. It does not need to be kept cold while in its cask, though it is traditionally served so.

Ibn Fadil makes inquiries concerning its price and how long it can be stored, being quite determined to bring some off-planet even if he has to pay for it himself. It's just the sort of luxury good that could be worth trading, and with a few samples on hand it'll create its own market. Not that he lets on that he thinks it's of more than moderate interest, of course!

He gets some pointers to people who deal with the vintners--the main grape-growing region is some distance up the river, and it's shipped down that way--and makes a mental note to follow up them before the crew leaves town.

"Strange and terrible times, these are," one of the guild masters says to ibn Fadil afterward, shaking his head. "But, we must carry on, I suppose. Come, there is something I wished to ask of you visitors." He leads the way to one of the alcoves lining the large hall. In them are displayed the masterworks of the guild in the past year, and as the meal is cleared away the guests are mostly circulating to admire them, and negotiating with the guild members on how much it would cost to acquire similar items.

"One hears little from Durrell's lands, but what one does hear these days is much concerning iron," Master Wiktor continues. "Little indeed passes out of his hands, but I thought to seek your opinion concerning this." From a cupboard in the back of the alcove--which displays a beautiful short sword--the portly smith removes an iron ingot, which he hands to ibn Fadil. "We are, of course, very pleased at the prospect of communications with the wider community it seems your ship represents."

Ibn Fadil's trained ears hear gold in that statement, but for a moment he is busy staring at the ingot in his hands, which can only have come to this world on a V&S ship. He knows this because the stamp on it is that of the Havath clan, quite possibly the most powerful dwarfish family in space. They would no doubt be interested to know that V&S is selling their iron to people who have a nigh-fanatical hatred of dwarves.

"Good dwarfish iron," he remarks, hefting the sample. "Harvath clan keeps its standards up, by all accounts. It would be hard to find better. And not so hard to find more," he adds easily, watching the man to see how he handles such casual references to dwarves and iron.

Wiktor looks a mite surprised. "Ah yes, I had heard some rumors that the foul things are everywhere. Pity, but if we can come to some accommodation.... They sell it dear enough to us, as you've no doubt seen."

"Greed is a terrible thing," ibn Fadil says piously. "But I have observed that competition tends to moderate its effect."

"It certainly can. Better to..." He clams up, but ibn Fadil is pretty sure he can finish the sentence: better to not have to buy it at all. He thinks he might be coming to understand these people somewhat.

The half-elf gives him back the ingot. "Indeed, one of Harvath's competitors might be willing to offer a better price, just to get a little more business. We would have to ask around." He names a couple of other dwarven clans that might be interested (though these are just educated guesses). "It depends partly on where the clans happen to be located at present, naturally, since they rarely handle transport. But of course, you would not know," he appears to remember. "The intersphere dwarven clans have a big advantage because they are within the Flow instead of in a sphere, actually in the river, as it were, instead of on the land. They travel through the Flow inside huge mineral-bearing rocks, building and tunneling them for generations and then moving on to another. Quite fascinating, really, though only dwarves could stand to live that way, I am sure."

"This is all very interesting," Wiktor says, apparently sincerely. "Rocks that float? Truly it seems that we have a great deal to learn here."

"Float is not exactly the right word," ibn Fadil answers, "but it is close enough." He tries to steer the conversation back to Rigolian products, and later wanders over to study the silversmiths' display, thinking that offering samples of Rigolian liquor in fancy cups from the same planet might be a nice touch.

Looking for an opportunity to be introduced to the lord's son, he pauses nears the edge of the group, not wanting to intrude. The conversation going on at the moment centers on the hunt planned for next week. Dorek is in his early thirties, with a trim physique and sleepy-looking brown eyes. One of the masters--who had been speaking with Wiktor and is perhaps now thinking quite well of their offworld guest--performs the introduction.

"Ah yes. I have been told of your ship. I hope you are finding your time here profitable."

"We have high hopes, my lord."

A bit more small talk and he withdraws, not having any particular goal beyond the introduction.

After the presentation of gifts and a blessing from the priest concludes the event, when they return to their rooms Yestin informs them, "Someone was here asking questions of the keeper; I don't think he told them anything that isn't already common knowledge, but it may be well to be on our guard. Friends of our, er, guest, perhaps?"

"Un-friends," ibn Fadil corrects. He looks to Valarin. "I suspect we have a choice between telling Captain Feliks about this Stoat's unhealthy interest in us either now, or after he makes more trouble for us."

"Unfortunately, I think you are correct in that." A sudden change in the wind rattles the shutters; another storm coming in.

"Well, they're probably not going to try anything in this weather." He hopes the ship is okay out there. "Morning is soon enough. I'll leave the explanation to you," he grins.

"Thank you, sir. That should be interesting." He appears to be quite serious for a moment, then grins back. "Necessary, then. Oh, and incidentally, Master Wiktor showed me an ingot of Havath clan iron he says he got from Durrell. I would say that confirms our assumption that Victor & Sons have been supplying him with the stuff."

"I guess it would," Val agrees.

"Michal," ibn Fadil says to the lad, "if Stoa's people really have been asking after us, then it looks like it is time for us to respond more firmly. Are you up to explaining to Captain Feliks that you are quite sure

those men who attacked me last night work for Stoa?"

He looks decidedly unhappy about that idea. "Uh..."

"I, personally, would prefer to take steps against him rather than sit quietly and let him make whatever plans he likes." The Zakharan's tone is neutral, but he is clearly judging Michal's response against some unspoken expectation.

"Oh, I understand that, no problem, but uh, what steps? I don't know if I want to explain to the guards how I know those guys..."

"I want Captain Feliks to take the steps, and give Stoa something new to think about. As for explaining without getting into trouble ..." He considers the problem. "You live down there where they usually work, yes? You have been curious about us foreigners, you happened to hear these men talking about us and followed them out of curiosity. Along the way you heard them mention Stoa, and when they attacked you tried to warn us, and then ran away. But you think Stoa found out you were there, and came to us hoping we would give you some money for the story, which would help you get away."

He frowns, thinking over what he's just said. "Sound too much like a story ... perhaps something closer to the truth would serve. What is the truth, by the way? Why were you there, and why did you try to warn us?"

"I was the lookout. As for why," he shrugs. "It seemed like a good idea at the time..."

"Tired of working for Stoa, eh?"

"That's not a difficult state to attain."

"Is Feliks the type to arrest you even though you are giving him information about your ex-friends' activities?"

"I don't know, and I'm not sure I want to find out."

Ibn Fadil studies him for a moment. "Well, decide. I am not going to drag you there by the ear" - however much he might want to - "and I would like to get some sleep." Clearly the boy is used to reacting, rather than acting; that will have to stop.

"Well, do that then. And I'll... think about it."

"All right." His tone is mild, but his manner is a little bit cooler.

He suggests that for tonight, the four of them stay together in the larger of the rooms, locked up as tight as the facilities allow. "Just in case." He himself will try to sleep lightly, alert for any potential problems.

The noise of the storm makes that easy enough; it abates some time after midnight. Once, he thinks that from a half-closed eye he saw one of the shuttered windows begin to open, and snaps fully awake, but there is nothing: just a dream, or the wind.

In the morning Michal, having done his thinking, says, "If you really think it's necessary, I'll go talk to them."

Captain Feliks doesn't look like he's slept since the bodies were found. "What do you lot want *this* time?" He frowns at Michal, as if trying to figure out where he's seen him before.

"To bring you some information about last night's attack on me, sir," ibn Fadil says.

On cue, Michal launches into his story. And it's a *good* story. Ibn Fadil would have believed it if he hadn't already known what happened and why. Feliks asks a few probing questions but appears willing to accept both the Stoat's involvement and Michal's fundamental innocence (at least regarding this particular affair).

"All right, so what do you want, then?" he asks when all is said. "I assure you we made every effort to find those men the other night."

"Oh, have no doubt of that, sir. And I know you have more serious troubles to deal with just now. All we would ask is that you have a few of your men linger conspicuously near the inn we are staying at. We will not be doing any more wandering about at night, but Yestin did hear from the inn's people that someone was there asking about us yesterday. I think, however, that a few small precautions should prevent any more trouble."

He considers that for a moment. "I think we can do that."

"And I was wondering," he adds apologetically, in light of the man's obvious exhaustion, "Does it seem a usual thing for this Stoat to be giving such attention to persons who are his lordship's guests?"

"Usual? I suppose not. But then you yourselves are not exactly usual, are you?"

"Heh! We are not," he agrees cheerfully. "It is only experience that makes me wonder if it has something to do with our competitors. Still, I suppose the only thing to do about it is be careful. Thank you for your time, sir."

Outside, the Zakharan says to Michal (quietly), "That was very good, very good indeed. I almost believed you myself." He smiles only a little, trying to hide the fact that he's almost as pleased as if he'd invented the lad himself. "Now, a little shopping, and then back to warmth."

After a little effort, he and Michal acquire a slate and some chalk and retire to the inn, where ibn Fadil whiles away the rest of the day by starting to teach the boy to read and write Common.

"This is the same phrase written in Zakharan, Elvish, and Common, in their three lettering systems," he says by way of introduction to the subject. He reads the Zakharan and Elvish and then the Common: "I really hate this planet."

"Really?" He looks at the strange shapes of the letters doubtfully.

"Really." He wipes the slate clean and starts writing out the whole Common alphabet. "Each of these letters is agreed to stand for a particular sound. Or sometimes several sounds. Strung together they represent the strings of sounds we call words. Simple in principle, but like most things, a bit more complicated in execution."

"Now, for convenience each letter is given its own name, so we can talk about them properly. The names of the letters in Common are..."

"No, you really hate this place? Why?"

"Oh." He puts the slate down and thinks about how to answer that. "Several reasons. All of them unfair," he adds judiciously. "First, it is too cold. I am told it gets warm in summer, but it never gets this cold where I come from.

"Second, it is too small. I like cities, the bigger the better. Except for Errinald. That is a planet that is almost all city, and I suspect even its gods hate that place.

"Third." He sighs, and half-heartedly pretends he is not still angry. "In my entire life I have never been so thoroughly insulted as I have been here. Worse, I have had to swallow the insult, for a number of good reasons that did not make it any easier to do so."

"Wow. Well, it does get warm in the summer, and I guess if you guys are going to the capital it's probably bigger than Myrr." He looks like he's considering asking about the insult business but thinks better of it.

Glad to avoid further discussion the matter, ibn Fadil picks up the slate again and (barring further interruptions) returns to the alphabet lesson. It goes indifferently. But one has to begin somewhere.

Soon thereafter, the expeditionary force returns from their visit to the forests, and after asking some questions locates the inn where the rest of the crew is staying. Hiro volunteers to stay with the ship to keep an eye on it, along with the two local guards.

Tomek of course must report to his captain. He's done a lot of thinking in the course of the night, some of it about how disappearing swamps, minuscule warriors, and voices that come from nowhere might affect his future.

Val sends a message to the castle to formally inform Tesfaye of the group's return (not that the returning ship could have been easily missed). As soon as ibn Fadil realizes they've arrived, Michal drops from his attention as completely as if he's vanished. He looks over the new arrivals for signs of damage -- and, of course, to see if Nyala has come with them. It seems he was more worried than he let on. No one is injured, and she is pleased in her reserved way to see him as well.

"All right," their captain calls the crew together. "It seems like it's been forever since we had this many of us in one place, so let's see where we are. I'm pretty sure we're just waiting for a reply to Tesfaye's original message about us before we get passed off to someone at the capital. It's in his best interests in a lot of ways, since it seems Durrell has kept his Victor contacts to himself -- and might be prepping for a rebellion -- so this will certainly make him look good.

"Would probably be in our best interests as well. We haven't had any actual trouble since the attack on ibn Fadil and Nyala the other night, but they are keeping an eye on us. So are the local guards, now, but I'd rather not put their abilities to the test. So be careful when you go around town. We had the blacksmiths' banquet last night. Lots of contacts, they seem very interested. Wish we had more we could sell them right off, but...." He shrugs, looks at ibn Fadil to see if he has anything to add from the evening.

Emmett jumps in to say, "Val, we're just here to open a route. Dazzle them with the beads. We'll sell them more later, assuming there is a later."

"Well yes, but..." He decides not to get into it. "What did you find out there?"

"A not overly informative dead end. Tomek's a good kid, but he was off base in thinking that the killing was done by some monsters from the woods. It was done by some monsters in town." Emmett takes a quick drink, then continues. "What we did figure out is that there's some sort of direct off-world contact right here in town. Pham mentioned that one of the victims recognized his holy symbol, which is kinda strange because there ain't no other offworld gods here.

"I dunno about you, but I'm kinda curious why if Victor's people are the only others ones here why the less Phamlike followers of the Herald of Hell are also kicking around. Is Victor working with them? Are they here on their own? If this Durrell fellow is planning to start a war - armed with fancy offworld steel courtesy of Victor & Sons - that might be good news to the worshippers of a war god." He looks over at Pham for some sort of confirmation, knowing that really the young cleric is as much of an outsider from the main body of his gods followers as any of the rest of them.

"Another thing: On Cadin I found out that the Church of Gond was quietly building their machine there for some time without everyone knowing about it. Maybe that's common - offworld churches slip into new worlds slowly, nudging things here and there to make their gods more attractive. If that's the case there might be other quiet churches here. The artificers guild is as good a place as any for me to start looking for my god's influence, and since some of the victims came from there, maybe they could tell us more about any links between our trading rivals and the other Hextorians."

"That's a good thought." Val nods, winces; he seems to be acquiring a headache of stunning proportions. "The more we know about what's going on under the surface, the better we'll be able to tell what they might want from outside. And if V&S, knowingly or not, is helping Hextor to spread through new spheres, Three Trees will certainly want to know about it. There could be repercussions for their business elsewhere."

It takes ibn Fadil a moment to recover from the shock of having these potentially explosive ideas dropped in his lap. This connects far too closely to his concerns about the situation on Bral for him to take it calmly. Looking worried, he says, "Speaking of coincidence, this Stoa's interest in us might also be connected. Michal, does any of this ring any bells - have you heard any talk about the Herald of Hell or anything like that?" He watches the boy closely with out seeming to.

Emmett glances at the boy as well, wondering what sort of wellspring of local lore ibn Fadil has tapped.

"Herald of Hell?" His eyebrows go up in some astonishment. "Can't say that I have, but... there's been all kinds of wild rumors around for months now. Those murders a while back, and now this curse business -- I don't know." He shrugs. "Stoa only ever does things for money, far as I can see."

He nods absently. "And anyone importing iron to this planet will have a great deal of that."

"Hell, you guys have plenty, as far as that goes...."

* * *

That evening, then, the group gathers for the second in the series of banquets. Val and Yestin remain behind, the former due to feeling unwell and the latter because with one thing and another it doesn't seem like a good idea for any of them to be alone at the inn. Their city watchdog is still there; if any of Stoa's people are around, they are keeping a very low profile.

Both women are present. Emmett is not thrilled about having Inez present in what he increasingly regards as a guerilla war, but she's bored enough to insist. Ibn Fadil has fewer worries about Nyala. The two are in their best finery, determined to impress--and they do attract attention.

The artificers' guildhall is a long, low building and is one of the few in Myrr to sport elaborate locks. The windows are small and high, more for air than light, made superfluous by a multitude of cleverly made lamps. Wolf and fox icons are prominent, invoking the presence of the local gods whose powers include protection and trickery. Behind the center seat at the head table is a baroque, massive and apparently very old water clock, its many parts in constant, almost silent motion.

Emmett walks slowly around the room, sliding his good hand across the stonework of the outside wall, which is very thick and well-made. All the while he is looking over the icons, carvings and other decoration for holy symbols to Gond worked in amongst the symbols for the local animal pantheon. If his deity has any presence on this world, it would surely be in places like this. "Maybe the Gnomes passed something to humans a long time ago?" he wonders. But there's nothing to indicate Gond's presence.

The head of the guild, Nikodem Cenon, is a tall, thin man of perhaps sixty, somewhat stooped and frail in appearance; he walks with the aid of an elaborately decorated stick. His son's murder appears to have added ten years to his age, but he makes the rounds with good grace, speaking to every one of the guests. He is a charming and very likable man, skilled at putting others on their ease. Sympathetic murmurs follow his progress around the room; poor man, to have been through so much, bearing up quite well really... there is considerable hushed talk of the murders, the presumed curse. Rumor has it that suspects have already been identified, but that Feliks hasn't been talking.

The form of the banquet is much the same as the previous; a staggering amount of food, a toast, and the dispersal to admire the guild's wares. These are many and varied, from clockwork to kaleidoscopes to puzzle boxes to ingeniously small devices that fold into or out of themselves to become something quite different.

Emmett spends a lot of time looking over the wares - fingering this, examining that - continuing his search for evidence of holy symbols or other signs that there might be some offworld evidence here. Much as he would love to start open discussions of theory, the obvious secrecy that would have to surround such new divine contact limits him to including some of the tenets of Gond in casual conversation or questions with the artificers, in hopes that this, combined with his quietly displayed holy symbol, would elicit some recognition. No such luck.

OK, maybe the Gnomes didn't pass anything along. I'm doing everything except open proselytizing and they're just not getting it... Emmett thinks, looking over the wares with a slight grimace. There is still nothing he can call evidence for the presence of offworld innovation.

Meanwhile, ibn Fadil idly evaluates the quality of whatever locking mechanisms are on display (from the front door onward), on a rough scale from "dead easy" to "that hideous monster on Majja's Tear." He also looks for any unusual behavior on the part of the other guests.

The locks on the front door certainly qualify as "hideous;" the displays run the gamut. Presumably, the more one wants to spend, the better one will get. As far as the attendees, he observes much the same interactions that he did the previous night. One or two of the journeymen here seem a little jumpy.

Emmett keeps his eyes open for good examples of intricate clockwork for sale, but more interesting still would be a good set of clockmakers' tools, though he doubts that such secret items of the order would be placed up for sale, and it seems that he would be correct in that. There are some nice clocks and a few elaborate toys. The water clock, too, holds his attention, and he spends several minutes quietly looking it over, looking for the multiple functionality that typified the works of Gond in the windmill temple on Janik. He doubts it - suspecting more that this 'merely' keeps very accurate time, but it would be another spring in his newly re-organized mental blue-print of this place.

After supper, Alais is examining the water clock to try and determine if there is indeed astrological significance to its design--he's quite certain of it, based on some of his earlier readings in the library--when he becomes aware of someone standing next to him.

"Quite the antique, isn't it?" Nikodem says with a self-deprecating smile. "My great-great grandfather designed that old monster. We've come a long way since then."

"Sir, could you please explain the significance of the symbology? If I'm not mistaken, I see certain correspondence with similar systems in other spheres."

"Indeed? Well, I'm not familiar with all of them, but..." He provides a brief discourse on the historical and mythological correspondences, having to do with the journeys of their god through the heavens.

"As you can imagine, I'm sure, we are all most intrigued by your ship. I hope we will be able to discuss its design before you leave the city--most fascinating mechanisms!"

When the man has gone on his way, Alais resumes his contemplations. Yes, all the correspondences are there; if one but knew how to operate it, he suspects, one might well be able to use this device in some divinatory fashion. Antique, indeed! Such a variety of materials incorporated--copper, silver, bronze, iron and more... where has he lately seen just these things...

Hmmm. I will have to report this to the half-man.

While he chats with one of the junior priests--a young man of somewhat somber mien named Lynden--Pham is bothered by a nagging sensation of being watched. He has made the rounds slowly in hopes of drawing out whoever might be keeping an eye on him, but those who approach either make innocuous small talk or want to discuss business. He is eventually disturbed enough to withdraw to a corner, locate a small piece of copper he keeps in a pocket of his robe, and murmur a brief prayer before resuming his rounds.

There are so many people, all thinking such a variety of things, it's quite difficult to sort them all out, but eventually the brother locates the source of his watched sensation; one of the guild journeymen is keeping an eye on him, wondering anxiously what Pham's intentions are, what will come of the night, what is really planned for he knows *they* don't tell him everything....

Meanwhile, a smartly turned out apprentice approaches the conversational knot that has formed around His Lordship and with apologetic mien speaks for a moment to Lady Rahel. She listens for a moment, then makes a regally dismissive gesture; the concubine Mela leaves the room with the apprentice.

A few moments later Emmett is replenishing his drink--talking about Gond to interested but wary artificers is thirsty work, and so is being glared at by the local head priest, who seems to be

feeling a touch threatened--when from somewhere nearby he hears Nikodem exclaim in some surprise and a voice loud enough to be heard by many, "Now where has Lord Dorek gotten to?"

As do others, ibn Fadil glances around automatically. The heir is nowhere to be seen. Mela is still gone as well. Many guests who were at the blacksmiths' banquet perform an elementary calculation and find something absorbing to look at in the floor, ceiling, or middle distance. Nikodem looks appalled to have committed such a solecism and is turning toward Tesfaye while he gropes for something that will smooth over the moment, when there is a muffled but nevertheless arresting sound.

Whumph.

The building shakes slightly. There is a faint haze of smoke in the air, thickening rapidly. The sound and smoke comes from below, some kind of explosion. The smoke smells of wood and something unfamiliar. The room stays calm until someone realizes that the front door is locked, at which point panic erupts.

Emmett leaps onto the closest table to get above the panicking people. "Everybody stay calm!" he yells, not expecting that to have much effect. "Alais!" He scans the room for the wizard, then leaps again across the gap between tables to get closer to the young magus. "We need to get you into the basement to freeze out that fire! The stairs are that way! Pham! Get him down there" he says, pointing to the door from the room that doesn't lead to the kitchen, hoping that his voice contains the certainty that he doesn't.

Ibn Fadil closes his eyes briefly as Emmett sends their only tickets off this hellhole *toward* the source of trouble instead of *away*, but knows better than to start arguing. Hooking his arm through Nyala's, he heads for the door.

Trusting that their navigators will be able to magically deal with the threat below before it engulfs the building, Emmett takes several leaping steps down the table to get as close as possible to the front door before leaping towards it, hoping to get to it before the crush gets too great. He has to fight his way for a few moments, but then the rush of people toward the other end of the room clears space for him.

"I'm going, I'm going." Alais calmly takes out his wand and progresses in the direction of the heat. He hasn't been near such a quantity of fire before, and is before he puts it out he wants to jot down some notes on the elemental properties. Just a few sentences--he realizes there's some urgency.

Some, yes. There is a fierce crush near the back of the main room, all heading for the same door Alais and Pham are. Beyond the door, they find as they fight their way through, is a storeroom. There is one door in the outer wall--this is where everyone else is going--and a second, narrow one on the inner wall. This second door is marked with emblems of the goddess, whose realm is knowledge; perhaps their workrooms are below? Pham wrenches it open and burns his hand in so doing; thick smoke, heat, and a sullen light pour up from below. There is sound now, too, the greedy hiss and crackle of flame.

"Alais!" Pham yells, quite uncharacteristically for the normally soft-spoken cleric. "If you're going to do something about this, you need to do it now, before the floor collapses out from under us and we can't do anything at all!"

The others streaming out of the building will no doubt alert the local fire brigade--if there is one. Pham follows Alais closely down the stairs, not so subtly "herding" the mage until he indicates that this is close enough. In the uncomfortable heat, the shadows of the flames on Pham's

face make it much more believable that Pham is, in fact, a more common sort of follower of Hextor.

But that's just a trick of the light. No. Really. It is!

Meanwhile, ibn Fadil and Nyala join Emmett at the door. Fortunately, since he didn't want to leave anything valuable in his room - and he's learned not to leave them behind - he has his lockpicks, for whatever good it will do. He knows there's little chance of getting it open before the place comes down around their ears.

Once the half elf gets close enough Emmett starts pushing panicked people out of the way, yelling "Give the man some room to work his magic or we'll never get out of here!" The goal is to give ibn Fadil a 5' area of relative calm in front of the lock.

Uttering polite 'excuse me's as he gently pushes past them Lynden makes his way through the over anxious crowd until he also reached the area around the door. Looking apologetically at the small man known as Emmett he says quietly, "I may be able to help if you'll allow me..."

Stepping up onto a bench Lynden seems noticeably more confident as he begins to project his voice across the crowd. "Ladies, gentlemen! Allow our good guests to assist us in gaining exit without further excitement if you please." He pauses fractionally to raise a small carved medallion into the air before him. "I am sure that Gerik will aid them in their efforts."

They grow quieter, at least, still pushing with fierce concentration as the haze thickens and breathing grows difficult, but no longer in imminent danger of trampling one another.

The Zakharan only frowns at the lock, shakes his head, and turns his attention to the hinges. Emmett catches the look and leans in close "Crap. I think the hinges are too big, and since this is deliberate they're probably a bar on the other side, too. That's what I'd do. Any chance of you and Nyala getting out one of those windows?" A very slight head jerk indicates the narrow things high overhead. "I think we're small enough for it, but I couldn't make it up there. Once out there you could either get a bar off the door or get some other help."

"Let us try all," ibn Fadil suggests. "Nyala and anyone else --" he glances around at the crowd -- "try the hinges, you try to take it down by force, and I will climb up and try the window."

Emmett gives a brief look to ibn Fadil, then Nyala, then the window, then shrugs. "Right. Good luck." A quick motion with his hand and his artificial arm produces a flat, hiltless knife, which he hands to the elvish archer. "Try this on the hinges if you don't have anything else." He then turns his attentions to the door.

Emmett braces his artificial leg into a crack in the stone floor and starts pushing with all of his nigh inhuman strength against the locked door. It gives slightly but does not break--just a bit more....

"This way, my lord," Nikodem urges Tesfaye toward the front door rather than joining the crush at the back; he seems to realize that the odds are better there. Neither is looking good; perhaps the smoke. Nikodem takes Tesfaye's arm in an attempt to lead him in the proper direction, but after a few steps the old nobleman staggers. "My lord?" He falls to the floor, bringing the artificer with him for a moment before he can right himself, bending over to try and rouse Tesfaye without success. "Help! Help!"

"What? Oh for pity's sake." Emmett snags the helpful calming local by the sleeve. "I need as many strong men as we can get to help me with this!" The sound of the fire is growing; it's harder to hear. The floor is uncomfortably warm, as well.

With that he activates his eye, hoping that the band of light will have a jarring effect to clear a path through the crowd towards one of the benches. He's going to need a battering ram.

Lynden nods and also moves towards the bench. "Let the strongest come forward to assist," he calls across those gathered, "and we will clear a route for them."

Between them they get a bench moved into position to swing. Nyala is on her knees with the knife, prying at the iron hinge pins and swearing in her own tongue. Meanwhile, ibn Fadil arranges his sword so he can more easily reach it while climbing, and essays the wall beneath the nearest window. Once up, he braces himself against the corner, attempts to peer out into the dark but sees only reflections from within in the thick glass, and then breaks the glass with the hilt of his sword. Once it is open, he takes a few breaths of clean air and looks around. There are people on the street outside; they seem to be part of a forming bucket chain.

"One, two--three!" Emmett barks. The improvised ram swings at the door; it shudders under the impact. Again. The lock bursts and the great leaves give way, and the group of them stumble out, gasping for air.

Two of the men who aided with the ram turn back to help Nikodem and Lord Tesfaye out as well; the latter is grey-faced and unmoving.

As ibn Fadil lands lightly on the street outside the building Nyala turns to look at him. "Another exciting evening out," she remarks dryly in Elvish, glancing down at her damaged gown. "I hope you are not hurt?"

Meanwhile, in the rear of the building, Pham hears the cries for help faintly, but does not recognize the voice. Thinking that getting the fire under control is the more important, he regretfully holds his place with Alais, who fortunately realizes quickly that this is not perhaps the time to be taking notes--mental ones will have to do, as the air is burning their lungs already and there are ominous snaps and creaks amid the growing voice of the fire as it tears at the building supports. At the bottom of the stairs they find a long corridor with many rooms on either side.

Alais looks at the wand his mentor gave him--so long ago now, and so far away! The first blast of cold gives them some space to breathe, at least. In the end five charges are expended before the fire is put out. It is then, of course, entirely dark until the intrigued mage produces a light.

Alais walks down the hall, ignoring Pham's attempts to pull him back to safer ground. The doors on each side--which normally would most certainly have been locked--have been eaten away, some of them, providing glimpses into the workrooms of the masters, their contents now both burned and rimed, and the larger space where junior members of the guild would work on projects together. At the far end, which from the more extensive damage is where the fire began, one large room reveals something very interesting. Glancing into the blackened chamber, Alais notes that there seems to be another door leading out of the room--away into darkness below the town. The ceiling looks very unsafe here, and at this point Pham bodily drags him back toward the stair.

"We can come back and look. There are injured people up there," the brother points out, coughing; the smoke and now steam are very thick still.

Out front, "Hurt?" He seems baffled by the idea that he might have been hurt by just climbing out a window. "At least we will not die of boredom in this company, it seems." He glances around keenly, again looking for anything out of place -- anyone who seems disappointed, or about to take violent advantage of the chaos out here, or is standing in the shadows wearing Hex-

torian symbols and thinking he's invisible in the dark. Near-immolation has definitely caused him to take a more active interest in what is going on here.

Everything *seems* right -- although several priests are now clustered around His Lordship and looking very worried indeed -- and yet....

There is a bit of blood on Cenon's voluminous sleeve, with nowhere visible it might have come from, and the half-elf recalls the man's hand on his lord's arm, just before Tesfaye fell....

"Emmett!" he hisses, making sure the Half-Man is going along with him as he stalks toward the guild master. Seizing the man's arm with its telling stain, he says loudly, "Are you injured, Master Cenon?" His words sound harmless, but his look says that he *knows*...

The man certainly looks startled, but who wouldn't being suddenly grabbed and in the light from Emmett's unnatural eye. "I beg your pardon who... ah, the visitor." He blinks, squints, coughs a few times. "The smoke. Hurt?" He seems puzzled. "Perhaps a scratch, nothing more." There is a hint of uncertainty in his voice, however, and he's tense.

"A scratch? Whatever from?"

"Falling, no doubt. If you would, sir." He is fixing ibn Fadil with a bit of a glare, unfazed by the alien's stare.

"In the middle of the floor. Of course," he says, but lets go -- and watches him, obtrusively at first and then less so as the excited crowd shifts about.

Cenon is glancing behind him at the building with a definitely puzzled expression as the smoke seems to be thinning and--after a series of weird crackling sounds--the noise is dying away. But he sticks close to the circle around the stricken nobleman.

With the door now open Lynden took a few moments to ensure that his fellow citizens had all safely exited the building before stopping to catch his breath. Standing to the side he is grateful to see that Lord Tesfaye is being attended to but moves forward none the less to assess the situation himself. Reaching down he lays a hand on his Lordship's forehead, muttering to himself as he attempts to identify the cause of his ill-health.

He looks terrible, and appears to have difficulty both breathing and moving. He may have had a heart attack or stroke, been overcome by the smoke... or by poison. Lynden looks around and sees that none of the higher-ranking priests are present, having no doubt left the building through the back.

"Whatever has indisposed his Lordship seems to be fast acting," Lynden murmurs to the gathered clerics. "I'm going to treat him for the smoke inhalation first," He looks up seeking reassurance but neither expecting or finding it, "those fumes were extremely noxious but if this doesn't work..." his voice tails off as he contemplates Lord Tesfaye's fate--and that of his currently-missing heir, under the circumstances.

Reaching up and removing the carved stag hanging from the leather thong around his neck Lynden holds it tightly as he gestures quickly, moving his hands around the body as if to waft the smoke away chanting all the while.

He doesn't look any better, but he doesn't look any worse, either.

At which point Nikodem pulls quite the tiniest crossbow anyone there has ever seen from one sleeve and shoots Lynden, who feels a sharp prick from the dart and then a spreading numbness....

"Hey!" Lynden exclaims slapping at the source of his pain. Then, "Gerik protect me," as he realizes the significance of the tiny bolt and the associated lack of feeling. "We may not have much time," he calls out grabbing the nearest cleric, "go and get Bendek quickly." "RUN!" he bellows as the startled youngster remains fixed in place. The young man finds his feet and takes off; the numbness lingers for a few moments, then slowly fades.

The Zakharan bites off a curse that ought to melt the snow in his vicinity, and ducks low. For an instant it seems he is diving for cover, but he has a knife in hand and uses it to hamstring the would-be murderer.

It's a tricky maneuver, made more so by the snow and the weight of the official robes the man wears, but a thin shriek sounds above the general noise as the knife bites into his leg. Meanwhile, Nyala does a quick scan of the crowd, looking for anyone who might be coming to the artificer's aid, knife held unobtrusively in the folds of her gown.

Things are starting to make a kind of sense. Emmett hesitates for a half a moment, then joins the fray; his blade bites deeply into the old man's side. He's not wearing any armor; whatever he was expecting to happen tonight, getting into a fight was not part of it.

Or maybe he simply doesn't care; Nikodem is muttering to himself, a harsh chant rising to a shout as he lunges awkwardly on his wounded leg toward the helpless man he appears determined to kill. "The weak must die! Strength alone will save us in the war to come!" A touch is all he needs, and His Lordship's labored breathing grows more so, blood bubbling from his nose and mouth.

The few people who came out the building's front have retreated somewhat. Some members of the bucket brigade appear to be guardsmen who are gripping their staves and advancing, but none of them are as well armed as the foreigners.

Meanwhile, Alais and Pham have climbed the stairs and emerged into the cleaner air behind the building, just in time to see a young priest skid to a halt and almost cannon into Bendek, who is busy tending to those who were injured in the crush or who took in too much smoke. He clutches the head priest's arm, babbling too quickly for comprehension of anything other than trouble. In the front of the building, someone screams.

This development calls for a change of tactics. Ibn Fadil leaps to his feet and draws his sword in almost the same moment, and slashes at Nikodem without hesitation; as his comrades may have noted before, wielding a blade with his left hand does not appear to be any hindrance to him.

It's a clean miss as Nikodem slips and flails in the snow. "Weaklings all! The Fire is coming! The Last Winter is at hand!"

Nyala glances around at this, then her attention is caught by a man who appears to be attempting to slink off into the shadows. She follows him.

Horrified by Nikodem's unexpected and extremely callous behavior Lynden spares only a heartbeat before he himself begins to speak, moving to interpose himself between Tesfaye and his assailant as he does so. Although his voice is tense he speaks clearly and then touches his Lordship swiftly before resuming his stance keeping the guildmaster at bay.

He looks much improved, though his breathing is still labored.

Emmett quickly sizes up the situation, then adjusts his position to be opposite to Nikodem from the half elf. Once in position, he closes to almost directly behind the spellcaster and starts

hammering away with cutlass and hook. The man is simply too dangerous to the life of the local lord to let live, and saving the local lord *has* to be good for trade...

It's hard to see in the torchlight--the hook seems to catch *in* the man's flesh, holding him still for that crucial moment as the cutlass blade slides through his ribs and *twists*, and with a scream he falls to the ground. The snow is dark with blood beneath him.

Emmett glances down at the body, taking a more thorough look for Gondish holy symbols, then up to the half elf. "Thanks for distracting him. He walked right into that." He glances around "Anyone care to explain this?" No one jumps forward immediately to do so. Still no Gondish symbols.

Bendek comes charging around the building, puffing with the exertion, and thumps down next to Tesfaye. "Marek ward us all!" He does a quick physical check and looks up at Lynden. "Jomei poison, looks like. You arrested the spread? Good." He begins a muttered prayer of his own.

Wicked stuff, Lynden knows, from a certain fish found only in the deepest parts of the sea. First paralyzing, it moves rapidly through the body; had the front door not been broken down, the lord might have been dead by the time they got him outside, and it's unlikely anyone would have looked for such a cause.

The visitors can chalk up another potential trade good, if so inclined--a fast-working poison of such deadliness would certainly be of interest to many, particularly if its origins (and hence proper treatment) were unknown.

Immensely relieved by the venerable cleric's intervention, but still trying to make sense of the situation, Lynden willingly gives way to his greater authority.

Realizing that few of them would have escaped the fire, let alone been able to prevent the subsequent assassination attempt, without the outsider's assistance he directs his thanks to ibn Fadil and Emmett. "I'm grateful for your help. We," he gestures back towards Tesfaye, "are in your debt."

"Hello," Alais says, rounding the corner and blinking in surprise at the carnage. "The fire is out, we found some of the most interesting things in the--."

Pham looks at the dying man in their midst. "Who is that?"

"Head of the artificers guild. Went nuts, tried to poison Tesfaye. When that didn't work, he started trying to kill him with clerical magics." Emmett gives Pham a quizzical look. "Why, you planning to bring him back for questioning?"

"Indeed, there will be questions," Bendek promises grimly before Pham can reply. "You men there, find something on which we may move his lordship." A piece of the broken door is pressed into service as a stretcher. "And bring that, as well," he adds, looking at Cenon's body.

Ibn Fadil glances around for Nyala; she is gone, but very soon comes back, pushing the man before her with one arm twisted up behind his back and her knife prodding him gently in the kidney region.

Emmett laughs at the man's predicament, a short harsh chuckle.

"What--" one of the locals starts to ask in astonishment.

"He was running away," she shrugs. "I thought you'd like to speak to him."

"This--creature--is obviously mad," her captive states through gritted teeth.

"Madness aplenty here tonight, but we shall see." The priest frowns. "Treachery and worse.... " He turns to one of the guards who was organizing the bucket chain. "See that all of those here present are brought to the castle, and mark well any who are missing. Lynden, go with these strangers and check the building, see that there are no others trapped or lurking therein.

"And locate Lord Dorek," he adds to the assembled generally.

Nodding his acquiescence Lynden turns to lead the way back to the badly damaged guild hall wondering whether further horrors awaited discovery.

Pleased that Nyala has the situation well in hand, ibn Fadil trades a glance with Emmett, shrugs to indicate his lack of strong opinion, and follows the local priest.

The Half-man give a little bow and gesture with his hook, indicating that Ibn Fadil and the others should take the lead.

Everyone seems to be out of the building. Below, the footing is treacherous due to the thick coating of ice on most surfaces. Their hastily lit torches provide wavering glimpses into the partially destroyed rooms, and at the end finally the narrow passage the explorers glimpsed before.

The dark, dank rooms filled Lynden with a sense of foreboding. Somewhere down here was evidence pointing to the fate of the young lord and the concubine he was so fond of. "Perhaps, they escaped," he muttered aloud, "I hope so."

He looks around for signs of what might have started the fire -- it does appear to have begun at this end of the building, at least. There is a lot of half-melted equipment, containers that might have stored anything. There is a heavy chemical scent in the air along with the smoke. Perhaps one of the other artificers will be able to identify these things--if they can be trusted?

Ibn Fadil looks about for corpses, obvious starting points of the fire, and any sign of Hextorian activities. No corpses or symbols meet the half-elf's inquisitive eyes. These were small, private workrooms for the most part, most of their contents destroyed or so badly damaged it's hard to guess what they were.

He walks to the end of the building and peers down the narrow passage. Judging by the thick wooden barrier that has been partially eaten away by the fire, it was intended to be hidden. It leads away into darkness, in the direction of the harbor.

Mindful of the quality of the front-door lock, ibn Fadil rather carefully checks this once-hidden door for any nasty surprises before slipping past the scorched wood into the passageway; there is a mechanism there, down near the floor--more poison, if he had to wager a guess--but the action of fire and ice have rendered it quite inoperable. Glancing back to whoever is closest, he says, "Would you bring that torch a little closer, please?" By the improved light he cautiously proceeds a little farther along.

It is barely large enough to accommodate one of the natives, with their relatively heavy build, but he has no difficulty. The walls are of rough stone for a few yards, after which they become smooth except for one area where it appears another adit has been carefully bricked up.

Emmett cranes his head a little past Alais and mutters a single word - brilliant red light erupts from his eye, illuminating the passageway. Now that he'd done it he expects the half elf to complain about the amount of light, the color, or something else, but at least now they can clearly see down it's Stygian depths. Smoke swirls like fog in the hellish beam.

Fortunately, ibn Fadil is **not** looking back when the brighter light appears. "Thank you, Emmett."

"Three will get you five there's another spelljammer down there - or at least the docks for one."

No one takes him up on it, and they advance cautiously down the narrow passage, necessarily in single file. It runs straight and level--dwarf-work, perhaps, hewn who knows how long ago in the course of the conflict between the two peoples, and now put to other use.

It ends at last in a round chamber, perhaps fifteen feet across and with a slightly domed ceiling. On the far side the tunnel becomes a stair leading steeply upward, but no one is looking at that just yet, their attention taken by the thing in the center of the room, atop a square stone block perhaps three feet on a side.

It seems at first glance to be a clockwork device, but of no kind of any of them has ever seen or even imagined before, a many-limbed ball incorporating dozens of materials, all of them precious to some degree, and every limb bearing some edge, point, or pincer. Each is stained with blood. Inlaid into the central body are the red arrows of Hextor.

It is exquisitely crafted, weirdly beautiful, and entirely evil; to gaze at it for long is to be caught in uneasy admiration. It seems... pure, in a way that defies explanation, a cold and perfect execution of power, and it tempts the thoughts down passages better not walked in the waking world.

Some time passes before any of them can shake off their unwilling fascination enough to realize that the thing is not finished; there are a number of holes in the central mass that look as if they must yet have their pieces fitted in. The curse is not quite complete; more would have been doomed to die in this buried room had any number of events above chanced differently.

Ibn Fadil looks both appalled and deeply troubled; half-unconsciously he murmurs a childhood prayer for protection from evil.

And Emmett grasps--perhaps Gond touches him then--that it is not an actual, working clockwork. It is too simple, too small for what must be a bewildering number of mechanisms required to make each of those legs move. It is a sort of model, what might be built if one had seen a painting of a thing, but not the schematic. Terrible though it appears, it is not real.

Not yet.

The half man recovers his sangfroid, wandering around the thing, peering into the holes. "Guys, I hate to make this worse, but this Gond-damned thing is just an imitation. They're basing this model on one they've seen."

A shudder thrills Lynden's back at the suggestion that there may be another such device in or around Myrr and in working order at that. He would give much to be able to locate and deactivate the original. Torture was to be abhorred.

The stair turns out to lead up to a locked trapdoor. Ibn Fadil, knowing by now what to expect, locates and disables the trap very carefully. He is about to start on picking the lock when he looks back at Emmett, and after a moment of consideration, steps back from the door.

It gives way under the half man's forged and tempered disgust, shattering as he straightens his arms and back after bracing himself on the stairs. If there were anyone outside to see it, the splintered wood and flying dust would look very much like Emmett had just torn his way free from an entombment through sheer bloody-minded power.

It lets up into a basement, which in turns lets into a building near the harbor; this ground floor appears to be used entirely for storage, and there is no one about.

* * *

Meanwhile, a dozen men slip through the shadows of Myrr, toward the little-used Sea Gate. Timing their motions against the footsteps of the constant patrols on the walls, the door opens and two of them slip across the open space toward the ship from another world. The guard there does not have a chance to give the alarm. Silently they climb the ladder and force the hatch. The others by ones and twos join them.

The armored walls retain sound well....

A short time later, a single man with a sword and pack on his back descends the ladder, and a much smaller figure as well. After taking only a few steps, they vanish from sight.

* * *

There are drums. The alarm is being sounded throughout the town; the dead guard at the ship has been discovered, and what lies within.

As men rush to their posts on the walls, one happens to catch a glimpse into a narrow street and stops with a shout; his comrades gather quickly around him, torches held high. The strangest of the ones from the sky is there, and two dead men. The snow is black with blood.

"Is it dead?" someone asks. But giff are tough--far tougher than anyone on this planet has reason to realize, fortunately for the young officer--and they quickly ascertain that he does still live. With no little effort the unconscious Yestin is moved to the castle in search of aid.

And so, in the early hours of that cold morning, it seems that half the town is crammed into the great hall at the castle, and many of them are asking questions. Inez is there, having remained with the crowd during the recent activity. A far smaller number are in the council chamber, where Lord Tesfaye remains grievously weakened but very much alive, and from a comfortable couch listens and directs the priests and guards in their questions.

The crew of the _Distraction_ is of course permitted entry, given their vital role in events and the new information they are bringing.

Emmett threads his way through the crowd to meet Inez, whom he gives a deep embrace, grateful that she is all right and just a trifle shaky after his encounter with the machine. She seems surprised to see him in such a mood, and gives him a somewhat worried look.

Seeing that the others were settling in for the questioning, Emmett uses some of his newly minted status to lay claim to a horse and do a quick run out to the ship.

There are a half dozen very edgy town guardsmen there. "Rolf's relief came out and found him," one of them tells Emmett, indicating the dead man at the base of the ladder. "And what he found up there...." He looks a bit shaken. "Well. Better show you, I suppose."

Emmett looks quickly at the guard, trying to get a good ideas as to who killed him (that is to say, ruling Hiro out) before moving into the ship. His throat has been rather professionally cut, so the local thugs aren't _completely_ incompetent.

It's cold up in the belly of the ship; the stove has been put out. Even so, the smell of death is everywhere. As they move slowly through the _Distraction_, Emmett counts twelve corpses, all of them armed like the men who attacked ibn Fadil and Nyala the other night, many of them bearing

Hiro's distinctive signature, but others different and hence very puzzling wounds -- but no sign of the enigmatic swordsman himself, until they reach the bridge.

Emmett strides around, taking in the scene, using his eye to provide pinpoint illumination (and making the locals more than a little nervous). "Local roustabouts from the look of it. And maybe someone else..." This last is in a barely audible whisper.

There is a neatly rolled and tied paper on the helm. _Forgive my haste in this writing, and also in my departure, if you can, after so long a time as comrades. An attempt this evening was made to seize the ship, which failed._ Emmett can just hear Hiro's deadpan tone. _I now find myself called away by an urgent errand, about which I think it better to say too little than too much. If the fates will it, we shall meet again. If not, do not be troubled on my account, for hope has returned when it least was looked for. May your endeavors be blessed by your gods._

Emmett rolls the scroll back up and pockets it. "Well, that explains everything." He turns to the nearest guard, "I have to get back to the castle. Could you get a detail of men to clean these bodies out of here?"

"Of course." The man almost salutes, then looks around nervously and back at Emmett with clear questions.

"Hmmm...Oh, a bunch of the local thugs who tried to kill our quartermaster a few days ago made a go at the ship. Hiro killed them all before leaving on a personal errand. I think you'll find street crime has gone down a little, given how they've weeded out their ranks in strange efforts to kill us."

Outside the ship once again, Emmett casts about a final time, ranging in a wide circle for additional signs. Some distance from the ship he comes upon Hiro's trail unspoiled by the boots of the guardsmen. Beside it is another set of tracks--the small, booted feet he has seen once before. The trails are headed along the coast when they vanish.

He gives a short sharp nod at the tracks, then turns his horse and rides back to town with speed.

Meanwhile, Lord Dorek has indeed been located--alone. Under truth spell he insists that he has absolutely no idea what is going on. Yes, he had left the hall in hopes of a few moments with Mela, and it seems he would not have been particularly distressed by his father's death, but he knows nothing of the cause of the fire, or about any poisoning attempt. Neither does he know where she is; he never did find her. Everyone remains suspicious, but it does appear that he has merely been masterfully set up. And he does have two younger brothers....

The journeyman Nyala caught trying to sneak away is far more helpful, albeit unwillingly. Yes, there was a cult to this new god called Hextor. Cenon had been its head, and had recruited him; he didn't know who the others were, they had always been masked when they gathered. He had been aware of the planned fire, and had helped to create the simple clockwork that set off the collection of flammable chemicals without human agency, but had not known of the attempt on His Lordship. He thought the fire had been intended both to better conceal the secret chamber, now that they were almost done, and to weed out the weaklings from the guild; had the fire spread further, so much the better. (As it happened, a few of the older members did succumb to the smoke before the priests could aid them, but thanks to the quick action of the visitors it was far from the apparently hoped-for death toll.) It seemed that Cenon had wanted chaos in the city, the better to temper it for what was to come.

At that point he goes off in a long, rambling and barely coherent tirade about how society is falling into decadence and a terrible danger, the weak rule and the strong are dragged down into servitude, the gods themselves are failing, and how the coming war and the winter that would last a hundred years demand strength. On and on he babbles -- about castles falling into the sea, fire raining down from heaven, great waves washing away all all the dross of a thousand years.

Pham hears in this an echo of his own visions, and those of the madman on Janik; it begins to appear that this is a universal phenomenon.

Ibn Fadil offers to help with a search of Cenon's home and any other properties, pointing out the way the underground hideout's entrances were supplied with poisoned traps and that he knows how to deal with such things.

Lynden agrees with the suggestion and offers to accompany him in case of further confrontation, confident that Lord Tesfaye would appreciate him being there to witness any discoveries made.

The two of them and several guards descend on the large stone dwelling, near enough the guild hall that the smell of smoke is heavy. There is no one there except for some servants; the artificer's wife died many years ago (under apparently natural circumstances, but now people are wondering), he appears to have sacrificed his eldest son, and his other children have homes elsewhere.

To do a thorough search takes them the remainder of the night; the guards are jumping at every shadow and afraid to touch almost anything after the warning about poisoned traps, so ibn Fadil and Lynden end up doing most of the work. The man had a small workshop on the upper floor, in addition to the one at the guildhall, and it's there (where the servants are forbidden to enter, let alone to clean) that the searchers strike paydirt. Ibn Fadil notices some marks on the floor indicating that one of the heavy benches has been moved back and forth. Behind it is a concealed cabinet in the wall. After long study while the others shuffle impatiently, he identifies the catch that opens it, and how the trap works--probably. No clear means of disarming it, and it might actually be in another room of the house, given the man's skills.

"May I borrow that for a moment?" he inquires of a guard, who passes over his staff. "I'd get back behind the door." When they have done so, from one side and at an angle, he presses the end of the staff against the catch; two darts thump into the wall on the far side of the room, where they would have pierced anyone foolish enough to be standing in front of the thing while they tried to open it. The trap sprung, he opens the cabinet to find a square brass box inside. It's full of papers.

Emmett stumps back in just as ibn Fadil is leaving. The two men share a brief explanatory glance in passing, making it clear that there'll be a general sharing of information once time is no longer such an obstacle to good intelligence.

Around then, Yestin regains consciousness, and adds what he can to the story of the eventful night.

Yestin ruefully rubs the top of his head, in the vain hope of suppressing the heavy throb that threatens to explode his brain. He blinks several times as though awakening from a heavy, dream-filled slumber, and knuckles his eyes to rub the sleep from them.

The Giff discovers himself not alone and stares in surprise at the many anxious faces crowding the chamber around him, nervous to discover more than a few pairs of eyes turned to stare his way. _How did I get here? The last I remember..._

Yestin sits bolt upright. He gives his eyes another turn around the room, searching for one face in particular among the throng. His round, pointed ears begin to twitch anxiously when the face he seeks fails to materialize.

Turning his gaze towards Emmett, he asks tremulously, "Where is Captain Valarin?"

"Hey big guy. I was just about to ask you the same thing." The half man grabs a stool and perches on it near the first officer's enormous purple head. "Do you want to hear ours first, or are you up to talking?"

Giffish facial expressions are difficult for non-Giff to read, but the troubled thoughts that lay pooling behind Yestin's dark eyes are easy for his long-time crewmates to detect. The Giff stands erect, as though presenting an official military report, but his massive shoulders slump despite his efforts.

"Captain Valarin was feeling better and suggested we take a turn in the fresh air. As we were passing an alley near the inn where we are quartered, we heard sounds of a struggle and saw a group of men apparently abducting a young woman. Valarin charged after them." Yestin doesn't need to elaborate on Val's motives to his crewmates. "He was outnumbered and getting the worse of it when I caught up. I fought his attackers, but then I felt a sudden blow and blackness fell. That was the last I saw of the captain."

Yestin's grayish-purple skin deepens nearly to black and his ears twitch furiously, signs of embarrassment and shame over his failure to protect his captain. His eyes dart momentarily to Emmett for moral support, and, perhaps surprisingly, to one or two of the guards whom he has befriended during his days on Rigol.

"I did not recognize any of the men. They seemed the sort of dockside trash found in almost any groundling port town. The woman I recognized as Tesfaye's, er..." Yestin's blush deepens. "As Tesfaye's."

Emmett lowers his head. "Ooohhh. Diplomacy!" he whispers to himself. "Some more of those men tried to storm the ship as well. Hiro handled them, and then left." Emmett shrugged. "Maybe he went after the captain, maybe not, but he asked us not to intervene with him. Val, on the other hand, I want to get a shot at locating."

Yestin cocks his massive gray head at Emmett's news. That Hiro had suddenly went off on his own was hardly astonishing -- the taciturn warrior was given to strange moods and impulses, and little inclined to explain his actions -- but the towering Giff gave heed at least to Emmett's desire to find Captain Valarin. Shamed by his failure to protect Val from groundling riff-raff, he was well disposed towards locating their errant shipmate himself. "Yes, we should seek out the Captain."

The room is full of surprised exclamations and a lot of very suspicious glances at Dorek, who glares back at them.

"They won't get far," Feliks predicts grimly. "We'll find them."

"Yes," is all Tesfaye says, clearly so far gone in fury that it's probably for the best that he can't actually stand up right now. Emmett is reminded of the "thorough" sort of justice these people practice.

Later, when ibn Fadil and Lynden show up with the box, more is made clear. The papers appear to consist of coded exchanges between Nikodem and Cyril, His Lordship's second son. Although it will take some time to decipher the entirety, given what they already know it seems

plain that the idea was to kill Bogumil and kidnap Mela, with Dorek in position to take the blame, leaving Cyryl as heir. Apparently Nikodem believed him more fit for the coming tribulations than his older brother.

Unfortunately, there is no indication of where they planned to take her or what was to be done with her.

Cyryl's political maneuvering was not unexpected, Lynden thought, fully aware of the intense rivalry he shared with his brother but his partnership with Nikodem was more worrying. The likelihood was that Cenon had chosen to take advantage of the younger brother's jealousy of the heir apparent but the bigger question that remained to be answered was who had recruited Nikodem? And for how long had he been an adherent of the faith he had earlier revealed?

At this point the visitors, Lynden, Bendek, Feliks, and Tesfaye have retired to the small council chamber to sort through everything. Then Brother Pham, who has been very quiet ever since seeing the pseudo-mechanical abomination in the tunnel, speaks up.

"My lord," he says with a bow, "I believe I can cast some light on these events. The god Cenon worships is known on many other worlds as Hextor. He is a cruel and tyrannical deity, and many tales could I tell of the evil that has been done by his followers. Some of you may have noticed," he glances at Lynden, "that I wear a similar symbol, but I give you my word that I do not worship that... thing." He has learned in his conversations with people here the importance of oaths. "Indeed, my advice would be to smash it, melt it down and cast what remains into the sea after your own priests have dispelled the curse." Bendek nods grimly.

"It is my guess," Pham continues, "that this god came here through Victor's ships--unless there has been other offworld contact we do not know of. You may wish to concentrate your investigations upon people who have had dealings with him, but they appear to be operating secretly here--which they do not usually do on other worlds, from what I have been told--and I am very much afraid that having had several years in which to work, that trail will be cold. But it would be a start. And if I may say so," he adds with another bow, "this makes it all the more imperative that we speak to your king, for who knows how deep their roots have penetrated?"

The castle is in a state of near-chaos at this point, as people try to simultaneously organize a search for the missing woman and captain, figure out how to uncover the rest of the cult members, and prepare a war party to attack Cyryl's manor. Questioning of Nikodem's spirit is put off until that evening, until what is already known can be sorted out, and to prepare for the effort of coercing one such as he was.

Emmett makes it perfectly clear to Yestin and the locals that he wants to be in on the attack. "If Val's anywhere local, he's there. And we'd have to move fast."

'The seeds of discord were well sown,' Lynden mutters under his breath observing the bedlam around him. Reluctantly he steps forward and calls for quiet, conscious of the attention he courted. "My Lord, it seems a rescue and bringing to justice combined is called for." He bows to Tesfaye and includes the offworlders in his obeisance, "With your permission I will assemble the search party."

Permission is granted, indeed it seems with some relief; Lynden is trusted and it means one less thing for his superiors to be worried about right now. Squads are quickly assembled and fan out from where Yestin was found.

Meanwhile, Emmett and ibn Fadil update each other on developments: "Twelve local ruffians tried to take the ship. Hiro and a gnome killed them, and then Hiro took off on a quest with the

gnome," and "Cenon had a well-hidden hiding place with a box full of incriminating papers. It seems someone thought it was a good idea for Tesfaye's younger son Cyril to be in charge of things here."

There follows a larger meeting. As Yestin and Emmett convene the reduced crew of the Distraction to discuss these developments, ibn Fadil takes Nyala aside and speaks quietly and seriously with her for a few moments.

At the ship, ibn Fadil immediately goes to the galley and starts getting a fire going again in the stove; the rest of the group follows the promise of warmth.

Emmett crinkled his nose. Despite the removal of the bodies the Distraction still smelled ominously of death. "Well, it's been a busy day, eh?"

"Here's the deal as I see it: Hiro has gone off to go do something for the Gnomes, and he'll get back when it can. I think one of the little fellers snuck on board the Distraction invisibly to recruit some help for something, then revealed himself to help Hiro. He said he'd be back when he could, and I think we have to take him at that. Besides, I don't think any of us have a chance in hell of finding Hiro if he doesn't want to be found.

"Val's been kidnapped, and is either right nearby at Cyril's house or he's miles away from here by now. I figure we owe it to the captain to try and rescue him if he's nearby, but if not, we we also owe it to him to continue the mission. I'm less confident of his ability to take care of himself than Hiro, but that's because Hiro has learned not to think with his..." He glances quickly between Nyala and Inez before continuing, "...heart.

"Plus, bringing the locals forces over to Cyril's house rather than make them ride will earn us more points in the letter of recommendation we want Tesfaye to cough up."

He looks back to Yestin "I think we're still much faster than the locals think we are, and that gives us a day or two to try to help Val before we have to skedaddle to meet with the High King. But if we want to do any business on this planet, we have to respond to that summons. What do you think, First Officer?"

The half-elf quietly closes the door of the stove, moves to a position near the middle of the group, and waits for Yestin's response.

Yestin blinks uncertainly. Until that moment, it had not occurred to the self-effacing young Giff that, with Captain Valarin's absence, he had been elevated to the position of senior officer of the Distraction. He flushes, for he had been only a minor member of his Giff Platoon before his... defection. Now, he is in command of men that are, in many ways, quite his senior in experience. It is, to say the least, quite beyond his understanding.

Yestin straightens visibly, standing very nearly at attention. "We should... we *shall* offer the Distraction to provide transport for the raid. It will no doubt ingratiate us to our hosts and also provide us the opportunity to rescue Captain Valarin."

At Yestin's own mention of Val's name, some of his confidence visibly dissipates. The sting of his failure to protect his senior officer remains sharp in his mind. "We don't know that he was kidnapped, though. He may very well be pursuing some Victor ship across the waves in pursuit of that distressed maiden."

Yestin colors, embarrassed by his own speech and doubting his optimistic supposition, and his eyes seek Emmett for support. "Yes," he reiterates, "we will aid the Lord Tesfaye's raiders and perchance rescue Captain Valarin."

Emmett nods briskly, and smiles. "Good. I'll get the weapons ship shape and clear things out for their troops to have a place to stand." For those paying attention, the smile shifts from a friendly supporting one for their new captain to a grim nasty one when contemplating bloody vengeance on the would be killers.

Ibn Fadil nods his agreement. "And I want to search that place too. If they have any sense they'll have destroyed everything useful, but then again you never know."

He pauses, either to gather his thoughts or to let it sink in that both his Zakharan accent and the usual anxiousness of his manner have disappeared. He seems quite calmly determined, and his speech sounds like an ordinary spacefarer's version of Common - more Bralian than anything else, perhaps. "I agree with Brother Pham that the presence of these Hextorians here is a serious matter. In fact I think it's serious enough that I'm not doing anything that's more important than looking into it."

He glances around at their not quite universally startled faces. "Before I get into why I think so, I figure I'd better clear up a few things. First off, I'm a liar." If saying this makes him uncomfortable, it doesn't show. "My name isn't ibn Fadil, I've never had a gambling problem, and I lived on Bral for five years because I was employed to collect information about anything and everything that was going on there."

Yestin's dark eyes grow wide at the announcement by ibn Fadil -- or whomever he truly is. He had been shocked badly some months ago to discover the treachery among the Giff employed on Bral. The possibility of another betrayer in his midst left him quite disconcerted.

His eyes flick around the room. He isn't sure if it is his responsibility as senior officer to respond first, as this is all quite beyond his experience. When no one else speaks up immediately, he clears his throat with a loud rumble and speaks in as authoritative manner as he could muster. "Pray, explain yourself, Master ibn... sir."

"Ibn Fadil' will do," he replies, "we're all used to it. Now, just before I accidentally spoiled my position there, I'd become aware that someone at one of the oligarchs' companies was up to something. I didn't know what, and I still don't know the details. It was mostly a definite feeling." His gaze flicks over to Emmett. "Like flying over a landscape and being quite sure there's an ambush down there somewhere."

"Anyway, before I could follow up on that I got mixed up in certain regrettable events and concluded that I had to leave Bral, which is why I took ship on the Lazy Cat, being as it was the only ship leaving at the time. I'd intended to return to Bral once things had settled down, but between one thing and another I didn't care much for the idea of staying there any more, and then this opportunity" -- he waves at the ship in general -- "was really quite irresistible." He grins, looking almost boyish.

"Exploring strange new worlds and all that. We might even have learned something worth passing on, which'll be my rationale when I have to explain myself later on."

"To the point, then," he continues, perceiving a certain lack of sympathy in his audience. "I think I know more or less what was going on at Bral and it's related to what we're finding here. Captain Gustan's actions never made even bad sense to me until I realized, when we were attacked as we left Bral, that he must've been in cahoots not just with somebody in one of the companies but with one of the actual oligarchs. Who I have to assume was involved in the import of ghouls to Bral and perhaps whatever else was going on there. There just aren't any other candidates. And now we find Hextorians ensconced here on Rigol. This probably sounds pretty thin to you all" (if,

he thinks privately, they're even really following it) "but I'm used to making something out of not much and I've gotten pretty good at it.

"What I'm leading up to, and you've got to understand I wouldn't be talking about this if I wasn't pretty damn sure about it, is that it looks to me like these Hextorians have access to, if not control of, the nearly unlimited funds and resources of at least one of the biggest trading companies working the Flow. And that scares me right down to my toenails."

He doesn't actually look scared, but then he never does. "It's a threat to pretty much everyone, everywhere. The only problem is that I haven't got any proof yet. I'm going to keep looking into it and try to get some, and if that means parting company with you all, that's what it means. But I think I know you well enough by now that I doubt I'll have to." He gives Yestin a direct look. "This doesn't mean I want your job. I just want to not have to make up poor lies about what I'm trying to do. It wouldn't work and it wouldn't be sensible." The fact that lying at all might seem wrong to some people doesn't seem to have occurred to him.

It's difficult to determine whether or not Yestin had followed the thread of ibn Fadil's winding explanation, Giff facial expressions being what they are. Giff are known for favoring directness over subtlety, after all, and it is quite possible that the nuances of ibn Fadil's intrigues are absolutely lost upon the First Officer.

Yestin frowns. "If there is a link between the presence of the Hextorians upon this world and the Victor's trading ships, which is a possibility if not a certainty, then your interest in that order coincides with our own for the moment. I doubt we shall have to part company any time soon."

"However, you have not fully elaborated upon your opening subject. If you are not the man you claimed to have been, then who are you? You were employed to learn all you could about Bral -- by whom and to what purpose?"

"It just won't feel right not having any more secrets," the half-elf complains with apparent sincerity, "but you're going to insist, aren't you? -- Very well."

Yestin shrugs. "We would be oblivious to the matter of your false identity if you had not brought the subject to our attention, unbidden." The giff colors purple-black. "_I_ would be oblivious, at least."

"Don't sell yourself short, First Officer. I'm good at what I do."

He takes a deep breath, and says (troweling on the Zakharan accent), "Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor of introducing the Faris Arif ibn Hassan Dawud Fadil Olnfar. Al-Quadir," he adds for the sake of completeness. Dropping the accent again, he continues, "I work for my family, which is called Olnfar. Among the things we deal in is information. I really don't know what use they made of what I was able to send them.

"And I didn't say it was the Victor that I suspect is behind these problems."

"Nor did I," Yestin responds. "Only that his ships may have provided transport to Rigol for the order, in which case your interests in the Hextorians and our service to the trading company coincide." The Giff rubs his prodigious jowls for a moment. "Your service to your family does not mark you as an enemy of Bral or Three Trees, then?"

Ibn Fadil (or Farissarif or whatever) grins at him, apparently pleased by the officer's perception.

The Giff rubs his prodigious jowls for a moment. "Your service to your family does not mark you as an enemy of Bral or Three Trees, then?"

"It's not about enemies and friends, it's about buying and selling. And trading. But to answer your question, we've nothing against Bral or Three Trees that I know of. We're interested in peace and profits for all -- and especially ourselves, of course -- which means we're against such things as piracy and pernicious activities like I'm afraid we're looking at right now."

The First Officer nods. Coming from a race of professional mercenaries, he could understand and respect the neutral but honorable trade attitude the Zakharan espoused.

Yestin sighs, clearly unused to, and uncomfortable with, this sort of public interrogation. He silently searches the crews' eyes for support, in the hopes that someone else will take up the questioning.

Emmett pulls himself off the crate he's been using as a stool, walks calmly over to Ibn Fadil, looks him square in the eye as if judging his character for the first time...and then slugs him right in the jaw. Hard as it is, the half elf can tell that Emmett - who at one time Ibn Fadil has seen put his hand through the staves of a barrel - could have made it an awful lot harder.

"That...is for lying to us. Pull that shit again, and it'll be worse." He takes a step back, the holds out his hand to help the half elf to his feet. "Now, what did you have in mind for the investigation? I think Victor's likely too stupid to be directly involved, but that makes him perfect fodder an arrogant transport."

It takes a moment for the Zakharan to respond, as he has to check that his jaw still works. Hoping that this will be the last time he has to let someone get away with hitting him, he lets Emmett help him up.

"That's what I was thinking about the Victor, myself," he finally says. "The only leads we've got are here on Rigol and back on Bral. We could follow the Victor and Hextorian connection here as far as it will go - which would mean a longer stay and probably getting involved in the business with Lord Durrell. Or we could go back to Bral and root around there. Or both, seeing as we're here already.

"It's also possible, or even likely, that the Hextorians are also active in this capitol city. That's something we could look into when we get there. Other than that I don't know. I've never done anything like this before."

"Learn before, during and after you build.' I guess we'll make it up on the fly for now, and see how much the High King already has on Lord Durrell. Given what we've heard about this place, the file is probably a foot thick and growing." Emmett looks over the crew, and getting a look from Yestin, adopts a more commanding manner, "Ok, we're through here people, and this ship needs to get into shape before the guests come on board for the trip - clean to impress, because they'll be questioning Gerard no end once we get him there."

As the meeting breaks up, he looks over at ibn Fadil. "Get Pham to take a look at that - Nyala'd hate to see you lose that tooth."

* * *

In the meantime, it's fairly clear that anyone who acts the least bit suspiciously is liable to be lynched--the townsfolk of Myrr are to a man wound to the snapping point after the night's events. The vilest sort of treachery from the highest ranks of town society--not surprisingly for a strong and warlike people, they generally abhor the use of poison--the prospect of further danger within, strange magics--the story of what happened at the guildhall is quickly repeated and grows until Alais is putting out fires by breathing on them, ibn Fadil is walking through walls, and

Emmett bursting strong doors with a touch (Lynden they more or less expect miracles of, so he gets less exaggeration)--and people still missing....

With the dawn, a ship arrives, blissfully innocent of all of this. It is the expected reply from the capital, with the summons of the High King to the outworlders.

* * *

By the time they have finished searching the town Lynden has been on his feet for almost two straight days, and there is no trace of the missing woman or the captain.

"What signs we were able to find suggest that they may have left by sea," he reports to Bendek as evening falls once again.

"Then they could be anywhere," the older priest sighs. "We shall have to hope that they did indeed make for their master, and that we shall find them there. His Lordship is most wroth." He hesitates, apparently weighing his words. "Strange and dark days have come upon us. These visitors... I believe they can be trusted, but I cannot fail to note that much of the recent trouble appears to have been on their account. I will be glad to see them gone, but I would not have them unwatched when they arrive at the capital. I will not command you in this journey, but despite your youth you have done great service already to your lord and god, and I believe this responsibility will not be too great."

A large, obvious yawn escapes Lynden as he looks up at his mentor in disbelief. "I am not insensible to the honour you do me by asking this," he tries hard to fight back another yawn and to remain respectful, "but I have never looked for this duty. Master, I fear that my words will fall on deaf ears away from Myrr. Surely one with greater rank and experience should escort them?"

Bendek nods, "And so thought I initially but there is sense in it being one with whom they are familiar." He ventures a small smile, "Besides, to be underestimated is no small advantage."

"I am to be a spy!" Lynden's voice began to raise as he took affront at the nature of his task.

"No." Bendek spoke decisively and his restraint felt palpable. "You are to journey with them and see that they do nothing to dishonor Lord Tesfaye or our faith. You will aid them whenever it does not conflict with our own interests but above all you will observe and learn from their ways. If, as I suspect, they are a catalyst on our shores then better to have one of our own at hand to state our case."

Shuffling his feet dispiritedly Lynden conceded defeat fate knowing that to argue further would bring Bendek's slow anger to boiling point. "I will obey your instructions in this as in all things Master. I shall hope to return with instructions from his Highness in due course. But now, " he yawns again more loudly, "may I withdraw to cleanse myself of this grime and perhaps snatch a few hours sleep?"

A moment's wait for permission and then he left hurriedly, seeking privacy and a chance to pray.

* * *

When evening arrives the crew again assembles at the castle to hear what His Lordship has to say. He is looking better, but it will be several days before he is fully recovered from the poison's effects. Bendek, Lynden, and Feliks are also there.

"Well." He looks them over. "As you know, a ship arrived this morning bearing word from the capital. His Majesty wishes to speak with you. It has been most... interesting having you as guests in our city. You have done me great personal service in uncovering these traitors, and have

suffered losses of your own. Do not fear these will be forgotten; the war party leaves as soon as we may. I know that you are anxious to locate your captain, but in this season it will be a week's journey to the traitor's den, and I advise you to heed the king's summons. Lynden will accompany you, to give report of the happenings here."

Uncomfortably aware of his position as senior officer, Yestin loudly clears his throat to capture Tesfaye's attention. The Giff's massive lungs amplify the otherwise innocuous sound until it resembles the dull roar of a cave bear.

"Your lordship," he begins, bowing slightly, "please permit us to repay the hospitality you have shown us by offering the service of our vessel, the *_Distraction_*, in this effort. It will greatly reduce the travel time to the renegade's lair and, perchance, afford us the opportunity to learn our Captain's fate while offering service to your lordship and your men at the same time. You would do us great honor to accept our offer."

Yestin colors again, uncomfortable with such flowery speech.

"That puts things in a slightly different light. Feliks, you will have command of the expedition. Do please try to take him alive." The lord is clearly annoyed by his own lingering weakness. "These had been prepared in expectation that you would leave in the morning. For saving my life I would ordinarily provide a gift of steel, but you are well-supplied in that, or land or horses, of which you have no need, so I fear I am reduced to mere baubles. Some of them may, however, prove useful to you. These have been in my family for many generations." To Emmett and ibn Fadil he gives silver rings. The workmanship is very fine; these weren't made by humans. Emmett's has a small flattened area on which is carved a spread-winged eagle; ibn Fadil's is hatched all over with a design that resembles grain sheaves.

It's loose on his finger; he gives Tesfaye a nice Zakharan bow and somewhat distracted thanks.

Emmett bows as well, the obvious clumsiness of his prostheses covering for any social gaffe in the slight nature of the incline. Lacking the Half Elf's naturally slim fingers, the ring fits more comfortably on his weapon calloused digits. The phantom fingers of his long last hand prickle as his mind starts racing to figure out what sort of enchantment this gift obviously bears...

Bendek steps forward and gives Pham a slender golden chain from which is suspended a large piece of highly polished amber, and to Alais a narrow silver circlet set with three smaller pieces. "Your quick action saved not only the lives of many within the hall, but prevented the fire from spreading. These may prove useful to you in your studies."

"For one whose appearance initially alarmed the entire town, I am told that many here will regret your departure," Tesfaye says to Yestin. "I hope you will find some use for this." He gives the Giff a finely carved ivory box; within it is nestled a tiny but incredibly detailed ivory carving of a raven.

"Many thanks, my lord," Yestin replies, clearly puffed up by Tesfaye's compliment. "In truth, I will be loathe to leave the company of the many fine men in your lordship's retinue. They are well worth their steel, I may assure you." The giff smiles, the creased curve of gray flesh no doubt eerie-looking to his Rigolian hosts. "For the gift, my thanks."

"Lord Tesfaye, by my figuring we'll have space for two dozen of your men on the *Distraction*. They'll have to do without mounts, but I think the speed at which we can move will surprise not only your men but our enemies as well." Emmett glances over to Feliks, letting the man know that he's available to help coordinate plans once the meeting is over.

Feliks nods, and the meeting becomes a strategy session, with people coming and going as required to get preparations underway. The Rigolian nights are long; with the loan of the ship making logistics an entirely different animal than they normally are on this planet, the attack on Cyril's manor is set for that very morning.

Everyone grabs a few hours of sleep, and then it is time to board the ship--two dozen hand-picked men armed with spears and swords (Feliks has unlocked the armory for the occasion) taking up most of the empty space on the ship.

The night is overcast, but for once it isn't snowing. Flying low over the unfamiliar ground, the *_Distraction_* covers the miles between Myrr and the distant manor in swift silence. Lynden stands on the bridge with Pham, marvelling as they travel along the coast for some distance, then turn inland.

The manor is a small, square-built castle on a hill, surrounded by a wall and a frozen moat. The place is sturdily built but old-fashioned even by Rigolian standards and hopelessly primitive to the starfarers' eyes. Villages nestle in the hills around it, snow-covered fields separated by thin bands of woodland, the forest hulking darkly not too far away.

A silent pass is made over the single tower; ropes are let down into the still and freezing air. With a piratical gleam in his eye, Emmett leads a half dozen men down to the roof to wait; a single flicker of red light suffices to locate the trapdoor. In a room below them, a light is burning. Even though he knows it's there, the darkness is so heavy he can barely make out the shadowy dragonfly shape as it moves off to land behind a copse of trees. The human eye could not possibly discern the patch of deeper darkness that soon makes its way toward the wall.

From the viewpoint of the manor's captain it happens something like this: It is just before dawn, and he is awakened by one of the men on night watch at the wall; someone thinks he saw something moving. Before the captain can do more than swear at him, there is an explosion at the gate and the thud of a ram taking down what is left of the great door after Alais' fireball hits it--although nothing can be seen from the walls but impenetrable shadow. They are under attack by demons.

The captain rallies his forces before the door to the tower only to stare in disbelief as the darkness falls away; he recognizes Feliks, but not the hulking, metal-clad creature behind him, and where did all of these men come from? Shouts come from the tower as the commando force begins its search.

"Your lord has betrayed his oath. Surrender at once," Feliks orders.

"Charge!"

The battle is brief but pitched, the defenders spirited but unprepared, ill-armed, and few in number. A dozen of them are killed, the rest herded off to one side of the courtyard. Within, Emmett's team manages to subdue Cyril, whose silence and haughtily defiant demeanor suggests that he knows that the game is up, and he lost.

While Feliks is sorting out prisoners and sending men to the nearby villages and the two clerics see to the wounded, the remainder of *_Distraction_'s* crew takes the lead in turning the manor upside down and inside out. Cyril is no artificer, and he also had less need of secrecy; his side of the coded correspondence is in a simple strongbox, along with a Hextorian symbol on a chain. At least he does not appear to have been initiated into the priesthood.

From the looks of it, the plot has been underway for well over a year; the servants say that this whole winter their lord has been in an odd temper, and very edgy since midwinter. Accusing

glances are leveled at Lynden-- "none of this would have happened had someone been sent for Brother Olaf" appears to be their chief sentiment. Further questioning reveals that the priest of Rudof who had been assigned to the manor had left it in late autumn, quite suddenly; a messenger had gone out with a request that he be replaced, but nothing had ever been heard. And needless to say, as far as Lynden knew, that messenger had never reached Myrr.

"We'll find both their bones in the spring," Feliks opines grimly.

All of their searching turns up no sign of Valarin and Mela.

There is a gallows under construction in the main square in Myrr; Nikodem's summoned spirit has revealed the names of some of his associates, and the hunt continues for the remainder. People look at one another in the street with new suspicion. Upon their return with those of the prisoners judged most important, the *_Distraction_*'s crew is introduced to Captain Benjamin of the *_True Wind_*, which had carried the message from the High King, and Gerard, who is to go on their ship and aid them in navigating to Narain.

In the aftermath of the attack, a great deal is accomplished. Ibn Fadil in particular is very busy now that he longer needs to come up with excuses for being nosy. A somewhat dazed Mihal follows him around, nodding in appropriate places as his new mentor explains what he's doing-- it's hard to say how much he's actually picking up, of course. Upon their return to Myrr, the half-elf asks the priests if he might take another look at Cenon's papers, but they tell him no more than they did before. His suggestion that they speak with Master Wiktor of the blacksmiths is noted.

As far as the Stoa -- if he is still in town, no one seems to know where. Either he's burrowed into the deepest of holes following the loss of so many men, or he has left town entirely. In either case, it seems likely that his interest in the matter has been purely financial; at least, no one has ever known him to have an interest in anything but himself.

Meanwhile, Lynden ensures that his charitable work will not be untended in his absence, however long it proves.

Emmett, meanwhile, spends his time talking to the members of the artificers guild, doing his best to separate the innocent dupes from the guilty Hextorians. Sparing no sympathy for the Hextorians - whose masquerade under the cloak of his own gods auspices has obviously deeply offended him - he spends his time with the unwitting artificers, discussing the nature and tenets of Gond. When Inez asks him about this, he replies that the parts may still be salvageable, even if the machine was flawed. There are times when Emmett despairs that Cog is absorbing more than the distraught and distracted Myrrians (Indeed, the parrot has learned the tenet "Waste No Effort", but tends to repeat it at the most scatalogically inappropriate moments...), but he perseveres.

The artificers are somewhat reluctant to talk to him; alarmed as they are by recent events and the possibility of further traitors in their midst, another foreigner talking about strange gods who seems to know perhaps too much about guild matters is not entirely welcome among them.

After assurances that word will be sent at once if any news of Valarin or Hiro should be learned, the crew of the *_Distraction_*, plus Lynden, Mihal, Gerard, and of course Cog, and minus one marine and its captain, lifts off and bids Myrr farewell.

8 - Narain

Gerard, trying hard not to appear at all awed or frightened, spreads out his charts on the bridge. He seems to have something stuck in his throat, and keeps clearing it while they talk, but eventually the two pilots have enough information to figure out where they're going, and that it will take slightly more than a day to get there, given the bad weather they can already see brewing and their dependence on visual navigation. Pham steers the ship straight away from the city, across the channel, until they meet an identical frost-mired landscape on the other side, then turns counter-spinward, into the wind's teeth.

The little spelljammer shudders but is in no danger, and the nervous newcomers eventually take their cue from the older hands and relax a bit, though they jump whenever the gale rises to a howl.

Yestin goes through the stores, noting that they are very low on supplies and looking for something that would make a fit gift to the king for their arrival. The silk, possibly--they don't seem to have anything even vaguely like it here. weapons and armor, of course. Or some of the glassware that has spent the long journey packed away in straw-padded casks?

Consulted on the question, ibn Fadil wonders if weapons or armor is a good idea. "It might be construed as suggesting a military alliance," he observes thoughtfully. "I don't think we want to accidentally commit Three Trees to anything quite so serious. The silk, definitely. And the glassware is a good idea, I think."

Emmett rubs his chin. "Something they haven't got, and something they want. Metal is good - they already know that offworlders can and do provide it, and we can offer the High King a way to break his main opponent's monopoly on weapons technology." He glances over at Ibn Fadil "two or three of the ingots we have might be a good compromise."

"I don't know about the glassware. They have a lot of craftsmen, so they won't want to pay shipping for something they can make locally. Plus, I've shipped glass before - it's fragile and the hamsters kept breaking it." He looks thoughtful again "Unless we've got something in stock that's a lot

better than what they have here? He can start thinking about how he'll put one over on us by getting his people to duplicate the process, so he'll feel smart while we really don't want to move anything that fussy. If we do have really good detailed glass we can go with that as a present for him the man and the steel as a present for him the king... "

Yestin nods at Emmett's assessment. In truth, it had not occurred to him to use the gift as an example of the kinds of goods that would be available should the King deign to open trade to Three Trees. Such subtleties often lay beyond the Giff's grasp, no doubt one of the reasons he struggles so with his poetry.

"I think we can find an impressive enough piece of glassware. Their own works are not without their beauty, but somewhat provincial in sophistication."

They settle on the silk, a beautiful ewer of swirled red and amber, and a crate of the iron ingots.

During the short journey, ibn Fadil matter-of-factly continues carrying out the same everyday tasks he had been doing before. Alais, meanwhile, experiments with his silver and amber circlet, testing it exhaustively to see what benefits it might confer. Its aura is faint, but it seems to be

some sort of divination spell. Curious, he leaves it on while he goes about his morning, and eventually finds that wearing it, a certain text he bought on their last visit to Bral and has rather laboriously been reading comes quite easily now.

Then he goes to join the conversation in the galley, where the others are questioning Gerard about what they can expect to find in Narain.

"The greatest of cities," Gerard tells them with pride. "Anything in the world that you want, you can find it there. Nowhere will you find more people, or finer, nowhere such markets and festivals." Ever since the high kings ceased wandering and settled there, all the world has come to them, and they have spent freely on their own city. Between the mountains and the river, the city is relatively sheltered from Rigol's weather, and the lands around it are some of the most productive in the world.

There is King Roald himself, a young and martially keen, it seems. Queen Natalia, it is asserted, is the most beautiful woman in the world. There are any number of important lords who reside at court, and very wise wizards as well, and even dwarves, ambassadors from the Deep King during this time of uneasy peace. Gerard doesn't know much specific about these people, of course -- he is a humble navigator thrust into this position quite unexpectedly -- but he's a good source of gossip. Everyone seems to know there is some sort of resolution looming with Lord Durrell, perhaps this very year.

Alais relentlessly grills the guide on the history of the city, with special attention given to any plagues or natural disasters, and gets an earful in return. The Great Fire of 117. The Year of the Dragon, 199, when several of the great beasts attacked the city and were defeated by eight champions called by the gods to fight them in their very lairs, one of them the heir to the throne, who did not return, and whose brothers fought one another for the crown. The Summerless Year in 203 when thousands starved and the Winterless Year ten years later, when plagues swept across the earth, the rivers dried up and stars fell from heaven to strike down towers.

Emmett eventually rescues Gerard by offering the magus an opportunity to examine his new-won ring. "I'm pretty sure the sucker's magical, but I have no idea how. Care to give it a look?" The half man prepares himself for the usual Alais conversation, doing his level best this time to follow what the young genius says about the nature of the enchantment.

Its magical aura is faint, and though the wizard says that it carries some sort of altering effect, he is unable to determine its purpose.

Lynden listens in, trying to stay out of the crew's way. No seasickness; aside from the occasional buffet from the wind, the ship's motion is very smooth.

He may try to stay out of the way, but he finds it difficult to avoid the inquisitive ibn Fadil, who tries to both put him at his ease and get him to talk about his god, and his work as a priest in Myrr.

Lynden swallows nervously but does his best to satisfy ibn Fadil's curiosity describing how he was called to follow Garek when a glorious stag led him to Bendek's care and how his days are now filled with Garek's wishes. "You may have witnessed that the women of my world are not free to enjoy the same liberties as men." He seems overly serious as he justifies his work. "I do not believe this should be so. A woman should be able to make decisions and not just about those that affect herself. Don't you agree?" He pauses to give his listener time to respond, wondering if the ship's women had as much liberty as it appeared.

"I think it is foolish to think otherwise; but there are many fools in the universe."

"So I work as best I can to help them avoid the worst of a woman's misfortunes" Lynden looks away for a moment as if reviewing his own memories before adding, "They have as much to offer as many a man..."

"What does 'the worst' include, in Myrr?" is the answering query.

"Violence against women is not questioned and protection comes only from the status of the man she is deemed to belong to. A lifetime of near slavery from which death is the only release," is the terse reply.

Sensing that he has touched a nerve (though he cannot help but wonder what kind of nerve - guilt, perhaps?), ibn Fadil drops that subject and before long the conversation, since his interest in the gods, law, and ethics keep bringing it up again. His questions suggest that he is a rather well-educated person.

Like the other Rigolians, Gerard has little idea what to make of the women and so tends to ignore them. Inez has given up on this planet, its stupid people and their politics, and is sulking in her cabin once the ship is on its way. Nyala has been quiet and watchful as usual, observing the crew's reactions to ibn Fadil's revelation and keeping her own thoughts, as usual, to herself. More patient and tolerant than Inez, she is also looking forward to leaving this place for somewhere more congenial (and warmer), but currently more curious about what they will find in the capital.

Emmett does his best to soothe Inez' mood, but he's really not great at it. There's only so much time he can say "They're backwoods hicks. Just ignore it. The Capitol will be better," before it stops having any real effect. He does start to feel her out on other things she might like to do with her time: his current obsessions of studying clockwork and sketching out new weapons designs don't do much for her, and it's been made obvious that she's not much into his religion, but surely something can be found to occupy her for the weeks or months they'll have to stay on Rigol to finish the deal and try to find Val and Hiro.

"This is worse than being in space. You're never around, there's nothing to do, I've been cooped up on this damn ship for *weeks* with *her* and now the captain's missing and...." It goes on like that for a while. She's been a sailor for years, she can keep her hands occupied with knot-work or carving or throwing things for Cog to fetch when there isn't work to be done; the root of the problem seems to be the lack of people to interact with. She can't even work up a proper rivalry with Nyala--whose patience with the ordeal only intensifies her own frustration--since engaging in that sort of thing would be entirely beneath the elf.

"Actually, it's only been a week, but I understand how it could feel longer...it's as if some obscene force were keeping us there..." Emmett turns his head and stares into the middle distance for a second before continuing. "In any case, I promise you that once we get to the Capitol we'll tell the locals that you two are able to get out and walk around. You might have to deal with a minder or two, but if the High King is going to deal with the outside world he's gonna have to get used to women being people. You, my dear, have just volunteered to be an example. So wear pants, drink

ale and scandalize the hell out of local society.

"We might even engage in some public affection, which might well make Gerard's head explode."

"Really?" She seems a bit uncertain about this. "I thought you guys didn't want us making waves."

"There's waves and there's waves. We can't go too far overboard, but...well, this place shouldn't be the sticks, and I don't think any of us want you two going crazy and crushing some hick local's head with a gaff hook. That'd probably make a worse impression than you being seen walking around." Emmett shrugs. "We'll need to straddle a line where they realize that we're different from them and if they want the benefits of trade they'll have to accept that - we have a little edge there because the High King does need trade from us or he's going to keep up with Victor and Durrell - without going so far that we get them to break off contact. Obviously all of our future ships here will be all male crews, but for this one they'll have to give us some leeway."

"I don't want to see you going nuts here, Inez. Yeah, we need to open a route, and you're a pro enough to realize that and take your lumps for it. But you're going to have to figure out what level of lumps you can tolerate, and we'll just get the locals to tolerate the rest..."

And that, at last, seems to mollify her a bit, though there's a speculative look in her eye.

The following morning the ship soars silently through clear skies, and below them a darker glimmer in the endless fields of snow turns out to be a river, wide enough that it is not entirely frozen even now. "The Lorant," Gerard identifies it, and directs Alais to follow it inland. Soon there are more mountains ahead, and a bend in the river, and encompassing that bend, the city of Narain.

It is indeed many times larger than Myrr, and surrounded by an even greater wall. The river flows in and out through great arches in the rock, about sixty degrees apart in the rough circle of the wall, and small boats pass through as well, while docks sprawl out along both shores to accommodate larger vessels that dared the deep winter storms. Villages dot the landscape around it, the lines of the fields visible even under the snow.

On the side of the river closer to the mountains, the land rises. Buildings are sparser there, as if someone had picked up one edge of the land and everything had slid down it, toward the river. On the height stands the castle of the High King, massive and strong, and above it floats his banner. The field is grey for the steel that gives mastery; across the top half, red the sword that maintains it; the bottom divided into thirds by sheaves of golden grain and showing the dominion of the kings in the form of a running horse, a white mountain, and a ship.

Swinging lower over the city, they see the now-familiar architecture on a somewhat grander scale, picking out marketplaces and temples, granaries and theaters. The streets are wider than Myrr's, and many are paved.

"Over there. I think," Gerard directs them uncertainly, pointing to an open space near the castle. Alais circles for a moment, watching the people scurrying around below them, which seems to be the usual response upon seeing the ship. Some bright person down there has got hold of a red flag and waves it around to indicate where he's supposed to go. The *_Distraction_* settles to the ground with barely a bump, and everyone organizes to disembark.

Awaiting them on the ground are a half dozen armed and armored soldiers, and it's something of a shock to see all that metal in one place. One of them steps forward and gives a brisk little bow, and he's clearly very well trained because he's not the least bit discomfited by any of this. "Welcome to Narain and to His Majesty's court, and may the gods' blessings attend you while you remain. Which of you is Captain Valarin?"

Yestin remains nervous about his new status as current senior officer, but refuses to let these strangers see it. It would not be proper protocol to let such a weakness show. The Giff draws himself up to full military erectness and speaks with as authoritarian a voice as he can muster.

"Our thanks for the courteous welcome. Captain Valarin was unable to make the journey. In Myrr, he went to the aid of one of the High King's subjects who was being abducted by ruffians and has not been seen since, though, knowing his warrior's mettle, we have little doubt that he will return to us shortly in safety and victory." Yestin wasn't sure how his more intrigue-inclined shipmates would favor his explanation, but the Giff generally prefers honest dealings whenever possible.

"I am Yestin, First Officer of The Distraction, currently in command." At this mention of command, Yestin felt the sudden flush of blue-black coloring his impressive jowls, and hoped that these warriors would not recognize it for the blush that it is.

'Your arrival has been prepared for, if you will be so good as to follow me. I am Sergeant Andras, and my men will assist with anything you wish to bring with you. *All* of you," he adds, glancing at the ship. Maybe it isn't training so much as plain old natural arrogance.

Emmett gives the Sergeant a big old smile. Andras responds with haughty indifference.

Yestin suppresses a frown. He was not entirely comfortable with leaving the ship entirely unmanned and, therefore, unprotected. Still, he had learned something of the laws of hospitality governing Rigol during his brief comradeship with the guards of Myrr; should anything happen to their vessel or its stores while they are under his protection, the High King would be responsible and many heads would roll. It put his mind somewhat more at ease. That the High King himself might have unwholesome motives doesn't even occur to the honor-minded Giff.

"Thank you, Sergeant. We would be pleased to be accept the *hospitality and protection* of His Most Royal Majesty, the High King. Our Chief of Security will direct your men." Yestin tries to match the arrogant self-assured tone of the sergeant, aided by his deep rumbling voice, to make it clear that he will brook no argument regarding the ship's security. He glances between Ibn Fadil and Emmett, letting the two men decide between themselves who will take up the task of setting the watch and subtly cautioning the King's men against trespass and pilfering.

Ibn Fadil doesn't appear to notice the glance; he is busy studying the soldiers and the watching bystanders.

Emmett is already stepping forward, quickly assessing the command structure as best he can so he doesn't accidentally order around the wrong person. He's also eyeing for the second in command types who might be more free with their information: Emmett comes well equipped with life experience for locating those who might be willing to buy him a drink and gripe about the soldier's lot.

None of these are good candidates, at least not right now; they act like men who are very aware of being watched, and their movements are crisp and professional. They follow his directions without hesitating in unloading the materials the visitors are bringing in with them, and though they do look around curiously at the ship their curiosity is admirably restrained.

The visitors are led inside. Gerard parts ways with them, probably to be debriefed. Tesfaye's little castle is downright cozy compared to this stone labyrinth; they pass down halls and up stairs and are eventually shown into a comfortable little suite, with four small chambers arrayed around a central room. The windows look down into hexagonal courtyards. Fires of pleasant-smelling wood are burning cheerfully, and a keen-looking young man in livery is poised near the door.

"In the morning, His Majesty will see you. My orders are to see that you are refreshed and comfortable between now and then," he says with a very low bow. "If anything is lacking, you

have only to request. This rope," he indicates the pull near the door, "will summon a servant at any time. Food and drink are being prepared now. Is there anything else I may bring your lordships?"

"Is there any chance of a bath?" ibn Fadil inquires hopefully.

"Of course. I will have the materials brought to your room at once."

Yestin grins, doubting that there is a tub suitable to his own dimensions anywhere about, even in this impressive (for a groundling edifice) castle.

Having avoided any difficulties on the *Distraction* by sleeping on the deck Lynden begins to feel threatened as the chambers were allocated. How he could he justify taking a chamber to himself when they were so many? Worse what would he risk if he did not? "I have no wish to seem rude but I require privacy for my prayers." He addresses himself to Yestin, "So I will not be able to share a chamber I'm afraid. "

This earns him a curious look from ibn Fadil. "Why are you staying with us to begin with?" he inquires, as politely as such a question can possibly be asked.

"He's... our religious watchdog." Emmett says happily, the mental edit a barely noticeable hiccup. The half man had already dropped his bags and gone to check out the window, looking to see how much of a security concern it might pose.

"Why?" Lynden is startled. His eyes widen slightly at Emmett's comment but he answers ibn Fadil nonetheless. "I was directed to accompany you by my master. Believe me it was not my choice." He looks from ibn Fadil back to Yestin as he adds, "I can summon a servant and request different accommodation if you prefer." Recognizing that not only his privacy was likely to be compromised.

Yestin shrugs. "It is not a question of our preferences, but your own. As sailors, we are well used to close quarters, but if you are uncomfortable performing your religious rites among off-worlders, we will take no offense."

In truth, Yestin is mostly indifferent to the matter of religion himself and never fully understood the human obsession with it. He acknowledges the existence and power of the Gods -- may as well to deny the very air we breathe as soon as deny the Gods -- but, in true Giff fashion, he prefers to put his faith in smoke-powder and steel. Still, those in the throes of religious ecstasy often create notable if thematically heavy-handed poetry and art, so there was something to be said for religion after all.

Emmett turns back, shuttering the window so Cog doesn't cause trouble. "Hey, 'he says, addressing the young page, "Is there a church or something inside the castle where the good brother could get quartered?" He looks back to Lynden. "I promise not to proselytize for any off-world gods when you aren't around to watch.

"And can we get some wine, please?"

The young man bows low. "Of course. Regarding the accommodations, I will see what shall be done."

A slight flush can be seen rising on the young priest's face. Caught between Bendek's requirement for him to observe the crew and his desire for privacy he is well aware that he is being teased by the half-man.

Emmett looks at the room and bed situation, trying to figure out who'd getting quartered where. He also gives Inez a look with raised eyebrows, saying "see, I told you things would be better in the city."

She shrugs back, as if not yet convinced.

When the servant returns with quite a lot of wine and word that baths will be available momentarily, he bows to Lynden and says that he is welcome to stay among the priests in the temple attached to the palace if he would feel more comfortable there.

The Zakharan finds Michal looking out a window at the courtyard and seizes the chance to speak with him privately. He has not explained anything to the young man; it's clear, though, that the disappearance of ibn Fadil's mannerisms and their replacement with a sort of quiet competence and complete attention to business has puzzled him at least as much as the education the foreigner seems determined to give him.

"So, what do you think, Michal? Will you stay here in Narain or go along with us?"

He shrugs, seeming relaxed now that they're off the ship. "I just got here, I don't know." Ibn Fadil of course has noticed the way he's been eyeing their surroundings, but he's probably smart enough not to try to snag anything.

"No questions? Ideas? Concerns?"

"Lots. Do you think we'll get a chance to look around the city?"

"I should think so, once we've been introduced. We'll probably be escorted, though."

He shrugs as if to comment on the likely utility of that. "So, do I get to find out what the big secret is? The whole trip here seems like everybody's been acting a little weird."

"At last, a real question!" ibn Fadil says lightly. "Back in Myrr we found out that the followers of that evil god we mentioned before were not only active here, but responsible for all those murders. And, worse, they probably got to this sphere by working with or through a large company, like our own, that has a lot of money and a lot of ships floating around. We're rather worried about that."

He stops there, with an almost challenging look, waiting for another question.

The young man looks startled. "There are more of you?"

"More foreigners in this sphere? I forgot you didn't know - sorry. We came here because we know another company was already trading here and wanted to find out what was worth the trouble of coming out to the back of beyond to get. We still don't have the answer to

that one, unfortunately. What we've found out is that the other company has been trading with this Lord Durrell and seems to have brought this cult to your planet.

"Which," he says slowly, "makes sense, in a way, if the cult is in control of the mission..." He frowns slightly, thinking it through. Surely a company with legitimate goals would pay its respects to the High King, unless whatever they're trading for is in Durrell's control, or unless they'd rather foment rebellion, unrest, and chaos...

Mihal looks appropriately shocked and solemn at this revelation. "Lord Durrell? Do you think he's one of them?"

"We won't know for sure until we ask him. If we *do* stay to ask him," he adds judiciously, since that's not certain yet. "Now, can I ask you to do something for me?"

Mihal gives him a questioning look.

"Think of it as a sort of test. Go tell that helpful young man by the door that you've really been taken on as a servant, and I want you to find a couple of seamstresses who might be able to come up with something for the ladies in our party to wear tomorrow. Be helpful, and get him or

someone he suggests to take you around the castle looking. The best possible outcome," he adds with a certain humor, "would be for you to come back with the queen's own dressmaker. I don't know what the worst would be, but I certainly don't want to see it. And I'll want you to tell me everything you've observed about the castle, how it's laid out, and the status of the people whose servants you'll be talking to. And of the servants, too.

"What do you say?"

He raises an eyebrow, gives a good imitation of a servant's bow. "I hear and obey."

When he returns over an hour later, he has a stout woman in tow. She is clothed entirely in black, wearing a veil over her face.

"Celina is one of the seamstresses here," Mihal introduces her. The woman curtseys deeply, unspeaking. "She is very well spoken of."

Ibn Fadil talks with her for a bit, discusses what he wants.

"Tonight?" Behind the veil her eyes widen and she bobs apologetically. "For court? Milord, I do not think... I do not know if something suitable could be prepared in such a short time."

"That's all right," Nyala says dryly, noting, "I don't see *you* getting all peacocked up for this. They can take me as they find me."

Celina looks at the way the elf is dressed and says a bit weakly, "I am sure we can do something." Nyala sniffs, clearly annoyed by the whole business but willing to put up with it for the moment. Inez never turns down clothes. By morning both women are simply but decently dressed according to local standards. The matter of payment does not come up; she is a servant, after all--but she accepts a generous tip with rather embarrassingly effusive gratitude.

Lynden has reluctantly decided that he's better off sleeping in the crew's quarters, perhaps on a pallet in the communal room. Daniel gives this suggestion all attention, brow creased in almost comical thought--clearly he takes his duties very seriously--then nods sharply and departs to see to the arrangements. In the end Lynden's bed is as comfortable as any of the others, and several elaborately carved ivory screens provide a degree of privacy.

Mihal, meanwhile, continues to reinforce ibn Fadil's initial impression of a bright young human with a lot to learn.

Later that day, as the swift Rigolian nightfall conquers the land again, there is a knock on the door.

"Lord Fynn to see your lordships," a servant announced. It takes a moment to place the name - the king's chancellor.

Ibn Fadil glances between the nervous Yestin and the still-silent Emmett. "Ah, we'll be very pleased to see him," he says.

Standing to receive the chancellor Lynden wonders apprehensively what his Lordship's visit signifies. A simple courtesy call? A lesson in etiquette or something else entirely?

Ibn Fadil, in contrast, seems keenly interested in the visit, and steps forward to be at the front of the group.

The door is open; limping footfalls approach. Fynn is old, with thin white hair. He is slightly stooped and walks with the aid of a stick, thanks perhaps to some ancient injury that renders his right leg almost useless. A scar passes down his cheek on that side as well. His eyes are brown, bright in the seamed face, and very shrewd. He is bundled in blue robes, heavily embroi-

dered with gold thread, and around his neck is the symbol of his office, a black iron chain with a silver key.

"Good evening, travelers from far and near," he greets them quietly. His eyes pass over the group, and there is no doubt that he is carefully observing everything about them. "I beg your pardon for intruding so upon your rest, but as you know, you will present yourselves to the king in the morning. I thought you might have questions you wish to ask, and I would also like to hear from you what has brought you all here." Of course Tesfaye sent a report of some kind.

Emmett offers one of their chairs to the aging man. "One of the joys of our ship of travel is that is more tiring to the spirit than the body, and talking helps cure that fatigue. And what brought us here was an honest desire for trade."

Yestin smiles, hoping the Chancellor, unfamiliar with Giffish facial expressions, will recognize it for what it is. He is grateful that Emmett chose to answer first; the subtleties of negotiation and intrigue often lay out of reach of his understanding.

Wondering if Emmett's 'honest' remark was directed at himself, ibn Fadil gives the Chancellor a bow of respect for his age and station. "We are honored to meet you, my lord." Then he watches to see what the man will make of the odd contrasts among them, and tries to figure out what he really wants.

"May we get you a drink? There's still some..." Emmett looks at the bottle he'd ordered earlier, "Well, a little bit of wine left."

Of course it would be rude to refuse. "Thank you, again." He settles back in the chair with his cup. "Honest trade, you say? Well, that is an honorable task. It would appear that you have done the realm some service in the meantime. I am curious how this came to pass."

"I believe," ibn Fadil says, "that the leaders of this cult thought we knew or would guess something about their activities in Myrr. As a result they made several attempts to kill us, and perhaps put their treasonous plan into motion sooner than they intended. Thus they brought their own doom upon themselves, since we actually knew nothing but started paying attention after assorted assaults, an attempt to burn a building down, and the like."

"Indeed my Lord," Lynden adds from his position at the rear of the group, "the scoundrels made an attempt against Lord Tesfaye's life having turned his own dear son against him. These good people were able to intervene before the consequences became too dire."

"And I am to understand that you know something of the god these men follow?" He does not seem to be looking at any of them in particular when he says it, but of course Pham feels singled out.

"My Lord, I fear that you have been misinformed." He thinks carefully trying to find words that offer no slight. "It is true that I have spent some time in their company these last few days but other events have prevented anything more than briefly snatched conversation. I hope to rectify that omission now that we are more at leisure and to introduce them to our own beliefs." Inwardly Lynden hopes that his words will deflect Lord Fynn's attention away from himself and onto other matters.

"Out in the wider universe," ibn Fadil says, making a mental note to watch Lynden even more closely, "this deity is well known in a general way, as a source of dissension and conflict for its own sake. All civilized beings oppose his works; until recently, I knew of no exception to the rule that his followers ought to be rooted out wherever they can be found." He pauses to let Pham speak up for himself, if he is going to do that.

"That is, alas, not always the case," Pham says slowly. "There are always those who do not believe there harm there, or who believe they can profit from it...." He shakes himself a bit. "But I can tell you somewhat of this god, my lord, if you so wish."

Fynn waves a gracious hand. "We will have time to discuss many things while you are here. I did not wish to impose upon your evening when you are so newly arrived and no doubt weary, but only desired to give you welcome to our city. I hope your time will prove profitable."

And with a few more polite words he is gone. Such a brief visit it seems he did not intend to get much information out of them; perhaps he only wished to see them. And what, they all wonder, did he see....

* * *

More servants appear early the following morning. They bring food and drink--simple, but finer in quality than they found in Myrr--and when the visitors have eaten, washed, and dressed, and gotten their gifts for the king sorted out, the keen-looking youth (his name is Daniel) leads them through the maze. There is an almost audible energy in the air, the sense that a great deal is happening all the time, of hundreds of people doing important things.

At last with a bow Daniel leaves them in what must be an antechamber to the throne room, a long, low room hung with tapestries. The focus is a pair of high bronze doors. There is a brief, quiet disagreement between ibn Fadil and Nyala -- they are here as ship's crew, she argues, not in a social capacity, and it would be inappropriate to enter together.

And he counters that he doesn't want any potentially fatal misunderstandings about her character. "Back in Myrr, I was so angry about it I could have chewed iron and spit nails." Obviously, he's spent too much time around Emmett.

"I think that since they are inviting us at all, they have no pressing concerns about such. And if they did, what of it? We will not be here much longer. I find it interesting," she adds with that slight smile, "that you will deliberately ensure that people think quite unflattering things about yourself, but grow angry when the same favor is done to others."

"Some bad habits are harder to break," he quips, and yields the point with a wordless gesture inviting her to walk beside him but not quite "with" him.

A tall, thin man in the royal livery speaks briefly with each of them and makes sure he has their names and rank correct, and before anyone knows it they are being announced.

The throne room is vast, walls leaping upwards to meet in a vaulted ceiling more than thirty feet overhead, with many narrow windows set in the stone, so they walk through bars of light and shadow. There are several dozen people congregated at the far end, and voices and footsteps echo from the walls and the bare floor once the herald has finished fishes. Banners and other trophies of vanquished enemies line the walls, and Emmett wonders if the Tesfayes' predecessor in Myrr is among them.

The throne is high, gilded, and appropriately impressive, as is the man sitting on it. King Roald is tall and broad even for a Rigolian, and in contrast to many of those around him he is a young man, with an air of barely restrained energy. He wears an iron crown set with dozens of gems of all colors, and a mammoth broadsword leans against one arm of the throne. He looks keenly interested as the visitors approach. There is a much smaller decorated chair beside his;

bundled in copious furs against the chill of the hall, the queen looks bored, perfect lips set in an expression of discontent.

Around them are clustered the notable people of the court. All but one of them are armed, which is startling and presumably a sign of their status, and several of them stand out from the others. One of them is Lord Fynn, leaning on an ebony cane as he stands near the throne. The unarmed one is a very fat man who appears to be dressed entirely in gold and carries rather than leans upon an elaborately decorated staff that appears to be a single, massive piece of ivory. The third (and fourth and fifth), and something of a shock, is a dwarf, or rather a trio of dwarves--the ambassador and his assistants, most likely.

Ibn Fadil covertly watches the dwarves, interested in their reaction to the group and to him and Nyala. There is no clear sign of recognition, but intense interest in the non-human members of the party.

"Be welcome to our lands, travelers from afar," the king greets them, "and you as well, Brother," he adds for Lynden's sake. "May the gods bless your journeys in the future. We are pleased to see you here in our capital, where we may thank you in person for the services you rendered us in Myrr; but for your timely intervention, we understand that we would have lost a worthy man. And furthermore, we understand that you are here in hopes of opening permanent relations that would be beneficial, of course, to all."

It isn't really a question, but he does pause to see if anyone is going to say anything. Many eyes are watching very closely.

"My liege." Lynden bows deeply from the waist and bends his knee as he speaks. "May Gerik's favor fall upon your highnesses. You do us great honor by receiving us." He awaits permission to rise, his eyes downcast, and the king gestures magnanimously for him to stand.

Yestin suppresses a frown. Lynden is as much a guest among the crew as the crew is among the High King's court, and it perturbs the Giff that the Rigolian priest spoke first, when it was clearly his own place to do so. Yestin is nervous about his new position as senior officer and therefore quite keen to follow proper protocols to the letter.

"Your Majesty." Yestin bows with a flourish, evincing a nimble courtesy made all the more remarkable by his impressive size and the conspicuously displayed greatsword strapped upon his back. "You do indeed do us great honor. On behalf of the crew of the *Distraction*, our greetings and humble thanks for your welcome."

Everyone else bows as previously instructed, Emmett with his usual brevity and ibn Fadil with exactitude. The formers scan of the room reveals quite a few armed guards standing in the shadowed nooks around the room, unobtrusive but very much present.

Yestin gestures for the castle servants previously commandeered into service, to bring forth the small chests of goods carried from the ship. "In commemoration of this auspicious meeting, may we present these gifts from the officers and crew of *Three Trees*. First, bolts of the finest silk, imported from far-flung Ku'Lung. Next, glassware blown by the master craftsmen of *The Jaded City of Jural*. Finally, a weight of quality iron, suitable for fashioning into the finest weapons, from the famous *Kron Hill* mines of fabled *Oerth*." In truth, Yestin isn't entirely sure where these goods had been manufactured or acquired, but he knows they will seem all the more impressive if they come from far-off and mysterious nations.

Yestin shrugs his shoulders and tries to appear embarrassed. "Mere trinkets, I'm afraid, unworthy repayment of Your Majesty's hospitality. Still, we hope you will accept them in the spirit of friendship with which they are offered."

Emmett suppresses a grin - the brief education he and Ibn Fadil had given Yestin on the flight in seems to have worked wonders.

The king does appear pleased, by both the gifts and the speech. "We thank you and accept these gifts. It speaks well of you that you have chosen to approach us so directly; auspicious indeed be this day." As he speaks, the man in gold steps points his staff toward the items, speaking softly to himself in what sounds like gibberish, and then gives a slight nod; everyone else ignores this behavior.

While the gifts are being displayed, ibn Fadil watches the watchers with bland curiosity, assessing their reactions - especially those of the dwarves, the king, Lord Fynn, and the probable priest with the ivory staff. The general impression is one of interested approval, but of course with courtiers it's always hard to tell what they really think.

King Roald continues, "Anxious we are to learn more of you and your people; we are certain we have much to offer one another. Allow us to introduce to you the most valued members of our court." He names people off to them, each of whom offers a slight bow. The man in gold turns out to be Aron the Wise, court wizard to His Majesty. Ambassador Rithisak Steelhand is introduced, and General Brosh, and Father Ziven, a small, brown, easily overlooked man who turns out to be priest to the king's household (which is not the same thing as the head of the church) and a flurry of other officials.

Yestin nods politely and exchanges the proper pleasantries in turn with each of the dignitaries as they are announced, though, a military man, he is most interested in the General and surveys the man with a critical eye. Stolid-looking sort, very difficult to read. Under the fine clothes he holds himself like a soldier, and a man in good condition as well. Surely his concerns are twofold: any threat that might be represented by the extra-planetary contact itself, which he can probably barely conceive at this point, and so perhaps greater at the moment how the arrivals impact his plans (surely he has them) for handling the upstart Durrell.

Lynden waits until he is sure the introductions are completed, before offering up a short prayer to Gerik honoring the advisers for their dutiful service to the King. He hopes this will not be seen to be presumptuous. If it is, no one remarks on it, at any rate.

When he's done with this a thought seems to strike the king and he smiles broadly, a careless expression. "As you may know, it is our custom here that after the midwinter festivals, we hunt, and the omens we find in the fields and forests guide us through the coming year. We would be greatly pleased if you would accompany us in this, that we might find time to further discuss matters of... mutual interest."

There is a slight stir among the gathering at this invitation. Even the queen looks interested.

This cements ibn Fadil's initial impression that this monarch will do nicely, and that they had better be damn careful in dealing with him. He also can't help but looked pleased at the prospect of a hunt.

Emmett leans forward "Your majesty, it has been literally years since any of us experienced a good hunt, and we gladly accept your invitation." He adopts his classic "humble" grin. "Of course, it has also been some time since we've ridden horses at run, so we ask your court to hide their laughter at us until the affair is over."

"Indeed," Yestin agrees, pleased at the turn of events. "I fear, Your Majesty, that I sit an awkward horse at best, given my stature. I hope there's a mount to be found that will not suffer o'ermuch for carrying my, er, prodigious girth."

These concerns are graciously waved away.

The ship's crew may be pleased with the King's suggestion but Lynden feels his legs turn to jelly at the mention of hunting. He has little experience of riding and can see no way in which he can avoid the planned excursion without exposing his deficiency or becoming a liability.

The formal part of the audience ends and small conversations ensue. Protocol dictates that Yestin pay attention to the king, of course, giving him the by-now-practiced short version of the history of the universe, with the chancellor and General Brosh listening close at hand. Emmett drifts that way as well; the talk is the sort of adroit generalities that don't really interest him, but he takes the opportunity to take stock of the general; a strong-looking man on the near side of forty, wearing a damn big sword, he's got a steady eye and serious mien. He is watching Steelhand, his expression impassive, and he only asks one question: "If the distances between these... spheres are as vast as you say, how can goods be transported? It takes weeks by ship from here to Mombast Bay in fair weather; your airship is very quick, but would it not even so be many years then from here to these other worlds?"

"Weeeeelllll, that's a little complicated. Um, imagine that your city is in the center of the lands, with the ocean a fair distance away." Emmett starts using his hands to aid his description, "Getting to the ocean would take a long time, but once on the ocean you could travel much faster. Our ship and the spaces off a world are like that: this world is in the center of the sphere, in which our ship moves comparatively as rapidly as carts move over land. Outside the sphere is something like an ocean, on which our ship reach even greater speeds. Even still, travel between spheres is a journey of months, and few make such a trip regularly."

Yestin nods and smiles softly, pleased by Emmett's straightforward and easily understood explanation. The mechanics of Spelljamming are somewhat lost on the Giff, despite his many years in space, and he had been about to ask Alais to explain. That could have been quite tedious for their hosts.

"But there are then other worlds within mere months' travel?" Fynn looks intrigued and changes the subject slightly. "Do you know anything of these... Victor people?"

"Yes, we do. Victor and Sons are another trading house. It appears they were the first such house to locate your sphere, and have set up a trading arrangement with Lord Durrell. But you must know this much -- surely he would have announced himself openly to the King and court, just as we are now?" Emmett delivers this question with a straight face, leaving it to Fynn to determine if the half man is legitimately surprised or getting in an attack on a rival by deliberately pointing out a gaffe in etiquette.

Yestin, perhaps missing the subtle purpose of Emmett's interrogative, adds, "We are acquainted with the Victor who trades with Durrell, a nephew to the head of that trading house. He is... not a scrupulous man."

The chancellor makes a faint tsk sound. "A pity. You know, I am sure," he smiles slightly, "that these people have confined their contacts entirely to Lord Durrell himself. I understand that a marriage alliance was made. His Lordship has found this relationship most profitable. If one believed every rumor, one would think that he now dwells in a house of iron."

Yestin and Emmett share a glance. Obviously, what these people are going to be most interested in buying is metal. Brosh's question hinted at what is likely his main concern; if any deal can be reached with these newcomers, can there be delivery in time to be useful to him, or will he be taking on Durrell without that?

"Victor and Sons has no monopoly upon the iron and steel trade, to be sure," Yestin replies cautiously. "I am sure we can accommodate your needs in volume, but as to when the goods would arrive...?" Yestin shrugs. "If your war season occurs in the summer, as it does upon many worlds akin to your own, then perhaps delivery could be speeded in time to be of use to you, should you need to campaign against any, ah, 'upstarts.' But I fear our arrival will be no secret to Durrell or the Victor, given the commotion we have occasioned, and I wonder if they would await his majesty's leisure to arm and attack."

"Too," Yestin adds, coloring self-consciously, "remember that we are but a humble trading house, not a political body capable of forging military alliance. Steel we may ferry on your behalf, but we have no men to offer."

"You are perspicacious, captain," the chancellor smiles, and changes the subject...

Alais is immediately buttonholed by Aron the Wise, the big man clearly interested in chatting with (and sizing up) a colleague. Alais' manner of conversation is, as usual, somewhat bemusing, but after a while Aron begins to smile. "You must stop by my workshop while you are in the capital, I'm sure we have much to discuss."

Pham and Lynden speak with Father Ziven, nothing of consequence but both highly conscious of the bright brown eyes measuring their words. As the conversation progresses Lynden makes an attempt to identify the Father's religious persuasion, looking for any symbols that he might recognize and listening for any obvious references to the usual pantheon of deities found on Rigol or of others with whom he is not familiar. Somewhat surprisingly, the priest is of Marek; the bear-god's selected servants tend to partake of their totem animal's nature, but Ziven is clearly of a different sort.

Ibn Fadil and Nyala find themselves approached by the dwarven ambassador, who bows and asks, "Forgive the crudity of the inquiry, but might I ask what manner of being you are?"

Ibn Fadil returns a nicely calculated bow and replies: "There is no possibility of offense, Ambassador. I have had to ask the same question myself, a time or two. The lady is an elf; I myself am part human and part elven. Our oversized captain is a giff," he adds genially.

"Thank you." He bows, dwarf-formal. "It is somewhat startling for us, you understand, to find the universe larger than we thought. The customs of humans are well known to us, of course, but I would be interested to learn of your own folk, to learn what we may have in common. It seems that we share one custom at least, that humans do not." He nods politely to Nyala; she looks gravely amused, but it's unlikely anyone but ibn Fadil would notice. Perhaps it's because of some nonverbal sign of the differences between her and the women of this world. The dwarf is certainly willing to speak to her; Inez is being largely ignored by the humans.

"The customs of humans vary widely," ibn Fadil notes. "Some might even say absurdly," he adds with a cheerful glance at Nyala. Somewhere at the back of his mind he is trying to calculate the potential value of a lost clan of dwarves to some of the other, powerful clans out in Known Space: but none of that shows in his friendly exterior. It might be considerable. Given the delicate situation here between human and dwarven populations, it's quite difficult to predict what will happen once more intersphere traffic arrives.

"No doubt we are all equally absurd to one another," he shrugs congenially. "I should like to speak under other circumstances than these," he adds very quietly, then smiles as they are joined by Lord Peric, who had been introduced simply as an advisor. "This hunt shall be an interesting business, don't you think? My people don't go in for it much ourselves of course," he laughs, "but I've acquired some slight skill, I think."

"We shall see what the omens bring," the new arrival says austerely.

"Let us hope the omens do not depend on my own prowess," ibn Fadil responds. "It has been far too many years since I rode a horse, much less gone hunting. Tell me, my lord, do your people favor the bow or the spear?"

For the remainder of the audience they talk with some pleasure about hunting, aware of the dwarf's bright eyes on them. What does he want to talk about?

* * *

At last, court is ended. Exhausted by spending several hours under intense scrutiny, the group is escorted back to their quarters, where food (and wine) are waiting for them, along with Daniel, who informs them that he is as always at their disposal, and if they would like to explore the city they have only to inquire and he will see to it that they are guided.

Emmett has a brief conversation of facial expressions with Inez before turning back to the young man. "Guides. Tomorrow. Two hours past dawn. We're going out to look around."

"Of course, milord."

It seems that most of the visitors are interested in exploring the city while they have a chance, and almost everyone feels some need to prepare for the hunt. The weather is gray and squally, but like the Rigolians they aren't about let this stop them.

Ibn Fadil and Nyala are up early and visiting the stables as arranged. There is a brief delay while Nyala explains in no uncertain terms that she is not riding sidesaddle, but they are eventually loaned a couple of the tall, sturdy beasts common on this world. They're not exactly light on their feet, but powerful enough to forge a way through the deep snow. After a few turns around the yard to get acquainted, they go out into the city in search of warm clothes and diversions, accompanied by a middle-aged servant assigned to guide them.

The city is, as they noticed from the air, considerably larger than Myrr (though that still isn't saying much compared to some other worlds). The buildings are less decorated, and more of them are of stone, lending the place a rather stern look. The streets are straight and wide, suggesting that this place was built to some plan, at least in parts. They pass through several markets, finding ample opportunity to pick up any items they feel will be needed for the expedition to come, coming away with a small bronze camping brazier for which they were charged extortionately, and as many warm items of clothing as will not require tailoring. Nyala teases him gently about his sensitivity to the cold; she seems to be in a better mood now that they're off the ship.

Brisk trade appears to be going on along the river, which although dotted with chunks of ice is not frozen over. They even see a few dwarves in the streets, staying carefully out of the way of humans they pass.

Emmett and Inez have ventured out on foot, accompanied by stares everywhere they go. Inez is ebullient at being able to **do** something and happy to assume that the stares are directed at her companion. She makes a point of talking to a lot of people--asking directions, inquiring about merchandise in the market, remarking on the weather, making almost constant small talk

with their assigned guide, and in all forcing them to acknowledge her existence, which most of them do, albeit with many a puzzled and rather disapproving glance at Emmett. Though they may have seen the ship descend, most of the people here have not heard descriptions of the visitors, or even know that there are any, perhaps thinking the ship some wizardly or dwarven delegation to the court. By the end of the day, however, rumors will be rife.

Emmett meets these glances with a big grin and a shrug, that says "not from around here, folks." Forcing the locals to form whatever opinions they want. He's keeping a careful ear cocked to make sure that Inez doesn't go too far out of line, but so far her questions remain innocuous tweeking, and he trusts her professionalism enough to know that she wouldn't really push the issue. If anyone asks, he'll happily point out that they are from far distant places, but won't make excuses for Inez' behavior.

A bit of asking around locates the headquarters of the Artificer's Guild; the population of the city is such that the guild owns more than one property in Narain. It is an imposing stone building, several stories tall and fronted with proper piety by a lavish shrine to their patron deities Albin and Lucja, the clever fox and the crafting spider.

The half man only goes so far as scanning the outside of the building for any hidden Hextorian marks, seeing none. He doesn't expect to find them, but he did promise himself to do no further research on Inez's day out. This is a wise decision; she is happier and more relaxed than she has been since they landed, more amused than offended by the occasional scandalized glance that comes their way.

After the quick scan, the two hit the marketplace, getting the warmer clothes they'd need for the hunt. Emmett also looks around to see what he can find of weaponmakers -- swords are probably highly restricted, but there might be people working in wood for staves, spears and the like. In as metal poor a world as this, they might have developed some high quality woodworking.

And they have, as was evidenced in Myrr by the number of items where they make do with wood in place of metal, using a strong, closely grained timber for the purpose. Metal goods are not really restricted by anything other than price; swords cost ten times what they would most other places they've visited. Inez buys a number of trinkets and a beautifully inlaid box to keep them in, and some furs as well, exclaiming over their lushness and subtle color.

Emmett parts with some coin purchasing a new spear shaft of the harder wood. If their spearheads are superior to the one he has on the *Distraction* he strongly considers adding it to the purchase, but adding the turret to their ships ballista back on *Bral* left the Half-Man familiarly cash poor. If it is out of his range, he merely gets the shaft, intending to install the point of his own spear during his free time tomorrow.

In the meantime, Yestin pursues the same general course he did in Myrr: getting to know the local guards and soldiers, discussing the state of defenses and other military matters (out of general curiosity -- not probingly), and being generally helpful around the castle and city where he can. The guards here are more disciplined than they were in Myrr, and it's more difficult to find people to talk to; everyone is correctly polite and helpful, but not chatty. Eventually he does locate the barracks, where several dozen men are drilling under the gimlet eye of the sergeant who first met the ship. That one didn't seem friendly at all, so he continues hunting around until he locates some off-duty guards keeping warm cheer indoors with a barrel of beer, and settles down to learning what he can.

Alais passes an amiable morning in the palace library, then has an impressive lunch with Aron the Wise, who asks a great many questions about spelljamming, spheres, and the nature of the universe beyond the world he knows. He is taken aback, as Rigolians tend to be, by the expanse of it all, the size and the number of worlds, the many peoples never imagined, let alone encountered.

Lynden speaks privately with Daniel about his lack of riding prowess. Perhaps he could accompany the hunt followers? Daniel, as always, listens as if solving this problem is the most important thing in the world to him at the moment, and assures him that every care will be taken in selecting a mount, and he will be provided with any assistance necessary. No doubt the king would be most displeased should any ill befall the visitors.

Subsequently he attends to his prayers, giving particular emphasis on his requests for appropriate spells for the morning.

That afternoon, and somewhat to his surprise, he is approached by Brother Pham. "I hope this is not an imposition, but I have a request to make. After what happened in Myrr, I am quite concerned about what we may find here. If this... plague reached that city, there is no reason it cannot have come here as well. I saw no signs in court yesterday. I suggest we hold a second hunt, for signs of the evil influence we encountered before." Unexpectedly he smiles, reminding Lynden how young the other priest is, and suggesting that the solemnity that has gripped him since they met is not his natural character. "It is a large building to canvas, and no doubt there are places we are forbidden to go, and it is a chancy thing in any case to seek such an intangible, but... I should feel more at ease for having made the attempt."

Lynden ponders for a few moments then returns the tentative smile. "A wise suggestion indeed. Between us we should be able to search widely and I expect I will be able to persuade entry into places where you may not. One moment and I shall be ready..." Lynden gathers his belongings together into a tidy pile and before leaving ensures that Daniel at least knows of their plans to 'explore'.

And explore they do, for the remainder of that day and on into the evening. The palace appears clean of any taint such as they saw so vividly in Myrr, but Pham remains uneasy. Surely the cult would try to exert some influence over the king if they could possibly manage it? Later on, talking to one of the more garrulous servants, the man says, "Oh no, your holiness, they don't all stay here. Some of the lords have houses in the city where they stay. I hear the wizard has three houses, and a dozen chefs in each of them, though of course he does stay here often. Lord Peric has a house, and Lord Holleb. And of course the general has that great pile by the river, what they say is haunted, and the poor man with no family alive."

Away from prying ears Lynden shares his thoughts with Pham. Perhaps it had been naive of them to assume that all the King's nobles would have been accommodated within the castle but the news that some lived elsewhere raised an eyebrow. Were these men of particularly high status to be allowed such freedom or just those with the wealth necessary to maintain their own households? Either way Lynden resolves to make discreet enquiries about them as and when the opportunity arises.

As the two priests continue their investigations, chatting with others during the next few days reveals that it is a matter of both finance and prestige--it is no small thing to maintain a household in the city and entertain at the proper level *and* keep one's own demesne running while one is away for months at a time. The lords with town houses tend to be from the oldest

families, ones with many generations of service to the realm behind them. Aron is an exception, but then people everywhere fall over themselves doing favors for such a powerful wizard. Not much is known of his personal history, but the king clearly trusts him and the people hold him in awe.

Peric's family has extensive shipping interests on the sea and river both, giving him access to a great deal of important information as it travels to and from the center of the kingdom. If the army moves next year, it will be on his ships. Holleb's family have for generations been beneficiaries of their guardianship of certain important roads, whose tolls keep them quite prosperous. And then there is General Brosh, about whom rumors conflict. His wife, children, and brother perished, that much is certain, but whether they died of a plague, a fire, a dwarfish attack ("he's got a powerful hatred of dwarfs, that one does, holy sir"), or whether Brosh caught his wife in flagrante with said brother and killed everyone in a mad rage, no one is quite sure -- it happened far from the city. Now he lives alone in a large house in the city with only a handful of servants, during the times when he is not attending the king or making a show of strength somewhere on the world.

Having satisfied his curiosity about the General, at least in part, Lynden decides that to delve deeper would only bring more distress to one who had suffered great loss whatever the causes thereof. The wizard's easy acceptance into the King's confidences was more surprising but given their own experience perhaps merely evidence of the King's generosity of spirit.

Pham is not so certain, and resolves to watch carefully, unhappy about the suspicious role he must now play, but more worried about what havoc the hidden cult might wreak.

* * *

All through the following day the visitors are vaguely conscious of a great deal of activity going on around them, but it is still an astonishing sight to see the next sun rise on what looks like an army preparing to move out under a blustery sky. They eat, dress, and hasten down to join the others and begin the procession through the city.

Once at the stables, Emmett spends a few minutes getting to know both his and Inez' mounts - patting them, making comforting noises and otherwise establishing a rapport. (Animal Empathy check to improve the already good reactions with both horses.) The horses are not particularly impressed, but they're generally placid beasts and well-behaved. Once that's done, he slings his quiver of javelins and spear onto the animals saddle and mounts with more grace than one would expect.

First, a dozen fully-equipped outriders, banners fluttering. Then a half dozen high-ranking priests in their animal heads and cloaks. Following them, the king and court, and the visitors -- some of the latter very nervous atop their tall mounts, however placid, and Yestin in a sledge drawn by antlered draft animals of a type they had not seen in Myrr, no horse being available to carry him. Then the huntsmen and junior priests with dogs. Then about a hundred servants (including Mihal, who has grave misgivings about this business) to see to all of the above, on foot or driving or riding other sledges packed with tents and weapons and food and all manner of other gear, and followed at last by another dozen soldiers.

Ibn Fadil suggests to Mihal that he look at this as an opportunity to learn (the lad will have noticed that he seems to regard **everything** as a welcome learning opportunity). In particular: how the servants behave, how their so-called betters behave, the effort that goes into organizing a

massive parade like this one. And how the locals react to the foreigners. "I can't watch everyone while I'm talking, but you can, if you're subtle about it."

Used to elaborately formal military processions, Yestin feels quite comfortable under the watching eyes of the common citizenry and even puffs up a bit with pride. It would be better if he had some proper Giff medals and commendations to festoon his chest, but his service with his troop before his defection had not been distinguished enough to warrant such recognition.

People line the streets and watch in solemn silence, and except for an occasional low-voiced order, no one in the procession speaks until they are beyond the walls. Lord Fynn, who somewhat to the visitors' surprise is riding, despite his advanced age and injuries, explains the way of things to them. They will travel inland and cross the river at Adessin, and from there climb up into the foothills to establish a main camp. After that, they depend on the gods to direct matters.

Lynden knows all about this custom, of course, having accompanied Tesfaye on past excursions, and wonders idly if His Lordship is meeting with luck this year, and if they have executed Cyryl yet. He is aware of grumbling among the junior priests about the presence of the off-wolders, especially their women, who clearly have no business being there, but just try telling the king otherwise when he's got his mind made up.... It **is** unusual to the point of being bizarre. The only explanation he can think of is that His Majesty wants to know more about these people - **all** of them. He spends a lot of time answering Alais' questions about what's going to happen in the course of the hunt.

Progress is slow with such a large group, but at noon they are crossing the river on a bridge of extraordinary length and height; it shows a grasp of building techniques they have seen nowhere else, and more than one of the visitors glances at Steelhand and wonders about its past. The dwarf looks entirely ridiculous on his horse but seems comfortable enough and cheerful.

Emmett lets out a long, low appreciative whistle at the construction, and if it wouldn't be too much of a social gaff he'll ride off to view the moorkins and suchlike before crossing. (If it is too out of place, assume Inez grabs his arm or something...)

No one tries to stop him, and that afternoon the dwarf manages to place himself beside Emmett in the line of travel.

"You think something of our handiwork, I see?" he inquires. He does have an unusually cheerful mien for either a dwarf or a diplomat. Perhaps, living amid hostiles, it's how he copes.

"I admire all handiwork when it's of high quality. And while I'm no expert, that certainly looks like high quality to me. Gond would be pleased." The half man replies, trusting that the diminutive diplomat will ask the obvious question.

And he does. "Gond being...?"

"Gond is my god, the lord of craftsmen," Emmett pulls out his holy symbol from under this many layers, "And he loves seeing skilled work as well as invention. I take it then that your people have never been visited by him?"

"I'm afraid not, but do tell me about him?" In the course of the discussion Emmett expounds cheerfully on one of his favorite topics, and learns something of the local dwarves' religion as well. It is a typically industrious pantheon they follow here and larger than many, with specialist deities overseeing many areas of dwarven life. He paints a very innocuous picture of quiet gods of craft and hearth.

"Hmmm...and do any of those hearth gods specialize in weaponmaking? I hear tell you have some fine steel, and am looking for a head for my spear. The shaft is made of local hardwood by human craftsmen, but having a point of dwarvish steel would make it a better example of the world for my company."

"Nothing on me, I'm afraid, but perhaps when we return to the city we can discuss the matter," is the affable reply. "There are some of my people working in the city, and they produce excellent weapons. Though I confess I am surprised; rumor would have it that there are entire worlds made of iron beyond our small purview." He gestures at the landscape around them, then the sky.

Emmett laughs. "I've done a lot of flying, and I've never seen a world made of iron. Of course, in your night sky I could point out a world of fire and one whose surface is all water except a few rocky crags. I'll point them out tonight if you wish, but it does mean that in a universe this big, anything is possible."

"The thought delights me; please do point them out when we halt this evening."

"It also means that a wise craftsman should rely on both skill and access to raw materials...in a wider world, there's always someone else who can supply the once rare, but skill is yours alone." Emmett wonders how the diplomat will respond to that veiled statement.

"Ah, but knowledge... it is like the *kepola*. It will slip from the firmest grasp and wander as it wills."

"I hadn't realized that your language matched knowledge and skill. It's accepted among the spheres that no one can match a Dwarf's skill with metal, even when their knowledge...wanders. I can only wonder what your craftsmen might master if they had access to other materials."

"Knowledge is in the hands no less than the mind. My people do good work, but so do many humans," he shrugs. "They have learned a great deal from us. What other materials have you in mind?"

"Well, that depends on what the client may need. We can get almost anything. It's a big universe out there, and someone once told me of whole planets made of iron..."

Steelhand cocks an amused eye in his direction but does not press further just then.

In camp that night Emmett and Alais point out those other planets that are currently visible in the Rigolian sky. The dwarf listens and nods and skillfully conceals his bafflement at some of Alais' more esoteric commentary.

Emmett, for reasons known only to him, scores this bafflement as an infinitesimally minor win for his team.

* * *

They turn toward the mountains, then, and after going on for some more miles call a halt as dusk settles over the white landscape. Flurries of snow come and go, but this doesn't seem to bother anyone unduly. Tents are raised, fires lit, food prepared. There is still something particularly satisfying about warm food and drink at the end of a day spent in the outdoors, even one of mostly very slow riding, while the wind and distant wolves sing the moon up across the sky.

Yestin seeks the company of General Brosh and his men, sharing meals with them whenever possible. With the General's permission, he schedules himself for shifts with any night watch that may be posted during the journey.

This works quite well as a means of making himself popular with the men; the general is reserved to the point of taciturnity, and Yestin catches rumors that the man has been more humorless even than usual of late, a sign of something on his mind.

Once camp is made Emmett travels out with the guards/outriders, trying to get a better feel for the woods and the local game both through striking up conversations and direct observation. He's also continuing to improve his relationship with their horses, and chatting with their handlers. When he asks 'yes, but do you train any *challenging* mounts' they aren't sure what he means--there are certainly horses that are more difficult than others, and stories about semi-legendary men who train the beasts of the air and forest. There don't seem to be any griffins on this world, and they clearly don't believe a word of his own stories. He also hears the stories they tell, similar but not identical to those he heard in Myrr, about the forest there.

For two more days they travel, always climbing now, until at last reaching a pine wood in a sort of dell beyond the first rank of hills. There a longer-term camp is established. Servants fell trees and drag them together after the evening meal is done with. At midnight this large central fire is lit, and the priests sing and chant their prayers for the remainder of the night. The others nap, sharpen weapons, and talk quietly. Despite his earlier words, the king has not spoken much to the offworlders as they traveled. Perhaps he is waiting to see what the omens say.

During the journey, ibn Fadil works at being the perfect gentleman: unfailingly courteous, cheerful, and (unlike most or all of the others) perfectly comfortable with their exalted company and the whole idea of having servants - and also continues to include Nyala in his conversations, whether she actually says anything or not. He asks about the horses' training and the cues and commands they expect, and tips the grooms for taking good care of them. They give him any a peculiar look, but aren't about to turn down money. Mihal later reports that he has been asked if his master is mad, or owns a silver mine?

"Hmm," ibn Fadil says, absently flipping one of the silver coins in question. "Is it cash money or generosity that is lacking around here?"

"I guess you would say the latter. It's just not how things are done around here," he shrugs. "They are part of the royal household, however small a part, and they take a lot of pride in that." His quirked eyebrow could mean quite a few things. "They're not using to getting something extra just for performing the same duties they've done their whole lives."

"How did you answer them?"

"Said you're definitely wealthy and slightly touched in the head," he replies cheerfully, as if daring disagreement.

He also encourages some of the locals to talk about their hunting experiences, and finally rewards them with the story of a hunt he once participated in, the goal of which was to kill a wily old lion that had taken to hunting people not far from the city. He's a fairly good storyteller, and he doesn't forget to explain what a lion is. The hunt took several days, and the kill was finally made by a Prince Abdul - the hunt was undertaken partly to honor his birthday.

His attempts to engender camaraderie are not entirely fruitless; the men are polite and exchange stories quite readily, and he quickly gets a sense for their personalities and the way they interact, which could be useful. On the whole, however there is still a sense that they've got the entire crew under a glass for the time being. Whatever comes out of their dealings with Three Trees might affect this planet more than anything else has in hundreds of years; they're being appropriately careful and not opening much at this point.

When the first sliver of sun is visible on the horizon, the priests each walk out from camp in a different direction. They walk for a hour, then return to report what tracks they have seen. It is a clear, bitterly cold day. Lynden is pleased when near the end of his hour he comes across the trail of a solitary stag; a good sign for him, whatever it may mean for the kingdom.

Pausing at the site of the spoor Lynden settles himself visualizing Gerik leading him on his chosen path. "Gerik guide me." He chants, his words for his ears alone, "Lift the mists of the future and reveal to me your plans for the hunt..."

There is a distant sound of hoofbeats. The answer comes: Blood spills in the snow/ Secrets whispered to ears not human/ Beware true omens.**

Concluding his communion Lynden gives thanks for the gift of foresight before sitting back on his heels in the leaf litter. The guidance given will indeed reflect events to come but he has learnt that foretelling the future is like looking at the reflections of a cut gem. A successful hunt would certainly be a bloody affair but Gerik's words may be suggestive of other possibilities. As for nonhuman ears there were several obvious characters to be considered including the dwarven ambassador. Watching out for omens was more tricky. Often it was only with hindsight that their meaning became clear. Lynden stands and returns to the main party brushing leaves and dirt from his clothing and pondering Gerik's words as he does so.

For the first day, the reports are good; there are deer, elk, boar, and bear to be seen, and the night howls prove that Rudof's children are watching over the endeavor--and still more. As Gwidon, high priest for all the realm, listens to the reports, he begins to smile, and turns to his anxiously waiting king.

"Excellent, sire. Mastodon! They passed by not longer than a day ago."

"Mastodon?" Emmett mouths incredulously to Inez, who shakes her head and makes a gesture indicating insanity, then one suggesting that she is going to stay in camp while he runs off and gets killed. He then whispers to Yestin, "Hey, one of those ought ta hold ya!"

"Yes, I suppose so," Yestin nods and smiles lightly, trying to conceal the confusion welling up in his Giffish brain; he thought a mastodon was some kind of whale and can't imagine how one made it up here into this mountain wilderness.

Emmett does try to find Lynden at this point. "Are we allowed to *hunt* mastodon, or are they holy or something?" Obviously the logistics of bringing down such game are whirring madly in the half-man's brain.

The young priest assures him that yes, the beasts are hunted. Of course, it looks like the king is going to claim that particular prize, as the hunt begins to break up into smaller groups, and excited dogs are brought to heel, ready to venture out in search of quarry. Not everyone remains on horseback, the visitors notice, some apparently more comfortable afoot for this business. Some don't seem to be going anywhere at all, namely Fynn and the large wizard.

Yestin dismounts his sleigh, which would of course be highly impractical for hunting. He unpacks and readies his heavy crossbow, the only weapon he owns that is usable for hunting, though not highly suitable for it. Having no practical experience with hunting, he attaches himself to one the king's party and hopes not to embarrass himself too badly. Ibn Fadil does the same, taking up his several borrowed spears. It looks as if Nyala is joining a different group.

When Emmett sees that ibn Fadil is attaching himself to the king's group he opts to go elsewhere. Much as he likes the idea of hunting mastodon, he thinks it's better if he schmoozes a dif-

ferent group of locals, for diplomatic reasons. Specifically, he's looking for any hot turks out to prove themselves, hoping for the most challenging and dangerous game.

Three main parties form, the largest heading off in the direction the mastodon might be found, and consisting of King Roald, Yestin, ibn Fadil, Lynden, the priest Gwidon, and a dozen other lords, soldiers, and priests. They take no dogs, as the track is easy to follow and the animals would be no help. About half the party is mounted, half on foot; in the snow and underbrush it is difficult to move quickly, even mounted, so there is little danger of being separated.

A second group includes Emmett, Alais, Father Ziven, and four of the guards who have been friendliest with odd little alien, with bear as their quarry. Nyala and Pham attach themselves to a group containing only two guards, one of the younger priests, the grim-faced general and the dwarf, the latter stating that since boar is closer to his own size than any other quarry mentioned, he will be happy to attempt it.

* * *

The first and largest group heads out from the camp at a good pace. As they move, the visitors are told at some length by the natives about the habits of their quarry. Females and young travel together in small groups, seeking the immense amount of forage needed to keep their bulk fed; males live separate, solitary lives except for mating season and fights with one another, which happen frequently. The spoor the priest found is that of a mature male.

For several hours nothing happens; they follow the trail down, back over the range of hills and then along the valley, whose sides grow steeper until they are likely impassible for a man, let alone something much larger. Slowly, conversation dies away, as everyone concentrates on the task at hand.

"Getting fresher," someone notes. They pass a sheltered, grassy bay where the creature apparently spent some time feeding. A sudden halt is called in a murmur; a distant sound of cracking branches makes its way up the valley to meet them. They move forward again, more slowly, and several of the guards are dispatched to attempt to cut off the creature's avenue of retreat.

They are approaching a bend in the now quite narrow passage--no more than thirty feet from one steep incline to the other. There is little use in stealth, the creatures being keen of hearing, but even so everyone makes little noise as they approach.

And then it rounds the bend in front of them--house-sized and covered in long, rough fur, round little ears flapping away, trunk raised into the air and the long, dull curve of its tusks glinting in the afternoon light as it moves its head. And charges them as soon as its tiny eyes have registered their presence.

The high priest, Gwidon, makes a gesture of blessing and stands back from the immanent battle; the collection of soldiers and nobles likewise hold back, giving their king the honor of first strike, and a chance to show his own skill and bravery, as holding a horse in the face of such a behemoth is no easy feat. He keeps his mount and flings the first spear of the day, but if it penetrates the armored and thickly furred hide it is only to deliver an irritating sting.

Ibn Fadil is quick to deliver the second attack, and as luck would have it a more successful one; first blood to the half-elf. Yestin fires his crossbow, but misses. The mastodon's trumpet blast echoes deafeningly in the passage between the hills.

The thing is ready to charge right over them when the others attack it from the rear, diverting its attention; they have it hemmed in. Lucky them.

Stepping smartly up to the King as he reins in his mount Lynden reaches out to touch him with a small piece of parchment saying, "Majesty, may my faith protect you." as he does so. Roald barely seems to notice, he's so focused on the animal before them, but he does give a distractedly gracious nod.

Ibn Fadil gives a whoop of excitement and moves off to the side a bit, so as to make room for the others, while he readies another spear for the next round.

Yestin quirks a brow at the thing's appearance. He can't help but note that it is *_not_* a whale, after all and tries to conceal the flush of embarrassment over his gaff. The Giff briefly considers charging the thing with his great sword, but quickly reconsiders; it would not advance the trading company's position if the acting captain among their agents were to be impaled upon an ivory tusk.

Cranking the windlass to reload his crossbow, Yestin plays the role of spectator for the moment.

The high priest continues to seem as if he will take no part in the attempted kill, perhaps waiting to see if his holy services will be needed. The accompanying soldiers let fly their spears with a yell meant to lift their courage, some of them riding up quite close behind the mastodon, showing off their mastery of their mounts as they hurl their weapons. It turns ponderously and charges in their direction, trumpeting again, until it is turned back by yet more attacks.

His Majesty's second attempt is more successful, inflicting another bloody gash on the thing--small on its bulk, but enough such stings and the creature must fall. Ibn Fadil's second spear misses and it looks as if the beast is going to attempt a charge to break free.

In the face of its rush, many of the horses become frightened, and in the tumult two men are thrown and trampled beneath the mastodon's enormous feet as they churn the snow. Like the others, Ibn Fadil must spend all his attention on his mount.

The size of the beast was impressive as was the bravado shown by those attempting to bring it down. Weighing up the odds Lynden decides that he is likely to be more of a hindrance than a help in direct combat and so moves to stand beside Yestin, keeping out of range for the time being.

The giff looses his massive crossbow again, this time to better effect as the bolt strikes its target, but inflicts only a scratch on the maddened beast as it rushes past.

"After it!" the cry goes up. There is a hasty conference between the king and the high priest on which route is best to try and cut off the creature's retreat, and soon the hunters are thundering after it, the fastest riders going on ahead to try and turn it back.

Yestin slings the crossbow with a sigh. He had little experience with hunting, and little desire for more. He could see where some men might find it exciting to pitch their strength against a dangerous beast, but the conclusion was, after all, almost foregone; dangerous though it may be, a mastodon was still only a dumb beast and no match for the wits or steel of a band of determined men. The Giff much preferred the thrill of true combat, battle against armed and cunning foemen, than this pale copy.

Smiling to mask his indifference to the outcome of the hunt, Yestin lumbered after the other hunters on foot, careful to keep his stride small enough that the giant giff did not overpass his human companions. He unsheathed his massive two-hander, more to impress his fellow hunters than out of any intention to meet the beast with it.

The mastodon does not give up its life easily; the chase and the battle goes on for the remainder of the day, an exhausting, exhilarating affair of flying spears, slashing swords, reddening snow, shrieking horses and shouting men. A couple of the footmen are trampled and killed in the course of the fight. The priests tend to the wounded and otherwise stay out of the thick of things. Ibn Fadil is having a grand time.

At last, when the sun has vanished behind the mountain and their spears are hurled in uncertain torchlight, the great beast bellows its last and sinks to the ground, and the final blows are struck.

A hush falls as the hunters gather around their kill. Gwidon begins a chant in praise of the gods, quickly joined by Lynden and the others. The first task is to remove the creature's heart, which will be used in the omen ceremony that ends the day--messy work for the priests, who are red from head to toe by the end. The tusks are taken as well as a few of the choicest cuts from the flesh.

"A most excellent hunt," the king remarks, clearly pleased by the day. "Let us return to camp and see how the others have fared."

"Most exhilarating, your Majesty," Yestin concurs with a smile, though troubled thoughts stir behind his massive brow. He is appalled by the waste of good armsmen, slain for the sake of a mere day's entertainment. Death may come at any time to fighting men, it is true, but the Giff hopes that his death, at least, will be in service to a worthier cause.

Sheathing his heavy blade, Yestin lumbers after his host, eager to confirm that his crewmates have not likewise lost their lives in pursuit of sport.

A half dozen men are left behind to continue the job of dismantling the massive corpse and guarding it from the wolves whose voices can be heard not too far away, and the rest of them make their way back to where the others are waiting. At first they talk excitedly, but as the slow miles pass they grow tired. The men are tired, chilled, and hungry by the time the light from the camp can be seen.

* * *

Members of the second group find themselves climbing higher, away from the main camp. The woods are silent, no doubt a reaction to their own presence... but there is that prickling sense, not to be ignored, that they are being watched. For hours they climb, following the excited dogs along their quarry's trail.

It happens so suddenly that only afterward is it clear what they saw. From nowhere, a massive, spindle-legged thing like a spider, if a spider is almost ten feet long, variegated black and white and almost invisible unless it moves, leaping upon a guard and sinking its fangs in, and then gone again while the man is still drawing breath to scream and his horse is still realizing that it ought to panic.

And then there is another flicker in the trees. There are two of them....

"Oh, Crap. Stay Close! Spears up!" Emmett whispers the former and yells the latter. He could swear that the spider actually disappears, then reappears near another of the guards, reaching out with long spindly limbs; the man's frantically plunging horse is moving so erratically that the beast misses its bite, but the rider is thrown at the other spider's feet, where he is easy prey.

Making an unusually rapid assessment of the situation, Alais takes appropriate action; a bolt of lightning crackles across the glade, almost invisible in the weak sunlight, to where the creature

is busy injecting its venom. Three limbs are charred clean off and the long "fur" smolders and smokes.

Meanwhile, Father Ziven has half-dismounted, half fallen and is busy seeing to the first man, who appears to be succumbing rapidly. The remaining two guards try to fling spears but are so shaken and so busy keeping their seats that the weapons rattle harmlessly off trees.

Emmett sets his hunting spear as firmly as he can, leaving it as a pointy deterrent to any other spiders jumping onto him from the trees. With that barrier in place he draws his scimitar and raises his hook to form similar deterrents. At the same time he manages to soothe his horse somewhat, though it moves constantly and nervously beneath him.

The spider with half its legs missing promptly disappears, its interest in the fight understandably diminished. The second is lightly singed by a fireball but does not appear nearly as fazed by this, springing onto one of the now-riderless horses, which screams pathetically and thrashes as the fangs bite deeply. Ziven is still busy seeing to the wounded men.

"Nobody bloody listens," the half man mutters, keeping his defensive position. "You let them come to you. So much for that..." The creatures can obviously turn invisible or move magically, but they don't react instantly, so waiting is the name of the game. Emmett seizes his chance and spurs his horse in hopes it will obey him and charge. Which it does, and the spear sinks into the spider's massive body. It leaps back with a hiss, bloody fangs gleaming gruesomely as its forelegs splay defensively. And then it's gone. For the moment.

"Everybody form up around the wounded!" the half man barks, maneuvering his mount to provide cover for Father Ziven. "I want a wall of sharp pointy deterrence to protect the good father and our comrades. Give them reason to look elsewhere for prey! Keep a close eye on your neighbors and if those things appear, back one another up." Once again the spear gets maneuvered upright and the scimitar is sheathed, replaced with a javelin. With any luck the poisoned horse will still be the most attractive prey, and he and Alais could dispatch the things at range when they appear.

For what seems like a very long time nothing happens. The wounded horse moans and collapses. Nothing moves in the trees.

"I've done what I can, but we should return to camp as soon as possible," Ziven announces, his brown brow furrowed with concern. They are short two horses, as the first victim's mount bolted off into the trees in the confusion following the initial attack, but the wounded are soon being carried by their comrades' sturdy beasts. Still they wait, not trusting the silence, and it is well that they do so! Perhaps wishing to avenge the devastating attack on its mate, the second spider appears mid-spring toward Alais, ignoring the spears of the men, and the young mage feels the needle-like fangs' touch and slumps down, too weak now to stand or even remain upright.

Emmett's spear bites home once again before the thing can vanish, and the spider seems to be content with its parting wound, for it does not reappear, leaving only drops of ichor melting the snow. Ziven kneels down beside Alais and places a small black object in his mouth, murmuring quietly, and the dreadful progress of the poison is arrested.

"Vicious little bastards." Emmett contemplates vowing that he'd track these things down, and then wonders about his skill in being able to hunt something that need not leave tracks. While he wants to be seeing how Alais is doing -- the wizard would be an enormous loss, and over the months he

has grown quite fond of him -- he instead flips up his eyepatch and sends the blood red beam raking through the woods, hoping its light would reveal the spiders for a javelin's point, but the creatures do not show themselves again.

When Ziven declares Alais fit for travel, the increasingly wounded band makes haste back to camp, hoping that their arachnid adversaries will not follow.

* * *

The three groups of weary hunters finally stagger into the welcoming firelight to be greeted by the cheers and embraces of those who remained behind.

Warm clothes, food, and wine await, and spirits are quickly revived, although it will be some days before the men wounded by the spider are up and about. Around each fire, men vie with one another to tell the best tale, employing mugs, knives, and cuts of roast meat in their efforts at pantomime. They lost a couple of men, but they died well in a quasi-holy cause and are no doubt being received by the gods.

The lords of the court enjoy themselves no less than the soldiers, though for those who took part in the mastodon kill, their stories tend to prudently flatter His Majesty slightly more than themselves. The *_Distraction_*'s crew is emplaced among them, each taking part according to their nature. General Brosh, with an air of thoughtful surprise, gives considerable credit to Nyala for her role in killing the second of the boars they found, to which she merely smiles her mysterious smile. Ibn Fadil can tell that she has enjoyed the day immensely; no doubt these forests and the hunt have reminded her of the better days at home. Emmett has the most appreciative audience he could want in his tale of the day's unexpected encounter -- Inez appears to be immovably attached to his side.

While Alais expounds (quietly, to conserve his strength) on the spiders, Emmett thinks "Man, not even a brush with death changes him. He's pure, 100% unalloyed academic. It's amazing, really." Given the obvious attention, Emmett does his level best to appear modest, but that's a wash after a few minutes. He instead endeavors to make everyone else in the group appear as heroic as possible, with desperate slashes by the wounded to hold off the enemy spiders, eldritch energies flying from Alais hands to reduce them to cinders and Father Ziven's calm, collected actions in the face of such mysterious danger. Plus his own modest accomplishments.

Everyone, in short, is having a good time.

At one fire, the priests have gathered and are preparing for the rites that will end this first day. Songs are sung, and particular herbs cast into the flames. People begin drifting over in that direction by ones and twos, maintaining a respectful distance but curious to see. Quiet falls, broken only by the distant wolves and the occasional sound of snow or ice falling from a tree.

At last the moment is judged correct. The hearts are cast into the fire, along with certain barks. A vast cloud of strangely-scented smoke issues forth, illumined from below by the flames. The watchers are silent and still, and everyone present is gripped by an almost physical sense of apprehension, a feeling of being borne down by the numinous presence gathering.

Only the priests of the Rigolian gods clearly see the shapes that form, but those who are closest catch a glimpse here and there and stir uneasily, keeping silent only with effort as serpents and fell beasts swarm, and the treacherous fox grins malice. Armies march over plain and mountain, cities lie deserted, ships are dashed to pieces by grinding ice, and a vast form of demonic mien grows like a thunderhead over all. There is a distant sound - no two who hear it later report it

to be the same, one suggesting swords beating on shields, another hoofbeats, another the sea, while still another heard a clash as of rattling chains.

Straining every faculty to make out details of the shadows, Lynden is surprised at the end to see a familiar form take shape, that of his guide and god, huge to his eyes. The many-branched antlers hold up the sky, his legs are pillars that hold up mountains, there is nothing else in the world. The vast dark eyes look into his, the crown lowers to point at him -- in threat or benediction, he cannot say, and darkness falls over his eyes.

Lynden is not the only one to faint (though he later finds that no one else saw Gerik's form in the smoke); several of the younger priests are likewise overcome by either fear or the intensity of the experience. The others stand dazed for some time, only slowly returning to themselves.

Yestin watches the ritual intently, understanding little but committing the details to memory nonetheless, lest the imagery later inspires a couplet when the Giff toils over his humble verses. His offended sensibilities at the hunt's waste of men are mollified somewhat; he cannot condone the loss of life for the sake of mere entertainment, but a sacred rite is something else altogether. It is no uncommon thing for men of the Gods to sacrifice themselves for the sake of faith, though few Giff would do so. Giff prefer to die for more practical causes.

Yestin frowns as he gazes around at the faces of the priests. He does not know what they see in the fire's depths as they pierce the veil between real and unreal. He only knows that they do not look happy...

Emmett, by coincidence of positioning, is close enough to make a go at snagging the young priest before he hits the snow, glancing back and forth between Lynden, Inez and the smoke, wishing that his connection to his god were closer so that he might see the motion of this machine as well.

"Sire, may we speak privately?" Gwidon breaks the silence at last, his voice hoarse. The two go off into the shadows of the forest; others of the councilors are summoned later on, and the discussion goes on far into the night, with all of those involved looking grave.

Tossing his head and writhing from side to side as he comes to Emmett can hear Lynden murmuring faintly, "Beware true omens! He said beware!" The young priest's distress, though obvious, is quickly controlled once he realizes that he is held by another.

"Lynden, are you OK?" He glances over to Pham, giving him a look of "do you know what just happened here?" Pham gives him a bewildered shrug, having caught the barest glimpses himself.

A quick pressure indicates his return to full consciousness and Lynden is grateful when Emmett releases him. "Thank you, I will be." He takes in the scene noting the senior priest's discomfiture and departure with the King. He was obviously not alone in his interpretation of the imagery. "Thank you for your assistance; the cold of the snow would have been an added shock." He smiles weakly. "The omens are not good..."

"Yeah, I...uh...kinda gathered that."

An attempt at a smile crosses Lynden's face at Emmett's reply. "I'm sorry." His words are almost muffled as he wipes the perspiration from his face. "I suppose I did rather state the obvious. Come, let's step away from this throng and I will tell you what I may."

Once their relative privacy had been established Lynden took a sip from a mug of beer he had snaffled as they passed by and regaled his audience with a description of what he had seen.

They are not the only ones who are interested. Lynden's observations are solicited later that night by a tired-looking Father Ziven, who has been making the rounds to ensure that nothing in the omens has been overlooked.

"And what did you see?" the brown little priest inquires.

"Master, I saw great horrors ahead and Albin's influence seems obvious. I fear that betrayal and war are the ill-omens that were revealed to us all and that it will take great resolve to turn the tides which are against us." A sigh escapes him as he considers the future before continuing. "For myself I am humbled that Gerik himself appeared to me, though I know not why I have been singled out once more." It does not occur to Lynden that he might choose not to reveal his personal revelation and he awaits Father Ziven's response to his disclosure.

"Ah." He does not seem altogether surprised. "And yet singled out you have been. And it seems that we are to have war once again, and that whatever is to unfold in this year, you must have a part to play." He looks at Lynden with seeming compassion. "You are young, yet your faith is strong...." He trails off thoughtfully.

Privately Lynden suspects that he has a fairly good idea why he is the subject of this unprecedented attention but that is one suspicion he is not about to share.

"We will speak again upon our return to the city. In the meantime, should any further revelations occur as to the meaning of what you have seen, please inform me at once."

"As you wish Master." Is his dutiful response as he wonders where his belief will lead him and under what circumstances his faith will be tested, for he is sure that tested it will be.

* * *

Brother Pham lies awake long into the night after his own prayers have been said. Though he did not see the visions that so affected the locals, he has heard them whisper to one another and is sorely troubled; the sense of looming disaster that has dogged him ever since he joined this crew has grown stronger. He looks back over his own visions, the tales of the half-crazed Hextorian on Janik, the connection that god seems to have with the atrocity in Myrr, the oddities in the Flow. Something is going to happen, something with terrible consequences, and it is no longer far off. And Hextor is clearly wrapped up in it. He stares at the stars, faintly hazed by the remnants of the sacrificial fire, dogged by the old unanswered questions about the god who called him until at last he drifts into uneasy sleep.

* * *

In the dead of night, when the camp has grown quiet at last after the strange omen-casting, ibn Fadil can hardly help noticing when someone joins him in his woolen cocoon (itchy, but warm).

"Good evening," Nyala purrs in his ear.

"I do hope our hosts will only consider me shameless, but I thought it best to speak to you as soon as may be without listeners. A most eventful day it has been -- during our chase this afternoon I was entertained by conversation with friend Steelhand while the good general was occupied with his quarry. He is most anxious to discover our position relative to the quarrels of this world, for he believes -- or would have us do so -- that this notorious Lord Durrell's first use for his imported steel is actually to attack the dwarves. If the man could but gain control of even a small portion of their mines, he would be then restrained by neither king nor the Victors' whims. And he is most anxious to know what is happening in that lord's demesne. Interesting, no?"

"Very," ibn Fadil sighs. "It seems that involvement in this place's politics is inevitable," he adds glumly. "My only consolation is that it was the Victors that started it."

"We could leave as soon as we return to the capital," she shrugs. "It seems that they have upset any number of balances in their dealings here. It may profit us as well to find out what they are doing."

"Politics is messy," he explains, "especially when the fighting starts. Nobody is going to thank us for the results, whatever they may happen to be, and if we are lucky we will escape with our skins intact, and I do not even like most of these people." He snuggles even closer to his lover. "But I do like you," he adds.

She smiles.

* * *

In the morning, funerals are held for the men killed by the mastodon. The second day of the hunt is fruitless; the soldiers are dispirited, the servants frightened, the nobles distracted by the omens of the first day, and as in Myrr those quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy in unsophisticated eyes as every small mishap is taken as a sign of doom.

"Attention to the gods' warnings is only wisdom," ibn Fadil mutters to Mihal, watching a groom make a sign against evil after dropping a bridle, "but this sort of worry is excessive." Throughout the rest of the excursion, he visibly refuses to become either dispirited or distracted. His attitude (expressed in words if anyone asks) is that the future will take care of itself, and being anxious about it is a waste of effort and not conducive to victory. This gains him a certain amount of wary respect from the natives.

By the third day, the hunters have recovered somewhat, and more game is found. Emmett earns himself further renown when, going out again with a small group of men, they bring down a good-sized bear.

"Mmmm...I've never had bear. This is pretty good." Emmett does his best to lighten the mood with the tale of the bear hunt - the flushing of the beast, the charging the prey, his desperate one-on-one wrestling match against the enormous creature until he was able to free his cutlass and end it with a single decisive stab...the usual.

"Lynden, what are the rules for using the animals? Would I be out of line by asking to make something from the Bear pelt?"

"I should think you could request it as your due." A flick of his eyes upwards is a small indication that he is accessing his memory before he answers gravely. "Provided you give proper respect to Marek and ask the permission of his priests of course. But what would you have made?"

"A cloak of some sort, I would expect. It's obvious from watching people around here that bear hide tans pretty well, and I or Inez could certainly do with some warmer clothing."

Lynden nods his agreement. "I expect the tanners would prepare the skin for you for the right price. Likewise Mistress Celina will be happy to oblige with your requirements once we have returned to the palace."

"The tanners, sure, but I'll do the other work myself. I have a pretty fair hand for these things, and I need to keep practicing the skills or I'll lose them." He gives a brief, overinflated wink "Besides, it'll be an excuse to measure Inez *very* carefully to make sure it fits as snugly as possible."

His claim to have needlework skills prompts a gasp of astonishment from Lynden. "The men here wouldn't recognize a needle let alone know how to use one but as for your other plans I'm sure you know best," he adds.

"'Know how to repair your own tools.' That's an obvious one. If I don't know how to work with leather, how'm I supposed to maintain this?" Emmett pulls down his heavy shirt, revealing the pliable armor that replaces the skin along his left side, admittedly hoping to draw a reaction. For some reason he enjoys pushing the young cleric.

A moments hesitation is all it takes before his curiosity overwhelms his apprehension at what was about to be revealed and Lynden leans forward exclaiming over both the quality of the leather and the disfigurement it conceals. "Does it cause you discomfort? Where it touches your flesh I mean?" he asks.

"Nope. The burned areas pretty much don't have any skin feeling anyway, but my muscles like the tightness of the skin. Makes me feel like I'm not about to fall apart."

"It must have been disconcerting for you at first though," is the sympathetic response.

"Well...right around here," He indicates the point of transition with the knife blade that is currently on the end of his stump, "there was some chafing when I first got this, and that itched like you wouldn't believe. But once I built my second skin that went away. Gond could have had the clerics make it perfect the first time, 'course, but I think this was his way of reinforcing to me that I needed to earn the skills for him to work through me directly."

Lynden nods. "Gerik also influences in a similar way and it is not wise to take such things for granted. Dutiful behavior is expected throughout."

"I think he did some pretty good work, too." Emmett takes the young cleric's hand and lays the palm against his skin, no doubt surprising the young man, but the move is quick, almost wholly unexpected and Lynden barely has time to feel the strength inside the half-man's grip.

A gasp escapes him as the half-man draws his hand forwards against his volition. "Please, don't do that," Lynden whispers in consternation as Emmett's superior strength overwhelms his reflexive resistance. A flicker of what could be fear is momentarily visible behind his eyelashes.

The half man, who is busy looking down at the point of contact with just a little pride in his god's work, continues unaware. "Feel how supple that is? I can only get that degree of strength and flexibility when working..." He feels the resistance to his grip and his voice trails off.

He looks upwards from where his hand is touching Emmett's skin, forcing himself to meet Emmett's gaze. "I am sorry, it was foolish of me to react so." Emmett can feel the butterfly wings of Lynden's pulse belying his word as he tries to mask his agitation. It is almost as if the cleric makes a conscious effort to distance himself emotionally as he continues, "The hide you have earned may well be what you are looking for. I hope so."

"Oh. Sorry. Hey, no offense meant. I just wanted to..." Emmett realizes that he is still holding the young priest's arm and lets go. "I just don't meet many other deeply religious people. I'm just showing off."

"I have met no-one like you and very few who give credence to what I do," is the hesitant response. "I too meant no offence and I do not wish you to believe that I find your past injuries distasteful. You just..." and Emmett can sense the young man searching for words, "... surprised me." Feeling somewhat self-conscious Lynden looks again at how the leather has been worked.

"As for showing off, your pride in your skills is merited, I would not know how to approach such a task myself."

"There is no one else like me, not even in my church. I'm one in six million." Emmett waits for Lynden to finish looking, then relaxes the tunic. "I'm pretty good by now at figuring out who's bugged by my changes and who isn't."

"And I'm sure there are lot of things that you know how to do that I can't even imagine. My father was a leatherworker, so I was lucky there in learning how to cope with being something totally different from how I was born. How about you?"

The question doesn't faze Lynden as much as Emmett may have been expecting and the reply comes without hesitation. "My mother died giving me birth so I never knew her and my father is a farmer, at least I expect he still is, as I haven't seen him or my brother for a long time. It was a challenge for him to keep us all fed and clothed, and he was often violent, so after a particularly bad beating one day I decided to run away and make my own way."

A smile lights up his face as Lynden recalls the day he was chosen. "Gerik found me when I was close to starvation and led me to sanctuary. You remember the high priest at Myrr don't you? Well Bendek heard my tale and said I should become a priest. I was in no position to argue and it seemed a fitting way to repay my good fortune. So the changes in my life have come about by choice really."

Emmett takes a drink of the local ale before continuing, "How did you handle taking your vows, becoming a priest?"

"My father was poorly educated but he made sure his sons knew their letters. It didn't take the other priests long to teach me to read and write and once I could do that it was a joy to be able to study on my own. To feel Gerik working through me is a great privilege." A small frown of concern appears briefly on his forehead as Lynden continues, "I don't know what he wants me to do about this war that is on the horizon though."

He brightens as he adds, "But I'm sure it'll become clearer with time."

"And what about you? Where do you hail from? How do you come to be travelling on the Distraction?"

Ibn Fadil and Yestin, following King Roald once more (after elk this time), observe that he appears distracted, but puts on a reasonable show of enthusiasm despite the fact that his kingdom appears to be headed for some sort of catastrophe.

With no little sense of trepidation, the ritual is performed again, and again the future appears grim. After the fourth day is much the same, the order is given to return to the city; the omens are clear, and now they must take counsel.

While things are being packed and prepared all around, a servant summons Yestin to attend the Lord Chancellor. The old man is alone, sitting at a fire a bit apart from the bustle.

"Ah, captain. Delightful. I hope you have found the week's excursion worthwhile?"

"_Acting_ captain only," the Giff replies stiffly, unwilling to let it be forgotten even a moment that he has only assumed command until such time as Captain Valarin is safely returned. Mitigating his stiffness, he adds, "Our time here was interesting, thank you, though I fear I was of little account in the hunt."

Yestin shifts restlessly on his feet, slightly embarrassed to continue. "My people -- by which I mean the Giff, not the crew of the Distraction -- are not much given to hunting. We do not eat

meat, you see." Diplomatically, he does not add that the majority of his people consider the "carnion-eating" of other races quite appalling.

"Ah yes. I am glad you were entertained, at least." After the small talk about the hunting, "You know something, I think, of the dilemma we face, the dangers of which we are warned. It goes beyond the bound of credulity that your presence here and the matters with which it is bound have nothing to do with the omens received. I will speak simply, therefore.

"It is urgent that we know what is happening in Lord Durrell's realm, what seeds of evil these other visitors have sown and what fruit they might bear. Your vessel is swift, and your crew not without cleverness. Will you go and see what may be brewing there that can so trouble our whole world?"

Yestin consciously suppresses the instinct to frown and furrow his brow; he hopes that his sudden agitation is not reflected in his coloring or repose. "For my part, I would gladly do as you bid. Some of your customs are strange to me, but the honor with which we have been received and with which your King and his loyal retainers have acquitted themselves is both familiar and dear to me and to my people. Many of my Platoo... I mean, my _crewmates_, feel the same, I am sure."

Yestin's rubs his prodigious jowls as his mind continues to work. "Too, I feel the troubles that are stirring here may be related to a strange mystery some of my fellows have been investigating of late. They would, I am sure, relish this opportunity to discern the nature of the Victor's relationship with Durrell and how it might bear upon the enigma in question."

The Giff sighs. "Sadly, we are not wholly free to follow the dictates of our desires in this matter. The *Distraction* belongs to the Three Trees trading house, to be used to further its interests. We have not the right to risk its destruction, as may happen, merely to satisfy our honor or curiosity, if satisfaction does not also coincide with whichever course is most profitable for our trading house. There must, you see, be foreseeable profit for Three Trees."

Yestin's ears twitch furiously as he continues to consider the matter. Finally, he heaves a sigh, acknowledging, to himself at least, that he is completely lost in matters of diplomacy. "I will put the matter before my crew. I will not order them to their possible destruction, but I will do what I can to persuade them to agreement, trusting, of course, that His Majesty will remember our service when the time to negotiate terms of trade finally arrives. Does that satisfy?"

"Entirely." There is no doubt that Fynn is very pleased and somewhat relieved. "I give you my word, and His Majesty's, that you will find your dealings here satisfactory."

Yestin smiles, believing Fynn to be an honorable man and, therefore, his pledge to be as strong as any contract written by (less trusting) men of commerce. "Then we are of an accord. Let me now take your leave, that I may offer what assistance I can in breaking camp. The sooner we are away, the sooner I may put the matter before my crew." He bows, then turns with a flourish of his winter cloak and throws himself into the business of breaking camp...

The following night, therefore, when the excursion has begun its return toward the city and the crew of the *Distraction* are gathered around their own fire, the matter is put to them. They appear to have gained the trust of at least some of the key governmental figures. The choice at hand is to visit the heart of trouble on this ill-omened world, or to do what business they may in the capital now that the hunt is concluded and sail on.

"The answer to the question of what that dread god is up to may be there," ibn Fadil observes. "Unfortunately I don't see how we could find it out, given how most of us stand out

around here. Still, the least we could do is swing by and see what size of an army this Durrell seems to be gathering."

Nyala shrugs, seemingly indifferent to their course, although ibn Fadil knows from their previous conversation that she is intrigued by the mysteries here.

"Oh, we'll find it out - it'll likely involve getting captured and listening to Durrell rant to us about his plans, of course, but we'll find out."

The half-elf stares at him, as if he can't quite believe he's real.

Emmett pokes the fire a couple of times with his stick. "I figure we need to do this, not just for any personal reasons but to set Three Trees up. I'd like to see something of the contract in writing first, making it clear that this form of activity isn't something that TT normally provides and that it costs extra, but I figure from how the acting cap'n described the discussion he got that across.

"I'm for it, as long as we don't take any stupid chances."

"I am greatly relieved to hear you say so," Pham sighs. "For I fear that I at least must go." He sinks back into silence, looking unhappy.

Emmett looks over at Inez, checking for her reaction; she is clearly displeased by the idea of going anywhere near anything to do with the Victors, but also sees that the wind is blowing against her, and mutters something that sounds like, "Guess we may as well," though there's a few other words sprinkled in there.

The half man prepares himself for another night of thawing out the bedroll.

The vote taken, the (acting) captain goes off to inform the chancellor that the crew has agreed to his request; the man is obviously pleased, and promises that they will discuss the matter again in Narain.

Emmett corners Inez as Yestin leaves. "Look, I know you're not happy with this. Maybe you could, I dunno, stay here, or..." he realizes how impossibly flat that sounds, and stops. "OK. We won't do anything more than reconnoiter. And we won't do anything that'll reveal you at all. OK?"

"Damn straight you won't. Why are we doing this?" she appeals in exasperation. "Look, we know what they need, we can make a deal and go. Why get involved in this mess, with people we already know are dangerous?"

"We can't make the deal unless we get involved in this mess. And given what happened in the last town we were at, we're already in it. I have no more desire than you to be here if the local are right and a war breaks out. But if we don't do this then we can't tell Three Trees that we secured the best

deal we could, can we?"

"Look, we do this, we go. Right?" Emmett knows that this is only half of the reason, and that the other half of the reason is 'because Victor pissed me off'. The question is whether Inez knows this, and whether she's going to bring this up now. Because the sad truth of the matter is that she's stuck.

"You do this, we go. I'm not having any part of it. People around here would probably rather not see women anyway." She stalks off huffily.

Later, ibn Fadil asks Mihal, "Do you want to stay in Narain, or come along?"

He's clearly been thinking about it. "I'll tag along, I guess. As long as nobody takes any stupid chances." He grins a little bit at that.

Pleased, the Zakharan says, "Only if it seems really necessary."

* * *

The journey back to Narain is without incident, though the company as a whole is subdued. Only one odd thing happens, and ibn Fadil is the only one who notices because it happens to him; one night half-way through the journey, he wakes up a couple of hours into the night feeling entirely rested as if it were morning. And by the time the sun comes up, he's not hungry--nor still by the time it sets again, and again a bare few hours of sleep seem to suffice as if a whole night's worth.

Upon waking, he eyes Tesfaye's ring with speculation, and takes it off to see what happens.

He promptly feels hungry as he normally would upon getting up in the morning; putting it back on does not seem to have any immediate effect.

In the morning, he consults Master Alais on the matter.

"Intriguing," the mage remarks. "Some sort of transformation of etheric energy, no doubt, enables it to provide the wearer with the things required for life."

* * *

Putting thought to action, the half man wakes early upon their return to the capital, seeking out the tradesmen Lynden suggested with a large bundle under his arm. While the fellows are unhappy about the hour their curiosity at seeing the offworlder (as well as the promise of good payment for work on the bear skin, and his impossible tale about lifting and throwing the animal during their two hour wrestling match) diffuses their ire, and Emmett leaves satisfied that when he returns the bearskin will be properly cured for his purposes. He also purchases a finely worked spearhead to go with the shaft of hard local wood.

That being done he makes his way as unobtrusively as he can to his arranged breaking of fast with the Dwarfish ambassador. "It never hurts to find out what the competition has to offer, and what they might themselves need," he thinks. He then remembers who said that - Valarin, when discussing what his mentor taught him - and the half man takes a quick moment to knock wood and hope that his friend and captain is doing well on this strange world.

The ambassador has a rather nice suite of his own. Servants (human) come and go, laying things out.

"Friend Emmett, good morning to you."

"Same to you, sir. Will we be trying your native dishes or one of the local delicacies this morning?"

"The latter this morn, although if you have interest, perhaps upon your return one of my aides will prepare you some dishes from our home. Though I should warn you," he chuckles, "that one thing my people are *not* known for is our cooking. There is little variety to be found underground, and that is one thing we are upon occasion pleased to supplement from the world above."

"I'm glad you were able to see me s soon after our return. I was wondering if you might be able to help me with something." Emmett sits and accepts a cup of whatever's offered--it seems to be water, but with an odd flavor that refreshes. "But I don't know whether your culture finds it crass to trade horses while eating, so it can wait if you prefer."

Diplomat, Emmett ain't.

"I would be delighted to assist you in any way I can," answers the dwarf, who is.

"I try and make it a tradition to pick up something of high quality from each trading world we visit, so I can show people why we'd bother to trade there. So far, for here, I picked up a fine hardwood spear shaft, perfectly balanced, nicely carved, strong yet flexible. What I don't have yet is a head for the spear, and since I figured that there are two cultures on this world, I should look to the other to see what I can find." Emmett takes another sip.

"I think I can pay you in samples of spices and foodstuffs that maintain flavor even when stored underground. Your dwarfish cousins on those iron planets have made some remarkable discoveries, as have elves, gnomes, halflings, giff and we poor humans." He glances at the ambassador, trying to gauge his interest.

"I should be pleased to provide you with an example of our work, and of course to sample your own wares; I am sure there is much that will delight us," he replies, sitting back in his chair; it has been built to dwarfish measurements, and the table is slightly lower than most of those in the castle as well. His dark, deep-set eyes are difficult to read, but they glance in the direction of one of the servants. "Of course we are interested in learning more of these new peoples, and of our newly-discovered cousins. You can appreciate, I am sure, the... degree of the change this portends here."

"Yes and no. The world I came from, the government has done very well in making sure their new trading partners don't change things too much. The same could happen here. You can never tell." Emmett, with his griffin-rider stature, finds the furniture comfortable. "People's loyalty to their lords isn't for sale for trinkets, and wise rulers know how to control the flow of new ideas. It's when those ideas try to sneak in - seep in through the ground rather than via a nice stream, that the problems come in."

Steelhand smiles slightly. "I think you misunderstand me, for I very much fear that your presence, added to those of the others, must change... everything. Be assured that General Brosh is not thinking only of this war that appears to be on his doorstep. I am speaking no secret here to say that for hundreds of years this world has depended on a balance ordained purely by steel-- which we have in abundance, and they do not. That is already changing, and with it all else."

"Speaking of such things, have there been any changes amongst your people in the past year that would indicate such...seepage? If so, be careful. Wet ground leads to ill footing." Emmett tries some of the breakfast before looking up with a grin. "How long do you think I can extend this metaphor?"

"You appear to be a man practiced at such work," is the dry reply. "We shall of course be on our guard regarding... seepage."

* * *

Lynden is having a breakfast meeting of his own, with Father Ziven.

"Good morning," the older priest says, a bit too heartily. "I hope you are well this day?"

"Yes, thank you though I was more tired than I realized." He waits patiently for the senior priest to instruct him.

"I know that you were sent here for what should be only a short time, to reassure your lord and superiors as to the trust we may place in these visitors. Loathe though I am to deprive them of your service, the omens seem to me--indeed to everyone--most distressingly clear. War is coming

this year, and there is no better candidate than Durrell to be its instigator. His Majesty is deeply concerned, as indeed we are all. You may not know that the visitors are being sent to discover what they can of his readiness, his plans--this is not to be generally known," he adds, "lest his agents become aware of our intent and through devilish means advise their master. It is my thought that you should accompany them once more--of course we will inform Myrr of events."

"Master, I know it isn't my place to question my elders but..." a quick nod from Ziven gives him permission to continue, "...is it right for us to involve these people further? They are honest and good hearted but so are many of our own folk so why then do we involve them in our problems?"

"Because they are here, and because speed may give us substantial advantage in preparing for what is to come," he answers with a slight frown. "By the time someone could be send over sea and land to view the situation and report back, a great deal of time will be lost. We have even less to lose, if he is allied with the evil from Myrr."

He gets up and begins pacing. "The distance from here to Highfort, and the difficulties of the terrain, have always made it difficult to maintain knowledge of. What little we have heard this past year and more has not reassured. The rumors they repeat in the streets are not far from true. He has used every means to delay the escape of knowledge about his offworld dealings, and his intentions now seem clear. And it has been long since we had *any* word from our brethren there. If he is working with these evil priests of a foreign god, it becomes imperative that a representative of the true gods be there to determine the truth of what is happening there."

So this was what Gerik was asking of him. He was to test the faith of the would-be traitors and see where their intentions and hearts lay. He felt a cloud of foreboding fall over him as he contemplated the fate of the priests stationed in Durrell's demesne. "I will do my best master though I fear it will not be enough."

The frown deepens a bit. "That is not seemly. If we are not bold when the gods stand with us, we cannot hope to please them, and our hopes must fail."

* * *

Again the crew of the _Distraction_ are summoned to the imposing audience chamber. There are no heralds today, however, and far fewer people in attendance; the king, Lord Fynn, Father Ziven and Lynden, and General Brosh are the only ones present.

"Greetings once again," King Roald says. It's possible to fancy that he looks a bit tired, and today he's all business. "My chancellor informs me that you have agreed to his suggestion; permit me to express my appreciation, nay gratitude for this deed. If you find what is suspected, I assure you that upon your return, your ship will have all the custom it can bear." He smiles humorlessly.

Yestin acknowledges the smile with one of his own, as well as a bow and flourish of his cloak.

"I regret that I cannot be specific in my charge to you. You are not my subjects, and I cannot command you, but say only that any information you recover will be useful. In this season it is unlikely he will have many men at hand, but there may be other preparations visible, though the terrain may make it difficult to determine. Highfort is strong and surrounded by mountains; there are caves and mines in which any manner of thing might be concealed; General Brosh will brief you on what you may expect. Knowledge of his strategy would of course be most valuable of all, if you can find a means to determine it.

"Brother Lynden, who has so often well acquitted himself in service, will accompany you as before. If there are any preparations you wish to make, inform Lord Fynn. When will you depart?"

"We shall be ready to part anon, your Majesty," Yestin replies with as much formal dignity he can muster. "As we were upon a mission of exploration when we encountered your world, we are already well prepared for a journey of much greater length than the short flight to Durrell's realm. We shall depart on the morrow, if that satisfies?"

His firm nod indicates that it does. "Excellent."

* * *

At last crew, gear, and supplies are stowed, and the TTS *_Distraction_* is ready to lift off--sans Inez, who remains behind in Narain. She wants no part of this adventure, and Emmett has been able to convince her that she can make a valuable contribution to the ship's mission by examining the local markets in more detail. The crew has acquired a set of navigation charts, which contain little detail about the continental interiors but from which Alais' knowledge of cartography allows him to extrapolate a heading.

The lands of Lord Gustave Durrell lie almost the radius of the planet away, in the high mountain range that forms the spine of Rigol's other inhabited continent. His domain is a wide valley in their midst, his seat a fortress guarding the sole roadworthy pass into the lowlands.

Consulting (in his official capacity as acting captain) with Alais on their course, Yestin lets out an appreciative whistle as he peers at the navigation charts. "Given the limitations on travel and communication on Rigol, limitations common to many primitive groundling cultures, I had not imagined that the High King's influence would extend to vassals a half a world away. Impressive."

Realizing that he had expressed his admiration allowed and having some vague notion that a captain (even an acting one) was supposed to remain aloof from such displays of emotion, Yestin colored darkly. Hoping that his embarrassment was lost on Alais, he drew himself erect in an attempt to salvage what dignity he could and said, "Keep me informed of our progress at regular intervals, Master Alais." Resisting the urge to salute, he stalked from the cabin, leaving the navigator to his tasks.

Emmett looks down at the strange structure of the world before whistling and turning back to Alais. "Sure is flat." With that comment the half-man turns to get back to his duties, but he turns back before exiting entirely. "Hey, Alais. When you get a chance, can you take a longer look at this ring? It hasn't done anything yet, and I'm wondering what it might be."

The mage examines the ring minutely. "Perhaps experimentation is in order. Have you tried breathing underwater, for instance, since you acquired it?"

"Ummmm....No. Nor have I jumped off of anything really high, or stuck my hand into an open flame. I've been slacking, I know. Any chance you could do a little...pre-experimentation analysis? Make use of those astrolabes and sextants and stuff you've been building?"

He shrugs and wanders off, still holding it, only to return a while later to confess that he knows nothing more of it than he did before.

The hours of the journey pass slowly. First land, then the water of the channel pass below, and then land again, dotted by distant villages and wreathed by frozen rivers. In the afternoon a storm comes up with strong winds, forcing the ship down until it abates in the wee hours of the

morning. Nyala paces the decks and polishes her bow. Brother Pham spends most of the time deep in prayer. Even Cog seems a bit worried.

The day after the less-than-totally revealing conversation with Alais, Emmett corners the local in one of his brief, non-meditative moments, catching him in the hallway. "Lynden," he says, stepping forward a bit "I was wondering if you could answer some questions for me." He glances past the young priest, indicating that Lynden's quarters might be the best place for this.

Once inside, Emmett drops gratefully down on Lynden's chair. "Thanks. I've been walking patrol for hours and my foot is killing me. Anyway...Ya see, your Lord gave me this ring, and I figure it's definitely magical. Alais confirms that, but I still don't know what it *does*. I don't know if I told you but Val recovered a ring once that let him randomly disappear and reappear somewhere nearby, and I'd hate to think that this could have some sort of similar function that'd screw up any plans we have once we get to Highfort."

Lynden sits cross legged on the floor in front of him his chin resting on his hand. "No, I didn't know of your companions discovery but I have heard of such items."

"Could you take a look at it, see if it rings any local myth bells or if your gods wisdom might illuminate things?"

"I'd be pleased to," Lynden says as he carefully takes the proffered ring from Emmett's hand. With great care he examines it from all sides and angles looking at the design and for any symbols that may give an indication of its purpose.

"Thanks." Emmett leaned back in the chair, looking around the room so as to not stare at the young priest while he worked. The cabin is sparsely furnished with a cot, chair and a low table. Lynden's bedroll is visible on the cot and a canvas drawstring bag can be seen peeking from beneath. A small wooden handled mirror and comb have been arranged neatly on the table alongside an earthenware jug, with water visible within, and a bowl and washcloth. The other furniture, chest of drawers and such like, which had been deemed unnecessary to his needs has

been moved to the side of the room to provide an area clear of obstructions. Hanging from a beam is a carved wooden pendant with a charging stag carved on it that Emmett recognizes as Lynden's holy symbol and it is clear from the candle placed below it that it was a focus for his prayers.

After exhausting that line of inquiry, Emmett starts humming tunelessly.

The hours of the journey pass slowly. First land, then the water of the channel pass below, and then land again, dotted by distant villages and wreathed by frozen rivers. In the afternoon a storm comes up with strong winds, forcing the ship down until it abates in the wee hours of the morning. Inez scowls at all and sundry. Nyala paces the decks and polishes her bow. Brother Pham spends most of the time deep in prayer. Even Cog seems a bit worried.

Lynden sits alone deep in meditation hoping to better understand Gerik's wishes. He feels that he is doing the right thing, but as usual the purposes of the gods remain opaque to mortal thought.

In his off-duty hours, it occurs to Yestin to examine the gift he received from Tesfaye. It is an oddly delicate item to give one such as himself, the ivory bird in its ivory box, so perfect carved that it seems it should breathe. Turning the figure over gingerly, he realizes for the first time that

something is carved on the bottom of the box's interior. Having grown familiar over the past weeks with the local dialect and writing, he sounds out the syllables slowly, then together, and then jumps at least a foot as the bird on his palm suddenly grows. He's seen a couple of real ravens in his brief visits to planets; it certainly seems to be life-sized now. It sits quietly, gripping gently with its feet.

Yestin stares at the bird in his hand for several long minutes, studying it with wonder writ openly upon his broad features. Slowly he extends his other arm, holding it aloft with elbow bent and perpendicular to his shoulder, forming a perch upon which the bird may alight. After a moment it steps to the proffered perch.

The giff stares into the stony eyes of the snow-colored bird for more long moments, imagining he perceives a glint of intelligence within. Remembering sundry tales of wizards and their familiars, he wonders how much more there is to this intriguing creature than meets the eye. "Do you have a name, I wonder?" he muses aloud. He hopes but does not look for an answer...

And he doesn't get one, though it cocks its head in a critical fashion.

"I shall call you Salt, then," Yestin says with a smile and a nod, "in recognition of your coloring and remembrance that salt, the stuff of life, is a thing of precious value on many worlds."

Wondering if the stone bird is merely a wondrous ornament or might have more utilitarian functions, he asks, "Salt, if it is your pleasure, will you fly to yonder mast and then return to my arm? I would see you in flight."

The newly christened Salt does as he suggests; in motion it certainly looks like a real bird. Eventually, when he does not instruct it further, it returns to its small, immobile form.

The second day of the journey is uneventful under clear, cold skies. They have grown used to being chilled, the memory of a sun that warms as well as lights a distant thing. By the end of that day they have come upon the mountains, and decide to halt for the night rather than continue when they are not fully certain of their bearings.

Midway through the morning of the third day, the sharp peaks below suddenly open out into two wide arms enclosing a gentler ground, though one broken by still deeper valleys and at times by chasms into which rivers fall thunderously, going away to gods know where. They see vast herds of animals moving, and smoke drifts up, marking settlements in the sheltered valleys. Birds of prey drift on currents, seemingly unmoving compared to the ship's greater speed.

They make their approach to Highfort by night. Under the moon, it can be seen that the land has become hilly again, and the mountains leap up once more as the arms complete their circle. There is a gap in their ring, and in that gap squats a mightier fortress than any of them have ever seen, entirely blocking the pass. It takes some time for the scale to become apparent.

The placement of the fortress puts its base a good fifty feet above the level of the ground behind the pass. The walls are one hundred feet high and fifty feet thick. The layout is square, with a massive tower at each corner and another on each side, above the road that runs into and out of the place, and a protected parapet runs along each wall, probably concealing any number of siege engines.

Below the fortress is a town which they know to be Toll. It is larger than Myrr and most unusually for a Rigolian settlement, it has no walls of its own. What it does have, somewhat to the visitors' surprise, is a spaceport; an area of ground between the town and the fort has clearly been artificially leveled under all the snow, with some sort of marker at each corner, sufficient to

accommodate a much larger ship than their damselfly. Sturdy buildings nearby suggest storage. What there is not, is an encamped army, but then there is still quite a bit of winter to go.

Yestin surveys the landscape critically, but with no clear idea of what to make of anything they have seen or what to do next. "The Victor has been busy, if that be his handiwork," he says to his crewmates, indicating that distant spelljammer port.

Rather than risk being seen, they approach no closer for the moment but draw the ship off some distance away, still under cover of darkness, to make their plans.

"What next, do you advise?" their (acting) captain asks.

"We may be able to approach openly," Pham says. "After all, they have seen ships such as ours before. I had thought to concentrate my efforts on attempting to determine if there is another of those hell-born idols to be found here, though with such a large area to search it may take some time."

"We may have to approach openly, if we hope to learn anything more detailed than the little we can see from the air." Yestin sighs, clearly not pleased by what he is saying. "It occurs to me that a stealthier approach may be useless, as there are few among us who could easily pass unnoticed among the native Rigolians." The Giff feels no need to remind anyone of the commotion their appearance made when they first appeared in Myrr. He shifts his eyes uneasily around the room, clearly uneasy with burden of command and hoping someone else will alleviate him of the need to make the immediate decision on what to do next.

"We do have two natives with us now," Nyala points out. "And at least we are no longer dressed as strangers. Some of us could likely move about in the town without attracting attention. However, if it is access to yonder fortress we require...." It's clear even through her usual reserve that she's impressed by the place.

"I _have_ been charged with locating my brethren and I too would like to disable any mechanisms created by the offworld followers," Lynden finally contributes to the discussion having sat and listened thus far, "but I am at a loss as to how to gain entry to the fortress."

He takes a deep breath before continuing, "Though I am fearful of the consequences I will volunteer for this task. It is required of me."

"Bravely spoken," ibn Fadil says seriously. "But I think our Captain" (he ignores Yestin's unspoken protest at that term) "is right that stealth is unwise here. I'm thinking more of a series of bald-faced lies, a quick reconnaissance, and a quicker exit. If Brother Pham is willing to pretend he belongs to the other side -- and if you, Captain, are willing to let me pretend to be the captain. I won't apologize for thinking you're a very poor liar, sir, nor for claiming that I'm good at it. Myself, Pham, and Emmett should be able to bamboozle them long enough to discern their plans, and hopefully escape afterwards." It is still a little strange for the others to see their previously self-effacing shipmate speak out with such boldness.

"_Acting_ Captain," Yestin corrects ibn Fadil absentmindedly, while considering the man's words. "Yes, I think stealth is right out. A few of us could pass as Rigolians, true, but too few for my liking. We seem to fare none too well when we split up into too small groups; we have already misplaced our Captain and finest bladesman, and I should hate to lose anyone else. Plus, any such disguises would be effective only so long as we didn't speak, as our off-world accents would give us away instantly. Only Lynden and Mihal could affect to be locals, and even that assumes that there would be no significant differences in dialect in rural nations located half a world away from each other."

Yestin blinks suddenly and turns his gaze from one to another of his companions, as though he had been voicing some inner argument with himself and only just now realized that he had spoken along. Feeling his face flush and suppressing a scowl, the Giff nods to Ibn Fadil. "If you have something in mind, we should be glad to hear it."

Emmett, of course, speaks up. "I think Ibn Fadil's plan has a chance, but we might be jumping too far, too fast. We need some better info about life on the ground. Maybe if we use the rest of the night to drop Ibn Fadil and Nyala on the outskirts to do a check of the ports perimeter under the darkness and pick them up at a pre-arranged spot? The more we can learn about them and keep up our sleeve ourselves, the better, and we've got a pretty fast ship that they don't need to see until we want to reveal it."

He leans back against the wall and continues, "As far as the town, Lynden, do you think you'd be comfortable providing some sort of cover story in case anyone does question us in town? I can do a fair convincing cripple if need be, and Ibn Fadil has passed for a beggar before - assuming no one looks too close at the ears. That ought to get us into town for a little bit, ask some questions about how often the magic flying ships come in and out and other wonders. That's a safe way to get some more information without revealing much of anything."

"I'm sure I could come up with something suitable," is Lynden's dry response, "but they may question my being there regardless."

"I had hoped to snag one of the guards, or maybe find a Hextorian, but one of them going missing as we question him would just set off too many alarms." He looks over at Pham, "Plus, I don't know how capable he'd be at making pretend - no offense, Pham." He looks back at Ibn Fadil "There are an awful lot of differences between the sects, and while it might work for the ultimate "We're landing in our unexpected ship" mechanism, I don't think it'll hold up to any sand in the gears."

He looks back over at the pilots "Do you two have any magical divination spells? Something like what we saw on the hunting trip, only without the fire and smoke? Any way we could feel this place out from a distance?"

Pham shakes his head. "Nothing so dramatic, I fear. I could attempt to determine a general omen for the endeavor, but I'm afraid I am not prepared to do so at present." He looks at Lynden.

"Similarly I could attempt a simple divination though I am not able to at present." Lynden acknowledges his limitations without hesitation. "

"I would prefer not to wait," Nyala opines. "I believe the half-man's plan is sound. We should certainly be cautious, but the pitfalls that snared Valarin and the others in Myrr, I think we can avoid." She glances at Ibn Fadil. "Shall we venture forth and examine this structure of theirs? A look inside the Victors' storerooms, if that is what those buildings are, may prove interesting. Lynden and Emmett, and perhaps one more? can venture into the town. I like the thought of gulling this lord." She had after all become friends of sorts with the man's daughter. "The more we know of what Durrell plans before we speak to him, it may be easier to sway him that we can be of use."