

THE SILENT MAN CALLED

A Fantasy Adventure Novel

By

Wade Tarzia

This book is a work of fiction. Places, events, and situations in this story are purely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Jeffrey Yule, creator of and my former editor at *The Mage* also read and edited this early draft. Jeff Yule also published an early version of the first 4 chapters of this novel as “Of the Mirror, The Man,” in *The Mage* in 1988.

Ninety percent of Rich’s and Jeff’s advice has been included here, from corrected spellings to the deletion (and addition) of entire chapters.

Additionally, my old friend Herbert Spitz (my Kollen or my Renik, my Fafhrd or my Mouser, my Kirk or my Spock, my blood brother) read the first half of the novel.

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And finally (and out of chronological order to return to the start), thanks go to two people, one a friend, the other a stranger. The preface: Back in 1982 the tale began as a Fritz Leiber ‘Fafhrd and Mouser’ emulation done as a joke that kept getting serious and serious until I knew I had my own tale. My friend Ken Shores, a fellow Nehwon fan, gracefully received installments of the most incipient version of the tale (“Of the Mirror, The Man”) over the U.Mass. Cyber mail network in 1982; watching Ken read each week’s ‘installment’ on our rented terminal and its 1200 baud modem at #15 Pufton Village was the ignition energy for this story. The stranger is, of course, the late Fritz Leiber, who taught me much about writing

fantasy, although he didn't know it and we never met except in an indirect way through an essay I published in *The Mage*. I learned from Leiber that heroic fantasy written with style and human insight is an admirable goal, however much I may stumble in my progress toward it. — Wade Tarzia, Naugatuck, Connecticut, 2002

Dedicated to unswerving Childe Roland,
and to Queequeg and his life-saving coffin.

CHAPTER I — LOVE, AND ALE, A BROTHERLY TALE

Consider the corrupting influence of a simple mirror. Youths make it their shrine, and righteous elders lie like thieves in its face or mourn before it as at the family tomb. And more powerful than lust! For, if a mirror is near, who will not first take a turn in front of the evil glass before submitting to a lover's arms?

— Halsa the Blind, Philosopher to the Red King

Renik was dreaming — a horse grazed over his parents' graves, and now bit down toward the coffins. Renik struggled to stop it but a weedy green anchor rope wound around his body, and that horse kept chewing downward until it broke into the coffins. The snaps of splintering wood became the cracks of breaking bones. The boxes rattled, their occupants flapped like grounded fish. Then Renik woke up to wind in his rented room and a flapping shutter.

His heart-pounding slowed. After a while he stood and leaned on the window sill to watch the desert's dry-brown winds scour the inn and whip along the empty alley that his window looked upon. It was a confined view but if he leaned out he could see the desert marching up to the borders of the city like an insolent landlord.

"Blasted dry ocean," he said to no one. "Plenty of wind, but no ship to use it. Sand shit!"

An unusually wicked storm was kicking up, leaving tattered awnings and rolling barrels behind in its currents. The cityfolk had been prepared early, of course, because they had watched the beggars retire from the main avenues to seek shelter. It was only good sense to study Fenward's renowned philosopher-beggars, especially when they fled to their niches and alleys. Everyone knew they were wise and foreknowing, which is why most people despised them even while studying them, tossing them coins and crusts with religious regularity, and in general spying over their every action with eyes stretched in side-glances.

Under Renik's window squatted the wisest of the beggars, Tenna the Blind. He had helped his lame friend, Oshen, to the sheltering wall of this poor little inn, where they huddled and spoke, sharing old

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bread and a new verse or two of a satire against the Dahsa that was going the rounds at that time. But they suddenly found Renik's opinion of the desert more interesting than gossip.

"We have observed," Tenna called up, "that both sand and water can be poured or flung on the wind. We have wondered whether these elements are brothers of different inclinations, or perhaps half-kin."

"And consider this — the loose robes of the camel drivers flutter sail-like in the wind, and aren't they, then, like sand-ships?" said Oshen.

Renik, startled from his reverie, looked down and saw the men beneath him. *Then* he fished in his pouch, for he knew something of the tradition in Fenward. He found a coin and dropped it between the men.

Renik rubbed his eyes and raked sand fleas out of his short beard. "You speak of brothers," he said. "That's a coincidence. I've come to this wreck of a city to visit my brother."

"Coincidence is the sudden recognition of the world's unity," Tenna said. "My advice is a question: If you are here to visit your brother, why then are you not visiting him? Do locked gates or ponderous rituals intervene? Perhaps the delays of appointments, couriers, and mediating majordomos?"

Renik nodded and withdrew to his room. Why wait, indeed? He himself had arrived before sunrise, having traveled all day and night, then sent a boy with a note to his brother to meet him. And wasn't Sena the Prophet's second of his Sixteen Principles, 'Proper Actions Rot Quickly in a Jar'? Yes, wait no more. Refreshed from this revelation and his nap, Renik slung on his cutlass, scratched his beard, and was off into the storm to deal properly with his brother.

"Is he a guilty man who screams in his sleep?" asked Oshen. Tenna the Blind scratched his back against the mud-brick and considered.

* * *

Renik's brother, Kollen, was also dreaming. He was a night tradesman — a smuggler, in other words — and commonly arose in the afternoon to pursue his living until the morning. Today he had slept fitfully, rolling in chopped-up dreams that culminated with Rippa the Moneylender paying over dry, yellow kernels of wheat for some important object Kollen had retrieved for him. Something was

wrong with the payment, he knew, but could only offer Rippa a weak smile as he puzzled out why. Outside, a pair of fellow smugglers examined a man's heart they'd retrieved for the study of a physician. It looked familiar; Kollen felt down at his sternum and noted a hole there, edges slightly wet. The men left him, pocketing his heart, laughing at his attempt to catch them. He couldn't run because his testicles were also gone, leaving a dry cavity and a set of dangling strings on which they had hung. The strings unraveled and left him half a man.

He awoke profoundly disappointed, clutching crotch and chest. His throat was dry, and he heard a commotion beyond the walls of his tiny cottage. Snatching his short sword from the side of his bed, he flipped to his feet (still holding his crotch), listened at the door, and flung aside its double bars to swing it open with sword tip.

The knife makers, poison brewers, smugglers, and one minor prophet peered in at him.

"Who'd you kill?" asked the poisoner, looking with an elite distaste at Kollen's blade.

"Did my weapon hold its edge?" asked the knife maker.

Kollen dropped his point. "I had a nightmare. Did I scream?"

"Rather more like two great shouts of indignation than a scream," said the prophet, settling his face mystically back into the shadows of his hood, from which collected dust fell in puffs, and he beat himself with a short whip as he wandered off.

"It's like I said," said a smuggler, glancing after the prophet, "you have to wake at either dawn or dusk, get your working hours straight and pure. None of these in-between hours, waking in the afternoon and sleeping before cockcrow. It unbalances a man."

"It was only a nightmare," said Kollen. "Probably brought on by my brother's visit. In fact, it was a timely dream to wake me up now. I'm to meet him soon."

The party of professionals scattered. Kollen swung on his cloak and pouch, then locked his cottage bar. He walked slowly down the narrow alley made darker and closer by the sun-faded awnings stretched out from each tradesmen's door like threadbare eyebrows. He passed by other neighbors, greeting prostitutes, trading good-natured insults with the food hawkers who hadn't poisoned him yet, and nodding at a bully who carried his scars. His feet made little sound on the sand drifts as he sauntered to the wine-sellers' alley,

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where Renik would no doubt be found trying to lord it on a stone bench, scowling away all curious glances.

* * *

A man winked into existence in the desert storm that was lashing Fenward. His robes were clean and dignified — the attire of scholars, priests, and mages. His long, elegant beard looked freshly combed and waxed. He looked around himself, trading glances between a gargoyle-headed border post and the city, both of which faded in and out of sight as the dusty-dry waves of the desert sifted by. He took a few steps and looked behind him as if to check that he still left his mark in the sand; he did, but the depressions were faint, as if he were a straw-stuffed man, and the wind erased them almost instantly. Then he grinned, danced stiffly, with decorum; gaiety was a disciplined thing where he lived.

He offered the border post a bemused grin, studying its egg-blunt face. But as he walked past it, he felt a tug of resistance.

“Hey, now! Why resist me, fading monster?” the sorcerer chuckled. “I’m not even real.”

The monster maintained a silent dignity befitting the last of a race. It was, indeed, the last of a thousand such posts that once guarded the perimeter of the city. They had all been hard and black, challenging alike the abrading sands and the faces of dusty travelers. The posts’ stony faces had been carved with deep features — heavy folds and wrinkles in semblance of great age, which, the wise carvers knew, was a paradoxical charm against aging for stone creatures enduring abrasive winds. But, one by one the monsters fell before the kicks of visitors, the deprivations of antiquarians, and the ravages that children heap on defenseless objects. One day only this last veteran remained, leaning against the desert tide that washed up against it, accepting the doom that comes to all things with a stone carver’s patience.

Sulem, the sorcerer, was hushed by its melancholy after his first address, strangely affected by this creature that was somehow less than magical and more than wondrous. But he threw dignity to the gritty wind once again and banished melancholy with a snap of his fingers. He bent close and whispered in the monster’s ear, although he could have shouted and no one would have heard him over the endlessly varied flute-notes of the storm.

“If you’re good to me I’ll come back soon and make you new, renew each chisel-dent, restore your wrinkles and ferocious eyes.

Because when I come back this way I'll bear a great treasure, the power over life itself that a great man discovered in days gone by."

The stony monster was unimpressed, and the man stood tall and set his sight on Fenward. From his distance the city itself looked as rounded and worn as the blunt-nosed monster that stared outward. Cynical visitors did liken Fenward's domes and squat towers to skulls and ribs poking up from an eroded cemetery. Sulem thought about the analogy and smiled. The man took out two mirrors from his pouch and hung them around his neck from a silver chain. He leaned familiarly on the gargoyle.

"Did you know, my friend, that all great people and events have their twin-kin? Consider a blind man at a mirror — each image doesn't know the other exists, yet both are simultaneously born on opposite sides of the moment. You're the gate keeper for such a pair. Their reflections walked in life here centuries ago — two hateful brothers, Shapor the King, Habran the Mage. Brothers always fight each other when one has and the other lacks, and Habran had immortality in his grasp — a crown invested with the secret to life itself, worth any quarrel! But he hid it from his brother and chose death — I think he feared eternity, unlike you, stone monster. And me." Sulem grinned and again looked up at distant Fenward. "Now, what two hateful brothers lost, an unloving pair shall find. Natural law! Destiny is thrifty; destiny is a miser. Two hateful brothers shall look into my charmed mirrors and see their ancient reflections and find their old lost treasure."

In his hand he held his two mirrors. Two brothers (two hounds), according to natural law and prophecy, were somewhere near.

His foreknowledge rang true. Soon he was standing in the shadow of an arch, watching Renik and Kollen meet from opposite sides of the street. They were wrapped in heavy cloaks against the night chill, each of them a shapeless woolen bundle, although loud words might be heard passing between them. Sulem nodded to himself.

"Brothers," he said aloud, although the wind wafted his words away before they traveled far, "I call you into my service as I call into my mirror your ancient reflections." He took the mirrors and faced them together, intoning three words of the Old Speech. Then: "Shapor and Habran: the sun set behind you long ago, but see what shadows were cast ahead of you." The mirrors did nothing, as was proper, for death is all dust and dark. It was life he sought.

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The brothers had entered a narrow side alley, where the wind was quieter though sometimes blew starry sparks from torches and leaky lanterns in the alley wine-shop. These lights hung from tripod-poles and varied the greater shadows into the flitting wheel-spokes of shades cast by drinkers wandering into and out of the cones of light. Here, the gathering folk stood in groups or sat on stools formed from sections of marble columns dug from the desert ruins. These seats were well polished from years of sandy pant-bottoms. The drink vendors dispersed hot or cold drinks and dates pickled in spiced wine to counter the wet-sucking sand. The alley hummed with the night's refugees, a press of bodies wrapped in camel-hair cloaks, capped with wide-brimmed drovers' hats. Silver bracelets and the polished hilts of daggers were stars that burned in the narrow shadows between the drinkers. And here the two brothers sat under the cone of light from a shaded lamp and watched drink swirled into their cups by a harried boy with no time to even brush the hair out of his eyes. Then Renik the shipmaster leaned up straight and won a space around his stool with fists resting on hips while Kollen sat in his own space of practiced indifference.

They had hardly finished their first sip when the sorcerer was standing before them with a deep bow.

"Sons of Laraf! I am Sulem. I have traveled far to find you both together," he began. "Please allow me the liberty of knowledge — I know of you both, and I need you both, and, pray, let me tell you how you can profit."

The brothers interrupted their just-started business and tilted eyes up at the intruder, whose ornaments twitched lantern light in their faces. And the stranger began a well-rehearsed narrative that gained momentum as the brothers glanced at each other, Kollen leaning forward, elbows on knees, head tilted sideways and upward, and nodding.

From Sulem's view the contrast in the brothers was evident in body and manner. Like Kollen, Renik was short and brown-haired, but unlike him, Renik was heavily built, bearded, plainly dressed in heavy woolens and an oiled-leather hood to which a light layer of dust now stuck. A cutlass with a bright but dented handguard, glimmering like the pockmarked gibbous-moon, pushed before him. And with a subtle jerk of his elbow he thrust the bald head of his weapon into clearer view. But Sulem spoke on even so: something about an

ancient emperor, his wizardly twin brother, lost secrets, and other such balladeers' romance. More, he had plopped down a money pouch on an empty stool between them. It squatted between the brothers like an evil toad, and Kollen's eyes strayed there and hooked in.

"Gold?" Renik broke in. "Where has it ever gotten a man? Draped in dreams, drunk in the gutter, then lazy in the arms of whores! Isn't that true, Kollen?" Then he slammed his tankard of cheap ale next to the pouch (he'd bought it to appear thrifty and responsible in front of his brother).

"How much gold? I don't share my brother's illness." Kollen sipped wine, costly in this grape-barren region. He was less hairy about the face than Renik, and instead of his brother's sternness, his face jumped between quick joviality and quicker irritation. He was lighter in build and wore a darkly dyed woolen cloak, some of which he wrapped around an arm, a habit in windy Fenward. His pants and shirt fit loosely.

Sulem twirled his beard around his hand and looked at them both.

"An illness?" he said. "Only if great fortune is an illness. If so, strike us all with it!" He took out a bright comb and ran it once through his silky beard, the comb reflecting lamplight into their eyes. "I offer no plague; rather, some gold for some service. There is something in this region that my masters want recovered, which we can do with your help, as I had started to explain."

Kollen leaned back and sighed, even if his hands clenched and whitened under his cloak. "If there's enough of the immortal metal there, we can do business. I deal in oddities, historical oddities among them, and I keep them up here." Kollen tapped his head. "You were talking about this ancient sorcerer, Habran. I hear familiar things."

For the first time that night, Kollen's face melted into the smoother lines of thoughtfulness. Rarely, this happened to him at unforeseen moments when accosted by the strangest things, none of them related to the other — it might be the sudden turning of a corner to see the line of an old building in a way he'd never observed before, or the face of a child, or an elder, the script on a statue, the flight of birds across a cloud, a snatch of melody, an odor. Then any of these instances became a memory, and warped double-images would overlay his sight as if he had two sets of memory.

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Just so, he'd once feasted in a public house in Ardkill village, and a man had told him the tale of an old mound in the wastes: "We call it 'The Giant's Grave,'" he'd said, and told him a tale about a giant, his tendency to eat shepherds who'd wandered to his door, and the trickster who'd convinced him to have some wine before dinner. Kollen had laughed and slapped his knee at the well-told tale. But later that night an older man, who'd not drunk much, but sat instead in a corner watching the sport, told Kollen otherwise: "You hafta have the age with ya to keep the lore, and ya've not gotten it, nor has the man who told ya of the Giant's Grave. But he's of a new family, not been here longer'n three generations, I wager it. My people are older, and we call it Habrani's Bed. A wonderful hard cold one it is, too! But see, there's truth even in the youth — they were giants in them days to have such beds!"

Kollen had been drunk, but he'd remembered that, and he recalled getting the shivers so bad that he went out, vomited, and went home.

He came to himself in the alley with Renik and Sulem, blinking a reflection from his eyes.

"I've heard the old legends," Kollen said, "and a scholar-friend of mine is wise in history and taught me some of it. I've seen a certain place. There's a carving, a seal, a seal of skull and star, or sun, both sitting on a set of scales. Habran's seal, the sign of a great wizard—"

Sulem's jaw muscles tightened. Kollen relaxed a little.

"And where—?"

"A place. You couldn't find it. Not without me. A mound or ruin with something underneath — one supposes. But there are a lot of big old mounds out in the country. Ruins everywhere. Wars leave them behind, you know, and this place had a big one a while back. That's why I haven't investigated further — too many places to find interesting things, and some more likely to pay me back than others. But if you want a hired guide to bring you there—"

Sulem leaned forward, his face brightening, when Renik leaned between him and Kollen and said, "Find the place yourself. *I* have business with my brother."

"Ah!" Sulem said, "but I am indeed hoping to engage you both. The sailors of Akrem speak highly of the shipmaster of *Renik's Luck*, especially of how you outwitted Lord Lowerth's harbormaster, who had a mad hatred for all watery things." Sulem leaned back, lifting one of the two mirrors that hung at his neck, and he combed his beard

again. “And, of course, brother Kollen has some small fame as a — how shall I? — a finder of useful things.” His mirror-flash got in Kollen’s eyes, again.

Kollen sat up quickly enough to rock his stone stool. “Small? Small, you said?” His eye-whites swelled, seemed to glow in his gray face.

“My pardon. There is your mighty exploit concerning the copying of the Three Unanswerable Questions from the foundation stone of the Forbidden Temple—”

“Furnishing years of philosophical dilemmas for a *well-paying* scholar,” Kollen finished.

“As it may be,” said Sulem, bowing. “Your exploits are trophies to your skill. What high deeds are attainable when such brothers cooperate—”

“Kollen can find all the trophies he needs, and he can earn them if he wants to, aboard the family ship with me, doing honest work. We are *not* interested.” Renik caught the flash of his brother’s eyes but took a long draw from his ale-pot to avoid him and the reflection from Sulem’s mirror.

“These are serious matters. You need time alone to decide.” Sulem stood up. “Let me find that wine boy, and you’ll be my guests.”

As the fellow left in a sweep of robes, the brothers sat and stared, stared so intently that a pickpocket started thinking that drink had greased his wheels and now was the time to move. Then some of the wind passing over the tower-tops invaded the alley and peppered Renik with grit. He broke from his reverie with a shake of his head. He gripped Kollen’s wrist. Kollen woke from his own odd stillness, but he couldn’t contest his brother’s strength and didn’t even try.

“Brother,” Renik said, “we haven’t spoken three thoughtful words together since I arrived. You want gold? I’ll give you gold. The last trading season was a fair one. I can match you coin for coin with that bag there when your foot treads the deck of the *Luck*, as an advance on your inherited interest in her.”

“I don’t need your gold, or father’s legacy, or a sailor’s crotch-rot. Let go of my wrist.” Kollen tipped his wine cup and held it empty on his knee. By then Sulem had found the overworked boy and sent him to the brothers. Wine sparkled in a stream, whirlpooling into Kollen’s cup.

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“A steady hand, there,” Renik told the boy, and patted him on the head. “How would you like to pour honest men’s tea on a sailing vessel? There’s a test for a steady hand.”

“I would, but I can’t, sir. My father’s poor and needs me here.”

That earned the boy a coin. “When your father prospers at last, look for *Renik’s Luck* in Akrem, at the north docks.” Renik glanced up at Kollen. “I’m in need of good men.” The boy grinned and bounced away to a circle of impatient drinkers.

“How’s Anasa, and Botha, and the rest? They’re all good men.”

“And some of them cousins. We’re a family and we keep the ship tight. Our family wanted that. Their sinews tie the rigging together. But she’d sail truer with the restoration of a missing mainstay.”

“You’re drunk, Renik. You’ve hardly sipped that rotgut tonight, but you’re drunk. That’s the only thing to explain it.”

“No. Let me tell you something. Let me tell you about death. You little fool, we’re the end of our line, understand that? Let priests prattle on about immortality, but we can’t see it. You can see a family, though. You can see a parent, a child, a grandchild, and — our parents are dead, and we’re childless, unless we’ve unwed women around tending kids we don’t know, and that’s as good as childless. Brother, I see only you. This winter I walked on two *graves*, and—”

Sulem wandered back. Renik breathed jets as Kollen drank and drained his cup again, keeping hold of his brother’s eye.

“So now. You’ve had time to consider my proposal. The reward is ample. I must engage both of you for this task,” Sulem said with a slight frown as he studied the stone faces before him. “Gentlemen, we have cast auguries, read the sky, and they say you both are the men we need. Understand, good tools come in pairs, and we all need each other to—”

“There’s an insult!” said Kollen, his voice rising two pitches above the beating rhythms of drinkers’ roar, which bounced and funneled between the alley walls. “I, for certain, have never needed anyone but myself—” (Sulem nodded, hint of a smile just bending his closed lips.) “—and to suggest that I’m a half-man when halved from my brother—” (Sulem dropped his gaze to the mirror in his palm; a double image swam in the sheen.) “—it’s an insult.”

Kollen finished his sudden tirade and waited for an answer. Sulem mumbled his excuse.

“My pardons, many pardons. But I wouldn’t want to dare you to the task without Shipmaster Renik’s worthy aid—”

And then Kollen snatched up Sulem’s mirror and looked straight into it. “Look here: I see a man staring back at me able to accomplish whatever he puts his hand to.”

Renik snatched the mirror away, spilling much of his ale between their feet, where it puddled in the packed sand. He rubbed his nose in the mirror while the whites of Sulem’s eyes swelled around his pupils.

“And I,” said Renik, “see a man who rode a damned long distance to deal well with his brother, to bring him home, *home!* And you’re right, I will go! Neither of you could succeed without me, and the reward seems ample.”

Sulem’s smile bloomed, but he kept his lips clamped on it. He bent over, turned Renik’s wrist to spill some more of his drink on the packed ground, and added some of Kollen’s own to mingle there. Then he drew a sign in the puddle. At once it became a perfect mirror, hard-seeming, marred by no ripple. Sulem touched each brother under the chin and drew them together until foreheads touched and each head became half of an arch over the mirror-puddle.

“Brothers, by your parents’ graves—” he began to say.

Began and ended, as two bravos, arm in arm, bawled a song into the air as they staggered through the crowd to find another wine-stall. They crossed behind the twins and were suddenly amused by the brothers’ earnest consultation; they leaned over and sang in their ears a rough verse — “Me mother she bore me then sewed up her crotch, me father he fastened his pants with a lock, and now that I’m grown and can dance on their graves—”

Renik jerked upright. “I’ve walked on two graves,” he whispered.

And Kollen, himself bolting up, started up on a theme of his own.

“I don’t need you, Renik, I never did need you, and I don’t want you in my way. Go home!”

The last word, emphasized with tone of voice and jutting face, broke Renik from his own sudden contemplation.

“Home—home, that’s right, that’s straight speaking. Kollen’s coming home to his rightful share aboard the ship that his father wanted both his sons to have. Sulem, sir, I dare you to beat that bargain!”

“Dare?” said Kollen. “Done!”

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And Kollen spun on his stool and did a backward leapfrog away, snatching up Sulem's gold bag and shaking it in his face with a snap of the head that said, 'Follow me.' Sulem spun in his own stool, still not sure what had gone wrong or right with his spell, and he, in turn, left Renik a bewildering series of bows and a "Wait, wait here, pray!"

Outside in the wide avenue, Sulem called to Kollen, and Kollen stopped his rush and remembered that he was now employed. He waited and waved Sulem on. Before following, Sulem glanced at Renik doubtfully, but then he hastened before he lost Kollen in a crowd of joking caravaneers.

* * *

A brother, Renik thought, was an idea, a possibility, hardly a reality. But even so, Kollen's image sat before him and, like indigestible porridge, wouldn't go away.

He stared into his tankard, studying the reflection of his nose deep within the thin ale. Renik leaned further over the pot, seeing his entire face in the brownish pool: a sharp nose, strong brows framing stern eyes. From better mirrors he knew his close-cut beard was sun-faded and showed some evidence of its owner's forty years. All familiar stuff, but the sight made him dizzy; the walls of the alley started turning around him, and then they settled back, not looking quite right. He shook his head and kneaded his eyes.

And while his head hummed with strange feelings, he wondered why Sulem's reflection had not appeared in the puddle of spilt drink on the ground. Well, it *was* cheap ale.

He felt strangely attached to his chipped ale jar, even though only a swallow or two remained. When a crowd of drinkers suddenly flowed out toward the avenue, Renik left, stealing the jar, but not before he grabbed the drink-boy by the shoulder and harshly commanded him to be at the north docks on the first day of spring next season. The boy squirmed underneath the unexpectedly painful grip and nodded many times.

On the avenue, the Dahsa's night guardsmen had just clanked by with their spear tips wavering uncertainly in the wind. Renik belched in their direction and went the opposite way, wandering wherever his anger might take him.

He was angry that he'd left his ship to try to reconcile with his brother. And yet, he was honest enough to reflect that he'd come to

Fenward as much to escape the ghosts at home as to reconcile. Ghosts had driven him away from the hearth in the big, empty room overlooking Akrem's harbor. It was a winter full of ghosts. The gales were frozen nails this year, but the old family house was colder; its relics of three generations of seafarers had become symbols of exile, not adventurous journeys. The ships had rocked and pulled against their lines, the wind had droned around the bare poles, and Renik had paced the icy cobblestones until his boots plowed the thin patches of snow remaining around the graves of his mother and father. There the green grass thrust up, hardly waiting for spring to start moving along. It was a symbol of hardy growth, and it had made Renik want Kollen there, to push his face in the snow, through to the grass, into their parents' moldy bones to show him what they all had come to, what growth they had failed to show. The next day Renik had ridden for Fenward.

"Your fate foretold for a coin!" cried a voice at his knee. Renik came back to himself and looked down. A one-armed beggar sat cross-legged in a drift of dust. "Master, you've the bearing of a king. Perhaps a palace is your destiny."

"The dungeon of the king's taxer, more likely." But Renik dug in his pouch where he knew a small gold coin lay. In sudden whimsy he dropped it in the beggar's lap. "What fortune can I buy with that?"

The beggar raised the coin to study it in a gleam of lantern light. He frowned. "You're destined to be poor, my lord." Renik gave him an additional penny for his honesty, and he walked onward.

Farther down the avenue, a shadow detached from a wall of deep-set doorways. He jerked his cutlass three-quarters free before he saw the female outline.

"Heaven's roof-top is in your stars tonight," she said.

Renik continued walking and said, "Tell me what's really in my stars, and I'll send you home with money and a night's holiday from labors."

She turned aside, hoarding all her secrets. Her receding shadow was a picture of loneliness, and Renik suddenly was terrified of loneliness, more than these eerily honest night hawks. The ale jar was cold on his lip as he drank a vow never to be lonely, never to let Kollen part from him again. He and his brother would be reunited. Reunification and—reformation, two good words, a theme to thread a night of uncertainties, because Kollen was a thief, no matter what he

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called himself. He brought dishonor to the family and pained their parents in their little plot of ground. Yes, yes, he needed good work, sweat on the deck, tar on the cheek. Kollen needed instruction, restriction, discipline! And the wisdom of a brother to guide him.

He trudged onward, stamping the avenue like a burly troll seeking the trickster-hero who'd eaten his porridge. "Instruction, restriction, discipline!" he droned under his breath between sips of his remaining ale, between gray domes of sand-blasted granite, which seemed to be the nodding heads of earth-swimmers peeking at the upper-world. In an increasingly fey mood, Renik bowed to a cluster of three (the Dahsa's observatory, craftsmen's house, and hall of oratory and music: his best pleasures grouped in an accessible triangle), but these troll-heads passed neither greeting nor proverb from the underworld. He saluted the guards at their portal, but they were statues or immortals in the habit of slow thought, for they hardly blinked. He kept walking, now into an avenue of hostels. There Renik found a watering trough, having knocked his knees against it as he wandered in a mind-fog.

He grabbed the edges of the stone basin to steady himself, and found himself staring back from the water. A lantern was swinging from the post of a public house and gave him shadow-dancing light by which to see. It was an uncertain image he saw, disturbed by wind-ripples. As imperfect as it was, however, the image was curious, revealing. His dizziness was turning into a head stuffed with clouds. He bent his head to his palms, took a grip, took control, stared deeper into the fluid. And every moment he stared he thought he saw more of his brother, felt more of the bond that drew them together as tight as a hangman's noose.

Ah, to find Kollen! To instruct him, to judge him. That need was like a chain drawing him on. Very strange, but very clear. Renik leaned further over the mirroring trough, about to learn something important.

The water tilted and rolled in the trough, as if all the camel caravans in the desert had stopped by that one trough and drooled their sludge in it. It rolled oil-like, like the calmed sea after nervous mariners dump a cask of whale oil over to glue the troughs and peaks into a steady ship's bed. Renik's face rolled in there as uncertain as a gale-shredded banner. It wasn't a sure surface, no foundation, naught to stand on, he mused. Water, it was as good as piss, when you

thought about it. Only the ship — the foundation! — had the worth. His parents' ship, their sons' floor. And what did the sons offer back? He himself, of course, had to mind the house, had no time for a family. But Kollen! He was a lazy land-dweller! Land-folk as a rule had time enough for everything. And why not, with the solid earth under? Half the job was done for them.

The wind sleeted Renik with grit. He closed his eyes, but stayed leaning over the trough, eyes shut, his mind seeing the nephew and niece that Kollen should have had to continue the family floor. The nephew ran to Renik and hugged his leg a strong squeeze, begged to be given a berth on the ship next season. The niece, on the other leg, squealed at the bolt of silk Renik had brought back from Sahla. Nephew grew, his hair bleached in the sun, brown, wind-toughed cheeks. He looked more like Renik than Kollen. The niece, a practical beauty, with an arm strengthened from pushing off the unwanted embrace, but an eye for the good and prospering chandler, with whom Renik in his Uncle's wisdom has arranged a good marriage. All that was missing was a loving brother and his wife, and that made Renik angry again. Yes, yes, it was Kollen's fault.

He opened his eyes and looked into the watering trough, and a face lifted clear from the rippling surface and stared at the stunned sailor, nose and ridged brow all glistening in liquid that ran off, and it was all red with family blood. Renik choked on a scream and jerked away from the image, running down the avenue, startling cloaked nightwalkers and noisy revelers alike until he felt like a fool. He slowed down and caught his breath.

Lips quivering, he threw the jar of poisonous drink in the gutter — he'd have nothing more to do with images in fluids. There was a tinkling smash that was curiously rewarding, a kind of boundary between the disturbing past and the now. Renik breathed easier and took a step. Yet his tread didn't cover a polite cough behind him.

"You're the sailor from Akrem," declared someone from a side-alley that reeked of manure. A man hobbled out, cloaked in a much-patched robe, with the wind fluttering a hood across his face. He walked with the aid of a cane, and as he emerged into the road, Renik saw the small wooden bowl hanging by a rope that was the badge of Fenward's elite beggars. Renik made a sound half-way between a groan and a sigh. His hand hesitated at the flap of his pouch.

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“No, no,” the beggar said, raising his open hand, “my thanks for the thought, or its seed, many thanks! But tonight I’m here to give.”

“What’s that? You—”

“You’ve given generously. Word goes around about the accented sailor. A sailor in dry Fenward! We should be paying *you* for the paradox.”

Renik started heating in angry. Was he being baited? The beggars were reputed to be wise and forthright, not ill-mannered.

“You’ve given too much,” the beggar restated, this time with a hint of accusation. “A gold coin to Orni — he’d eat a month on that! We had to restore balance. That’s what Tenna said. Trust a blind man to see, we say. Have this. One of our craftsmen made this gift for you.”

The man hooked his cane on forearm and thrust out his hand. Renik studied the hand, delaying acceptance because of the embarrassment that comes with a gift. The hand was dried, callused, the scab of an old bruise on a knuckle. The fingers were stiff and clawed white and curved like a rib-cage; they balanced a small dull sphere on their tips.

Renik took it. It seemed like a sphere of clay, although somewhat denser. A loop of leather was attached, like a necklace. Indeed, that was what it was. The beggar was again half a thought ahead of him.

“Yes, it hangs about the neck. You can use it once.”

“Use it? Use it for what? Listen to me, I—”

“You will find what you need to find, when you hang it around your neck. You are seeking, true?”

“What? No!”

“Please — we mean no offense. Advice is all that we have to trade. Why would you have traveled unless to seek? Why are you alone now except that you miss? So we have reasoned. Please take the gift. A drop of your blood will consummate its powers.”

Renik was utterly confounded. With a clearer mind, perhaps he would have snorted and shouted and walked away. With a cloudy mind he traded stares between the bauble and the beggar. The fellow’s hood had by now blown aside. Renik saw nothing to fear, no sign of duplicity. The beggar’s eyes bore right at his own, and his curl of white hair shone softly, almost endearingly, in the trace of moonlight that shot between two towers rising above the scatter of

brick houses. But all else was like rough pasturage, the wiry whiskers growing around sharp cheeks and chin like thorns on a crag.

Renik nodded once. The beggar nodded twice and pulled his robes around him, waiting. Renik shrugged, pricked his small finger with his knife, and squeezed a drop onto the sphere. It drank it dry. Before the beggar limped away, he said, “Look outward, now, not inward. Eyes to what you seek and nothing else. The seeker looks in no mirrors.”

Renik watched the beggar disappear and then was about to walk off himself, but he hesitated, unsure now of where he was supposed to be walking. He turned, stopped, turned again, found himself completing a circle and feeling stupider each moment.

Then he heard a tinkle on the cobble stones. The shards from his smashed ale-jar — he’d kicked one, and, as before, the high, clear sound cut into his mind like the great wind-chime that mariner’s had set up on Jetty’s Rock cut through the fog to warn off the ships. Suddenly the shards rang again, and into his sight came another form, from the same alley the beggar had used.

“Are these your shards, Renik? I’m sure they are, and I’m sure you treat your ship a measure better! Have a care for *my* deck. As stony rough as it is, it needs no more jagged places.”

Renik turned his ear toward the half-familiar voice and frowned. An old man owned it. He stepped forward into the street light, and the lantern’s rays set his short white beard faintly glowing. The alley funneled the wind to an inland gale, which sent the white hair flying like a tattered war banner. The fellow hugged his robes around a thin, tall frame. Not a beggar — or at least not one of the officially recognized breed of Fenward. His robes were whole, if threadbare. A sash gird his waist, and this was his only garment of note, for it had been kept clean and shone whitely like his beard in the wan light of the lanterns. But all else appeared like the man’s weary face — well used and dusty. It was Hrothe, Kollen’s friend, an old conjurer or scholar or some such. Renik knew him from his infrequent visits to Fenward when he and Kollen had mostly stared in their wine cups and grunted at each other, with Hrothe mediating through impatient sighs.

The seaman feigned disinterest but was happy to see a familiar face in the odd evening. “Stalker of honest men, why’re you hounding me?”

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“To quote from the poet, ‘Youth is the time of answers without questions, whereas wisdom—’“

“Hrothe of the Too Many Words, see wisdom in economy by saying something short and ordinary.”

“Very well. Economy: trouble walks the streets of Fenward, tonight. Where is your mirror image, your brother? Where is Kollen?”

Renik sighed, casting his eyes to the heavens where a few bright stars burned through the dust-fog and moved on with their clock-work pace.

CHAPTER 2 — OF THE MIRROR, THE MAN

Rock ‘a there baby, lie still in your cradle,
the moon, she’s a lady with stars in her stables
and all will shine on you and banish the sprites
who crouch in the shadows and crawl in the night.
— Old lullaby

The stars winked through the drifting dust, and the stars of the city winked in the form of bobbing lanterns carried by night walkers and the sudden spilling of light from the doors of busy wineshops. To the side, on a roof, a cat’s eyes shone, hanging in the night like diamond rings on a specter’s hand. The world around Kollen shone with promise everywhere he looked — but what blazed brighter still was the thought of Renik burning in his own heat.

Renik was angry, so Kollen was happy. It had been that way ever since they had reached late boyhood, when Renik suddenly saw too much of their father in himself and then started acting like it. *So, so!* he thought. *I’ll end the night with gold to dribble before his face. Then let him spout noble nonsense about honest work.* “And I’ll buy the most expensive Sahlian wine and fill his cup with it to soften his self-righteousness!”

“It is a pleasure to hear a man plan for the future.”

Kollen stiffened abruptly, not aware he’d spoken aloud. His employer had spoken to him for the first time since leaving Kollen’s cottage with the required equipment. Sulem was an odd, silent man, sometimes mumbling a word or two to himself. Well, as long as he had no plans to cheat him of his money and steal his liver in the bargain — Kollen had met some devious employers. He turned to Sulem, slanting an eyebrow.

“I can’t recall an employer paying me before a job was done. You’re free with your money. That worries me.”

“Gold is nothing to me,” Sulem said, “I have yet ample store if only your brother would join us. It is essential that he join us — he is the other half of the night’s events, the half of the complete mirror-image that balances the augury of success. You’ve gathered the tools of your trade. Now we must retrace our path and importune your brother to....”

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“No, no,” said Kollen, “he sets his mind and it doesn’t bend. That comes of managing unbendable spars and masts all his life. They bend just a little in the gale, then snap, like he does. He won’t come.”

They walked on for a while as Kollen seethed in anger that he had suddenly dredged up; he felt all the stranger because he thought he had long since stopped letting Renik bother him. His blood pounded in a rhythm that matched the thud-and-cough reverberating between the walls of the Dahsa’s courtyard some distance away. It was the lord’s prize, a machine of fire and steam that somehow turned some kind of fan in the great hall, a thing like a wagon wheel whose spokes were flat wooden slats. Kollen had fantasized about stealing it; it would be his greatest plan. In fact, the idea, so impossible a few days ago, now seemed entirely practical, and he worked out the details until his brother’s disapproving face disturbed the visions. Kollen’s teeth clamped down and he got out:

“I don’t know why he even came up to Fenward this season. He always brings a load of the same dull stuff with him. ‘Do this, Kollen, stop that, Kollen. Father and mother are dizzy from turning in their graves because of *you*, Kollen.’ I’ll cough up my spleen and *die* when he says something new. Don’t bother yourself with Renik or you’ll start talking like me. Let him boil himself in Fenward, or Akrem, or wherever he wants to cook.”

Sulem turned slowly from Kollen and raised his face to the sky for several moments, evidently occupied by a heavy debate within himself.

“Besides,” Kollen said, “I’m the only mirror image you need. Renik would only slow me down. He was always hanging on my belt, pulling me back. He only had the luck of passing through my mother’s womb first. He was ‘elder’ brother. They gave him everything. But I went off on my own, worked myself up— There I go again. Never mind. You only need know that luck is hot in my veins, warmed further by fire-red gold hanging at my belt.”

Sulem let another long pause go by before saying, “Let us make haste, if it is to be just we two.” He frowned. “My auguries suggested our party was to be a magically correct threesome. There is potent magic in that number. Auguries have a strange way of going awry when the primary parts are too long separated. Where will your brother go, do you think?”

Kollen shrugged. “With my luck, he’ll probably be waiting for me when we get back.”

Sulem nodded, satisfied. “He’ll be our counterbalance, that is how I shall read the augury, and we’ll find him when we return. The world reflects differently from each man’s eyes, one is many, truth and lies, but paths entwine as destiny flies.”

Kollen looked askance at Sulem. “You’re a strange man. A midnight adventurer and a poet. One is many, is that it?”

“One can be many,” Sulem said, smiling, “but usually just two: the man and what he sees of himself. But let us put aside philosophy and hasten on. Hasten on with the glad knowledge that Renik’s share of the payment is now yours — for I never said it was going to be easy, and what lesser man than you can do what I have in mind?”

Kollen nodded curtly, once. His reputation as a giant had preceded him, he saw with satisfaction.

They obtained horses from a wizened hostler at the city’s edge. Kollen would have tarried a moment and sipped spirits with the local farmers, but his employer urged all haste. No matter. The night air of the countryside was clear, and Kollen felt a euphoria as if an intoxicant drifted on the wind. *God-nectar*, he thought. Heroes sniffed it before they set out to murder dragons and pull the beards of dark entities. But Sulem didn’t share the mood. Haste was all on his mind.

They guided their horses along a rustic road leading south from the city, over a shallow part of the river that ran through Fenward, and out into country that grew less sandy with every step. The country hereabouts would give up its desert and become a dreary moorland, fed from tributary streams from the river and trickles from the hill country far ahead of them. Kollen mused about beliefs concerning this place. Some said the rather sudden boundary between desert and moor was unnatural, so unnatural as to constitute a kind of enchanted land that few felt safe in crossing. Some said it was the remnant of a curse that had blasted the land in the Great War centuries ago. But what were beliefs to the countryfolk who got their living from herding and peat-cutting? Their roots were deeper than wars and curses.

The gibbous-moon was rising, and Kollen was momentarily startled from his thoughts when he saw the moon reflected at his horse’s feet in a hill-fed pool of water. His horse drank, and when she was done, Kollen held her still until the ripples died out a little. He shrugged, looked around himself, but his only possible watcher was

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Sulem whose beast was still a few lengths behind, negotiating a hillock. Then he leaned over, saw his own image, and it was magnified, rather impressive. In fact, it seemed so huge that a giant stood above him and looked down upon the silly mortal at his feet. The Kollen-giant seemed ready to shake the world with thunder-chuckles, and the real Kollen on horseback tottered in his saddle with dizziness. But his horse felt his movements and took them to mean a nudge forward. They traversed the pool of water out onto marsh grass, which rasped crisply under the hooves like crumpled paper. The familiar sound had a calming effect — for where he'd grown up, there was grass on the hills, and he had a vision-memory of boy feeling it lodge between bare toes. The odd feeling went away. Kollen even smiled and straightened his shoulders — didn't he have rather heroic proportions in the water mirror? Therefore, how much greater must be the *real* image that walked and breathed?

The trail forked, and Kollen waited for his employer, barking a remonstrance about his sloth.

* * *

“Well, Hrothe, you've been sipping the moon-dew too heavily tonight. You couldn't possibly know that Kollen is in trouble. He just went off to do some errand.”

The wizard shook his ragged robes around himself like a tall bird fluffing its feathers against the cold. He shook his head. “I have heard strange gossip on the breezes.”

Renik snorted and turned away. “Conjurers always say that.”

“Renik. For both your sakes listen to me.”

“And what have your winds and star-got runes told you? Last year when I visited to see about a cargo of black-market silk, your good luck omen almost got me pin-cushioned by the Dahsa's crossbowmen waiting in ambush. Explain that!”

“I can. I had stumbled over my astrolabe earlier that night, and bent it. Thus all prophecies I read were likewise crooked.”

“Oho!”

“But listen to me now. Kollen went off with a tall, thin fellow, did he not?”

“You could've conjured that from the gutter rats.”

“True. But I had a bad feeling today, and I followed them; I watched with my own eyes. And when I did, my sight went dark.”

“You were hung-over from the equinox conjurings.”

Hrothe set his hands on hips. “If you don’t want to listen to me, Renik, then why are you standing here?”

“Alright. But be quick about it.”

“The stranger with Kollen cast no shadow.”

“Hrothe, he was drowned in shadows, it’s dark!”

“There were street lanterns lit, making the dark-half of passers-by ten feet tall. Good enough for you? You yourself noticed nothing strange about the man?”

Renik thought Sulem was strange the moment he met him but didn’t mention the lack of reflection in the puddle of beer on the table. He was even beginning to doubt what he had seen.

“Come with me, Renik. We’ll talk about this.”

“Brief and to the point.”

“Impossible. Follow if you love your brother.”

Hrothe’s home was a tent of old, pieced-together canvases pitched on the roof of a crumbling tenement. “There are fewer rats up above,” he explained as they stumbled up stairs that groaned as loudly as the drunkards who were sleeping on them, “and the air is always fresh.” At least the stench couldn’t be worse than the reek of piss and wine-vomit that infected the stairwell. Now they neared the roof-top entrance — a black square filled with stars — and Hrothe said, “my home, close to the sky that always tells the truth.”

“For such a mighty mage,” said Renik, “I wonder where your magic tower is?”

“Where I left youth behind,” said the old wizard. Then he turned aside and pointed upward. “Look, the star Alhan gleams through the wind-borne dust. It is a good omen, the star that sees through all mist that clouds the future.”

“What of the present?” asked Renik.

Hrothe bowed, saying, “A timeless instant between past and future, a boundary between change; it does not exist.”

“Good, Hrothe, that’s a good lesson; now what’s this about my brother?”

“You must find him at once; get him away from this fellow.”

“How? They’re gone, now. I can’t follow, and I’m not convinced that I *should* follow. If Kollen is after trouble, then he may have met his teacher, and may the lesson leave memorable bruises. Yes, welts and blood in the mouth, and a new vantage point on Life itself seen

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from across the lap of a taskmaster laying the end of a rope across his ass.” Renik had to take a good breath after that one and had time to look into Hrothe’s face; he noted the tightening of Hrothe’s mouth, the slight widening of the eyes.

Then Renik continued without planning to. He walked across the roof as he had stalked the puddles on his ship’s deck. He crossed his arms and uncrossed, then, slapped his thighs and shook his cutlass. “I should’ve brought that rope myself, a nice short length of it, and wet it in brine for great, stinging whacks. My brother the child! Who’d have thought? My parents wouldn’t—be happy they’re dead and can’t see! They can’t see my brother the smuggler, with neither land nor ship under his feet, a hovel instead that he can leave with men of the law at his heels. I’d call the law myself but I have my eyes on a horse — Hrothe, are you listening, do you know that horse? — a horse I saw in the market with a good back, and I’d buy that horse to bring a bound and lashed brother home, and I know a blacksmith who’ll forge him a bracelet of honor, pinned to an oar handle, where lawful men are made on the honest sea. I won’t be surprised if...”

Renik rammed full into Hrothe as he careened about the roof-top, bumping his knees against the low coping and making echoes shake in the dark spaces between the adjacent tenements. He stopped. Hrothe had backed up against his tent. His arms hung at his sides as he stared at Renik.

“Stop that, Hrothe. You heard about staring a dog in the eye, haven’t you? What was I saying? Yes, I can’t follow Kollen, anyway, because I’m not a bloodhound.”

Hrothe didn’t answer for a while, and when Renik angrily repeated himself, with some sailor’s epithets thrown in, Hrothe at last folded his arms.

“What did the beggar give you?”

“What did he give me? A charm— you were spying!”

“Nonsense. Who do you think this ‘craftsman’ of the beggars is? I am an honorary member of their clan. I made the necklace tonight, for me at first, but since I found you and your younger legs.... Fear nothing; it’ll bring you to Kollen. It warms to the task even now. Feel it?”

Now that his attention was called to it, Renik did feel a tug around his neck. The bauble hung at angle.

Renik looked up. “Why didn’t you give it to me yourself?”

“Would you have accepted it? Would you have listened to me? I don’t know you well, Renik, but well enough.”

“But he said...”

“Oshen spoke truly. You did upset their idea of balance. Luckily, this is a strange night of interwoven threads, and everybody’s needs have crossed, to be satisfied at once. Now—,” and Hrothe tapped the charm, sending it swinging; it returned to its eerie angle, hanging a bit in the air, “—the charm will draw you to your brother even as the light of truth draws the scholar to...”

“That’s all? No army of dust-warriors to follow my command?”

“Because of my advanced years and other limitations....”

“So I waste half the night over a cheap bauble?”

“Renik, it will work. Kollen is like a little brother to me and *I* treat him like kinfolk. So listen here.”

An accusation! Renik’s eyes flared, but he only saw a worn old man in front of him. “What?” he said between clenched teeth.

“I have always held the telling of the future to be a cheap trade. But tonight is different. I wish I knew why. But see that wisp of light, there, as I point? Anraa’s Flame, a comet, has appeared in the sky. It never brought good news with it.

The wind threw a cloud of dust in their faces. Renik cursed and spit; Hrothe bent head under hood, enduring the blast until the air cleared. Then he held his palms up as if they were a mirror or a window. His wrinkled brow furrowed even deeper than its accustomed plow-ridges. “What shall I tell you now, except to find your brother? And...” he cocked his head curiously, “—very strange.”

He wouldn’t answer at once, but kept staring at his spidery fingers until the seaman was ready to turn away. “Renik, look in no mirrors.”

* * *

Eyes forward. Look in no mirrors. Right. Riddles for advice and a dull trinket for aid to—what? Find his brother. Well, that was why he had come to Fenward, wasn’t it? He jogged to the hostel at which his horse was bedded, and he roused the tired creature and was soon trotting down the South Avenue through the Quarter of Temples and into the marsh that began after a shallow river crossing. This was where the trinket led him, tugging under his shirt, the thong around his neck. All the while he marveled at the magic and the speed with

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which events were passing. A short time ago he was simply attempting to make peace with his brother —

— and now the charm around his neck was tugging viciously to the right. Renik swerved the mare aside to avoid decapitation, and found his knees whipped by raspy marsh grass growing by the side of a little-used trail. He gave the horse its head. The bauble was working, but why the wizard had chosen such a discourteous enchantment was a question Renik would ask later.

Sometime afterward he had less patience.

“I’ll be talking to you, Hrothe!” The amulet was working perfectly. Already his neck was a piece of raw meat. The charm settled down in the hollow between his chest muscles. Was it getting warm? Would it burn scars into him besides tearing him into shreds? All for a greedy brother?

A little ahead the path cleared. In another moment the underbrush fell behind, and the trail became smooth. He winced in anticipation as he reined to the right, but the charm agreed and only quivered.

Renik watched the star Alhan on its circle in the sky; it never plunged into the ocean as the seasons changed, and Renik had often navigated by it. Renik kept his eye on that star, strangely drawn to it while abhorring its gossipy winks and finger-shakings until his horse stopped at a pool of water by the side of the trail. The animal snorted when the damp smell reached her nostrils. Renik dismounted and let the mare drink. He bent over the water, found it clean and cool, and washed his face in it. The lantern hanging at the saddle-horn threw a diffuse light and formed a halo around the outline of his reflection, and the brightness overwhelmed the image so that no feature of his face appeared: a body without a face — like a blank page to be written upon with either divine verse or obscene limericks, straight columns of correctly added figures, or cheating additions to fool the taxer.

All of which reminded Renik of his life’s own ledger book.

Perhaps he’d not kept the strictest watch over the debts his deeds were accruing. If only. If only that water-mirror were the medium to his life’s ledger. Much could be changed; much ought to be changed. He might reach forward (he did) and ruffle the reflective surface, erasing the crooked columns and false ciphers of his days (he tried, but the ripples died, and the vague image returned). Renik suddenly straightened and pulled his beard.

“I know who I am,” he said aloud, “but not *what* I am. I know right and wrong, but not the when and how of them.” He squatted there a while, brooding over these strange matters. *Well, damn*, he thought. The impromptu mirror was drawing out unfamiliar philosophies. Yet again, wasn’t a man two men — the man and what he saw of himself? What a strange thought.

“Is it, Renik? Is it so strange?”

His cutlass was out so quickly that the horse didn’t see the movement and continued drinking. Renik took up a warlike stance.

A figure of a man picked its way around the pool. A long paleness swung by its side. The figure moved, and then Renik saw that it lifted a sword, resting blade on shoulder. “A man is naturally two — the rightful soul and the creature in the shadow, or perhaps the face peeking out from the surface of cheap ale. They’re brothers, closer than brothers, but one must be the master. Only one.” The figure hefted its weapon.

Renik let his fighting instincts take command as he leapt forward, the other man back-stepping and swinging his own sword that now glowed in the moonlight.

The moon had moved a bit by the time Renik was wiping his sword. It had suffered deep notches in the combat, and they caught at threads of the dead man’s shirt as he slowly wiped the blade. He lifted the weapon toward the moon, sighted along it, finding a few remaining stains. He began to furiously rub them out. It wouldn’t do to leave any traces of the crime — a most foul crime at that. He rubbed and he sweated and he shivered as with winter chill. He vomited.

He had killed himself. He lay there on the marsh grass with a curling stream of his blood darkening the moonbright pool. It was a crime against self and a broken law of nature, for was he not still standing, alive, breathing, over his own murdered body? But he was dead, dead, dead!

His eyes wandered up to the heavens for some answer. Perhaps it was there, but the dusty mist moving in from the desert began to veil the stars and make the moon into a fuzzy-edged oval. Renik’s mind was penetrated by the same mist — dream-like stuff that made all common sense distant and hazy. He tried for a moment to recall something Hrothe and the beggar had said, but he didn’t try too long.

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With a glance at the short, stout corpse in sailor's garb, he mounted up and headed off.

* * *

Kollen and his employer met the line of hills that would gradually steepen toward the eastern mountain range. They entered a shallow valley and meandered up the banks of a stream. Somewhere behind them, the distant clash of steel on steel drifted over the fenland, slight as the nearly invisible moor-mist. Kollen was about to pause for a deeper listen when his employer urged haste. Kollen shrugged, tugging his sword an inch or so from his belt — bandits were not unknown in these parts.

The night was colder and clearer in the hills. The breeze had quickened. The hills were more pronounced, but the scrub forest that blanketed the land to the east was still another few hours away. Here, the growth took on the twisted form that was the heritage of miserly soil. Each scrub tree was a skeleton that leaned against moor-winds in some myth-maker's vindictive afterlife. Kollen guessed their predictable story: they uprooted themselves during the new moon and danced the dance macabre. Still, there was something alluring in the thought, and he pictured himself bowing, spinning, hand-in-branch with trees animated until dawn stopped magic and merriment. He looked toward his solemn partner who didn't match his own mood quite well enough, and sighed.

"We'll leave our mounts here, Sulem. The place isn't far, but I don't want the horses stamping around on the hill where they can be seen and heard."

The gorse crunched beneath their boot heels. Ahead of them a lifeless bulk lay on a patch of high ground: a mound like a woman's breast growing from the hillside. Grass covered it over. To the left of it grew a grove of stunted trees. The Giant's Grave. Habranne's Bed.

"Tell me, what're you looking for and how can you be sure that this is the place? Damn me, but it's small, isn't it? When I had first come here, I expected something more like a kingly burial mound. This suits better a king's wet nurse! Not trusting auguries entirely, I hope." They were very close, now. Kollen stopped and looked it over. "What if it's empty, Sulem? From what history did you learn the whereabouts of this thing you're after? Old scrolls can lie, you know; in fact, they usually do. I keep my gold if I get you inside, mind that.

Even if dust is the only treasure.” He unpacked a sledge hammer and several pry bars — ones fit for jimmying locked doors and ones for rolling boulders.

“Trust me,” said Sulem. “This seems to be as good a place as any: a land littered, I noticed, with the monuments constructed by very ancient folk. What better place to hide something than a plain in which so many dead nations buried their own bones and relics? Such places suck up all arcane attempts for finding relics; they are mires in both the physical and the magical sense. Thus our great need for natural human expertise.”

That was true, Kollen figured. The countryside for miles around was known to have standing stones, mounds, and earthworks from forgotten ages — truly a maze of remains for all antiquarians and treasure hunters.

“Besides,” Sulem said, “other ancient writings hint that Habran hid something important in this land, hid it from his brother. Well, I’ll tell you, why not? It’s time. I am looking for a crown. Habran made it, and it represents something important. A man who knew him wrote that it is in this region.” Sulem turned his face aside and smiled thinly. “Doubtless an intelligent man such as yourself has read the annals of the Red King’s seventh scribe?”

Kollen hadn’t, and had never heard of this minor clerk or his clan — an *unknowledge* not worth the mention. But suddenly his head spun, and as he shook the strange feeling away, the matter seemed of great importance.

“The seventh scribe? I’ve read his brother’s book, too,” he said. “Now let’s empty this old pile. And then we can find another one and steal the bones of its king and sell them as soup bones for the Dahsa’s kitchen, and then go on to others, as many as you want, from as many histories as you care to mention.”

Sulem bowed and put away the mirror by which he had been inspecting the arrangement of his beard.

They lit a lantern from a coal kept glowing in Kollen’s fire-crock, and studied the small mound. It did have a portal of some kind, a great rock slab. As Kollen had promised, there was a carving on the stone — a set of scales, balancing a sun and a skull — upon which Sulem leaped and traced with finger in his first display of emotion that night. Kollen now busied himself by arranging the tools of his trade. He nodded with satisfaction as Sulem looked on with

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impatience. He had used his most erudite contraption to lever open the door-stone — contrivances of wedges, levers, ropes, and pulleys. He tightened, pounded, marked chalk lines until Sulem fairly turned around inside his robes with impatience. But at last Kollen gave a final tug to his tackle, released a lever, and the door became the jaws of a yawning giant and thudded to the ground. Kollen acknowledged his employer's bow with a dignified nod.

Inside, the mound was indeed small and even rudely made. It was corbelled up and had a rough stone bowl against the further wall, filled with ceramic pots of calcified bones and a few bronze ornaments. Kollen was about to laugh hugely when he suddenly stared at the facade of the far wall, which was made of roughly stacked stones in a decorative pattern. Trance-like, he stepped to the wall slowly and tapped it with his sledge hammer, producing a hollow sound. He stepped on the funerary bowl and whacked and pried away until a black hole was revealed. He chuckled, now, shone the lantern through, and turned his head back to Sulem with a wink and nod.

"As I thought," he sighed, although he didn't know why he should have thought so.

Once through the hole, they saw that the barrow was simply the antechamber to a sort of cave that drove straight into the hillside. The flat path forged ahead between smooth, straight walls. Overhead, the roof arched just out of reach, and all the stonework showed no seams, no signs of earthly masonry. It was all too perfect, wondrously perfect.

If the place was this well made, thought Kollen, the defenses might be as well planned. Good, good, he said to himself. The mightiest adventurer in the world could not accept any lesser undertaking.

"An old place," said Sulem, "yet they built it well."

"Well enough," said Kollen, who swung a lantern low to check the floor ahead and stopped to think. Something wasn't quite right. He set his lantern down. He breathed in the cool air of the tomb (if that was what it was). What was he doing here, any way? But it wasn't the tomb that was wrong; it seemed to be—

Sulem suddenly spoke up. "Be careful of the way, for the ancient builders were full of pride over their work. I'm sure their wisdom remains in these walls to cast the careless down."

Kollen was about to agree — was, in fact, about to strongly agree — but then Sulem produced a mirror by which he combed his luxuriant beard in the lantern gleam. Several times the light got Kollen's eyes and suddenly something clicked in his brain.

“Sulem, that's enough with that damned mirror. What do you need it for? I said *stop*.”

Kollen swayed in a rush of dizziness at the peek of his own face he got in the polished silver. His hand fell away from a dagger hilt.

Sulem exhaled slowly.

“Now, I was saying you better be careful of the way, and, in fact, that any obstacle placed before you may be too challenging. Perhaps we must...”

Kollen was about to agree when his vision blurred, cleared, and he changed his answer to a snarl.

“Others have pride in their skill and good reason to be confident in the nets of their enemies. Attend, if you need further proof of my mastery.” The word ‘pride’ was resounding in his skull like the deafening peals of a temple bell. Kollen thrust aside the warning and took a palm-sized bronze ball from a pouch. “There must be a pitfall before us, it being the sort of trap the old fools would have made. Listen.” He rolled the ball ahead and put ear to floor. He must have been satisfied by the sound, for he nodded Sulem to follow as he retrieved the ball.

Kollen rolled the ball again. This time, however, it made a disturbingly hollow sound as it passed over the pavement. Kollen nodded wisely, for even the master can take pleasure in demonstrating the most basic concepts to the child. He triggered the floor with his sledge hammer; flagstones tilted before them, which would have emptied would-be plunderers onto bronze spikes in the pit. Kollen chuckled and then led them across a narrow ledge that remained along the side-wall.

“They were fools, children, idiots!” Kollen said as he turned and stood nose to nose with his employer. “Who'd they think was coming tonight? *I* came. Me. They insulted me with their simple trap.”

“But at least *I* will ask no more questions to insult your dignity. Honored sir!” And Sulem bowed low for the second time that night. Kollen allowed himself an incredibly intense moment of self-love and continued the task. But he returned no courtesies.

On the next roll, the ball picked up speed. It didn't come back.

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“Downward it goes,” said Kollen. “Well, this is a good turn. Time for some action.”

“How so?”

“Now, now. You said no more questions. Learn by observing.”

It was so obvious that he laughed. Anyone approaching the downhill section would naturally look to his footing — and ignore any head-level dangers. He didn’t even think to amateurishly trigger the devices from a safe distance. He flashed the lantern downward at the apex of the incline, dropped his sack of gear, and slid down the smooth way on his back after a short running start. A child might have guessed — such a thing was the basis for many a scene in street-singers’ tales of heroes seeking the hidden hearts of wicked sorcerers and such like: hooked bronze blades imbedded in the walls, that even the lantern could not discover, so well blended into the background veins of stone had they been, tricking the eye.

‘I would never have done that before,’ he told himself. ‘Yesterday I was twice more a coward, or half a hero. Today I’m whole, becoming every instant something better. It’s an auspicious night!’

Kollen called up. The sack of gear came sliding down the ramp ahead of Sulem, who smiled in approval.

* * *

Renik didn’t care where he went as long as the way was satisfactory to the brutal charm. It was a hateful lodestone attracted to his brother, and in a moment when his neck throbbed particularly hard, he toyed with the idea of throwing the thing away. But he wavered between decisions, ashamed of himself because a shipmaster had to make instant decisions and stick by them. *Age*, he told himself, *has chosen this poor night to crawl up and rot my heart*. His hand stole up to his neck, then dropped down again to grip the hilt of the cutlass. He squeezed it, finding something reassuring in the solid, familiar grip.

He’d always found an answer in that one prized possession when danger threatened and the only recourse was in the simple, honest old blade. On a thought he drew it out. He turned the hilt this way and that, letting the lantern beams flash off the guard, which was dented but polished like a mirror. Renik wore no jewelry but always kept the hand-guard shining. He raised the weapon closer, saw the twisted suggestion of his form in the curving guard. Somehow, he wondered,

every image he'd seen this night had been the farthest thing from a portrait. Richfolk had painters remake every detail so that the canvas breathed, as admirers of the work might say (although any common sailor could've told you canvas breathed). But tonight terrible images, blank faces, bent faces — those were his portraits.

Renik took the blade in hand and tested its temper and sighted along the blade at the moon, again. The blade was true but for its slight, planned curve. But his images— like his blood line, the images were bent and broken. Nothing was planned, no children and their entry into adulthood, no nephews, no nieces. No continuance. The world might well stop at the edge of Renik's feet, or Kollen's, as far as their family could go.

This is one kind of death, Renik thought. He raised his eyes to the hand guard one last time to give it a good long stare. And then he dropped his hand as a cold feeling sank through his heart.

He had been journeying up a meandering valley, silent but for his thoughts and an occasional, impatient snort from the mare. They had climbed out of the chill air that coagulated in the lowlands. The terrain leveled off, widened into a plain where it should have been warmer. But the chill continued even up there. And there stood two figures with arms folded. Renik went numb. He brought his horse beside them and said:

"I thought I left you behind." One figure, himself, really, shook his head. "Did I leave a stain on my sword? Has the guilt of the crime conjured you up?"

"Indeed," he (it) said, "and says the proverb: 'he who is guilty is the first accuser.' A night on a gloomy waste calls for somber meetings with shadow-selves."

"Greetings, then, shadow-brother, and you also, shadow brother the second. Why won't you speak as cheerfully?"

"He," said the first Renik, "plays a silent role tonight. Together we spring from a heavy burden on your soul. Had you a mirror you'd see it in your own face. But on this uncivilized heath, we images must suffice. Hear me: it's best to lay aside all burdens and be lightened of guilt."

Renik considered; he was insane, of course, or marked thrice by vengeful gods. Either way he'd have to stow his terror and proceed with double watches and reefed sails. He answered in a moment, "Penalties come after admissions."

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“Penalties come for hoarding up crimes!” the ghost of himself suddenly howled. He saw himself warped in wrath, and Renik shrank back. Then the figure gestured and changed the tone of his conversation.

“Renik! Dismount before this court.” He couldn’t resist that summons; he dismounted stiffly. “You are accused of triple murder — of a man and of yourself and of your family. Not the least of your crimes, these culminate a life generally disposed to excesses of greed, declines of character, failures as son, brother, and shipmaster. What your father built, you have unmade; what you owe your brother, you have retained; what should have been love freely dispensed became tyrannous advice, commands, and admonishments. Your fatherly duty goes undone. Your ship shudders beneath your heavy tread, and had they voice, the streets would cry out under you. Discipline! Restriction! Instruction! What have you to say that might plant mercy in the poisoned garden of this trial?”

Each word had been a blow. Each accusation had enacted itself before his tortured memory. He faced the two images of himself and began to shake down to his boot heels. It was all too true. He saw it all in their faces. They were better than looking-glasses — they were tutors in the subject of himself.

“Guilty,” he said.

They nodded in unison. “Too true,” said the Judge. “Come forward and kneel.”

The Judge lay his heavy hand on Renik’s shoulder. He knelt in the damp vegetation. Now he knew what the Silent Renik was. He came forward on measured treads, on his face a mask of monumental sadness, in his hands a duplicate of the cutlass that had rung in the defense of ship, crew, and self. Renik bent his neck and shed a tear for the man he’d thought he was. All lies, and painted masks, and false nobilities. The sword arose while Renik the Judge chanted out a narrative of crimes starting on the day his birth gave his mother pain. The executioner nodded sadly all the while and quietly wept. The sleeves of his loose tunic fell away from the raised arms, revealing thick muscles that swelled around the grip of the weapon. Those had been hard-won muscles — he knew each one, hardened to the coarse ropes and polished tiller. He’d thought they were honest muscles bred by good work on the sea.

The life he'd had out there on the water, a good life! Which reminded him how often he'd had to be a judge himself because, at sea, not every situation had a written law to govern it. A shipmaster sometimes had to be a lawmaker. But he could always stand on one rule: the judge must be cleared of guilt in order to judge, and a judgment from a guilty law-maker was itself a crime.

With the thought came the action. He'd never drawn so quickly in his life, pulling his cutlass over his head to meet the blow of the executioner. The impact hammered the blunt back-edge of his own blade onto his head, but the pain only maddened him. He slashed across the torso and took the executioner down. Then Renik stood and faced the judge.

The image of himself did not move, but glared fatherlike. Instinctively, Renik stopped in midmotion. The Judge made a gesture across the throat; again the bitter guilt crushed him down. He raised the edge of the weapon to his own throat — then stared at it cross-eyed and flung the weapon from him.

Renik met his image with fierce understanding. No one would ever recount that fight. There was the weary horse looking on with interest, the lantern hanging on her saddle horn casting a weak light for the combatants. The moon coasted down its slope for the night, interested, perhaps, but forced away on insistent business. But the fight lasted a moment. There can be no equal to a man fighting for justice. Once Renik leaped by the guard of his double it was only a moment's work to throw down that entity and kill it on its own blade.

He stood up. His chest heaved for breath as, for the second time that night, he stood over a conquered self. Renik still wondered at these mirror-wights and judgmental concerns — although the last was a side of himself he seldom explored. *Perhaps now is the time*, he thought *And magics be damned. All moor-mist and moon-fog!* Appropriately enough, the Judge and Executioner dissolved into the weedy ground.

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CHAPTER 3 — THE MIRROR-MAZE OF THE MOOR MEN

Spin on your heels and clap your hands
and peek in a mirror's sheen,
shake out your hair at the ogre there
but go to the end if you scream!
— Rhyme from a children's game

Dawn was near. Alhan was on its low swing in the sky, and the moon had skidded down its arc as well. Morning stillness and the moor, heavy with the grays and blacks of a funeral mood, were hushing the night creatures.

Ahead of Renik a hill arose from the bogland, and a bulk lay on its slope — rather like a dome, reminding him of Fenward's odd buildings, although they were bald and this had a cover of fur. The head of a youthful, slumbering giant. Perhaps, he mused, it had turned to stone on the break of one unfortunate day, having fainted from imbibing the heady blood of too many heroes. Kollen was probably plundering its corpse. But stone-turned giants probably had treasure likewise transmuted; it was only fair. Renik drew closer. Horses were tethered in a hollow below the feet of the magicked giant, which now wasn't a giant at all: it was a grassy mound with an entrance facing him. Before the charm gave its final neck-jerk, Renik knew his brother was there.

But the gem was confused! It wrenched to the left, then the right; it hung in the air and shook, it spun around Renik's neck so that the leather band made a hangman's bruise. Renik endured the pain, which was literally wearing thin until the charm made a decision and pulled him to the left.

He wondered if Kollen had been dismembered and strewn about the landscape, but finally the thong tugged him toward a grove of stunted trees to the left of the barrow. So, so! The beggar had not said the charm would bring him to Kollen; he'd said something about going to that which he *sought*. Too true — he'd never been clear about that.

Renik walked toward the grove. The vegetation scraped his boots. It was crisp, entangling heather over which one had to lift the feet high or the bushes would ensnare the toes. The charm pulled harder, once flinging the shipmaster on his face when undergrowth caught and charm tugged. But finally he stood at the edge of the grove. It was a circle of trees, and light shone faintly from within.

Renik slid his cutlass free and poked it through the branches and pushed them aside. Inside, a pool of water stretched out lazily among the moss-lips that sipped its borders; moonlight shone from its surface. The fluid hung there, thick and calm like a puddle of oil. So used to the energetic sea, Renik had always been vaguely unnerved at the sight of still water. This time was no different. Still water, he figured, was like a hole through the earth. It might be filled with stars or with depths no sounding lead could measure.

He slapped himself. It was a strange, terrible night, and he wasn't helping himself out of it. "Double watches and shortened sails," he reminded himself, "and a steady hand on the helm!"

He was answered.

The voice was indistinct, garbled. No, it was an echo. Renik leaned farther into the grove and saw nothing. He jumped to the edge of the pool and challenged the shadows with his cutlass point, but he only disturbed the water, and the sounds went away. He crouched like a hunter, cocked his head, and listened.

There it was again! An echo, an answer, a voice.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark of the grove, Renik saw that the pool was three-quarters circled by a rock wall that formed a perfect bench for foot-washers. The pool nestled in the enclosure, and the slender trees sprang up around the edges, sending their roots into crevasses and over rocks like ropes strewn across the deck of a busy ship. The echoes bounced from the rock wall and gave the voices an eerie quality.

But the voices — perhaps there was a cave at his feet. Yet, the moonlight streamed into the grove and revealed no entrance. Renik let more moonlight into the grove by hacking down some branches. Still, no cave, no person. But as the light poured in more fully, so too did the voice increase in strength. It became a conversational babble.

Renik squatted on his heels as the conversation hummed between the natural enclosure and chimed in his ears. That was Kollen's voice! It surely was! And another may have been Sulem's, but the

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shipmaster couldn't tell, and the other voices he heard were a confusing tangle even if they only interjected a word here and there.

"Quiet!" he heard Kollen say, and then what was probably Sulem's voice, "...for what... where do we..." and others chimed in "...see how he does ...they're close! ...no worry, friends, he'll be..."

Just as Renik decided a throaty scream was in order, his eye caught a movement. In the pool! He shifted himself to defend. After a tense moment, however, he saw that the movement was actually *in* the pool.

Then he saw his brother. Kollen floated in the water like a picture. Renik's breath stuck in his throat. Kollen was moving, and so was Renik's own viewpoint, sometimes turning downward, to the side, then back to his brother, whom he evidently followed in a kind of underground chamber. When his viewpoint suddenly took in booted feet and a robed arm that passed in front of his vision, a hand clutching a mirror, then he knew what his viewpoint was — he was inside another man's body.

The night had been so strange that Renik accepted the sudden deduction in one stride and then was on to further thoughts: he was inside Sulem's body, and indeed Sulem's voice seemed louder and clearer to his ears now that he was certain whose it was. How ever it was done, it was done. Perhaps it made sense. Pools of liquid had been affecting him strangely — this one was simply another stanza in the song. And since he was now so close to his brother, he figured, the magic was simply stronger, clearer, more certain.

The other hum of voices had not receded. Renik cast his sight across the magic pool and found what he sought: in the far corner, in a different angle of the pool, four men were standing or sitting and looking almost, but not quite, at Renik. Like Sulem, they were robed, but unlike Kollen's employer, their clothes were richly embroidered — gold thread strung across the somber fabric glowed like fiery worms, throwing light from lamps set beyond his gaze. They spoke among themselves, nodding or shaking their heads, bent intently over some sight before them. One took notes on a parchment scroll, another seemed lost in mumbled charms, while a third leaned over, elbows on knees and chin in hands, his face seeming ready to burst from the thin film of water to emerge on the airy side of reality.

A fourth man sat on a heavy chair in their midst, chin drawn back to his chest and hand slowly twisting a heavy black beard shot through with gray strands.

Renik scratched his beard, puzzling over these pictures. He became dizzy trading glances between brother and strangers. And in the midst of this reciprocal travel, he discovered a third mystery. A little off to the side of the group of men, if he cocked his head measuredly just *so*, he could see Sulem. But not the Sulem with his brother. No, this image seemed to be in the same room as the other men. In that room, Sulem stood in place but moved, gesturing with hands, stamping his feet toward no destination, mouthing words in time to the voice that Renik heard answering his brother off in the opposite corner of the pool. Very strange. Sulem here and there at once? There was one difference in this one odd image, though. The stationary Sulem was wreathed in lights, faint as starved fireflies, as quick as darting black flies.

So then. Sulem watching Kollen, graybeards watching Sulem, Renik watching everybody. He didn't understand it all, but he nodded his head. The world was made according to Renik, with himself at its apex. As for the magic, he'd not question it further. Every child had seen how a hand or stick thrust into calm water went suddenly crooked. Water was magical, plain and simple, bending sights, playing tricks with sounds (so an experienced swimmer had once said), and in the portentous night he'd only found one especially special pool that warped light and sight and bent their image from far places for his purpose.

And that purpose — he'd purged himself, he'd defeated all the evil elements that had gone into himself, and now he was ready to take the true judge's seat, with his mirror an extension of his undefeatable vision. Now: consider Sulem's fate, and then — not rescue Kollen but decide whether his deeds warranted rescue or punishment, even multiple punishments. Renik breathed in easily, the task of the night at last resolved—even if his head seemed more than ever stuffed with clouds.

"Ho!" Sulem's voice suddenly said. "Here is a most dour guardian!"

"Child!" came Kollen's insolent voice. "Dragonish stares are false warnings when the stares are from stone dragons."

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Renik turned his attention to his brother, and those other watchers broke off their consultations and peered more intently themselves. A water bug skimmed across the surface of the pool, making everybody's images shiver in its wake.

Sulem walked forward, bringing Renik's sight with him. Kollen's head turned toward them all, his smile a smirk as if he faced the dimmest fools. His hands were insolently clasped behind him.

Renik added 'arrogance' to Kollen's list of crimes.

* * *

"Dragonish stares are false warnings when the stares are from stone dragons," said Kollen.

Sulem edged closer to the guardian of the archway. A stone dragon grew out of the keystone of the arch; its face leaned downward to watch the chamber beyond. Kollen slid the door of the lantern shut, and when their eyes adjusted to the gloom, they saw the distinctive gleam from the idol's eyes hanging in the air: twin-stars of staring red framed in the night.

"Perhaps the eyes aren't all harmless," Kollen thought aloud. "This is a sorcerous gaze, unless my considerable genius is fooled. Should we pass, well, as a rule, the teeth of monsters are always sharp."

Strangely enough, Sulem exulted over the moment. "Here we are stopped, then. For what pry-bars could you have to gain leverage in magical matters?"

'Silly mortal,' thought Kollen. He didn't answer until he'd stared longer at the idol's eyes, then with a flourish he began his address.

"Many are confounded when a solution to a problem is too simple for them to see. Attend to the lesson of the rat, which passes through and beneath the most cyclopean of walls. Gather not the strength to batter through walls, Sulem; rather should you find their holes."

"A wondrous lesson," conceded the man. "Pray show this student the fruits of rat-instructorship."

Kollen took from his pouch a copper tube filled with soot. He commonly used it to blacken his face for night ventures. Now, however, he poked a hole in the bottom of the tube with his dagger, then pried away the wax cap on the other end. He put the tube to his mouth and with a puff sent a cloud of soot to blacken the idol's eyes.

“And so,” he said with god-like modesty, “we proceed beneath the gaze of a blind guardian.” They went onward, and found the chamber to which they had expected the path to lead.

It was magnificent. The diffuse light of the lantern revealed two rows of columns carved in stacked images of satyrs, all tangled together as if participating in the orgiastic rites of a love cult. The two rows marched toward the end of the chamber, lost in the shadows, and didn't seem to support the roof, their tops simply terminating in the chief satyr. A king must be buried here, Kollen thought, because that was a royal privilege: to have expensive do-nothings.

The center of the chamber sloped downward to a stagnant pool, perhaps fed from some trickle in the hill through a chink in the roof. Around its edges grew toadstools and pale grass, those bold vegetables that braved a wan existence in the gloom of caves and crannies. He stood by the pool and watched its surface and saw the image of himself staring back in the dim illumination. Kollen was stuck there for a moment watching that portrait: distant, indistinct, the depth of the image something one might become lost in. He nodded slowly, agreeing with himself that it was an image of greatness so far detached from reality that it could be a colossus bestriding the void of creation. And it was a lonely image, like himself. He'd always been alone, it seemed, the seed of solitary grandeur sprouting in the body of a child. He had never needed *anybody*, not a father wondering if he'd ever grow taller nor a brother trying to stretch him to unnatural proportions by rules and commands and impossible tasks. The family had only meant slow death for him, incremental suffocation. It had been an easy thing to sever the family rope that bound him like a hangman's collar. Let them coil and twist and end in breezy Akrem! Kollen son of No One needed no one. It was only his quick, stupendous mind that had gotten him anywhere — like that of the clever trickster who had fooled the giant.

But was that *Renik* staring out at him from the pool? Kollen leaned closer and looked again; Renik was indeed a picture floating in the pool, eyes intent on something strange and wondrous. Well, be damned! Old Stiff-britches intruding on his thoughts again? Kollen leaned forward to ruffle the water at his feet in defiance when Sulem touched his shoulder from behind.

“You fear no traps, master? No winging darts steeped in Shabian poison; no pits, or snares, or nooses encrusted with crushed glass?”

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Kollen broke his entranced gaze but ignored the question and turned aside from the pool and his brother. A great mind like his, he reminded himself, was apt to conjure any vision it chose. But he could choose to ignore it, and he stood up to play the lantern light around the vaulted room.

“Lord,” Sulem chanted, “you fear no lurking serpents, falling axes, gaseous incense, midnight clashes?”

“Hardly,” said Kollen, who was noticing the way the toadstools bowed toward the far end of the chamber; and didn’t they look like tiny acolytes bowing toward a spongy fungus-altar! The blades of grass tilted in concert with the worshippers — by Sin the Trustworthy, weren’t they like diminutive staffs for the mushroom-priests, slanted with them in the reverence of the mass? And they too were attracted to some point at the far end of the chamber, just beyond the lantern’s cone of light.

Whatever was there, it would be wonderful! If it wasn’t, his mind would make it so. Never before had his senses been this sharp: certainly none of his sudden glimpses of allegory were visible to any creature lower than he....

“King of thieves,” whispered Sulem, “for such you are who can see those sharpened spikes, waiting pikes, shining jewel in waiting gloom — none have eyes like yours to see the way before you: only you.”

“There is nothing here to fear,” intoned Kollen, trancelike finishing, “nothing here but a path that’s clear.”

Their procession was like a pilgrimage. The layer of mold on the floor grew thicker as they went, and it clung to Kollen’s boots with every step. The spongy stuff dispelled all sounds, and if they went quietly before, now they were two shades treading with cobweb feet.

Then a throne at the chamber’s end leaped out at them when the lantern’s circle of light embraced it. It was a massively regal bit of furniture. And on the ground before it lay a set of moldering bones. Kollen’s super-heightened senses had detected immediately the barely recognizable remains. They had lain there long, and now only the skull retained its old shape. He bent over to see the cause of death when a gleam caught his eye. The death weapon, he thought, but then he saw this was a golden gleam. He pushed the remains aside with his toe and levered up a long object, untarnished. He picked it up, brushed it off, and discovered it was a scroll, clutched in the remains

of dead fingers. He began to unwind it when another gleam caught his attention, this time from the throne a few steps ahead of them.

Another skeleton, a melancholy host. Kollen's sense of drama began to feel insulted. "Bones and more bones," he said, shaking his head sadly and yawning. He passed the golden scroll backward to Sulem, who took it in a distracted way, pushing it under his arm.

Still, there seemed something to be salvaged from the sight, a bit of drama for the prince of thieves. A tapestry had fallen from the back wall to drape itself over the skeletal sitter's head and shoulders, and what had been a revered king was now a cloaked and brooding scholar of the night. Yet it wasn't wearing this crown that Sulem was after. Instead, the rotten tendrils of the tapestry drooped over the skull, although cloth-of-gold remnants still shimmered faintly in the light. And on closer inspection, the bones themselves gleamed slightly. Kollen now came forward and rapped them with his dagger tip, and the bones rang back at him in discordant tones.

Those were bones made of hollow metal: thin, beaten gold, eternal and unrottable. Kollen recoiled from the idea. Something seemed terribly wrong with golden bones, although he couldn't put to words his discomfort. Bones should clack, not ring, he reasoned. Bones should rot or dry rather than remain so long articulated. This was a joke on eternity, or something like that. It was a joke on himself, somehow. Kollen stared at the bones and imagined he saw himself as in a mirror; it was Kollen, and it wasn't Kollen that he saw. The face was different, the clothing rich, like Sulem's, the eyes.... Well, maybe the eyes had something to them, a saddened set of Kollen-eyes?

"I am Kollen, and Habran," his lips formed and his breath almost voiced. He and Sulem stared at each other with perfect understanding. But this sudden familiarity coming from a stranger enraged Kollen, and he tore himself free of the daydream and tried to forget this strange fancy. He tried to focus on the golden skeleton once again. One side of him said, *It's a fortune, most valuable corpse I ever saw.* The other half said, *Trivial man! A riddle, or rather an instructive proverb about mortals, about....*

Sulem's voice disturbed Kollen's double halves.

"We are so close," Sulem said, "that I feel Habran's magic from where I stand. Not Habran himself: he is as dead as the brother he fought in the war that made Fenward into dried fruit. But his magic...." Sulem didn't seem to be talking to Kollen at all, so the thief

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turned, puzzled. His employer had cocked his head over his shoulder to speak, and he continued, looking around the chamber and grinning at the skull of the throne's sitter. "I feel the magic because I sense no magic at all, not a spirit or centipede-soul or slightest ripple of the astral plane. Something here is drinking all forces. A cataract — emptying to what abyss, I wonder? But this explains why arcane power failed to find the legacy of the Emperor and his wizard-brother."

The strange feeling was returning to Kollen. A thought about a ready dagger up his sleeve crossed his mind. But Sulem smiled at him.

"Prince of purloiners, deity of devious undertakings, consider the lesson of the egg, the fruits of careful breakings!"

"I don't understand."

He felt the dagger, thought about tugging it free.

"Kollen, be our eyes and hands. We could not find what destiny by strange chance made yours. We are close enough to touch and find, but the honor remains yours. Pray continue your search." And that mirror came out again — this time, it was glowing faintly in the gloom that grew around them with the lantern set on the floor. "Look at yourself, Kollen, stare, study! Where in ages past did your echo hide his treasure? What traps did you and he lay for the seeker? And as his brother coveted the treasure, just so your brother covets your company under his rule; the balance is complete. But there are two sides to the moment, just as mirrors show perfect images in reverse. Habran *hid* his discovery out of fear and uncertainty — for isn't immortality a vast power as fearful as death? — but so shall you *find* it out of boldness and surety."

Yet, Kollen stood still. His arm lifted from his side a few finger-widths, but the muscles in his body had tensed, shivered under a strain. He started sweating little silvery beads. Sulem nodded to himself, half smiling.

"Then don't find, if you cannot. Leave the house of riches unspoiled, run home to Fenward, beg charity of your brother, and dare not show your face among once-peers in your finding-trade. It was true, what I heard, that your blood is as thin and cold as the dew, your sinews fit for sewing only an infant's wrappings."

Kollen rocked on his heels and turned hotter; sweat burst and ran, and he wept twin spigots of tears. Then his emotion formed a wedge

that split his tangle of resolve, and he relaxed, suddenly and strangely. In the background of his mind, like the memory of a dream, he knew that things were not going the usual way. He shrugged off the feeling, shook his head and wiped his face. His hand dropped from the knife hilt. Turning the lantern full on the throne, Kollen swept aside the goldsmith-bones. The metal man bounced and bonged as it flopped to the mold. "I wonder what this drapery may hide?" he said. The tapestry swished to the floor, destined again to cloak the patient bones.

* * *

"I wonder what this drapery may hide?" said Kollen's image. He swept aside a sagging skeleton sitting on a throne. With an experienced eye and a chuckle, he sought for and found a cleverly hidden notch not to be found but by touch, and with three fingers hooked in he lifted the flagstone seat of the throne. Then he plunged his hand within a recess and came up with a crown.

It was a massive treasure, solid gold from the feel of it, with leaves and vines etched along its curve, and a quaint, heavily bearded head riding its rim. The head had a body, but it was distended and woven through the convoluted floral designs, so that only a heroic untangler could have gotten him out. He was the perfect god for a gardener. An ornamental band running along the crown's base had a series of symbols cast in relief.

Sulem's — and thus Renik's — eyes came closer to the crown. Kollen was turning it in the lantern light, letting the beams reflect off the faceted designs, which glimmered like the fragments of a rainbow beneath the gloom of a storm cloud. Sulem gasped, voices cried out in wonder to Renik's right side, startling him because he'd forgotten about those other watchers gazing at the same scene from somewhere else.

"Hold still, Kollen; let us see the treasure shine!" Sulem said, and Kollen did just that, freezing like stone. Renik's shoulders twitched and itched.

Sulem's eyes now hovered over the crown, and a bead of sweat rolled down the end of his nose, hung there like a pearl, and dropped onto the treasure. He spoke loudly, his voice resonating in the great chamber until the echoes answered themselves.

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“The face, it is strange enough. Habran’s? Or whose? And something inscribed here in the old tongue: ‘I am woven into the world, but as small as an ant. I am a turning wheel but no obstacle stops me. I am worshipped by some and wasted by others.’ A child’s riddle! *Life*, the answer. A strange thing, but the man who had the power of life in his hand was no ordinary man. Life! How else is this watered moor alive in the midst of Fenward’s desert? The crown attracts life without even being touched, without ever being invoked. Kollen, turn it over. Lord Archmage, pray see it through our joint eyes. What two warring brothers lost, a hateful pair have helped us find, and it is soon in your own hands.” Sulem now unrolled the gold-leaf scroll that Kollen had passed him first. “And this,” he rolled it out and scanned quickly, “this seems to be — another treasure! Script in Habran’s own writing or I’m a street-sweeper! But who is this on the floor?” Sulem’s gaze turned down to the bones nearly dissolved into the mold. “Little remains, but his skull seems crushed. An ancient tomb robber, belike, slain by a traitorous comrade. Yet the murderer left the real treasure untouched, whatever else may have been here.” Sulem kicked the bones. “It hardly matters, now, for oh! this crown!”

Renik saw the elders in the other corner of the pool nod, wagging their beards in unison. But the contemplative mage sitting in the ornate chair was as withdrawn as ever. His voice rode over all the echoes and unclarities of the charmed visions. His words boomed out of the pool and sent shivering ripples all across its surface.

“Sulem, be reminded that you have only one brother in your grasp and the crown hardly yet retrieved from the ground. Recall history besides prophecy, and remind yourself that the Twin Emperors ruined a kingdom and poisoned a land in their war over this treasure. Freshen your mind with the fact that their avatars have quarreled tonight, separated, perhaps even hated. Their division, too, might ruin ambitions, if not kingdoms. Your spell has enslaved weaknesses but left strengths brooding in a maze. Know this, and then herd your booty here quickly and carefully.”

Sulem heard that reminder and the image of Kollen jumped as the mage stiffened.

Likewise, Renik stood and stiffened. He had seen enough. He had stared down the souls of evil men and knew that his place in the night’s strange events was fit and certain. Sulem and his elders had enchanted Kollen and tried to enchant himself — luckily, he thought,

the strength and righteousness of his own character had resisted all attempts over his own will. Renik now knew himself to be purged and pure, strong and straight as a keel of adamant, as unmovable as a new main mast, as unstoppable as the tides.

He was the gods' scourge on the material Earth.

And who would be judged first, and who to be judged worse? Kollen must come to trial for deeds of conceit, greed, and, especially, irresponsibility — the forgetting of the father's duty to become a father, to continue the family, to strike a blow, a small one, any way, against Death itself. This was law, this was the fundament of human life; to plant no seed was a pure crime.

As for Sulem — Sulem's crimes had multiplied upon themselves. He was responsible for Kollen's crimes as well as his own, for greedy magic was used to intensify greed, and deception was used to make greater his brother's deceiving conceit.

Renik's blood boiled within him — a fierce joy to bring the guilty to an accounting, and a fiercer will to purge all folk less perfect than himself. He had never phrased this way his disappointment in other people, but why not tonight, when Sulem's magic had brought out the best and strongest in himself? Why should not great truths be revealed to Renik the Judge of the World on this wondrous night?

He shook a fist at the heavens and spoke before the gods for the innocent multitudes. "And who knows what other crimes rend the earth with poisoned claws!" He composed himself, brushed hair back from face. "I'll spend the rest of my days sitting next to this potent magical pool, and I'll stare into the council halls of the mighty and the secret chambers of the wicked and into harlots' bedrooms to witness every sinful detail. In days to come the multitudes will throng around this grove and I'll tell them the truth about their lords and about themselves. They'll call me Renik the Judge, Renik the Just, Renik of the Pool of Guilt." He drew his cutlass and pointed it to his now animated brother and then to the watching mages.

"You and you," he said, "are guilty, guilty!" He stepped forward, bent over the pool to stare down the accuseds' throats as he began to think of exact charges, and then he saw the reflection of himself staring back. A shock went through Renik as he realized the pattern and began to expect what would happen next, but in the midst of this the four faces of the elders turned toward *him*. Mouths opened, bodies

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straightened upward from stools. Renik's head was spinning as he tried to keep from stumbling in the water.

"Sulem!" one of them cried. "Renik has followed you! He watches, there is a resonance...."

"Your sending bounces through a nearby mirror," a calmer voice said. The seated man then leaned into Renik's sight. It was the first time he'd seen his face. It burned with power and determination. "Break free and control the sphere around you. Now."

Control? Renik thought as his mind twisted. Then aloud, "I'll give you control!" And he took his sword, upon which he'd been leaning, raised its muddied point, and plunged it toward the elders who were now gaping at him and stumbling back over their stools and table.

The point harpooned the water. He felt a concussion, a shock. Renik blacked out and awoke in the midst of drowning. Throwing himself backward, he coughed for several moments and then gathered his wits. He was kneeling in the center of the pool, the water lapping around his waist and settling down again. There were no more images, but as he stood and stepped upon the shore, he saw blood swirling thickly on the surface, and gore stained his cutlass tip.

Awaiting him as he turned were four more of himself.

* * *

Kollen broke out of the trance after Sulem turned heel and rushed back through the tomb, a globe of light conjured forth to hover before his path. But the thief didn't notice the sudden flight, and the transition from trance to reality was too smooth to ruffle his mind. He blinked and continued to study his prize.

The crown was magnificent, fit for a forest king with its detailed vegetable likenesses! And the elven face cast into the rim seemed the very spirit of vines and mosses, with his braided beard intertwining among the twisting plants decorating the rim. Kollen turned to show it to his employer and didn't see him.

He turned and called out, but when Sulem made no answer he whipped his dagger free and rolled aside — nothing, no back-stabbing attack from behind. "Sulem?" No sound. Where could have he gone? Kollen slanted the beams of the lantern toward the ground and read the trail of footprints that had turned around, skidded through the dirt, and headed back the way they had come.

Then Kollen felt none too well. Much of his former vast confidence was dripping away to be replaced by the cautious boldness that had kept him alive and well-fed for most of his life. And worse, he started recalling all those strange moments when Sulem had spoken to himself. He shook his head and shivered in the rawness of the tomb and suddenly wanted to be out into the free air. He left with lantern in one hand and dagger in the other — he slipped the crown upon his head.

A voice hummed through his skull! Kollen's teeth jittered with the vibration, as if a giant had spoken with Kollen's head between his teeth.

"By all the gods I know and don't! Is it time already? Has the master's work come to pass in a flash of years? Dear gods! I've outlived all but You, and I've nothing to recall of it but a whisper of years as the fly hears sand-grains clinking through the hourglass. And who are you, sir, to have come along and stopped this dull dream? I owe you something, but I'm afraid of what I must give."

Kollen had the meanwhile been spinning with daggers in his hands, seeking the body that must be attached to this thunderer in his ears. What he would have done, who knows? Terror had sent him down to impulses alone.

"Where are you? Who are you? *Who* are you?"

"Ah, he can speak! And speak strangely, too. The years have indeed passed, here's evidence. I'm not what you call a learned man, but the master left old scrolls around the garden, and I often picked them up and put them on the table near the fountain. I read some of them — read the letters, sounded the words. They were old scrolls from old dead folk. The words weren't ours, you might have said, just as the bog gives up its bog oak, which is a tree and not a tree, and the peasants dig it from the swamp, and the ancient wood, dead and fallen in another life, can still be hewed and made to hold up their cottage roofs — good wood, but not from our world. Am I clear to you, sir? Your words aren't mine, but I understand them! That's one of my gifts. The master said he'd give me gifts if I did this favor for him. What if I had said no? That's the path left untrodden, as they say."

"Who are you?" Kollen was able to repeat. By now he had backed up against the throne, counting on its thick rock slab to form a shield against dragon or giant.

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“Master took my name away. Sorry. Wouldn’t mind having it back, but everything’s a trade — you can be wise or strong, as they say, but not both. Now then, the master said he’d give me long life, as near endless as I’d care for. Then I’d get command of armies. A kingdom onto that, well-watered, whose lifeblood ran according to my own. And he said he’d take my heart away so it couldn’t be broken. That’s bad wares traded for good! Who wouldn’t take the deal? My heart was broke enough. You might say this life is just a heart-breaking business. ‘Give me an iron one!’ I told him. He smiled — I remember that, for he seldom smiled — and he said it’d be a heart of eternal gold. And it’s as cold as gold. Three hundred years under the sunless earth — that’d break the stalks of most folk’s minds. Me, I dozed through it all, just a little bored. But who am I? I was a gardener, the master’s, Lord Habran, second to the great King himself. Now, how important is the king’s brother’s gardener? Third in the world, I always thought! Question the second: where am I? On your head! Your head! How many gardeners can dance atop a man’s head, answer me that, if you’re wise.”

Kollen paused a moment before ripping the crown off. He cast it to the ground and the titan’s voice was gone. Not gone — he listened to a tinny voice calling in the darkness. Kollen picked up his lantern, bent over, whispering oaths monotonously as he sought the crown. Soon a ray of light glinted from the gold. Kollen shuffled up to the crown, still bent over like an aged man leaning on his cane. He could just make out the voice, which was muffled in the thick mold of the ground.

“Kollen, sir, I’d like to be picked up again. It won’t do, throwing off a king into the dirt. Although, truth, this mold has a proper fertile taste to it. I’m minded to open up the roof of this place and let the sun in; what a garden would grow here! Here now! Man, pick me up and look me in the face if you have spine to do it.”

Kollen started giggling. He staggered back and fell into the throne, and laughed harder. He set the lantern down and juggled his daggers a moment before taking them both up in his left hand so that he could wipe sweat and tears with the other. He stopped laughing. An animated golden face was wriggling on the edge of a crown, telling him the most absurd things that, nonetheless, made sense when you thought about them. And the voice was still working, pleading, commanding, explaining. Kollen went over to the crown, touched it,

picked it up gently, and looked into the face, expecting it to be still and cold and silent. Then the lips turned up, carrying the beard with them into a gnomish grin. Wrinkles spread up the forehead as the thing's eyes squinted at Kollen.

"I have to say, you shouldn't have put the crown on, it could kill a man, and that's no joke," explained the face. "I would've come out, eventually, but cold metal takes its time waking up. It isn't for wearing, better for looking at. And if you're not the one, then, I'm sorry. But if you *are* the one, and if it's the proper time, then I have something to tell you, and then you can give me a gift."

"If I'm the one? The time?" Kollen whispered. His mind commanded disbelief, his senses told him all was well in the world.

"Yes. In the time of Anraa's Flame. Have you seen it? If so, it's the time. If you are you, then go to the island in the sky and make the music that you would. The harp's there; a most wondrous thing it is, too. I heard it playing as the master's ship rode a wave that drove us through our journeys. I remember, it was like an embrace of green glass that pushed us, and we needed no sailor and set no sails, and the ship's sorceress was idle the live-long day. But she got her gift, too, so the trip may have been worth it to her. But not for me — I nodded away my gift in the still shadows; I wonder if it was a gift at all? But I crave your gift, and that's to kill me."

"Kill you?" Whispered again. The earth womb bounced his whisper around in the ensuing pause.

"Kill me," mimicked the little golden man in the same whisper. His eyes seemed to droop and sadden as he looked up at Kollen.

Then the image started extricating itself from the crown. Kollen was frozen in wonder, this time, and he held the crown out in his arms as the wondrous gardener pulled his arms out of the meshing vines and leaves, and then slipped his legs out and stood on the edge of the crown. The crown remained whole, and the man began to swell, from figurine to doll to child-size, without gaining any weight, as if a goldsmith inside of him were beating out his insides within some hollow of his body; and like gold on the jeweler's anvil, a little bit could be beaten out a long way.

The mannequin leaped the ground, a gong-like echo accompanying this move. By the time he had swelled to man-size and had walked over the golden bones that Kollen had earlier cast aside. The gardener nudged them with his toe; Kollen noticed now that the

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bones were smithied so perfectly that he could see no seam, rivet, solder, or hammer mark on them. Perhaps the golden man was impressed with this perfection, for he split open like a husk and slipped himself over the bones, sealing around them as if the smithy had sewn his skin around the frame. Now that he was large and whole, sounds could be heard emanating from the man, subtle tinkles, clangs, bongs. His inner self was no longer a cave for a smithy but rather for musicians. He was a fantastic temple full of bells, cymbals, and chimes. But not a loud temple. The creature's flute-like voice easily overrode the noises.

"The master had a funny way about him," said the gardener, sitting himself down on the throne. "But he was a poet and philosopher besides a great mage, and it's not easy accounting for such a man and his actions. Now, then, Kollen, I've given you my message — seek on, if you are the master's kinsman, heir, image, or whatnot. Follow the trail, find the harp in the pregnant island. You'll know what to do from there, I'm supposing. Then...."

"What if I'm not?" Kollen said, then, "What if I don't?"

"If you're not the one? Things will care for themselves. My army'll see to it." Kollen jumped at several odd creakings in the gloom. "I'm sorry. If you're not the one, you shouldn't have come here. Not that I wouldn't have poked around myself, no shame or blame attached, sir. It's just that, well, matters are large in these wizardly affairs. As the master said once, 'Strong measures must be taken. I play no game.' That's truth."

The creaking Kollen had heard became a scraping and a clacking. He remembered his daggers, caught one up, flipped it and caught the blade for a cast. But he saw nothing. He picked up his lantern, whirled, flashed the lantern at another sound — wood scraping wood.

"And if you don't get out of here, then it won't rightly matter what you might do once you find the harp. You won't be finding anything."

"Stop this," Kollen said, snapping his head to the golden man and then to the shadows. "I don't understand enough, how could I? Tell me more!"

"Sorry," and the gardener did seem truly sorry, with his arms gesturing in the darkness like butterfly wings illumined in sunset light. "I can stop nothing. Even my kingship here seems to mean

nothing, just as the extra few centuries of life were simply wearisome. It all seems as hollow as my chest.”

Kollen caught a flicker of motion at the edge of light; then his dagger was whistling: on target! It thud home with a distinct knock of wood.

A vaguely human form emerged into the light. More forms emerged — the wooden satyrs — and more still were climbing down from the tops of the columns. Like the golden man untangling himself from the crown, the wooden creatures untangled themselves from each other, untwined like vines of peapods escaping each other.

Kollen backed away until he bumped against the throne. They advanced, but not like an enchanted army, not at first. A ring of them locked arms, their arms split apart, and the parts splined together like ropes or vines. Kollen saw their toes wedge into cracks in the floor, and they grew there like roots, probing through the mold, prying under loose flagstones and tilting them upward. He realized they had caged him in while he had gaped like a child at a marketplace puppet show. And then more of the statues fell forward and began crawling toward him. But before they got far, they had stretched out along the ground, becoming obscenely thick roots that shot forward.

Coming to himself, he turned and ran, blundering into a lattice work of tangled arms and legs, but always those immobile, carved faces stared out from the net and drove him near mad with their quiet stares. They formed a large circle around him and the throne.

“I hope you’ll accept my apologies and grant me that favor. Destroy that crown, and end me. It won’t hurt, but I can’t seem to bring myself to it. Once you’re alive, you’re rather stuck with it, grafted on, tied and nailed, you see?”

Kollen stepped up upon the throne over the prattling golden man to escape the snaking roots, and then from throne-top leaped at the living wall. He got a leg over, and the lamp burned his hand: for the first time he cried out, and then screamed louder still as the wall swelled, rose up to meet him and topple him backward within the circle. Kollen fell hard across an arm of the throne, jounced to the mold.

More precious moments passed as his breath came back in gulps and jerks. In that time he felt an arm disentangle itself from the wall and reach across his face.

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“I have the greatest confidence in you,” said the golden man, in maddeningly confident, calm voice. “Other men would have gone mad by now. Lord Habran’s shipmaster did, after I was transformed. I thought it was fitting, my change, like a caterpillar into a butterfly, or a blossoming bulb. I was used to changes, I guess, but he went into fits, he did.”

Kollen pushed, twisted, and choked. Finally he slipped free, lacerating a cheek while pulling his head free. Yet the pain was a welcome companion. It acted like a liquor, undrugging the paralysis of fear. Quick as a squirrel he slipped out from the fingered roots that snared him.

“That was good,” said the gardener. “A man has to show some spine in a fix like this. Don’t worry at all...”

Kollen leaped to the wall again, which now resembled a throbbing net of branches whose great, hanging fruits were the satyr heads, and again it threw him down. The space he had was the size of a horse’s stall, and the circle of toes scraped closer, and now the cage was roofed over as two or three unemployed satyrs climbed up and shrugged into the gap, weaving themselves into the basketwork. From outside of the cage, others produced weapons — pruning knives, bill hooks, scythes, sickles, saws, axes, and hunting spears. These last they poked through the gaps as men bait the caged bear before letting it out into the arena.

In his moment of surrendering terror Kollen saw his sack of implements on the ground by the light of the dropped lantern, around which some oil had leaked and caught afire. The failing light of the dropped lamp sent a beam upon the dented head of his sledge hammer. He got the hammer, was raked by a wooden weapon that scratched his ribs, and he withdrew to the ever narrowing calm that was centered by the throne. He picked up the lantern and smashed it on a satyr head. Flaming oil ran down the constricting wall.

Kollen then took his hammer and baited the baiters, letting them poke at him and slash, after which he’d swing and bash arms, heads, weapons, and braided knees with wild blows. The burning oil, and now some wood, brightened the chamber and wouldn’t fail him there.

In the silence of the deep chamber the sound of splintering was deafening. The magic being released had lost no strength over the years, but the satyrs’ bodies had rotted, and Kollen saw tunneling insect holes, like plague sores infecting the satyrs’ hides. The hammer

arced and thudded like a dull ax, gouging out holes and fist-sized nicks.

“There’s a good job of it,” cheered the golden gardener. “I wouldn’t ordinarily cheer this wood bashing — it’s against my former trade, you know, but under the circumstances....”

Kollen withdrew from his work, and, in a rage that he hadn’t seen coming, he lowered the hammer head to the ground, turned, and swung a great arc that landed hammer head to golden head. The effect was as if he’d struck a bell. The golden man slammed against the arm of the throne, pivoted around it on his hip, spun, and landed on his feet in a crouch. His head was unmarked, although his body was ringing in several different notes at once — evidently each of his organs were indeed like separate little sounding boards themselves.

Kollen’s hand was numb with the blow; his ears hurt, and he knew greater fear than he had before.

The golden man only shook his head.

“I understand that. But it won’t work. Can’t work. I can’t die until it’s all done. None of the master’s chosen helpers can die. Isn’t that the problem? Never would’ve thought it, before. The years make a philosopher out of you, that’s a lesson I can pass on, young man.” By now the satyr-wall was getting distressingly close. And besides the monsters, the wood had caught fire well. He’d be burned while strangled and crushed. Smoke rose in the air, but seemed to collect at the ceiling and began filling the room.

Kollen felt crushed already. A poison slew his will. He wiped sweat, dropped his hammer, and gazed at the gardener, who looked back at him with a grandfatherly-gentle face somewhat ruined by the smooth hemispherical eyes that seemed incapable of human sympathy.

“Worry not!” intoned the man. “If you’re the one, you can’t die.”

Suddenly that statement seemed like dire prophecy rather than gift. Kollen found himself in that blank stare and little smile, and he picked up his hammer, and threw himself at the flaming wall, pulling his leather coat up around his head. The burning wood had weakened. He flailed through rotten wood, burned wood, and embers were fireflies around his head. He was slightly burned, and he smelled burning hair and singed wool and leather. He pulled back, leaped for the hole he’d made. He hit the ground with eyes squeezed shut and rolled in the mold to put out any flames.

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Something clanged at his feet. He opened his stinging eyes and saw that the golden man had thrown the crown there with a “Don’t be forgetting this, now.”

It was all enough for Kollen. He took it and ran, lit down the hall and some way beyond it by the flames.

He paused at the archway. His breath was ragged whistles as he looked back. It was hard to see; his eyes kept wanting to close in the smoke. Kollen heard the woody rasping of monsters disengaging themselves from each other. One of the damaged satyrs was already limping toward him through the smoke, and he thought he heard the measured bong-bong-bong of the golden man walking calmly among his army.

Kollen dropped the hammer and stumbled back toward the outer air, guiding himself with hand on wall, remembering only at the last moment to duck under the blades set there, and to toe around the pit of spikes.

He wasn’t there to see his fancied mushroom priests shivering as he retreated, some uprooting themselves and following, tumbling behind his heels. And the grass growing by the troubled pool waved slightly with a phantom breeze.

Kollen emerged carefully into the predawn air; the wavering tip of his second dagger had no foe in line when he spun to view all around, for on top of all this madness at his heels, there was still Sulem. The horses were still tethered; he heard one of them nicker. Where was the roguish Sulem if not in the cave or waiting in ambush here? Kollen started for the horses and then tripped in the grass.

He pulled his feet in to stand and found that they were bound together in weeds. He didn’t think of it much, but slashed the grass and stood up. But he almost tripped again and had to kick free from an entangling growth. No matter how lightly or highly he stepped, the weeds caught his boots and wrapped them around. Soon his progress became a nightmare flight, in which the spirit is willing, but the feet encased in cold molasses. He slashed at the grass with his dagger, but the short weapon was no scythe. He had left his sword hidden in the bushes by the horses with some unused gear, not thinking he’d need it underground.

If that were all, it would have been enough, but suddenly the moor lit up with life, not the light of morning but the movement of awakenings. There was a pounding of hooves as the horses tore out

their tethers and kicked up their hind legs. They whinnied and nipped each other playfully, running circles around Kollen struggling on the ground. Several field mice appeared out of burrows and scampered up his clothes while birds that ought to have been decently sleeping were popping the air near his head with a sparkle of brown and white wings as if a torrent of air sprites sported in sunny currents.

And now the bushes were reaching. They found loose corners of trousers and arms and tugged at them like eager lovers. Kollen leaped free; more bushes caught and dragged. One crinkly tendril was unraveling its convoluted form. The dagger tip licked out, parried the reach and severed it. Then his ankles were ensnared, and then freed by another saving slash followed by a tumble and leap.

It was most absurd and dire. The journey across the moor was a dance and a duel with the undergrowth. Perhaps some of the tendrils of his earlier, strange boldness clung to him, for Kollen whipped the crown from his head and held it above the reach of his enemies. A thick sweat began to soak him just as the clang of a sword duel reached his ears.

Kollen had no time to see who was killing whom.

* * *

Renik turned toward the four images of himself. He was vaguely aware that Sulem and Kollen had come out into the open, Sulem standing fifty paces away and watching the strange scene before him. But Renik's immediate attention had to concern closer matters, like his four kinfolk who were drawing their cutlasses in unison. Warily he gripped the hilt of his own, more tired than awed.

"No more accusations," he said to his selves. "Whatever you are, whoever sent you, be it myself or some other, begone! Matters are afoot that underlie the foundations of the very world. Even you must see that."

The Reniks shook their heads as one and answered in one voice: "One matter remains afoot: it is you, now judged and sentenced to death."

It was starting to sound like the song of a street-singer, the tirade of some vagabond who, having outworn his store of songs and amusements, must begin again his tired act. And then a very strange thought snuck into his mind, that perhaps he had always sounded just as tired out to Kollen.

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They surrounded him and rushed at once; Renik thrust aside all thought and turned toward the two at his back, having judged the speed of the forward pair. Cutlasses fell together.

Renik swept the pair aside in a single, wide stroke. There was a twin clang and flying sparks, and an instant later he took a third blade on his own as he spun around; the fourth blade had struck one of its own in the tangle of bodies, sentencing one shadow-Renik to death.

The three remaining executioners regrouped and charged. Uncomfortable with the thought of killing himself again, Renik turned his sword and rapped one of them on the head with the flat of the blade. Then he ducked another blade, the edge whistling through his hair. He back-peddled, side-stepped to keep his two active foes in a line, one in front of the other. They fouled each other and then split apart to outflank Renik, but he surprised them again by running back between them before they closed the distance. He ran toward the groggy third-Renik, who was recovering from the light rap; the sailor beat the sword from his hand and gave him a second accolade with the blunt side with a *clang*-thud. That one wouldn't rise again that night.

Renik faced the last two and lowered his sword. They were charging. On their faces was that foiled rage that Renik understood so well. It was a bit of himself that had always been a gale he should have always steered clear of, but instead he'd always just ridden it out. But now he checked the storm by dropping his sword point and shaking his head sadly at his selves. Their faces screwed up into the distilled rage of a hundred tirades. But Renik doused them with simple recognition of himself. They dissolved in midleap, brushing him in the last moment with a puff of mist.

There seemed another duty left. Renik raised his cutlass-guard to his eyes. There was enough light now to see without his lantern, and he saw his twisted self, his brother-image. It was Renik, and it was not. The splayed-out face rolled across the curved brass seemed to command him onward to unfinished chores. Renik half-resented such slavery, but as he listened to the commands, they made some sense. Something *necessary* was written in the sword's face, something part of himself. He swayed with an onset of dizziness that he had come to expect all night, but what was that? He could ride *that* out. He closed his eyes and clutched his weapon under his arm, imagining it to be the tiller of his creaking ship. But under the eyelids, no storm darkness.

His cutlass-image remained, beaten out before his mind's eye, straightened into a better picture of what he'd seen. The man was dressed like a king, crowned by a gold circlet. His height was greater than Renik's, his face different, his spirit...they shared that, and all else, and anger and a greed that cracked the river-ice of centuries.

Renik opened his eyes so wide they hurt.

"Lord Shapor I may be," Renik said to his weapon, "and Shipmaster Renik son of Laraf sweats in his stinking woolens and commands gold and silk and marching squadrons. Don't stare at me!"

He made his cutlass a sword again, a tool under his command. He pivoted it by the guard, swung it by the hand and turned around.

The last matter of the night was approaching. Sulem was stepping forward, bowing and congratulating Renik on his success, and mouthing words about profitable employment and auguries and balances. Renik took care to avoid looking toward the mirror that Sulem had ready and threw his cutlass so that it spun a half-turn and hammered the breath from Sulem with the pommel. Renik leaped on the sorcerer and flung away his mirrors with a ferocity that made them hum as they spun away. He stamped on his face for good measure, grabbed his cutlass, and then went for Kollen, not noticing the golden scroll that fell from Sulem's sash into the gorse.

He saw his brother, and he stalked across the moor toward him. What he saw didn't surprise him — the little man wrestling in a snake-pit of bushes and a gaggle of animals. The earth itself had risen up against guilt, a sign that all the gods of the world's nooks and crannies had allied themselves with Renik. He moved slowly to the rescue: let Kollen struggle for a moment; it was his punishment for the night's deeds.

What *was* somewhat surprising was the flaming specter that suddenly staggered out of the mound. Evidently his brother had penetrated deep enough into the underworld to have angered the earth's elementals. Thievish and wicked even to the world's core! He remembered something about that, something about withholding treasures from his hand, and if he stared at his cutlass guard again, he knew he'd recall the details. But he resisted as he confronted Kollen's pursuer. *Ah, Kollen!* he thought. *The wisdom of a brother to guide you? Both of us lacked that.* More sad shakes of the head, and his cutlass rose up, became like the flames themselves as it caught their

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light and fell again and again on the burning apparition until it collapsed into smoking fire wood.

It was more than Kollen deserved, but he *was* kin. That was a good thought! Kin! Brother! Renik moved resolutely onward.

By the time Renik was ten paces away Kollen had lost his weapon, and he was pitted against a particularly muscular bush among the tangle of damp, uprooted branches. An earthy smell pervaded the air, scented with sweat. When Kollen suddenly recognized Renik's admonishing tone and his form limned against the dawn stars, he whooped with joy. But Renik reached across a tumult of beasts and declared, "It's a stern hangman and his howling mob that have you now, my brother! Give me this prize, this unjustifiable ambition and vulgar desire all at once! Give it here, and all crimes are paid in full." Then Renik took the crown away from Kollen's reaching hand and left him. Kollen's rage suddenly outweighed his terror, but the grip of the shrubbery eased off, and the knot of animals (now increased by a wolf and a marsh-hen) making treaties, truces, and love, withdrew from the enchanted circle around him.

Renik's path was straight, although the grass of the moor clung to his heels, and the animals regrouped and danced around him. When the shrubbery began to lean and uproot itself in its enchanted goal, Renik swung his cutlass in wide, low cuts. The sword cleared a path where Kollen's dagger could only have failed.

And ahead, Sulem was groggily arising from the ground. The tall magician saw Renik coming. Perhaps Sulem had some strands of power left him, although the gear of his trade was now flung yards away, lost in the ferns. But now he was a seer, because instantly he divined Renik's unforeseen role in the night of botched events, and he ran.

CHAPTER 4 — ENTER, THE SILENT MAN

A loud man for singing, a silent man for truth. — Old Proverb

It was a short race. Renik was a short man, but he gained his speed from a higher order than terror. He grabbed the sorcerer by his flying robe, wrapped a loose fold around his head and neck, half-choking the man, and dragged Sulem into the grove.

“For crimes you have committed I must lay dooms upon you,” Renik yelled. “Seek comfort in confession!”

Sulem squirmed and choked around in the sailor’s grip but eventually got a fold away from his mouth and panted, “I’m not your enemy! You don’t understand that”

“I understand enough of everything.”

“Confuse not the tool with the deed, you must”

“Stained is the weapon that has slain unjustly,” Renik intoned.

Desperation spread its dark wings over Sulem. He could not overpower the sailor, nor could he pull his sending back and awake within himself in the safe tower room at Akrem at his archmage’s side. The magic meant to chain his eyes for his lord’s use during the important venture had indeed become chains, now hobbling him to this material prison. He tried to break free a second time: the closest he got was a momentary fading of his trance in which his face flickered at himself for moment in the mirror in the Archmage’s council room. Habran’s awakened crown was like a drain in a tub, and magical power was draining away through it. Sulem was young and powerful among the inner circle of the Guild of Mages, but he had never experienced this power.

And now — this, this man, this common sailor. Sulem’s magic had worked on Renik — worked, and worked, then worked around into a circle. The runes, the sightings, the scrolls studied until dawn was a patch of annoying light in reddened eyes, it had all shattered like glass spears. He should have taken the clue that all was bent awry when Renik refused to join the venture.

Renik tossed him in the pool in the grove, holding him at bay with sword point and listing his crimes in a thunderous voice. Ironically, Renik had tossed Sulem the crown, evidently associating the treasure with said crimes and having nothing else to do with it. There Sulem

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sat, water lapping his waist and the object of his adventure in his hands — or at least in the hands of his enchanted projection. He found time to wonder that shackles conjured for the brothers had come back to shackle the enchanter. Sadly true, mournfully learned: who could say what a man would see of himself?

Renik now began to pronounce a heavy but just sentence while the trees of the grove heaved like vegetables giving birth. Sulem tried to dash around the sailor and out to freedom, but Renik easily caught him and tossed him back into the pool.

At the last, Sulem, a brave man despite all of his precautions, stood with philosophical calm in the midst of the pool. He spoke aloud, although Renik wasn't listening.

“Something perpetuates the spell I wound around you and your brother. It should've been unmade when you threw away my mirrors. And now Habran's magic shall kill us both if you don't move away.”

The bushes and branches leaned inward, towing the thicker trunks with them, it seemed, and the grove creaked, ground, and cracked. The magic was inherent in the crown's power over life, now set in motion by unpracticed fools and now as uncontrollable as a fully rigged ship before a gale.

“Let us both away or we're both doomed!” Sulem, said, louder this time, his earlier calm having restored his will to live. The mage took a splashing step forward against the point of Renik's sword pressing on his robes, and when the seaman continued shouting out stuff about crime and punishment, the mage sank back, the subtle poison of fatalism unhinging his will. He fingered the crown, laughed at the thought of his concurrent success and failure. Again he whispered a word to break his sending, to pull his image away from this reality and back into the warm tower room of his guild. Again, it didn't work; the transportation of his body's image was locked; the magic meant to empower him was now an armor of cobwebs. The crown sucked in all magic, and a thought came to Sulem — wasn't magic simply a bad imitation of life?

But life, real or imitation, meant time to learn the way of using the crown. His fingers traced out the designs of the crown and felt the power flowing through it. It was as if Sulem had his finger on the world's pulse.

He found another moment above terror and schemes and ambitions, and he stared in wonder at what he held. Life-force at his

fingers, perhaps even immortality. But not for himself; the cobbler's children went shoeless, wasn't that the saying? And — oh so curious, so mysterious — not for Habran, even. The great sorcerer had this in hand, this very crown he'd made with arcane might. And for what? To lay waste the land of his greedy brother? To hide and then die somewhere in hiding, perhaps interred in a grave as lonely as this moor? For what reason? What rich man dumps his gold into the river?

Now the crown made its end in the things from which it drew its power. The trees convulsed, twisted in knots that defied the best of untanglers, and they wove over them a kind of bridal bower or temple dome. "For what reason? Answer me!" Sulem screamed, and he danced and laughed and put the crown on his head, and at the last, as the grove shrunk over him, Sulem threw the great crown at Renik in the shadows.

Renik was entranced in his sentencing, and Sulem's magic would have doomed him if Kollen hadn't arrived and thrown his brother onto clear ground; the thrown crown wedged between the wrestling brothers and knocked the breath from Kollen as he fell. Kollen caught his breath as he sat on his roaring brother and watched the grove bend inward in a mass of knotted trunks inches from his feet, even as Renik heaved beneath him. There was a final shudder and then all was silent. Only an earthy smell and a knot of braided and splintered trunks remained a monument to a strange night.

On the marsh, all was at last still, although the day-beasts, awakened earlier than usual, were just now acknowledging the world's light and getting about to normal business (the wolf trotted off with the marsh-hen flopping in his jaws) while Kollen caught up with his breath at last. He had no mind for the wildest event in his entire life — his eyes were all for the dewy mist that arose over the moor as Mother Dawn kindled a healing glow in the east.

Eventually Renik twisted beneath his knees and said "Get off me, Kollen, I'm crushed to death thrice enough." He rolled off, and together they watched the smoke exude from the mound and its deep bonfire.

Renik roused himself a long time later; he started shaking as he realized the impossibility of fighting enemies that were all himself. He was three hundred years old, or that tired. He looked at his brother and suddenly wondered at the dirty, familiar face. Oh, so familiar! The line of his nose, the angle of brow and eyes of brown! They had

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had mud fights when they played as boys, and Renik saw his brother now through the dirt, and perhaps a bit of himself, and then sick feelings tugged rusty fishhooks through his guts.

“What’d I do to you? What was I going to do to my own brother?” Renik stared down at the grass springing up between his legs and leaned over to hide his face in the growth. But he finished, “Kollen, will you let me use mirrors and magic as an excuse? Tell me that you will.”

“Sure.... Huh? What?”

“Shall I say that I came to Fenward to return things that should have been yours: inheritance, friendship, and myself for a brother? Or shall I say the truth. I came to you as I always did, to thrash, punish, and scold. Sulem’s sorcery only fanned the flame. This was no rescue. Damn everything; all nobilities are false.”

Kollen looked back over the night’s history and thought he understood a little of it. “Strange: tonight I’ve also seen myself; not much size but a load of sound. If that’s what spells do, I wonder that sorcerers aren’t a fountain of morals. But shall *we* salvage something of it all?”

“Salvage what?” said the melancholy Renik sitting in the marsh, studying a tick crawling along his thumb.

“At least we’ll find the people who used us so poorly. A curious story is behind this Sulem fellow; mark me. And we’re the characters in it. I’ve a mind to....”

“Stupid man! We should thank them for a lesson learned.”

“But I’m not convinced.” Kollen’s muddy face brightened. “You saved me from a vine-garrotting, even if it was an accident. The right man is dead, at least. And in the end our faults turned around and brought us fortune.” He went to slap the fat gold bag from Sulem, which should have been hanging by his belt, but he only pounded his thigh. Lost! Lost in the barrow or in the grass. Kollen leaped up to search, but Renik understood what he was after and held his brother’s arm.

“Will you search for tainted treasure, Kollen?”

Kollen pounded his thigh again in anger. Then a thought came to him, and he relaxed again.

“Tainted treasure? Yes, I’d take it. But not gold won in dreams. My pay was part of the enchantment. Fog gold! But not this!” Kollen held up the crown, its ornament now muddy and jammed with bits of

grass. And like Sulem, Kollen took it and danced on the moor, but he held it above his head a safe distance.

Renik rubbed his short beard and said nothing. He wasn't sure if he wanted any part of faults that brought fortune, or this crown. He was simply happy to have Kollen here without bad words flying between.

He stood and hugged his brother roughly. They laughed together and fell into the mud wrestling. They arose as hungry, tired men amidst the glowing curtains of morning.

"Kollen, I've a mind to drink deeply and expensively tonight! The darkest, deepest cup of wine in Fenward has my name on it."

"And in the darkest, sootiest wineshops where mirrors are blind."

In the waxing daylight they hunted out and calmed their perplexed horses, and in doing so discovered the scroll that Sulem had dropped.

"A scholar's treasure for Hrothe, and of use to us as well, no doubt!" Kollen put it in his pouch, for the time letting Renik hold the crown, which he showed increasing signs of having some interest in after all. This was the butt of some joking until Renik barked a short oath, and Kollen froze the smile on his lips. The smile melted to a knowing sneer soon enough, and the brothers were quiet for a quarter-hour afterward, and Renik wrapped the crown in the folds of his cloak.

But the quarter hour passed, and they resurrected some of their jolly feelings as they followed the trail back, sometimes heeling their tired and irritated mounts into a lazy canter, racing each other when the trail widened, their stirrups banging together and threatening entanglement when the trail narrowed and the race heated.

They took the river road into the city, but long before they crossed the city boundary, the brothers heard the clamoring of the temple gongs that kept the Dahsa in a fitful half-sleep until he awoke cursing religion in general, although that day he would anonymously establish the Cult of Silence. And others awakened to the gongs and came forth from the inns and the hovels, the ragged tents, and the clean-swept cottages. They marched the dusty tracks alongside the brothers, calling to kinfolk and friends, cursing enemies, sitting down to make bargains and saddles, shirts and horseshoes. Smells from the pots of street vendors curled upward and mixed with the vapors of camel-dung fires. Brown hands curled around cups of morning brew as the sun slanted its lances, warming the brown brick walls of the shops.

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“This is life,” a philosopher was heard to say as he settled his rump on a warm curb, a student or two gathering around.

“That’s life,” said a friend to Jos Benn the saddle maker, whose daughter — through a fantastic series of events — had some weeks before broken off her arranged marriage to the tanner’s son to become Fenward’s traditional Prophet. This was an altogether lonely and dangerous profession sure to turn away all prospective (and proper) sons-in-laws.

“Is this life?” rose a mourning voice from the crowd, its owner a young lover chasing the scent of perfume through the smell of sweat and camel dung. Eavesdroppers told him it was, and invited him to join the festive funeral procession of Rippa the Moneylender to make the day cheerier. It was Life: crooked and diseased, strong and stubborn.

And in the midst of it all a silent man stood. He was not present in body yet could be seen in the tall bronze-sheet mirror that was Eni the Metal Worker’s chief exhibit at his stall. As the mirror was well-known in Fenward, and since few could afford it, the mirror was safe from intrusion, and the ghostman was undisturbed. He was a fine specimen of a human being, with his silky black hair and bushy beard, cheeks rosy with health and muscles smooth and rounded with more than human strength. He dressed in a simple white tunic, trailing a golden chain that shackled his ankle and led off to nowhere.

He seemed content to study each passer-by, giving attention to those who proceeded to their business in pairs. He diverted his attention only for small things like the dead rat in the gutter and the funeral of Rippa the Moneylender (at which only the stranger and the corpse wore a solemn face). When Renik and Kollen rode by, he broke his gaze from Rippa’s shroud as if he’d sniffed something interesting. His patient stare turned toward them just as they plunged into the crowd that always gathered in front of taverns and the funerals of moneylenders, and he lost them in the press of warm, noisy bodies despite the fact that his image skipped through a series of reflective bodies in pursuit — a pail of water, a puddle of urine, a rich woman’s polished silver gorget.

The silent man was patient, however, and he returned to Eni’s mirror, there enthralled by the poetry of Fenward’s faces.

CHAPTER 5 — THE SEER SAYS

Then the great sorcerer stopped him before he stepped through the mirror. “What will become of you when you know each sadness and each triumph that will come?”

Fanmacol said, “I will nod in melancholy as I meet each happiness; and each sadness will darken my days before it comes. But still I must know.” — *The Legend of Fanmacol and the Enchanted House*

The brothers had ridden to the stables and delivered their horses and tramped through an awakening city to the old square tower where Hrothe pitched his roof-top tent. Hrothe was sitting cross-legged, watching the sun rise. No one had slept all night, so after a reunion and a tale of the night’s venture, they rested before having a drink at every wine stall in the city before napping it off on a rug unrolled before the tent. Hrothe recovered from the binge before either of the brothers, and they found him waiting up for them. By then the sun was gone and twilight soothed hammering heads.

“Celebrations being done,” the old man suddenly said, “it’s time we learned more behind these events. If you come with me, I might be able to help.”

Hrothe waited as the brothers grumblingly put on their boots and splashed their faces from the cistern by the tent. Then he led the protesting pair out of the city and along a trail that to the river. They forded the stream where rocks were scattered knee-deep across the bottom, and climbed the far bank with last year’s reeds brown and crunching under foot, the spring growth sending green spears upward. The thin line of trees stopped abruptly at some scratchy, dead-looking vegetation that in turn gave way to sand and weathered rocks. They didn’t stop until they’d climbed a hill whose head was bald and scrubbed smooth from sand storms. Hrothe walked straight to a dip in the stone that sheltered a little from the wind. He sat down and groaned about his old knees, but he began talking at once.

“About this Sulem from the mages guild at Akrem — Kollen, you said he was interested in Habran, in some treasure he was supposed to have hidden. Did you know that once Habran and his brother, Shapor, were the most powerful men in all these lands?”

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“I heard something like that, mostly in stories, some you told me, others told by tavern singers.”

“True, their history is still kept in stories and legends. Not many written documents survived that nasty burning of scrolls and scholars that followed their war. I have seen a few surviving scraps, and from them I can tell part of the history. Shapor was a king who ruled here about three hundred years ago. Habran was his brother, famous in his knowledge of the arcane. He lived at the distant edge of the empire but, they say, communicated with his brother through a cauldron of water in which their images could appear and speak. In this way Shapor ruled and Habran advised, and together they were strong. But their empire left little more behind — a few fallen stones. Fenward was known by another name, then, and was the capital of this empire, once a fertile land. And this happened because these two brothers quarreled; Shapor wanted something that Habran had and was ready to take it by force. But with his magic Habran wasted his brother’s army and blew fiery winds upon his seat. No sorcerer has regained a tenth of the power he had. How to measure it? Fenward is built over the capital of the empire, and a poet who lived in those times called it ‘the flower of the world’.”

Hrothe scooped up sand that had gathered in a crevice in the rock, and poured it out slowly in front of the brothers.

“Now listen to me closely. Habran did not kill his brother but rather reduced his power entirely. Habran ruled the ruined land long enough to set up major cities and districts into sovereign states under warlords smart or brutal enough to hold them together long enough to let the roots of order sprout again. These small states remain as Akrem, Fenward, Aratos, and Ithian. No one knows exactly what happened to Habran thereafter, although we know Shapor gathered around him not strong men, now, but wise men, men like his brother, so that they might find this thing Habran had. I suspect that Shapor was also a sorcerer, even if history recalls him only as an emperor. As it is, this was the birth of the Guild of Mages in Akrem. The guild has been seeking this hidden treasure, or trying to reinvent it, ever since — but don’t think their goal is earthly riches. No, no. Something else, something so great that no hint has escaped from the guild in all the dusty years. So tell me, what makes two powerful men — and brothers — make such war on each other? What would king and mage

of their high degree possibly want that they made this wrinkle in the Earth's flesh into a desert and wrecked an empire?"

Kollen was opening his mouth to reply, but Hrothe pressed a finger over his lips. "Don't answer! You'll only make a joke like you always do when I speak seriously. Only this matters right now: this new year is a strange one. Remember what I told you two nights ago, Renik? And the Mages thought you could lead them to what Habran hid. Why? Is all this a coincidence: sky-omens, mages, enchanted slavery — if I interpret correctly what you both have told me — and strange employments? The mages need you. It scares me that they should believe this, and it scares me that in one instance they were correct.

Renik frowned and wrapped the old sack tighter around the crown.

"And consider this: they, too, were afraid of what they were seeking. Why else did they expend the strength so necessary to send Sulem's double-image here to oversee the venture? They needed to see what he would see, and they wanted to cover their trail and protect their agent and themselves. But for some reason I think Sulem could not pull himself away even though making his sending took strength, the combined powers of several of their primary mages. Most of them will be sick for days."

Kollen was going to leap between a pause to make his joke, but Hrothe's face, so silent-serious, took his words away.

"Hrothe," Renik said, "why have we walked into the desert this time of day? It's going to be cold and dark soon."

"Humor an old man, Renik, and have supper."

"What?"

"Here." Hrothe handed him a pouch with a loaf of bread and a water bottle. Renik shrugged and indeed appeared to be hungry, although Kollen's stomach was still gurgling with after-wine poison and would exact revenge for a while longer.

It *was* getting cold. The winds were beginning to change direction as they did when night fell on Fenward. The breeze was blowing out their body-fires. Kollen tucked his pant legs into the tops of his boots and pulled his hood over his head, and when he looked up again he saw Hrothe laying ear to rock.

"Don't bother me until I arise," Hrothe commanded.

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So they sat there on the exposed hill, backs bent to the wind, with the sounds of Hrothe whispering a strange word or two and Renik attacking the hard, brown bread. Kollen yawned and curled up on the ground. The rock was still warm, and no doubt Hrothe had the right idea, whatever it was.

Renik nudged him to wakefulness some time later. Kollen leaned up and saw Hrothe stretching himself. The wizard took some water and tore a piece from Renik's massacred loaf, and ate. Renik had lost the last cup of patience from an already dwindled barrel, when finally Hrothe spoke.

"The Earth has a pulse," he said. "We live on the body of a giant, or I hear the unified heartbeats of every living thing, all gathered up together to the sound of slow thunder, like the tread of a marching army."

Renik stood up, shaking off a shower of sand. "If you're going to lecture us about"

"Brothers, please, sit on this hillside with me." Renik paced twice, and he sat. "There's good solid rock under us, that is why I brought us here. This hill is special because its roots go deep enough to tap into the blanket-layer of earth that binds this world together. Such a place makes any power I have stronger by a hundred times. It is one reason why I came to dwell in Fenward. I really do hear a pulse under us when I put my ear to this rock, but I don't know what it is. And with incantation I also hear other sounds making their way through the world's creaks and sighs. This rock is bone to bone with the foundation stone of a certain tower in Akrem, and I heard echoes from the councils of the mages."

"So tell us what you heard and who said it, and what open window they stand near that I can reach with an arrow!" Renik leaned forward, and Kollen sat up straighter.

"Who? Magic is seldom that direct. I can only hear the echoes of the spirits that are the names' substance. There is much excitement, much planning. Of equal quantities I heard — of contentment and anger. Your names echoed through those walls and rooms, too. Does that surprise you? The anger I understand. The contentment — it is disturbing to hear that amidst failure to bring this crown home. Ah, yes, and the crown! No one is planning to wear it. I don't think it is a crown."

Renik had been running sand through his hands like an hourglass, but lost patience before his palmful ran out. He threw the dust aside and got to his feet.

“Well what is it then, Hrothe? The fancy lip of a chamber pot? I’m ready to squat on it now, I tell you I am.”

“What is it? First, it isn’t for wearing. Kollen learned why. It’s like a loaded wagon poised at the top of steep hill. No one here has the strength and skill to steer that wagon once it’s been pushed over the lip. It may have a braking pole to stop it, but that’s another secret. The fact that Sulem came as a sending — a difficult and strength-draining bit of work — shows that he feared the crown or its curse. Yet I doubt it was cursed; its curse is its power, and nothing else. Second, I think the crown is like the wagon indeed, but you are supposed to push the wagon down the hill and follow it, not ride it. *That* is what the Guild may know, although I cannot say this confidently. For now, the only safe course is a careful study of the scroll, that marvelous golden scroll! Wondrous not for its gold — that was merely done to preserve ideas against worms and rot; the defense against the simple bookworm or the drip of water is so costly; there’s a lesson in that. No, not for the gold is the scroll fantastic, but rather for its ancient voice of — of whom? Who can say? The person who died, whose bones you stepped on in the mold? Who was it, who died there? I shake from more than the cold, I dare not guess these matters. Yes, let us hasten back and begin the task! I can help best by...”

“Help?” said Renik. “Help us by conjuring up a spirit to fly through their tower window and bring us back a head pickled in a jar that we can command to tell us everything! We need advice, not more riddles. Kollen, let’s go. It’s a long walk back to Fenward, and in the dark.”

In the darkness Hrothe was moving, a blur of gray where the clouded-over moon set his white sash faintly alight. While he fumbled in his pouch he said, “Believe me, there is a magic that can do exactly what you want, but it’s not the kind I practice. Ask your mage friends, who might well shroud *your* head in a box with herbs, to be made to speak or sing or dance on tongue tip. It can be done.” Hrothe stood up, and he had a lantern in his hand that he lit by a coal kept glowing in a ceramic jar. “Back to Fenward we go, and not entirely by night. I brought a lamp so you wouldn’t ask me to conjure up the sun from its bed.”

* * *

The humble skill of lamp-lighting got them back to Fenward, where Hrothe crawled to his pallet in the tent and promptly slept despite his eagerness to attack the scroll; finally, he admitted the need to gather energy for great leaps, which is a lesson Time teaches only to the aged. But Renik was just beginning to awaken from their mighty drunk, and Kollen himself squatted on his heels and rocked there with unspent energy. He watched Renik sit on the edge of the roof and dangle his feet over the side as he watched the city in its evening life. Four stories below, a stroller hurried by with a lantern in hand, its light casting circles of yellow on the ways. A noisy group of revelers navigated by bouncing against walls and following the echoes of their uncontained laughter.

Kollen scooted over to his brother. “Only half the city sleeps at night,” he told him. “There’s much alive. In fact,” and Kollen looked wistful, although Renik didn’t see in the darkness, “it’s as alive as Akrem in its own way, not far different — that’s why I settled here. Think of the desert as an ocean, and then understand why I stayed. Feel the wind — dry, yes, it’s dry, but it’s sea-breeze steady, and the travelers’ robes are sails that impel them across the sand-sea.”

Renik looked at him. “Which wind shall carry you back to a real port city? Show me, and I’ll toss a coin to the breeze and buy passage for you. I wasn’t so drunk last night that I don’t remember asking you to come home.”

“I remember.” Winds passed across the roof as if to promise a swift journey home. *Home*. He thought of Hrothe snoring in his tent and looked over his shoulder. Fenward was a kind of home, and whatever home it was, that old man had been more than half of it. “Whatever we do, the adventure lies in that direction, if we choose to follow it. We have to follow it; I don’t see a choice, Renik. How can you go home with all that’s happened? And think of what might be at the end of it, if this golden hat that weighs as much as an infant is at the beginning! I’ll come that far, at least, to home, to Akrem, and then we’ll look around us. And I bring Hrothe with me, if he’ll come.” Renik slanted his face and began to speak as Kollen added quickly, “He’ll pay for his way in a dozen ways, believe me. I know he isn’t isn’t direct. He’s slow and patient, and you know, he’s right most of the time.”

“He can come,” said Renik after a while.

Not long later Kollen bent close to his brother to whisper, although the wind would have cloaked any normal conversation.

“Hrothe warned us, and now we can act on it. It *is* dangerous to go to Akrem without further help. Let’s go.”

“Now? Where? Not up another hill!”

“To a place I know. You’ll see.”

The place wasn’t far, only a half-hour walk through a maze of alleys to where the river touched the city a second time, but here it rumbled through a narrow ledge of rock where the land tilted down and away to the south. They could still see a few lit squares of windows in the taller of the city’s towers as they walked along the top of the ledge, then bore away southwest across a boulder-strewn plain, finally descending a slope. At its foot sparsely grassed knolls washed up against the city boundary. Here the slope was carved into ridges and boulders, and Kollen turned left into a narrow cleft in the rock. They were off the path and had to pick carefully along a washout and then up a crumbling ledge. They were doubling back toward the city, but the path suddenly turned into a wedge of shadows unrelieved by any moon beam.

Renik put a hand on Kollen’s shoulder. “Wait, you’re worse than Hrothe was tonight! Just where are we going?” Renik had his cutlass point dangling in the gloom at their feet. “This place doesn’t look too safe.”

“No bandits in here. Never. You have to trust me.”

“Well, trust you and a good iron, maybe. Lead on, mad man.”

They were soon in a deep ravine whose walls swallowed up the sky, but somewhere near its end, a red glow lit a passage. In a moment they were squatting in a low cave lit by a fire with a man sitting before it.

He looked older than Hrothe even if Hrothe was more wrinkled. His age was in his eyes, which were set in the center of radiating wrinkles, with eyes in the centers like tiny spiders ruling their webs. He studied the two men, and he leaned into the light so that the vapors from the pot hanging over the flames curled around his face and tinged his cheeks with orange. It was a well-fed face, having no sign of aesthetic or fanatic starvation. The skin color was impossible to guess because of the lurid fire, although Kollen could see the well-rounded skin was marked all over by small wrinkles, like ripples in pond water. He was old in some ways, for sure, but the smoothly

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shaven face and head — if he had ever had any hair — made the man seem like a plump and frightfully knowledgeable boy.

“I’m making tea,” he said in a wavering contralto. “I have plenty for visitors.”

“We’ve drunk tonight,” said Renik.

“But not my tea, and not on a night like this. Sweet air! Winter chilled, summer spiced! The in-between things are best.”

Kollen accepted a cup and sipped.

“I sniffed steel as you entered my little valley. I know a man by his prized habitual possessions. I will see yours.”

Renik frowned and leaned further backward, if that was possible, seeming already to defy balance with that stiff back. Kollen cleared his throat and passed the man his short sword (his weapon of choice when he knew he wouldn’t be chopping through doors or building rustic ladders for plundering ruins). He studied the weapon and gave it back, still holding out his hand until Kollen passed over three other daggers from waist, boot, and sleeve. When he was done he held out his hand for Renik’s sword, whose tip he passed over the fire without surrendering the hilt. But it was enough.

“Now I can give you what you want.”

“What we want?” said Renik.

“What you came for,” said the man.

“What price?” said Kollen.

The old man smiled and leaned back into the shadows, squatting there on his mat like a fat, quivering heart fallen from a butcher’s table.

“I’ll need some favors. You,” he said, nodding with approval at Kollen, “are a thief. I’ll ask for thieving. A black goat from the Somlavi herders. It’s their fetish; they won’t sell it. But first seal our bargain. You know how, I think.”

The old seer drew a circle in the sand to the left of the fire. Kollen shrugged, pricked his thumb, and let three drops of blood soak into the ground.

Renik was watching him curiously and was probably wondering if it was time to run the terrible old sorcerer through the heart.

“Kollen?”

“I know what I’m doing.”

The seer leaned over the fire. Smoke suffused his clothing and dimmed the light in the cave. He nodded at the two brothers and set

about digging up various boxes and bottles in the sand of his cave. The seer mingled colored sands on the cave floor, then reached into the shadows for cages and let loose a snake, a rat, then a wingless crow (the healed stubs of its wing bones looked like pegs in its sides) to scuttle about the picture. The old man closed his eyes and sat still. It all seemed like such a small effort, but in a few minutes the sorcerer fell backward on his elbow and panted for breath. And then he looked on the two brothers with fear in his widening eyes.

Kollen said, "So? What's my thieving worth?"

"Not enough," the man whispered.

"What's that mean?" Kollen leaned forward, hands on hips. Renik leaned on his bared cutlass, the brass handguard glowing dangerously in the firelight.

"Where have you come from? What do you want with me? I'm protected! I won't be taken easily!"

"Kollen—?" Renik was standing, now. He kept half his sight on their rear and his blade on guard.

"What's this? We came here for some simple advice. That's all."

"You've come here from the Moon's dark side, brothers, or from the wrong side of the grave. Leave! I tell you, leave."

"Kollen! This place stinks."

"Wait, Renik." Kollen reached across the fire and took hold of the seer's cloak. He pulled gently. The old man's eyes seemed ready to pop out onto the ground. "I'm a respectful thief. I don't bully old folk. Just tell me what you saw."

"Have your advice, then. I want it off my soul." The seer broke spasmodically from Kollen's grip. "Brothers! You're the bloodhounds for what your enemies need, a coven that joins to drive you to death's lee shore. Flee your enemies northward to something that all covet — such a treasure that you'll stand on a path of riches yet never have a chance to look down at it. Flee the man who lays now in a womb crying for birth, wrapped in a basket of life that grips like a funeral shroud, crying your names. Trust yourself to the sea, northward, I said northward, where the sea will carry you willingly, and mayhap turn your hairs grayer, and you'll be eaten by jaws wide enough to swallow a ship. Then, a darkness gathers around you both. Oh black, parental, smothering arms! Take up tombstone carving for a trade, because you stink of death, and death follows you, and you'll stand on the broken spine of your family."

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With that the seer took a whistling breath and fell backward, thrusting at the sand with his heels to roll his bulk away from them.

“Let him speak one more *death*, Kollen, and he’ll start charging us a coin for every further breath of it.” Renik sheathed his cutlass. “I was nervous for a silly old man and his tricks. I know a whore in the city who’ll tell us better fortunes for lesser tasks. Sena the Prophet said, ‘People flock to seers to know their futures; then they feel safe doing what they have already planned.’ Let’s move on. We knew what to do.”

“I want neither coin nor....” the sorcerer leaned up and scooped up the sand in which Kollen’s blood had soaked, and he dumped it in the fire, “.... nor bargain of any kind. Those were free words. Interpret them strictly or freely, and I free you of any commitment. Only leave this place.”

They did leave, and neither man spoke to the other until their feet were scraping the hard-packed road into the city.

When lanterns and stray light from window cracks began to brighten the path, Kollen admitted that he was surprised at the night’s outcome, but he still trusted the gist of the advice.

“And it cost us nothing, right?”

Renik let his silence ask the questions.

Kollen let the silence stand for a few minutes longer; then he stopped walking and threw his thoughts at Renik’s back.

“Speak, brother, why don’t you speak to me? Why don’t you share something with me, even if just a thought? We never spoke; you just tossed a few commands my way, plenty of advice, almost never a genuine question. You don’t share anything, never have, and now when it would cost you nothing you — ”

Renik had stopped but hadn’t faced Kollen. Now he turned his head until Kollen saw his profile against a wine-seller’s lantern down the road. Speech seemed to come with effort, as if a fog as thick as butter choked Renik’s gullet.

“I came to Fenward for you.”

“Empty handed but for a spare loin cloth and shirt for a trip of a few days.”

“I came to share everything.”

“Praise-worthy intentions.”

“If you offered hard work as often as you asked for this and that perhaps you’d have more to your liking, Kollen.” Renik turned now to face him, hooking his thumbs in his sword belt.

“Hard work? What we’ve gotten tonight has been almost all of *my* hard work!”

“What has happened since I’ve come here that hasn’t happened against our will?”

After a long pause Kollen said, “Is that how it all happened?” Kollen recalled their boyish happiness in the light of the burning barrow the previous dawn. “Well, then I believe you. We’re driven, never driving. If the seer is right, then we’ve a long driven distance left to go.”

Renik started walking, but said over his shoulder, “I’ve learned to ride out a storm. There’s time afterward to set your own course. That’s the way of the world.”

“There’s always a storm,” Kollen said under his breath. He watched Renik walk until he met a fork in the road. Then he had to wait for Kollen to show him the way.

* * *

In the morning they ate a breakfast with Hrothe as the sun peeked over the domes and towers. He accepted Kollen’s offer of a change of scenery with a quickness that made Kollen blink.

“Perhaps I can be of use in what may follow,” he said. “But I warn you: my magic is neither thunder-tossing stuff nor the dark pool of wisdom dearly bought, both of which exact more payment from the practitioner than he knows. Mostly, I can help you chose roads.”

They ate in dead silence.

CHAPTER 6 — THE AWAKENING OF AKREM

Rock ‘a there baby lie still in your cradle,
the moon, she’s a lady as heard in a fable
and she will shine on to drive away sprites
who creep upon soft shoes out in the night. — Old lullaby

“Never worry about it, Hrothe; a special wind drives me toward Kollen. We’re fated to meet, like keel and reef. I’ll find him. How far can he be?”

How far, indeed? Renik asked in his mind. Sometimes he thought, actually, that Kollen was like a mirage — a vision of a land just within sight but never reachable. And just now, his brother was unreachable, having gone off by himself even while Renik, Hrothe, and the crew were in the middle of the bustle of events that were to lead them to sea in the next few days.

“Wait for me, Renik. I’ll come.” Renik did wait as Hrothe stumbled out of Renik’s house, still wriggling on a boot. Renik smiled in spite of his melancholy: Hrothe had the knack of leaving his dignity behind, forgotten at odd moments. Renik, a simple, blunt man, admired Hrothe for that. It was strange, but he thought suddenly that this was a source of Hrothe’s strength, not his magical craft. Dignity could be like an anchor, sometimes, cast out at the wrong moment. Surely, Hrothe had shown some strength and flexibility in their two-day journey across the desert and the mountains. He had shown his aching bones only after they crossed the rim of the mountain range and looked down toward the coast, with Akrem standing out as some fields and towers at the edge of the ocean-sparkle. Then he had leaned on the mane of the horse and then thrown up his hands, composing an ode to the Spirit of Completed Journeys.

Hrothe got his boots strapped on and joined Renik in a limping stride. Renik wobbled some, too, still sore from all this unaccustomed horseback riding in the past days. They walked silently for a while, made quiet, perhaps, by the heaviness and mystery of their surroundings.

This was the oldest part of the Akrem, criss-crossed with roads that were worn into the ground like an ancient’s wrinkles. The spires of old temples rose, or leaned, and here and there one could pick out

the heavy stonework that the warrior-lords of the centuries-dead founders had laid. A few spires and domed roofs rose into sight, and all were dominated by the thick tower of the Guild of Mages, as tall as a merchant ship stood on its stern, squatting in stark strength, gazing across the rooftops of humbler buildings. Even the Dahsa of Akrem's towers were lower, and their gilt trim somehow made them seem smaller still.

Renik was used to these surroundings and would not have felt the brooding weight if the streets had been rather busier. The evening had just begun, and the gibbous moon shone bright as a lantern, but most of the street merchants had already packed their carts and folded their awnings, and were now bent over the handles, pushing the carts home with sweating haste. You could feel that haste, but Renik thought that, if he asked them, they would only shrug, or even deny their early night. 'Sir, I just feel like going home,' they might say.

They walked on through the air that was at the verge of change from the shore breeze to the land. The ocean smell, ever-present in Akrem, was being diluted as the planted fields and beyond them the wooded hills climbing up the eastern mountain range began adding their scents. It was spring smell to Renik, for the herders were driving their winter-thin animals away from the city and up into the pastures, and so the land-breeze didn't carry the scent of fresh manure with it.

The needs of winter had long ago made the tradition in Fenward of letting the animals crop wherever they could find grass, and at the edge of the city, that included the burial grounds. Before his trip to Fenward, Renik had been there walking among the pillarstones with the last few sheep and cattle getting in a snack before the drive to the summer pastures. They were back at their proper business even though some years ago one of the elders of Akrem had put on a public spectacle against the grazers. He'd stood on the Speaker's Stairs and declaimed a great speech about the beasts allowed to drop their manure near the stones of revered soldiers and statesmen and even priests. It wasn't a topic of great interest at that time, but the elder had hired food vendors and jugglers to follow his speech, and suddenly great feeling for well-treated graves arose. Blacksmiths got good business out of the rich for wrought-iron fences, and humbler folk banded for a short time to hire children to drive animals away from the cemeteries.

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The day before he had ridden to Fenward to see Kollen, Renik had stood before the stones of his mother and father with a pregnant sheep pulling up some grass nearby. And in a prelude to all the odd revisions of feeling he would be going through, he'd shaken his head and wondered how the company of an animal could disturb the dead, or the visiting living.

He had sat on the grass with the sheep grazing around him. They had already trimmed around the stones so that the "Laraf son of Len" and the "Shenna daughter of Agrapar" could be seen above the grass. On his father's stone, the simple carving of a dolphin also stood out; it was bent in an arch, and the grass was just high enough so that the fish seemed to be leaping into a sea of green.

"Perhaps he went back to the cemetery," Hrothe said, startling Renik from his musings and seeming to have read his very thoughts. But in truth the old man's suggestion had some sense. Earlier that day Renik and Kollen had gone together to their parent's graves, Renik hoping that Kollen would swear an oath over them, an oath to family fealty and brotherly loyalty, an affirmation of good decent work on the sea after this mess about Sulem and all could be straightened out. Renik had suddenly felt himself free from the last chains of silence and had poured out a lake of plans, possibilities, anecdotes; that is, Renik was strangely happy on the grassy hill of the dead. In fact, Renik wished the whole mess could be forgotten despite the possibility for real wealth the adventure offered — he day-dreamed about sailing for a cargo of wine at Sahla with Kollen converted to a willing merchant-brother learning the business from Renik in a long-delayed education. But the day-dream was broken as his brother had stood at the graves and only gazed out over the city with his thumbs hooked in his belt, silent in a foreboding way. And later they had quarreled back at the family house, fought over something as menial as running errands to get their, ship *Renik's Luck*, ready to sail.

"No, he didn't go back there," Renik answered with certainty. "We'll take a turn around the marketplace before heading back to the Twin Irons. It's all we can do. Kollen's just out avoiding the necessary work that the *Luck* must have before she sails. Provisions have to be stowed and ordered, even for a short sail. Loose nails found and driven down, dry-rotted wood cut out, new lumber fit and knocked in, ropes to be tarred, odds and ends replaced — Kollen was never any good at it. I could always find him with a coil of rope

needing splicing, sitting legs a-dangle over the sides, staring out across the city. Once I ...”

The moon glowing over Akrem’s angular roof-tops saved Renik, pointing accusing light on the blade of his attacker. Renik didn’t have time to draw completely; he ducked under his partially freed cutlass and took the full, clanging brunt of a slash from a long sword. Renik finished his draw and slashed downward, hit the attacker in spite of himself, and then finished more consciously with a thrust under the breast bone. It was done well, and there was no return attack. The foe coughed and slumped against the wall of a warehouse.

Renik pulled free and spun around; no other foe stepped forward in the alley. His every nerve hummed like a harp string when he turned toward Hrothe’s face, which was a fuzzy white oval punctuated by deeply planted eyes. The old wizard remained flattened against the side of the building as the attacker coughed and vomited even while trying to raise his sword again.

Renik stood there, looking wildly around, and then he bent over the corpse and stifled a cry. Hrothe came forward and leaned over. From the next street over came the sounds of the night-watch, trading shouts with the guards in the marketplace tower.

“What” Hrothe started, but hearing the watchmen, not knowing where their route was taking them, Renik suddenly took him by the shoulder and hurried him around the corner of warehouse until they could melt into the shadow of a buttress.

“Hrothe,” Renik whispered as he caught his breath, “I know him. He’s called Anar, a personal guard of Tanid, a gold merchant. We had no quarrel!” The rough masonry was damp under his hand as he leaned against the wall. The night in general was cold and cheerless, a mist having hung at the mouth of the harbor, threatening to move inland.

“Hired by the mages, perhaps, to — ?”

“Anar? He drank in my house, he’s a jolly scoundrel.” Renik broke off and moved them farther down the alley, with many pauses and backward glances and under-the-breath protests.

“Perhaps not hired, then,” Hrothe replied, but let the statement sink in as Renik fled the scene of the fight, skirting the warehouse and taking another alley that went between some shops. Most of these — long, low shops owned by small craftsmen’s associations — were darkened, although the hammer-ring of a tinsmith or jeweler could be

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heard in the depths of one of the houses. Renik stopped them with a hand on Hrothe's shoulder. The unlit alley was dark, since the angle of moonlight didn't penetrate there, and the air smelled of urine. Renik listened, then shook his head and stared at Hrothe. A moment later he was tugging him down the alley again, mumbling,

"I won't believe it, can't understand it. Anar was a jolly fellow."

There was no warning for the next attack. A spiny creature swelled out around the corner where the alley opened onto a cobblestoned street.

Renik was hypnotized, unsure of what he saw. In a second he knew it was no monster, but rather five of them, a mass of men with cutlass blades and pikes extended, coming forward like a charmed pincushion.

Perhaps it was lucky that the shock of the last attack was between its peak and resolution. Renik was numbed enough to be calm, and rational enough to act, and now only a wildman tactic could save them, and that's what he did. He shouted — there is such relief in a battle-cry when all seems impossible — and charged his new foes, then flattened against the wall after having drawn out a spear cast. His cutlass wove around in a figure eight and touched outstretched blades. The attackers swarmed around him coolly, without a word. There were four of them, one dying rapidly to give the others a moment to lunge. Renik backstepped furiously to keep the men from his flanks. Blades chiseled on his own and sent shocks through his arm.

"Run!" he shouted at Hrothe, who had flattened against the wall of the shop and sunk down to a crouch. Battle raged three feet from the wizard's knees, and he wasn't stirring.

Then Hrothe spoke a word, two words, but Renik didn't understand them, and by the time he cried out again for Hrothe to stand and run, he saw a change come over his attackers.

A spark like a lightning bolt played between their weapons for a moment, and then their blades were all drawn together with a staccato ring. Even daggers thrust in belts leaped out and clanged against the mass of metal, and the attackers tried to pull them apart to no avail.

Hrothe staggered to his feet and whispered hoarsely, "Take us to a canal, Renik, into a boat, before they let go their weapons and simply tear us to pieces with fingers."

Hrothe struggled to move away on suddenly quivering legs, and he tugged Renik along as the foes wrestled with their stuck weapons. Then Hrothe himself collapsed.

Spell work was harder than it looked: Kollen had said that once: “Wizards don’t sweat much, except on the inside.” Renik hadn’t been quite convinced but he was now as he jumped up and slipped an arm down Hrothe’s back and hoisted him by his sash. They staggered down the alley, where it opened onto a canal. Already Renik heard the slapping of water against rotting piles that kept the sides of the old canals from washing down.

He hurried along the path that ran along the canal. Down a little ways, several punts rode the dirty water. The tide was up, the boats riding high and close to the level of the alley: good timing for getting a fainting man into a boat.

“Obvious,” panted Hrothe without being asked. “Mages’ Guild. But, it makes—not right—no sense. They wanted you alive a few days ago—not right.”

“Maybe they changed their minds. Couldn’t handle us.” Renik untied the boat and kicked it away from the litter of small craft nuzzling around the piling like hungry puppies.

“Must leave this city now! Time—need time to think. We’ve started something beyond us. Should’ve known—would happen.”

“We’ve got to gather the lads, then we’re off. Before we left the ship I sent three men to finish rigging the *Luck*, and the rest should be gathering at the Twin Irons.”

Hrothe nodded and curled up on the bottom of the boat where bits of flotsam swirled in the water that had leaked in, but the old man seemed ready to sleep. “Fine, restless water,” he said, yawning, “magic crosses it only with supremest effort. It’ll rain soon, I hope.” And then Hrothe was asleep.

He had a quarter hour to rest while Renik poled their boat through the maze of canals that formed Akrem’s southern flank. The rotting piles were driven into the canal muck, some of them braced by cross-beams that Renik had to duck, while others leaned into the canal and let cascades of bricks and stones slump into the water, on which green masses of weeds were growing. A dead seagull floated by, not the first dead thing to float there, Renik mused.

Occupied by scenes of decay and the slow rhythm of push, lean, pull, it didn’t seem too long before the prow of their boat bumped the

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little quay that abutted the back door of the wine-shop called The Twin Irons.

Renik knocked on the door and spoke a word. In a moment he heard bars withdrawn, and the shopkeeper's daughter blocked the doorway. She had a sturdy body bred on the deck of a ship — not an altogether uncommon thing for the practical mariners of Akrem, who thought it proper that the females be able to do men's trades if they fell ill, or, more likely, drowned. Deena, though, had earned some reputation and muscle as a woodcarver, and it was rare ship in the nearby stretch of docks that didn't sport one of her figureheads or ornamented rails. Deena leaned her head out the door, a narrow face framed with light brown hair, pierced by large blue eyes. A carpenter's broadaxe swung in her hand, looking as ready to shave down a beam or a man, but she dropped it and slipped the bars behind the two men when she saw Renik. Her eyes rove over the shipmaster.

"We're fine, Deena. Can't explain right now. Bar the door and watch...no, better, peel vegetables on the dock as if we never came in. I'll owe you a favor."

"More like a hundred favors," she said, but she pressed his arm before sitting on the stool at the door, bowl of potatoes at her feet, axe leaning against her leg under the skirt.

Renik settled Hrothe down in the hammock of the Iron's back room, a place always available for the shop's old customers and generally continuously occupied in the season of family quarrels that preceded the spring's sea-work.

Renik emerged unseen from the backroom and stood in a corner cluttered with empty wine jars behind the long serving table. He looked over the men of his ship who'd gathered there. There were no others, the hour being rather early for wineshops, and most dockers and sailors were working into the night with oil lamps hung from rigging as the sailing season began. And yet, someone else — an old fellow, or a laughing-lazy man, or a singer — should have been there. Again, Renik felt strange — like the streets, the wineshop ought to have had other patrons.

The mood may have affected his men, for most of the crew of *Renik's Luck* were sitting in a glum circle around a dented table.

They were a shaggy-looking bunch, as sailors often are who have been awakened from a winter's snooze and hustled to the tar pots to prepare their ship. But Renik had stopped them before they'd gotten

into the swing of work. The winter cold was not boiled out, nor had spring's warmth thawed the heart. He leaned against the old smoothed wood of the door jamb and thought back to their meeting three days earlier.

* * *

This year he had given them strange orders after his return from Fenward. The ship had been hardly scraped and given a few patches when Renik had ordered all such basic work stopped. He had gathered them at his hillside house, and hired two of the local people to cook a huge supper and carry seven huge wine jars from a merchant's hoard, and for a wild night the rafters had shaken with laugh and song until Renik hushed them with a speech hinting of a different start of the season.

For the first time in a long time, Renik had been happy. The house was open and full, as a house should be, and Kollen was home, and no telling what their fortunes could bring. The return from Fenward had been a most agreeable contrast to his winter melancholy, when the house was empty except for the company of cousin Anasa who had dwelling-rights to a room in what had been their grandfather's house. At assorted other times the place might host some of the crew or a visiting trader. Most often, however, especially in the winter when sailors are drawn to the hearths of family, and when Anasa was often warming at the fires of friends and other kinfolk, the large common-room of the house echoed to Renik's solitary tread. Then the room's displays seemed like tomb furnishings. Curious wine-jars from seldom-visited ports, a carved spear given to grandfather as a gift from primitive folk on a far north coast, the toothed jaw of a whale — they all reminded Renik of what had been and not what could be.

But now — Kollen! The family was gathered and complete. Kollen needed no introductions. The ship's crew included a cousin and two second cousins, and some of the remainder were friends of the family or kin of family friends. Akrem's mariners usually comprised families and associates working the same ship for years. It was even said that children learned their social connections by going to sea and reading the carved marks of their kin that decorated deck rails.

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Renik had simply said, "Men, my brother has come home," leaving further details to be worked out over the wine jugs in the tumult.

Hrothe had the knack of easy friendship, and he shared a cup with the men but didn't laugh very often and often studied the empty corners. He had been hard at study of the golden scroll they had gotten from the crown chamber, as much as he could on horseback across the desert and in the last two nights. The study had made him silent.

At last Renik had called them together, and they had leaned forward, foreheads almost touching, as he told them to heave down the ship from the braces and get her floating as soon as they could. They passed glances that even wine-giddy heads could read, for what Renik asked was no easy task for a twin-masted vessel nearly a hundred feet long, and still needing some coats of tar and a few hull strakes.

"I know," Renik had said, his jaw muscles tensing beneath the short beard. "It's not the way to start a season. The ship has to be ready, that's all." He had swirled his wine around in its cup and stared within it, then, cupping his hand over the top of his goblet most curiously, he said looking at them straight, "There's been trouble. None of you are involved. None of you have to be involved. There's work on these docks for good sailors, and I'll help you find it where I can. Whoever comes with me might be rich at the end....or dead. I will tell you more tomorrow, when I know more myself, with Hrothe's help."

Anasa was the first mate and the eldest of them all, a cousin of the brothers. He unfolded a bony arm, knocked his pipe against the table and searched for his tobacco pouch. Anasa had kept his pouch in the same place since the dawn of creation, but this was speech time.

"Been waitin' for death long enough, I s'pose, and the deal is, if he can't get here before winter's last snow, then he's missed me for the year." He found his pouch and began the laborious unlacing of its straps. "Aye."

Enesh gave his nod. He was the next eldest after Anasa, stout and bald, and the best navigator by the stars, as if the dome of his head were the model of the skydome there to consult at close range.

"Leave the ship?" said Atono, the tallest among them, a mighty rower, and a gentle foster parent for the ship, whose planked sides he

treated better than his own skin. “Quicker I’d be leaving me liver behind, but the rest of the hull work...”

“I’m on,” said Turlane, who might model for the statue of a prince in the folktales. “My mother said I’d die young, which is the best time, anyway.”

Thon nodded his quick, sharp face, Thon, the hungry thief whom Renik had caught stealing food from the ship and had drubbed him and then made him work to pay it off; Thon had refused to leave when his sentence was up.

Botha, the brother’s second cousin, slapped the table for his ‘aye.’ He was as short as the brothers but twice as thick, and when the ship sailed dangerous waters, Renik always told Botha to go over the side and stay between rocks and keel. Calin, a second cousin, reminded Renik of the gift of a fine, thick keel-timber once given by his father to Renik’s father, and how the unrequited debt was still remembered painfully in that part of the family — but he agreed to go after some blinking and shaking of the head. And Banath and Santell nodded their heads, friends of family and relatively new to the ship, but spirited enough, at least that night, with the wine in them. And little Mikello, the youngest, an orphan picked up at the end of a voyage two years ago and now living aboard ship; he bounced on his stool, and the dark, curly locks fell across his face as he pledged undying faith to ship and crew.

But Esha was silent. Renik patted him on the shoulder.

“I know Esha. It isn’t many of us with three newborns struggling past the winter, and a recovering wife to think about. Now, Esha has a rare liquor to have planted triplets, hasn’t he, lads? That’s why I wasn’t going to let you go this time. Master Veetoe will take you on the *Charger*, a good ship, though lacking the *Luck*’s character and maturity, but she isn’t going far from home this season. Next voyage, Esha.”

That had been the start of the season for them — all minds fired up with Renik’s urgency but unblessed by further explanations as he, Kollen, and Hrothe dived into feverish planning.

* * *

Renik refocused his eye to the present. That was all three days past, and since then the crew that Renik now saw in the low-ceilinged tavern had worked day and night at getting the ship partly sea-ready.

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The *Luck* was floating early, off her braces in the low-tide mud early enough to have gotten on the deeper-water docks at Akrem's north side. Now she had better be ready to leave calm waters.

Renik stepped around the long table and dredged up some humor.

"These faces are long enough to haul fish with. What's your tale?" he said. The faces turned toward him. Anasa spoke.

"We loaded some bags of charcoal, that was easy enough. We got some sweet water on. Aye. Then Tomo levied on us twice the coin due for the food. I paid out the coin, Renik, 'cause you asked good speed."

"Even then we had to hammer down his door to get him out to sell us the stuff," said Turlane. "And then the chandler wouldn't sell us rope to restring the foremast. We made do with our spare cord, but that leaves us old stuff for repairs."

Botha drummed the table, his own face heating up with the flush of ill events. "Said he had none until the week following, Captain. Had none! What, with half the ships in the city nearing ready to slip?"

Renik scratched his beard slowly, then just as slowly drew his cutlass and laid it across the table, still sticky with the sweat of killing.

"Those things are strange enough. My story is stranger. I've been attacked twice tonight by townfolk."

The men looked at the dirty blade.

"More still," Anasa said after having run his finger along his master's blade and studying the smudge on his finger. "Ship's bein' watched." The men looked toward their first mate with a low surf-noise of questions. "Didn't say nothing at the time. Didn't want Botha to go twist off any heads, 'least not right off. Up in the sailmaker's loft there's a set of eyes, and a beggar in Tar Lane looks rather too healthy to be a'beggin'."

They pondered these matters in silence as the low fire in the hearth behind the board crackled and Mikello fed scrap pieces of old planks and spars to keep it going. Meanwhile, Hrothe dragged in from the back room, looking bleary eyed and ten years older than yesterday, and just as shaggy as the others in the old sea-cloak he'd borrowed from Renik. He sat down on a corner bench and poured himself wine from a bottle he'd taken from the back room. However, it appeared that he'd already downed a significant part of it. He drank

more and settled his head down in his palms, mumbling something about bad weather.

Renik picked up his sword and inspected it for damaging notches before sheathing it again uncleaned.

“Seen Kollen? No? Where’re the others?”

“Enesh, Calin, and Banath are with the ship, threading up a new line,” Turlane said.

“Good. Now listen: This is why I rushed the ship to water. Kollen and I were involved in a little mishap in Fenward, but what we got out of it is this.” Renik took out the crown, which he’d been keeping in a canvas sack suspended under his arm. Whites of eyes popped and winked like fireflies as the crew formed a close circle. Curiously enough, they were quiet. “Yes, it’s solid gold, but Hrothe thinks the worth in it lies in something else. It may be a kind of map to an even greater treasure. How? I don’t know. I had hoped Hrothe could tell us today, because he’s been reading a scroll that Kollen won in the same venture, and it may hold other clues, but he needs more time.” Renik glanced over to Hrothe, mumbling with his head in his hands, and he frowned and quickly found another subject. “One clue is that we must take to water and sail north. That makes good sense if only because the Guild of Mages wants Kollen and I, and we need some safe time to sort out this mystery. Hrothe says we need moving water between us, to confuse the trail, and we’re going.” Renik suddenly put the crown away and looked at his men. “The mages want a treasure; they were convinced Kollen could lead them to some of it back at Fenward. It’s all a long story, when we’ve the time for it. But this is how it’s turned around — now *we* are going to lead the chase. We’re going to find this stuff, and plate the *Luck*’s hull with gold, and roof your houses with it. Those who come have a fair share in the ship’s business as ever. You have a say, as you did last night. Some of you are family, and the rest I treat as well as third cousins. But the family must decide. The family has declined, bad luck taking two of our ships. Now, the remaining one, *Renik’s Luck*, now there’s the proper name, and a prophetic name! Kollen is my other half and he’s back. The family is as complete as it will ever be, and I stood on my father’s and mother’s grave and had no ill portents. So I’m sailing, I’m taking the risk, and Kollen and Hrothe, and whoever else will come. Now I’ll”

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Renik saw that the men were contemplating the ire of the city's dreaded sorcerers. He was leading into another speech just for that topic, which he'd rehearsed in his mind all day, when the tavern door flung open and let in a loud and ragged figure.

"Mist and chill!" it said, bringing a stink of fish and wet leather with him. Soon a wrinkled little man shed his oilskin and hung with it a roped-together half-dozen flounder. "Wine, hot wine, or I'm a dead man. I've Shemer's supper here in trade for hot, spiced wine."

"Teel," said Anasa, "I thought I saw a half sunk skiff in the bay this mornin', but I figured it was a ghost and a bad prospect for the day."

Teel shouldered his way into the table of Renik's men. "A ghost, ya say? Aye, aye, aye, I'm a ghost of a man and getting ghostlier every day. A man catches fish and can't sell 'em. That's a ghost-making business. Shemer! Hot wine!"

"He's out helping provision his son's ship," said Renik. "Mikello, play bar boy. Dayna's busy. Now Teel, go drink yourself into a blacksmith's warmth, but over there in the corner, because..."

But Teel heard only the drink part and grinned hugely, which sent a wave of wrinkles up his face to break in ripples on his eyes. "Aye, spice up a cup real good, boy! Old Teel's been rowing on icy mist and tramping freezing cobblestones all day. That's my story. I always sell some fish over at the wizards' compound, when they're not eating lizard's livers, ya know. But today the cook there said they're all locked up because ..."

"Teel, not now," Renik said.

"Aye, ya wanting no stories now. Youths, youths, never a patient one among the lot. But I says to myself I'll stay right here and wait for 'em to be done their spell work and the lot, and *then* they'll buy my fish, for food's the best for halving hunger, we know that. But their gate's been locked all day, and that's that." The old man's eyes narrowed, and he grinned a little. "'Course, ya not wanting to hear about their soldiers, either I guess. So anyways I goes..."

"Teel, good fellow, tell us about the soldiers."

"Aye, ya want the tale, now! So then I figures I'll sell fish to the wizards' guard. But believe me if I tell ya that I pushes my cart to the barracks and then out comes a full guard, all clanking an' running, spreading out through the Five Corners. And no fish sold, that's my tale. Ah, boy, thank ya, nice and hot!"

The fisherman gurgled down a draught, savoring the steam curling up from the cup and fanning it toward him as he set the cup down. The smells in the room were a curious mix of fish and spices.

“Teel, how many of the wizards’ guards were out?”

“Close to all of em, Renik sir, I’d wager that. So I goes around to the kitchen side anyways, seeing that I knows the master cook...”

“How long ago, Teel? The guards, I mean.”

“Ah, now. As long as it takes for a ghost to walk here from there.”

Renik stood up. “Lads, to the ship and look busy. Bring Hrothe with you. Botha, you and I are looking for Kollen. He’s late. We’ve got the tide now, but it’s going out. We have to cut out soon.”

“She’s lacking good wings; know it, Renik.” Anasa said. “Sailmaker was white and shivering when he told me his boys fell sick and the canvas wasn’t ready.”

“Can’t worry about that. This is a crazy city. We’re safer at sea with old canvas.”

The men got up and began swinging cloaks around them when several bronze-armored soldiers stepped in asking for a shipmaster named Renik as well as any of his kin.

* * *

Kollen saw Teel pushing his cart into the Wizards’ compound when a line of soldiers spread out with long, clashing strides from a postern gate. He had strayed near the estate with a dangerous curiosity and now figured it was all done. Still, he’d lived so long because his wits were about him. From inside his cloak he drew a leather bag he used for just such awkward moments, although his heart wrestled inside him as he purposefully approached the soldiers, shaking his bag of jewelry of semiprecious stones.

“Bright gems for the dear one?” he called in a sing-song voice. Kollen shook the leather bag again. “They heal the wounds of wife-fight, fast and final!”

For this the leader pushed him away without another glance. Kollen turned aside, bowing low, and went off at a tangent.

The Dahsa’s city guard was curiously absent tonight, even as observers. The Mages Guild and Merchant Guild had long had a strong influence on city rule, as well as a strong personal guard. The sailors were too independent for their Navigator’s Guild to have built up any power in consensus, although it was among the oldest of the

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city's organizations. That left the Merchant Guild to be most visible, their hired swords occasionally seen confiscating smuggled goods or plundering a foreign ship whose crew hadn't smiled the right way. The Mages Guild seldom could be seen doing anything, but their guards were often heard at practice behind the tall walls of the Guild estate, or escorting a mage, robed and mysterious, on a quest aboard the guild ship or caravan. But tonight, Akrem's Dahsa was not affecting independence and at some unheard signal had ceded the streets to the Mages for a rare martial display.

Kollen walked on, listening to the Mage guard dividing into five groups of ten, each taking a main avenue. He whined out his wares to be safe with his act a moment longer, but sounding faker to himself each time, and soon he just walked quietly. What to do now? Hrothe had advised they get to sea, not necessarily to follow the seer's advice (Kollen had admitted the event on the desert trip, and Hrothe had shamed him by simply nodding his head) — "Let us get to sea as soon we are able, for sorcerous arts cross water with only great difficulty, and we will be safer to think and plan." The family ship, *Renik's Luck* (Kollen smirked), was to be ready in a few days. And yet Mage soldiers were out, most likely chasing the men who'd survived their first attempts at mind-slavery. Would they survive the delay in getting to sea?

Kollen bent his path to the shoreline, eventually dropping a few feet from a rotting pier and heading out across the mud where the gibbous moon threw a ghost of a shadow before him. The strand was littered with soggy boards and gull-picked fish bones, the garbage of a bustling port city. He hopped over the scatter and sloshed through the waves up to the ankles. Way out across the harbor, toward the north, a dark gray cloud hung, a line of mist that plugged the harbor and extended across the straits to the great isle of Calan lying a three-hour row away. The tide was coming up. It rolled and broke, and the frothing, perfect whiteness contrasted with the dark, greasy mud of the tidal flats. Sea stink and fresh salt air intermingled; they were smells ingrained in his memory of childhood and reminded Kollen that he was home again.

He had intended to play-act a disenchanting wanderer of the strand, treading slowly by the sea, lost in thoughts, as unlikely a candidate for arrest as the whining peddler he recently was. And besides, he was in

the water as Hrothe had advised. But suddenly he found he needn't act a part that he fit naturally.

He bent over and laved his hands in the cold sea, musing about old days and lost years. The weight of the golden scroll taken from Habranne's mound pressed against his side as he bent over to look at the dead sea-creatures he'd found at this same strand decades ago, bringing them home to an admiring mother who wrinkled her nose. 'Mmmm, Kollen, he was a real monster! Now why don't you go bury him in the garden so we don't lose him, that's a good boy.'

Without knowing why, he drew forth the gold scroll and studied its characters. It was too archaic for him recognize more than a few words here and there. Hrothe had spent much time with it in the desert — at camp and even on horseback — but he had kept silent on what he'd learned.

But Kollen did ponder what the scroll meant in other terms: it was the treasure that had gotten him home again. It had worked indirectly and dramatically, for sure. *The most valuable things are always the most dangerous ones*, Kollen thought. He slipped the scroll back into his shirt and stared out along the shore. The sun had gone down but he could see the bare poles of the ships that lined the docks or rocked at the ends of their anchor ropes in the bay. Their masts and rigging formed a vast, low spider web across the horizon. Spider webs caught the dew in the morning and made the drops into tiny gems sparkling in new sunshine, and so, too, the poles and rigging caught the orange glow in their own webs and caught Kollen as well. *Home* had wrapped him around.

Kollen smiled and stood up and started walking across the strand, bending his path back toward a stone ramp where the harbor fishermen dragged in their catch. Several boats were stranded on the mud with their weedy umbilical cords tied to the pilings. A pair of men had just left their boat and were dragging their catch between them. It was as timeless a scene as he could recall.

"I could be young again," he murmured. Then he thought, *How often had I gone in Tal's old boat, keeping him company as he dropped nets for fish as I rowed in a circle and we brought them up. Tal, poor old fellow, hardly ever three rotten fish between him and starvation, and my father and brother blowing words in my ear about wasting the day in a leaky skiff. Mother understood, somehow she did. 'Make the run to Yenish without Kollen this week,' she'd tell father. 'I*

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need someone home with me for a few days' chores.' I remember, that's what she would say. And I'd have a week of Tal's smelly skiff and his good stories. Somehow I never did anything wrong in his eyes, never got a bad word out of him.

Tal had drowned before Kollen was a full-grown man. He had washed ashore wrapped in his own net, protected in a tough shroud that even had a few fish in it. The city guard had dumped him in a mass pauper-grave just as they'd found him.

Kollen turned from the sea and headed back into the city. He was beginning to make himself sad, and he always avoided that as best he could.

He climbed the weedy rocks and gained the wide shore road. Still intent on losing himself, he took a crooked course through a market, where he thought that the low, stone shacks were dark and quiet rather early, then he swerved into an alley, where a few children tossed a ball made of tied rags, and then into another where the echo of an argument over rent was channeled by the close walls into a roar. He tried to forget his melancholy and concentrated now on getting lost in people. That was always a good rule. He drew a map of the city in his mind and turned onto a broader street. Yes, he heard it and smelled it. The echoes of a brawl bounced between the stone buildings, and the walls channeled a wind composed of vomit vapors and the smell of cheap wine.

Rich merchants once owned the houses on this street. The buildings stood two or three stories high, forming a valley that brought an early night to the locale. But the rich had moved out years ago before a tide of encroaching poor, like a master running from the guard dog he'd beaten and starved to make it useful in its anger. No sound of harpsichord wafted from crystal-caged windows any more. Instead, slivers of light escaped warped shutters, refugees from the sportive wargames that were taking place inside. Below the shuttered windows, ornate archways that had been warded by liveried attendants were now thrown open to a riot of visitors. Harlots sat on stone lions that had been the keepers of family dignity; the folds of their skirts were stretched tautly between widely spaced knees — like the open doors of the taverns, signs of hospitality. Meanwhile the bravos of the street strutted before their princesses, equally ready to fight for their honor or sell it to the best bidder.

Kollen let the tumult burst around him. He bought wine from a bent-backed vendor, whose arthritic hands were stiff but still could snap up a coin with practiced accuracy. Kollen took a seat on a curb and sipped his drink, trying to sink into the surroundings, but also (though he wouldn't have admitted it) to push his luck, dare bad luck to follow, which was a kind of game he'd always played when bad feelings seized him. He planted his back against the wall and braced his feet in a gutter where melodies rang from bottle shards.

A brawl started warming up in the street. He leaned up and looked, but it turned out to be only some bravos working up some sweat for their women. He relaxed, sipped his wine again, and leaned back against the damp stone, under the leer of the wine seller, who kept an eye on his rented cup, even though the duel down the road really started going with a rapid series of steel rasps and rings. The crowd shouted to the fight's rhythm. Professional women whined their frustration as their prospective customers literally dropped them to watch this free and more immediate excitement. The crowd shifted and moved down the road toward the fight, and Kollen got ready to leave as his camouflaging comrades thinned out.

And suddenly he knew he'd failed to disguise himself. A man or two had neither fled to watch the fight, nor drank, nor leered after a woman. They stood out in the thinner crowd. They let bottles fall from hands that now had a new purpose. They didn't look like Guildsmen or their soldiers — and in fact they looked like the worse dregs of this street of human wreckage. One man was scarred over by the marks of a disease he'd barely survived, and the rot eating his nose showed the advanced stages of another. The other's ear was cropped (a punishment for many crimes in Akrem), and his face was crossed with the scars from knife fights.

One man drew a rusty cutlass, and the other uncurled a leather thong that was weighted with lead at one end. Kollen drew his sword and made ready to run when he saw a third man lurching toward him from another angle.

The cutlass was a pressing matter. Kollen attacked first, and his foe defended, letting the man with the humming thong close in. A weight spun around his ankle and tightened. Before the thong jerked, Kollen lunged toward his captor, who fell spouting blood. Kollen jerked out his blade and slashed the thong before the sword was on him again.

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Now *he* had attracted an admiring crowd. He heard wagers and calls of advice or bad luck. As he moved around the cobblestones, the circle of eyes seemed to spin around him as if he and his attackers were the motionless center of a moving wheel of onlookers. The third man was wielding a cudgel. Kollen moved; he bound up the swordsman's longer weapon and daggered his side with his other hand. He ducked, spun, and slashed the clubman, both events splattering the crowing spectators with blood, and then he ran. A few thrown bottles chased him, and two of the attackers. The swordsman ran out of blood rather early and collapsed, but the clubman ran even as his insides were spilling out of his gash. Kollen looked back in horror as the foot steps followed and hastened, only slowing when the wound had let out such an indescribable mess that running was no longer in the question. But Kollen still ran, slowing only when he was near the tavern where he was to meet Renik and the crew. He paused, caught his breath, cleaned his sword on a rag in his pouch and wiped the thick sweat on his face with the clean side before casting that away

When he arrived at the Twin Irons looking calmer, it was behind a line of armed men who were not there looking for drink.

CHAPTER 7 — ASSASSINS IN THE MIST

For the remedy of most common ailments there are few things more effective than an evening stroll along the waterfront. The damp salt air is a brush that scrubs away the depositions of the vapors that cause sickness. If you go in the early evening, most of the bravos, thieves, and cutthroats have just entered the taverns to drink — all people you meet are then good folk such as yourself. — from *A Way for Every Illness*, by Henli al Sirat

Kollen was at the end of a double line of ten soldiers, all armored in bronze and leather impressed with the sign of the star-in-hand, the mark of the Guild of Mages. No one had drawn any weapons, although the leader swung a truncheon on the end of its strap. The torchlight from inside the tavern painted the man in shadow on the far wall, the ghost of the swinging mace more menacing than the weapon itself.

“The master of *Renik’s Luck* and his brother — that’s who we want to see,” the guard leader said. He was the shortest yet the most formidable of the group, with his gray-streaked hair of experience and little wrinkles around his eyes that threatened to suck the eyes in with amusing doubt or pop them forward in fury.

The crew was sitting stiffly upright like children confronted by parents.

“Who’ll say where to find Master Renik? I’m told he comes here,” the guard continued, turning slowly and pacing the length of the room, and then turning again at the end as if he were reviewing the ranks of his legions. “There’s a reward,” he added when he was met by blank stares.

And then Anasa struck the table with his bony fist.

“He’s talkin’ now, ain’t he lads? Aye. We can tell you a tale for a reward. And just how much reward is that, by the bye?”

The rigid backs of the crew relaxed a little as that pragmatic old voice sounded out the room to see what could be done with the situation. Daggers stayed home.

“Enough, and too much for you! Speak to me, old timer.”

“Well, then, I’ll say that you’ve come to both the right and the wrong place. He ain’t here, but we know him. Aye, we know him,

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don't we, lads? He used to come here before he cheated too many men this side of the canals. And there ain't a man in this room what's not owed some money by this Renik and his crew. Ohhh! A terrible scrofulous crew he has, too. Aye." Anasa struck the table with his pipe-end and blew a puff, leaning into the cloud of smoke to stare fully at the leader.

"That'd be true," said Botha. "Last season I did three day's work caulking his rotten hulk of a ship, and he never paid me! I'd say he's a smuggler that cares nothing for honest labor. Let me tell you, a mangy bouncer tossed me from the deck when I came for my coin, Atono would be his name."

"See here," Teel chimed in as Atono began tugging his earlobe. "I'm begging to be explained..."

"Ohhhh, aye!" All heads turned again to Anasa's moan, a moan that told of years of unpaid debts and atrocities. "That's not the end of it, not at all! There was the time when..."

Atono stood up and shook his finger at the guards. "I'd be thanking the gods that you've come at last, especially for the one named Botha, who's a kidnapper of children."

"He stole myself," Mikello offered, "and Master Renik whipped me horrible."

"Hang 'im!" someone said, and the entire room roared with agreement, Renik loudest of all.

The guard was nodding his head at each accusation but finally he called for silence and asked where this Renik might be found. The room hushed. Anasa was the center of a circle of gazes, not the least Renik's. Renik had thoughtfully found a tray of tankards and was slowly polishing them.

"Where to find him?" Anasa said. "Where to find him?" he repeated again. His hand was searching furiously in his shirt for the tobacco pouch that lay on the table before him. "In the temple," he said finally.

"The temple?"

Suddenly Teel hammered the table with his fist as his eyes narrowed. "Aye, you young iron toter! Of course, in the temple. Listen to the elders and learn yer trade proper! Renik owes me money for fish!" And he grabbed his string of stinking fish and shook it at the guard. "In the temple he hides from his debts!"

“In the temple,” Anasa broke in, “because he’s a mighty smooth one. There’s no ship’s spy-glass good enough to magnify the soul’s true coastline, ain’t it the truth?”

The guard found himself agreeing, although his face showed curious doubt.

“In the temple of Nehtan,” said Renik from the corner, “paying false coinage to the Sea Lord, and buying a good name among fools who praise his piety.”

There were low-spoken agreements all across the room, and the guard seemed satisfied and was asking which of the several shrines dedicated to that god and who would go with him to share the reward.

“Rain,” Hrothe said from behind his empty wine goblet. “You’ll have to go in the rain, quite properly. Bad weather’s good weather. You’ll not find him in the rain, captain!”

The leader narrowed his eyes and walked over to Hrothe, tilting the old man’s chin upward with the end of his mace.

“What’s this chatter from an old drunk? What about the rain?”

“You can’t see in it.”

The guard leader nodded. “But perhaps you’ve seen something?”

“I have, sir,” Hrothe said.

The crewmen were doing an excellent job of concealing their horror, Kollen rumbled through his brain for a way out, but Hrothe disarmed the situation himself.

“I saw...” Hrothe’s eyes stared into a distance that wasn’t in that room, “a skull on a hillside, caged over with unseen bars and glaring most fiercely.” Hrothe turned his eyes to the crew and to Renik, and the room fell still at the gaze. “I saw the dead walking doomed city streets, and I saw the living with open eyes lying in tombs.” Then tears made shiny roads from *his* eyes, falling in twin waterfalls, and the wizard shook with sobs.

The leader of the guards shook his head and turned aside. “Give the man another drink.” Then he dug out a pouch and began clinking silver coins to be earned when they found Renik. And how could they refuse after that fine drama?

And how would they get on the ship and away?

Kollen pushed into the room and got their attention by drawing his short sword and burying its tip in a table. The weapon bounced, its springy steel waving the hilt in their faces, drawing all eyes there, which made double the surprise when Kollen suddenly had his own

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silver coins in his hand. He carelessly flung them on the table. The circles rang and quivered, or spun off the table and pinged on the floor before everyone's eyes. They made an impression on the guards, because Kollen always kept his silver well-polished; most of the effect of money, especially bribe-money, with which he was well-familiar, was in shine.

"Let me add my money to that of this soldier for the capture of Renik, son of Laraf," he said, lilting in the Fenward accent he knew so well.

The guard narrowed his eyes. "And you are—?"

"Laranz Sofistocad, Left Hand Assistant to the Adjudicator of the Dahsa of Fenward." Kollen bowed.

"And the right hand—?"

"Gone to Klar village, on a false scent, I'm happy to say. Perhaps we'll change sides when next we report to our master? Because Renik is here, not there, as well you know."

"I know it better than you," said the guard, warming a little under his armor because of the tavern's warmth and Kollen's familiarities.

"But let me bare my soul and my documents to explain," Kollen continued. He reached for the scroll that was secreted in his shirt, displaying its ancient marks to everyone in the room. It was such an insane risk that he knew he would get away with it. And the golden scroll shined and mesmerized as well as polished coins.

Hrothe raised his mouth from a refilled cup and looked on with eyes smeared over by wine and exhaustion.

"An edict," he explained, "of commission. It is signed, countersigned, and witnessed by the Dahsa of Fenward to enjoin joint, co-officialized bonditure between the Fenwardian Dahsarate and the Dahsarate of Akrem for mutual collababoriation." Kollen knew that fake words have the greatest effect, and he scored a hit with that one. "All for the delivery of Master Renik to the officials of this city for the performance of lawful punishment, after which my Dahsa only wishes me to witness the execution and carry back the heart and liver of the criminal."

The guard leader went back to swinging his mace by the strap.

"What business does Fenward have with this Renik fellow?"

"His crimes are manifold — need we mention them at all? Must I mention this little matter between the Dahsa's daughter, a child really, and Renik, an affair entangled with one Franla Benn Lod, a smuggler

of Akrem's octopus ink and a poppy-dust dealer on the side? Whereupon, ah, let us say, certain cravings of the daughter for essence of poppy, and certain needs for her cousin, the court's chief clerk, Daflinnid, by name, coupled with entirely legal and yet unsanctioned possibilities between royal first cousins, and finally, concerning a little journey of Renik's to the south, where, you know, there is a rare breed of octopus protected by law from a fisherman's taking, and it has eight arms and, few know it, eight *other* organs prized for their certain effects when properly cured and powdered (the sailors grunted and nodded), and need I explain such delicacies further?"

The guard captain agreed that the details might wait, and then Kollen was apologizing for his suddenness, "—because I've just arrived from across the desert and came at once to this place where our spies said I could find wronged men to help me capture this Renik." And Kollen pounded his thigh where indeed a puff of desert dust sprinkled to the ground. There had been no time for washing clothes since their arrival.

The guard made a token show of studying the scroll (he couldn't read, anyway) and gave it back to Kollen.

"Lord Captain, let me aid you. My own eyes know the face of Renik. He escaped me twice, but never the third time will pass, I vow it!" Kollen's voice sank an octave and quivered long and earnestly on the vow. "Now, I suppose you were on the way to secure his ship, since on last report he meant to slip the dock and make for the port of Sookoo. I beg to accompany you! And how are the winds and tides, good sailors? Contrary, I hope?"

"In an hour, no ship of that draft can cross the mud-flats," said Anasa. "Even one sailing light."

Kollen bowed one more time to the guard. "Most perfect timing! You've funneled him in, and he's caught at the neck!"

"And we're off this instant," said the guard, and strode in a leaderly way out the door in front of his orderly ten men and the disorderly sailors.

The tavern emptied, except for two old men, and a worried young woman emerging from the back room with her hatchet hooked over a shoulder.

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“They’ll be lost and stumble in an open grave,” Hrothe prophesied, and then struck the table with his head and started snoring.

Teel lost hope for his fish and apologized to them.

* * *

There was no plan, only chances that were extended to the next moment, with the next moment crowding as unsure as the last. Kollen had always prided himself in well-laid schemes and alternative plots and emergency hiding holes if everything failed. He chewed on his tongue, inventing new oaths.

The leader had enjoined silence on his men, an order that could stifle voices but not the clink of a weapon and the scuff of feet on cobblestones. A drizzle set in and began to be flung about by a light breeze that sometimes gathered the droplets into larger drops that ran coldly down their faces. All the while Kollen didn’t dare look at his brother. They could pass no sign, although they walked together, and Kollen could read no intentions from his brother’s steady breaths.

They turned from the narrow road onto the wider avenue that skirted the shore. There was room here for merchants’ wagons and nobles’ chariots to clatter by each other with no contests for right of way (a philosopher had noted that if only all streets were so wide, quarrels might disappear altogether). At the moment, there was little traffic at all, and the men passed along the street like a funeral procession that had to catch up to the body. That was Kollen’s own metaphor, and he pinched himself for composing bad omens.

They passed the line of ships, and the stationary vessels themselves seemed to flow by in a sluggish river in the other direction. And as they marched, Kollen noted that their party had picked up some unfamiliar faces. Two or three people were marching with them, cloaked in the mists but not bent against them, ignoring the cold and peering steadily ahead. He noticed that their stares were distressingly similar to two of the soldiers who were breaking their even ranks and striding forward with their own eyes fixed in purpose.

Kollen didn’t know that Renik had also been accosted by entranced enemies, so he veered away and picked up his own pace, striding up to the guard leader as if to confer with him.

When he looked behind himself, he saw they had attracted more people from the avenue and side alleys. At that moment he was going

to abandon his act and draw his weapon, but then they were next to the *Luck* and the pace of events changed.

Anasa hailed the guard to stop the column as they drew up to the ship. Kollen bent close to the leader for a few whispered words of advice, appropriately cautious and submissive, such that the leader sadly agreed that they would have to capture alive all hands on the ship so that they might be saved for questioning and dire punishments.

In the instant before the leap over the rails, Kollen took all of her in. He hadn't been able to visit the ship during the flurry of activity when they had arrived at Akrem. He hadn't seen her for years, not since the last time he had visited the city, when Renik had happened to be at the docks readying for a voyage.

Renik's Luck was similar to many of the other merchant ships built in the city, where tradition dictated the best way to build ships, and thereafter a few decorations and hard use gave each vessel its own character. She was about one-hundred feet long, decked over, and carrying two masts, the fore rigged for a square sail, the aft lifting a great triangular sail strung from a long boom. It was a hybrid rig common enough in the mid-latitude of Akrem, with blood-lines equally split between the warm, light-aired south (thus the triangular sail and its huge embrace) and the more tempestuous north. Between the masts was a large hatch over her hold. Renik had added an innovation (a theft, really, from an odd ship he once spied in his furthest-south expedition) — a triangular foresail strung between the foremast and a bowsprit to squeeze all the speed she could from the breezes. She wasn't a fast sailor, but the *Luck* could make headway through many contrary winds. Into her hold had gone anything that could sell — wine, spices, hides, bolts of cloth, rare hardwoods, and ingots of iron and bronze. Their father's way had been to carry much of one thing and a little of some others, just to cover all angles, and the method had kept the ship refitted year after year.

She had made family and associates a reasonable living, but Kollen felt a mix of emotions as he took her in — good days and bad days, cherished memories, half-risen angers, and now in this absurd drama he found himself drawing his sword to board his family's own ship and face his own comrades without explanations.

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The ship's figurehead, a life-size, wooden dolphin painted in gold, smiled oddly at him as it did when it had been his last sight of the ship years before.

Then they swarmed up the plank. The leader shouted for all to surrender, Renik trying to outshout the guards and hopefully send his shipboard crew an indirect message.

Enesh emerged into the light of the lamp that swung from the boom. The light gleamed from his pate while he held in his hand the end of a sheet to which he had just attached a heap of canvas.

Renik shouted, "We're here for Shipmaster Renik. Surrender up the scoundrel now!"

The guard leader wasn't happy at having been outshouted. Kollen saw this and bowed to him, inviting him to lead a search through the bowels of the ship, which he did as the ship's real crew thundered about on the deck overhead and made threatening noises at their own fellows who'd been on a cold watch. When the leader emerged from the empty ship, the crew had already bound up Enesh and hoisted him by his feet into the air; in reality or with unrehearsed acting he was a truly indignant man. The leader ordered the crew to put him down and watch all the captives. Renik presented himself to the leader, saluted, and asked humble permission to leave the ship in charge of these loyal citizens and the courier from Fenward so that they might corner their quarry at the temple.

Kollen pushed forward and said that he should go instead, but the soldier raised a warning finger.

"I've heard enough from you tonight, *respected* sir, and now I remind you whose city you're in. Stay here for now." He assigned two of his men to stay with the ship, one of whom did not acknowledge the command, only stood quietly scanning the world around him.

As they trumped off in pursuit, another soldier was long in obeying and earned a shove from his officer, thereafter shaking his head as if to clear it and stumbling after the column. Soon he regained his steady demeanor and stepped in line behind Renik, with eyes calmly fixed on his back.

The men disappeared into the drizzle after parting a wake through a group of people who were clustering on the dock.

They wasted no time with the soldiers. Anasa clubbed one of them with a pail and the other fell under a heap of bodies, and both were

bound and stashed behind the main mast. That done, the crew who had been on watch were unbound, and their wild questions finally answered.

Kollen stamped on the deck and cursed out his brother with banked-up rage. "Always taking command! He should have been a king! Who knows a city better? Who made his life tricking guards? He should have stayed on his ship!"

Then Enesh began a discourse on the errors of going too far in playing a role when Anasa jumped up from his seat on a capstan and pointed to the avenue beyond the ship. Kollen saw two shadows depart the area, one having emerged from the sail-maker's door.

"Damn me if I fergot the spies!" cried Anasa.

Kollen jumped and bounded down the plank with at least a task to do on this terrible night of foiled plans. He sped through the eerie band of loiterers who stood in front of the ship. He had very bad feelings about them, but first things were first, even tonight. He heard running steps mixed in with his own.

Turlane, swiftest among the whole crew, was catching up with him with a light cross-bow in the crook of his arm. He nearly passed Kollen when he suddenly pulled the braided wire back with one jerk of his superb young arm, and he aimed while hardly slowing down. Kollen swept on as Turlane's bolt whistled past his head and struck down the closest runner. The body flopped down rudely and rolled twice.

Kollen went on after the remaining spy. To his left the shore-front houses passed in an undulating line of angular roofs and lamp-lit doorways. To his right the line of ships bumped the docks and tugged their lines, sea-hounds sniffing the offshore breeze. A late-working rigger heard the footsteps and leaned over a rail. Kollen streaked by, flashing through the puddle of light cast by a storm lantern. Then his quarry slipped into a side street as Kollen was gaining.

Kollen followed and was catching up so quickly that it almost was his end. In that alley the spy gave up the chase and turned when Kollen was at his heels. Kollen skidded to a stop and fell at the spy's feet. The man slashed where Kollen should have been standing. The dagger whistled twice, and then Kollen wasted no time himself, slashing once wildly in the confusion, then having hit his man, he thrust again more surely at the groaning creature and felt him spasm on his blade.

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Kollen didn't wait there. Tonight it was to be death in the darkness, no face attached to the deed. He loped back the way he'd come, wondering what kind of people they had murdered that night in unthinking action.

He turned onto the dock avenue and jogged back to the *Luck*. He passed an evening stroller or two, and they gave him a wide berth as folk do on a dreary night. But the next night walker he passed veered aside and would have gripped Kollen in a bear hug. The assailant appeared to be unarmed, so Kollen settled for rapping him with the flat of his weapon, which was not good enough, and they grappled for an instant — it was a bearded docker with the smell of sour wine on his breath — until Kollen could answer with a more powerful blow with the pommel.

Then Kollen ran, and as he ran he dodged another seeker, and then stopped short before a third who was drawing out a cutlass and a fourth who had a dagger already drawn. He stopped the first from drawing his sword with a hand on the wrist, and he repeated his pommel tactic. The man's head rocked with the blow, but he kept on drawing, tearing from Kollen's arm and tugging the long weapon free. The man with the dagger lunged. Kollen skipped backwards and straightened his sword arm and arched his body out of reach. The attacker ran upon the blade. The swordsman was letting fall with a stroke when Kollen met it with a defending slash and then took off running again. He won most of the way back to the ship when three men emerged from the fog and swung up axes — shipwrights, coming home from shaping timbers and now induced to whittle him down. In a flurry of motion his short sword clanged against a blow, half severed an axe haft, and opened up the chest of the third man. And by then his throat was crinkly dry despite the rain that dripped down his face. The poisons of his wild sprint were taking hold in his veins, sending nausea through his gut and numbing his limbs. Dance, slash, and another blow met. The shock of it almost took his weapon away. He got around them and started running again.

Another man lunged at him. He raised his sword as feet tramped behind his back. But it was Turlane who bounced into sight out of the fog, and he clubbed down the man at his back with the crossbow and got Kollen aboard at last.

He sat down on a box. He bent over his knees and his chest heaved. Rest a few moments, he figured, and then think of how to get

Renik aboard — and Hrothe! He suddenly remembered Hrothe still sitting back at the Irons. Now how would they get him on board?

As he worried the problem he heard a commotion on the other side of the mast, a sound of snapping cords, shouts, and the bump of a body hitting the deck. Kollen raised his head in time to see one of the bound guardsmen flapping on the deck like a giant fish. His face was bloated, reddened with effort. Blood gushed from his nose. Trailing ropes proved that he'd burst one of his bonds and was well on the way with the others. Two sprawled seamen regained their feet and tried to tackle him again, but with a rip and a pop he tore his arms free of the ropes with no regard to his own wrists, which were now horribly lacerated. Kollen started rising when the man was on him.

He had Kollen in a crushing hug as they rolled across the deck. Kollen grunted. He exhaled for a breath and found the grip wouldn't allow him to inhale. He choked. The crewmen beat the mad guardsman with pails and weapon hilts, and he still crushed Kollen. Worst of all, the man's face was inches from his own. The soldier panted and sweated, but his eyes were vacant and calm.

Kollen's arms were pinned to his sides. He tried for the dagger in his boot, stretched, choked, thought his spine was cracking, and then the world was heavenly. Again he could breathe, which he did with many howling gasps.

When he could see and hear again, he saw Anasa standing up from the corpse with a shipwright's adz in his hand, now steaming with blood in the chilly air.

"My 'pologies, Kollen, but dismasting a man is slow work when he's wrapped around yer mate. Now, if you don't mind swinging an iron with the lads, we'll be better off." He slipped Kollen's sword into his tingling hand, and as he looked up, he saw all hands spread along the rail of the ship holding off a swarm of attackers.

They were ordinary city folk, some armed, most bare-handed. They were storming the rails and bounding up the ship's plank. Two were on the deck and dying on the sailors' blades. Kollen got to his feet and parried a club, and pulled a ragged beggar off Mikello, and promptly fell beneath the beggar's improbably strong grip. Mikello clubbed the man with a mop-handle, and Kollen pushed him back off the deck.

He decided. "Cut the ship free! Off the dock! Mikello, axe the bow line!" And Kollen ran to the stern and hacked at the stern line

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and stared for a moment at the plump woman hanging on the rail and throwing a leg over. In his moment of hesitation, her hand shot out and grabbed his wrist with the strength of a wrestler. He pried her off and into the water.

Mikello had thought quickly enough to start hoisting the foresail, and as other sailors were freed from the defense, they loaned hands. The sail caught a breath, and the bow began to edge out. Suddenly Kollen saw two familiar faces in the crowd of attackers — Hrothe and Deena. His heart sank, he sagged against the rail. But then, no, they were sane and hanging at the edge of the conflict. Deena was tugging Hrothe back and Hrothe was going forward, with the woman winning the contest. Hrothe was yelling something as the ship swung away.

Kollen ran back to the stern and waved them away.

“A rope!” Hrothe yelled. He broke away from Deena and stood tottering at the edge of the dock. It took a moment for Kollen’s mind to work, but then he looked around himself and found a coiled halyard. He ran and slipped in a pool of blood, slamming down face-to-plank. Then he was up again and had the rope, and it spun out in a spiral toward Hrothe. It was a selfish thing to do. Kollen knew it.

Hrothe caught the rope and fell into the sea with it. Kollen called for help as he pulled Hrothe in then swung down to catch his hand. Mikello and Kollen tugged and panted and got him aboard.

Kollen caught up a loose crossbow and lifted it to shoulder to cover Deena’s retreat, but she was already backing away from the crowd that mobbed the dock; she backstepped until she bumped into the sailmaker’s shop, and then she ran into the night.

“Where shall we go, Master Kollen?” Anasa squatted on the deck next to him and rubbed a sore back.

Overhead, the main sail slid up the greased mast as the sailors cursed the massive yard upward. The foremast yard had already been hoisted, and Turlane had only needed to swarm up a stay and loose the forgotten reefing lines. Enesh and Botha tacked its lower corners to catch the off-shore breeze, which was curling over the roof-tops of the city and down into the harbor. Soon both sails filled with a dull boom and tightened.

* * *

Renik set the pace for Nehtan’s temple at the southern flank of Akrem, the end farthest from the ship. He would march the guards there and hope Kollen or Anasa had the wits to get out while they had

the chance. As for himself, he always had his sword and a pair of legs. But Renik reminded himself that he had wits, too, and he'd better use them before he relied on legs or sword. Perhaps he might win to the docks and steal a skiff, rowing out in the harbor. In this poor weather he might elude pursuers and meet the ship as it set out.

Or, he could always bleed his life away on the wet cobblestones.

"This way," he said, and he led them down a side street away from the docks, down Drummer's Road. "I'll bet he's at the shrine on the desert road." He and the guards walked the length of Drummer's and then turned onto the street of the leather workers. Renik could smell the tanning liquids as he passed the closed shops. He knew many of the tradesmen on this street, and as he turned his gaze to take in the familiar shop fronts he saw that a guardsman had moved alongside him, walking faster than the rest, staring strangely. Renik suggested they trot, and they did, following him in a chaotic jangle of weapons and breastplates that sometimes resolved into a regular rhythm, rather like the sound of a witch's rattle. The soldier who was getting closer trotted faster. "By your leave, Guard Captain, we can go two ways now, the way we're going, or down that side alley there." Renik let the hint settle politely — any stronger suggestion would have rubbed the leader wrongly — but the guard took it.

"Sor, take three and meet us around this block at the temple."

Renik prayed thanks to any god who listened for dividing his foes in half. But the strange soldier was still with him, staring harder every instant, lengthening his strides. He was almost at his heels now, and Renik could contain himself no longer. He was where he'd planned to be, and he suddenly dodged through a wooden gate and threw it shut in the face of the guards.

It was always open at this time of night, since the scullery boys of the merchant Tanh passed through it to ferry their pots of refuse to the canal across the road. Now Renik barred the door and ran. Shouts followed him as his cutlass banged against his leg and drummed out a clattering call to retreat.

Then the door behind him splintered, and he heard pursuing foot steps. It was one man, followed by others. That one man outpaced them all, even in the weight of armor.

Renik knew who it was. At the next corner he turned and waited. The man came around the corner, and Renik ran him through the armor gap under the arm. It was the entranced soldier, indeed, already

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bleeding from wounds not of Renik's making. His skin was lacerated from wooden splinters, some of which stood out from his face and hands. He coughed blood from the great wound, but he came on again. Renik swung and split his bronze helmet. Blood squirted through the split, and the man was climbing to his feet. Renik turned and ran.

By then other booted feet were at his back. Yet the terrible thing was, his ears could pick out one set of footsteps that pounded faster than the others like a leather-booted hell-hound. The fellow's companions shouted protests, pleas for him to stop and bind his wounds. The feet carried on.

Renik's breath burned his throat, but he was nearing the docks again. He smelled the sea, heard the slap of loose halyards against the masts. Somewhere a watchman called out to a friend, and from an open window came the homey sounds of clay pots ringing to the spoons of supper — the contrast between familiar things and terror maddened Renik and increased his speed.

And then he was on the avenue of the docks. One enemy was close behind him. Renik looked in both directions and his spirit rejoiced when he saw his ship coasting the docks. So close! But he had to turn, unshoulder his weapon, and meet the man who was twice as quick as his fellows.

Renik backed away from the soldier. The man was decorated with great gouts of blood. He turned his calm gaze, found Renik, and lunged. Their blades crossed and rang. Renik planted his foot on the man's chest and knocked him down. He lunged for the gap between two houses as he heard the rest of the soldiers arrive. His single foe got up and silently followed him there. Renik bound up the man's sword with his own to keep the struggle silent as the soldiers jogged past the shadowed niche and went north along the avenue, back to where the *Luck* had been tied. They struggled until Renik knew he was being overcome. He broke off and swung his weapon in an overhead circle. The heavy blade gained speed, whistled, and hewed off the soldier's weapon-arm at the elbow.

Still, the soldier came on, clubbing Renik with fist and gushing stump. He bashed the soldier with the handguard and stepped back again. The soldier jumped forward and this time suffered a split neck, and then a second and third blow that hewed his head off altogether and spilled blood down the sailor's boot.

The foeman didn't get up, leaving Renik time to sniff in full the stench of fresh gore as he leaned against the wall of the house, sickened and exhausted. Soon, however, he was back into the avenue, running to catch up to his ship. Stumbling, gasping, cutlass blade shouldered for running and dripping warm stuff down his neck, Renik ran south. The *Luck's* mizzen sail was a pale, twisted triangle fading into darkness and rain.

His thoughts for one instant were a burning jealousy rather than despair. He wanted to shout, 'Traitor my brother!' and 'It's what you wanted because I worked for it!' An eerie moan escaped his lips as he ran, laden with anger and fear and accusation that would be long burned into his memory.

Then fear of being left behind took over. He sped by a knot of people who turned as he passed and started following — some of the faces he was able to see were those of dockers and shop owners he had known most of his life. A troop of guards searching the lower city stopped, watched him running, then started shouting and jangling after him. The ship was closer, his pursuers too close. He tried to cry out, getting some unintelligible gurgle past his lips.

He was abreast of the ship, and the crew saw him at last. The ramp of a merchantship angled up to the docks in front of him, and he took it, bounding past startled sailors, the plank springing under his feet and impelling him forward. The *Luck* sailed parallel to the dock several feet out, but quick thinking Kollen had slashed the lines to the cargo crane that was lashed on the front of the mizzen mast. It fell out and bounced to the end of its line and clunked against the side of the docked ship like a bony limb reaching for Renik. He pounded across the deck on a wave of commotion. Someone behind him made a long howl of triumph, laying a hand on his back. Then Renik's feet leaped onto the harborside rail. The *Luck's* crane was plucking at the docked ship's stays as if they were harp strings. He caught the boom, leaping down along it, sliding as far as he could. Renik hung there, feet over water. Hostile hands shook the end of the crane before it slipped from their grasp.

The crew hauled in the crane. Renik held on, his lungs sucking air in whistles. The boom came in. His legs brushed against the rail. He let himself slip to the deck and dropped his cutlass.

They turned the ship across the wind, with the sails close-hauled and prow headed out into the bay of Akrem at last. Soon the docks

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were dissolving into the mist and rain, and crowds of people were turning away from their escaped quarry, and Renik was turning to gaze on his brother whose character and intentions escaped *him*.

One person remained to watch the ship's stern turn gray and disappear in the fog. In the customs house, which was the only dwelling at the waterfront rich enough to have glass windows, a man was reflected. The official building had four windows facing the harbor, and four reflections of a simply dressed man in a white tunic shone from them. He seemed calm, unexerted, unlike the mass of people who had suddenly awakened to find themselves in a different part of the city than they had last recalled, covered with sweat and hammered with the worst headaches of their lives. They dispersed with hardly a word to one another, each one certain that they alone had suffered a kind of short sickness, and each wandered back to his or her errand, shame-faced and mystified. That night Akrem's wineshops did good business.

The lone watcher stayed a while longer. In his hands he pondered two figurines of nearly identical men, except that one was of heavier build than the other. The man tilted his face to the clouded heavens and smiled sadly. Then his body started shaking as if he were laboring like a giant. He held his gaze dispassionately on his reddening, corded limbs until the strain passed along to his face. Clearly he labored. And just as clearly he released whatever burden he had, and he disappeared, he and the golden chain that bound one ankle and led nowhere.

CHAPTER 8 — BROTHERS IN THE SEA

We must be twins separated at birth, because your nose is nearly as long as mine, which I always thought to be singular. Do your sailors want to string extra sails from it as my lads do? — Shipmaster Blathy accepting Shipmaster Tem's surrender at the Battle of Calan.

The Straits of Calan had eaten too many ships, and Renik was glad to see them slip behind his rudder. Unpredictable winds burst around Akrem's northern hills, and the currents swirled powerfully, and all helped grind ships against Calan's stern cliffs. Now The Teeth lay ahead after a day's sail out of Akrem.

"Mikello! Call out the Teeth as you see 'em. If you miss one, we're all fish meat!" It was good to cheer the lads.

"Aye, shipmaster. Black water on all points."

Black Water. Unlucky prophecy! But the boy was from Calzat, where the manner of speech was different. All the same, "That's *smooth water*, boy. Learn the proper speech hereabouts."

"Aye, shipmaster. Smooth water all around."

Renik leaned over the rail and gazed over the edge, chin on fist. He watched the bow of the *Luck* hammer its way through the seas. Every shattered swell sent a sheet of water up to the chin of the proud figure head — a gilded dolphin, his father's gift when Renik had taken over the *Luck*.

"White water, Shipmaster! But on the hind quarter. The Teeth on the stern!"

Renik cursed. "Nonsense! Who twisted your skull around, lad? Look again!"

But the watch-boy braved the tempest. "The Moon shows it, sir. Foam at the helm's quarter."

Renik climbed a stay and gazed behind. The boy was right. The moonlight glowed on the spray.

To have passed The Teeth without a struggle was such good luck that it had to be bad luck. And not yet so much as a stubbed toe among the lads! It looked very bad.

* * *

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Kollen was still getting used to the ship's roll. He walked down the empty cargo hold over the dented planks, leaning to the left, slipping over a board still greased with a spill of whale oil from last season's trading. One small candle burned at the end of the dark space, and this was at the entrance to the aft cabin where Renik and some of the crew slept (the remainder holing up in the bow). He navigated to the point of light and found his brother squatting on a stool near a low table that gave the illusion that Renik had a larger space than he did. The curtain to his niche — one of the shipmaster's few concessions to status — was tied aside. They were alone. A teapot steamed over a brazier of coals that swung on gimbals in a copper box. The coal-glow painted a gleam on the golden crown and scroll. Renik motioned him to the pot but continued to bend over the table as he studied the scroll.

After Kollen had wrapped his hands around a warm cup, Renik held up the scroll. He had been staring at it with his chin resting in his hands, but now he held it out carefully as if it were a poisonous thing.

"Do you know this speech?" he asked.

"Flannish script. That'd be the scholarly speech of the south kingdoms. Few people would know it, now, mostly the older scholars."

"Can you read it, I asked."

"Hrothe could, but not me, not much of it. I can tell it isn't magical. No ascendants and pictographs, no versified passages. That's how you can tell. Looks like a narrative of some kind. That would reduce its price somewhat on the black market."

"If this were a smuggling voyage," Renik said, putting down the scroll, "that would be a most important insight. However..."

Kollen sat straight and put his tea mug down with a definite tap.

"You asked what I knew, and that's what I told you. You're starting to blame all this on me, I can see that now. Does anything ever change around here?"

"No, no, evidently nothing ever changes." Renik leaned his elbows again on the table and rubbed his forehead. "You ran away from us in Akrem in one of your usual tantrums, right when we needed crew all working together. That hasn't changed."

"And I pulled all your asses from the hot coals, didn't I? And when I had everybody together on the ship — and wasn't that your job, brother? — and when I had everybody on board and me ready to

lead off our enemies, who steps in? Renik the Shipmaster steps in to leave the ship without direction. I'm the one"

Kollen stopped. Renik's eyes had suddenly become white-bright, but when he spoke, his voice was quiet.

"The ship had a direction, I think, after I led off the guards. A running direction. The ship turned its back. You turned your back and ran."

"Am I dreaming, Renik?" Kollen smiled and sweetened his voice up one octave. "I must be. I seem to recall a ship without its master and enemies all around, and I, yes, *I* gave the order to cut loose. I saved us for the second time while you were diddling with guards in a job I know best to handle."

"You wouldn't have survived what I had to do," Renik said, forcing the words like molasses through his teeth.

"I survived it a hundred times at Fenward, and Ithian, and Aratos!"

"You deserted me. Deserted me years ago and deserted me today. That's how you know how to survive."

Kollen arose, turned toward the curtain, and then spun around in a circle again as his temper picked up speed. "You're thinking of new ways to load weight on my shoulders, to treat me like you did when we were boys. You've never stopped teaching lessons, but I didn't come here to sit at your feet."

After a tense moment, Kollen seemed equally ready to leap from the room or leap on his brother. He decided to stay and stare his brother down all night if need be, if only to see him avert his eyes. To his surprise, after enough time went by for them to calm their breathing, Renik surprised him. His jaws unclenched, his fists relaxed, and he said:

"I'm sorry, Kollen. You're right, partly right. About lessons." He gave his face a vigorous rub. "You didn't run, and this situation isn't your fault. I hope it's not mine, but I'm not sure. I'm sorry, I say it again. Shall I a third time? I'm sorry. I become crazy sometimes. Father passed that down to me, I think. But let's be fair and admit that we make each other crazy." He stood up, motioned Kollen to the ladder leading to the deck. "Too small in here to get room to think. Come with me."

Renik lead the way, while Kollen stood his ground. Renik stopped, half-turned, then shrugged and said, "Well, I'll be up at the

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bow.” Once there, he found that wind had turned on the starboard tack, and a few of the men were pulling in the yards to maintain course. Spray was washing the forward deck as the ship cut water-knolls. Renik endured the blast, looking forward until Kollen was standing silently by his side. Renik waited for the next blast, and it showered them and ran shimmering over the deck. He grabbed hold of a taut line holding the foresail; he placed Kollen’s hand next to his.

“We’ve got wealth to win. We have to do it together. Apart, we’ve lost nearly everything. You didn’t say it, but you thought it — that I haven’t been strong enough to hold the family legacy together.” Kollen had begun to open his mouth to speak, but Renik smiled and Kollen didn’t go on. “Too true, much too true. If this line parted here, I wouldn’t be able to hold the sail. Two of us might, or might not, but it would be a brave fight, wouldn’t it, brother?”

Renik suddenly found himself feeling more sincere than a wise, tough shipmaster should have felt, even before his own flesh and blood. Spray doused them both again, running off their noses and chins in thin spouts. Their noses were mirror exact, Renik suddenly decided, and then he marveled that he’d never really acknowledged the resemblance.

“The *Luck*, now, she’s a good ship and she’ll make us a living from the sweat of her keel. Father and mother are in her, don’t you know? Father carved her figurehead himself, and mother drove the last nail to fasten it for the family luck. It was for *our* luck. And I’m sorry I’m a tyrant still. It takes a while to sober a man off evil drink, right? Speaking of which, is Hrothe sober yet? We all must confer.”

They went below, Kollen still silent and dark-eyed while the dolphin figurehead, now a dull yellow in the fading light, smiled at the stream that splashed around its nose.

* * *

Some of the day’s last light came through the port of Renik’s cabin. The shipmaster sat back on his narrow bunk, which he had been sharing with his brother for a quiet yet curiously tense half hour as Hrothe examined the golden scroll, which he held it like a baby.

“This was penned by Habran himself,” said Hrothe after a while.

“So?” prompted Renik.

Hrothe’s eyes popped open, and he said: “I said this was penned by Habran himself.” The wizard carefully unrolled the gold leaf. “It is

unmistakable. The language is old enough and its manner is his; and look, signed with his seal, a pair of scales balancing the skull with the sun. I have seen his seal on two other scrolls in my lifetime. And now," he continued as if he were the only man listening, "it is here in my lap. Chance is amazing."

Hrothe got to his feet and gathered his tattered robes around him with something like dignity. He tossed the scroll in Renik's lap.

"Melt it down into a lump of gold, then toss it in the sea. That's my best advice. I refuse to deal with it further. Everything about Habran was too much for ordinary men. Value yourselves and your fellows."

The brothers traded looks before Renik sputtered.

"I don't believe it. After all we've gone through! Melt it?"

"I have enough honor," Hrothe said, "to admit that one man in a multitude is ready to accept the responsibility of Habran's knowledge, and that person isn't here. Not in a broken old wizard or two greedy merchants." He stared at them both, but longer at Kollen.

"Then you're baggage on this journey, do you hear me? Why did you come if not to do what scholars do?"

But Hrothe was retreating through the curtain. In another moment his steps rang hollow on the deck above. Kollen gave Renik two firm taps on the knee then followed the old man.

Hrothe was kneeling on the planks, arms folded over the rail.

"You know," said Kollen, standing behind him, "Renik always had spasms when things didn't look to go his way, but tonight he's right — you have to read that scroll, Hrothe. What do we have to go back to? The Guild will bottle our spirits and ferment uncommon liquors with them, that's what." Hrothe didn't answer. "And if we don't find this treasure or whatever the crown and scroll lead us to, won't the Guild keep on seeking it? Is that better? Listen! At least you have to get *me* to this treasure. Do it for me! Not so I can steal it from Renik — though he sometimes fears that in his cynical mind! — but to help us all. I'm the only one who can handle strange situations. Renik and the others know only one trade; I know more. I don't need them, but I need you. And you all need me if you want to be rich! Think of us, Hrothe. Renik and the lads strutting like princes in Akrem free from hard sailing. You walking Fenward with a boy holding a sunshade over you and another whose sole duty is to run everywhere buying books and scrolls for your delight."

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Hrothe shook his head at all the visions Kollen conjured for him, too tired to question his younger friend's idea of gold-joy, and the more he shook his head, the more Kollen took this as a need for further permutations of their future state of grace. Where Kollen drew breath to splash more color into the image, Hrothe sighed loudly enough to stop him.

"No good can come of awakening this piece of history. You've found and sold oddities and heirlooms before. You have all the confidence of only mercantile and adventurous experience. But let me give you the healthy pessimism of age." Hrothe turned his face up at the younger man. "And let me be a prophet. If we keep this thing, our only profit will be in hard lessons learned."

For a long time they watched the horizon. The twilight glow was a sensuous purple, which began giving way to night's jeweled curtain.

"Hrothe," Kollen said as a sudden thought bubbled to the top of his mind, "I wanted to ask, what were you talking about in the Twin Irons when the soldiers came? Do you remember?"

Hrothe tilted his head lower and the shadows under his brows deepened. "I remember. I remember because I wasn't as drunk as I seemed. I saw something from far away. Sometimes I can do that at the edge of a faint from exhaustion or sickness, moments that are like dreams but more frightening, and they often make frightening sense, symbols of what I will encounter in the future."

Hrothe turned away from the sea and stared up the length of the main mast. "A skull on a hill, caged, and sleepless people in tombs." He locked eyes with Kollen. "What do you think it means?"

Kollen chose not to answer. Together they watched night finally fog-in the horizon. When all was dark and sea breeze and water-sound were the only other beings in their little world, Hrothe stirred. Neither man had moved for a long time, and Kollen, having lost his mind for a while in the merging of sea and horizon, was startled from the trance.

"Can the world be a temple?" Hrothe asked.

The younger man was still trying to decide whether it was a friend's or a teacher's question when Hrothe went on.

"Let us hope so. I have just offered my prayer under the sky. I haven't prayed since I was a youth. That means the world is about to change, youngster. I'll continue with the scroll. Not because of you or

Renik, but because of bravery and cowardice, which are brothers whom I must somehow unite.”

* * *

Two nights later. A cool draft wafted in under the leather curtain of Renik’s nook. Hrothe didn’t seem to notice; he spread out his materials on the table, leaned over them, and shook his beard at the display.

“As I’ve said, this scroll contains Habran’s obscure writing — he was notorious for it. Interspersed between his hints are addresses to his brother, explanations, apologetic in tone. It’s remarkable, this document! Itself, it is the doom of many historians’ arguments. But at the end of it is a substantial commentary written lucidly, as far as I have translated, and it is pressed in another hand. It may be unfinished.”

Renik and Kollen nodded in their different attitudes — Renik crouched over a map that drooped over his legs, and Kollen sitting cross-legged on the floor, spinning the golden crown on its edge and watching it gyrate to a vibrating halt as if it were a coin or a top.

So far he’d been able to spin the crown three times in a row so that the ornamented front faced him when the crown came to rest. He gripped the edges and snapped in a push-pull to try for a fourth time. *Perhaps the crown embraces the simplest philosophy: he thought, that life is a gamble. Will it turn to more practical coins if I keep winning the spins?*

Now Hrothe stirred and looked up. “What about those hints and riddles I read to you, Renik? Can you make anything of them?”

Renik grunted and slapped the wax-tablet on which Hrothe earlier had scratched out a list of Habran’s place-name phrases translated in the common speech that Renik could read. “If I drew a course and made a map from that sing-song, it would send us hither and thither for months across the ocean on all points,” Renik said. “Look here. I’m no scholar, but these poet’s phrases about cities and winds and islands can mean many courses. The destinations might be Saracil, in the far south past Kola’s Strait; Sahla, in the middle south; Ithian east across the continent, where are seas I’ve never sailed; Aratos, west across our Inland Sea, and other points north.” Renik jabbed his finger at all corners of his chart. “The hints would have us hopping to every isle answering to the name ‘rock.’ Maybe half a dozen ships could

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explore all these leads in a year, but not one. So here we are tacking zig-zags in the middle of the Inland Sea. And for what? Toward what?"

"True enough," continued the wizard, ignoring the questions, "and see this mark here on the scroll? Right at the end of Habran's script? The stamp pressed in at the end? A scribe's mark of completion of a copying task. It's an old scribal tradition where a copier uses an original to make a copy and then marks the original to show how many copies were made from it immediately. The mark has no number after it so it means only one copy was made from this. This scroll is an original, I think, in Habran's writing, but a copy probably exists. Yet there is no mark of completion at the end of the second script that follows after Habran's. If the guild has a copy, then they may not have a copy with this additional writing done after Habran left off. That may be to our advantage. What was it you told me, Kollen, about that time in the barrow with Sulem? Will you stop that! Are you listening?"

Kollen stopped his crown-spinning and tried to hide a childish grin. He looked up apologetically.

"The barrow? Sulem? The scroll, yes. I only remember he was most interested in the crown."

Renik carefully rolled his chart and put it back in his chest. He folded his arms and sighed.

"So the scroll may be useless to us, too. It's meant to confound, not guide."

"Perhaps. That seems to have been part of Habran's intention. He left instructions for a course that only certain people might complete, or follow. But there is more to the tale. The mages were stuck on a problem, perhaps this same problem, and that's where you, Kollen, came in. I have found a passage in the scroll where Habran writes of an 'earth crown' hidden in a fallen tower. Many fallen towers lie between Akrem and Fenward. Shattered empires leave them behind in abundance. The mages searched many of them, perhaps, but eventually turned to you, the finder of lost things. Habran had fooled them because they did not guess his riddle: the barrow in which you found the Crown was only a fallen tower in metaphor — it was a tower laying on its side, in a manner of speaking. Impossible riddles that few can unravel, pointing the way to one treasure, and probably others."

“I hope not one,” said Kollen. “I hope it’s just simple, honest gold, garnished with some rubies and diamonds. I’m feeling lucky right now! Let me tell you”

“Why map the way to such treasures even in riddles?” interrupted Renik “Why show potential enemy and heir alike the way to your storehouses? Had he magic on the brain and nothing else?”

“Good questions, all of them,” Hrothe said, glancing disapprovingly at Kollen who rubbed his hands together to generate heat and spun the crown again. “The scroll is useless as a guide without some other clue, but it may be useful as a guide to Habran’s mind in his final days. And with some clues the scroll’s advice might all fall into place.” Then Hrothe looked up and gazed at the bulkhead behind the men. “I’m reminded of something. A traveler once told me about a sacred mountain, and on its head was a temple whose worshippers were select, trained to reach the temple by bypassing assassins and traps. Yet the priests of this cult accorded high status to anyone who could sneak into the temple — the uninitiated penetrator was the god’s favorite, so the beginning of the path to the temple was well marked.”

With no further explanation, he went back to work, rolling out and rolling in the scroll, its panned stick-figures emerging and disappearing as he went, a river of thoughts emerging from a cavern and passing into another. The breeze wafted more strongly under the curtain. The ship rolled, the brazier rocked a little on its gimbals, making the room seem oddly unsettled.

Kollen cried out and slapped his knees as the crown settled a fifth time facing him. Hrothe tried to ignore it this time. Renik, who had shown admirable patience with his brother’s distraction, was starting to frown and shift on his stool.

“This bothers me: that the Guild sought out both of you. Why? Why include Renik? Kollen was the vital link to the treasure, yet they felt they needed you both so badly that they expended magic to try to keep you together. Sorcery is difficult, contrary to most folk’s belief. It is also dangerous, and the spell on two of you was no mean expenditure.”

“They wanted slaves,” said Renik, shrugging.

“Not entirely,” said Hrothe. “Their spell was an indirect one, leaving you some wits left, even some free will. It takes potent magic to entirely enslave a strong human spirit, and from what you told me,

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it seems that they didn't enslave you, but instead made stronger certain impulses of your natures, brought out certain of your qualities, as the sculptor carves the king, accentuating his noble features, swelling his muscles, raising the forehead. You were tools that they sharpened...."

"Come to the point," said Renik.

"Let him talk," said Kollen, who rather enjoyed hearing how mighty they were, although he was now giving the crown a curious look as if he began to doubt something.

Hrothe finished, "—but then they tried to kill you in Akrem. Suddenly you were expendable."

"And how did they enchant an entire city if Kollen and I were so hard to hold, and why bother sending out their soldiers, and why didn't they try to enchant *us* again?"

"And why were we suddenly expendable, if they needed us for something?" Kollen added.

Hrothe looked up and smiled. "I don't know. Isn't that rather exciting? Mysteries upon mysteries. You two seem unreliable victims of enchantment. Perhaps that's why they were content to set spies, bully the chandlers to keep you at dock longer, and finally directly set their guards on you. As for the enchantment of the city — I have no idea how the Guild did it. At best such a spell is impractical and would have worked on such a scale only on minds of the weakest will. Even then, the spell would have taken the utter concentration of everyone, from Archmage to hall sweeper."

"All just to kill us? Killing is simple enough," Kollen said, readying a seventh spin of the crown but now hesitant.

"The murderous aspect of their enchantment — yes, strange. It seems to conflict with the Guild's other preparations."

Hrothe stared at the brothers intently before concluding.

"A second faction is involved, with some of the same knowledge as the guild's. It would explain why magic seems to work poorly on you, because it is much easier, by far, to misdirect another's spell rather than build up your own. A child can tip a huge stack that only a strong man can pile up. You have survived mirror-sharpenings and human bloodhounds, perhaps because two forces are tugging at your opposite ends. One faction wanted you alive, the other dead. Or..." Hrothe looked off in a corner of the room. "Or one faction wanted you alive in their grip, and the other wanted you out of the city, away

from danger as fast as you could be made to go. The call of bloodhounds sent you running.”

“Bloodhounds who knew us,” said Renik, staring at his callused palms. “I saw some familiar faces among them. Why not? We know half the city. How many friends did we hurt or kill, I wonder?”

Hrothe didn’t answer and let a long silence pass. For a time he seemed hypnotized by the roll-and-creak of the deck. The silence was not awkward, though, since the brothers had enough on their minds to bridge the moments. At last Hrothe did stir. The motion broke the brothers from their stares, and they found the old man eyeing them strangely, even fiercely. For Kollen, who knew Hrothe well, the expression was like a poke in the eye. Renik now shifted uncomfortably, looking at his brother for some explanation, though it came from Hrothe.

“These are the least of our riddles,” he said in a low voice. “Are you ready for this next? I am not. You must be. You must know everything now, you must be convinced that this venture is large, oh so large, my friends. Listen! Habran wrote of two brothers. Over three-hundred years ago! He has sculpted your images in these words. He says, ‘Sundered brothers, long cleaved apart, dwelling as far as wet and dry are far. They will come after these sorry days and come to witness sorry days. They shall stand upon their own corpse, a suicide. Their eyes will want light but they must be like fireflies, for they must always walk in dark places. They must weigh the miser and the martyr inside death’s belly. What they seek, shall be found, for this is the just-world’s law of balance: what two hateful brothers lost, an unloving pair shall find. Shall they keep it and be rich? Shall they give it back and die? They can choose. No tyrant shall command. One choice shall end the circle of my cursed formula.’”

Neither brother looked at the other. They didn’t need to. In both their minds the seer’s face whispered, ‘Take up tombstone carving for a trade, because you stink of death, and death will follow you, and you’ll stand upon the broken spine of your family.’

Kollen broke the silence with a chuckle that was a few notes higher than usual. “What a fool’s choice — be rich or dead? I’ll make that choice!” he said. “But then, what’s this about ‘death’s belly’? We might as well steer a course for the Moon’s dark side.”

Renik sat upright. “There, or anywhere,” he said loudly, “no matter what an old scroll says. I reckon all prophecies a cheap trade

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until the prophets start speaking straight, laying out honest maps, with currents, wave-angle, wind direction, and star points. I'll steer by those, and the only prophets with such solid stuff are navigators. I follow myself." At the same time he called himself a liar as he felt his heart go limp.

Hrothe ignored this bravado and pointed to the crown in Kollen's hands.

"If you haven't had enough, then here is another part of the mystery: the riddle engraved on the crown, which Sulem read out. The obvious level of the riddle is easy to solve: 'I am the strings that tie the world, and I am an ant; I am moving like a wheel, but immovable; some worship me, others waste me.' The answer?"

"Creation," said Kollen.

"Yes, close enough. Or you might answer 'life.' Now that is the first layer, but the metaphor, the thing that Habran wanted to pass on? Life or death?"

He could see that Renik was growing impatient, and Kollen was brooding, probably about having his head pickled in a jar and standing on dead folk, so he changed the subject.

"Well, there are other things of import. First, Sulem wasn't there to see this fantastic metal fellow. Dear gods!" Hrothe hugged himself with both his arms and shook. "Would I had been there! Haven't I lived long enough to have earned the sight of wonders? The important point, however, is that Sulem and the guild didn't hear the golden man's own riddles — this 'harp of the sea', this 'pregnant island'. Good! We shall work with these. Second, not all of the scroll is riddling and morbid. There are more lucid parts in the end, where the other hand takes over and finishes, and for Renik, perhaps, something close to the compass angles he wants. I have translated this later part quickly, here and there, and so far I've found only a questing monologue, useful for a historian, perhaps, but supplying little reward for us right now. It probably is a commentary by a self-important clod. Yet with both accounts we have the key right before...."

"Turn it," said Renik.

"Well, too easily said." Hrothe bowed his head a little, then raised his face again and shrugged. "The scroll is written in a dead language. I am, regretfully, rather out of practice. And then there are Habran's riddles, his cryptic style." The room was silent, Renik stared, Kollen rocked with nervous energy. "It's all here," said Hrothe. There was

silence until Hrothe continued in more subdued tones, "Well, I skipped around, knowing I had no time to begin at the beginning like a good scholar...."

Renik said "Out with it, if you please!"

"Uh, the 'Clouds of the Red-River,' that's where Habran would have us go first. It is advice that does not stand out well in Habran's text, and so I think it is an important guarded clue, hidden for us to find. He wrote about an isle called 'Red Rock' in the far south, the 'Land of Clouds' high in the mountain range of Calan, and 'Red Cliff' on the northwestern shore of the continent. But look here where the 'Clouds of the Red-River' is called 'the world's well.' Life begins in a spring of water, so say many old myths. That's our clue. We have to find the 'Clouds of the Red-River'. Cryptic, yes. But you must believe Habran had a good...."

"This crown is enchanted," said Kollen suddenly, holding the thing in outstretched arms and looking at it.

"Kollen, we know that well enough!" Hrothe slapped the table at the interruption. "And you've been making it into a child's toy for a quarter hour, now!"

Hrothe's anger gave permission to Renik's. "Yes, give it here before you release another spell and end the world!"

"Not that kind of magic," said Kollen. "No, no. Watch this." He spun the crown again, and Renik caught it and, belying his own fear of it, threw it down on the deck hard enough to leave a crescent-moon dent.

But Kollen only grinned and pointed at it.

"See? See how it landed? It always ends up facing the wall at that angle. I spun it a dozen times and it always landed that way. Throw it, kick it, and wager against me. It's enchanted. I'd win!"

Renik reached for it slowly, shaking his head. Hrothe beat him to it and hugged the crown.

"That's our clue!" he said, and smiled with self-satisfaction.

Then the cabin was in a tumult. The brothers took out daggers and scratched lines in the planks where the crown had faced, and then Renik leaned past his brother to yell up the ladder-way.

"Banath, up on deck, you on watch? Call out the stars near the west, call em out, and their height!" He turned toward Kollen and Hrothe. "Ha! The crown narrows the strange choices! I'll make a

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good guess, gentlemen. Clouds and red rivers and pregnant islands! Banath! Have you looked?"

From above, the sailor's answer came as a distant shout: "There's a cloud bank settling in, but I makes out Alhan setting a palm-width high, and perhaps...." the voice was lost in the wind.

"Good enough!" Renik bounded boyishly across the cabin, if one can bound in a closet. "Alhan, Hrothe. Do you remember that? An omen, wouldn't you say? The crown faces a point west of north. From here we steer north with Alhan just off our left side. We're for the Hearth Isles, where molten rock — red rivers! — flows into the sea and boils the water into woolly clouds of steam. Giving birth!"

After that, Renik and Kollen's enthusiasm couldn't be restrained, and they jumped up to the deck as if their presence might draw friendly winds and blow them more quickly along. However, Hrothe sipped his tea in long, slow draughts and pondered the next riddle in the scroll. There, as off-handedly mentioned as had been the Clouds of the Red-River, Hrothe had read something about 'diving into a dead city.' The hint didn't excite Hrothe. In fact, only after two more cups of tea slowly sipped did he unwind the ancient scroll to begin searching out more leads from that hint.

* * *

The cloud bank that had been settling in turned into a long, miserable storm that hardly let up for a week. *Renik's Luck* weathered the breeze like the proud old lady she was, but the sea took a toll in long dripping watches that chilled them all down to the bone marrow. There were no hot suppers for anyone, except for occasional mugs of tea that Hrothe carried to the cold sailors.

He had finished one such duty when he saw a strange man reflected in a puddle of relatively still seawater in the middle of the deck that had not yet run off. Hrothe blinked. There was no mistake; it *was* a man, a bearded fellow with jet black hair, clad in simple, white clothes, and there he was in the reflection but not present on the ship; little ripples that passed through the puddle made him seem to move as if buffeted by sudden gusts. He reached out his hand toward Hrothe. Startled, Hrothe cried out, and Enesh, at the helm, heard him and then saw the stranger himself. The helmsmen stared and stiffened, and that was nearly the undoing of them all. Distracted and frozen, Enesh loosened his grip on the tiller, which the sea suddenly tore lose.

The long handle swept out of reach, then, as if in mutiny, swung back and bashed the helmsman in the stomach. Wind and sea now started swinging the ship broadside the waves.

Renik, having been at the bow seeing to some matter, was aft in another second, crying, "What goes here?" His call was drowned in the wash that knocked his feet from beneath him. The broaching sea shoved him across the deck and stuffed him between two posts of the rail — the third post having been painfully removed.

His position was absurdly deadly, wedged as he was in the rail, with head fighting to clear the boiling cold spray. Between breaths he saw Hrothe and the helmsmen fighting the tiller. Other sailors ran out from below, assessed their situation, and ran forward to reset the foresail tack that had ripped out when the ship was thrown broadside. Then another heave sent the *Luck* far over on the starboard side, burying Renik in the next wave to foam at the ship's lip. But the return roll tilted the ship far enough on its opposite side that Renik was for a moment clear of the sea, suspended at a considerable angle in the air above it. He twisted free and fell toward the other side of the deck, where the next invading sea carried him back onto the deck near the mast.

He shook his head free of the brine and looked aft, where Enesh was on his knees gasping, and Hrothe was sliding across the deck latched to the tiller. Enesh, recovering and still casting glances at the deck, applied his own arm with the straining wizard but advised, "Let her come all the way around! Too late to turn, we have to take the seas on the bow. Hrothe nodded, and together they swung the tiller over and brought the *Luck's* bow into the wind.

Hrothe and the sailor were sliding over the deck on the end of the long handle. Blood dripped from Hrothe's nose. Renik hopped-slid to the tiller and made a questioning roar. Hrothe replied with uncommon vigor

"Stranger on the deck! Surprised us! Look!"

In coming aft Renik had missed the strange form, and the confusion of waters on the deck had by now erased his image.

"Where?" cried Renik, drawing his dagger and stepping forward uncertainly. "Where is he?"

"In the water," yelled Hrothe, but when Renik sidestepped cautiously to peer over the rail Hrothe shook his head and added, "No,

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no! A vision in a puddle, a body but not a body, like Sulem, but only a mirror reflection. It must be a sending from the Guild!”

“Then he’s gone now, I see nothing,” Renik began, now searching the deck and the sea, still not quite understanding. Then the water had drained and calmed enough on the deck so that Renik suddenly stiffened and pointed. In the disturbed sheen of the wood, he saw the image. But before Renik could react, he was gone, faded like morning-lost visions from a dream.

The ship was still fighting broad-sides of the sea. With Renik at the tiller and some quick work on the part of the crew, they managed to get the ship turned around into the wind and pay out some warp from the bow to help keep them there riding out the storm ass-backwards.

Someone eventually dragged Hrothe, who had fainted, below decks. Enesh and Renik shivered at the tiller until the sky brightened and crew could see enough to make the tricky turn-around back to their course. When that was done, Renik had time to ponder the golden chain that had been manacled to the stranger’s ankle.

* * *

The sea was a brutal farmer that threshed the *Luck* with a passion, but at the end of the second week at sea the ship easily shouldered aside the water, her husk having been nailed by Akrem’s shipbuilders, themselves notorious for stubbornness. It was the morning after the gale, and the sailors were straining over rigging that was frayed and loosened from the punishment. The only idle person was Hrothe, who was still combating the strain of his exertions of that very long week. He sat with his back against the mast, dreamily contemplating the chain of islands that Renik had somehow found for them even through the storm.

Renik gave the tackle a last tug and ran the trailing line through an eye. He wiped sweat from his brow despite the raw air, and judged the distance to the islands by the height of the mists that coiled on the horizon three points off the port bow. The clouds above were long trailing things, cotton balls torn up and stretched out by the tail end of the storm. The clouds over the isles were born there, having risen from a few hot island-cones until they too were caught in stiff winds and unraveled. However, most of the isles were not chimneys. As they drew closer one could see the rocks by averting the eyes just

above the horizon, allowing the vision to see just around the line that cut apart the sea and the air. They were black rocks, little heads peeking at the sailor while their grandsire scraped his head in the sky in a patriarchal way.

Two hours, Renik figured, or one more long tack to the north. The Hearth Isles, in the southern speech; the Forge of Pitbairn, in the speech of the primitive fishers who sometimes rode the storms out this way.

“Watch! Fry your ass, you! Call it out, call it clear!”

“Clouds, Master Renik. P’raps an isle or two and some black rocks, but I can’t be sure.”

Renik had navigated well, almost too well. He should have been off at least a bit. Maybe the rocks were a mirage and the clouds the young sailor called out had to be just that, simple clouds low on the horizon, perhaps building toward another storm. He found himself absurdly hoping that it *was* another storm, a continuation of the bad luck they should still be having, by his esoteric calculations. It was better to get ill fortune in dribbles, not torrents.

“Call it again, Mikello! You’ve slept long enough up there!”

The boy bent his head of curly black hair and waved back to his captain. “Aye, Master. It’s boiling clouds for sure, and a string of isles!”

* * *

“The Hearth Isles?” Hrothe grunted out of a doze and slowly stood up to the drum of his crackling knee-joints.

“That’s them, Hrothe. See the far peak? Or more truthfully, see the mist in the distance? That’s the crotchety old granddad, hammering out his irons in a cloud of fire and smoke. We’ll stay away from him; his idea of hospitality is to cook his visitors. His kinfolk string out in a large circle that runs south then curves to the west. We approach the second isle closest to the west, Lap Child, it’s called.”

“I once talked to an old sailor about them, but never thought I’d see them so close myself. It’s wonderful! The earth opening its bosom, its life blood pouring out beneath the sea and creating new isles.”

“I was only here once or twice as a child,” Kollen mused. “I don’t recall very much. Renik says Lap Child has water, and we’ll freshen

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our supply there. Sorry, though — no red rivers of rock pouring from the little fellow: the Child is too young to be playing a god!”

Lap Child, however, was old enough to have grown a head of hair. A scrubby pine forest bristled on the shore, and taller trees took root beyond. The *Luck* anchored in a cove, and because the sea floor sloped so steeply, anchored quite close to the shore. On the beach were signs of previous visitors; a small construction broke the smooth lines of the beach. Renik set a watch and immediately got half the crew in a long boat. They hit the beach with joyous shouts, somewhat constrained by the roar of their master, and hefted kegs and weapons on shoulders. Renik led them over a tangle of boulders and through a cleft in a low ridge that backed the strand. Soon the stunted pines beyond muffled all roars and shouts.

Hrothe and Kollen stayed behind. The old man limped up the beach to the construction. It was an altar of sorts with a weathered carving on it, a wavy design, perhaps.

“A sea shrine,” Hrothe conjectured. “A simple thing, but reverent enough.”

The pedestal supported a rough stone bowl almost an arm-span wide. It was empty but for a few grains of sand and some gull droppings. But toward the back of the shrine Kollen kicked up remnants of past sacrifices blown from the bowl: an old sandal, a leather cap. These were reverent gifts, Kollen mused, since sailors were a notoriously poor lot.

“It doesn’t look like something ordinary traders would leave,” Kollen said, feeling a melancholy for the sailor who’d offered what was probably his only pair of sandals. He hoped he’d gotten what he wanted: safe passage, cured toothache, reunion with family. He shook his head and spoke to distract his bad feeling. “Not too many ships come here. Nothing to come for, really. A lot of shipwrecks around these rocks. Renik says there’re reefs everywhere the more you sail into the group.”

Hrothe nodded and said after a while, “Anasa tells that these isles have regular visitors. Simple folk, a fisherfolk who sail out here from the coastlands to the east and fish for days at a time. Inordinate amounts of fish seem to cluster here, and they regard the isles as magical. This shrine might be theirs.”

Hrothe went off to explore up and down the beach, while Kollen lingered. The sea-battered shrine and the old scraps struck a resonant

chord in him. He thought, that, despite the gentle breeze and the sun, this was a sad place.

Kollen climbed the low scarp and squatted at the edge of the forest. The sea breeze chilled him, and the surf's drum didn't care about that, or anything. The ship hung out in the harbor, looking small and inaccessible despite all the crew's happiness with the close anchorage. And there was Kollen, sitting alone, feeling alone, used to the feeling but just now not too happy about it. He felt that loneliness was his birthright and the medium in which he was born to work. By habit he told himself all would go smoother if he could work alone even as this habitual philosophy started sounding hollow. He remembered the death-prophecy of the seer during that night in Fenward. In desperation he tried to counter-balance this vision with the cheerful but strangely grim prophecy of the Golden Man in the tomb of Habran: 'Worry not! If you're the one, you can't die.' In all of the Golden Man's cheery gossip, he'd made that promise sound grim.

Kollen composed obscene riddles to cheer himself up.

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CHAPTER 9 — THE SEA-DREAMS DRIFT

I just want a woman with salt in her hair, yo ho!
and oilskins for pretties, and kisses to share, heave ho! — Hauling
Song

Kollen was not a born seaman, and the motionless sand was a luxury. Sweet solid ground! It didn't open up and swallow you, and hills didn't roll under your feet. But having just gotten off the boat, the ground did gently sway still, as if the earth were a mother rocking the isle to sleep.

"Dry Earth," he mumbled, yawning, under the imaginary shadow of the weathered shrine, "you're my god tonight, and someday I'll build a temple to you." He spread out a square of weathered sailcloth, made himself a sand pillow under it, wrapped his cloak and a blanket around himself, and squirmed until the sand-bed was a contour of his body. The sun had set behind the last island of the chain and silhouetted its crags so that the isle became the spine of a sounding serpent. Anasa first saw the likeness. It reminded him of the time, he said, when a flying dragon had swallowed him, and he had used a sail-needle and thread to stitch its gullet closed; then he tickled its throat; the resulting sneeze blew the dragon apart, and Anasa propped up a wing with a couple of ribs and sailed the carcass home, getting three pennies per pound for it at the butchers market. Then the air was fertile for dragon slayers; the heroes multiplied until Kollen wondered that any dragons could be left.

Anasa kept the tales going after that, relating the lore of the Hearth Isles and the troop of merfolk who guarded the territory. They were said to be the color of drowned men; they captured ships and ran them aground if the ship masters lost a battle of verse and riddles with the chief of the merfolk. Kollen fell asleep as the old mate was telling how their underwater cities rose above the waves one day each year—

Anasa always told good lies.

The light of moonrise woke Kollen into a half-sleep in which dreams and reality are indistinguishable. Music had awakened him, or perhaps not awakened, but lulled his mind into the trancelike doze in which he now found himself. And perhaps it wasn't even music. Its rhythms matched the pulse of the surf, although a melody seemed

woven into and between the pulse. Kollen became interested in that half-heard music; his mind rose another layer toward wakefulness. His eyes opened into slits.

The moonlight had brought the serpent spine back in sharp relief, black against faintly glowing horizon. He felt delightfully chilled around the face, just enough to feel grateful for his thick blankets and canvas cover, which is a prime element in the joy of half-sleep. For a while he lay there thinking about world-serpents spanning the sea. He hummed a tune, a strangely beautiful one in time to the roll and swish of the waves. And later still, after dozing and waking, he thought he dreamed about the queen of the merfolk standing in the surf, drinking a libation to the stars. He was half awake as she approached the shore, knee-deep in the ocean, staring at the sleeping men, and sometimes turning her gaze to the stars. She was majestic and frightening, silent and still, and Kollen passed the boundary into waking enough to lean up on his elbow and paw through the sand for the sword he'd laid beside him. But the dream vision was gone in the pale foam of the breakers, and he slept again.

* * *

The sailors spent the next day in recreation on the island. They had a little under two weeks at sea, but Renik wanted them to rest while they could. Rest might be in short supply someday.

They put out to open sea in the late afternoon, not wanting to be caught sitting a second night should pursuit catch up. Renik had called for a meeting, "Because we were chased away, and now we must start the chase." *Chase for what, exactly?* Renik said then to himself. Renik walked his deck and felt the long roll of the ship that was evidence of an unballasted voyage — they had no cargo and hadn't even time to load rocks to settle the ship a little. Something was in (if only metaphorically) an empty hull that could cool a merchant's yearning toward the gamble of such an adventure. It had sounded good back in Akrem, with the excitement of their escape at Fenward still warm under the armpits, and the promise of some great gain. Now he wished he had the simplest of cargoes to divert them to to any port with goods to let them break even. As he leaned with a fist gripping a stay, he wondered what prevented them from living that accessible daydream — shipping an honest, simple cargo? It wasn't money. Under his bunk, a small chest held enough coin to buy

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something: wine, furs, even timber for the wood-scarce coast they had left behind. Why did he think there was no use in turning aside from this chase of the unknown that had already proved dangerous?

Renik shifted his grip and pulled himself up the stay to make a pensive look-out over the sea. The Hearth Isles ranged about them, barren rocks, mostly, as bare as his hold, as featureless as their prospects. He shimmied back down the rope with the only sure knowledge that their prospects must be more than hints. The crew would want to know something solid — they had been remarkably patient with him — and Renik would like a basis for some confidence himself. This was Hrothe's project, a garnering of hints as he interpreted the scroll. Renik alit on the deck with a thump and slowly sunk down the companion way to his bunk below. Hrothe today had said he had enough to report sometime in the evening, and that was soon.

* * *

When Hrothe called them together, Kollen found Renik lying in his bunk with eyes staring out the small port. Kollen stood several feet away and, undiscovered, watched his brother. Like himself, Kollen decided, his brother was sitting on foreboding thoughts that arose from the incongruously cheery last two days.

It had been cheery despite some minor misgivings because Kollen had allowed himself to be transported back in time. As he wandered the shore at Akrem and remembered his boyhood, he had wandered the decks in the recent good weather and actually studied the ship. When he found a carving he had made over twenty years ago, he had nearly done a jig and shouted out an embarrassing happiness. It was a little figure of a woman, faded and dented, but it had somehow survived on a sheltered piece of deck that hadn't had to be repaired in all those years.

He remembered carving that because he had been enamored of an older woman who sold candles and lantern oil along the docks, and it had seemed to the growing boy that her sidewise-glances had meant something exciting. He had never had the chance to find out, because they shipped and returned in a month to find that a plague had broken out in their absence and had taken hundreds away. He never saw her again. Not knowing if she moved away to save herself or had fallen to the fever had added depth to the memory. And there she was again,

sprung alive from a blurring scratch, made perfect in the mind, if not absolutely authentic. *Never mind*, Kollen thought, *as Hrothe has told me, art sharpens reality and can't be expected to get reality exactly right.*

From the carved woman it was five strides away to a patch of deck right behind the short foremast. That area had proved to be out of the main traffic and thud of cargo, and was often shaded by the foresail. Kollen recalled that a game board used to be cut into the planks right there. He strode over and indeed found it. This board, though, wasn't the original, having the sharper lines of a recent work, and the deck here seemed recently refurbished. It was the son or grandson of the board he remembered and the men who used to sit around it on an off-watch, telling tales and jokes and studying the taps of game counters across the squares. Kollen had learned to gamble right there. All this time later, he associated the rattle of dice with the flap of the sail and the rounded press of the mast against his back.

The good weather of the last days had worked some changes in him, and Kollen was starting a conversation with Renik that reflected his vaguely pleasant mood when cousin Anasa came before the lantern hanging outside the bunk-room beyond Renik's niche, making his shadow fall upon them and rousing the shipmaster's attention.

"Beggin' your pardon, men, but Master Hrothe is startin' the reading. We're hopin' you're on the way joinin' us."

Renik leaned up and rubbed his eyes.

"Right now, Anasa."

"Good," said the old man, although he hadn't moved as he looked between the two brothers. Then he sighed and leaned on the bulkhead. His skin texture seemed to match the tough old wood. "Now is the best time to be tellin' you, ain't it?"

"Tell me what, cousin?"

"I think you know, Renik. Renik, we've been cousins since you were born, and that runs on now forty year, am I right or wrong? I shipped with our grandfather and your father, and had shares with both of them in all their ships. And you and me, we've been shipmates since you were old enough to whip and tar a rope end."

Renik nodded each point on to the next as he sat straighter and started looking grimmer.

"You taught me to splice a rope, cousin, and caulk a plank and scrape off barnacles from keel to reef."

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“Aye, I did that! And you and me sailed this ship alone across the Green Sea when the crew got arrested at Shamay, and that caravaneer tore down the jail-house wall to get them out and away to the portage on the Black River.”

“And we hired the leather-dyers at Saracil to tow us up to the portage to get them,” said Renik, “and the caravaneer wanted only a cask of wine and my gold buckle for the jail break.”

“That’s how it was, and a good deal for us. We’ve done many a good trade, Renik, and I’m getting old, and I’m happy just to wake up in the mornin’ and stamp deck, and I’ve a one-seventh share in the ship to keep me fed in my dotage, but even so, our hold is empty, our last port was a wild, empty place, and the next port is unknown.”

“You tell the truth, Anasa.”

“I do, Renik. And the lads are young men wondering if their share on this trip will pay for the clothes they’re wearing out, and they’ve been prodded by guards from the Archmage of the Guild, and all of em’ wonder if they’ll be spelled into bait fish and sold on the dock when we come home. That’s all I want to say, and all I have to say, me bein’ between the shipmaster and the lads.”

“And you said it well and true, Anasa.”

The old man nodded once and turned away. The brothers listened to his steps scuffing through the empty hold, and then Kollen said, “Come on, father, your children await you in the fore cabin.”

Renik stood and stretched; he rubbed his shoulder and said: “And I feel as old as a father of twelve. Let’s listen to Hrothe. Now he’s the keenest one here for the quest — did he turn greedy like us? Or has he been youthing to counter-balance my aging? Brother, we must share his madness or we’ll go sane.”

Roughly half of the crew slept in the back of the ship, and half in the front, embracing the vessel with human presence. Like many ships of her design, *Renik’s Luck* made few divisions of status, and the common room where everybody took their meals was in the forward part of the ship so that the shipmaster had to walk to his meals with his crew.

Anasa’s words, still warm in the ear, reminded Renik keenly that the cargo hold was empty but for their water, provisions, spare lumber, and a dozen sacks of charcoal. The lack of material presence — that strange state for his merchant vessel — weighed down on him as they shrugged past the ladder to the deck, squeezed through the

narrow door to the hold, and walked through the echoing space to the fore cabin, where the rest of the crew were wedged around the ship's stove. Light spilled from the cracks around the door, and, in the darkness of the hold, formed a square of perfect brilliance. The form made Renik think of a simple coffin he'd seen being made at Asher's shop not too long ago, and Kollen was reminded of a well-shaped grave he saw being dug, when he had once stopped, in a fey mood, and traded cheery riddles with the grave digger.

Each brother couldn't suppress a glance at the other.

The common room was tight but warm and tidy. A lamp burned on a table and the hatch above was cracked open to clear the air. The off-duty men leaned on narrow bunks against the hull, or squatted on sea chests. Hrothe was sandwiched between the bunks; he read haltingly from the golden scroll, his voice wafting with the light from the door cracks.

“—all chambers. I am sad’ — no, make that ‘lonesome — in his place. Once he walked here’ — no, Hrothe you old fool — ‘at one time he stood here in control’ — or in contemplation? — ‘of the world. Now he wanders.’ A pause here, lads, a break in the script. He returns with a hasty hand: ‘They thunder at the gates. Habran does not care. He waits for the people to kill his guards and storm his room. He sits on that black iron box of his and just looks at me as if I should know what to do. But I know nothing and he does not tell me. I am at life’s end, and I ought to remain with my lord’s few loyal guards and bleed with them like a man. I ought to, and I would if I could conjure a gargoyle to fly this scroll south, where somebody must read it. I will not be a man, not of the common type’ — no, make that ‘mold’ — ‘not of the common mold. I will myself fly out of a road’ — no, no, that’s ‘way’, you don’t fly on a road, do you? — ‘fly out of a way I know, which my lord showed me weeks ago on that strange night. I feel no love’ — perhaps ‘loyalty’ — ‘no loyalty to this mob, this tower, this man once my lord. Henceforth, exile! Southward I go, into the wilds with no friend before or behind me. Today I killed Tranta with a sword I hid under my robes when I saw the mob come. He would have dragged me from the gate amongst them; I would stay in the tower and stare my lord in the eye until he spoke truth; the act of killing was too easy, though I got silence for my pains. Death I know, and I have explored a wilderness of the spirit.’ He signs it, ‘Solan, Habran’s apprentice and scribe.’”

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“Drinks ‘round,” said Turlane. “They were great men in the olden times; scribes were heroes and heroes were gods!”

“Men are,” said Hrothe dreamily, still poking through the scroll, “what they see of themselves. And I wonder— I wonder why an apprentice was forced to make himself a soldier and exile as his lord sat without care? And I wonder if it was Solan’s bones that Kollen found in the crown chamber?”

Anasa puffed at his pipe and said between his teeth, “Better ask what kind of master sits down and bequeaths a sinking ship to his crew.”

“A one with black innards, I’d say,” said Botha to general and loud agreement that drowned Hrothe’s, “— would you hang a man purely because of an accusation?” which also met with agreement.

But young Mikello, listening to everything with chin on knees, backed up Hrothe. “I feel bad for Habran. He were mighty sad to sit by himself and never speak a word in his sinking fortress and earn a bad name for it” — and for this soft-heartedness, the boy was stuffed into a sack and tossed between them until Renik entered.

Hrothe was glad for the intrusion. “Renik!” he said, “great news! The later writing in the scroll is not an interpretation of Habran’s original — it is an account by his apprentice.”

“What does it mean for *us*?”

“It means that it was penned by a man who was closest to Habran’s work, perhaps his councils. Interpretations are, by comparison, the magnified egos of self-important scholars. And it means that I can read most of it. Solan didn’t write in riddles, though he tried to solve them. Hear this!” Hrothe rolled back through the columns of text. “Solan was present at some kind of siege of Habran’s house. He appears to have taken on unasked-for responsibilities. He writes: ‘Habran will not talk. Perhaps he cannot talk. He looks like death. If he has lost hope, then I have not. But our poor guards may lose all hope soon. They think he passed down his knowledge and command to me. Poor men! I cannot break their spirits as they face death.’ And yet this occurs further along the scroll: ‘He made it understood to Alisaan that the Keys cannot be undone, not by himself. But he has hidden them, one in the Forest of Klarad. If it is hidden then it is meant to be found. I must find it. I will find it and undo his work. I have not taken this his last writing, abandoned him to his sickness and brave men to the angry councilors and townsfolk, just to

end by living safely elsewhere while knowing such forces are loose in the world. How should a mere apprentice come to this decision? Why has he left it to me to make it?" Hrothe looked at Kollen. "Well! The Forest of Klarad! Kollen, what was the name of that village near which this mound was?"

"Klar village."

"Ey! That's it! But that poor boy, Solan. He almost reached his goal. Those were his bones for sure laying before the throne. What you survived, Kollen, he could not. But what is this here ..." He turned back to the scroll, read again, and then looked up, his brows converging.

"Undo Habran's work? What does it mean? Why has Habran given this man his 'last writings'? What puzzles me most is that these enemies of his — apparently Habran's very followers at his ancestral estate — were not the greatest problem for Solan. His mind was on a greater problem, which he never does seem to elucidate. Listen! Solan is our guide. He did much of the work of untangling Habran's language. And now I can trust all my half-guesses. Don't you see? We aren't seeking simple gold and gems. Something else more important lies..."

Hrothe was interrupted by Banath, who was the evening's helmsman. They heard his footsteps ringing down the deck, and he dropped rather than climbed down the fore cabin's ladder.

"Renik, the ship isn't steering by the handle...." He finished with a look that said, 'we can't see why.'

Renik shouldered his way past, saying "Did you check for trailing weed?"

"The rudder is free. She seems clear."

They met Enesh at the helm. Enesh's muscles swelled as he swept the great tiller back and forth to show the problem without words.

Renik took the long handle in hand: it moved, and he applied his full strength, heard his bones popping as the sea's lips sucked powerfully at the rudder. Renik eased the tiller back. The ship had shifted a bit but wouldn't bend her course.

"By Nehtan's beard. What...." He leaned over the transom saw the clear rudder, then craned his head on either side of the ship and suddenly found a woman hanging on to the starboard quarter of the ship by some kind of stick hooked into the hull.

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She was long — tall, rather — and her long hair trailed down her back and played in the foam of the stern wake. Her face was turned upward as she was being towed along her side; it was a broad and high-cheeked face, and the eyes were curiously large. Of her limbs it might be said that a sculptor would have wanted them as models for heroes' statues, so powerful they looked, although the skin that covered them was a sickly blue.

Stricken by awe, Renik gathered in the sight and only later would figure to himself that no words of either beauty or ugliness could quite apply to this eerie woman.

Her expression so struck Renik that he and this woman locked eyes, his face remaining blank though color-drained, and hers looking ever more curiously until she unhooked her implement and spun away in the swells behind them.

Then Renik bounded from the aft rail, and his crew crowded toward him. He said nothing. The crew stopped, seeing their shipmaster obviously fighting for words, and as rare as *that* was, wise Anasa shushed them all and laid a hand on Renik's shoulder. Renik pointed astern. The crew had missed the woman floating behind, but now they couldn't miss her. She sat astride a killer whale whose sword-fin suddenly sprouted from the water, and she crouched behind it as the creature arced in and out of the sea and caught up with them.

The crew murmured; a few of them cried out. They crowded the starboard rail and then Botha turned toward Renik, jerking a thumb downward.

“Here's why she won't steer.”

Renik leaned over and saw the dark length of a whale nuzzled up against the bottom of the ship. A quick inspection on the port side revealed a second. The *Luck* was cradled between the great fish.

The ship bashed through a steep wave and showered salt spray on the men, but none noticed as the sea-queen — as each in his own mind named her without thinking — drew abreast of the starboard rail.

“Dead trees,” they heard her say in an odd accent, almost to herself, “shaped finely, well fit, spread with wings, stitched with sinew.” She passed her gaze over each sailor. Each sailor was stunned to deeper silence. “You ride on a dead thing, I ride on a live thing.”

The sailors bodies were keyed into the tilt of the deck, which seemed to be the only moving thing. Renik stepped forward. He opened his mouth.

“Therefore I must be dead,” the sea queen finished.

Renik clamped down on whatever absurd thing he was going to say. The woman’s words made a strange kind of sense that deepened her mystery.

Renik wiped sweat from-his brow.

“Tell me the truth,” she suddenly shouted, standing on her mount with the sea foaming around her legs. They noticed she carried a sword or short spear with great hooked teeth serrating both of its edges. “Are you alive or dead?”

Renik’s temper started simmering. She was playing games with him, trying to shame him before the crew! And he was ashamed.

“Alive, alive,” he called out, because he had to say something, now. The sound of his own voice gave him confidence. “And if these are your fish squeezing my ship’s sides, I’ll ask you to call them off before I send an iron in their guts.” He turned his head and gestured at the hatch. “Anasa, get me irons.”

Soon enough the mate came up with four unattached harpoons. Renik thudded the deck with the butt of one and waited for the woman to speak again.

“Words,” she said, “words. I have teeth.” She turned toward the bow-end of the boat and remained there until all the crew peered ahead and saw low black rocks a short distance ahead, slightly off the port bow.

And meanwhile the *Luck* was slowly turning from its parallel course with the Hearth Isles. The bow swung toward the middle of the island arc; the foresail fluttered, the great mainsail had been close hauled and now jibed dangerously to a stern wind. Renik had a suddenly wild desire to swing the main boom out to the breeze and try to outrun their captors, perhaps navigate a suicidal course among the scatter of rocks due north.

The woman turned toward them, wrapping her arms around the whale’s tall fin. “Tell me the truth,” she repeated. “Why would living men come here?”

His crew looked toward him for direction. They looked doubtfully ahead toward the crowded sea.

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It did not seem like the kind of day for a tragedy. The sea was a world-wide hand playing with sun-gems. Sea birds squawked, playing chase with the ship. Only the fluttering sail and an eerily out-of-place woman whose strange utterances paralyzed ordinary thought—

“White water, Master Renik.” Mikello’s voice, a small voice, out of place with the weight of its message. The breeze fluttered hair back from twelve faces, all eyes on Renik. Somewhere ahead came a muted roar of sea on rock.

“Sorceress or sea-witch....” Renik said, and he balanced his iron in his palm, uncertainty still clinging to his will. He hefted the weapon and slipped his palm back toward the butt for a powerful cast. Why did she lean on that whale fin as if nothing were happening, her chin resting on knuckles as if the event were passing with muddy slowness?

Anasa was behind him, Renik’s weapon bearer, and Turlane had taken up one of the harpoons and waited at the edge of Renik’s vision.

“Return the course of my ship to me,” he shouted. The woman straightened, but *Renik’s Luck* continued toward the rocks.

Why did she look so puzzled and sad?

Renik drove home his iron.

The barb was deadly straight on course, and only a quick crouch — as quick as a shark turning for its prey — saved the sea-queen. And then events began to pass with nightmarish speed. The woman’s whale veered closer, and the sea-witch sprang up from her crouch and arced through the air like a porpoise. Her toothed sword bit into the rail near Renik, and she hung there as he took the iron offered by his mate. Turlane could hardly have acted in that moment, and then it was too late with the woman and Renik so close. They were so close that Renik had to back up to bring the point of his weapon to bear. He saw her odd expression and the rough-woven material that bound her breasts and wrapped around her waist, then she snapped out her arm and caught the iron shank of the harpoon. She jerked it hard enough to pull a stubborn-gripped shipmaster within her reach. Then her hand snapped out whiplike, wrapped around the base of his neck, and she flung Renik into the sea before dropping off herself.

It was that quick.

Kollen reached the rail first and tightened his grip on the wood when he saw no sign of either his brother or the woman. He ran to the stern and leaned over the water, and then he saw both people, his

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brother floundering, the woman treading water, both of them swirling in the wake made by the great whale that circled them.

Someone had brought up an armful of weapons and dumped them on the deck. Kollen's eye alit on a crossbow as smarter sailors than himself remembered the rocks waiting to rip the ship. The capturing whales were gone, and they threw the ship across the wind, which was stiff enough to tilt the deck sharply. Kollen clung to the rail and felt the *Luck's* side crunch against rocks.

His horror mixed with wonder; he suddenly thought that this was the woman — real, not of dreams — who had stood hardly a dozen feet away and watched them the night before.

CHAPTER 10 — ISLAND IN THE SKY

Once a philosopher in the Red King's court told him to build no more towers, because views from towers unavoidably draw the eye downward, reminding us of graves and gutters, and low things of all kinds. Thus the King decreed that only sunken gardens and pleasure courts of every kind should be built, so that humanity might become taller, cheerier, and more charitable from the simple act of looking upward. — *The Chronicle of Gamli*.

The sea splashed Kollen's legs. He hung over the side in a loop of a line inspecting the damage to the ship. One plank had been stoven in, another torn completely away. But this was the ship's good luck. She'd made a noble effort in the last moment, heeling over in the reach across the wind and kissing the reef with her side instead of her belly. Perhaps ten barrels of sea taken on, no more. A few men were inside the hull, on the other side of the wound with augers and saws. Another rib was being nailed side by side with the broken one to add strength. The torn edges of the planks had already been squared, and spare planks spiled, cut, drilled, grooved, and butt-blocked. Soon Botha would replace Kollen at his perch to drive in the spikes and the caulking wool.

Turlane stood watch above him with a crossbow, although even the sea-witch probably couldn't swim as fast as they were sailing now. It was the same crossbow that Kollen had caught up and cocked some hours ago, though he had relived the moment ever since. He went over in his mind the aim he'd taken. What more could he have done? The ship was bent to the breeze, there had been duties to perform, but Kollen left them all to Anasa, who was far fitter for this rambling amongst chewing rocks.

He kept recalling how he'd seen Renik floundering in the sea, lined up along the shaft of the weapon along with the sea-witch. Captor and captured man, they were both so close! He hadn't thought about it at the time, but now he'd had the leisure and figured the choice had been well planned somewhere in his mind — whatever target he hit would be the right one. With everything lost, there had been nothing to lose: revenge and charity both had ridden on that bolt.

The bolt had arced away, but he hadn't been sure what happened as the distance increased between them. And then both people had sunk under the waves.

Kollen had ordered them to cruise, but to cruise for what, the crew wasn't sure. For his brother's body? Perhaps. But they guessed it was the hunting season for witches. No one asked questions. Kollen sat astride the bowsprit, one arm entwined through a stay, the other balancing the crossbow. He stayed there so long that Anasa said between pipe-puffs, "Aye, we've a new figurehead, lads. Who'll call it back for supper?"

Kollen stayed there until the evening, when he stiffly made his way aft. He ordered the *Luck* away from the steamy isles until daybreak.

All that night he dreamt of Reniks climbing over the side — laughing, bloated Reniks holding out the bolt that had hit its target. What was worse still was that he heard again that haunting music of the night before; it overlaid his nightmare and made it all the more horrible because of the juxtaposed terror and beauty. Finally Kollen awoke with a hand on his throat — no, a blanket twisted around him. There was no more sleep to be had.

The new shipmaster found Hrothe against the main pole. He had a lantern burning by his knees. The scroll lay there too. Kollen leaned against the mast, seeming to study the scroll with Hrothe, but the strange characters swam in his dulled vision. The wind caught a tuft of the old man's beard and suddenly made Kollen think of leaves waving in a breeze against trees that were planted on good, solid dirt.

He squatted next to the man and said, "What'll I do, Hrothe? I'm not fit for ship-mastering. I may own part of her, but that was father's dutiful gift. I'm only a thief, oddities merchant, and smuggler, outwitting guards and officials, living off the tastes of my customers, who're usually as strange as the things I get for them."

"Don't be afraid to take the master's place," said the old man. "Start thinking well and then acting on those thoughts."

"So I asked for advice! And second? You'd say to keep up the quest, wouldn't you?" Kollen moved over to the other side of the mast.

"Yes, continue the quest." Hrothe set aside his scroll. "I'm sorry to say this to you now, Kollen — you're my dear friend! — but this adventure is more important than our lives. And yet I can say nothing

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better, even though I've practiced speech-making all day. Because the men will need to be well persuaded to keep going."

"Then make a speech about this, this creature who took Renik from us. Think she's down there now in her tower? Are we sailing over their cities even now, these merfolk? Anasa knows some tales that say...."

"I respect our mate very much, but I do *not* believe his sailor tales. They are amusing and may preserve a strange kind of truth, but a scholar must sometimes set aside amusement and seek plainer, or even stranger, truths. If droves of merfolk swim under us, where were they? They didn't arise to challenge us to a song contest. Only this strange woman. And she is a woman, a human. How and why she lives in the sea, I don't know. I can guess, and what I guess frightens me. Perhaps Anasa's tales about the Hearth Isles are true in a way, guilty only of exaggeration. She is the merfolk all rolled into one. A few sailors have seen her, at different times, perhaps years apart, decades even. Or longer. Perhaps she has forced ships aground. Word spreads, drunken tongues wag. Our tribe of merfolk is born. But *we* are left with one woman who commands whales and asks remarkable questions. I wish Renik paused to speak with her instead of throwing that harpoon. That's why we must go forward and think each step through. Strangeness surrounds us. Perhaps she and the golden man are kin, do you think, Kollen? That almost seems too sensible! Brother and sister of the weird, Habran's supernatural guardians of his treasure? Perhaps I seek too much balance, too much sense. At the very least, though, we have a duty to answer our own questions and set things straight."

Kollen rubbed his chin and smoothed back his hair before adding, "That isn't a duty to persuade the men to follow us now."

Hrothe nodded and turned again to his scroll.

"Shouldn't we forget all this, Hrothe? Renik was the driving force after we convinced him of the venture..."

"What was your driving force?" Hrothe asked. "Junior brother tagging along behind like a calf for its milk? That I doubt, young man. Who asked me a few days ago to get him to the treasure so that he could act alone?" Hrothe turned to face Kollen; Kollen kept staring out to sea. "The next treasure, Kollen, will be just as dangerous as the first one. Should we give up the quest and let someone else, such as the Mage Guild, find it? Renik would have been interested in the next

treasure. Habran's scroll hints about it." Hrothe turned the scroll until he found a spot that he'd marked with a strip of cloth. He read: "'And second there be that hides at the fourth of the wet hills and confers lordship upon Earth's churning girdle, which is vitality through melody.' The sea, Kollen. I am certain it controls some part of the sea. The crown for the land, now something for the sea. Perhaps Habran was indeed a man of balances."

A time passed in which Hrothe's lamp burned out and they sat together without a chore under the star-sparked sky, and with time to be lulled out of anger by the gentle sway of the ship. Banath, at the helm for this watch, was humming an old tune that carried on the breeze and reached the watchman at middeck, and they traded melody and refrain.

"Oh rise my bright lover
and light the path clear,
the sea, she's a carpet,
her breath is the air — "

"My mistress the moon,
light my way to your room,
ere your father the sun finds me here."

Father Sun did return to chase the lover away with a singed cheek as the only reward for his active climbing. Hrothe said of this, "You see, we must go on, because it's the way of the world to chase and be chased. There's always a treasure before us and hounds behind us."

"I was chased by hounds, once," said Kollen. "The Lord of Dromzen set his prize pack on my trail for three days. You know, I can still hear those hounds."

"See now, more relations, Kollen. You and Habran are kinfolk. He writes allegorically of a huntsman that follows closely at his heels and sounds the hunting horn more loudly every night. He says he has been fleeing him every day of his life. There's a theme to unweave!" And as if he meant to start his new line of study immediately, Hrothe rolled up the scroll on his lap and fixed his eye on the setting moon.

"But did the fellow hear music as well as hounds?" Kollen ventured after several moments had passed. "We're surrounded by music, on this ship, and in my sleep. Maybe in yours, too?"

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Hrothe stirred in the tangled shadows of the rigging. “Yes, I’ve felt music. I hear it in my sleep and feel it as I wake. I said nothing, in case it was only an old man’s delusions.”

“Perhaps an old man’s and younger man’s delusions. Don’t mention it to anyone. If they hear it, then they can tell us. If not, we won’t start any rumors. Another question to answer, hey Hrothe? We’ll be sailing to Earth’s end, stripping our sails to make scrolls of all the answers.” He looked up at the stars and judged the height of the Twins. “And now it’s almost my watch time. I’ll send a sailor to bed and look out for dripping musicians.”

Kollen took the helm wishing Renik were there telling him where to steer.

* * *

Renik’s Luck barely made headway in the dead air. That was well enough to the sailors’ liking, since she was threading through the shallows around the fourth island. In a small rowboat, Kollen and two others rowed a bow-shot ahead of the ship. Six others in the longboat warped the *Luck* through the trickiest of the rocks.

Kollen shouted back at the ship, “Hrothe! Here’s your fourth isle. It’s a bare rock that the gulls use for a privy.”

The isle was a smooth rock amidst the shallows. Here and there were gull’s droppings, yellow-white like fresh milk, along with the cracked shells of their feasts. Tufts of grass somehow survived in isolated nooks, and it would have been a hard man indeed that could’ve found the heart to tread on those tough vegetable-hermits. They oddly impressed Kollen. One might, he thought, find a kinship between such things as people and salt grass — the gods had given them both the hooks with which to latch on to something useful and make a home there.

They paddled to that island and Kollen and his crew made a landfall on the rock, finding what they had expected. At least the ship had found dark, deep water on the other side.

“It can’t be the fourth isle,” said Kollen, who squatted on the bow thwart of the boat and looked up. “You sure?”

Hrothe leaned over the rail of the ship.

“Habran is clear about that, at least: he writes ‘from the west seek the fourth isle, an eye in the sea, an isle in the sky.’ But I am not a

seaman, and what is an isle to me is a rock to everyone else. Let us try the next isle tomorrow.”

“Been there,” said Anasa, “oh, maybe twenty year past. Junk grass and a salt-water spring, is all’s there.”

Kollen squatted a while longer until the men began to cast doubtful glances his way. “Up the long boat,” he finally said. “Out to blue water for the night, and in the morning we see this mountainous third isle. Maybe it once was the fourth, the third having sunk when the ocean-god farted. Hmn! Riddles and allegories. Scholars keep ‘em! Hrothe, I thought you said that men were giants in days gone by. Giants, but not map makers.”

They kept the ship sailing until morning found its way up for one more day. And on that day the sun beamed against the black cliffs of the third isle — Mountain Isle, on the chart — but its rays were sucked in by the unreflecting stone and the pines. Only a glistening thread of mist from a waterfall gave back any hope that everything wasn’t built of Night’s shade.

They had a breakfast of biscuits, dried apples, and tea, and then the sailors bent hardened arms at the tackles and lowered their smallest boat. Turlane and Atono rowed, with Kollen at the bow and Hrothe at the rudder. All of them clinked with dagger hilts thrust through their sashes and bare cutlasses leaning against the thwarts — all but Hrothe, that is, who would only carry a small target shield for the general defense. The remaining crew kept a watch with the three crossbows, and more importantly, they kept the *Luck* tacking along the shore. If the sea-witch or her kin returned, they had orders to flee first and worry later about the stranded men.

Kollen had given those orders himself, and no one had disagreed or suggested alternatives. This easiness was starting to give him disease as he slid down the rope to the waiting boat. He had watched the faces of the men stepping into their thwarts. Did their expressionless, sweating brows hide some agreement made with the men left aboard the ship? Might Kollen and Hrothe be scheduled to be left behind on this large island? The waterfall and pine forests might seem to be a guilt-ridding promise of livelihood for stranded men, might they not? Kollen studied the rowers’ backs. Their motions were strong, practiced, and graceful. The combination of this ease of motion and unreadable backs swelled his suspicion. *Why*, he asked himself, *would they agree to anything? What drives them to follow along now? Anasa*

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hasn't spoken about goals and profits and courses since his conversation with us two days ago. Does that mean patience or unvoiced alternatives?

From time to time Kollen turned his head to watch the dark mass they approached. The third isle was marked by precipitous cliffs all around. Somber evergreens furred over those slopes, although in places bare, black basalt showed through the forest. As they neared the shore, Hrothe pointed out the peculiar aspect of the cliffs: they seemed to be made of regular columns. Closer they came, and the columns became hexagonal pillars molded from the cliff face. Near the bottom of the cliffs there were steep piles of broken rock buttressing the lower slopes. These, too, consisted of hexagonal stone, shattered and shortened versions of the cliff. Hrothe wondered at the regular shapes, but Turlane said, "You find it on many of these islands. It's the masonry of the giants who tread the land in bygone days. But isn't it strange that the giants' towers seem to fall down as well as the houses of smaller folk?"

They finally came up against the shore, but the cliff fell straight into the sea. They skirted the stones, bearded by masses of sea-weed, until they found an inlet, which was the tail end of a long ravine that cut deeply into the slopes towering above them. The waterfall noticed in their crossing tumbled through it. There was a spit of sand that divided the slopes of the loose black rock, and they pulled their boat up on that and struck out. The ravine steepened considerably within several strides of the beach. The stream of sweet water cascaded down its length, and at times the men were climbing through a dazzling mist on treacherously wet rocks. Hrothe slowed them down, but still, either his ripened will or a hidden strength in those thin legs, and a low roll of a curse, got him up the slope.

They stopped at one point and saw the ship far below them where the green ocean floor made a sudden drop into the secret blue. *How deep?* wondered Kollen, *and do the palaces of sea-folk point spires to the sun?* He imagined the merfolk watched them through the crystal sea, and his brother's face floated among them, blue, swollen, and grinning.

Kollen had to stop in shock. For a brief time it had been very easy forgetting that Renik was dead. Had he refused to believe it? Had hard work thrust the sadness aside, or was he as darkly deep as the sea below him? Shuddering, he harshly ordered the gasping men onward.

Finally, the ravine narrowed to a vertical knife-cut. This was Kollen's place, something more in his line than this captaining of better seamen than himself. He took the end of the rope carried by Turlane, knotted it loosely to his belt, and began climbing. He was more accustomed to scaling vertical walls of human make, while dodging the regular patrols of guardsmen. *This* wall offered varying hand-holds, and loose flakes that came away in his hand at inconvenient times. The trickling water was icy up in the windy heights. Yet more than once he pressed his skin against the black stone, which was heating up in the sun and warmed his chill, so the darkness of his climb wasn't all a bad omen. Finally the fragmented rock yielded to its master. Kollen drew himself to the rim of the ravine that was topped by thin tufts of grass leaning against the sea breath. Straight-arming himself up on the lawn, he stood. He was on a small meadow through which the little stream wound to empty off the edge of the basalt wall. The meadow sloped upward and cut off his view of the horizon. He walked up the slope, stopped, and blinked.

The island was hollow.

The meadow sloped down a short distance and then seemed to plunge into a mile-wide valley, or bowl. Inside, a sea blinked back at him. And at its center an island twinkled in sun-bright water. A squarish shape on the isle suggested many things, such as towers and tombstones.

Kollen walked to the end of the meadow to look further into the great bowl. The entire slope did not plunge so suddenly, he was happy to see. Off to his right, the cliff became a steep but passable slope, which could be gained by a traverse along the meadow. He began to automatically plan a trail down the slope, which was pin-pricked by spare-looking pine trees, while far below, sea birds were wheeling on the air currents. They spun in clouds of winking wings where the sunlight slanted over the steep rim of the island-bowl. In their course they were sometimes swallowed up in the shadow that was as dark as the water was bright. The wind coursed straight up the inner wall. It was so strong that it carried drops of moisture up from the froth breaking over rocks of the inland shore and peppered Kollen's face with brine. It wafted the birds effortlessly to the heights.

Kollen jogged himself out of his study and ran back to the edge of the cliff, where his worried companions were shouting for him. Kollen secured his end of the rope to a scrubby pine and called down,

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“Get up here and see a sight!” The first to come was Turlane, scrambling spiderlike up the line. Then Botha, and they pulled up Hrothe at the rope’s end. Kollen led them across the meadow without explanations. Turlane swore. Botha shook his head.

“The fourth island!” Hrothe whispered. “The Pregnant island! An island in the sky, or at least as seen *from* the sky.” He pointed at the small central isle. “It was a simple riddle, solved with sweat, not wits. Habran and his folk were both jesters and riddlers.”

* * *

“Not a house, nor a monument,” said fine-eyed Botha. “I’d be thinking it’s a fortress tower on the water.”

They rested on the shore of the inner sea. For a sea it was: the tide had left high-water marks, and the water was chilly brine. It was a deep inner sea, too, if the sharp dip of the slope into the water was an honest sign. From this vantage point they looked up at the calling birds that nested along the rocks. At times their cries filled the titanic bowl, resonating within it until the men became silent visitors at a foreign temple. At other times the wind became a long drone that deadened all other sounds; then the one voice was silence itself, the tone of a shrine as opposed to a clamorous temple.

Kollen stood up to break the eerie trance.

“A fortress? And guards pacing battlements, and maids in waiting leaning from airy windows tossing flowers toward us. Is it a royal welcome, Botha?”

“No, but I’m seeing dark windows, mayhap a gate, too.”

“You’re probably right, then. Maybe you see a boat hanging on the shore for us, too. Unless we swim it? You up for a swim, Hrothe?”

“If need be.”

“Liar.”

But Kollen’s experience in land-matters won the day. He had carried an axe instead of a sword, in case they needed to cut trees to make a ladder for an otherwise impassable section of cliff. Soon they floated into the inner sea on a raft of dead pines roped together with a section of the climbing rope, and they used crude paddles made of hastily shaped branches to propel it. The thrill of the quest was a sweetener to the steady progress they made among the sporting birds diving for fish. Soon they could see details in the castle Botha had described.

“For certain, it’s an old tumbled pile a’creep with salt grass, painted over with gull shit,” said Turlane after a while.

They were within a bowshot, now. It was a small tower, no larger than a middle-wealthy merchant’s house. The island rose sharply behind it, and it seemed as though the builder had economically turned the isle into a house by simply building a front onto the peaky knoll. Then the house would be a narrow one, or the isle was hollow. They came closer. Hrothe crawled to the front of the raft, dangerously unbalancing it. He raised a hand over craggy eyebrows.

“There’s a sign over the door! Botha, read it! What symbols, pictures....”

“Can’t be sure,” Botha said, squinting his eyes. “Might be a letter, I’m thinking, but I can’t read but to see my name in....”

“Form it with your hands!” Hrothe hissed. Botha placed one hand horizontally, and the other vertically beneath it. Hrothe frowned and pulled his beard. Soon, however, his face lit up. “A scales! Look again, look, Botha.”

“Aye, could be. Aye, they are that. Scales.”

Hrothe leaned back on his palms. “We are here.”

Gray stone, bird shit, dried sea weed: it was no scene of majesty, thought Kollen. Yet wasn’t there more, if one looked past the streaking-white dung? Certainly Hrothe found it so; he ran his fingers over the stone door as if it were a woman’s breast. Kollen squinted his eyes up at the facade, for that’s what it was, a front built onto a knoll of black lava. It rose for three levels, narrower at the top than the bottom, and mortared skillfully. Like the barrow he and Sulem had explored, this tower was made with no skill of earthly masons — it seemed to grow out of the bedrock all in one piece.

Turlane stood by the door scratching his head after he’d thrown the full of his brawn against it.

“No doormen in red satin?” said Kollen.

“It’s locked, Kollen. No key hole, and no seams.”

“And no hinges,” finished Kollen. “Hrothe, they were great men in those days to have opened such doors. What’s the secret?” The wizard made a hmph and continued his inspection. Kollen stepped back and cast his eye up the front again. The window set in the upper reaches was promising.

Kollen walked around behind the knoll, but there was no place to climb, and the knoll disappeared straight into the sea. He stripped off

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his boots and bags, and slung only his axe and rope around him. The cold water swirled up his legs, he slipped, and went down quickly over his head. Kollen came up sputtering and cursing, and he struck out around the isle. He had to swim only a short distance until he saw a crack in the knoll. Here the climb proceeded quickly, offering hand holds and places to jam his knee into. Soon he was on top of the knoll, where the tower was built flush up against the stone with its topmost crenellation only as high as his chin where he stood. Kollen pulled himself to the roof. A square hole in its center stared up at him. He paused. The hole was inviting — too inviting.

The muffled curses of the men below roused him. He shrugged and leaned over the hole, explored into its depth.

The party shouted with indignation when Kollen stuck his head out the window above the impassable door and called out. “This Habran was a backwards man! He makes doors impassable then makes you get in through the roof! Here, up the rope. And bring my clothes from around the corner. I’m freezing.”

The spiral stairs wound downward and told the tale of long vacancy. The edges of its steps were sharp and unused — as if the mason had just taken his square-edge from them with a final nod of approval. No one had ever lived here. Yet there was a semblance of life in the tower, the kind of life a child imagines to exist inside a conch shell. For the tower hummed with the pulse of distant forces like the conch shell that sighs the ocean’s sound in the ear. Kollen heard a wind, although his hair didn’t stir; he heard faint groans and creaks and sighs, even if the tower squatted solid as a moneylender on his silver-hoard. Perhaps, he thought, the tower was a door to the heart of the world, and they were hearing that mighty creature’s pulse.

Down farther, their intrusion brought its own kind of life. Their feet scuffed the steps and sent whispers flitting down and up the passage. Kollen felt cold, as if the breaths of shades fell across his back as they spoke. Breathes of other kinds also — the air slowly pushed down, then up the stairs. This Kollen sensed when once they paused to listen, and he’d closed his eyes, and felt the back-and-forth rub of the inner breeze. Meanwhile the windows extracted a filtered light that was quite enough to see by but not enough to bring anything inside the tower to the usual clarity. The square hole in the roof sent a shaft of whiteness down through holes cut in each floor as they

descended, an effect sharpened by the contrast of the basalt-dark walls.

Their journey ended when the stairs emptied into a room of water.

Now Kollen knew where some of the odd sounds had come from — the waters swelled and slapped the curved walls of this underworld antechamber. Yet life there was — the chamber resounded with the steady breaths of the sea over which the tower was built. Its straight rock grew seamlessly out of the native stone that rose from the sluggishly churning water.

“Fine mason-work down to the very founding stones,” said Kollen. “Shall we now weight our feet with stones and continue the journey? The stairs continue into the brine.”

Hrothe did not answer, nor did the others. Kollen explored a few steps into the water, then slipped in farther than he’d intended.

“The steps go down true enough, but there’s a bit of sea weed that’s been using them before me. That’s the second time I’ve been sucked into the drink today....”

“Never mind that,” Hrothe snapped, “but listen! Do you hear it? Music! You don’t need to be asleep to hear it, now, do you?”

Kollen listened, then nodded his head.

“You hear it?” Hrothe asked the other two seaman. They looked at each other first. Both of them nodded.

“Heard it for days,” Turlane admitted. “As we slept, like you said. I didn’t want....”

“No matter, good sailor. No one wanted to say he heard it. But now look instead of listen; over there to the left.”

They did. At first there was nothing more than a deeper shadow than the rest. Kollen’s eyes adjusted, and he saw the blurry curve of a carving. Behind him the men were lighting a storm candle. He waited impatiently, gnawing a knuckle while they knocked sparks from flint and steel into a pile of tinder from Turlane’s pouch. When finally the light reached across the echoing room, they saw the now familiar scales — Habran’s sign — but in them was balanced a fish against a skull.

“So we have the shrine of the Death-God of the fishes,” said Kollen.

After a while Hrothe nodded at Kollen.

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“You were right. The stairs lead downward. That’s our sign and the only path left.” Everyone stared, except Kollen, who gazed off into the slapping pool.

* * *

Hrothe’s words were rattling in his brain: “Perhaps you should wait while we think this over,” Hrothe had said, regretting his persuasive power as Kollen removed his clothes. “Perhaps the stairs mean nothing, no riddle, no hint, nothing.” But Kollen had merely shaken his head, because Hrothe had made too much sense when at first he hadn’t been worried about Kollen’s safety. Now, Kollen would dive into the sea for a treasure full, perhaps, of sea-magic.

Whatever it was, Kollen wouldn’t put it on.

Kollen knew how *he* would use such a thing, though, were he to learn its control. There was a certain harbor master’s house that sat on brightly painted pilings in Saracil, and he’d have the house walk like a crab out into the center of the bay. And if the treasure sent its influence through all things watery to the last degree, then he would reverse-flush the sewers of Ithian as a debt to a certain prince who had once staked him out in the marshes.

Kollen was good to himself and allowed that his character was not much worse than anyone else’s, and he didn’t trust anyone with a treasure of magical power. Hrothe was probably right in his belief that no one should get a hold of this treasure if they were no better than himself!

Thus he slid easily through the cold waters, guided only by that square of light that sliced through the center of the tower and filtered unevenly through the pool, since the stairs had ended about ten feet under the water. Though he wasn’t much of a seaman, he was a good swimmer, and he’d plied somewhat murkier depths when his career had taken him out of Fenward and to the coastal cities on business. Here the murkiness was of a different brand — the dim light seemed to swim itself and sent confusing images around him. He swam amidst a legion of wraiths that all seemed to dance to the music of the sea. The melody was not so much louder in the water as it was sharper. As sharp as the water that stung his eyes; he blinked, and suddenly his questing hands struck something solid. In the dimming depth Kollen panicked for an instant and let out some of his precious store of air. The bottom. That was all. He cast a quick glance, saw a

blackness somewhere off to his left, and another in front of him, where the bottom dropped off again into deeper places. Then he sprang against the ground as his lungs burned holes in his sides.

The men above saw him flail the water, sobbing for breath, clutching for the rim of the pool. Turlane waded into the water and tugged him to the ledge.

“A ledge—four or five fathoms down, maybe. Nothing there. Maybe a cave or overhang. Then the shaft continues downward. Cold!” Smoke from the thick candle hung in the cool air; it swirled around the chamber like the slow whirlpooling of the tide. Hrothe said nothing: squatted, tugged his beard. Kollen was readying himself for another dive when Botha finally finished some errand on the other side of the chamber — he carried a small, barnacle-encrusted flagstone that he had pulled from the rim of the chamber.

“I’d say carry this to the bottom, saving you many a good breath in the fight downward.” Kollen clapped the seaman on the shoulder and accepted the burden. He hefted it — grunted beneath nearly a third of his own weight, and stored his breath.

The stone tugged him headlong to the bottom. A pain was building up in his head like a needle ready to burst out from within; he held his nose and blew, and bubbles bubbled through the inner maze of his brain and relieved the pain. Renik had taught him that trick when they were boys, but also said if he blew too hard, his brain would come out of his left ear.

He was shivering with the cold when the ground came up. Hooking his feet beneath the boulder, Kollen stood up beneath the sea.

It was strange to stand there. His eyes stung, and he kept blinking them in the hazy currents, and he brushed back a waving frond of seaweed that had taken root against the thick breeze of the tide. In a heart-beat’s time Kollen found the puzzling darkness, released his foothold, and swam. It was a cave. The entrance was low; Kollen wedged himself for a moment and looked behind him, where he saw the wide knife-cut of blackness where an undersea valley led away to the outside and supplied the room under the tower its tamed tides.

He turned once more, and faced the darkness of the cave. It would be madness to try it now, to probe in there. Yet he swam forward, scraped his back against the roof of the cave, and swam lower. Soon

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the light faded totally. But before it did, the last gleams showed the way slanting up before him.

Madness. He followed the way, up into complete darkness. When his lungs were nearly spent, Kollen splashed an unexpected thinness. He didn't think, but he breathed. Fresh air! His hands found a rocky ledge to which he pulled himself and rested half out of the water as his heart hammered like a gong in the temple of Nothing.

For a long time he lay in that bubble and just tallied up his good luck. For a longer while he shivered and beat the blood back into his limbs again. Then he noticed that he was breathing heavily, long after he should have recovered his breath. Kollen felt suffocated. It was not the air, which was fresh and cool. He lay on the shore with his eyes tightly shut. He mastered an urge to stand and run. Not understanding his own panic made it worse — why, he'd hardly flinched at greater exertions.

He rolled onto his knees, eyes still shut. There was a dripping that drove him near to screaming, and the cold. No light! *Death must be like this*, he thought. A small, high laugh trickled from his lips; the sound resounded through the thick air and shivered like his body did. The dripping continued, as did the soft lapping of the water on the shore's edge.

Kollen hugged himself and tried to brace up again. This place, it was a madman's temple, fit for no one with a claim to the clean upper air. The weight of the stone above crushed him, the air was hardly better than water for breathing material, and—

He opened his eyes, saw nothing as expected, and he fell into a whirlpool of spinning. The water! He must get back! That was easy enough, the tiny waves brushed his ankles with wet kisses. He pushed himself backward. The water slipped easily over his head, but when he tried to come up again there was nowhere to go, no up or sideways. The sputtering man thrashed the water and gulped it until the bell in which he appeared to reside thrummed all about with coughing and screaming and that ever-present whispering.

He may have fainted because it seemed he woke up wracked by shivers, and something was gripping him around the waist. He pushed away feebly. It was the water, in which he lay up to his waist. Kollen crawled up onto the shore and fought the desire to curl into a ball that water-whisper measured the passing of time. At some point he was again beating his body back into warmth and submission, like the

priests of Chimchell who whipped themselves during the winter solstice until they saw the eyes of their god in the sky.

Odd recollection, altogether sick, and this was no healthy place, he thought, and kept saying, "I'm all right," until he realized he was yelling aloud. He tried to settle himself, concentrating on the regular rhythm of his own breaths, and soon found it better to look somewhere off to the side and let his ears do the seeing. That was better. Much of the weight was off him. The small sounds were like ripples on the surface of a pond — over to his left some bulk or object lay, because the echoes rippled away from it as if a rock poked above the pond and marked its place by the water it disturbed. He crawled. He had no direction in mind — that is, Kollen didn't think in up or down anymore, just 'over there'. He felt around and met something sharp — a stone, or a step. A step, for there was another, and again another. The conception of direction returned again — there was an *up* in this place.

He counted nine steps; Kollen tallied each one as if he climbed upon the nine Virtues of the Universe and would be asked to recall them in the gods' judgment chamber. At the top he found another object. It was rough, perhaps natural stone. He felt his way up the top and knocked something over.

It sang out. Kollen cried out in pure terror and crouched.

After a while — still nothing. No vengeful spirit, nothing. Kollen had backed himself up against the cold stone of the cave. His hands were stretched out over the edges of the steps, for they were the only reference inside the lightless cavity. Small sounds continued to echo from the walls. But now he identified a new sound amidst the familiar whisper-drip — a low humming, or more likely, a rhythmic humming of one musical note.

In all his strange terror he'd not given a thought about the music they'd been hearing. Now it seemed that it was curiously absent in the cave — or not absent, but transformed into something more than music. Soon he thought that he could now hear the music, but it was overpowered by that surging hum. The unheard part of that note was passing through his knees and his hands and shaking his insides.

Kollen edged forward, remembering the nightmares of childhood and how he'd overcome his dream beast by stopping his flight and turning to face the creature. His hands found something. He froze, then boldly lay hold.

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Metal, cold metal at first, then he felt that it was cold, shivering metal. The hum, or song, or whatever, was indeed coming from it. His hands shook, felt further and found wires that rang out perfect notes. The riddle was answered even as he recoiled in fear, even as a dissonant chord bounced around the chamber. The sound itself was slight, but evidently the surrounding cave was so unused to any but its own slow sea-noises that the clinging moisture burst from the unseen rock like spray off a shaking dog come in from the rain, and Kollen heard the pool below him bubble and rebound up the steps to wash his ankles, as if a playful giant-child had dropped a boulder in it.

Kollen wiped water from his eyes and waited, assuring himself that the water had settled and he wasn't going to drown just yet. He explored more carefully, biting his tongue. His fingers traced out a harp.

Sometime later Kollen removed the instrument from beneath the small drip of water that had been falling regularly on its sounding board.

* * *

Green water lanced through with spears of light: the sight had never been so welcome — he might never fear the sea again, or at least not in the same way as he once had, because there were worse things than the sea. You could lose yourself in the darkness he'd visited. How long had he been there? An hour? Two days?

But more than the welcome light made the trip back to the surface a joy. As soon as he had entered the water, lungs breaking-full of many breaths, the water had leaped up around him in a pliant, glassy sphere. He knew it was a sphere, or bubble, because his hands could feel the cool, elastic sides. His mind was somewhat prepared for this magic — didn't he have slung over his back with his belt the Harp of the Sea?

He could push against the surrounding water, feel the rough stone of the cave through the membrane, as if he wore a thick glove of the smoothest silk. After much wonder and experimentation, Kollen found he could move, after a fashion. The bubble moved with him, and he could float or sink, depending on how he stretched the bubble and moved within it. After some time he had, by accident or wits, slipped, bounced, and wobbled himself down the tunnel, to the bottom, and then slowly up the sea-well toward the light.

The Silent Man Called

He broke the surface and gasped for the air he had been breathing all along. He saw a thin film around him, playing with the dim sunlight streaming through the well in the tower. He yelled in triumph to his companions as he blinked in the light.

Something was deadly wrong when he wobbled over to the ledge. No one waited on the edges of the pool. He twisted wildly around in the water, quite unreasonably, yet afraid too, that he'd spent a longer time than he imagined in that grotto. Why, he'd heard many a story of people who had touched the world of enchantment and danced and feasted there for an afternoon, and returned...half a lifetime later.

Kollen clawed his way up the submerged stairs and shoved up on the ledge. He mastered himself and put on the welcome warmth of his tunic and boots. He adjusted the golden harp across his back and picked up his axe that lay forgotten by his abandoned rope.

He peered one last time into the pool, then turned to the stairs. Ahead of him were the sounds of war.

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CHAPTER 11 — IN THE SEA-WOMAN’S ARMS

In some leafy bower nicely shady
I’m never coy about a questing hand.
The cloak to ground, the skirt now opened wide,
revealing all those wonders exercised
on merchant, prince, and warrior alike.
Come look upon my thighs (the sight is free).
This vise of mine has broken weakling’s ribs
and bruised the thickest bravo’s set of hips,
and my lips have sucked the juice from learned men —
a universal thing I am for war and peace.
My heart cannot be broke: I ate it raw
to shock a jaded man to lift his piece.
— *The Courtesan of Cruxed*, by Josanante

Renik had sometimes daydreamed about his death. He would apply his cutlass one last time on a pirate’s skull, killing at the instant of being killed. He would ride out his last gale, drowning under a mountain of brine with his hands clamped on the tiller. Of course, he could die ignominiously in the taxer’s dungeon — but even then, there he was, wise and enduring, writing the memoirs of his travels for use as standard text in the Guild of Navigators. He’d settle for bookish glory if he had to.

Instead, he was simply drowning, and his last deed was going to be a terrified gargle. He had a vague recollection of coughing, flailing fists, and the immense current of a whale’s tail. For a moment he was free of the water and saw the sad sight of the *Luck* bent lip-to-the-foam. This was the second time in as many weeks he had to watch his ship leaving him behind, and Renik tried to thrust aside the chilling image. He scouted around himself, spinning with oar-sweeps of his cupped hands, and he stared full into the face of the sea-witch.

A crossbow quarrel stood out in her shoulder. And what could only be planks from the *Luck* were floating nearby where the sea coursed around dark, shining rocks. He turned back toward the woman, and she was gone. Only the fin of her killer whale was there circling him.

When he thought to look beneath him it was too late. He made a try for his dagger, but something about that face under the sea slowed his wits. Her hair hung around her head most like tree branches made of floating silk. A little ropery cloud of blood misted from the wound in her shoulder. Her large eyes were deep enough to drown a man, and the curve of her shoulders promised immense strength, which she demonstrated by suddenly embracing the shipmaster and drawing him swiftly to dark water.

Death was ice and bursting lungs.

* * *

Death was small creaks and sighs, and green curtains. Death Himself was whispering in Renik's ear in tinkling, slow melodies. Renik had heard them before, as he'd slept on the ship the first night off Lap Child. Now he figured it was the song heard by doomed men, and he shrugged, watching the way the curtains shimmered in the light. Yes, there was light, which puzzled him for a while, since he'd always figured that graves shut out all glows except for an occasional swamp-fire burst.

And he'd also figured that death-beds were hard and cold, but not so: his was a cloud, or the puffiest feather sack ever made. Renik rolled in his bed, remembering to close his mouth and stop his ears with fingers lest any maggots or centipedes — surely they weren't far — should start their feast. Sure, it was a bit early. His spirit was still warm in his body, even if departing, one foot over the threshold, the other in the body still. Once on his side, however, something pressed into his ribs. He felt around and discovered his dagger pressing into him. It was such a mundane, silly thing to pester him in Deathland that he opened his slitted eyes wider and sat up.

Deathland was a soft, glass cage. It spread around Renik in a perfect circle, although its surface seemed to swell and shrink as if it were breathing. He pushed his finger into the surface; it yielded. He pushed harder, and his finger broke through, accompanied by a squirt of water that jetted out so powerfully that it hurt. Renik pulled his finger back; the hole melded smoothly into the wall.

The water was salty.

"I'm alive," Renik said in a monotone of only half-belief. And then he knew where he was, and at whose mercy. Suddenly the gentle green curtains swaying above him seemed to fall like leaden drapes.

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He looked down, grabbed his ankles and squeezed. His breath started coming in sharp gasps, even if the air he breathed was cool and plentiful. He was in control again after several minutes passed, but the sense of burying depth hadn't left him. He tried to become interested in the occasional fish that swam by his prison, or to plumb the darkness under him, but that only made him feel the way he did the first time he climbed a mast as a boy. This time, there was nothing to hold but himself.

More time passed, and Renik discovered a tiny filament that strayed from a spot over his head and led upward to the light. At first he mistook it for a drifting thread, but the strange way in which it twisted made him think otherwise. It was more like a writhing silver tube, almost invisible unless the light struck it just so. It curled around like a sly dancing girl twisting gracefully away from a too-familiar reach. It was like a whirlpool, incredibly slender and perhaps infinitely long. An airspout, certainly! It only made sense — a water spout in the upper world, an air spout down here. And evidently it was where he got his breathing air.

He reached to touch, then suddenly withdrew his hand from the hole (which looked like a woman's breast inverted); it wouldn't be good to disturb that tube.

Again Renik started shaking, feeling a weight that wasn't there.

Later, he let the imperceptible pulse of his cage lull him into a trance during which the sea-song returned. A lot of time must have passed, because the seaman was aware of a darkening. He let the music help him forget about where he was and how he was there.

Later yet, the sea-witch materialized out of the green right before his eyes. She must have drifted up slowly, because her features became visible by degrees such that the seaman, half-dozing, studied her face for some time before jerking backward to full awareness. Then she swam in circles, spinning in a dance that made her tresses wind around her neck and torso. Renik twisted around, following, digging his heels into the yielding walls of the cage as man and woman waltzed around each other.

"I think you are alive," she said, startling him. She imitated Renik, sitting cross-legged and maintaining her position by small movements of her cupped palms, which continued the impression that she was dancing to a low, exotic strain. "But live men talk." The voice seemed

to be a whisper, but it echoed through the water and into his bubble with unlikely strength.

“What do you want with me?” Renik started.

She opened her mouth, paused, said, “I...” and shut her mouth. “I wanted you in the Toothed Land, but then I remembered. Now I forget.”

“Toothed Land?”

“It eats ships.”

“You mean the reef? Those rocks?”

“Yes, rocks. Hungry rocks. Are you hungry?”

Renik’s brow furrowed. She left and returned a while later with a few mackerel, which she thrust through the walls of his chamber. They flapped on his lap.

“I have to remember,” she said and darted off with strong sweeps of arms and legs.

Renik watched his fish flap between his legs. He was indeed hungry. She might have brought a few hot coals on the half-shell, but he recalled how Shemer swore by fresh, raw mackerel, so Renik shrugged and cut the fish with his knife, thrusting the refuse through the bottom of his chamber.

He was glad to see that the bubble absorbed the water that briefly squirted into the space.

* * *

Renik was cold when he woke up in the darkness. This time there were stars above him, and raw sea-breeze, and his bed was now decidedly damp as compared to his warm bubble. He didn’t know why he should be lying under the stars, nor why he should have remembered a warm bubble. But at least *here* was less nightmarish than the place he’d been, or dreamed of. He could fill his lungs with an armful of air and stretch his eyes to cloud-height.

I’m still enchanted, he said in his mind. *Sulem is out there sucked under the moor, but he’s still playing puppet-master. Have a care, Renik. Double watches and shortened sails! Hand on the tiller and eye to leeward.*

This explanation and advice was good enough until the degrees of awakening finally reached his fingers, which were wrapped around damp, spongy stuff like seaweed.

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Well, it was seaweed. As before, when he found his knife hilt poking his side, the mundane detail snapped him into healthy awareness. Renik sat up and beheld the seawitch seated at his feet. This time he didn't jump so sharply.

She was kneeling and swaying gently, tilting her torso and her head, and she hummed something that had the sound of tides and breezes in it.

Her large eyes shined in the light of the rising moon. They were fixed on the seaman. He drew his knees into his chest and huddled there shivering with more than the cold. In the more natural surroundings he was able to settle himself to study her more closely than before. That was when he noticed she had undone the spiraling band that served her for clothes. But the strange thing was, he couldn't quite see her as a woman. Her form was womanish enough, at least in the concealing darkness. She was slender and firm, and the twin curves of her breasts would have hauled up his manhood mast-tall in any other situation, and why not? She had the fullness of a grown woman with the loftiness of maidenhood.

But womanhood ended there. Her shoulders were braided over with muscles as hard as twisted rope. He might as well run his fingers over an anvil than to explore her cliffs and plateaus. Squares of muscles showed on her stomach even in pale night-light, and her arms could latch a ship's rail and her legs wrap a dock piling and hold a ship against an offshore gale.

For a moment he imagined those legs squeezed around his hips, his chest flattened against those perfect breasts, his hot member bathed in her sea-cold juices, and then those steel limbs would crush the life from him like an octopus.

Renik's mind recoiled from the odd mixture of lust and violence of his fancy. He tore his gaze away and looked at their bed. Bed! No platform for lovers, that was certain. They floated on an island of seaweed that must have extended around him a long way, since he couldn't see the roll of waves except in the distance. The vegetation was bunched and woven in a tight mass, and it had to be a fairly thick mass, because it was raised high enough above the water to have become drained and dry. There were stones and shells woven in the bed like gems in a queen's brocade.

"I saw you in the stars. Have so many years gone by?"

He jumped. Damn! Why did she do that?

“They help you remember. Now you can lie or tell the truth; I don’t care, because I know.” She tilted her head toward the stars.

Renik picked at the bunches of seaweed, probing for shells and stones while she studied the sky. He hadn’t a clue of what to do or say.

“Where am I in the sky?” he asked finally.

She answered a long time later, as if her perception of time were not his own.

“Not yet. The sky spins, and your image is at the bottom like the sun, but above the sun, and so we must wait for the wheel to turn some more. Over there, wait with your eyes.” She pointed toward a black pinnacle on the horizon: probably the third island of the Hearth Isles arc, if he recalled.

So they waited, and in the meanwhile she said, “You are thirsty,” and Renik was, and she reached behind her and got a stone jug of water. Renik drank, then looked at the jug, seeing a potter’s mark carved in its side that indicated its origin in Sahla, far to the south of Akrem. It was probably reef-booty from a wine ship sailing up here to trade the precious drink for the furs offered by the rustic folk who lived in these northern climes.

“The Toothed Land gives me what I need,” she said. “It’s hungry, all the time, but generous with small things.”

“You help feed the rocks.”

She nodded. “I always feed the rocks. It’s what I am to do.”

“And yet when I last saw, my ship was sailing away, and you’ve kept me alive.”

Renik instantly regretted this observation, because the woman’s face fell, and her hand was suddenly on his arm like a carpenter’s vise. She drew him toward her and alternately studied his face and the sky. She relaxed and released him.

At that close range Renik had noted the wound on her shoulder. He had a dim memory of a crossbow bolt sticking there when he’d been thrown from the ship. Someone had grabbed up a weapon and shot mighty quick. Turlane, probably; he could do that.

Yet the wound was nearly healed. Feeling rather daring under the circumstances — and the mystery and cold had burned off his small cargo of patience — he said, “That barb didn’t hurt your shoulder very much.”

She didn’t turn her face away from the sky. “Nothing hurts me.”

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Another speechless span passed before she tossed something in the air that spun and landed in front of Renik; it was a crossbow bolt.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth when I asked for it? I might not have driven your vessel to the Toothed Land.”

Renik had no answer.

“Even now you don’t speak. Truth comes slowly to men, but their hands are fast for weapons. No, don’t speak now. The truth rises over Tower Island.”

Renik put aside the list of questions and watched the sky over the isle. At first he saw nothing more than a few stars wink over its skyline. He squinted for more, averted his eyes like sailors do when scanning the horizon, and he saw it — the line of vapor that astrologers had seen and Hrothe had discussed.

“Anraa’s Flame,” Renik said.

“I know no flame,” said the sea-witch, “only you. You’re there in the sky. I was waiting here for you.”

“What’s all this about? I came here sailing through, that’s all.”

“A lie.”

“I meant you no harm.”

“With a weapon.”

She picked up the arrow and threw it so hard that it hummed through the air.

“Why did you raise a weapon? Didn’t he tell you? You came here for me, for *me!* I guarded Tower Island. No one came near, the sea ate them all, until the sky should burn again, just as he said.” The woman leaned forward; her huge eyes were unreadable, but her arms were knotted up into iron columns. Moonlight sparkled against the shells in the weedy island net and made their bed as starry as the sky. “I’ve curled up in the ooze and slit fishes bellies with my fingers to suck their guts,” she whispered. “When I was lonely I tumbled in the crests of storm waves to lose myself. When I was tired of the sea I begged the islands for a knee to rest on, but I cannot touch the land. When living was too much I ripped myself with barnacles but I cannot die.”

She gripped Renik’s ankle. He didn’t try to escape, instead drawing his dagger. She smiled. He sprang up and got one hand in her hair and pressed the dagger tip under her jaw. Her grip never changed.

A drop of blood ran down his blade and across his thumb.

“Press it in, rip it across,” the woman said, no longer smiling. With her other hand she ripped down his pants. She ripped them hard

enough to straighten the brass eye-hooks and send the course wool scraping painfully down his thighs. "Lie with a bloody mess, if you wish. Afterward I'll still give you what you came for."

Renik dropped his knife and planted both hands on her shoulders. He locked his arms, but she wasn't moving forward yet. Instead, she studied his organ with detachment.

"Once I was a woman," she said. With a wrestler's speed she was past his arms and had his body locked up in hers. Her teeth were very white. The strands of hair that fell around his face had been combed but smelled like the weeds they lay on. A sharp shell was digging in his buttock.

Once she was a woman. *But she's forgotten*, Renik thought in a flash of insight that was remarkable for its calm logic in the midst of an impossibly strange event. She had him wrapped in mainstays; for the first time in his life he hadn't a clue about a solution. Shame and rage shot through his veins like storm floods through streetdrains, but he might as well have wrestled with a statue.

And then a second remarkable thing happened. His mind flipped back to a cozy house in Kordhal, and Blue Mara sat astride his hips. He was young and had had gold in his pouch from clever dealing, and after guardedly chagrined traders had shuffled away, Blue Mara glided over and leaned against the ship's plank, daring him to love her until she dropped. "No one has yet," she'd boasted. "Not a prince come knocking, shrouded in cloak and mask, nor gold-weighted pirate-lord." She had a perfumed room in a good inn, and there Renik had gone, stumbling in eagerness up the stairs while trying to appear bold and sure, and he even yawned for good effect (though he thought he saw Mara grin). Oh, she made him wait a moment as she rubbed a sweet oil on her breasts and rubbed her sweet nipples against his chest. Her lips made little pecks and nips on his mouth, and when he'd have more, her strong arms resisted with a mixture of a wrestler's and a lover's skill. She slid down, alternately wetting his penis with her lips and then sliding up again, granting his mouth increasingly longer access to her tongue until at last she wiggled down her own warm trail to his thighs. She straddled, clamped her legs on him, and with a dive-and-curl of her hips had snared and slid down his spar-hard organ. She rode there slowly, too slowly at first for a hot young man, and Renik had nearly cursed that slowness or begged for speed. Her vagina smelled sweet as it tightened and

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loosened, and before he was aware of it, Blue Mara had hastened and Renik climaxed, bending nearly double. And then she slowed, but never stopped for the second time, and Renik barely reached the third and then admitted Mara had won again.

He never knew why she was called Blue Mara: because of her blue-painted eyes or the bruises where she'd gripped his shoulders.

How like and unlike the sea-witch, who straddled him now. She wasn't cold; her womanhood melted over him, seemed to run away in warm streams. Renik responded, which surprised him more than the fact that a woman held him fast to the ground. And strangeness upon strangeness, she held her posture over the captive, as if unable to proceed further. Her body recalled womanhood, her mind had forgotten. Renik helped. It seemed the only course left. Already his arms were aching with her grip. If this kept up, she'd have him broken into pieces.

It was a strange love-making under the stars, on a seaweed bed. The woman learned the movements after a while, and then she began teaching the rhythm that her body had learned in the sea, where all movements are strong and graceful. Her breathing changed perceptibly, and she gasped now and then, but through it all her eyes were on the sky until Renik finished. She had learned enough to know when to relax, and she did a little, sitting upright on him, releasing his bruised arms.

Renik awoke sometime later. He was surprised that he'd fallen asleep, didn't recall falling asleep. The sea-witch reclined near him. She had pulled some kind of covering over them both, woven of crinkly, dry seaweed that sounded like a thousand tiny rattles when the breeze ruffled through it.

The woman spoke almost at once.

"Where is your brother?"

"On the ship." It didn't surprise him that she knew he had a brother.

"I thought I saw your twin, but I wasn't sure. I'll bring you to him tomorrow. Both of you will follow me, and you will have what you want."

She sounded as much like an accuser as a helper.

"Why? Why will you give us this—this thing? You said you guarded the isles. For whom?"

"For Habran."

Silent voices, streaming breeze.

“He brought you here, left you here? Is he—?”

This time she seemed to want to answer at once. She looked in Renik’s eyes, broke the gaze, came back again, turned to the sky, the weeds, his eyes again.

“There was,” she began, “she was, there was.” She shook, and shook out a tear. “There was a woman whose trade was ship-keeping. Her lore was deep, her magic was strong. She stood by the shipmaster for the mage’s ship.”

“Aye, there was that custom,” Renik said. “I remember!” Her words had uncorked very old memories of his grandfather, darkened and curled over like a pork chop over-fried, but this done meat had two green gem-eyes burning out of the ashes, and a mind that could still master his mouth up to the end. “Grandfather’s day, in his times it was still the custom, but now you wouldn’t see it anymore, unless a wife or daughter ships aboard, and she sings the chants, if she has a mind for them, and won’t mind the rough songs of sailors. And there’s a song grandfather would sing, only when he was alone with me and Kollen. Said it was a woman’s song quoth to the storm winds....”

“That was the custom,” the woman agreed, gaining strength from Renik’s affirmation. She even smiled. “Beautiful songs, long and slow, those might quell the killer waves, if the woman had the mind to trace the strength of tides beneath her and tie gentle knots of water ‘round the ship. And she did. Her love of the sea was great because her terror of it was greater. And she was the best, because the great mage had chosen her for his own ship when he journeyed. On his last journey, he offered her dominion over the sea as she had never had. She was to guard sea-magic, and wait for two who should have it, wait as long as she needed, for the world was then like a treasure room to which the door had been wrongly unlocked for thief and pilgrim alike. The master drew my blood, and I drank it for this new life, and he left me here to my dominion.”

“Why? How precious was this thing?”

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “I remember only—a war. No one to trust but a trusted few. Precious things to hide. Men are always fighting and locking things away from each other, I remember that.”

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Renik thought about that even as the image of his own brother came unbidden. He forced it away. "It's true then, that Habran and Shapor hated each other," he said.

"First they loved," she said, "thus the hate, which is sick love."

"That was long ago, Habran and the war, centuries ago. How can you know these things? How can you be here and say you were there?"

She ignored his question and said instead, "He left a message for you. He sends his greetings in the time of Anraa's fire and begs that two brothers will bow to the maggot and hold festival over their parent's graves."

Renik grunted and leaned back into the sea-bed, but he shuddered, too.

"He asked me to stay here, and I cannot die."

And Renik couldn't sleep any more. The woman sat up out of the cover and rocked gently on her knees. Renik tried to stay warm and failed. He didn't try to talk until the long night ended. Then the woman stretched and stood up. She pointed to the third island.

"More, I have more." She shook her head. "Not now. Later we go there. But not yet." She stared into the sea for another one of those long, awkward moments. "I must return to the sea. For a time." She ran across the weed-isle and leaped into the sea.

Renik, too, stood up and began working the shivers away on the huge carpet of weed. Eventually he got warm again between his exercise and the rising sun, and he slept for a while until an hour or two past noon.

When he awoke it was almost with reluctance. He felt refreshed enough, but he wasn't ready to give up the sound of the melody he was hearing. It had worked among his dreams and soothed their strangeness. It had carried him along just as the seaweed carpet under him carried him on the rolling ocean. In his awakening mind the cry of gulls had marked cadences to the song, and the wind rustling the dry weeds was an accompanying undertone.

He wouldn't give this up except that the song suddenly changed. It echoed, seemingly, against a wall suddenly planted in the distance. Renik climbed swiftly to full wakefulness. He found his dagger hilt instantly, and unlaced the weapon for no reason he could have explained.

He sat up, saw a huge black ship bearing down on him, and stared at it open-mouthed until his mind started working. He knew that ship. It was moored at the south docks of Akrem and sailed only on the urgent business of the Guild of Mages. It was painted rather than tarred black, although gold paint brightened the ship's masts. The ship carried no figurehead, but eyes were carved on the bow. The ship was rigged similar to the *Luck* — square foresail and a great triangular sail on a fore-and-aft yard hung slanting upward from main mast — but it had in addition a small third mast with triangular sail set astern.

Renik took all this in during the few seconds he had sat up. Then his sailor's mind told him that the ship was not going to run into the seaweed, but it would cut close. Already he could see the heads of sailors.

He lay back down slowly and just as slowly raked seaweed over his body. The isle was rather spongy to begin with, and perhaps he'd been sunken deeply enough to have escaped notice. By the time he had snuggled down, he heard the breeze pouring between the rigging and around the canvas of the ship. The vessel passed so closely that Renik could study the faces of sailors and bronze-cased soldiers and dun-robed mages talking on the raised aft deck. He stared one man full in the face, and then the ship was by and its canvas wings silent again.

Renik was sitting up, watching the golden masts flash in the distance, when the seawoman slipped easily up on the isle and knelt beside him. She too watched the ship.

She offered Renik a bluefish from her net pouch, and some shellfish, and a drink from a stone jug — wine, this time. Renik was famished and tried to show interest in the fish, slicing into the creature and chewing some of the oily flesh. He was at least happy she fed him clean fish, not the cod, whose uncooked flesh was often a home to curled-up parasites.

The falling sun was making the ship's masts glow fiery orange when the woman said, "I don't like that ship. Perhaps this one is food for the Toothed Land. If it goes nearer, it surely will be."

Renik nodded and spoke through his food. "They're my enemies. Feed them to something, by all means."

"The sea changes when men come here. Some I let pass if they do not stay long. Some men are not greedy, but come only to take some fish. They give thanks, as is proper, and I let them come and go,

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because when they drift at sea and sleep on the beach, they sing many fine songs, and I listen. Other men mean to stay too long, to look all around the isles for what they can take. They cannot stay.” She shook her head.

“They mean my brother harm on the ship he rides. They chase him now, thinking I’m with him.”

“Your ship has seen them and flees.”

“You saw?”

“Men have climbed Tower Island, but the big ship comes and chases the little ship away. Is this not right in the world?”

Renik admitted it was the usual way of things.

“Your ship passed by as you slept. I watched from a distance.”

“And you didn’t wake me? You said....”

“You will come together. The world is made like that.”

The woman said this with such eerie conviction that Renik had to believe it.

“The men on the isle have gone to the tower. We’ll go there. For now the little ship swims cunningly among the shallow lands between the isles. It is safe for a time. Come with me now.”

She wove her hands in a circle and muttered a word.

The seaweed between them boiled in a froth and parted, revealing a glassy womb. Renik understood. He dropped down gently into the bubble. The woman slid down and straddled him, and the bubble slid through the tangled weed and closed above them. It dropped for a while until daylight was only a vague glow over their heads.

She didn’t mean to begin practical matters at once. Renik sensed a difference in the fresh sea-smells that rose from her. It was a kind of sweetness belonging to bedchambers and warm embraces with an eager partner. She didn’t rape him this time.

CHAPTER 12 — TOWER BY THE SEA

Who can say why the empire shattered? Aren't empires always being dropped on a hard place? Fifty years later, and everything is still crumbling: the district, the city walls, and, if you must know, my roof is starting to leak. I'm not going to fix it, I told my wife, because that's the fate of roofs, and I won't upset the natural order. — Cham Hronikad the Gossiper in a letter to the poet Josanante

The sun was near finishing with the day when the sea-woman herded Renik's bubble into an undersea tunnel through Mountain Island. He'd seen it as a growing blackness in the green water, and at last that blackness swallowed them up. The woman pushed the bubble gently, while a perceptible current pushed them both along. Renik lost sight of the woman almost at once and knew of her presence only by the press of her hands on the side of the bubble.

But the darkness was good in a way, because no one would ever see him squatting alone and separated from everything human, hugging knees to chest hard enough to leave bruises on forearms.

At last they glided toward a patch of light, and this lent Renik enough courage to wait out the ride until the light was like a glowing waterfall pouring into the jagged exit. They drifted into that light and burst through the surface before Renik knew they were even close. And before he realized it he was standing in the cold sea, not sitting in a warm bubble. The rude transition caught him swearing and slapping the water. The sea woman broke surface and steadied him.

When he was treading water easily, Renik studied his surroundings.

The Mountain Isle was a bowl in which gods might wash their feet. A small island rose up from the center of this inland sea, although now the sun was so low that the high walls of the bowl sent shadows to dwarf the hill that punctured the waters. This odd geography had a similarly odd effect on the man. Overhead the sky was still light, although turning into dark blues, and the western glow was high enough to paint the corner of the sky visible over the walls of the outer isle. These lights and half-lights threw the inner world into a dusk that wasn't quite a real, healthy dusk, but was instead a twilight of a separate world.

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The dusky sheen glistened from the skin of the woman floating around him. It was a wan, gray gleam, like the glow of pure marble bathing in moonlight on an avenue of temples. Renik shivered with more than cold. Might he have actually died without knowing it, like the half-sleeper who mistakes the dream vision for reality? And what did one fight for here, if so? Would a deathblow result in life, and would victory plunge one deeper into death?

Renik broke off his thought. Life for the past two days had been so full of wonders and terrors that a man might lose his mind inventing more.

“I’ll leave you, now,” the woman said. “Hold this fish.” A dolphin suddenly poked its head from the surface and gave Renik an amused look. “I have a task to do, a ship to feed to hungry rocks if I can. Find your brother on the isle. In the tower’s deepest chamber you’ll find what you came for. Dive deeply and rise into a side tunnel. The tunnel rises in a cave where you can breathe. The thing is there. I’ve heard it, but it is all darkness, and I never saw what I heard. Habran taught me to be a sea-queen, but a sea-queen can never leave the water. We’ll meet again, at the isle or at your ship.”

“Wait! Find what? What are we supposed to find?”

“I’ve heard it,” the woman repeated. “It fills the sea with melody. It sings sorrow to sleep and makes the world carry you in strong arms when you are weary. Can you not hear it always?”

Renik didn’t answer. He’d gotten one of his answers without asking the question, that much he knew. The woman took his silence for an answer. She flipped and the last he saw of her was a set of feet slipping down like whale flukes. Renik tread water for a moment as he thought about how Habran had given this sea goddess both power and imprisonment. Simple philosophers always said that kings are really slaves — those philosophers didn’t know half of it. The woman was addicted to that music. It gave her strength, and it made her stay. Renik shook his head in the wonder of it.

He paddled to his dolphin. The fish did indeed offer a ride. Renik hung on to its fin, and the creature towed him to the central isle. As the place drew nearer, he saw it was like a mound on the sea, and with that thought he conjured an image of the barrow from which the first of Habran’s treasures had been retrieved — and he thought it would be fitting to find Kollen there.

A tower on the shore became evident as a sharp, square outline.

He gained the shore. His feet tread slippery cobbles as his steed turned quickly and left him. Renik stared after the creature and felt a detached, philosophical sorrow that he might forget the dolphin-ride since it had been the least fantastic event of the week.

The tower was several yards beyond the water. Even this close, it was hard to make anything out of it other than its angular lines. It was made of dark stone, and the day's light was fading fast. Renik found a door, and also found that it had no handle or hinge, lock or slot or anything else that fine, upstanding doors should have. He peered up the height of the structure; its perfect stonework was revealed in the last light of the day but revealed no easy way in. A window, yes, there was a window, but no ladder or rope or handholds. Renik backed away for a better look, and then he heard faint sounds of war from within.

He squinted at the dark rectangle and cursed slowly. There! The flash of metal, a ring, a howl, and the baritone shout of a man. Then something dark fell from the window, nearly crushing the slow-footed Renik. It thumped and rolled a few feet: a man, a soldier, bronze encased, and with a cloven skull.

Now the din had increased and wafted from the window in full force. Renik shouted, but the battle was too loud and overwhelmed his cries.

The soldier had fallen with his weapon in hand. Renik took the short, heavy sword and craned his neck up at the window. He was now armed, but his men were dying, perhaps, and he had no way to meet them. Damn it all! How did a man get inside?

Renik started around the side of the tower, almost tripping over Kollen's rude raft, which was pulled up on the shore and lashed to a boulder.

A sloping cliff of black stone met him as he dashed around the edge of the shore and dived into the sea, working his way around until the slope was easier and he could scramble up a crack in the bedrock. Two moments later Renik stood upon the bald head of the isle, with the top of the tower almost level with his eyes.

The struggle had burst out on the roof of the tower, evident in the meaty sounds of butchery that came over the evening breeze. Renik became dizzy with a sudden wave of faintness — his shivering days on the sea had asked for a toll — then he found strength enough to

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rumble an oath and run toward the battle. He crossed the space in five long strides and leaped to catch the coping of the crenellation.

With muscles trembling with weariness, he drew himself over the wall, fully expecting to have his skull split in the confusion.

One tall figure was standing broad-braced in the center of the tower roof; it roared and held a glitter of blades at bay. Not Kollen, who would have stood a head or two shorter. He fought two soldiers who cramped themselves in an opening on the roof. Renik's sailors had the advantage of position, but the soldiers had armor and numbers. Gore spread out in a widening pool that shined stickily in the twilight. Beyond the mass another figure moved, keeping other enemies from advancing out of the roof. This one was shorter and broader, again, not Kollen. To the side was a figure easier to identify: those could only be Hrothe's robes stretched over his tall frame. He shielded the stout fighter from the left side with a small, round shield.

Renik had taken in all the view within moments and made the final heave onto the roof. He called out and joined the battle on one side of the tall man, who was Turlane. It was to their advantage that Turlane did not think very much when he fought, or that he thought very quickly and effectively — whatever, he didn't question the mysterious appearance of his shipmaster, but instead yelled in his deep voice, "Ho, the master's on the deck!" and doubled his blows upon the foe. The stout figure opposite, Botha, returned the hail, and it was a potent medicine for Renik, and he knew then how a man might die of exile.

For a while the three seamen kept the soldiers back and even drove them a few feet back down the hole in the roof. Two corpses sprawled at their feet. After a few moments Renik wondered why they were holding their ground at all, and roared his orders — that he would hold them at bay while the others escaped over the edge of the roof.

"Renik..." said Turlane between cutlass strokes, "Kollen's below."

"Down there?" Renik stared into the teeth of the soldiers filling the entrance to the tower. In a moment his mind made that sudden adjustment to reality that twists the truth around and sends it out the door with a kick in the pants. It enables people to live under the judgment of stern Doom, and it told Renik that Kollen was alive.

* * *

Kollen had turned the corner of the stairs and met the rear of a small party of soldiers. They already advanced upward, leaving behind one of their fellows lolling backward with an arched back, an open mouth, and a split forehead, drinking his own gore, which spilled into the gaping mouth and splashed over like an overfilled cup.

And yet this wasn't the strangest thing.

A robed man was sitting cross-legged behind the bronze armored soldiers. He was sweating; he was shaking; he was occupied with great efforts.

He hadn't noticed Kollen tread up behind him. Kollen dealt with the surprise quickly — surprises fell too thickly these days to have much effect anymore.

Killing — it was not out of the question, although assassination and back-stabbing had never been part of his trade. Axe him from in front, then, give the wizard a fair chance, turning murder into a neutral kind of killing. Kollen was tired, bone weary, and death seemed so convenient, and war seemed so tedious. He would only have a few seconds to continue to the back of the armored soldiers before they knew the foe behind them. They were bunched up around the landing, fighting with the sailors, perhaps six of them against Botha, Turlane, and Hrothe.

Killing. But not for the man carrying no weapon and no armor and no war. Kollen hammered him a light blow on the head with the blunt end of the axe. The man stiffened and looked full at Kollen before keeling over like a potato sack. Then he disappeared in a heat wave shimmer.

The face was Sulem's.

Kollen paused a moment at this surprise, but only a moment. Sulem should have been dead, but then again, he had never seen him die. It was only slightly more surprising that Sulem had disappeared. *Are they never real?* he wondered. *Do they always live in enchantments that empty the substance from the man?*

But now, no time! Kollen took no pleasure in killing, and less from stabbing in the back, but those were friends' bodies being gashed up there. The axe went up and then flashed down on the warrior last in line, who was craning his head to and fro to find a gap to slip his sword through to join the fight. Kollen aimed a sideways blow at the narrow gap between helmet and backplate. The weapon

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struck, slowed down in the flesh and bone, and passed all the way through.

Did I behead him? Kollen wasn't sure. The soldier stood upright, felt back at the supposed wound and dropped his sword. But there was no blood. The flesh had not been cut although clearly Kollen's ax had passed through something and the soldier had known it. The soldier discovered Kollen behind him but was still trying to decide whether he was dead or not. He spoke. The words came from a distance. Kollen knew he should strike again, but a sudden sight of ocean, blue sky, and ship's rigging was imposed over the scene before him, like a picture sketched on glass overlooking the battle, and this amazed and slowed him.

He struck again as the soldier was looking at the ground where his sword was lying on the stone, or on the wooden deck of a ship. Kollen's weapon struck full on the crest of the helmet and should have jarred his arm. Instead he felt as if he'd slashed through a pillow, a particularly large, overstuffed one. The axe swung through its arc, impeded just a bit, and almost took off his own leg at the knee. The soldier started to grimace, the expression passed and left him more bewildered than ever. But this time he shouted to his fellows.

At the same time, the sailors above were engaging real steel and flesh and bronze, and suddenly the combatants were, it seemed, swinging weapons made of mud that mushed softly through each other when they clashed, and reappeared whole and sound at the other end of the swing. This went on for a few comical moments until the soldiers withdrew down into the tower, and Renik and Botha drew back a step and glanced at each other and their weapons.

The soldiers answered the call of their comrade behind them. They backed away from the foe whom they suddenly couldn't engage and sought advice from each other and the mage Sulem, who'd accompanied them on their enchanted trek to that strange field of battle. They saw Kollen, they saw the ship on which they knew their real bodies were standing — so they were told — in front of the magical apparatus that would send their solid reflection hither.

Kollen backed away until the pool of water was behind him. He was trapped. He would have to fight or dare his foes to strip armor and chase him into the pool. What happened instead is that the soldiers — and Renik's sword taken earlier from the dead soldier — vanished.

Up above the sailors were peering cautiously into the well in the tower's roof, and below Kollen was bending his torso to peer around the twist of the stairs, ax held in guard in front of him. And farther down the stairs, an aching-headed Sulem merged silently onto the stage, a phantom actor not introduced by the master of ceremonies. In his hand, a dagger, in his eyes a bloodshot light.

Kollen heard a faint ring of steel, as when a keen knife edge has just left the object of its work and springs back straight and true with a little chime tone. He felt a pull and started to scream an oath at his own stupidity and bad luck. But Sulem had only cut the belt on which Habran's harp was slung.

Sulem could not withhold a laugh, and it was no sinister chuckle of triumph. Rather, the mage sounded a little hysterical, almost unbelieving that the treasure had come so easily. Nor could he resist a long, slow study of the instrument as he backed away from a wild-eyed Kollen.

At last he regarded Kollen and bowed.

"Kollen, you have done well. Thank you! And I thank you for not killing me a minute ago. I didn't stab you in the back when I could, and so you are repaid kindness for kindness. Shouldn't we be civil whenever we can?"

"When we can," Kollen said. "I thought we left you behind."

Sulem rolled his eyes and hugged himself in mock terror. "Indeed, indeed! Renik thrust me in that grove of trees and actually gave me back the crown we had sought, you and I. It was fantastic, such power! I couldn't control it, and I threw it out in the end to try to save myself, and then the trees rolled in and wrapped me around in a womb. The magic had actually sucked me away like a great drain — my sending went back to Akrem and burst the mirror through which I had come, and my *real* body exchanged places, and I was suddenly in the grove. I would have died there had I not been sitting in the pool of water under the stone ledge. I shivered in the water for a day, pondering the nature of darkness and fear, and then... then a man made of gold unwrapped the trees and found me there." Sulem shook his head in wonder and smiled faintly. "Wonders and wonders. You saw him? Fantastic! He is there yet, I think, tending the vegetation on the moor. I could not persuade him to come with me. Well, well, he's his own man — if I may call him that — free of master and duty but with the comfort of the trade he likes, so isn't he then among the

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luckiest of people? What garden would we find on that moor if we should go there again? But my own tasks continue, as do my masters who oversee them.”

Sulem shrugged and grinned, then backed away so steadily that he was at the edge of the pool without knowing it. He struck the harp with a finger. For no reason Kollen winced, but the tone that came out could hardly be heard. It was there, however. A note brushed the ear with the tickling tongue of a skilled lover. A more powerful vibration was felt rather than heard, felt right through the boot heels, a savage thump in the earth’s bowels that echoed around them.

At that surprise the mage lost his balance at the edge of the pool, and Kollen figured he’d have to dive again for the damned harp after throwing his axe into the mage’s head. But Sulem bobbed to the surface, and none of that happened as the mage walked on the water. Or fell, rather, but he leaped right back up, and he giggled. The solemnly robed mage stamped on a resilient water-floor and giggled and danced a jig. He grinned at Kollen and cried, “Simple magic now, but the best is to come, if we can learn its ways! But this water magic I think I can direct or I’m no mage! Farewell for now, Kollen.”

The mage struck a few notes in succession, now, and the results added, compounded. Instantly the water rose and swirled around him. A transparent sheen coated the entrance to the room of the pool, just inches in front of Kollen’s nose. In a daze he reached out, touched, and pushed a finger into a spongy glass. The mage was sinking in a large room or bubble made of water. Kollen moved forward. He leaned over the edge of the pool. The mage was down there, looking up at the end of a tunnel. The well was vacated of water, and to replace it, a gush of air struck Kollen on the back and nearly pushed him over.

The last sight of the mage appeared through waving lines, like spirals etched onto to a glass window that was spinning, or a barrier made of a large, spoked and spinning wagon wheel. The mage was running in his bubble.

Then the sea squeezed by the fleeing man and popped back up the well. The sea gushed upward and washed the very top of the room’s ceiling and flung Kollen bouncing and swirling in the sudden tide that pushed him up a flight of stairs. The water subsided, leaving oaths and bruises and stone-step waterfalls behind.

Kollen was now alone in the chamber. Outside, the sun was close to setting and no longer sent any light through the well in the tower. A tide of darkness followed the sun's retreat.

* * *

On the roof of the tower Renik had taken his final shoulder-wrenching swing of his sword, and it had hit home near the hilt of his foe's weapon in a blow that should have disarmed him — but his sword had passed through with only the slightest pause. The soldier backed away warily with his fellows, seemingly as confused as the sailors. And then Renik's sword simply vanished. He stepped back wiping the sweat from his eyes with the backs of both hands as if this might clear unreality from the sight.

The others also stepped back, those who could. They watched the entrance into the tower, as well as the spot where a couple of the soldiers had fallen in their gore. The two dead soldiers were suddenly not there, nor was their gore. And yet a third body remained.

Renik lifted his burning eyes and saw stout Botha leaning back against the crenellations, lungs whistling to catch breath. Hrothe, dark as a shadow in the twilight, was bending over the fallen Turlane. He rose up and gave Renik the dead man's cutlass.

Wordlessly and cautiously, they entered the tower, watching for ambushes, but the only foe who appeared around the corner was Kollen, his weapon also on guard. He and Renik pulled up short and faced each other with raised blades. In the uncertain light both looked decidedly ghostly, both men framed in a shaft of twilight misting in from the tower's well. In Renik's mind the memory of the seer in the cave at Fenward arose unwelcomed. *You've come here from the Moon's dark side, brothers, or from the wrong side of the grave!* he had cried. So with a mixture of relief and fear he failed to greet his brother.

"Kollen, are you whole?" Botha broke the silence first, letting the words roll past dry lips, and he set his back against the wall and slid down to his behind. Renik and Hrothe followed him down and drank deeply from the water-skin Hrothe held out. Kollen still hadn't spoken, nor did he sit down to rest with the others.

"Kollen?" Renik rolled his head aside. Kollen's face was a white oval above him. His eyes were large and round.

"Kollen, can't you speak?"

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“I can,” he finally admitted, “but I don’t know how *you* can.” He smiled weakly. “I have to bring you back from the dead, Renik. Did you empty your lungs of water?”

They let it stand with those few words. Their windy breath filled the chamber with sound. Kollen squatted down to give his lost brother another look, a strange expression of recognition gradually moving across his face, and then their proper reunion was interrupted by a rumble that shook the solid bedrock. A vibration coursed through the cold stone, and a cutlass set on the ledge jittered and jingled as the vibration rose to a hum.

Botha bolted up and said, “The fire-islands are groaning, forging their fireballs.”

“Maybe not,” answered Kollen in a moment. “The sorcerers, they have the treasure. Something unwholesome is happening.”

Hrothe roused himself. “Habran’s treasure? Tell....”

“A golden harp,” Kollen yelled over the din, “found it in a cave.”

Renik jumped to his feet, “I was told about that, but how....?”

“Told? You were told?” Kollen’s brows furrowed.

A rising wind was then drowning Renik’s reply. Wind? Renik thought. Under a tower?

“Out!” yelled Kollen. “We have to get out!”

Botha jumped to his feet but lost his balance as he stumbled in the shriek of air. Kollen grasped the man’s belt, but both of them fell over the edge into the water. Renik reached out to draw them in.

There was nothing to reach. The men were gone. The water was gone. He pulled his way to the rim of the ledge and saw the men swirling downward with unearthly speed, as if a giant was sucking the water from the ocean, and the two men with it. They tumbled in the brine until they were set on the weeds and rocks of the sea floor. From this vantage point Renik saw that a kind of natural well dropped straight down for forty feet, then stopped and changed into an undersea ravine that dropped away again and wended away in the gloom. The water left behind cascaded down the sides of the well and glistened in the scant light still penetrating the well of the tower.

It wasn’t long before Renik knew he could never follow them down that slippery way. Nor could they climb up again, unless they sprouted crab-claws to latch onto the slimy walls.

“Kollen! Botha!” His voice was magnified in the great depth of space below him. “Follow the way out of here. Don’t wait for me and

Hrothe. There's a tunnel you can use, through the wall of the island. Go back before the water returns! We'll follow or weather it out in the tower if we have to. Run! Get to the ship! Run!"

Renik turned himself at his own command and stumbled across Hrothe. The sudden earth shaking had thrown him against a wall, a trickle of blood on his forehead. He mumbled groggily and moved weakly.

He hefted Hrothe into his arms while tears of exhaustion coursed down his own cheeks. He remembered getting up the first landing and starting toward the second, and then he probably fainted. He recalled only awaking from thick fogs. He blinked, and again, until the mind-mist lifted, and he found himself wrapped in the night with a glimmer of glow streaming down the central shaft of the tower. Moonlight. It should be half moon, he thought vaguely. Somewhere in a dream he recalled the events that led him here. His head cleared. He suddenly knew that if the moonlight was shooting through the tower, then a long time must have passed since he had fainted. He leaned up on his elbow.

Hrothe's warm body lay nearby. And a storm was sweeping up the stairs.

He heaved Hrothe to his feet and dragged him upwards, heels bumping the steps. The air bore the smell of the sea. In the next moment a cold, salty mist was borne on the breeze, and Renik was now past the second landing. At the third landing, he slipped and brought Hrothe with him down three painful steps. Now the mist condensed into huge drops of brine that slapped him rudely in the face and dripped in torrents down the walls. Then a storm-goddess was giving birth in the chambers below. Renik hoisted Hrothe by his white sash.

"Oh merciful gods," he prayed. His arms were pain; Hrothe seemed a soggy three hundred stone, and his own legs were stumps of fire. Renik passed the square hole in the roof top when the tide nipped at his ankles and burst beneath them. Overhead, the sky lit an awesome scene.

It was an expanse of ghost-pale foam that filled the inner sea as if it were the ale-pot of the gods. For the moment the two men were suspended on the fountain that streamed from the top of the tower, then they plunged down, landing on the roof. For several moments the roof was awash in the tide. Turlane's body was jammed between two

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crenellations and flopped there obscenely. The whites of his eyes shone through the sheets of water.

Renik held Hrothe's head above the water and looked frantically around.

The drunken sea had returned. The bowl of the hollow isle was filled with the stuff nearly up to the height of the tower, and there was no sign that it would stop. The tower was the center of a whirlpool whose sloping sides leaned away into the sky.

At the point where the tunnel pierced the isle's outer wall, a gush of ocean must have spewed as if a sea god were urinating after guzzling a sea of beer.

It would not be good if Kollen and Botha had been caught there.

Hrothe began to awaken as the cold water lapped his chest and face. He and Renik clung together until their attention was caught by a most mundane event. Something floated in the surf and knocked against the tower. Logs, a bundle of logs crudely tied together with rope. The raft that he had seen on the shore by the tower! Now it tumbled gracelessly around before his eyes, swirling in a circle around the tower.

The captain rose without thinking and tossed himself and Hrothe into the sea. He was not so beaten that he didn't know a gift from the gods when he saw it. They bobbed up and down, Hrothe struggling with sudden strength, until Renik caught a length of trailing line from the raft. He pulled the raft to him, got Hrothe to hang on, then pulled himself up and then Hrothe. Thereafter the two men caught only glimpses of what happened. The inner sea swelled higher, the raft spun around the tower faster and faster until the building seemed to be the thing that spun. As the speed of their circuit grew, so did their distance from the tower, and soon it was lost in the froth. The raft lurched to the lip of the bowl of the hollow island. At some point they had washed over the top of the isle itself, but neither man recalled that. Their world had become a roar and the rough logs of their boat; their loftiest ambition was a grip on the ropes that bound the raft together.

CHAPTER 13 — ASCENT OF THE OCEAN-SLOPE

Surely the world is wonderful and full of awe, and who needs to bring the gods into it? Show them the door and bar it after! The world is its own god and temple, and birds teach us the nature of the kind of divinity invented by people — birds shit in tree, lake, offering bowl, and on the stony heads of gods, admitting no difference between them. — Cham Hronikad the Gossiper.

“Run!”

Before Renik’s words had finished echoing in the cavern, Kollen understood everything and pulled Botha’s arm. Renik was far above them, an impossible climb up the slimy cliff. He and Botha were in the sea’s way if it returned. So with a torn heart he led the way through the twilight place. They jogged through the shining ooze and around encrusted outcrops of rock where strange plants sagged on the uncovered floor. Fish flapped and gasped by their feet. They followed a bend, and then the sky appeared above them and widened as the valley widened while the slope plunged downward. And down they went, falling and sliding in the soft stuff, cutting their legs against the razorlike shells that stuck to the rocks in clumps, their way lit by night-glow as the sky became pinpricked with a few stars wherever the glow of the half moon didn’t wash them out. The light hinted at a vastness before the men.

What was once an island was now a mountain rising out of an encircling, shadowed valley. Kollen sighed, having had enough of diving into such places.

He craned his head at the stars where the pinnacle of the isle reared its head — Renik and Hrothe were somewhere atop that peak, and as unreachable as if a mile of ocean separated them, for a mile of ocean would have been an easier journey than a climb up that unforgiving slope. Still, he called out and strained his eyes for two men sliding down the mountain. His voice carried far within the gouge in the Earth, and when he knew he was answering himself, he stopped. Botha waited, panting by his side until Kollen turned away.

Wordlessly they tumbled down the oozy hill. Their only path was set alight by the moon: a broad saddle of land that bridged the depths

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and lead to an even darker darkness. Maybe it was the tunnel to the outer ocean.

They came to the land bridge and the slope turned upward. He and Botha climbed it, often by digging their hands into the sea-mud. One side of the ridge was illuminated, the other side a depth of nothingness.

They entered the deeper darkness of the tunnel. Gripping hands, they edged forward using the suggestion of a lighter spot in front of them to navigate. It was a short journey that lasted too long.

Finally under the sky again, they took in great breaths, basking in the comparative brightness of the moon. Kollen recovered quickly, being more used to the burden of underground ventures. He looked around for the *Luck*. But the unfamiliarity of this new landscape made it impossible to find what was familiar. And for the first time Kollen grasped the enormity of the thing he'd so stupidly lost.

There was no ocean. They stood on a slope broken by shadows that marked valleys newly opened to the sky, the moon illuminating regions that had never been lit. And who could blame the moon if it slowed its flight to observe the foreign territory beneath it?

In scattered spots pools of water lay still, too lazy or stubborn to have obeyed the strange force of the golden harp. A nearby pool was disturbed by a flapping fish. Another lay on the bubbling soil, and Botha toed it into the pool, saying, "We're brothers today, fish."

A far away-rumble shook the mud, made it quiver like a fat belly of a wagon rider driving over cobblestones. Kollen suddenly knew the sea was coming back. He took a half-step back, thought about racing up the slope of the outer isle. And yet if the sea came back, its waters would probably wash up and over the cliffs in its fury. Still— he almost took Botha by the shoulder to make a run for it when he realized the rumble was not getting any closer, that the sound had been there ever since they exited the tunnel. For a time he listened, waving aside Botha's questions. And still no sea, only a steady, far-off noise like the sound of breakers down a tall cliff, of a huge army marching just out of view.

There was no other place to go. They searched the horizon, made a guess as to where the *Luck* might have been tacking when the tides withdrew and plodded in that direction. Within a few minutes Botha stopped Kollen with a hand on his shoulder — speaking aloud seemed out of the question, though neither of them would have known why if

asked — and directed Kollen to the merest pin-prick of light far to their left, east of the island. They changed direction. There were many shining things on the sea bottom, but they latched their eyes on the steadiest of the gleams and went forward.

In all that unrelieved expanse, time was measured by sucking footsteps, but the rhythm was one that quickly lulled the mind. Sometimes they stumbled over a stranded sea-thing, or stepped on popping bladders of peculiar plants. Once they heard a heavy breathing in a shadowed depression and steered away from whatever lay there.

They had trudged for what seemed a long time when Kollen saw that star blazing steadily at him in the field of ooze, and now it seemed unmistakably a human light, not another shining, wet shell. Botha saw it too, and they stood a moment before they mutually decided to run. A space of jogging brought the outline of crazily tilted rigging against the stars, with a lamp hoisted from a mast. Soon the hull of the ship came into sight — a hump beached on the side of a weedy knoll. It was a ghost-ship of a dream, and Kollen shuddered with the thought. But the small lights burning there were not spirits but oily smelling lanterns. All of the sudden the scene was welcome and warm. Kollen shouted, and Botha joined him.

Similarly weary shouts, with a note of hysteria, greeted them. One of the small lights came bobbing over the terrain toward them. Kollen guided the messenger with shouts.

Mikello was there to greet them. Perhaps the only person left with hope or energy, he hugged the two sailors with all his strength and spoke in a breath of waiting and fleeing the wizards' galleon among ripping reefs and the retreat of the sea.

The *Luck* leaned sadly. The end of the main yardarm was imbedded in the mud, and the sailors had hung a few lanterns from the rails besides that thoughtful light on the mast. Anasa reclined on the tilted deck, tough as tarred rope but just about all done for the day. Tall Atono finished lashing the rigging, "For what retreats comes back, Kollen, an' a mighty tide comes, for the hair o' me crotch be twitching." Bouncing Mikello had only a scratch or two; as for Enesh: his bald pate was bruised, his usually well-combed beard all ragged, and he lay propped against the mast. And Thon sat under a lantern and nursed a blow to his shoulder that a loose block had inflicted. The sea had swept Calin and Banath away.

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At intervals Kollen went out beyond the ship and shouted, while his stomach twisted in guilt because he hadn't made that hike back up the mountain to find Renik and Hrothe. At intervals someone saw to the wicks of the lamps that swung and flickered in the wind. They were pitiful beacons for their missing men and for the sodden hearts of all the men around it. But the ears were free enough, and they turned outward beyond the ship for any clue. They heard the faint wheeze of bubbles that broke through the ooze for miles around. The wind keened around the summit of the great island-mountain behind them; the ocean ground away at the earth somewhere out in the darkness. Kollen was exhausted to begin with; the monotonous sounds lulled him to sleep despite the slow terror he felt. He jumped up, heart thrashing chest, when the change began.

It started as a vibration in the decks. The loose lid of a jar started a high-pitched rattling. Kollen snapped to heart-pounding wakefulness. It was coming. Nothing more could have been done, yet he wished they could have been more prepared. He feared to look but climbed the leaning deck and straddled the rail.

He saw it as a dull band encircling the horizon, glittering in the moonlight like a woman's white girdle unrolled from the waist. Kollen was paralyzed with that calm terror that is the acceptance of imminent death. This was the wall of the sea rolling back to its stripped underside. What Habran's magic had gathered was now being returned.

There was still time for thought. In Kollen's case, there was time for anger. Anger unbound the ropes on his will, and then his lip curled back in disgust and understanding. This magic wasn't great nor was it evil — it was just plain stupid. Habran had been stupid to gather such power and leave it to be misused. That was the wonder of it all. "Hrothe," he said aloud, "you should be here to see this, this mistake of your great man."

And he knew the treasure was not really cursed, wasn't protected like the treasures in the old legends and songs of heroes. The curse was in power. The curse was the curse of a sharp knife left in the keeping of a child not yet wise in the lore of honed edges. All of the adventurers were worse than children; they were buffoons seeking dangerous stuff and looking up in shock at a suddenly slit finger.

The latest in a chain of buffoonery was going to splinter their bones and timbers, but Kollen descended from the rail, slid down the

leaning deck, and walked once more onto the sea bottom. At a leisurely enough of a pace he inspected the ship, walking fully around it as the crew bustled around doing last minute tightenings in a ritual meant to create and bolster bravery, although they didn't really think of it that way. Kollen did; he understood. His inspection was so absurd and correct at the same time that he felt the magic and tradition of it stiffen his spine.

The ship was sound. Comfort came in knowing that inaction was now their only possible act. Kollen nodded his head and came back to where he had started his inspection, now inspecting the sea bottom for the wave that ought to be approaching. The rumble was louder, the thunder in the ground was heavier, true, but the chaos held in store seemed held in check a while longer. The band of sea — that was what it seemed to be — seemed taller and closer, and Kollen noted how it encircled the horizon rather than come straight on. It occurred to him that they were squatting in the middle of a circle of withheld ocean— or in the center of an impossibly huge maelstrom.

He nodded without really knowing the truth. It was a maelstrom, a big brother to the confusing currents that circled between ebb and flood tide around Majle's Rocks in the Straits of Calan. A ship could founder there, be driven on the rocks if a helmsman didn't judge the currents aright: the currents shifted too quickly and powerfully to adjust sail on the larger ships, and it was then up on the reef with you and cracked ship-spines. There was the legend of a maelstrom in the far northern sea. Sailors often talked about its collection of eaten ships made visible each year when the sea swelled in a deep cone and bared the ocean floor littered with ship-bones. But that was said to last only a few minutes a day during the spring.

They were in the center of something like that. The maelstrom had swirled around Mountain Island, and now it was swirling inward again, like a loose fist tightening ever so slowly around an ant hill. The arc of the horizon was now an arc of sound, the moonlight glowed against the foam. He watched it and wished Hrothe were there to see it, despite the fact that this thing that surrounded them was their death. Yet there was wonder in it, just as wonder surrounds old grave markers and killing storms.

He wondered if he should meet his death standing on the sea bottom; that seemed like a good, honest way to go out. But then, despite all of his lone-wolf tendencies, all of his confidence and over-

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confidence in himself, Kollen felt lonely. He was going to die standing in the muck of a strange sea-bottom, and only a few strides away he saw the shadows of the sailors making ready for the onslaught. They worked silently, for death was as much on their minds as Kollen's. The men were wrapping loops of cord around the base of the stout main mast. They tossed loose possessions down below, wrapped their pouches and knives in many folds of their sashes. Hatches were lashed down, stays given a testing tug, the sails an extra wrap with the reefing cord. Death was coming with the rumble of a mountain-tall chariot rolling on cobblestone hills, but on this fragile wooden artifact some people were going about the simple business of life and hope. Then Kollen burst into tears, and his loneliness grew desperate. He clambered aboard the ship, but felt naked in his emotion and so scaled the tilted deck and sat alone astride the rail with a view of the coming sea.

"This ship is the center of the world," he said, trying to frame up a sudden thought as he looked down over the sailors. "If it were a seed, it would grow a new world having all the best things in it. A strange idea, but it's true. We're all shaved down to essential bones. All the ambitions and ranks of the world are gone with the shavings. What we are now is enough. We've done all we need in a few simple tasks, and we're made kings in the completion of the work, and we can sit down as satisfied as any king in the world. I'm sorry I can't say this better."

Anasa called out, "The idea is good, Kollen. We have asses to sit on between great labors, and sometimes that's all a person needs, and all a person can do, and it's still a brave thing anyhow. That's what you meant. So we saved you a space here with us, we did. Slide down. The storm that comes is a kicking, gouging bully if I've any sense at all, and I do believe I have some."

Now Botha slipped his self-made bonds and climbed up to him. They watched the paleness sweeping toward them for a moment and then he said, "Kollen, I'd be a coming down to the mast and resting with us a while." The whites of his eyes shone, and Kollen nodded.

They slid down on heels and buttocks and slipped beneath a loop against other snuggled bodies. Kollen had to agree that this felt good even through they might be safer underneath the closed deck. By unspoken consent, though, they would face the sea on the deck. *Being tied to a ship isn't a bad thing*, he thought. *This solid thing, these solid people, it's all good. Why didn't I know this before?* He noted

how the men had wedged the boy Mikello between them, locking him safely among them in a knot of braided legs. The boy's wide eyes were the only visible part of him revealed in the one remaining lantern that the sailors had let stay lit. *Somehow I should have been a part of this. I willingly let it pass by. I blamed Renik. He shares some blame, but I have an equal part of it. I must tell him. Only half-blame. We're so alike. My brother, swim with the current! Swim to me.*

He found himself taking deep breaths in readiness for the wall of water that would envelope the grounded ship. The wind now carried enough mist to blot out everything but the moon above. The mist formed a heavy dew on the deck and ran down the mast and into his shirt. The ship shivered as the gusts increased. He stared at the deck, found the chance to marvel at how tidy it was, passed the time somehow as the roar of the surf increased as did the pain in his straining jaws and clenched fists.

The ship lurched in a wave of brine; foam and spray soaked the men in their ropes. The ship rocked, spun a half-turn, and then shed the water like a dog come in from the rain. She was borne upward.

"She floats free!" someone shouted after a choking gush of sea foam ran off them. Kollen scrambled from his loop and danced a jig; he didn't know how, but she was free. The *Luck* was living up to her name. She'd need help, though; the tides spun her around, and she might take the seas wrongly at any instant. In twos and threes the sailors were freeing themselves from life-lines and rushing about on the deck, mad with terror and looking for a sailor's task, any task.

Kollen pleased himself with suddenly knowing the right orders to shout.

"The foresail! Haul out the foresail! Give her a course!" He ran to grab the tiller before the rudder was jerked to splinters, but they had already lashed it. Several men tumbled forward to haul the foresail from its tub and secure at its first reef point. Very slowly the bow of the *Luck* nosed over from the wind and angled its stern against the oncoming blast. Once the ship bumped the sea floor as it fell to the bottom of a wave's trough. Kollen grit his teeth as the vessel healed over against the frothy wall, but again the *Luck* buoyed up and shook off the foam, and floated in the thicker water that followed.

"Wind's turning," Anasa yelled. He pointed over the starboard: the dark mass of the island was terribly close, yet the *Luck* was being drawn parallel along its shores rather than toward them. Kollen

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looked over the rail and noted that they still traveled with the swells, didn't fall broadside to them. It was quite true, then: the currents of the maelstrom had them in hand, swirling them around the great isle even as the whirlpool slowly constricted.

Kollen sat with Anasa, who crouched under the lashed tiller. Everyone was braced for further misfortunes, and yet Kollen was dumbfounded by the silence.

Quiet. The deck was tilted, but the winds were quiet.

The roar of the surf could still be heard, but now it seemed to come from a distance, or below them. It was quiet enough to hear someone coughing and the splat of water that dripped from the rigging, and the comparative silence of those noises made him think he'd gone deaf. He shook his head, stuck a finger in an ear. Then Kollen saw that, although the deck was still, it was canted at a steep angle. What? Had the ocean gone again and left them stranded?

No — the *Luck* was imbedded in the side of steep, smooth slope — a water slope, calm, glassy water marked by small ripples. Yet even these disturbances were so smooth that the moon reflected from it like an eye in a mirror.

The foresail hung mostly slack, and overhead the masts rocked ever so slightly across the sky.

“Stay lashed down,” said Kollen. His voice sounded loud after having to shout over the blast. “This could all come down again.”

The old mate said, “I once swore I'd seen everything. Now I'll have to live forever, 'cause I full expect to miss something new the day I die.”

Below them the water sloped downward to a mist that enveloped the base of the maelstrom. They were being drawn upward by the swirl, unlike the usual effect of water swirling down drain holes. Kollen swore beneath his breath: ever since the mirror magics of Sulem, the world had turned around and inside out.

Kollen hooked his arms through the starboard rail — the up-hill side — and watched the black water. Humps of flotsam spiraled upward with the ship. The summit of the maelstrom loomed over them like a steep ridge rising up and blotting out part of the sky. On the other side of the ship Mountain Island drew steadily closer, although they were circling it at immense speed, making a turn around it each quarter hour or so. Yet they felt no wind, as if the sea were carrying the air with it. Anasa steered the prow at different

angles until the ship began to edge by the wreck and climb the slope, and he cast many glances at the island that the maelstrom was slowly closing around.

The ship edged up the slope for a while, drawn, seemingly, by altered natural laws along with the swirl of ocean. But soon they reached a point about midway up the slope at which the ship rose much more slowly, if at all. By then Kollen thought he saw something on the lip of the sea — a light, a light that might be thrown by several storm lanterns hung from yard arms, and soon his eyes thought they saw masts angled against the moon for a moment as the maelstrom turned them around and around. He hung by the rail for many minutes and stared into the oily, black shadow cast by the ship. Finally he slipped his shirt over his head, kicked off his boots. He went below, found his short sword, and tied it firmly on his belt. He found himself without any daggers, and borrowed two. All the while the sailors watched him without speaking.

“Anasa, think you can keep the *Luck* going up this slope? Maybe up and over the lip, down the other side, out to good flat ocean?”

“Up? Up and over the edge? Aye, cousin. I sailed the *Luck* to the very sea bottom, so why shouldn’t I be able to figure out these currents? And I’ve been doing that, but it takes a space of thinking, and ya want to think something like this through before ya alter sail.” He studied the ship’s rigging for a moment and then added, “Up and away, why not? Never seen white water ‘midst the stars.”

“If there’s a way, you’ll see it,” said Kollen. “And when you do, the ship is yours and the crew’s to go where you will. Renik is the shipmaster here, but he isn’t here, and I can’t see how he’ll return again. If I have any authority at all, then I relinquish it to you, Anasa, the senior in our clan.” Kollen looked at each sailor, giving each a good appraisal. “I’m sorry we involved you. You agreed to go, but you couldn’t have known about all this. Renik, Hrothe, and I couldn’t have known either, but the responsibility lies with us. Now you must leave us to it.” He gestured above them, up the sea-slope. “They’re there, the mages in their ship. I’m going for a gam with them. If I can get away, then I will, and if you hear me shouting somewhere in the sea before you sail off, pick me up. If you don’t hear me, then you can do one thing. Set the long-boat adrift with some provisions before you escape. Who knows, perhaps I’ll find it, perhaps even Renik will. It’s a hope you can leave us with.”

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Then Anasa stared at Kollen, and his eyes narrowed and gleamed. “But wait a bit, now. Y’said, Kollen, that we’re all kings because if the world is all stripped to the bone, did you, now?”

“I did.”

“Then we all stand here on the same level. Is it what you said, near enough?”

“Near enough.”

“Then fair enough! And since we’re bound together on this ship, all of us lords, then this is the time all of you lords have a say.”

The sailors had all stopped and listened to the old mate, a few grinning, most cocking their heads to hear better, as if they hadn’t heard right.

“Aye, lords! What do you say now? We left Akrem like a sneaking lover chased from the bower. We sailed the sea in fear, but yet in wonder at the strange tale that set us out here. Now the world’s changed, hasn’t it, lads? We’re all babes, y’see, we’re new men. We’ve watched the sea run and come back, we’ve hit the sea bottom and lived, now we sail on a mountain. Do luckier men than we live today? Did we take to sea to live an easy life or a free life? Free! The wonder of our days makes us lords of them. Shipmasters! The world is all up-and-around, so forget everything that came before. Grab a line or do nothing! Stay ready before the mast or sleep or gaze on the odd waters round us. I say, when the shipmaster takes the duty to set matters right, then the rest of us can tread deck a while and wait for his return. What shall you do? That’s all I want to know.”

Mikello came forward, young enough to have tears in his eyes from the speech, old enough to know the right answer. And that, perhaps, was the true wonder.

“I’m aboard this ship with you, Anasa, that’s what I know, that’s what I do! I’ll grab a line, haul a yardarm. The *Luck* is my home and all these men are my brothers. She’s the only place under my feet. I don’t care where she goes as long she carries me there. An’ I wouldn’t run now, not from wizards or an army of whales! If there’s something to follow or find, it’s as good as anything. This is just another storm and some port lies ahead.”

“Aye, boy!” cried Anasa. “The best boy! Y’ve earned yer keep here from the start, yer all ours and we’re yer own.”

“He speaks well, the boy does, and he speaks for me,” Botha said. “I suppose he’ll be master over me one day, if the world is all turned over like everyone is saying.”

“Sure he will,” said Atono, “and I’d be thinking we won’t toss him overboard after all. But mayhap we’ll keep any gold or silver we find at the end of this voyage, if ya have nothing against it.”

“And I’ll guide you there by star and wave, if there is a ‘there’ to see,” which was the longest speech that Enesh had ever made, and Thon never made speeches but only deeds, and he nodded as ever, for like Mikello, he’d adopted the lads and ship as all he ever had had or would have of family or estate.

Kollen smiled lopsidedly, not able to commit to more than that. He opened his mouth, then shut it. He shook his head in awe at them, especially at Anasa, whose little eyes were two small sharp candles in his head that no wind could waver. *Anasa and Hrothe*, he thought, *are two halves of a spirit greater than anything I ever knew*. With the thought, he acted, had to act, had to leave.

“I hope to see you again tonight, before you tilt over the edge. If not — I’ve heard you know your compass points, cousin.” He winked. Anasa nodded and slapped Kollen’s shoulder, put hand back on tiller. Kollen slipped over the rail and into the sea.

He stifled a shout, expecting cold water to ice him down, but the water was bath-tub warm. He accepted this luck without question. He swam away from the ship, now and then looking back down the seaslope to marvel at the seascape below. The shadow of the *Luck* moved against the cottony mist that rose out of the torrent at the maelstrom’s roots. He noted with some dismay that the sound of the roaring had risen in pitch as the throat of the whirlpool at last closed around the island and ground at its roots.

Kollen swam, and as he did he recalled his father, and he was saying, ‘Son, avoid doing stupid things, because you may not be able to pay for them the way you want to.’

True, but he’d made the ultimate blunder in losing the harp and intended to pay for it. He measured the waters and recalled his mother’s advice on the subject: ‘Don’t wait to be punished — try fixing the mistake first.’ She’d said that after he’d opened the cage of a merchant’s racing dogs who craved a race down the docks rather than Kollen’s attention. She had helped him round up those joyfully free animals before humorless Simalo had returned; and later he

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deeply pondered why his dogs ran so poorly that night, and why the harbor folk, forming a corridor down the docks, had bet and won against him. Thereafter Kollen had become the favorite of longshoreman, sailor, and courtesan.

It seemed the fixing of mistakes sometimes paid off in other than moral credit.

He pushed aside the ocean and put more distance between him and the *Luck*. The force of the current moved across and upward; the effort of swimming upward wasn't different from normal swimming. And the higher he went, the further ahead and above of the *Luck* he went. He was pondering this phenomenon and wondering how to slant his course to meet the mage ship properly, like a bowman leading a duck, when suddenly something winked at him nearby. A hundred feet above him and a few hundred ahead, light winked in and out of a swell of water. The lip of the maelstrom was near, and the mages' ship was there.

The blackness of the ship had made it nearly invisible. As Kollen tread water and listened, he could hear the low whistle of the breeze brushing the masts and rigging, and the sound of a ship's wake grew steadily in the background. The maelstrom was sweeping along, and Kollen estimated that he need only swim upward at a constant pace and he'd run straight into the ship. He did so, and as he worried about being rolled and crushed under the ship, the quality of the water suddenly changed. He'd been swimming along easily enough when suddenly he found himself choking on a breath of water. He swung his arms to reach the surface, but he had never really sunk. His hands fought with a strange membrane, rather like water suspended in a fine web. Kollen was like a fly caught in a spider's web after a rain, and now he was drowning in a dewdrop that still clung to the net. He fought harder, desperately rather than with control, and then he was out. He had hardly enough time to spit water and draw a wheezing breath before his stomach did a flip-flop, and his arms thrashed air as he fell.

He was tumbling down a wet slope, skipping along its surface like a flat stone skipped across a pond. His breath was knocked from him when he hit the water square on his back and into something hard. He gasped out the water he'd swallowed and then saw the ship.

It and he floated together in a bowl of sky. The moon wavered clearly in the smooth water. Even a few stars stared back at

themselves. The ship hung in the center — ship-soup for a sky-giant. Above them all, the sky wavered a little, as if water surrounded them all, unbelievably pure water filling in the gaps of the world like air — then Kollen knew the ship was in a huge bubble stuck on to the lip of the maelstrom. He had simply swam up and fallen over the lip, tore through the bubble wall and tumbled down into the depression.

The water was waist-deep against the hull; under that the bubble formed a pliant floor. The ship spun in the middle of the depression and piled up the loose water in a spiralling wake. Kollen backpedaled from the ship to gain a look up at her. He saw light reflected against slack sails and gold-painted masts. They burned many lanterns up there, and he saw light gleaming from a rank of spear tips. The roundish objects had to be the helmeted heads of the spearmen, backs turned against him. *Good*, he thought toward them, *keep looking that way, mates*. He began swimming around the hull, scouting ways to get aboard. The way proved easy enough: the ship's anchor fluke hung almost within arm-reach, and he crouched under the water and sprang up against the bubble-floor, caught the anchor, and pulled himself up. There he stood, his head at the level of the rail. He got up on the deck, shielding himself behind a tangle of rigging and fallen spars — evidently the *Luck* was not the only ship to have suffered in this event. The mages were not in control of everything!

Kollen inspected his surroundings more carefully and saw a bearded man standing by the mast.

He'd forgotten his sword was bound fast in his belt so he wouldn't lose it in the sea; he clawed at its pommel while his lungs seemed to leap between his teeth and flutter there. It should have been a clean draw straight into the forehead to stifle any cry. Instead it was a short century before the sword came free while the man watched him. The fool! Was his night-sight ruined? Did he think Kollen was a comrade with a bursting bladder, tearing his pants down to piss? At last the weapon came free. He began the planned maneuver, hesitating with the thought that he'd be better to escape overboard, and then he stopped entirely. It was a mirror. The apparition was an image in a tall mirror propped up on a stout tripod. Of course — the mages had done their 'sending' magic through mirrors, and here was part of the apparatus, probably used recently to send Sulem and the soldiers to the island-tower. The apparition watched Kollen serenely, and Kollen

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drew back behind the shadow of the rigging; clearly, this called for some thought before the venture could proceed.

He began to think and was interrupted at the very start; beyond the mirror another apparition appeared. It was a woman, frozen in the act of climbing upon the ship from the side opposite to Kollen. She had cast her glances around and caught his eye. She unfroze after studying him, and completed her entrance on the scene. She too hid in the shadows, crouching on her haunches. Kollen exchanged glances at the doings on the ship and on the woman, and his mind suddenly clicked — this was the sea queen who'd kidnapped Renik. Kidnapped and released? Renik had not said so, and yet he had returned somehow.

The mirror-man must have 'heard' her, because he folded his fingers calmly and turned at a profile to Kollen and the woman. Kollen thought he meant to address her, or both of them. But he didn't. The man looked back toward the stern of the ship toward the quarter-deck, below which on middeck the circle of mages held their counsel, and he moved no more.

The mages were squatting around the harp, with Sulem pacing back and forth behind them, twisting his beard around a finger. On either side of the deck their soldiers were gathered in crooked ranks, discipline lost in the pace of fantastic events. A group of men were gathered on the quarter deck — liveried sailors, unemployed sailors now that the vessel was in something other than human hands.

The harp was playing itself. Its strings vibrated, and its eerie, slow song wove itself into the rhythm of the ship's slow turning.

Surely, interesting events had passed after Kollen had lost the harp. The instrument evidently took things in hand once struck. Whether or not the mages had tried to play their own tune was an excellent question. Some of them had instruments of their own; they struck cautious notes and watched for effects on the golden harp now standing in the center of their circle. Some of them struck experimental chords lightly, holding their instruments close to ear. One man rolled a scroll forward, studying its contents in such a rush that a slight rocking of the deck sent the unread portion unrolling across the deck like a wagon wheel unpinned on a hill. Meanwhile, the harp's strings were a blur, and its quiet notes wove through all sounds of foot scuff, cough, and voice.

The mages looked worried. Quite certainly they were *not* in control of the day. Perhaps they too had noticed that the whirlpool

was constricting, losing the speed of a spin that had kept them safely hurled clear of the island. And perhaps the harp had a kind of attraction for its home, the lonely tower, and was now singing its way back.

Activity livened the band. They had come to agreement on some issue. A bald-headed woman with tattoos on her pate went to Sulem's side, and Sulem paused for a minute then nodded once. She left him, inched forward on her knees until she neared the harp, and brought her fingers into touching closeness. Aboard the ship, tension made fists clench and jaw-muscles ripple. The mage touched three times: two single notes and a chord. The ship lurched sideways.

Men were grabbing rails and twisting arms in halyards. Kollen heard a grizzly man in a gold-embroidered storm-cloak call up to the mast watch. A voice drifted down.

"We might have pushed off a bit, sir. Can't tell yet."

The mages seemed satisfied; evidently the lurch had been a good sign, at least in the right direction.

The knot of mages broke up from their circle. Wine was being passed around. *They're celebrating rather early*, Kollen thought, *but perhaps things are bad enough to call those three pluckings a small victory.*

It was a good time to act, too.

And the sea-woman read Kollen's thoughts and thought it was time to act, herself. She drew out a curious weapon from a sheath at her back. It looked like a sword, but a sword made of sea-bleached bone inset with shark teeth, the same weapon with which she'd latched onto the *Luck's* rail when she'd grabbed Renik away. She kept her eye on Kollen as they moved forward in unison, and Kollen wondered if he was to fight her *and* the shipmen for the harp.

His plan was simple — run, grab, and dive overboard. He'd seen the harp work for the man who'd stolen it from him, and he hoped something similar would happen. Perhaps a nice dry tunnel back to the side of the *Luck*, or the formation of a water castle with fog gates and ice guardsmen. He'd accept anything of that sort, as long as the harp was back in his hands.

It was ridiculously simple to run across the deck and take up the harp. The stretch of wood from bow to middeck did not seem to exist in the memory. Terror and triumph had brewed a strange potion that burned and chilled the channels of his veins. Memory would later

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claim that the first event to occur was the raising of his sword after he'd picked up the instrument and cradled it in his left arm. People were making motions and noises, but Kollen didn't take any but the most instinctual action. He was dimly aware that his sword tip was up at guard and traced snakelike trails in the air with its tip. He knew that the sea-woman had not attacked him. She stood at his side most like a comrade. Her own sword stood as still as the mainmast that stood sentinel behind them both.

Kollen saw all this, but his attention was riveted to the harp. Its touch had affected him. It felt much like the day when he dangled his legs in the public bath at Fenward, and one of those freak spring thunderstorms was brewing and Hrothe had climbed from the bath and warned Kollen to withdraw. Kollen had ignored him, instead watching the clouds stand up on the horizon and march over Fenward like misshapen gods. Perhaps in a moment the rain would pour down through the atrium roof of the bathhouse and he'd feel the cool drops that were such a rarity in the desert city. But before rain ever came, a bolt of lightning struck somewhere close, and a spark of it leapt between his feet still dangling in the sunken bath, and his senses were jolted for moment with something that was not quite pain. The next moment saw him scrambling upward to stand at the edge, Hrothe's admonishing voice in his ear, and the rising wail of a man whose comrade had also felt the jolt, would always feel it perhaps, because he floated face down in the bath.

Kollen almost felt that way now, except now he had a sense of himself. Each harp note sent its thrilling hum through him, and he knew he wasn't hearing, but rather *feeling* the notes as he had in the cavern where the harp had sat under the drip of water. The instrument produced sound only as a by-product of its true function — Kollen knew it to be the truth as if he were the man who'd made the object and knew its way.

Such power he had never felt. It animated the senses even while it set the spirit's feet in deep bedrock to feel the earth and the sea throbbing together. A snatch of a thought came, a memory of a thing once said or something he'd once said himself, but he knew he'd never said anything like it before: 'The sea swirls; and the earth also has currents. Every mountain is an earth-wave. The difference does not matter, that's the secret. Everything is spliced together like a rope.'

Odd enough memory, strange enough thing to think of when a bravo is stepping up to the edge of your vision as you contemplate deep music. Without disturbing the harp in any way, Kollen dipped his point and swept it low to meet the thrust meant to slide under guard and into kidney. The soldier tried to pull back and disengage himself for another thrust; Kollen used his forearm to deflect the higher thrust, which left his own weapon perfectly poised to slip under the chin and up into the throat. The soldier hung there for a moment. Surprise left quickly, eyes rolled up, bowels let loose, weapon rang on wood. Kollen whipped the sword free as a cry ripped the air next to the sea woman.

An arm was spinning slowly in the air on an arc of blood. The shark teeth had sawed more than sliced through the arm just above the elbow of the next man of the pair. Abstractly Kollen admired the bravery of this form of sword technique, because the woman had had to grapple close, set the inward-curving teeth into flesh, and then pull the hilt down and forward to reap such butchery — a complex action that didn't leave the practitioner ready to meet the next foe. This time it hardly mattered. She wasn't done with her man. He staggered back in wonder, and she thrust upward from a crouch. The tip went under the breastplate; she hooked and twisted and drew out a rope of glistening stuff from her foe. Kollen knew he might have felt sick on another day, but the magic that suffused him left him numb to horrors.

Further attacks were quelled at the two sights spread out before the crew: Kollen and the woman were the two sides of death: his man rolled serenely onto his back, dead by quick mischance, and hers still flopped and coughed into his grave in a death that wouldn't happen soon enough, drawing more of his own insides out before he was done. That seemed to be enough killing for the moment.

Only three long breaths passed before the next event, but that was long enough for Kollen to think of the happy face of his brother returning to his marble-faced turret room to see the golden harp Kollen had found. Renik would be full of love and pride in his twin brother's work. He would throw aside his mage's robes with that familiar twist of his arm, gathering the folds between elbow and side. He'd rest the other arm on the bronze astrolabe that stood next to the window on its support. There he is! His face doesn't betray strong emotion, just a squint of eye, the smile's precursor. 'Father would love you, Kollen,' Renik says. 'A wise son, a loving brother — it's

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the stuff that strings a ship together with family sinews. It's the luck we have, you and I together.' He holds out his hand for the harp. 'Such a treasure! How shall we use it, brother?' Now his mouth smiles but his eyes smolder.

And all this may have happened, should happen, or unfortunately did happen — although Kollen felt his memory, or vision, to be a mix of truth and lies. His recollections were not really all that clear. The pictures in his mind overlapped and blurred, alternating views between rough cloak and silken mantle on a brother whose face alternately darkened into weather-beaten hues and then to a silken paleness made by an indoor life and long night-watches.

Then the real world intruded. Kollen's eyes focused easily on the sharp image of wooden deck, rigging, and angry people.

"Thief, and now murderer," said one of the mages from the crowd. She stepped out and faced Kollen and the sea-witch: the bald-woman with the intricate tattoos across her head. "You don't know what you do. Return our property. Much is now at stake."

"You stole it first. Don't speak about crimes to me."

The mage frowned and would have answered, but now Sulem stepped forward, on his face a mixed expression of fear, haste, and knowledge.

"Finding what was once stolen does not justify ownership," Sulem said. "Two men once discovered deep knowledge; one of them took that knowledge and locked it away. So do not speak of ownership; say instead a recovery whose rightness or wrongness can be debated. But what is not to be debated is that we're in danger, and we know best about this harp. Kollen, we're all involved, we all can die. Set it down!"

Kollen looked at the sea-woman, who was looking at Kollen fixedly, and Kollen looked at his harp.

"I think I'll play," he said, and he set the instrument down and plucked its highest and lowest strings simultaneously.

All of the strings burst at once.

Immediately Kollen felt the long, dreamlike jolt run out of him. Magically slowed time snapped back to sound and speed. Fear refilled the vacancy instantly. Unfounded boldness, a touch of final desperation, and a foreknowledge he didn't know he'd known — all of that had gotten Kollen as far as that lonely spot in middeck, a replay of his night in the barrow. The fleeing magic abandoned him

there, and he looked stupidly at the sword in his hand and a ring of enemies around him.

They were angry people, but for a few moments they were also amazed men. Sulem cried aloud and threw up his arms; soldiers piled up stupidly behind him, unsure of permission for vengeance or what kind of revenge to practice.

“This has not happened!” he screamed. “Kollen!”

Everyone stuck their eyes to the quivering strings of the harp that sprawled across the deck from their pegs, splayed out as if a skinny octopus had died there.

A sickening motion ran beneath the great ship and the timbers groaned like a hold full of drunks about to vomit.

“Capture him,” Sulem said, looking up at Kollen. “He must not escape — it means our lives, now.” The mage stepped back to let the soldiers flow around him. “Capture him and bind him to the strongest part of the ship, because he cannot die, and so we will ride on his fate.”

They didn’t follow the order immediately because the ship shifted violently, sending many of the crew sprawling. Contrary winds started slapping the previously slack sails. The shipmaster started bellowing frantic orders to take in all sails.

“He cannot die,” Sulem repeated, without taking his eyes from Kollen. There was jealousy in that look.

Kollen didn’t understand until a picture formed from the gray fogs swirling in his mind, a picture and soft echoing words, a golden man saying, “Worry not! If you’re the one, you can’t die.” The strange words, from golden man and mage alike, spoken with such conviction, froze him as well as any spell, and perhaps, he thought, it was a spell indeed. He moved himself to prove that he had will left, breaking for the starboard rail before the soldiers penned him in entirely. They were just starting to do that when the foretop watchman cried down:

“A ship on the beam! Above us on the beam!”

Heads turned, bodies stopped, and Kollen was left fenced in by a ring of pikes. High above them on the lip of the bowl of ocean a ship in full sail was perched. Its canvas glowed in the moonlight as it balanced on the edge of the rim, and then its stern up-ended and the bow descended. Kollen had a vision of old Anasa clutching the tiller, wanting to see everything before death stiffened his wrinkled hand.

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Renik's Luck plummeted down the slope and emerged for one moment into the light of the lanterns before clashing with the ship. Kollen saw the gilded dolphin nailed beneath the bowsprit plunge into the light then disappear in a crash. The ship wrenched with the impact, sending men tumbling, and Kollen fell into the ring of spearmen. A stray spear point scratched him in the leg. He struggled among the fallen warriors, kicked out and stood, tripped over the entangled spear shafts.

He opened the skull of a warrior who had grabbed him around the legs, then ran to rail's edge. Time seemed to stop, as if all the calms-before-storms had gathered themselves up for one instant of distilled action. He saw that the sea-woman had made it to the opposite rail. She had ripped-up two fighters and had just finished wrapping up a third in her strong arms since her shark-tooth sword was left behind in a tangle of guts. Their brief partnership was to begin and end at the antipodes of the adventure, and with nary a word between them. In that strained moment there was enough time for Kollen to see her face, the sadness that rested there as she took a last look at the ruined harp. What part did she have in all of this? Why did she have that look of completed understanding, something that Kollen himself lacked?

The woman's muscles popped and jumped all across her shoulders; the captured man's neck cracked, the sound mixing in with the creak of planks and cordage. She let him fall and then dropped herself into the sea.

Events started moving quickly again. Something warm was running down his leg, piss or blood, or something, he didn't know. A soldier came to his wits and lunged at him, evidently forgetting or ignoring the command to capture, because the man's eyes behind the nose-guard of his helmet said, 'You're dying with me.' The ship was bucking beneath his feet, and the world was dizzy. Only the speartip rushing forward was real enough to consider. Kollen parried the weapon and continued the motion around in a circle to bring his sword point across an unarmored throat. He leaped to the rail. Then with his last look around he saw that bearded man in the mirror. They locked gazes for a second while Kollen balanced there. Then the ship lurched, and Kollen had to consider the confusing half-sights below him. His head snapped to the side to catch a final glimpse of the

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mirror-man. Then he jumped, and something struck his feet a terrible blow.

CHAPTER 14 — THE HEALING SEA

An inn, some wine, your fellows for cheer — but a seat in the wastes to ask why you're here. — A Fenward proverb

Renik cherished a cool, wet feeling on his lips. He clutched at it when someone's words filtered by the pounding in his ears.

"Slowly, Renik, slowly. Water is precious stuff in these sad times."

Precious? he thought. He remembered it being damned cheap some time recently.

And, slowly, he remembered having eyes and worked at opening them. When the world finally settled, he knew the pounding in his ears was the indecisive advance-retreat of the surf. It brushed a sandy shore. At the corner of his vision he saw Hrothe. The wizard's beard was a tangle sparkling with sea-salt. The sun was looking downward, and Hrothe sat with his thin chest bared to it.

Other people were around them. The babble of their strange tongue teased his ears. He sat up, found that his body hurt everywhere, but he turned around until he saw several small boats drawn up on the shore and about thirty people squatting next to them. They were hardy folk, tall and thin, dark haired, dressed in heavy woolens and oiled leather.

The Fisher Folk. Renik knew them, dwellers of these northern coasts who hunted in the winter and farmed in the summer, and, between these tasks, fished from their odd boats of leather hides sewn over basket-like frames. Renik watched them now, their dark eyes staring back at him. When he heard a movement to his other side, he rolled over and suddenly stared at two bright points set within a mass of wrinkles.

An old man was sitting there on his haunches. He grinned a grin of large yellow teeth and chuckled slowly.

"You some bad boat-man, ey? Come float half-sink trees — no good!" The man continued laughing slowly and reached a hand into his tunic to itch.

The raft on which he and Hrothe had come was pulled up on the beach. Hrothe gestured at it and said, "They met us on the sea and took us here."

“Hiah! Teach you make boat better, better, ey!”

Renik thanked him for helping, but the old man pointed at the raft.

“Bring you here, give food, give water. Now we take good strong rope from bad boat, fix my boats. That thanks plenty, ey?”

Renik nodded. The old fisher called out to his people. Several young men raced ahead and began to unstring the raft.

“They waited until they could ask us. Good, honest sailors, Hrothe. The rope is a good trade for the services.”

“An admirable exchange.”

The gnarled headman sat by them while the youths ferried the rope back to their boats, and others began restringing tortured rigging. After a while he said, “You boat-mans big lucky live in storm. We two big lucky, everybody, ey?”

“Big lucky,” Renik said.

“Maybe other boat-mans lucky too. Maybe they come back, find you? Maybe you kinfolk them, ey?”

Renik and Hrothe looked at each other and sprang up from their elbows.

“Kinfolk, yes. How did you know that?”

“You two come north on big boat. We see boat go sail again north after storm. Maybe you that one.”

“Did you speak to them?” Renik asked.

“No, no. Sail big fast. Hiah! Big fast that one, black boat, three sails, square and...” The man thought and drew in the sand a long yard and a triangle dropping down from it.

“Lateen,” finished Renik. “A ship. I saw them. The sea-witch said she’d...” He stopped, seeing Hrothe’s bewilderment. “I’ll tell you later. We’ve tales to tell to each other, don’t we?”

Hrothe nodded, watching Renik turn his gaze out to sea and let sand run between his fingers.

“But they sailed north,” Renik said, lifting his chin. “What’s there, Hrothe? What’s there unless the *Luck* sails ahead of them?”

“We only know *we* are alive, alive against all chance. But be miserly with your hopes.” Hrothe pointed all around themselves where the trees of the isle leaned or lay shattered in the ruin that the sea had brought.

The sea had left ruin behind it, but also much food. The stranded people walked around the island and found fish on the beach and among the woven mess of the trees. That night everyone had a feast.

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Roasting fish over twisting flames, the Fishers told how the sea had swirled into a great whirlpool around the third island, and how it eventually constricted and finally collapsed in a rage. One of the boats in their small fleet had been demolished, and the general chaos of the sea afterwards had thinned the crews of the other boats. After a meal for the living they solemnly made one for the dead.

The Fishers scrounged in the sand along the beach. Renik didn't understand until he saw them retrieve some stones that were scattered about. With cries of triumph, the fishers rolled forth a stone or a slab, until a sizable number of pieces piled up. Then the folk made a small shrine, and its center-piece set up finally on their platform struck familiar chords in the two men. It was the stone bowl, or shrine, they'd found on the beach of Lap Child. The two men were stunned. The sea had so changed the face of the isle that it had become reborn land, with trees torn up and hurled harpoon-like, and weeds, sand, and pebbles smoothing over the low ridge that backed the strand.

As they watched the rites for the Fisher Folk's dead, the two men told each other their tales. They finished about the time when the ceremony was done, when the moon had coursed far over toward the west. Its light was sharp in the clear, windless air. Renik turned away from its cold, clockwork stare.

"Ey!" called the old man. "You two come fire. Very cold now."

They went to the fire, and Renik fell asleep to Hrothe's attempts to learn a few words of their hosts' speech.

* * *

Renik shivered around the embers as Mother Sun built up her own coals. But something more than cold had awakened him. He wasn't sure what it had been, and he hardly cared. The exertions of his adventurings had finally struck him. Renik had spent the night wrapped in fever-dreams: warped, unending things in which the burning logs became arms and spines in a pyre. He had strength enough to marvel at the quality of Hrothe's own bone and gristle, and then he sank his head down in the crook of his arm again, trying to ignore the fretting of the sea. He couldn't, and he lifted his head and saw the sea woman standing waist-deep in the surf.

With great effort and much grunting, he leaned up on his elbow, and in stages got to his knees, then feet, and hobbled toward her. He

met her in the water. She studied him a moment, running her finger along his cuts and bruises.

“The sea has used you poorly, but it let you live, and me, and perhaps your brother, too.”

Renik’s mouth opened, his eyes brightened.

“You’ve seen him? My brother? My ship?”

“I’ve seen your brother, and part of your ship. I like him. We had much pleasure together on the ship of your enemies.”

Renik, for a fleeting moment, was almost jealous of any pleasure Kollen might have had with this woman, captor, lover, and ally. But of course, he didn’t yet know what kind of pleasures she meant.

She told Renik what had happened in the past day. She didn’t understand all of it, nor could Renik explain it to her. It was enough to know that Kollen had tried to recover the harp, had failed even with the sea-woman’s help, and that he lived at least until the magicked sea collapsed and swept all friends and foes apart. “Your coming here has not brought any peace to my isles,” she finished, shaking her head. “And you’ve taken the music away.”

“The music? I’m not sure I... of course! There *is* something missing. The sounds, the music.”

“The magic,” she said, stepping forward. Something in her look made Renik step back too. And then she stepped up on the dry land. The woman looked around her, seemingly unaware of the people who’d risen to stare. “I’m free again. The land is mine, again.”

Renik thought he ought to do something — congratulate her, hug her, dance a jig. But both of them stared down at the clockwork foam splashing up and bubbling back down the sand.

By then other sleepers on the beach had noticed; Hrothe and some of the fishers shuffled forward and stood a few feet away.

“Do you want Habran’s final message?” the woman said without raising her eyes from the foam. “I was saving it for our great council on your ship.”

Something inside his mouth was squirting a bad taste — Habran’s messages didn’t seem meant for lucky people. Renik nodded, though.

“He said to visit the skull on a skull whose eye is the sky and whose jaws eat the sea. He said to dream there, and listen to the dream.”

Renik gazed away at the brilliant dawn horizon. The sunny plains of sea were broken here and there by the isles and looked rather like a

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chess board from which most of the pieces had been removed. Renik let his eye drift along the horizon and let his mind drift along its own channels. He turned a little to include Hrothe in the conversation.

“Salazen. It’s a city lying between two ridges, and part of the city is built over a steep, rounded hill. And it has the best harbor in these northern parts. Its arms —jaws, I suppose — curve out to embrace the harbor. Everywhere else is all rocks and cliffs. A good clue; he didn’t trust that we’d learn that the crown is a compass.”

“Salazen, Renik? That’s where Habran lived. It was the far northern limit of Shapor’s empire, a peaceful place because only primitive peoples of small, weak nations lived beyond. And there Habran lived, far from court intrigues, a fine abode for a scholar, I’d like to think.”

“But what about this ‘skull on a skull’, and this ‘eye’ business?”

“I think... ” Hrothe began, then stopped. “Ah, I can’t say, really. Something I dreamed about. Perhaps the crown will show us the way after all.” No one was ready to question Hrothe’s ingrown gaze.

The sea-witch turned to Renik. “Where now?”

Renik shook his head. “If my ship returns, it’ll find me waiting for it. But Hrothe, you should go home; hop a ride with these fishers and get your way south in hops and skips. You can do it. You’ll find villages, and trading boats. There’s no point in continuing the journey. And you?” he asked the woman.

She was backing away into the water.

“I’m going home,” she said. “Who can take back what has been forgotten? My feet have forgotten the land. I’m— I’m not a woman, not a human, have been neither in many years.” She turned and plunged back into the sea, although Renik thought he saw her face reappear once more before he too left the shore. He lay down again by the fire, where the ember-light lost to the bright fire burning in his head.

* * *

Renik woke up knowing he had been dreaming. They had been monotonous and twisted visions, neither meaningful scenery nor straight, honest nightmares, and his sea-merchant’s mind liked things neatly packaged and lashed down. For a time he just remained aware of awakening and questioned nothing else, until a splash of icy salt

water hit him, his world began to rock, and a weary cursing started somewhere behind him.

Renik opened gummed eyes. A golden dolphin stared at him.

He wasn't impressed. He knew that dolphins *were*, that they were *good*. He knew that he had known some admirable fish in his days. Renik reached out and touched the grinning snout, and the skin felt wooden. Golden wood. Well, this wasn't correct at all, for dolphins were either gold or wood, not both. Perhaps he should take this up with the old man who fumbled and cursed a little behind him. His gray beard flapped in a breeze, and he looked like a wild sea-elemental—

The old man noticed him waking and said: "Renik! I'm glad you're up. I can't make this boat behave."

The old man's words were landmarks to a lost navigator. Identity came back to him.

"Hrothe," he had a file in his throat and his voice was rough, "damn, why am I sleeping with a fish?"

"Lay back and collect your wits for a moment. You've been delirious for two days. As for the fish, surely you recognize the figurehead of your ship. Thirsty? Can you reach the jar by your feet? I've been dribbling water past your lips and I'm tired of it by now."

He pushed off a scrap of sailcloth and a sheepskin he'd been wrapped in and drank deeply before looking around. The sea wrapped the horizon and faded into iron skies. And they were in the *Luck's* smaller longboat. A lug sail pulled the boat along.

"Where did this come from?"

"The sea witch found it floating empty in the sea. We — Kollen and the others — took this boat to the island and left it there. It's a miracle it wasn't crushed, but that enchanted sea was rather gentle in its collapse, as I recall. It fell down like a mountain of thick oil, with little frothing or fuss about it. It was the waves that came afterward that did the damage. Well, now, the sea-woman gave us the water, and some fish. We rolled you into the boat, and here we are." Hrothe looked concertedly at the reclining man. "Did I do well? There really *was* nothing for us on the island. Oh yes — she also found us the *Luck's* figurehead floating out here." Hrothe gazed over the waves. "I thought we might give it back to the ship later."

Renik leaned back again, but when he closed his eyes the spinning got worse.

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“You said you’re having problems sailing her?” he said after a while, “and when ever did you learn to sail?”

Hrothe looked away and smiled. “Sometimes Kollen and I spent time in Port Talan, drifting down the river from Klar Village, a few miles below Fenward, in a small boat Kollen had for smuggling. But on some days we went fishing. Good days! The sun loosened these old bones of mine, and one can forget age when hoisting a meal from the sea’s cooking pot. As for sailing, I asked Kollen to teach me; I thought I had spent too much of life studying what I couldn’t see.”

“You’re good friends,” said Renik.

“We’re brothers.”

Renik nodded and said nothing. A long time passed as he lay propped against the wooden dolphin, gazing upward at the shreds of clouds and across the woven water. The singers sometimes called the sea the “whale’s road,” and there was a great truth in that — a road only for whales. For sailors it could be a tortuous path for all its lack of obstacle. Renik wanted only to run across a hard expanse marked with signs leading to Kollen, so that he could take his brother by the shoulders and look at him for perhaps the first time.

But the sea was too much in Renik. Wind and spray could calm as well as frustrate. His unease passed, the clouds seemed to be signs — wispy arrows pointing somewhere. The endurance and stoicism of a shipmaster returned, and by then Hrothe brought up the topic that had been dropped.

“Tell me how to sail this boat. I bring her toward the northwest but she skitters away from it.”

“She isn’t a good sailor. Better for rowing or sailing before the wind. Still, she’s not loaded proper and the sail is pulling her over where she’s light. Here....” Renik shifted some of their stores to trim the hull, and then Hrothe found that her tiller eased and she held a better course. “Maybe when evening falls the breeze will come more from the east, and we’ll sail even better. It will if the mainland isn’t too far off.” He sought the canvas blanket again. He was cold, and his head hammered. “Age is ambushing me,” he muttered, “I’m never sick like this.”

“Not age,” said Hrothe, “but this irresponsible life of visiting the sea bottom and rescuing old men from the grip of angry gods. Rest, rest! There’s nothing the world can do to you now.”

They were words of too much confidence, but they had a curiously soothing affect.

But before Renik did permit sleep he said, “Northwest? Why’re we going northwest?”

“Habran sends us there, remember? It’s roughly in this direction from the Hearth Isles, as I recall. Salazen, that is. We lost our crown-compass but not our direction.” Hrothe sighed. “Enjoy the sea, Renik. It may be our only holiday from a very old struggle.”

Renik took the advice and lay back.

Later he woke up from another fevered nap and stared full into the moon’s eye. It was a serene, hopeful light it sent down, even if the same moon had looked upon a variety of madnesses over the past few days. Renik thought there was something fundamentally important about that but couldn’t quite nail down *what*. He imagined that Kollen and the lads were looking upon the moon at that very instant — and if only the orb were a mirror for searching beyond the horizon’s edge!

Right now the horizon was a vague zone that barely kept sky and sea separated. It was easy to imagine it was no edge at all, but rather turned upward to meld with the heavens. A sea of stars! Were they islands or reefs or the lightening of storms?

Renik leaned up and searched the dark interior of the boat for a sack of provisions. He found one and withdrew a strip of salty fish and slowly tore bits off. Hrothe nodded off at the stern, one bony elbow locked around the tiller. The old fellow had amazing endurance, but soon he would fall to Renik’s fevered state. He switched positions with Hrothe, who was too tired now to stop him, and watched him collapse into sleep.

Strength was slowly returning to the shipmaster. The two men were three days at sea, and the breeze held truly and gently from the east — it had indeed bent toward the west with evening, and the little boat could manage a beam reach when the breeze wasn’t too stiff. Renik didn’t know if they made much headway. Strangely enough, he didn’t care. Distance traveled wasn’t as important as rest, recovery, and the enjoyment of an ordinary life. As dire as the situation was, sailing the seas in a small open boat seemed ordinary enough.

He felt well enough to relieve Hrothe all that night and piloted the boat by keeping her port side to the setting moon. It was good to set a course again after having had too many decisions made for him in the last few days.

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He steered the boat for another hour before admitting the truth to himself: the nagging worry that life was all changed now. He could no longer play at being both brother and parent to Kollen. It had been a hard role, and none had failed to peek past the actor's disguise, probably. He wished Hrothe would awaken and talk. The old man deserved rest, but later when the boat chanced to rock and awaken Hrothe, Renik wasn't displeased. The old man sat up and inquired about his health.

"The wind's come up a bit."

Hrothe accepted this answer, rubbed his eyes, and propped himself up in the sheepskin that the headman of the Fishers had given them. Renik watched him a while, thinking he must have fallen asleep again, hoping that he hadn't. But Hrothe spoke.

"How will she weather a harder wind?"

Renik shrugged, then knowing that the gesture wasn't seen, said, "Not too badly if we can keep head to the seas. She floats light and free."

There was a pause in the night, then, "Boats and humans are much alike. Steer us straight across the ups and downs, and we weather the storm." Renik grunted assent and took it as a reminder to tighten the running stay. When he had, Hrothe said, "You once asked me where my wizard's tower went; remember that night on the roof? I discovered that stiff towers built patiently over the years break in the gale rather than bend. Thus my flexible tent on the roof."

"I remember this: you said your tower went the way of your youth. I thought it crumbled from age."

"Would that it had!" said Hrothe. "But it crumbled *because of* youth."

"Huh?"

"You are surprised? So was I. I share my failure with much of humanity, placing all trust in youth and strength until I made it my sole pursuit for the best part of my life."

"I don't understand."

"It is easily told. All wizardry is a pursuit of eternity. Nothing more. The necromancer seeks control over life by lending a veneer of it to dead things. And the high wizard invokes the power of celestial bodies and winds and nurturing earth — all these forces are the materials of life, ever in motion, alive at the dawn of creation and perpetuated until the landlords collect the dues."

“You leave out the prophets and the alchemists,” Renik said.

“Prophets? The most common attempt to take life by the horns and guide it, extend it. And the alchemists: pity them, the poor fools, dallying with eternity with gold as goal.”

“So they fool themselves trying to make mere material immortal,” offered Renik.

“You are now a philosopher, sir.”

“A sailor is often a philosopher. We’re cramped aboard a ship and if we don’t talk and talk then it’s a bad day. With land often out of sight, eternity is often on our tongues. But the high scholars won’t talk with us and so never learn this. But how close to eternity did *you* come?”

“Close? Ask instead, ‘What part of it am I?’ I pass to you my life’s earnings condensed into a question.”

The stars had traveled another fingerspan when Renik asked, “But you never told me where your wizard’s tower went.”

“Nowhere. You were there. A tall, decaying building filled with broken people and rats.” Wind hissed against the sail and cooled their brows with spray. “My apprentice drank a potion that I thought would extend life. I was napping while it cooled. The boy was dead when I awoke. Then I rented my tower to poor tenants and moved to the roof to maintain sovereignty.”

CHAPTER 15 — THE CITY OF LIGHT

We free ourselves from the corrupt southern kings as we set our hearthstones on the bones of this dead city. Let the sun set on others; it will only paint our city in light. — A founding father’s speech, Salazen, Year of Hala 503

Dawn lit her breakfast hearth in the wide east, and Renik leaned lazily on the tiller, watching for the first gleam of the day. It came in a blink, a pregnant chip that birthed an orange disk.

“Dawn, spare a minute and send me and Hrothe a pot of hot tea. I’ll build a temple to you for it.”

The sun had other mythical chores that day. Renik made do with the water and food they did have. He slipped a loop over the tiller and bent over his snoring companion. He raided the sack for a handful of cured fish. He munched for a while before seeing the boat needed some bailing. Their weight was centered somewhat toward the stern and the water was threatening to rise around his feet. They had removed the rowing thwarts to make a relatively dry bed raised from the bilge, but now it looked as though Hrothe might start floating away on his boards. Renik found the bailer and leaned down to scoop when he saw a face staring at him from the pool.

He had to look twice — yes, a bearded man with dark, thick hair, of strong middle age it might seem, but for his eyes, which were sad, jaded, or old beyond knowing.

“Hrothe,” said Renik. “Hrothe!”

“Hmrg,” said Hrothe.

“A strange man,” he said carefully, “is in the boat with us.”

Hrothe arose blinking. “Sand in the boat?” he yawned. “Are we beached, then?”

Renik, wide-eyed, made a sudden leap and cleared Hrothe. The boat rocked and almost spilled them, but he managed to catch the mast and balance himself at the bow.

“In the water! A man, a face. Move back.”

Hrothe started and scrambled backward. Then he became suddenly calm.

“Where, Renik? I can’t see. What pool?”

Renik started to answer, then slowly looked down at his feet. His leap had merely changed the boat's tilt, and now the water was pooling at his end again. The ripples were smoothing to a slight slosh. The face was still there, distorted and sad.

This time Hrothe started guessing but he could not stop Renik from falling over the wooden dolphin as he again rolled across the boat to escape the water-mirror. Hrothe truly understood, moved to the bow, and said, "Renik, squat amidships, if you please," to let the water pool at his own end. After a while Renik saw Hrothe look up.

"Renik, I've seen this man before. *We* saw him. In the puddle of water on the deck, in that storm."

"They found us! Give him a blast, Hrothe, before he tells the others! Conjure him to the sea bottom!"

"I don't work that kind of magic," he said, looking down at the image again. "I can only bring forth the properties of materials, or join things that are united in essence."

Renik started tearing at the lashings that held a harpoon in the long boat. "Then reach through the air and tug out the essence of his heartstrings! Off my ship!" Renik got the pike free and raised it.

Hrothe barely stopped Renik from spearing the pool and knocking a hole in the boat. And by then the boat gave up trying to steer itself and started to veer and heel dangerously. Hrothe dropped the sail in time.

"I may have been wrong," said Hrothe. He gathered his legs under him and balanced as best he could. "I may have judged rashly back in that storm. But how could I have known?"

"Talk sense! Wrong about what?"

"He may not be a sending from the guild. Look at him indeed! He doesn't look vengeful. In fact, he rather looks confused. Who are you, stranger?" The man didn't speak. "Renik, this isn't a man of the guild. It cannot..." Then his voice trailed off and he made a sign, an arc of his hand from the east to the west, and then gathered in to his eyes. "Brother in search of the world's mysteries," Hrothe mumbled. The apparition seemed to recall something as he gazed off into the distance; a shadow of a smile appeared on his lips. The apparition's hands formed a circle before vanishing, leaving Hrothe stunned. Renik edged up cautiously.

"Hrothe?" he whispered, still holding his harpoon. The voice broke Hrothe from his stillness.

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The old man moved to raise the sail again. He told Renik to get the boat going south southwest. Renik didn't move until Hrothe repeated the request in a tone of voice that the shipmaster found strangely unnerving. He obeyed without question. When they were sailing with the wind off the stern quarter, Renik tried,

"He showed you something."

Hrothe nodded.

"The ship, the *Luck*. I saw it, saw our sailors treading over me, saw a sail bent to the yardarm, although the image was not clear, wavering, like the surface of water. They're alive, near the Hearth Isles looking for us, perhaps. I would bet anything that a wide puddle of water — a mirror — is standing on the deck after swabbing." They skittered along the rollers a while longer as the old man remained leaning on the gunwale, studying the sea. Then he said, "And I saw something else after that: the vision of the ship cleared, the water went black, and then it showed me a multitude of corpses sleeping in the ground with a pale city rising around them."

At the end of the day the pale sail of the battered *Luck* thrust above the horizon just as Night stood up from his sleep and sought Dawn's low-burning supper fire. Night was doomed to be always beyond reach of that cozy warmth, like a traveler frozen at the threshold of an inn's breakfast room. But humans, despite all the dooms inflicted upon them, benefit from their in-between state — frozen between gods and basic elements, Renik and Hrothe came home to the *Luck* and to a bubbling-hot tea-pot. There they shared fantastic stories beneath the star-dome.

* * *

Gulls' wings, gem-pure flashes of white, burst around the main sail, the one sail and mast that remained whole on the ship. The upper third of the foremast had snapped off, and the sailors had strung together a patchwork of sails between the great spar of the lateen and the stub to keep the steering balanced. The ship trudged on as proudly as she could manage — as proudly as a stubborn old dame with a broken leg — her bow catching lazy rollers and riding their crystal foam. Between the gulls and spray, the tired ship was wrapped around with celestial alchemies.

The port city of Salazen was another kind of brilliance. Its white-stone houses set the shore gleaming with suggestions of ethereal

dwellings against the dark-pined hills. But the main city lay in a valley between sheer cliffs so that it seemed threatened by the very jaws of the Earth and made Hrothe shake his head and stare at the sea. A chill took Renik's spine in tiny jaws itself. But this was the place, no doubt. Habran's last riddle had been pretty clear, and if it hadn't, then they had spun the crown many times, and each time it had showed them the course to Salazen.

"No wizard-ship that I can see," Mikello shouted from the tip of the mast.

"I'm surprised," said Kollen. "We led them a merry chase in this direction then reached around them at nightfall, heading back toward the Hearths. Maybe they double tracked, too?"

Renik, hardly listening, looked over the bruised bow of the ship and shook his head for the hundredth time that day at the adventures his ship had endured.

Days earlier, Anasa had lost patience during Kollen's adventure on the wizards' ship. The mate had sailed the vessel to Kollen's rescue, having discovered that piling on all canvas caught some light breezes and nudged the *Luck* up the sides of the whirlpool. Confusing tales from that night suggested the ship's bowsprit was now a thorn in the side of the Guild's ship, a thought that rather pleased Renik, actually. But everywhere there was ruin and frayed cords and sprung planks, and she took on water at a distressing rate.

More than once Renik began to shout for Calin or Banath, drowned days ago. He stopped himself and was silent — things were moving too quickly for him to have carved those tragedies into his mind's slabs.

One lost part of the ship had returned, however: the battered figurehead rode with them again, lashed to a rail.

Renik turned back to his men.

"Whether they're there or not," said Renik, "we have to make port and repairs. Salazen is ruled by a counsel of elected merchants headed by a member of the city's most prosperous family; they call him by the old royal name, Tuc, only out of old custom from colonial days, for the city is rather like Akrem, Fenward, Aratos, and Ithian — a small nation itself."

"Salazen," said Hrothe, leaning on the rail and looking outward. "Salazen is also ruled by strangeness. All the lore-masters have heard parts of its story. The prophet Tos Radi was born there; he was always

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predicting the end of the world, which would begin at Salazen, he said. But he died shrieking about demons flying about his head, and few know of him now. And other tales speak of a horde of enemies dwelling on the mountain tops, who descend every fifty years to wreak havoc. Perhaps these are only fictions. But I don't expect to have a relaxing visit there."

Renik waved his hand as if flies buzzed around him. "I've been to the city many times. Haven't seen anything strange unless times have changed suddenly. Salazen has always found it profitable to keep the peace with all parties. Let's hope that hasn't changed."

"Change," said Hrothe, who had become a melancholy companion despite their reunion with the ship. "The passing of things is the bloodstream of the world. Hope not for continuance."

* * *

"It was a bad storm, but we won through. We want a space on the dock, time for repairs, and a chance to buy some of Salazen's trees for treeless Akrem."

Renik stood over the harbor master who'd met them at the entrance of the harbor in a longboat while the *Luck* lay to with just enough canvas spread to keep her pointed into the wind. Renik had not made the city a regular stop because his ship was better suited to low bulk, high-value cargoes that were only had from the warmer southlands. Yet the Akrem market sometimes made lumber a good enough cargo to bring home, and good furs could be gotten too, and even occasional rarities traded from far past the mountains of this northern land, enough to make a stop there profitable once every year or two. But Renik wasn't ready for the harbormaster's behavior, for he always listened to ship-gossip at Akrem and hadn't heard of any ill in the north. The longboat held men who made no secret of cocked crossbows, and the rest lifted oars and glared from behind shields set at the sides.

"There's lumber to be had, that's true, quite right, and some furs. And plenty of dock space." The harbor-master was tall, lean, and quick. Buttoned under a hard leather helmet and vest, he looked up, and across the ship, he was like a sapling with eyes, waving in a fitful breeze. "But I'll have a glance aboard y'ship before ya come in. Haven't heard, have ya? Oh ho! Where y'been? Sailing in the dark places, have ya?" The fellow chuckled nervously and looked around

himself again. Then he said, with a half-smile and eyes looking askance, "Salazen's under siege. Her friends and enemies alike unknown. Haven't heard? Well, well, news travels slowly over the waves." He smiled more broadly. "The enemy hits and runs. Very cunning. The Tuc expects a shipload of 'em any time, he says. He can tell, I assure it! Aye, and mind! If I don't return in a minute there's a slim ship hanging at midbay and has a cauldron of liquid fire on't. Throw a line down."

Renik had the rope ladder uncoiled. He said nothing all the while, but let Kollen conduct the master into the hold. A minute later he returned with Kollen behind him. He showed himself to his anxious men and hastily bowed before the shipmaster.

"Very empty, true enough, empty and waiting for fine, squared lumber! But y've nothing...."

Renik kicked open a small chest that sat warming in the sun. It was a third full of silver coins, and a few gold ones, and some semi-precious stones.

"True enough," agreed the harbor master to an unvoiced question. "Hard cash lightens the ship to sail quickly, eh? Welcome to Salazen! Take dock space on the sheltered north, under that cliff. As safe there as anywhere." He stepped down the ladder and into his ship and ordered his boat away, and as the oarsmen bent backs he called out again, "Indeed, welcome! Stay long enough and be damned with us, sailors." All the while he flashed glances around the sky as if his fortune might any moment drop downward.

The harbor was deep where the cliffs plunged into the water. The docks were built against the cliffs and stretched around in a long curve to the narrow river that split the city. At the river mouth the dock arched upward to become a splendid bridge, carved with intertwining fish and seabirds, and then the bridge descended to become the docks of the southern half of the bay. A shipyard took up much of the southern waterfront, although it didn't seem to be doing much work. Several small fishing vessels were being built, but a big-bellied merchantship was half finished and might always be; its half-planked sides were graying in the weather.

Renik and Kollen were returning from the shipyard after ordering supplies. They tarried a while on the bridge and watched life wind down for the night. It seemed a good time to talk, away from the crew and all, and Renik wanted to talk. Since his rescue, they had

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embraced, spoken of their adventures and of small daily matters. But his brother had changed. It wasn't the Kollen who'd left Fenward several weeks ago, and it had taken isolation out on the sea for Renik to realize it.

The silence was just as good as talking, because Renik didn't know what he wanted to say.

They leaned on the wooden rail and looked landward at Salazen, tracing with their eyes the twinkles and pin-pricks of light that were being kindled throughout the city. The cliffs against which the docks were built formed the tallest, steepest side of the valley. The northern half of the city nestled under them, and the regular squares of a crenellated wall on the cliff top marked the place of a light-towerhouse. But the tower was dim, and the dungeon was lit by no bright window-squares. The city stopped abruptly at the river edge, where small craft moved their insect legs to get their passengers in for the night. No cargoes boats here except for a few light canoes of fur traders: the river was shallow and blocked by rapids a mile upstream. Three other bridges, less grand than the one on which the brothers stood, arched across the river and joined the halves together. The southern side of the harbor below the river sloped upward more gently into a ridge that bristled with gabled roofs. The light of the setting sun beamed gold against the windows of the houses (attesting to prosperity) and square towers that spiraled up on ledges and artificial terraces, all hemmed in by a maze of light defensive walls (most suitable for keeping off bullying neighbors, these seemed). This architecture made the upper town rather like a dozen small fortresses all grown together through an organic treaty. The gables rose up the slope until they marched across the sky, threatening to tear the clouds with their saw-tooth profile.

Toward the harborside, the ridge grew into a swollen, rounded mass that commanded the city. Rising steeply from the ridge and falling steeply into the sea, hill formed the southern protection of the harbor. The hill was rounded and bald, except for a bump or pimple at its greatest height that might have been a boulder or a small structure. Oddly enough, considering the extra height this knob afforded, the city's main fortress, more of a fortified estate, was built on a level plateau that formed the transition from hill to ridge. Perhaps the high point had been unsuitable for a large structure. In any event, Salazen was a fine, middle-sized city, face on to gentle sea-breeze and toothy

gale alike, while boats rode snugly at anchor within the motherly arms of the bay.

“Strange city,” said Kollen.

“I suppose so,” Renik said. “Unnatural, something this large being so isolated. But this is the best bay in these latitudes, and finished timber and furs and other things pour from the harbor to buy civilization from the south to feed and clothe their bellies.”

“Not that; look up on the hill to the south. There’s a ship up there moored to the city’s fortress”

Renik saw it. A large, black bow jugged around the corner of the keep. Its masts competed with the tower’s own height, and they were fully rigged. Renik recalled it.

“That? They hauled an old ship up to the castle, propped her up, and made her into a kind of citizen’s hall for the merchant seamen. It’s a proper council room for a city of seafarers, isn’t it?”

“Proper,” said Kollen, “but it’s likely they only wanted to save money by saving themselves the making of another building. *That’s* proper for sea merchants.”

Renik ignored his cynical brother and imagined that they unfurled the sails on festival days, spreading the city’s banner out in the breeze to celebrate good voyaging for the year. And if the land ship would never sail again, then it lived on proudly a while longer rather than rotting on some mud flat like a beggar’s corpse.

Renik shrugged and roused himself. There were other things to think about, such as rest for the crew, in shifts. He sent Kollen to the town to hire out rooms at an inn he knew, the Wayfarer, so that the sailors could dry off and lick wounds, and to find a physician for the hurt men. Tomorrow the supplies would arrive and there would be much work on the *Luck* — not only repairs but disguises. To start, she would have a coat of tar to finish the work interrupted at Akrem. The pursuing wizards were looking for the battered and peeling *Renik’s Luck*, not a ship fresh from refitting. Hrothe was also put to work. He had promised a spell or two to turn aside any spells of finding, or at least spells made dull by the protective water that was the sailors’ only fortress wall.

Back at the ship, Renik told most of the crew go ashore to spend the night in comfortable rooms. If enemies came, they would come to the ship first, most likely, and if they did perhaps a messenger could be gotten to the inn to warn them. The men filed away without

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comment. Everyone was half dead and would later show off fine scars.

* * *

Kollen turned a corner on his errand and heard the ring of horse hooves against the cobblestones. Abruptly, a procession rounded the corner, and he had to jump out of the way with the rest of the strollers. Twelve horses clattered by, two abreast, striking sparks from the cobbles with their shod hooves. All the riders were heavily armed. The first two bore broad shields, followed by two more who raised torches in the twilight air. The next rider rode singly, streaming a banner that carried Salazen's coat of arms in bold colors — a tree balancing a coin in a set of scales. (Scales again! Habran's legacy? Kollen shivered, but this time the symbolism was both fitting and apparent.) The banner bearer was followed by another single rider, framed in the torch light, fore and aft. His helm was silver-bright, his cloak was white, and a brilliant, red baldric crossed his chest, supporting a gold-hilted sword. His horse was white and black. But if the accouterments shone richly, so much more did the man, who sat upright in the saddle as if a carver of heroic statues had placed him there. His face was smoothed from marble, which was set glowing by the red-gold beard that fluttered around it as the rearguard of torch bearers swept by, trailing a tail of sparks.

"It's the Big Man of the city; we call 'im the Tuc of Salazen," said a passer-by at Kollen's question, "although he isn't no Tuc, really, since the city has no string leading to the southern kings nor the dahsas. But it's our tradition, still, and he's still the Tuc. He's riding the rounds o' the city. Done it since the troubles came, and there isn't a cityman who don't love 'im for it." And then the man ran off on his own errand.

Kollen decided again that it was a strange city, but this time he couldn't decide why, straight out. On the surface, there was nothing wrong with Salazen. It was a well-made city with more than the usual number of prosperous-looking houses. Narrow streets curled over the hill like tangled snakes. Tile and slate roofs marched along the ways, and every door contended with its neighbor for the brightness of its paint. The widest avenues were paved with flagstones that rapped with the foot steps of bravos and scuffed to the glide of gentler folk. Even the side lanes and alleys were of cobblestones or wide timbers,

worn smooth and grooved with traffic, all smartly drained into the river.

Maybe it was the light. Salazen was too well lit, as if each inhabitant yearned to work his trade well into the night, a model of work ethic, or greed, who could say? As night came on, more and more torches were raised from outworn masts and spars that they had planted all over the city. The fires would soon outshine the night sky. And more than one stroller scurried away with torch or lantern; even street vendors sold oil and kept braziers burning to light all those lamps. Strange — perhaps a potent nightmare cursed the folk hereabouts, and the lights lay siege to sleep and dark fancies.

Maybe it was all his imagination working too much. But if it was, the reasonable mind could not explain why people crossed the streets quickly and ducked as quickly into doors and the shelter of porches. And each person cast a glance upward before hammering doors and shouting to be let in.

It didn't seem like a city under siege: that was it, that was the strangest thing. Kollen saw a few more openly brandished weapons than he was used to seeing — spears and axes and crossbows, weapons that don't mix well in casual errands — and the people scampered indoors as soon as they could, true. But there was no visible damage beyond a battered roof here and there that might have suffered some hail damage. So who was the besieger? Seagulls? Mad seagulls? A new breed of bird letting fall thunderous droppings? Was it flying fish or falling stars that made the folk look upward and cover their heads with several heavy hats?

Kollen tossed more ideas around as he sought out the “Breathless Wayfarer.” The rooms were affordable, the food smelled good, they'd send a boy to the ship to inform Renik of the place, and the windows kept an eye on traffic through the town. More to Kollen's liking, the rear of the establishment emptied onto alleys by which cautious sailors might travel. So the instincts of land life took hold again. He rubbed his peeling nose at the thought, wondering why it seemed as though a year had passed by on the sea.

The innkeeper told him the way to a physician's home. It was across the river, “—on the high side o' town where all y'nobles sit and discuss we workin' folk.” Kollen set off across a bridge and up a cobbled road that wound past arched doors set deeply within well-mortared walls.

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The healer lived in a narrow, two-story house whose whitewash glowed in the light of a lantern that swayed on its hook. Whether or not he discussed the working folk, as soon as he had heard Kollen's request he swept on his cloak and hat and slung on his medicine box.

They walked down the steep road, savoring the spread of lights in the town below and talking pleasantly enough, even if the physician walked a zig-zag path that brought them under every overhanging gable he could find. Once, Kollen's gaze went to the dark line of hills to the southeast, and he was about to say that the moon was ready to leap over that ridge, when he saw another gleam not far away. It was a many-colored shine, and it floated on top of the shadowed hill like a giant eye. Kollen asked about it.

"That? Well you're right, sir, it's the Dome they're using tonight, a kind of temple from the olden days, now an outwork of the Tuc's castle on the hill top for his councils and meditations. Sure, if you want a real sight, be here at midwinter when the sun sails low in the sky, low enough to send its rays through the stained glass of the Dome and shine in all the colors. And a mighty bright fire the Tuc's kindled there for the night's councils, isn't it? He's ridden the rounds and has called the first citizens to speak of the war."

He stopped and sighed, and Kollen imagined he still heard the ringing of hooves on cobbles and stood aside to showers of sparks from the Tuc's torch bearers, streaming like shooting stars.

"'Tisn't good at all, though I'll be having a wealth of business before the end. Aye, poor folk! I saw a lad last week with a spear straight through the top of his brain. Remarkable thing, a wonderful straight cast that'd be the envy of any soldier. The weapon passed right through and came out the bottom; didn't even need a stretcher to take him off, no sir, just had to grab the two ends and cart him away. Remarkably sharp icicle, hard as iron. Couldn't do anything for the lad."

"No?" said Kollen, looking half at the physician and half at the light on the hill. "How did the youngster come upon this setback?"

"'Tis the war, sir. You haven't heard? From Akrem, you said? An evil thing, a sad thing. Between you and me and the lamp-post, there's nothing for it." The doctor bent close, and the graying whiskers of his beard, blowing in the wind, tickled Kollen's nose. "There must be a great guilt in the city, and it's called up a curse of some kind. Aye,

sure. And someone must make an atonement to some god, anyone's god."

The wind turned and brought surf-sounds from the bay. Their boot heels sought for secure grips in the valleys between the cobblestones as the hill turned steeper.

"Aye, and the guilty one had better be fast about it as folk get all spiked up while atonement gathers dust on the shelf! That's my thought."

The doctor slipped on the damp cobbles and cursed his high-set house. "Course, an elder of the city who knows about such things has his own ideas. Said it was all because of the bad-luck year that's signed in the sky, do you know? Well, sure, when the moon's gone you can see a fiery arrow in the sky, low on the horizon. It brings bad luck, I'd have to agree with that. Helps strengthen the curse like liquor brings out the evil in a bad man."

Kollen's eyes went for the sky, even though he knew he couldn't see the comet yet. Between that and the light on the hillside, he could barely keep an eye to his feet.

"Devilish, dirty phenomenon," the healer concluded, "what with the Tuc all cloistered so strangely most of the time, and demons sailing over Salazen and nailing citizens to the ground with ice-spears."

Kollen glanced at the doctor, slipped, and again looked to the path, noting how the heavy dew congealed on the stones made the road shine in the city's lights. "Demons?"

"Aye, a bad thing, even if the weapons do melt out after a time. But you're from Akrem, so far to south, what, three weeks sailing? You don't know about the siege, then. Doused your decks well, have you? They toss lightning and fireballs when the temper's in 'em. Sorry, it isn't the best time to visit the city. But when I was young..."

Kollen stopped the tide of speech long enough to insert some strategic questions. By the time they were clumping the wooden flooring of an inland bridge, Kollen had learned twice more than he wanted to hear.

They arrived at the tavern to await the battered crewmen, who soon arrived. Kollen passed Anasa coin for the doctor, and bolted out of the door with a quick bow to that informative man.

* * *

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“Salazen is at war with flying devils.”

Renik accepted his brother’s statement easily and thoughtfully and asked, “Are they winged folk or something more like large bats?”

“More like people, I think. The whole city is living in a nightmare. Hard to believe, maybe....”

“No, it’s not hard to believe, brother.”

“I thought I’d tell you first.” Kollen sat on a sea chest and leaned over his knees. “It gets crazier every day. First the land rejected us, then the city, and the sea takes a bad turn, and now the sky. It can’t get any worse, isn’t that good to know?”

They listened to the waves lap against the hull and hull rubbing against the dock. Kollen found them reassuring, honest sounds, and understood for the first time why his father and brother were happiest with a deck under them.

“Yes, it’ll go further than that,” said Renik. “Yes, it’s all madness. Brace for more of it. I wish I could tell you something better, but—but I don’t need to, Kollen. Weeks ago I would have thought I needed to tell you more.” He stood and clapped Kollen awkwardly on the back and withdrew his hand quickly. “You’re a tested master of the *Luck*, now. They say you can’t have two masters for one ship, but that was when the world was governed by reasonable laws. We’ll break laws, break them all to be in fashion with the times. Now I’m only your senior by experience, but not in wits and bravery. Shipmaster Kollen, will you command the land forces tonight?”

Kollen turned at the stairs to the deck and said without being able to see his brother, “Renik? When you fell in the ocean with the sea woman, I shot a bolt at you and the sea-women, and I didn’t know who it would hit.”

“You did?” A pause. “That makes sense. Bring back some fresh bread when you come tomorrow.”

* * *

Six dock workers delivered supplies to the *Luck* in the morning, and a precious store of the ship’s funds clinked into the hands of a dour merchant. There were white pine planks for torn decks and hull, coils of new rope, and a smoothly shaven bowsprit. An hour later pots of bubbling tar were delivered. All of the crew who could still walk were put to tasks. Some were pumping the ship dry. In fact, they had been pumping her out all day in shifts until Atono, head stuck deeply

into the rank bilge, found the weak seam. They drove tarred cords in and slowed the invasion of the sea such that the pumps could be let be for a few hours at a time. As the day went by the ship lost some of its neglected appearance.

By supertime the harbor side of the ship was finished; the half of the ship that faced the cliff could wait until tomorrow. He had every intention of finishing the job, but Renik was unaccountably sad as he stood on the dock and looked upon his ship, half of it shiny and black, the other half the lightness of weathered planks, light and shadow divided exactly at the keel.

Meanwhile other crewmen lowered the new bowsprit in place, strung lines, and folded the spare foresail on the decks as if no collision had ever ravaged her nose. They slopped pine tar over the sprit, and left it for other matters of appearance — the damage to the bow would take more than a few days of work. Some hastily shaped wood to fill the gaps, and a layer of concealing tar was her reward for faithful service. For the first time in her rugged career, *Renik's Luck* was made over like an aging night-woman.

They stowed the golden dolphin below with apologies.

Then they looked doubtfully at the snapped foremast. It was Anasa, still weak from his battles with the sea, who offered the best advice from his hammock strung for him above decks: the mast stub should be made to support another great, slanting spar that would take a triangular sail, the pure form of their own hybrid rig, often seen in southern waters where the breezes were light. Also, the change would disguise the Luck by drastically altering the lines of the ship. But the work would have to be false work, he grumbled, "...there bein' no time for proper riggin'."

Renik spent the afternoon smoothing the broken end of the mast and making it ready for a spar and tackle that Thon purchased at the shipyard. By nightfall the same six, sweating laborers lugged an old spar to the deck, and the same dour merchant held out his hand for more of the ship's coin.

The sun fell beyond the cliffs and abruptly drew a curtain over the exhausted crew. A breeze wafted out of the deep valley of Salazen and cooled sweaty brows. Renik sat on the rail and kicked the money chest with his toe. It was becoming frightfully empty, and still he had to eventually buy some lumber if an empty ship was not to draw

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attention. The crew had earned triple wages and all he could spare was a coin each for ale and a good meal.

Those who had their turn ashore bid their shipmaster a goodnight. Enesh later came from below to hang a lantern from the boom and stood by Renik to watch the city light its own torches.

* * *

Strange city. Kollen leaned from the window of the Wayfarer and wondered why a city at war with sky devils would continue to set out lanterns by which the enemy could see.

“Bring the damned lamp closer, Kollen! Am I a young man with decades of eyesight left to destroy?” snapped Hrothe.

Kollen moved from his post and tipped the oil lamp to let the fuel to the flame. Then he set the lamp by the wizard’s elbow.

“Now you’ll burn me? Have a care!”

Kollen set the lamp at the head of the rickety table and studied his friend. Hrothe was hunched on his stool with the oily smoke of the lamp curling around his white brows. He was enthroned here amidst his only baggage brought from Fenward, which had included a spare robe, a cloak, and a leather satchel of his most precious scrolls. His friends the philosopher-beggars had promised to look after the remainder of his things stored in a spare room of his tenement-tower. He waved the smoke away and bent closer over the ancient golden scroll of Habran, scratching notes on some wax tablets that Atono had made for him with some spare lumber and melted candles. As soon as he and Renik had been rescued, Hrothe had eaten his fill, slept, and plunged directly back to his work. He was translating furiously, as if an hourglass that only he could see were set before him.

“I’ve seen you in better days and never like this.”

“I’ve seen myself in better days, oh youth, and I grieve at wasted time, wasted life.”

“And I’ve seen you on a day when an ant dragging some prize through the sand would send you into philosopher’s heaven, where you would have commanded the gods to bow before the significance of the insect. Where’s *that* Hrothe? And no more of this ‘youth’ stuff. I’m forty winters and left youth behind some years ago.” Kollen wandered back to the window.

“Youth,” said Hrothe, “is a quality independent of age. It’s squandered by the young, stolen from the poor, inflicted in odd moments to make one a fool, out of reach when it’s most needed, in

ownership to a blessed few who can, at the moment of death, look back on a life short on useless dignity and long on jigs in spring meadows.”

“What’s this...”

“Quoth the Poet:” said Hrothe,

“I wasted youth in seeking Truth —
the scholar’s pen is a poisoned fang.

No wine! But pass the dragon’s tooth.”

At that the old man leaned forward into his folded arms, depleted of all energy to read or dispute. Yet in a moment he leaned up again and wearily took up his stylus.

“Youth,” said Kollen, “is a small boy hiding a mouse in his pocket.” Hrothe turned his drooping eyes in question, and they found Kollen standing before him, one hand holding shut a deep pocket in his shirt. Something fought within.

Kollen tipped the creature out and leaned on the wall. “Been poking his nose from the windowsill all night,” he grinned. “Now, I give mercy to this poor mouse, and so too should you give mercy to yourself. Rest!”

But Hrothe’s face had perked up a little. “I recall a young man so hungry that he was chasing rats in Fenward one night. I thought he’d be eating them, but that couldn’t be right — no doubt he was studying their lore, for mighty wise are the sleepless rats.”

“Still, the man was the better for the meal you gave him. Stopped him from raising the lore of rats as high as his mouth.”

“Very true!” Now the wizard stood and stretched aching bones, and joined Kollen at the window. “I’m too close to the task to rest, but will you walk with me? By the river, perhaps.”

“Aye,” groaned Anasa from one of the room’s beds. “I’ve been battered and broke, and tonight I’m drowned in conversation — and me as old as any of ya. Here’s my youth, sold for a coin’s worth of sleep!”

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CHAPTER 16 — THE GODLESS TEMPLE

I've seen a vale of sorry souls
by a burning lake
and gazed within an angry god's
book of graven fates;
sights I've seen have burned the eyes
of many lesser men —
but I was deeply stricken
by the crystal-mirror vision
of a youth I never had. — Josanante, *Preface to the Grave*

The dew collecting between the cobbles caught the night's lights and turned the path into a silver net on which the two men walked. Their way turned across the river and up the winding road that Kollen had taken last night, until they neared the top where the height drew out deep matters. Hrothe was no longer tired, or if tired, was animated by Night, patron saint of deep thinkers.

"I'm afraid to read onward," he was saying, "I'm afraid history has painted Habran too brightly; I fear he was less than a hero."

They paused at a gap in the close houses where they could see the ocean, now a meditative plain.

"Not a hero? Why worry about that?" Kollen said. "You'd lose a lifetime's sleep thinking about all the humbler folk around you. Heroes? I made my living better on the rogues."

Hrothe smiled that smile that always made Kollen a youngster, and always made him angry. "No, you don't understand. What if a man was called a hero, but he had really won a decisive battle by arriving at the right place at the right time after having lost his direction and so trooped from the wilderness and — surprise! — into the enemy camp."

"So he wouldn't be a hero, but he wouldn't be a coward. You've just described what makes most men heroes."

"Precisely. So how shall we measure ourselves to become better?"

"Who ever worries about that, Hrothe? You think too much. Most people just want their next meal, with or without an improved spirit. Maybe these questions were treated in one of The Prophet Sena's

Four Lost Mysteries, ey, Hrothe? Since they're mysteries, let them be."

They resumed their walk up the road, which writhed under their feet in the illumination of torches. For an instant Kollen did think beyond the next meal as the constant moonlight and the wavering flames of human-light suddenly became hero and human, the moralist's ideal, and the inconstant reality. But he didn't tell Hrothe.

"One must have the ideal of the hero," said Hrothe, "don't try to deny it, cynical youth! Legends made Habran a hero fighting bravely against a greedy brother. Listen to me Kollen, like you used to some nights when we sat on my roof. The only widespread account of Habran, the one read by most scholars to their rapt students, was written by Nabos, Habran's close subordinate — so Nabos claimed. He survived the great war, found a patron, and eventually wrote his book in the comfort of safety. I suspect he was a minor clerk kept by the mage, as he did many others to maintain his scriptorium. I suspect he left Habran rather early in all these events, taking advantage of the chaotic times to profit by relaying his tales about the great men of the times. What wealthy man wouldn't have kept Nabos at his court to impress visitors with his so-called 'experiences'? And so what we have learned about the mage has been through the boasting pen of a puffed-up fellow, making himself great by writing familiarly about his former master. Now we have Solan's narrative, which paints a different picture. See here, some of Solan's part verifies Nabos's history, but Solan also mentions events that Nabos did not. Nabos probably knew very little and twisted his own emptiness into a story. Nabos finished his narrative gracefully, like a story teller should do. But Solan finished his own narrative ungracefully, replete with all his doubts. It is quite possible we have learned about Habran from the wrong man all these years."

Their path took them past several large houses. Most of them had armed men standing at their doors. Kollen passed a friendly word and was returned a short reply.

"Let us set it all on the table for the mind's exercise. The scroll you found in the crown chamber — Habran wrote most of it, and about a quarter of it was finished by his apprentice, Solan. Habran seems to have entrusted Solan this 'last writing' of his with some expectation that Solan would know what to do with it. I'm guessing. In any event some of this information *did* get to Shapor's followers,

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who eventually formed the mages' guild. A copy of Habran's writing must have drifted south after he disappeared; perhaps Habran or even Solan made sure they got a version for a reason we don't know. But certainly Solan drifted south with the original scroll on which he had added his own guesses and fears. But I think I have guessed more than Solan did on this one point. The apprentice was young, inexperienced in some matters. Habran wrote about him indirectly, and Solan didn't know it. He wrote, 'Fly, sparrow of my mind, ruffle your feathers against the cold of the times. Little seed do I have to keep you here, nor would I have you flit among the cackling magpies. Long have I locked you from the rookery to make you fly.' 'Sparrow of my mind'! There is an old story of a king who had an illegitimate son whom he loved and kept at court until he saw that the court was too corrupt for his son's good heart. By subterfuge he encouraged the son to depart. The son's name was Modaviant. In Kordahlian that means 'sparrow-soul', an endearing term often used to connote a gentle character. Solan didn't concern himself much with old fables, or he might have understood that Habran was sending him away purposefully, though by indirection. And the purpose? Perhaps to ensure Habran's story would be preserved, and also so that it might be told by a young man having his doubts. And, not least important, Habran may have wanted his brother to have the scroll in some way. Doubtful Solan may have been the way to get it to him before... before whatever bad thing happened when the attackers broke down Habran's door. Much of the scroll is addressed to Shapor. I thought that this was a manner of speaking to a phantom reader, a way to set his goals and tone as he wrote. But too much of these portions are apologetic and explanatory — or just what a sad brother would want his estranged brother to read!"

"So Habran wrote about magic and confessions, and Nabos was a story teller for hire, and Solan an uncertain, angry historian. What did Solan say to take your hero from you?"

Hrothe said, "It was what he did *not* say. Throughout his record he supplies the threads of argument but not the conclusion. The apprentice worshipped the master and could not make an accusation. And yet Solan has accused Habran of the deepest crimes — in his heart he did! I heard him. I hear him now."

Now their path took them between a crumbling wall on their left side, and on the right were three short, stout towers, joined by a wall,

which crowned the highest point of the hill watching over the city. They seemed disused: no light holed the dark walls. Kollen didn't like those towers, standing there in a brazen row like village elders presiding at a trial. And they stood so straight and unmoving, sharp, square outlines with angles as unforgiving as a hangman's frame. Kollen frowned, but Hrothe continued talking.

"—was afraid to say that Habran himself wrote in riddles because he was trying to write in apologies. For what crimes? He couldn't even admit them on a lifeless scroll. No: not a hero, Kollen. Only consuming guilt."

Then their road ended. The cobbled path continued, but the sudden boundary between city avenue and open space wrought a change. A lightless gulf separated them from a brilliancy of torches that decked the walls of the city's fort a hundred or so paces before them. It had a large, round tower, and two smaller towers flanking the gate opposite, all enclosed by crenellated walls. The bald hill swept up behind it like a thunderhead made of coal dust. On top of the hill was that odd dome the physician had spoken of, and tonight it bled many-colored lights as before. And if the bulging hill, the dome, and the torch-lit fort were not enough to form a memorable picture, then the sea vessel that was moored against the fortress was happy to add its own oddity.

Kollen would have drawn them closer, but Hrothe declined the adventure, noting that armed men paced the walls and would not welcome visitors at this hour. Kollen turned aside, not quite sad at avoiding that borderland of darkness, yet still mystified at the sea ship poised for a land journey.

Hrothe turned around and walked back the way they came, face turned up at the moon, and in a mumble meant only for himself, Kollen heard him say: "What wide places might the mind try to leap? What would a man do? Who made the gardener and the sea woman into sad inhuman creatures to guard a treasure? Would a hero do that, or a villain?"

Kollen's eyebrows bent, he opened his mouth — then closed it. They walked on between the shuttered windows that let only starved lines of light past.

They were halfway down the hill when Hrothe pointed to the foundations of some of the houses. At this point the spiraling road was built against a terrace, so that they stared fifteen feet up at the

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glowing slits of shuttered windows, or might look over the roofs of the other houses across the avenue by turning toward the downhill side. Hrothe leaned near the terrace and said, “Here, Kollen, you’re our master of civilized constructions. Tell me your tale.”

Kollen examined the wall by light of moon and lantern. It was cracked, and moss grew on ledges formed by uneven bricks — then he saw a faded curve, a change in stonework. An ancient doorway was built into that terrace wall. Long ago it had been filled and blocked over. The material that filled the arching portal was smaller and rougher. The later mason had used mortar to fill his cracks, rather than the tight fit of well-shaped stones. Kollen stepped back and observed the wall in whole. It was built of large, square blocks, stained by centuries of sea-blast. They followed the line of the terrace down the road until it stopped abruptly. A street-level house was built against the sudden termination, and, above, the terrace faded into a relatively recent wall of a garden.

“Salazen is old,” said Kollen. “The colonists built their houses on the bones of a dead place.”

“That fits the stories Anasa was telling us yesterday. They say the colonists came here to a harbor with a small castle and its associated outbuildings, or a well-to-do hamlet — all nearly intact, in such good repair that the first shipload of people feasted on wine that they found wonderfully aged. And bones could still be found here and there where their bodies had fallen.”

“Old lies, that’s all. Anasa always told good lies.”

“I suppose,” Hrothe sighed. “However: Salazen, Sala Azan.”

“What?”

“Sala Azan — ‘sleeping city’ in the old speech. By the good gods! I think I believe Anasa’s lies better than history! They must have been hardened, greedy colonists to re-people such a city.”

They walked without talking as Hrothe leaned a little on Kollen’s shoulder going down the treacherous hill. Hrothe was more tired from his adventures than he’d admit to anyone but Kollen. Once at the base of the hill, he leaned back on his two legs and limped on his own.

“Do you know, Kollen, Habran wrote of a dead city, and I’ve been recalling my....visions, dreams. I wanted to stay at sea in a sinking ship rather than dock here. But look at all these lights, all the life around us! I wish I could forget everything we’ve learned.”

Thereafter the wizard was silent all the way back to the inn.

Kollen left Hrothe at work and sat in the public room. Few patrons had ventured beyond their locked doors that night. He jostled the dozing wine boy and in a few minutes was sitting before the fire with a cup of hot, spiced wine. The thin, aproned publican would wander through the public room now and again, shaking his head, pausing to smile and bow slightly to Kollen, who was the source of most of his wine-profit for that night, and then wander on. But Kollen enjoyed his solitude before the fire. The low flames were wanton lovers among the embers, and rather than help the wine put the man to sleep, they aroused his senses. It wasn't long before a woman crawled from the embers with love on her mind. His fantasy was short but detailed. Her skin was so hot that his sweat sizzled on her. She didn't burn, however, but only made Kollen sweat some more.

He ended the fantasy suddenly. It had become too real in an unreal way. His heart was racing, more than it should have from a fantastical love-dream. He took small sips of his wine and rubbed his unshaven chin. He imagined his lover came from an entire population of firefolk and flame castles and creaking landships impelled by gales of smoke. And somehow that made all too much sense.

He left his wine unfinished and arose in a swirl of cloak. He laid a coin on the side table, where the bar boy had again dozed off with his cheek cushioned against the dented wood, lips puckering in a puddle of spilled liquor.

Nodding to the doorkeeper, who nervously played with a bent and rusty sword as he sat on his stool, Kollen emerged into the avenue and stretched his arms to let the breeze ruffle the folds of his clothes. The smell of the sea recalled long past days in Akrem, and the breeze equally reminded him of times afterwards, when wind and starlight accompanied him on a hundred errands in and about Fenward. For years he'd been a creature of dual worlds — bred on the sea, fled to the land, and then equally a haunter of midnight avenues and clamorous market places. Now the breeze wafted him down the flagstoned main road that flowed to the harbor. He climbed a stone tower encasing a wide spiral stair, entered onto the bridge and hiked over the resounding planks to the south harbor, descended the twin tower, then drifted along the row of two-story chandleries and storehouses. He walked to the end of the docks with a such purpose that no one questioned him — a lesson he'd learned long ago. He passed a group of dockers bent over an ale pot, all of them sheltered

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under a porch — probably bachelor-bravos. Everyone else seemed to have doors between them and the night. Soon Kollen was through the shipyard and out into the rough land beyond.

His path was over the slippery rocks in the tidal borderland. He navigated by the moonlight as he'd done often enough during clandestine meetings. When he angled by the city he navigated by the lights of the castle, picked his way over the coarse marsh grass toward the brilliant fort and the dark bulk improbably moored to it.

Kollen knew it was the escapade of an errant boy. He shrugged and continued up the slope by the light of the torches. Boyish curiosity would not be denied in the city of curiosities.

The sand dunes ran into a smelly lowland. But as soon as he'd plunged in he was out again, on dry rock. The fortress was a bonfire above him, although the prow of the land-bound ship was hardly visible, its tarred hull drinking in all the light the torches threw against it.

He angled to the south to keep the ship between him and the fort. Keeping an eye on the fortress walls for guards looking in his direction, he climbed the smooth stone hill, often using his hands because one slip might send him down in a tumble he'd never recover from until he smashed on the scattered rock debris at the foot of the slope. He angled to keep the sea vessel between him and the main tower. The ship was less well lit, and an outwork of some kind supported the ship and would offer some cover at the end of his climb. Finally he was standing under the vessel and wiping sweat from his lip. The hull curved out above him and lent its shadow. Kollen touched the wood and found it smoothly tarred — well cared for, as if the ship was to be ready for a deluge (but that idea didn't seem strange anymore).

He ventured out under the wall of the fort where armed men paced the parapet. And like everything in this city, it all seemed wrong. The torches would ordinarily foil a guard's night vision, yet the place was lit like a festival. The lights were hoisted up into the air on poles to reveal an enemy that apparently materialized in the air, making all walls a vain defense.

The walls of the fort stood fifteen or twenty feet high, about enough to thwart a pirate attack, like most of the fortifications of Salazen. Few enemies threatened this isolated city. Lumber was no prize for thieves, the pickings were richer in the southern sea lanes,

and in a pinch the enfolding harbor could be defended with a quarter-hours' warning supplied by the watch tower up on the north cliff.

Kollen stayed in the narrow shadow at the base of the wall, flattening out against it when the tread of a sentry approached. He circled the fort half way when he knew that it was not what he had really come to see. He had come to see the dome, which was connected to the fort by a walled pathway, and was now just barely glowing as he climbed the final slope to the hilltop. It was a dangerous way to go. The lights from the fort lit the length of the walled path. But his curiosity was at the boiling point, and when the guards next passed by he padded to the wall and walked backwards until the gleam of a helmet was turning his way. Kollen squatted amidst the boulders and grass at the base of the wall and threw his cloak over his back. Good enough. He repeated the maneuver twice more until he had climbed the slope entirely and could hide at the end of the wall where it curved around the dome. Now that armful of terribly blank horizon that was the sea, and a few dim lights from shoreside hovels, were the only things behind him, and they were telling no secrets.

Full in his elements after such a long absence, Kollen breathed the sharp air and hugged himself. Before him was the wall, well masoned and blocking his view of all but the tip of the dome. And the sight was intriguing: many-colored rays spearing through a faint mist.

He was equipped for his plans, since his pouch always carried ten feet of thin, knotted cord with a padded, triple hook on one end — he'd learned the thieves' lesson of thrift long ago, that things were usually only ten feet out of reach. He swung three times before he found a crook in which a tine could lodge. He pulled himself up and over the coping.

The dome was a mass of color that dyed the mist and seemed to inspire it to swirl like a court dancer. It was a lattice-work of stone arches with panes of thick, stained glass between them. The source of light was not from within the dome as he'd first thought, but by a circle of lanterns set on poles around the dome. Kollen was seeing the dome set aglow by the lanterns that shot their gleams through from the other side of the building. The longer he stared, the more he could puzzle out the many colors into designs, then scenes. There were birds of all kinds, and the sun, stars, and moon, winged people, and clouds that were not just clouds, but entire cities floating in the heavens with

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spires growing from the cottony land and mystics looking from windows in those spires into the higher reaches. But the scenes were dim and suggestive because some of the lanterns on his side of the dome were spoiling his vision, and the others were behind the dome and sending their light to his eyes through double thicknesses of glass. No doubt the figures came through sharp and fine from inside the dome, and Kollen wondered how much more marvelous they would be with the sun beams cutting strongly through the glass at noon.

The work of art was powerful, however, freezing the adventurer in awe. Kollen thought the pictures pulsed with a life with roots in the tides, winds, and heavens that surged and wheeled in ceaseless cycle. It was only when the bitter scent of the lanterns filled his nose that the entranced man shook his head and attended to reality. His wrists quivered with the strain of holding himself suspended, and he drew himself over the wall.

He secured his hook on the outer side to give himself a handle back up the wall, and he dropped downward, working around the edge of the dome. The stony hill sloped down steeply toward the fortress, and from this vantage point the fort's blaze competed with the lights of the city spread behind it. All told, the star dwellers might look down from the heavens and swear the night sky was below them. Salazen was a handful of diamonds cupped in the hands of the valley.

Kollen peered cautiously inside the dome, and was instantly impressed. The roof had seemed wondrous from outside, and now it was downright unreal as he got his first look as the builder had intended.

The fantastic scenes were sharper. Kollen edged just inside the arch, spinning on his heel, craning his head at the sights above him. The sky-roof was a meadow, all blooming, and as the lights outside burned low, bringing dusk to the scene, he thought about the passing of all beautiful things (Hrothe would have been proud to see an unpractical thought spark in his eyes!). In a life of smuggling and selling in the dead hours, Kollen had learned much of art that he wouldn't admit, and something of appreciation had seeped through the skin of his hands with every dealing — yet he was always on the outside looking in, so to speak, and his stolen or smuggled objects always had passed into another's keeping. Ha! Now he was inside, and Kollen seeped it all in, unconsciously comparing this brilliance with the dusty nature of his life in Fenward — always the seller, he

mused, living in his cottage behind the Broken Sword with only a few rugs strewn about, and some on the walls to keep the sifting desert-dust at bay, and to give his eye something less dreary to look upon than the dun brick. They were old rugs, heirlooms he had stolen, but their designs were faded and only suggestive — you'd stare at the needlework and seek to find the intended picture, but the mood of the moment, usually a melancholy one, simply took suggestions and worked a dreary will on them. Not a place to symbolize the fullness of life! Hrothe's drafty tent had always seemed warmer, and he'd slept there so often that Hrothe had kept a space cleared for his bedroll.

Outside, one of the lanterns blew out completely, darkening the interior of the dome and reminding him that he wasn't there to gawk or muse. He turned his sight around the building. Except for the ceiling, the dome was modestly decorated. Carved niches surrounded the inner wall, and a shelf built of the dome's coping stones extended outward — and held horribly suggestive ornaments. Kollen caught his breath, jumped a little, and then exhaled slowly. A row of skulls lined a quarter of the encircling shelf. But there was more. He had seen a large, square altar, thick and solid, in the center of the space, but first the wonderful stained glass, and then the skulls, had distracted his attention from a statue lying on its top. Now, surely, this statue — no doubt the decorated tomb of some founding father — was the second wonder there. It had been perfectly carved and painted to mimic a sleeping man. Kollen swore that it was breathing. He reached out and touched it by the foot, and the statue rose slowly to a sitting position, owning the face of a man surprised but too groggy with sleep-trance to take account of his surroundings.

He was a man of medium height, with sharp impressive features jutting around a beard of red gold. He was still wearing the same clothes and armor that Kollen had seen when the man had swept by with his retinue on the streets. Awakened from death or sleep or wizardly trance, the Tuc of Salazen made an impressive picture.

Kollen was dazed with a mixture of surprise and bafflement, which prompted him to take a half-step forward and begin an awkward explanation. The Tuc drew his sword automatically, still suffering from a form of his own amazement. He lifted feet and spun off the altar easily, assuming a defensive stance. All the while he studied Kollen's face, eyes narrowed in that 'I've seen you before'

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look. Kollen had decided it was best to withdraw rather than talk, and began to do so when the Tuc came fully to himself and jumped.

He was no soft merchant-lord or shiny-cased ruler play-acting a warlord. The Tuc was fast. Kollen had time for one parry that deflected the Tuc's saber blade as it thrust toward his head. Kollen was well positioned to slash downward for a disarming or head-splitting stroke, but the Tuc showed his speed again and leapt up close to bind their blades. They grappled in the shadow of the arch; they spun like dancers, leaving Kollen on the inside, the Tuc out. The man might have pressed his advantage by holing Kollen inside the dome and calling the guard. Instead he backed away until he was only an outline in front of the fortress's torches.

Time to leave this place of strangeness and beauty, Kollen told himself. He skidded around to the rear of the dome, thrusting his sword through the fabric of his cloak and grabbing the dangling rope. Then he was up and over the coping and bounding blindly down the hill. He expected to see a row of bouncing torches winding down the hill in pursuit, but that didn't happen. The silence of the night frightened him.

He returned to the docks by the way he'd come. He was crossing the river bridge, still looking behind for pursuit, when he saw the masts and dark hull of the ship of the Mage's Guild. He walked onward secure in the fact that here was, after all, the bad luck that a just world would hand out to him.

At the *Luck's* side Kollen called the night watch as loudly as he dared, and Thon stepped forward with a boarding pike in hand. In a moment he was below the decks before a glowing brazier, and was warming his hands around a cup of tea. Renik offered no scathing words for his brother's adventure; he only nodded slowly at each detail and smiled when Kollen mentioned the mages' vessel.

"I know," he said. "They dropped the hook a while ago. A rolling fog enveloped the bay, and when it rose, the ship was anchored. They have the city in a fine terror, but so far, I think, between the jury-rig, new tar, and Hrothe's spells, they don't know we're us." Renik continued honing the cutlass laid across his lap; a sliver of its edge was mirror-bright. "I sent Botha to tell the lads to stay low. The wizards sent a party out as soon as they could unlimber a long boat and bump the docks. Our brave harbor master accosted them and was

charmed into stillness — or stone, for all I know. Certainly, we've stolen the patience right out of them, this time."

Then they heard feet pounding the dock and the deep voice of Botha arguing with Thon. Renik swore something and bounded to the deck, where Botha stood before him, leaning to and fro, breathing heavily. The lamp hanging on the boom made a trickle of blood dripping down his arm shine.

"They took Hrothe!" he gasped. "I tried to stop it, surely I did, but ten to one and close quarters and a hedge of pikes pushing me out the window, and I did what I could, which was to break a few shields before I fell on me head."

"You all right? You fell from an upper window and then ran all the way here?" Renik set him down on the hatch, probing for broken bones.

"Certainly not, Renik! Not before I ran around to meet 'em again, but they went out the back door, and by then...."

"Who? Who came?"

Botha blew and sucked and said, "Armed men! Fancy clothes, chain shirts."

Renik shook his head and stamped his foot. "Not the Guild soldiers! Kollen, stay here and captain the ship — below decks, brother. Everyone — Tuc and mage alike — knows your face too well by now. I'll be back. Botha, have Thon salt that scratch."

Renik's feet pounded planks from deck to dock, each thud sounding a new nail driven into all their plans, weighting them down toward immobility. But what bothered him just as much was the sight of Kollen's grim silence as they parted. The expression of his face seemed resolute, but Renik was almost afraid to ask, *Resolved about what?*

* * *

At The Breathless Wayfarer Renik paused at a circle of light thrown by an accumulation of lantern bearers. Townsfolk flittered across the space in front of the inn. As they moved with aimless rage, Renik side-stepped through the press of bodies to study the numerous bravos and how they stalked and preened, waved their spears and swords, and mostly threatened their comrades with the flashing points.

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“I had a look at him,” cried one, “I’ll swear his eyes had a glow. A sorcerer, he’s a sorcerer and the Tuc’s having at him for the troubles. I was going to stick him and damn the council!”

“And Brant and me, we saw him, too! Mumbling something, eh Brant? A spell to bring the demons again. We were going to shoot an arrow in him if the guards hadn’t crowded ‘round and took ‘im out the back way!”

And so it went as the bravos talked themselves into a lynch mob, and it was a good question to ask, whether they meant to hang Hrothe alone or dangle a few city elders with him.

Only one person talked sense, but it was a stream against a tide. An aged woman shook a finger at the group.

“And sure ya ought t’have hit the poor man in the heart to save him a ruckus for all the justice he’s about to get here. Ah, he was such an enchanter, that one, who let a company of jingling-jangling soldiers march straight in and carry him away. Ya children!”

The crowd swelled and milled around an imprint in the silted gutter outside the inn: a rounded impression. Renik elbowed past the group on his way into the inn. The voice continued behind him: “That’s where the sorcerer’s apprentice jumped from the window; landed on his head, he did, bounced and got up again....”

The lads were gathered mournfully in the room and were readying for a siege, the way the crowd was talking, although the rabble’s attention was so far focused on getting stories out. The table at which Hrothe was working was overturned; his books and papers were scattered around.

“Was over before I could raise my head,” said Anasa. “I was sleeping, then there was a noise and Botha yelling outside. They bludgeoned through the door and I just woke up under the bed. All the other lads were drinking downstairs. Don’t know if they wanted Hrothe or all of us, but they seemed happy to get Hrothe and take him away.”

“There were forty of them, maybe a hundred, Captain Renik sir! And Botha pushed them from the room before they poked him back!” Mikello shivered from his heels to his curling brown hair.

Renik cast his gaze across the room. Something was wrong. Or right. Hrothe had been arrested by stupid soldiers; that was in their favor. They had left Hrothe’s manuscripts on the floor, and the fruits of his researches fluttered in the breeze coming through the window.

Renik gathered up the scrolls and wax tablets. He stuffed them in a sack and set them in Anasa's arms.

"Everyone, we go back to the ship, by the back ways. Maybe I should have kept us all there until I'd figured this damned city out." *Damn!* he thought. *Now all the world will know about the recently arrived sailors and the trouble they attracted.* Renik mustered the men and led them out of the room and down the back alley to the docks.

"We're not putting out, are we, Captain?" Mikello skipped alongside him.

The row of buildings on either side of the alley seemed to lean nearer the men and exhale fear until the air was hot and close.

"No, lad, we don't sail from any port while there's crew a'shore." The statement was echoed by vigorous shouts. "But which would you defend? A few small rooms which blind the eye or the sides of the *Luck* with room to stretch an iron?"

Now there were shouts all around, and Atono cried, "Ho for Castle Luck and King Renik! He's a fool who holds a rooted house."

Old cutlasses and carpenter's axes came out and improvised gilded standards for the king sweating in his threadbare woolens.

Once out of sight of the tavern, they plunged into the maze of narrow alleys behind the main avenue of the river. Sometimes the overhanging gables suddenly parted and let through a sight of the upper city, dreaming in its distant twinkles of unconcerned lanterns and evening fires. Then Renik wondered at how that little river in reality was the boundary to another world, almost guilty in its innocence, sinful in its unhearing, blind existence. For real life was in these narrow, smelly ways, in the annoying darting of cats from under foot and rats from heaps of refuse. This was the real Salazen, a city of undisclosed horrors and hunched houses that gossiped in their slow, creaking way, of what they had seen. Certainly those gabled shoulders and shuttered eyes quivered in amusement when Renik turned a corner and collided with an armored man in the meeting of several of the spidery lanes. Behind him the others came to a jarring halt.

Weapons rattled and men cursed. Renik pushed himself away and told his crew to form up behind him, the warrior he'd crashed into doing the same. They were about to pass each other when someone from the other side shouted, "They might be the foreigners."

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Immediately the leader of the men caught Renik's sleeve, and Renik twisted free and sent the man stumbling backward with a shove.

"What's this?" he said. "We're honest sailors going to spend the night on our ship, and who'll blame us with all this madness in the city? Leave off!"

"Madness or not," said the leader of the soldiers, "We've been ordered by the Tuc to arrest the crew of a southron ship."

"Be damned, I'm insulted enough to tell you it's us! Lads, go by and I'll talk with this idiot. The Tuc, you said?"

"No one leaves! Stay where you are!" The soldier moved to block the crew from slipping by, and his men came forward with him. The crewmen of the *Luck* were unarmored; the soldiers had thick leather vests, and the leader was chain mailed. Renik had done what he could in the few moments he had, but now whipped free his cutlass and severed the shaft of an outstretched spear.

"No one assaults honest sailors of mine!" he said. Renik placed himself before the soldiers and waved his own men to retreat as the soldiers rushed forward at a word of their leader.

Renik sent the leader sprawling backward with a blow across the hilt of his sword, and he split the shield of the next soldier who jumped to the protection of his officer. Then no one pretended to any order as the seamen and soldiers joined the chaos in the slanting shadows between the row of hovels. The officer had regained his feet and Renik took him on, his wool-cloaked chest against browned chainmail. Botha's fighting roar shook the space between the hovels and mixed with a cry of pain and futile shouts of strategy. Sparks leapt from hardened steel blades and beat out a rhythm of metal rings that, most absurdly, made Renik think of the ring of the caulkers' mallets that resounded in the shipyards in the springtime.

War's clamor wakened the tenants of the small houses, and bright yellow squares opened up on the alley, silhouetted heads leaning from windows then drawing back suddenly as the blurred flashes of blades swung by their noses. It was a crazy mixture of pain and comedy that maddened the shipmaster, for he could make no sense of it, and so he strengthened his swings. On one such surge of fury he'd dazed the leader with a solid blow to his helmet. The man reeled backward; Renik raised his sword for a killing blow, with the faint traces of mercy just beginning to check his swing. Then something *flew*

The Silent Man Called

between him and his foe, bringing cries of astonishment from the combatants now spread along the alley.

CHAPTER 17 — CITY IN THE STORM

To examine the death of empires? Impossible! Even the disputes of ordinary families can arise from complex matters. Thus imagine how impossible it is to be the physician (or the grave digger) for an empire of families. — Gamli the Chronicler

Renik stopped his sword in midstroke; the downed leader kept up his guard and backed away from the sailor, crablike. The curious house dwellers suddenly closed their doors and shutters — the thuds of bars slamming in niches echoed down the now quiet street. One of the soldiers moaned an oath:

“Please, no more of this! Is there any god that...”

The leader flung a sharp word at the man, dividing his attention between Renik and the sky. The fleeting forms swept by again and brought another gale in their wakes. This time the men were prepared; they flattened against the sides of the houses and braced their legs. Whatever the things were, they were cavorting over their heads and flashing between the houses like ghost-gulls between ship-rigging. Then suddenly someone yelled. One of the specters was dragging a wounded man into the air.

Renik reacted slowly, drugged by wonder. The creature was vaguely human, dressed in flowing robes, and armed with a curved sword. It had one of Renik’s crew by an ankle. From its mouth came a sound, half a storm-shriek, half a man’s shout. Another form whisked down from the sky and grasped the other foot of the man. Then the shipmaster dashed ahead and caught an outstretched hand — Atono’s, he saw now — and Atono’s hand was a vise in his terror. Renik held on as the poor man rose into the air in the grasp of spectral bearers. One of the creatures let go an ankle and rose as if its sword were drawing it upward. Atono came back to the ground as the creature fell upon Renik. He pulled his sword over his head. The enemy’s weapon met it and beat him down to his knees with the impact. These ghosts were deceptively appareled, he thought; their strokes fell like solid stuff!

The seamen awoke from their own amazement and threw themselves across Atono. Renik met the next stroke still on his knees but better prepared. The curved blade glanced from his own, and the

sailor bounded upward and slashed across the specter's waist. A second slash caught its weapon square by the hilt, and it shattered — into glassy fragments of ice.

The shards flew in Renik's face and stung him. He wiped his eyes and looked for his foe; he found him careening down the avenue like a puff of wool buffeted by the wind. It trailed guts from its wide wound. They unwound from the tumbling ghost like loops of fog trailing from a low cloud, and they melted into the air.

Renik caught up to the dying creature where it lodged in a corner of an alley. Throughout the short battle it had worn the same, mournful expression, and even now maintained it in its throes. There was something about that look, some quality of fundamental sadness. Then the creature arose with its last strength and swept its arms forward — a blast of wind and icy particles punched Renik in the face. And then it dissolved into the spinning refuse of the alley.

Back down the street the crew had drawn Atono among them and ringed him around with a hedge of weapons. The troop of guards had done the same for its own wounded, although as Renik jogged back he saw three specters flying away with one of the downed men. The leader drew the remainder back beneath the eaves of a house. Separated by a spear's reach, the two groups leaned against the winds. Wooden shingles flew from roof tops and spun and splintered around them. A half-full cask toppled and rolled, its deadly force scattering the men in two directions as it shattered against a wall and sent its bands and staves flying.

In the scuffle Renik found himself beard to beard with the leader of the guard. They shouted a conversation in each other's ear.

"What devil's city is this," yelled Renik, "where guards accost honest visitors while monsters rule the streets?"

"You have the answer: a devil's city. The gods have damned us all, so I care no more what law you've broken. Tonight if you're a man, you're kinfolk!"

Lightning arced the sky in chains. Not good, honest lightning, but hovering streaks that shot horizontally and slit chimneys and walls. Fire balls zig-zagged between the houses and split into children of themselves, or burst in sparks.

"Listen!" yelled the guardsman. "Everyone for his home! Duty ends at the end of the world!" And to Renik he cried, "Guard the

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wounded man. The sky devils carry off anything that seems dead or dying.”

Somewhere the city was burning. The sailors navigated toward the docks by keeping the glow at their backs. Renik raised a prayer to Sena’s Four Mysteries (long suspecting them to be the four gods of the compass points) when they saw the *Luck* tugging against her lines. They rushed across the stone quay and went in single file across the wooden docks. On the way sheets of rain ran in torrents between the gaps of the boards, then turned to hail that rattled the wood and crunched under foot. Once a lance of ice slivered to pieces before them — it left a deep gouge in the dock.

Botha and Enesh met them at the ship’s plank. They helped their mates get aboard and passed Atono down below as Renik studied the ship. She had passed through the gales fairly well. The hastily improvised rigging still survived. He thought sadly of Atono bleeding down below. Anything that Atono’s hand had formed would likely outlast a life of storms — if only he could patch his own sides! Then Renik suddenly realized he hadn’t seen Kollen, and he called a question over to Botha.

“Gone, Renik! He suddenly jumped up and said he knew where Hrothe might be taken, and so he was going there.”

Damn Kollen! was in Renik’s mind first of all. *Off on his own again as always, and now the shit would float a ship.* And as fast as that thought had come, it passed, and its wake Renik mused that he couldn’t have expected his brother to obey orders to sit and wait. He shouldn’t have given them at all. Kollen had done right, had done the only possible thing in the upheaval of Salazen, and that was good. *What did the guard master say?* he asked himself. *‘Duty ends at the world’s end?’ Some duties, not all. Kollen had one duty left.*

With a strangely calm sigh Renik wedged himself in the hatchway to watch as ships tied to the docks strained against their cleats. The more ponderous vessels anchored in the harbor, including the wizard’s ship, lurched dangerously even with bare poles. This was a puzzle. Although Renik had known the city was plagued by strange events before his arrival, he’d suspected the wizards ultimately had a hand in the matter. But their ship was as beat as any other, its tangled rigging speaking of damage.

He didn’t know why, but that’s when he decided to go, too.

Renik stuck his head down below and bellowed for a watch to replace Enesh and Thon, whom he now called below. Up came Mikello, swathed in a well-oiled leather cloak.

Down below, Atono was breathing his last, a bloody froth on his lips. His bandaged sides wept a film of blood. Someone was heating a brazier of coal with an iron thrust in its midst to singe closed the deep wound. The iron warmed slowly to red heat.

But Atono bit back his pain and fear and shook his head. “No, no,” he said, sitting up in his companions arms, “this old hull be torn fine, but there’s a plank yonder needs caulking....”

He sank into outstretched arms with his eyes on the unfinished task.

Renik watched the others ease the man back and stare blankly. Anasa was little better. The oldest of the crew, he needed a long rest in better surroundings to recover from the strains of the adventures. Now he slumped against a hull-rib and stared with half open lids. Of the others, only Botha, Enesh, Mikello, and Thon were healthy enough to sail a ship. Enesh it would have to be, the navigator.

“Enesh must care for the *Luck* until I return. Botha after him. Set the foresail so you can haul it up in an instant. If the fire spreads to the dock, you slash the lines and nose her out of the harbor. If you can, beat around until it’s safe to go in, and look for me, Kollen, and Hrothe somewhere beyond the south headland. We’ll light a fire if possible. If we’re not there, run to a Sahlian port. The mages’ guild makes Akrem too warm for us, eh lads? And if they didn’t, the moneylenders’ll want payment on the *Luck*’s last refurbish, which — this being less than a profitable voyage — you can’t pay. But she’ll give you a passing life in Sahla until it’s safe to go home again.” Anasa stirred and licked his lips for a speech. “Hush, Anasa! Heal up! You’re only a councilor today, understand?”

His sea chest held his only concession to armor — an iron-reinforced cap and a neck-to-groin leather apron sewn over with varnished iron scales. He strapped these on, checked his cutlass for notches, and grabbed a light cross-bow, a handful of bolts, and a small shield. He climbed up the ladder into a changed world — one all of spiraling snowflakes. Mikello shivered at his watch against the main mast. Renik patted him on the back and wordlessly bounded over the rail, down the dock, and onto the icy stone quay beyond.

* * *

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Kollen was running through the deserted main avenue toward the hill-road to the fortress when out of a side alley a familiar set of faces emerged into the lamp-lit street. They were stern graybeards in dark robes, flanked by brassy warriors with angry-looking halberds. Hoping they hadn't seen him, Kollen dodged around a corner and lodged himself in the niche of an empty shrine. What had begun as an expedition of rescue was now a rout. *Poor Hrothe!* he thought. *Where now do you figure in flights and fancies?*

There were shouts and curses in the streets beyond. Somewhere a light flared and died — were the wizards taking shots in the dark, or had they bumped into a patrol of city guards? He counted on the last, stepped from his shelter, and looked into the street. It was clear except for two meandering folk trailing wine bottles in hand, travelers late from a tavern. One was very tall, the other about as short as Kollen. They had to be very drunk indeed to be reveling tonight. He was passing them by in a quick walk when the shorter of the men spoke.

“Pardon me, but where do you find a sleepless tavern hereabouts?”

Kollen, shifting his gaze between the two men and the shadows of the street, answered, “I don't know. I'm a visitor. Sail four weeks to the south and I'll show you places that open at twilight and sleep at high noon.” He wandered closer to them, seeking camouflage in numbers.

“It's what I've always said,” said the short man cloaked in gray, “go to the warmer countries for hospitality. Say, stranger, we'll follow you there on the morning tide, for the town's like to be warmer than even I fancy by morning.”

“Warm by a hearth in the north,” rumbled the tall fellow, whose bulk was further increased by a fur cloak, “where the ale is icy-sweet by nature.”

The two friends championed the glories of either compass point for a while longer, accepting Kollen as their companion in visitation. The street echoed only with their good natured talk concerning wine, and cardinal directions, and things were looking better every moment.

But in the deception of silence the enemy glided from the shadows before them. His impromptu companions saw them first, and Kollen stayed his step as they froze speech and stride in unison.

“Darkness bears night's children,” said the tall man proverbially.

“Would that it bore fat, wakeful tavern keepers and slender girls,” said the other.

“Get away from here,” said Kollen, transfixed by the row of cloaks that stretched across their path. “It’s my fight.”

“What? And pass such excitement, sweeter than wine shops?”

The tall one shifted slightly beneath his cloak, and then a huge, pale sword was hovering in the air. Then the short man had something in his hand that hummed dangerously.

One of the graybeards stretched out his arm and traced a wide arc on the avenue, and before him an arc of green flame blockaded the street in front of them.

“A trite trick, a lack of art!” said the gray-clad man.

And then, even if they would, it was too late for Kollen’s companions to run as the guild’s bronzed soldiers clattered up behind them and sealed off the alley in a semicircle of pike points.

Kollen could only draw his short sword and hold a dagger daintily by its blade, and try to be brave. “They’re poor drinking partners; I’m sorry about that.”

The short man was about to answer when the line of robes parted and one came forth to say, “No, Kollen! Don’t you recall that night in Fenward when we drank to our mutual profit? Say not ‘poor’, but rather ‘betrayed’. You the betrayer. And also a destroyer, so we learned.” Sulem stood before his fellows and crossed his arms and looked at Kollen with a mixture of anger, respect, and bemusement. “Yet who can blame you? Were this a court and I the judge, I would not. You have done no wrong. Nor have we, not if you knew all that is at stake, not if you knew our deep thoughts and motivations.” He gestured at the mages and then all of them in the alley. “We are not evil. You are not evil. That’s a problem. How much easier would adventures be if there were merely ‘good and evil’ to strengthen our arms and seal our convictions. But I don’t think I can convince you of this here, and you’ve caused us much trouble besides. So...”

Then a second wizard stepped forward with upraised palms. His voice resonated between the buildings as he spoke to Kollen’s companions.

“Leave us. Walk past the soldiers behind you. We want *this* man only, but if you interfere, we’ll honor no companion.”

A third wizard stepped before the illuminating flames —the bald-headed woman with the tattooed pate — and she cast a globe before

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Kollen. It burst on the alley ground and then a great bubble inflated out of the shards, taller than a man.

Then the tall barbarian stooped. His bare arms thrust from beneath his cloak, swelled in an effort and overturned a water trough that stood before a hostel. The water spread onto the street and met the line of fire, steaming and hissing. Then Kollen saw the fire-herder bend over at the middle with a choked gasp from the sling-stone loosed by the gray-clad man, who then pocketed his sling, and whisked out a slender sword.

Kollen turned his attention to the bubble, which were aimed at him alone. Sulem ignored the goings-on and concentrated on Kollen and the bubble, and as woman swayed or swept with her hands, so the bubble rolled toward Kollen.

“A gentle prison,” Sulem said, “an altogether humane cage.”

The bubble held a deadly fascination for him — his mind ran to the doom that could await him there, not withstanding Sulem’s comments. Likely his doom wasn’t to be immediate, otherwise the soldiers would have been ordered to skewer him and be done with it.

“Fear not, Kollen. You’ll be encased like a jewel as few have ever been, a precious man in a crystal sphere. No king has ever boasted such a treasure. We’ll make you uncommonly rare.”

Kollen leaped aside. The bubble just missed him, and he’d felt a loose fold of shirt pulled or sucked as the surface passed by. He began to shake.

The two night-goers were single-handedly standing against the wizard’s guards, who’d constricted their circle around them. Now on one side the bronze-cased soldiery herded them in, and on the other — a fifth wizard replaced the injured fire-maker, and he wove a glistening web between the two sides of the avenue.

The web distracted Kollen only for an instant, but it was enough. The mage woman made a wild gesture; the bubble made a humming sound as it veered and came on with speed. Now Kollen turned to run but made only two strides before the bubble slipped over and around him. His skin tingled and felt as if a rainy mist had chilled him all over. The air popped, the bubble solidified and rang like a crystal, and Kollen stood inside.

He beat wildly against the clear sides with the hilt of his sword, but that only rang the bubble’s interior until his ears quivered with waves of sound. He probed with his point, but the sides couldn’t be

scratched. In panic and blind rage Kollen raised his foot and kicked at the wall with no effect but to lose his balance and fall. And as he fell, the globe rolled slightly away down the alley.

Kollen hadn't lived this long because he didn't learn quickly.

He twisted around and began running within the sphere, awkwardly at first, and then with greater speed. This took all his attention, and he saw too late that his direction was all wrong: he careened into the web-wall the mages had set up. The wall gave slightly, but still the impact threw his face straight into the glass of his bubble. Then the entire world rebounded; the globe whipped backwards and rolled straight into the fighting. Now he had the perfect seat for gladiatorial contests. A weapon shivered against the cage, and a face gawked in comic astonishment through the glass. It could have been enjoyable had not the air started getting hot and stale within.

The two strangers had made a mighty accounting. Some of the soldiers limped with gashes, and two lay motionless on the cobbles, and blood ran in the tiny valleys between the cobblestones. The two now had their backs against a wall; the giant's weapon was a hammer on brazen armor, while the small swordsman wove between all blows, and he couldn't be hit, but he often struck.

Kollen step-rolled his way into the thick of the fight. He surprised a spearman who wheeled about and delivered a blow to the sphere with his weapon butt. Kollen continued to the side of his companions, who flashed him odd glances. Kollen took a moment to observe the wizards. It looked very bad; they were unweaving the web-wall they had just strung up, since it had become a barrier to themselves rather than a cage for the three men. Kollen pounded the glass sides, trying to get attention from the two. In a moment when the spearmen fell back for a breather, the short swordsman said something directly to Kollen. The voice didn't penetrate well enough to hear. Kollen made desperate rolling motions, and pointed to the wizards. The small man suddenly caught the idea and brightened.

He fainted at two of the spearmen who had advanced again; they drew back a step, and he rushed across to the sphere and planted his palms against it. Kollen about-faced and began running within. The giant followed his friend and the globe, and in this way they burst through the thin line of foes, rolling their impromptu fortress wall before them.

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They ran down the avenue the way they had come. The spearmen limped and jogged after, but scythe-like strokes of the tall man's sword deterred them from getting close. Inside, Kollen had ceased moving; he pressed hands and feet against the bubble and watched the world spin. A trace of blood ran in a little spider-web pattern where his nose had been mashed against the side. Then he noticed his companions running on sides opposite to the warriors in pursuit. He wasn't sure, he was dizzy and nauseated, and his sense of direction was gone. But Kollen had the sensation that *he* was chasing *them*. Indeed, the bubble was whirling faster by the moment, and the short sword he'd dropped inside no longer jangled at his feet, but was glued to the sides and only jingled as the cobbles vibrated the chamber. Then a grayness whirled around and filled his sight.

His cage glanced against a wall where the alley forked. The impact dazed him for a moment, but the globe kept rolling a short distance, spinning Kollen sideways and making him nauseatingly dizzy. He stood, shook blood from his nose and sweat from his eyes. Then he vomited a gush.

In the sudden weakness of his sickness he fell forward and started the globe rolling again. Just to keep his equilibrium he had to stand and either keep the globe still or keep it moving in one direction, harder to do now that his feet were slipping in his vomit. Kollen looked for signs of pursuit, but saw neither his enemies nor his brief companions. No doubt they had lost him at the intersection of the alleys. He couldn't worry about friend or foe, because the air was becoming dangerously stale and his vomit stank enough to choke him. He walked, and soon he ran again — where, he didn't know, but he had it in his mind to ram the sphere against a wall hard enough to crack it open; that seemed to be the only choice left.

He trotted down the alley and found that the ground again sloped downward. He tried to slow himself and was successful until the slope steepened toward several buildings down the road. Kollen groaned but then tried to gain courage to allow the globe to accelerate toward those anvil-walls. Again the globe picked up enough speed to plaster the man against its rim. He waited. He did strike a building, but it was a glancing blow, and his journey continued in another confusing sideways spin until finally the bubble mashed into something soft. The globe gyrated for a moment but came to a rest with Kollen

cradled in its bottom. The glass turned cool against his skin. Water slopped on the walls of prison outside.

He had fallen into the river, one huge bubble among all the rest. He lay on the bottom of the cage and regained his senses. He couldn't stand, because the globe slipped beneath him, nor did he want to stand. Vomit and blood splattered the sides of the globe in a thin film. He pinched his nose closed and concentrated on breathing whatever air was left. Kollen was in this state of affairs just as the world dropped from beneath him and became a mighty crash.

Then there was air for breathing, and water too. He flailed and coughed. His feet stumbled in water and among rocks, but a powerful stream thrust him away from the shallows and into the deeper calm of the river. That was as close to drowning as he ever came, but the lights of the city oriented him — he knew up and down, and some instinct controlled his flailing arms to tread water until he could breath again.

Soon Kollen enjoyed the clean river water, which washed the vomit from him. He swam to the south bank of the narrow river and crawled under the shadow of pilings on which houses were built, slogging quietly in the stinking mud until he met the sterile bank beneath the building above him. He peered through the pilings as if he were under a monstrous spider, looking between its legs. From the far bank he heard pursuit, then soldiers fanned out along either direction. Their armor gleamed in a curiously orange light. Could it be near dawn already? He edged out a little until he could peer upward past the bottom of the structure. Not dawn, but the light of a burning city, and strange forms were flitting through the skies, leaving gales of wind and inhuman shrieks in their wakes. Kollen, however, was tired enough to weather the most fantastic turn of events with a shrug. He didn't doubt that his enemies had called a legion of demons against him. What mattered now was that he lose himself completely before they conjured hell-hounds and set them loose on his scent.

Shivering and generally miserable, he started working his way downstream, skidding along the mud banks, creeping under the pilings of docks, bridges, and overprojecting cottages when possible, and when not, he slipped into the cold stream when flotsam floated by, and added his head to the drifting garbage. Soon he was nearing the river mouth where it widened into the harbor. Under the shadow of the large bridge on which he and Renik had stood not so long ago

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in time (but far away in events), he gained the shore, stumbled through weeds and cast off spars and timbers whose faint smell of rot hung over the bank. He moved quickly to warm himself in his wet clothes, and a welcome heat began to grow as he jogged through the dark shipyard and retraced his path up the hill to the fortress. Going back to the *Luck* might only draw the mages there and threaten his comrades. But over-riding any other consideration was Hrothe. Hrothe was still his goal, and, after all, a goal in this wild city was the only comfort to be had. The road seemed clear — he had the feeling that all events would center at that eerie dome.

CHAPTER 18 — THE SKY OF DREAMS

Ghosts and goblins, conjured and called,
circled in a dance,
Even the shadows on the walls
shivered to the chant.
Each word of the spell sounded across
the fields and forest trees.
The hounds of the village bayed over the tillage,
and from their chains broke free.
— *The Wizard-King of Kilkey*, Josanante

The erratic storm smashed Kollen with rain, hail, and wind by turns as he climbed the wild side of the hill to the fortress, often slipping backward on the slippery four-limbed crawl and abrading his palms. The shrieks in the air made it plain that the sky demons were still at work, and all places under the open sky were as good as graves. At least the guards were gone from the parapet — wisely so. Kollen ducked and wove as he went, certain that an ice spear was aimed to pin him to the ground.

He had been wondering just how he was going to get over the wall this time — he'd lost all his gear except for the spare dagger in this last hour's adventure — when he saw colored light streaming out of the bottom of the wall. He froze in wonder but soon understood and grinned. The dome was above him, up the steep incline, and here was a hole in the base of the wall through which the light streamed. He crept up to the hole, scraping his knees on the scatter of stones washed in the rain flood. Here the wall had decayed, and streams of run-off water had undermined it, and there wasn't a mason who worried about fixing it. Kollen widened it with his hands and managed to squeeze up and through, all the while with a muddy stream running down his back and out the bottom of his tunic.

He rose into the walled path about halfway between the castle's courtyard wall and the dome. He ran along the wall and behind the dome during a fierce peel of thunder and lightning that made him forget for a moment how cold he was. After he'd collected his thoughts, he edged around the side facing the castle, where lay the entrance to the dome.

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He heard Hrothe's voice from the chamber.

In all his exhaustion and fear, Kollen came very close to shouting out to the old man.

The voice was echoing wearily, answering some muffled query. He could only catch bits of it.

"—that, I would *not* be here. He didn't mean for it to happen that way—down—and he...."

Kollen edged around the dome, looking for guards, and indeed he saw two of them, although they stood far away down the long corridor formed by the walls that extended from the castle out to the dome. They watched the sky with backs pushed against the wall that divided the courtyard of the castle from the grounds of the dome, an understandable inattention to duty had saved Kollen from being seen. But surely the soldiers couldn't see well in this weather, and they were out of earshot of the dome's councils.

Out of the arched entrance, bright, flickering torch light cascaded and painted a patch on the ground. Kollen moved up. The voice — the Tuc's voice — could be heard fairly well; it had a disturbing quality. It was a fierce whisper that climbed the heights of frenzy and would abruptly pause, and waver in its emotion, decline to a brooding roll, when Kollen would lose the words until his voice climbed again. He froze by the door, entranced by the peculiar power of the speech, and half repelled.

"— lay on the altar at noon, when the sun coursed straight upon the dome and gave light and life to the images — his truth — The merchant sits in his vaults and uses his additions and subtractions to know the substance of which his estate is made (Kollen missed some) — tally of the world recorded in the glass of the dome. What did your Habran mean by it?"

Kollen glanced at the guards; they were still preoccupied with the war in the sky and the smell of the burning city, but in his position, he could be caught before the bright interior of the dome. He took a breath and moved.

He was prepared for the Tuc's speed this time. He pivoted around the corner quickly and quietly and saw Hrothe strapped to the stone chair, with the Tuc sitting on the central altar with his back to Kollen. But despite his position the Tuc again surprised Kollen with speed; he twisted around when Kollen was a step away and almost had his hand on his sword when Kollen grabbed his throat. He tried to knock the

Tuc's skull with the pommel of his dagger, and for good measure, kneed him furiously. But the man was heavily armored beneath his embroidered coat. Kollen's knee throbbed with the unyielding impact. He changed his tactics, throwing the Tuc against the wall and pounded his head three times against the stone as the man gave up his sword and reached for a dagger. The dagger fell and rang against the floor, and Kollen finished with a punch to the Tuc's chin that dropped him.

He turned to the door, slid along the wall and peered outside, but the guards hadn't heard the brief fight.

"Kollen," Hrothe said and smiled wearily, "or I think it must be, for who else would come for this old man?" He was blindfolded and strapped hand and foot.

"Kollen it is, but keep your voice down." He crawled on the ground to the throne and sawed through the thick leather straps as he spoke. "Is that the true test of a wizard, then, to see past blinders? And why the blinders? You never had daggers in your looks."

"No, but the Tuc thought I might, not knowing that mesmerism isn't my school of practice." The wizard blinked as the blindfold came off. "You shouldn't waste time seeking old carcasses like mine. But I thank you."

"I came as fast as double armies of foes allowed." He freed Hrothe with the last cut, and helped him to his feet and sat him to the side, where the guards wouldn't see if they peered through the arch. Then he bound the Tuc with the straps. When he stood up and had a chance to look around, he furrowed his brows and hugged himself. He saw again the skulls that he'd seen on his first venture to the dome, but now he had time for closer inspection. Most were as smooth and brown as acorns, but a few were still furry with mold. Next to each skull was a rich goblet, and empty bottles of wine were stacked on the floor.

"Hrothe, were you invited to dinner or funeral?"

Hrothe shook his head slowly as he rubbed his limbs back into life.

"He calls these old heads his councilors. I gather the Tuc hasn't listened to anyone living for quite some time. He's a madman buried to the hilt in wonder. I was hauled here as food for thought, as he intended you and Renik to be." Then Hrothe squeezed Kollen's arm, stared, and whispered. "Kollen, he has possessed Habran's third

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treasure for many years, although he misunderstands its nature. But it gave him a kind of wizardly sight. With it, he's observed the far reaches — as measured in both distance and time, I think. This last of Habran's keys is attuned to us, in a way. Attuned to the entire situation. Like a warning bell one attaches to a gate to sound out the passage of a thief. The Tuc saw or felt us coming for the last key. But he expected a shipload of raiders, not a ragged bunch of sailors and a crumbling scholar. It took him a while to narrow his sight toward us and then attempt to take us. For some reason I was the only man he found for arrest. Perhaps you and Renik moved about too much. I don't know."

Kollen shook his head and squatted on the floor near an oil lamp set there, his lips chattering, his hands cupping the scant warmth of the light.

"I thought we were looking for a treasure that would control the sky? It has to be. It's the last piece of the world that the sorcerer left unowned, isn't it?"

"The sky? In a way. The hazards of recent days have been teaching me, severely but well. None of the treasures are exactly what they seem. *Sight* is the more basic property of the third key. The Tuc was gifted with *sight* as he used something in the dome. It took time, but time supplanted his inexperience in wizardly affairs. Think of it! The sky — it embraces everything. Think of the saying, a 'bird's eye view.' The third treasure embraces everything, as does the sky. Mastering it, one has the bird's-eye view of all things, embracing the first two treasures along with it."

"For what? Answer me that."

But Hrothe only shook his head, and evaded the question.

"Kollen, this is Habran's advice from the sea-witch — to meet him on a hill on top of a hill. I have avoided this meeting since we arrived. Now, here I am. The last treasure must be in here."

Kollen nodded and picked up the lamp and followed behind Hrothe as he walked around the dome, inspecting each feature as Kollen winced and told him about the guards at the far end of the walled path. But Hrothe seemed occupied with other matters and simply waved his hand as if to say, 'Let them come or not.' The old man was bone weary, but despite that he stretched and peered, and got down on his knees, or stomach, and felt surfaces with his hands, and once quoth the words of a spell that, when expended and resulting in

nothing that Kollen could see, left him even more exhausted. The old man's lungs swelled and expelled in sharp gasps interspersed with coughs.

Kollen wondered what they'd do with this last treasure if they found it. He hoped they would find nothing.

"The Tuc never mentioned handling any artifact here," Hrothe said. "Perhaps he didn't need to."

Then Hrothe rested against the altar and gazed up at the glass. Although night was close to falling hard, the remaining light and the castle's torches still made a faint display of colored rays in the room.

"What a marvelous place!" Hrothe said. "Does its construction remind you of anything?"

Kollen went to the walls and instinctually ran his hands along the stone. He didn't understand what Hrothe had meant until he realized that the track of his fingers was unimpeded. "It has no seams, no blocks. It seems grown from the bedrock, like the tower on the island."

"Yes. And the glass! That too. Not dyed, cut, and soldered in place, as in a king's shrine, but if we climbed a ladder and looked, we'd see that it was perfect, without seam, one with the dome. The Tuc said the stained glass contains magical formulae in the guise of the artist's images. He was right. Look there! An image of the crown you retrieved from the barrow. If I'm right— yes, look again and see the golden harp, and behind us, dividing the rim of the dome in thirds— a black section of glass. This is the collection of the mage's arcane knowledge, not hidden, but instead open to the world for all to see, and safely hidden because of that. The trail *does* end here." Hrothe went to sit on the tall throne and pondered. But Kollen was now thinking the puzzle through. He looked upward.

The arches met directly above him. Carved where a keystone would have been in an ordinary dome was a skull.

He showed the image to Hrothe, who was suddenly stricken to silence.

"Hrothe, you haven't told me everything," Kollen said. "Time to lay it all out flat, agreed?"

Hrothe nodded and reclined into the throne, and said: "All roads meet at the grave, Kollen."

"Common wisdom! We've come too far for that."

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“Common wisdom. I agree. Common things are most durable and proven, however. And I have told you everything just as I’ve been learning it. Believe me. And yet didn’t I really know the truth all along? It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. Let’s go home to Fenward, where I’ll kiss the sand and the fleas.”

“I’m still listening.”

“Habran— ah, well. I was telling Renik when we were floating together in the ocean— never mind. I am— disappointed. Such a basic, human error. Where are the heroes? I learned that lesson myself long ago, so how could a man like Habran—?” He trailed off and sighed.

“Hrothe, I’ve listened to you worship a dead man long enough. I’ve never worshipped anything, unless it was you at odd moments. Don’t be so surprised. At least you’re a living man offering some proof. Worship nothing less than that; that’s the lesson *I* learned.”

The words had a bracing effect, and he immediately wanted them back. Hrothe stared at the younger man, then stood and pointed at him.

“What are you sitting on? Stand up a bit. What’s that surface on the altar? It looks as if it were laid on.”

“So what?” Kollen answered, turning around and looking. “The mason wanted a smooth surface.”

“Of course,” said Hrothe. “Of course he did. Because what’s underneath was to be hidden. Why lay on a masoned surface when the whole dome was grown straight from the Earth’s bones? So let’s look beneath it. Pry with your dagger tip, or use that urn over there to shatter the veneer.”

Mystified, Kollen passed Hrothe the weapon while he wrestled the urn over the altar. Someone would hear the noise. But it didn’t seem to matter as Hrothe urged him toward the task, his sunken eyes lighting up again.

Outside the dome, sounds of battle could be heard, shouts, storm-shrieks. What battle? Whose? Kollen didn’t care. What *couldn’t* happen in a city where monsters flew in the skies and a proud lord sets up a charnel room near his fort? No doubt the wizards, the city guards, city folk, and all manner of monsters were charging the dome. It only mattered that Hrothe urged him to heave the urn and smash it on the altar.

The smooth surface shattered in places, and shards flew all over. Hrothe immediately swept away the fragments and clawed at the fractured top. Some pieces fell away, others he pried with the dagger until much of the long altar was bare again. The wizard stood back and pointed with his bloody fingers. There was an outline, a form of some kind cut into the real top of the altar, and the mason had not filled it with any mortar. Clearly, it was the form of a sword. Kollen bent over it. It was not cut in the surface. It was molded there. It was molded there as if the solid altar had once been a block of soft clay, and a sword had been pressed into it. Yet the altar was one great block of bedrock. The figure was melted in. Both men stood quietly in their own thoughts. Hrothe traced the pattern with his finger.

“Whose sword?” he said, then turned away as if he’d touched a snake in the dark.

“I’m more lost now than ever, and Fenward is getting farther and farther away. What is it?”

Hrothe sat on the floor and hugged his knees. He tilted his head back, stared, and mumbled.

“Fenward is so far away with its nightly dust storms, the ones you could always trust. I wonder if they still blow there, and if the beggars still gather at the crossroads to play a game of *chlab*?”

“Listen, I think you...”

“Habran and Shapor wanted immortality, Kollen, and Habran made three symbols of Life and invested them with primal energy to capture it. Shapor wasn’t around to see the result, I suppose. The result was here, here in what was once his brother’s hermitage-estate.”

Then Hrothe giggled. He didn’t laugh, that would have been too reassuring, as tears would have been. Hrothe giggled. Kollen clamped down his jaws until the muscles hurt.

“For everlasting life,” Hrothe said, “you must have the sword of Death.”

For a short time Hrothe rested from his emotion until he felt well enough to stand and face the younger man. He spoke, looking more tired than ever before.

“The crown of leaves and buds, and Habran’s gardener as guardian, symbolizing earthly growth and regeneration. Then the harp of the sea and the sea-witch — the sea is the ungoverned power of life, and is inanimate life, and music of a kind, and to order it is

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another hold over life. After earth and ocean, the sky. The all-embracing sky that watches over all, a medium connecting all, and symbolic of divinity that lends life its spirit. It is all so sensible, a simple formula to distill life, to poison death. Common, vulgar desire!”

Kollen shrugged. “Sounds like a good idea to me.”

But Hrothe turned on him and grabbed him by the shirt. “That’s because you haven’t thought deeply about it, Kollen! You’re forty winters old and still a child! You have to have spent your youth on the idea, and to have killed a youth, to understand what it means.”

Hrothe released him and sat back again, rubbing his head.

Kollen shrugged again, very slightly, let a few moments pass, then asked in a careful voice, “So.... we’re inside the third treasure?”

“Of course. And what better way to protect it than to set it in clear sight on a hill top? What better symbolism than this — a dome for the sky? And that explains the strange legends that Salazen has produced over the many years. Anyone who had imagination and patience to study the symbols and time to spend meditating in here, they could loose the guardians of the third treasure — the very dreams of the dreamer made solid. This must have been a strange city to live in, Kollen!” Hrothe started dusting off his clothes. “And I fear, dear friend, that we have led the mages straight to the secret. This is what they wanted all along, and even when we outwitted them by escaping Akrem, we became their tools, perhaps better than they could have hoped. We have been most excellent guides.”

Kollen wasn’t especially pleased at the thought of being a tool. He’d labored mightily in the past several weeks. He shook his head and then erupted into small chuckles and then peals of laughter. He’d listened to playwright and ballad master and street singer, all of them presenting tales of fools and fated men. Kollen had laughed then, too.

Hrothe gestured toward the arch, wearily impatient. “Stop laughing,” he mumbled, “and look at the chaos outside. You know what it— Kollen, stop it.”

Kollen expelled his last breath and waved his hand. “Why worry about it? It’s only a pageant of demons playing their parts. I saw them earlier when....”

“No,” said Hrothe, “they are the Tuc’s fancied servants come to take him away.”

“The Tuc’s servants? I thought the wizards conjured them up against us.” Kollen went to look out of the arch.

“No. The Tuc told me many things. They appear after he’s had a nightmare. He has told no one except me, I think. I suspect they are connected to the magic of the dome — if each treasure had its messenger guardian, then the dome may have these, released by the mind that dwells here and studies the formulae. They are the elements of the firmaments woven into the strange sights of the Tuc’s mind. If the mind is bent or disturbed, so will be the manifestations from the sky. What are they doing?”

“Flying like hunting hawks around the fortress, flitting amidst thunderbolts like storm-sparks. They’re plucking hailstones the size of boulders from the air and smashing them upon the people below. Some of them have jagged lances of ice. It’s like the world’s at an end, all the world being plucked up and dropped onto the rocks, like gulls cracking clams for dinner.” Kollen shuddered. “You’re right; let’s get away. I’ve had a rest and want to live a moment or two longer.”

As they arose, so did the Tuc, superhumanly bursting his bonds with a shriek.

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CHAPTER 19 — THROUGH DEATH TO THE DOCK

I know a land where seas are dry
where sand is surf and piles up high
against a dock where ships are lashed,
and hills are reefs where ships are smashed.
— Sailors' song

Blood ran down the Tuc's face from the blow Kollen had given him, and both his wrists were torn from breaking through the straps. Terror carved his face. He had his saber from the floor and slashed at Kollen. Kollen backstepped and tripped over Hrothe. The Tuc lashed once more with his slender sword, the edge turning and giving Kollen a welt across his forearm. Then the Tuc was standing in the archway, looking at the wonders of the sky with his look of terror now changing to wonder and calm resolution. It was unexpected and disarming, that transformation, and Kollen merely shoved himself up in case another attack came, and grabbed a sliver of stone from the broken veneer for a weapon. But the Tuc only turned toward him slowly and said, "Shall we go to the dead city? There we're allies, you and I." And he shook himself and dashed away. Kollen jumped up and followed and saw the man jump upward in a salmon-leap, catching the top of the path-wall. He hauled himself up in a single jerk and looked over his besieged fortress for a moment, then he was gone over the side.

Kollen returned to the dome, rubbing his arm. "He's in good company, out there. He's as wild as the phantoms."

Hrothe joined Kollen at the arch. Outside, the world was a disorder of wind-borne snow, thunder, lightning, and bursts of shrill laughter and drawn-out groans. The royal hill of Salazen had come alive with a festival. Both men hunched in the entrance way for a time and watched the pageantry.

"They are his terrors," Hrothe said, "fearful and uncertain ravings of the Tuc's visions. He saw something that broke him, Kollen. The power of the dome gave him far sight, and he saw *something*."

"Should've killed him when I had the chance," the younger man mumbled.

“Perhaps, if you’d be Death’s tool,” Hrothe said. “But perhaps the Tuc is our guide. Each treasure has provided us one but we’re too used to golden men and sea witches. We shall discover the answer.” Then he patted Kollen on the back and took his arm. “Come, let us go into the wild night ourselves to find our comrades. We’ve nothing left to do here. We’ve gone through much, you and I, and we’ll pass through this too.”

Kollen nodded but averted his eyes.

They left the dome and walked the walled path to the fortress, for they saw no soldiers at the end of the path, now. Dead or frightened out of duty, they had left their posts to the wind, which abraded the battlements with grit and bits of junk tossed about the city. The postern door leading into the courtyard of the keep had not been locked after the Tuc. This door led to a guard room under the wall; a dead man lay there, a shard of ice driven through his shoulder and slowly melting, making watery blood. The door near which he lay was half opened to the courtyard. Kollen pushed on the door, and it yielded slowly as he rocked it open through a snow drift. They found the court littered with dead people — all were crushed, burned through, or skewered on melting slivers.

The wind was still gale-like, but the demons were resting, or off to take council. Kollen stepped out into the courtyard and examined the double-gate banded in polished bronze. Thoughts of escape out the front door so teased the man that he hop-skipped in hesitation before walking self-consciously to the bar. He began to drag it back.

Then the gate started rumbling and bending inward. Kollen bounded backward. Thick metal bands were beginning to glow and burn into the wood they had strengthened. Hrothe narrowed his eyes, then pushed Kollen before him without a word. They crossed over to a flanking tower, found its postern door unlocked, and slipped within as the castle gate bellied outward like bloated stomach, smoking and splintering. They ran down the narrow hall, found the gate at its end open, but a second door into the main fortress was locked tight. Within, the last defenders of Salazen’s royal house sweat out their siege. Another exit led out to their left, upward in a spiral stair within the thickness of the wall. This came up on the parapet, which extended ahead of them to the tower but before running into the tower wall, the parapet joined with a graceful stone arch that bridged the space between the wall and that odd ship moored to the side of the

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fortress. Kollen helped Hrothe over this only escape route as the old man slipped in the ice.

The bridge was treacherous with slush. Their ragged clothes suddenly became fluttering sails that threatened to carry them over the rail. But Kollen got them both across the bridge and onto the deck of the ship. The rigging was up and hummed in the gales, and bright red sails were furled on their yardarms that, on festival days, might spread the flag of the city widely to the skies. The decks swayed slightly under his feet as the gale hurled itself against the painted masts and forced groans from the old timbers in semblance of its past sea-life.

Kollen left Hrothe in the lee of a small house that sheltered the companionway. He explored downward and saw in the light of low-burning lanterns the innards of the vessel, which echoed with his footsteps. Inside, the cargo hold was converted into meeting hall. Rows of benches faced the far wall at the bow, which held a bright shield with Salazen's tree-and-ship ensign. No one was there.

He returned above and saw Hrothe with his head turned toward the castle above them. Some kind of mischief was occurring within the fort, evident in a long cry of outraged stonework that fought above the howl of the wind. A heavy vibration was shivering the wooden decks. Kollen ran over to the edge of the ship and looked down; the rock-strewn grass was almost thirty feet below. A young man might slide down a rope, or even risk a cracked leg and slide down the hull unaided, but Hrothe—

Hrothe smiled thinly through his exhaustion and waved Kollen on. "Time for me to rest, my boy. Go on; I'll catch up later."

"Brave try, Hrothe. I'll cut a rope and lower you down...."

"No time. Enemies behind us. Mages, it must be. Go."

The grinding sounds had risen to a shriek. Splinters of masonry flew upward from beyond the lip of the wall. The mages were stripping the castle down.

Kollen ran to one of the masts and sawed at a halyard with his dagger. One end parted after several cuts, and he stepped back as a spar fell part way down before the line tangled and caught in a block. He jogged down the deck and found another halyard, hacked through, and found that someone had long ago ceased with the pretense of nautical accuracy with that spar and simply had fastened it to the mast. Meanwhile, somewhere behind them there was a crash as a dread mage of the guild performed his art and threw down a portion

of the wall that led to the dome. They had hoarded their strength and now it was all expended in impatient efforts as their treasure was so near. Perhaps they would even take apart the magical dome before they learned that it hid no treasure, but rather *was* the treasure. The thought cheered Kollen up a little.

But now bronze-helmeted soldiers appeared on the parapet and made unheard shouts into the gale. Kollen abandoned his efforts and ran to defend the bridge when a great pop and rip blasted his ears. Above him, the spar that had fallen and jammed now slammed around in the gale and loosed its sail. His original plan might work after all! He caught Hrothe in his arms and awaited the outcome.

He had expected the sail to rip out and carry trailing lines over the side of the vessel. Any normal, weathered sail would have done that; however, the sail was really a huge banner with the city's emblem sewn across it — it was all wide red silk, proud and immensely strong stuff that withstood the storm wind.

The deck shook under Kollen's knees as the soldiers discovered them and ran along the parapet. It was a strange defect of Kollen's character (but occasionally a strength) that he could become detached, almost cheerful in the worst moment. At that moment, he was paralyzed, without a clue, and he grinned and muttered, "Not good times for an ordinary working man," and then he had attention only for the chaos that unfolded. The mast against which they crouched tore through the weak old planks of the deck for several feet until it stopped. The ship jerked and shivered; the sound of cracking timbers ripped the air, and a heavy grinding motion passed through the vessel, telling of stone supports shifting and grinding on weathered mortar underneath. The vessel turned, and the lines that held it moored next to the castle stretched and popped or tore out their cleats. Then the sail parted along a seam and shredded in the storm but still clung to the leaning mast as if it were a kite and the ship a very fat child flying it.

The noble old vessel leaned over and bumped onto the stony hillside and down the hardest ocean of her career. Near the bottom she ripped. She spread her bowels to the air. The deck fell beneath them, and Kollen's last effort was to throw himself and Hrothe upon the mast as it tore free and levered the hull into fragments. Their world swayed and cracked, but, strangely, the smell of rotten wood overpowered all other distractions.

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CHAPTER 20 — WITH DEATH TO THE LAND SHIP

I've seen a ship with snapping sails
all manned for sailing mountain-gales
for her keel was iron-bound
for cutting over solid ground
— Sailors Song

In the wind the sign of the Breathless Wayfarer spun on its one remaining chain, and that seemed to Renik a sign of humor. “Breathless indeed,” he said at the sign with its little jolly man jogging up to a painted door with bouncing traveling pack frozen in time. “Run, little man. The wind of life pushes you now like you never knew it could. Any door in a storm, that’s my advice.”

“Madman, are you coming in?” called a voice. Renik looked at the inn’s real door, which had parted just enough to show a face and a beckoning hand. Renik stepped up as charitable hands drew him in quickly so that they could slam and bar the door again.

The inn was crowded to standing space. “Crewmen of *Renik’s Luck*,” Renik bellowed over the oaths and weeping. “Pass the word — I’m here from *Renik’s Luck*.” Some passed the word, and *Renik’s Luck* resounded in hysterical voices all through the inn as if the phrase brought a promise of relief. Renik waited impatiently under hopeless stares. When the news returned by way of shouted exchanges, Renik turned away. He hadn’t expected to find either Kollen or Hrothe there, but it had been a familiar point, some shadowy promise. Turning his back on invitations to stay, and then the curses as he left, he was out again into the storm.

His path was up the hill, past the merchant mansions, and to the fortress. He crossed one of the bridges — mostly by clutching its rail and slip-sliding across the piled hailstones — and gained the southern half of the city. There he skirted the riverfront that led to the harbor. This was Salazen’s second main thoroughfare, lined with smithies, boat-building shops, chandleries, and exchange houses. Most of these were shuttered and dark, although one stout man gripping a hammer came a step or two from his smithy and motioned for Renik to shelter within. He waved his thanks but moved forward.

The path turned just before the harbor and doubled back inland, up the side of the hill. Small, neat dwellings of merchants and tradesmen lined the road. Among them Renik found a long, two-story structure, as large as a two-masted merchant vessel. Its stonework was ornate; a series of arches formed a sheltered porch behind which shuttered, arched windows squinted. But rays of light gleamed through cracks in the shutters, cloaked beacons of civilization within. Renik went to a door, pounding and shouting — another place where Kollen might be holed up. Massive bolts withdrew after a moment, and hands drew him in. As in the Wayfarer, the interior was hot and crowded, but the people were subdued. Low-burning lanterns hung at short intervals and revealed a long, tall room. Benches lined the walls, the only furniture. Wounded people slumped everywhere, and weary, hopeless forms squatted on the floor. The most active inhabitants stood sentinel at doors and windows or tended the wounded.

Renik wandered down the long room of the public hall once merry with the sound of festival and auction. He wove between the sprawled people, peering each in the face in the dim light. Dirty faces returned the gaze, or brightened with hope when he bent near, then returned to misery when he turned out not to be kin, friend, or lover. He navigated toward a broad staircase. It, too, brimmed over with refugees, as did the second level. The upper floor was somewhat fresher, however, some of the shutters being thrown back to allow the defenders a view outside, where, right then, a few dogs fought over a dead thing.

He left the melancholy place and had hardly crossed the road when he saw the ordered troop of sorcerers and their soldiers marching up the hill. As Renik flattened against the wall of a house, he saw that stragglers were stiffening before the gaze of the mages and then fled away or fell to their knees shivering after passing the brief inspection of the faces. Renik didn't know why this fear preceded them, but at least *he* wasn't affected. He edged away, hand tensing toward his cutlass hilt. Ten feet away a gap between the houses offered protection, and he couldn't resist it any longer. He slid along the wall and into the gap, purposefully keeping his eyes averted from his enemies, just like that good old advice about mad dogs and drunken men.

And still, the wizards didn't notice him.

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One of them touched the barred door of the auction house and it burst inward. They entered, and soon the inhabitants walked calmly out into the streets. After three or four steps out of the door they awoke from whatever spell had prodded them away, and they fled for other shelters.

Renik hid under the roof of a public well that was a hundred feet up the hill. He had a view of the hall from there, and he watched carefully as the mages appropriated it for the night after the search of faces. That they meant to find Kollen or himself he did not doubt. But why their sorcerous commands had not affected him was an intriguing question. Perhaps that unlucky skysprite, the Flame of Anraa, had aimed its baleful eye against them, conferring some kind of legal protection, like the magistrate who forbids all punishments except his own? Renik was a practical man, so he accepted whatever security that was his and leaned back to rest.

He'd meant only to rest a while before continuing his search of the city, but utter exhaustion sent him for a doze before he could resist, and Renik awoke from a deep sleep as the wind began gusting again. It whipped a few splatters of rain under the open shelter and woke the sailor. The sky was misted over and he saw no stars to tell him the time. But it was at least a few hours before dawn. His shield lay by his knee, and he took it up in anticipation. His guess was correct — the bad weather that had awakened him announced the renewal of the war between sky-specters and city. The phantoms coursed low down the street like seagulls seeking scraps. Within moments Salazen rocked again with thunder and hail. Renik crouched up closer against the supporting post of the well roof. Until dawn he watched the shingles peel away from his shelter as ice and rain were driven on the gale, and lightning hovered, shattering the chimneys that staggered along the drunken line of sky. Renik endured the onslaught until the specters retired; he had been left untouched, as if he did not exist.

Soon the tired-looking mages, slow-gaited with shoulders drooping, left the hall and entered the dripping morning. Renik let them pass and then followed at a distance. They proceeded up the hill, past a row of shops and a larger building, a warehouse. It was burning furiously, and a few people stood to the side and dully watched and warmed themselves.

Renik paused by them and studied the flames. As one wall fell in and sent sparks upward like birds from the grass, he could see the remnants of boxes and bales inside — the hoard of some merchant, perhaps even of one of the sad people standing by him, looking on in stony thought or shaking their heads as they held frozen hands out to the fire. Then Renik thought this was something of a marvel, a rare honesty or acceptance. Here the fire ate someone's wealth, but at least the calamity warmed the body. Perhaps this burnable wealth was most valuable as heat. Cold coins were worthless today. Perhaps wealth wasn't itself useful but rather its conversion into heat. Or into something else as useful. Renik knew he was chasing down an important idea, but it wasn't yet all framed up with good handles to catch hold of.

He stood there for a while longer until the tall peaked roof of the warehouse fell in, revealing burning structures behind. Renik walked down the street to this other inferno, which was a temple, and here he found other people watching the ruin. They all waited for morning to start warming the day, although the sun seemed shy, or it was lost in a sky that swept up from the horizon in gradually darkening shades of gray. Renik looked southward over the bay. From his vantage on the high road, he could hardly tell where the sea stopped and sky began. Gulls wheeled along on the raw breeze and complained, dodging pillars of smoke from the fires.

Turning back to the temple, Renik saw a statue of Sena draped in charred timbers, leaning into the ruin that would soon consume him. Since Sena the Prophet's Sixteen Principles were roomy enough to admit a few gods here and there, two other statues flanked him — Renik didn't know which ones, now, since, unlike the Prophet, these were of wood and were well charred. Perhaps one was Nehtan, the sea lord, to whom Renik had sometimes sacrificed some gold at the temple in Akrem and some other port cities. But since he was suspicious of having his gold mediated by very human priests, and since Sena's Sixteen Principles had always confused him, Renik had not been the godliest of men. And now the delicacy of this burning temple, with its gods poised to tumble into the coals, made religion seem ever more fragile. In fact, the entire city was a picture of one's philosophy of life — something easily put into chaos.

"People are weak and small," he said aloud. A bystander heard and nodded. "So much lost in an instant! Cargo, gods, city, people, all

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charred and broken in a night. Perhaps they'll be better for it afterward, the frivolity burned off, the essentials remaining."

He didn't wait for the bystander to nod or nay-say, but stalked past the temple and up the hill.

"Sena," he called, "what are those four missing principles? Your axed-off toes? Some airy nothing, not enough to fill the sail of a toy boat? What if they only said something like, 'Wear sandals over sharp stones'? Would that be bad, I wonder? And what if you meant us to make up the remaining four ourselves? Not a bad idea, but why four, that's the real mystery, I think."

No one answered except the gulls, still circling and complaining. He paused, struck by an idea whose form he couldn't yet speak. He sat on the lip of roadside cistern. He stared at the water — his recent unease at mirror-images now smothered under all else. Besides, the wind ruffled the water so much that only the universal gray of the sky was reflected. A lone gull floated by low and stared him in the face as it cried out and glided in and came to rest a few paces away down the road.

"I suppose I've never seen a seagull until now," Renik said, slowly, dreamlike. "You've surrounded my life but like the waves I plowed, I hardly noticed you. I've heard your shriek and didn't hear it. I've seen you floating on the sea, and never did I stop to think that we were brothers. I don't shriek like you, but in my mind I have, in my mind I shrieked a long call at the wide sea that tried to make me shrink and disappear because it was so huge and I so small. A gull's scream is the correct reply to the world. Cry louder, you've got the answer! The day you grow silent is the day the world overwhelms us all."

Renik would not have moved from his seat and his thoughts except that, a short time later, the swirling grayness above did at last part for a time, letting out orange rays to splatter the sky above the city, revealing strange patterns of cloud and mist. His entire life had been spent under the sky; the strangeness broke into his reverie suddenly and made him sad. But the gull took off in the next instant, and Renik, glancing after the bird, nodded.

"Yes, that's good advice. A road to travel is best. No sitting for a working man." He stood and went ahead at a fast pace, soon pulling up some distance behind the slow-going mages. "Let the hunted hunt for a change," he said aloud.

Not long afterward Renik stood to the side of the main gate of the Tuc's fortress. He had watched the mages' destructive entrance. Even over the wind he'd heard the shriek of enraged metal bands and wood. Now he ran his hand over the bronze — bent and torn, barely cool enough to touch. And wooden beams thicker than his thigh were splintered and toothy in their demise. Renik peered through the broken gaps of the gate and saw a tight knot of mages gripping hands in a complex stance. Blocks of the left wall of the courtyard were popping out and rumbling to the ground one by one, leaving square, ragged gaps in the wall. Then they flew free in fours and fives. Finally, a large section of the wall careened outward. Its fall shook the ground. It left a wide gap that revealed another courtyard behind, and an open gate revealed a stone path bordered narrowly on two sides leading up to the mysterious hill-top dome. The guildsmen disbanded and stepped over the rubble toward this new destination.

The soldiers, evidently left unemployed, remained their rearguard. Some followed their masters, and the rest climbed a set of stairs to the parapet on the left side of the courtyard, from which they could oversee the main courtyard under them and their masters climbing up the hill to the dome. The parapet joined the main tower, ending at a stout door. But just before the door, a small bridge arched into the air and disappeared below the edge of the wall. Renik could see no more, but he noticed the rising masts of the land-ship shivering in the gale, and no doubt the bridge joined ship to fort.

He slipped around the ruined gate and stood uncertainly at the edge of the courtyard. The soldiers were watching their masters. Wind clutched at their cloaks. Inside the court, ice that had caked around buttresses and cornices sometimes parted anchor and crashed to the pavement. Snow was piled high in the corners, and a broken weapon jutted upward from a tangle of debris and ice, or a frozen hand, or face, poked from the drifts, as if creatures spontaneously generated in the ruin were caught in the act of climbing free. The donjon tower itself had not escaped a killing stroke: the facing wall had been split by a lightning strike.

As Renik turned away from this wasteland, he saw a bright, square sail unfurling from the ship beyond the wall.

Tired as he was, the fact went by his mind. His eyes reported that the sail of a ship was rolling out; his mind said that the ceremonial

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land-ship would never sail again. Of course, such a truth could only stand when the world was right.

Then hope swelled Renik's breast with a breath of new strength — just who was crazy enough to loose the sails?

The soldiers also noticed the unfurled sail. They edged carefully along the parapet to the bridge and peered over the edge. The lead man waved his sword and shouted, but his voice didn't travel.

Renik unlimbered his crossbow and had it cocked. He ran part way up the stairs, aimed, and drove a bolt through the back of the leader. He cringed at the deed — having never killed from behind — but he had a second bolt ready and killed another man as they caught the first falling warrior in surprise. Renik knew that wars depended much on speed and appearance, and it appeared that men were falling from unseen enemies. As soon as the first keeled over, his cloak flapping in his companion's faces, a second man had cried out. They turned toward him, then toward the terrific snap that the sail of the land-ship gave as it parted and shredded. Then Renik was on the parapet and clubbing the head of the closest man with the crossbow.

Three of them were down and a fourth was driven down to the stone by Renik's cutlass. The next man to meet him struck awkwardly with his halberd, and Renik responded with a natural grace that was unnatural in its disinterestedness. Renik seemed tied into a drummer's rhythm, his heart's fast beat, so that any task seemed as necessary and easy as breathing as long as it didn't ask him to turn his course from the moment-to-moment drum-beat of events. Thus it was amazingly simple to duck beneath the blow and slightly tap with his shield. Wind and tap and dragging cloak tugged his foe into a soundless plummet over the wall. The sixth — Renik traded several blows with him. Detached from the fight, connected to the one world-important goal of meeting his brother again, the shipmaster watched his opponent while savoring the clear ring of their blades, then he killed him. The halberd of the seventh whistled by and clanged against the wall. Renik spun on the slippery stone and slashed the edge of his shield across the knees of this warrior, who stumbled forward upon Renik. But seven was a lucky number and a lucky man fated to die on some other day. Accordingly, Renik ducked his head and shoulders further under the man and tossed him to a deep drift of snow below. The eighth — he stood enchanted, unable to move against the blur that had slashed through seven of his fellows in as many heart beats: a kind of magical

protection for him also. Renik left him clutching wide-eyed at a crenellation and met the ninth.

Nine was no lucky number, but it was three threes, a magical quantity, a potent enemy. The soldier instantly cleaved Renik's shield down to his forearm and wrenched the weapon free and struck again before Renik could recover, this time offering a breath-spilling thrust into his midriff. Renik's simple armor saved him, but in the moment he recovered his breath, the warrior's sword drew back a third time and beat aside the rent shield. Renik's arm went numb; his hand released the handle, and the shield spun away like a lost kite. The ninth warrior stood his ground while the crazy land-ship behind him rocked steadily off its stone buttresses. Renik *knew* he had to gain that ship, yes, certainly that land ship, symbol of such important things to a desperate, quest-burdened sailor, but the ninth man was a living wall before him. Renik met his next attack blade to blade, but the foe was strong and quick, disengaging and returning his blade with finesse. Renik drew back and parried with the hand guard. Then as the ship leaned over in its final throes, desperation forced the shipmaster to step back and throw his sword point-first through his foe's leg. He rushed the man, plucked out the sword, and threw him from the edge, and Renik was upon the tenth soldier, who backed out upon the bridge, blocking Renik's way out of fear or duty — it wasn't clear which. But he lost footing as the bridge rocked under him. Renik planted one foot on the crumbling stone and jumped.

Nothing could stop him. The wrenching of the stone and splintering of the ship drowned all other sounds. For a moment he saw the disbelieving face of his foe, then he rammed chest to chest into him. They both fell and slid across the slushy span of the bridge. Before it could entirely crumble they flew onto the leaning deck of the ship. The man under him cushioned the impact, and Renik left him. At that point he fixed his eyes on the things that mattered: Kollen and Hrothe. His brother had loosed the silken sail and was now awaiting the outcome. He held on to Hrothe, clutching him to the stout mast, the only part of the vessel likely to come down in one piece. Renik dropped his cutlass, leaped across the deck, and held himself as a shield over them as the ship twisted, broke, and fell from its buttresses. The mast tore through rotten deck boards, leaving behind a bow wake formed of jagged wood. Then the mast stopped suddenly on a stout timber and withstood the punch of the elements.

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In that moment, the ship capsized onto the hillside and thundered down the slope.

The ship slid most of the way down before parting along the keel and splitting in half. The starboard side yawned open slowly to the drum-roll snaps of its ribs parting from the keel. The deck between the two halves sagged and became a jagged plain of planks and timbers that sprouted from the ship's tangled insides.

Renik was the first to rise from the ruins. He disentangled himself and started helping Hrothe, who had become dislodged and tangled amidst the planks. He found his sword and sheathed it. Kollen was dazed and climbed up slowly, checking his sore parts and adjusting to his brother's sudden appearance. Then without speech or gesture, the brothers laid Hrothe on a wide plank and ferried him onto the hillside. There they rested, looking on the hill over which the guts of the ship were strewn. Somewhere within the remains a fire burned — a shattered lantern, soon to fuel a mighty blaze. The ship was to be its own pyre after its last voyage. The thought gave Renik satisfaction, as if certain laws and destinies were unfolding according to art and design.

He shook himself and shrugged. For a moment exhaustion had threatened to overwhelm him, but soon strength was returning, flowing like a storm-swollen river through his limbs. His spirit was still animated by that inner drum-beat, and he fixed his next goal on the *Luck*. He picked up Hrothe from the plank and carried him, because Kollen's help was slowing them down. Hrothe groaned and struggled weakly. Kollen staggered behind them.

Renik kept up a brutal pace all the way through the marsh, across the dunes, and to the shipyard. He saw Kollen gritting his teeth in efforts to keep up. Surely he'd undergone heroic efforts himself and was now about all done. But Renik's way was unarguably to the ship, and Kollen would have to find strength from the root of his bones. They came onto the wooden docks, found the main bridge fallen, but Renik crossed the narrow river mouth over the jumble of floating debris that had wedged in the ruins. Kollen wept with weariness and followed, barely avoiding plunging into the river as he slipped from the rocking footpaths.

They found the ship as they'd left it. Two of the crew spied them from a distance and came to meet them. Renik wordlessly handed the burden of the old man to them. Within a minute they had all won to

the *Luck*'s deck. As more aid tumbled up from below decks, Renik motioned them to hoist the jury-rigged foresail. He meanwhile slashed the mooring lines as Mikello and Thon gave up trying to greet their strangely silent shipmaster and got Hrothe and Kollen below. By then Renik had jogged back to the tiller and watched as the nose of the ship edged out into the breeze.

The wind was hearty. It blustered from all points out of the valley of Salazen, and the foresail snapped uncertainly to and fro. Farther out into the harbor, the wind was dangerously strong. Yet here he set the tiller in the hands of Thon, and he ran down the aft hatch to his cabin. When he came back again he had the fabulous golden crown thrust in his belt. He took back the tiller and gave a short command about loosing the main sail — someone with escape on the mind had thoughtfully hoisted the huge yard, which would not have been quick work, so now they merely unbrailed the canvas and watched it roll out with a huge pop that stretched its stitching. The fore and main barely balanced the helm, and *Renik's Luck* coursed through the rough harbor like an angry whale as he leaned heavily on the tiller to fight the ship's lee helm. As he worked, he noted with little interest that they would pass in full view of the black ship of his enemies. Indeed, three robed mages gazed on the *Luck* with deep fascination, then began moving with energetic purpose. The shipmaster felt a tug of some invisible force, a command. It was nothing, however, to his marching rhythm, and he shrugged it off as he took the crown from his belt and slowly raised it aloft for all to see. The mages did indeed see it — they could not have missed it even at this distance, for the gold stood out against all the grayness of air and water. Then Renik cast it upward in a high arc to let it splash into the harbor, and he turned back to his course seemingly without another thought. The crew on deck watched the act, and who can say why none of them cried aloud at this loss of their only treasure won in a dangerous voyage, and why they attended to their deck chores after only a brief gaze at the spot in which the crown had dived? But soon the mages had cut their own anchor line and raised a dangerous amount of sail to follow the *Luck*, so perhaps there was enough to think of besides a magic crown.

Renik's course took them out of the harbor and into the less chaotic expanse of the sea. For a while his ship rode the swells before the wind and southward along the coast, He kept this course for half

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an hour, perhaps, with his crew hardly moving, only staring at the mage's ship in chase. And then Renik broke his silence, obeying a plan only he knew, and he shouted for men to adjust the boom, and he brought the ship slowly over the waves at an angle. When the wind lessened for a minute, he wrenched over the tiller to bring ship around and brought them across the wind. The sailors adjusted sail frantically. The cliffs on the shore, tall and dark, stared them in the face.

He gestured for Thon and when he came, took him by the shoulder. Words came thickly, with effort.

"Everything up on the forward deck: men, food, everything important." Thon stared him in the face before nodding sadly. Renik looked back at the mage's vessel in pursuit; but its master had not yet turned his bow to face the shore. Renik didn't think he would.

All of his men were on the deck, crouching amidst sacks and chests and casks. They looked toward the approaching shore and then toward their own master. Renik studied their faces.

Then the grip of his mind's beat left him, and he sagged on the tiller. He'd guided the *Luck* through a threatening sea toward an equally threatening shore, denying all his seaman's instincts. What had he been thinking of? Destruction and possible death were on those foaming teeth before the bow, teeth large enough to snap a ship's spine. The only rational decision he'd made seemed to be the tossing of the crown in the sea. For that act he'd retained a quite clear memory of an idea — that they were done with it, so the mages might as well occupy themselves diving for it, or conjuring a fish to fetch it.

He'd rushed ahead to complete the prophecy of the seer back in Fenward. His father's last ship would be ground to bits, all the profit of a lifetime and a half strewn across an alien coast. Seabirds would poke through the wreckage finding shelter in the lee of a plank reaching a bony finger from the sand. In later days fishermen would walk the shore and recover bits and pieces, burn them in their hearths, build them into their own small boats. They would wonder at the skulls staring out of the sand.

So then; this adventure had started as a simple holiday to Fenward to bring back his brother to his full share. The effort had been a failure all along. Renik saw that now, just as he saw the rocks before them. He leaned on the tiller to bring the bow away from the reef; he thought further about the success of his life in general. A life of hard

work, a life of greed, of hoarding up a merchant's experience of the world, but little else stored away for contemplative moments.

"How to be a complete man," he said to the breeze whipping his hair, "that would have been a worthy quest, that's a real question, one of Sena's Four Mysteries."

Those teeth were close enough for their clashing to be heard — hungry, yes, but not thirsty, water a-plenty, foaming ale for all. There were two sets of those teeth, and they opened wide. Renik steered directly between them in slim hope for his crew. In the last few moments the wind diminished as they sailed under the brow of the cliffs, but the ocean threw them forward. The ship groaned while Renik waited, feeling the shudder running up through his boot heels. He wondered if the quest for the complete man might begin by somehow winding life back to the beginning again. He smiled as the ship drove upon the shore and broke.

He smiled as he recalled the old seer in Fenward who'd said the brothers would stand on their family's broken spine. As the once straight and tight deck planks bent and sprung put of place, Renik nodded in homage to completed events.

Just maybe this is all correct, he thought. He stared down at the deck, to the tiller, up at the rigging, to bones and sinews of the ship. Terrible joy rose in him. "Snap the family spine!" he shouted forward to Kollen, but no one could hear him over the roar of the surf. "Break the ship! It has always been a bad point between us, Kollen! Break the ship, let her be the prophecy, not *our* backs of flesh and bone. Kollen! Everything is..."

The men jumped up desperately trying to hear what commands he was shouting in last instant as the ship broke. Mikello started aft when the keel bumped again and he froze. Everybody seemed frozen, even the ship. Only the world moved beyond them.

The faces crowded along the rail of the mage's ship and watched the sea sacrifice its own to the stark coast.

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CHAPTER 21 — THE ROAD GOES EVER ON

But be lightened when you find yourself under the wrong stars —
we travel only one road and so can never be truly lost.

— Howilat the Elder, *Essentials of Navigation*

The slow death of the *Luck* came on one dulled fang underneath her as sea-surges started work. The ship lurched once after the snap of her spine; as she started settling, the decks parted in the middle, forming a chasm of jagged wood and white water. The main mast, already weakened when the ship had collided with the mages' galleon, cracked and heeled over, spilling boom and canvas into the sea, showering the deck with splinters. Then she settled once more and began the long process of being torn up in the surf. Renik breathed a prayer to no god and then patted the tiller of his ship. It was a good ending. The vessel was a sacrifice — to what or whom, he couldn't say — but the law of the world decreed something in return for a sacrifice. Perhaps the pay was only this strip of ocean between the black fangs and the sandy beach beyond. If so, perhaps it was enough.

But there was yet some last effort; the sea was surging up over the stern as Renik sloshed his way forward and leaped the split in his ship. He found his disheartened men squatting on the tilted deck. Renik turned his sight to the shore, which was a scant hundred paces through boiling sea.

"Up now," he said calmly but insistently, hoisting men to their feet. "The *Luck* has got us this far; now she asks us to go this last little bit ourselves. We've bought some time away from our hunters, but just a little. Come on, lads. Unlimber the boats."

They helped him with the ship's two boats. They lowered the longer boat and held it more or less against the hull as the surf thrashed it against the leaning ship. Mikello jumped down, then Thon, and they helped Hrothe and Anasa in. Renik helped Botha down and bade him tie a line to the stern. Then he shoved them off. Two sailors rowed and Botha steered through the surf, and they finally reached the shore, drenched. The two weakened passengers were deposited and left with Thon, while Botha and Mikello rowed back through the surf, Renik and Kollen heaving at the line to help them through. When the

boat was bumping against the hull, Renik tossed down casks of water, flour, salt beef, and dried fruit. The return voyage was labored and slow. Renik tossed a few more casks, his cutlass, and a box of tools into the second boat, and suddenly pushed the boat away with Kollen and Enesh in it before anyone could question.

He looked again at the *Luck*, and he apologized. The decks gushed foam with every sea-surge. The sagging rigging hummed off-key. At his feet lay the ship's figurehead, the scraped and dented dolphin. It lay on its side, one eye directed somewhere above, the secret smile on its lips. He shrugged and nudged the figure with his toe. For no reason he also smiled in that closed-lip way.

"Shall we go, fish? If you can't get me to shore alive, then I won't come there alive. Simple deal." Renik shed his armored apron, picked up the figurehead, and jumped into the sea.

He didn't struggle against the water but rather clutched the dolphin and floated with it, leaving Atono's body to lie buried in the hold. He rose on the crests of the surf and fell in the foam. It knocked him about, but he always held the wooden fish and drifted until the next breaker crashed around him. Soon he was in shallow water. His feet brushed the sand when he sank at the bottom of each swell. The breakers tumbled amidst sandy foam a few times, and then he arose from the sea, cold but cleansed, with knees and elbows scraped and stinging.

Renik looked back at the mage ship coasting behind them; he could see the slant of the spars changing, sails flapping. The mages were heading back to Salazen.

The sailors made a camp about a mile from the shore in the hill country that bordered these northern coasts. They sheltered under a low cliff in a little basin, ringed by pine trees. Beneath the cliff, a pool of water spread, disturbed by nothing more than the occasional dropping pine needle. Sodden and cold, the sailors spent a long hour getting a spark to catch among some tinder. At last the fire caught from flint and steel, and a ring of desperate men shielded the small flame and midwifed it into a blaze. The glow of their fire was well hidden in their dell; their foes would have to troop around the corner to find them, if they were relentless enough to follow now. The coast offered a hazardous landing hereabouts, and the hike from Salazen would be a long one. But the sailors hardly cared. The men clustered around the flames in utter, conclusive exhaustion. Their last

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possessions were piled among them. Their food might last a few weeks, if they could supplement it by hunting with their remaining crossbow. Perhaps someone might risk some cautious fishing. They had most of the ship's carpentry tools. The boats were hidden in a thicket of marsh grass near the shore. Later they might comb the shore and gather the flotsam that might drift up from the wreckage of the ship — and possibly Atono's body to bury again. They had a few coins left from their money chest. Someone might risk a hike to Salazen and do some purchasing when the city straightened out, if it ever would. Anything was possible.

Renik shrugged and slept.

In the next two days they portioned out reckless amounts of their rations. Everyone needed full stomachs and rest after all they'd survived. Luckily, the sky demons had retired or held no rule beyond the city, and the weather held fair enough. On the third day they would take counsel, reckon their stores, and ration them carefully. At least fresh water was plentiful.

During that time some of the sailors risked walking the shore to collect salvage; they noted a thin cloud of smoke from the direction of Salazen, but no ships on the horizon. On one such journey Renik, Kollen, and Mikello were the only seekers, and the day being pleasant and their enemies seeming far away, they went about their tasks slowly. Like the air, the sea had calmed, but not before the *Luck* had weathered a harsh battering and settled deeper. Atono hadn't risen up or hadn't floated to the beach if he had. Renik searched up and down the shore for the tell-tale sign of seabirds clustering around a large source of food, but he saw none.

They collected useful pieces of wrack to bring back to the camp, especially the remains of their sails, which were needed to make tents. When Kollen was done bundling his pile, he found a few broken boards and set them up like a bench. Then he sat quietly looking out at the wreck before shouldering his load and heading back to the camp. He brought the boards with him absent mindedly. Renik watched his brother as he readied his own bundle, and thought he had a good guess as to what Kollen was thinking about. In a single moment, Renik had sacrificed both his and his brother's remaining birthright from the family fortunes. That rude bench he'd made was the last of it and the last use of it. And mayhap he thought this was the last theft that Renik had done to him. Perhaps. But when Kollen had

finally dropped them on the beach, he had left with a wave of the hand as if to say, 'Let's get back and get to work.'

Renik's and Mikello's bundles were ready and they stood together to follow Kollen, but Renik suddenly paused and studied the remains of his ship. He had avoided looking in that direction, but now it called to him, for something said this was his last view of a past life. It seemed then that the wreck was a wall or boundary line, or a door that had closed on his life, split it in two when caught amidships like a cloak caught in a slammed gate. He was a divided man and rapidly separating, granted a vague dream of his life before the wreck, before he'd visited Kollen, all of which receded behind his forward-traveling half.

Mikello was a sharp enough lad and recognized the look of wonder on his master's face, and if he guessed little of what Renik was thinking, clearly a shipmaster looking on his shipwreck was a sad moment, one of those great moments. Mikello had often thought that a person's life was like a bunch of cargo bales, of all sizes and shapes, and that great moments in life fit into those bales. He had thought further that everybody's life comprised bales of similar size and shape, though what went into those bales might be different for each person. One's shipwreck was rather like another's burned farmstead. Mikello's face suddenly burst into tears at the thought of all those bales of cargo in everyone's life, ones gone by and ones to come, lives full of great moments.

"Come, Master Renik," he said, daring to tug Renik's sleeve. "Let's leave the good old *Luck* behind us. There's plenty coming and we've shoulders to carry it all."

Renik looked down at the boy and smiled and slapped his back gently.

"Smart lad, good lad! One of the best things I ever did was take aboard a starving little brat at Saracil. You always lightened our hearts when we threatened to become sad gray men."

The boy composed himself and opened his mouth, but this time his words failed.

"You've been good crew, Mikello. Now that you haven't a ship..." Renik stopped and knelt and gripped his shoulders. "Now that you haven't a ship, you must at least have a family. My family. I don't know whether to make you son or brother. Let only that matter remain between us. I declare you family, and if all I can offer is my family's

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bad luck, then perhaps even that will change. New blood! It never hurt a family, boy-o. Come, let's go back to camp with this stuff and tell them all!"

And that's what they did, and the sailors greeted Mikello into their midst as if they'd only waited for this declaration, and waited overlong for it. Renik settled back on his sail-scrap bed with the strange of joy of life and death in his meditating eyes.

On the second night it was well into Renik's watch when he saw Hrothe studying him from the other side of the fire. The old man's eyes seemed dark and sunken, and his face was more set and cragged than usual. His right leg had suffered an injury, probably in the ship ride down the hill, and it had swollen badly. Perhaps a bone had cracked, but the wizard had clamped down on the pain, and now he swung a charm on a leather strap — the same kind he'd made to draw Renik to Kollen across the moor at the beginning of their adventure.

"I made it today," he said, "when everyone was either sleeping or combing the forest for food. Since you saw fit to cast away our compass crown, you'll have to wear an ambitious collar again and feel its tug."

Renik reached over the sparks and took it, spun it on its strap, and grinned.

"Kollen told me about your discoveries in the dome," he said, "so I figured I might have one last journey. But I thought something would guide us there without that damned crown, and now I see I was right. Hmph! So much for adventure's end. I wonder if the Tuc of Salazen is going there, too? He must be half-way there by now, wherever *there* is."

"He may be. Soon the mages will guess as I have and learn that everything to which the crown led us was only the tools to carry out Habran's real goal. He only left them behind for us to follow. For you, rather: Renik and Kollen, the sons of Laraf, two ordinary men, two ordinary brothers, their distant shadows cast ahead of them. The treasures were a path to lead you here, whether for greed or mystery, it didn't matter as long you came. The harp you destroyed, and — see! — that didn't matter. The goal was never the things. The path is all. Casting away the crown was, perhaps, the right thing to do. And it may take some time away from the mages if they elect to try to recover it first."

Hrothe grimaced with pain as he leaned up higher against a folded scrap of sail and stared into the flames. A log collapsed into embers and shot sparks into the air.

“You and Kollen,” Hrothe mused, “are echoes of the twin emperors, but also opposites in important ways — casters away of the things they coveted. Habran knew, somehow, that two brothers would come along able to do what you did. Part of your pattern may be to find, then destroy — as Kollen did the harp — or, more importantly, to give up what you found? That could be most important.”

He leaned up again, now almost sitting, all pain forgotten.

“Important, possibly because these treasures leading us here couldn’t do much harm for long even if they fell into the wrong hands. They’re too powerful; the finder is likely to kill himself with them this day or the next. It just so happens that the first to find them were the proper folk. I’m guessing, of course, but this explains why the mages wanted you only half chained up. They have followed their bloodhounds, hounds fated to find lost things. They would have followed you much more closely had not plans gone awry in Akrem. And how they went awry! I’ve pondered about it, and I think this is what happened: the mages twisted the weakest minds of an entire city in an attempt to keep sight of you, to give you just so much freedom, a short chain on which to run before them before they again tried to catch you again. You had outwitted them, they thought, and they didn’t know what ally you had. The townsfolk were their shield at Akrem. But the mages were wrong! You had no ally that you knew about. But something changed their spell — the spell designed to spy and capture was changed to kill, against their plans. Somebody else did that, somebody with confidence to know you would survive but be driven away as fast as you were able. What a powerful ally you have, somewhere.”

The old man poked at the fire and watched the sparks rise into the trees like voyaging stars. Around them men were snoring or talking at the other fire. Botha could barely be seen sitting on a boulder beyond the firelight, keeping watch with cutlass and crossbow. Kollen was sleeping at the second fire. Mikello kept watch over *him*, tucking in Kollen’s cloak when he chanced to roll or twitch it away. Hrothe nodded in his direction.

“Kollen told me today that he wants the mages to find the dome so that they’ll know everything, come chasing at his heels like hunting

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hounds to make him feel sharp and alive. I think Kollen understands more than myself, but he would deny it. He put himself to sleep tonight like a runner resting for tomorrow's race."

Renik swung the charm around and put it in his pouch. It shook inside, knocking against the other odds and ends in there. Apparently this charm already knew where to go and needed no drop of blood to show the way ahead.

"I'll run that race — after I've had a good sleep myself."

"Kollen runs beside you," said Hrothe. "He too is bound up in this thing, although his unswerving brother must lead the way for some time more, turning aside for nothing. When you both come back, we'll be waiting, for these men around us are good down to their foundation bones."

"Good men pushed too much. They must hate me. They'll never follow me again." Renik also poked at the fire.

"No. If they were stupid men, yes, you'd be right in saying that. But not these. They have seen and heard nearly everything we have. They trade tales among themselves and come to decisions as weighty as any king's council. We did right in hiding nothing from them. No, Renik. You have a good crew, and they have a good shipmaster."

Renik said nothing, which was the right thing to say, and leaned back against a bundle.

"Where will we go?" he asked later.

"To the place I saw in my dream when the silent man came to us on the sea — a deep, black place, very cold, full of strange sleepers. Visions of that place flowed into the charm as I made it."

Renik frowned and tried, "What should we do?"

"What a wise man does when cornered by supremest danger."

"Thanks, Hrothe. Pleasant dreams to you, too."

The sailor sighed and rubbed an aching shoulder. Darkness crowded around the camp like a besieging army, and the flames of the fire were heroes who shouted and pranced, daring the foe across the border.

Renik said, "When I followed you and Kollen to the land-ship, I swept through the soldiers with a strength that wasn't my own. I was Death's right hand. What was that?"

Hrothe didn't answer for so long that Renik assumed he'd dropped off to sleep. The old man's voice eventually spoke, however, as the fire snapped and sparked through a new log.

“That was resolution and responsibility, Renik. It was magic of some kind, but it was your own. You were magnified, increased, as you were at Fenward by Sulem’s magic. I think now this is your part, your strength, your destiny.”

“And Kollen?”

“Kollen is not resolution. He has been learning it to become whole.” A pause. Hrothe cleared some of the coals to let a draft beneath the new log. “Kollen is Well. Kollen, I think, is rejection. He can turn aside, as you cannot. In a way, he cannot be corrupted — at least not for very long before he turns aside again. You, Renik, are not so practiced at turning aside, whether from a good course or a bad one.”

Hrothe’s face was becoming a heated red oval across the fire. His eyes burned and flickered, and Renik dropped his own gaze into the flames.

“The strength of resolution, and the strength of saying ‘no’ add together and make a strong human being, as strong but as flexible as my tent on the roof of my tower. That strength— you will both need it. Recall Habran’s prophecy. Didn’t it go something like this: ‘They must balance the miser and the martyr inside death’s belly. What they seek, shall be found. Shall they keep it and be rich? Shall they give it back and die?’ Hard choice, because the choice seems easy.”

“I don’t feel strong. But I do feel death.”

“Then sleep, Renik, for sleep is a little death and knowledge of all things is a fine shield. Sleep knowing that death has temporarily allied with you.”

Even if Hrothe’s parting remark didn’t encourage dainty dreams, Renik leaned back and meant to sleep, but he caught the wink of something through the branches of the pines. A spark of the fire, perhaps, rising on the heat— no, it was a star. A star! The familiar sky had returned over the land. Renik drank in that scant light and hoarded it just before a cloud bank cloaked it again.

* * *

Too soon morning filtered through the trees. When Renik awoke the gap in the branches revealed a dull gray *nothing* that shed a mist that formed droplets on the krinkly hairs of his wool cloak. Movement had awakened him, however, and not the drizzle. Across the embers of the fire, Kollen was stuffing two sacks with biscuits, salt beef, and dried fruit. Renik leaned up on one elbow and rubbed his eyes. By the

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time he rose, urinated, and washed his face in the pool, his brother had rolled a scavenged shred of sail around a harpoon shaft and passed another bound-up canvas roll to him. Botha found Kollen a heavy dagger, and Kollen handed Renik one of the sacks. Renik took Hrothe's charm from the pouch and hung it around his neck. The path — said the charm as it tugged — was straight up the wall of stone, which they climbed around. They briefly appeared to the men below before disappearing over the lip.

* * *

On the first day the brothers went through a forest carpeted with brown pine needles. The trees had never been touched by fire or axe and had grown to great girth. Neither of the two spoke in that quiet place. They saved their strength for the journey, Kollen following Renik, Renik led by the charm. They passed easily between the trunks, and their footfalls made no sound. Even the one deer that spied their journey watched unafraid as if it were unsure that its eyes had seen what its ears had missed.

They stopped and got a fire going where the forest thinned out to a plain. They made a pile of dry branches to last them through the night, piled pine boughs into beds over which one piece of sailcloth went as their floor, and they the rigged the other piece as a lean-to facing the fire. After a simple meal, they wandered to the edge of the trees. The plain spread before them towards the east and was bound on the north by a line of hills beyond which Salazen lay. The hills glowed fire-red in the late sunlight, their low profile undulating like a titanic chain stretched across the horizon. The plain's south side bordered another line of hills rising further away like a distant wave of shadow. Both sets of hills converged somewhere ahead. The plain was a series of undulations that the brothers viewed edge-wise. Their troughs were shadowed just enough to give them the appearance of smooth, gentle waves in a land-sea. The charm tugged Renik forward; he tucked it away in his pouch.

The next day was colder but promised comfortable traveling. Renik and Kollen covered many miles by the time they rested at noon and ate some biscuits. In the next hour they crossed a shallow river and found boot prints in a spit of mud — the Tuc had apparently preceded them, guided not by a charm such as Renik carried but by his mad vision. They followed this trace all day, Hrothe's charm

remaining in general agreement with the direction. Renik had not slackened his pace at all, and finally Kollen took hold of his brother's arm and said "Far enough," as the day began to darken.

Renik's insistent pace had bought them a breath-stealing distance. The spring grass was knee high, and the ground had remained firm most of the way. Now the two lines of hills had converged considerably. And the wind came sharply with the evening, hastening the two men forward.

"I wonder what giant lives at the end of this plain?" Kollen said. "His lungs are sucking in world-wide gasps."

"Not a giant," said Renik slowly. "Something else."

The wind burst off the hills and blasted the plain. The ridges caught some of the last light, but rather than reflect a friendly glow, they sucked it in at places, revealing the entrances of valleys hidden from the rays. And that relentless wind drove the men forward where the ridges converged in a steep-sided valley, a gash in the earth.

Kollen gave up any attempt to cheer his solemn brother, his efforts having themselves been heavy with foreboding.

"Feels like we're close," he said.

Renik nodded, although his gaze trailed off doubtfully into the dimness under the hills.

Nothing worth burning grew on the plain, and so they pitched their canvas pieces into a cramped but more wind-tight tent. Kollen had made loose bundles of dry grass to lay under and over their cloaks, and if they missed their fire, their natural blanket dulled the sharp edge of the night. There they lay, listening to the wind shudder the canvas. To Kollen it seemed that they were sailing still — the narrow end of their tent, where their feet went, was pinned down into the breeze, so the shelter was now a sleek hull shouldering the air stream.

"We started out sailing," said Kollen, "sailed our way across sea to land, then at Salazen, from land to sea. Now we've come around in our course, for our tent is a landship, of sorts, but the currents run overhead, reversewise. We've rotated the world on its head." He said these things to lighten their mood, but Renik wouldn't unload or unbend.

"Then is it the shifting of the sea I hear transferred below me? I thought it was the pulse of the earth."

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Puzzled, Kollen looked at the black profile of his brother, then noting that he lay with ear down to the canvas, he bent himself for a listen. But he could hear nothing. He wouldn't admit that and said instead: "An underground river, perhaps. Maybe we can fish..."

"Or if not a river," Renik broke in, "then the lee shore of Death's northern principality."

Kollen turned over and listened to the flapping of the sail cloth. He couldn't quite get warm.

Renik wasn't in the tent when Kollen awoke. He scrambled out on knees made sore by hard travel and night-cold. He looked over the plain: nothing there but short grass rustling in the wind and some early-springing white flowers whose waving made the great meadow seem flecked with the sea's white-caps. The river they had crossed yesterday meandered back into their path and made a shiny ribbon through the meadows before them.

Then he heard a voice and looked off to the side. There he was, squatting on a hummock and talking to himself. In an instant Kollen feared his brother was losing his mind. He had begun to suspect it when Renik had rammed the ship ashore. True, that madness, added to the tossing of the crown into the sea, seemed to have convinced their foes that they weren't worth chasing anymore. But had Renik planned it that way? He'd never said so.

The wind brought his voice closer; Renik was chanting poetry.

"Morning," said Kollen. Renik waved him to a seat in the grass.

"And a good one, brother! Sit and help me before we start." Kollen hesitated, then sat cross-legged by his side.

"Eat yet?"

"No," said Renik, "plenty of time for that when we start out. Listen here, though:

"Through ocean gale and driving hail,
through storm and wind I glided,
past the ire of island-fire —
and monster-waves abided.

"Well," he finished, "how did it go?"

Kollen gave his brother a long look. Then he said, "Island-fire. It doesn't fit in there. The Hearth Isles didn't spit any fire while we were there."

"Well said!" cried Renik and slapped Kollen across the back. "Art has lied, and it must only be guilty of exaggeration in its truth. It's

late in life to take up verse, I know, but patience a moment.” Renik thought hard and said:

“—while ocean-ire unclothed the mire,
and monster waves abided.”

“Better,” said Kollen. “But now I miss something else — the beginning. Doesn’t it start off too quickly?”

“Oh, I composed the first stanza earlier. Here:

“Let stone be set, admit the net,
by stalking Death defeated,
but stout remains are verses framed
where deeds remain unseated.

“Not bad work for an artistic cripple, huh Kollen? Now let’s off! Those cliffs are on a course of collision, and I want to see the spot before noon.”

Renik kept up a chatter all morning, barraging Kollen with questions. It was, Kollen thought, like the time they stood in the cemetery at Akrem, where Renik had suddenly opened himself for a few moments. This relation disturbed him — the presence of death had seemed to dig deep into his brother to free him at last to say all. Kollen looked about him, furrowing his brows. But he could sense no death on the bright grassy plain.

Yet Renik seemed not to, either. He spoke and asked much as they went along, wanting to know all the little details of Kollen’s life that he’d never had chance or inclination to learn. Kollen answered, and Renik responded with his own narratives. He drew out episodes of his life as the goldsmith draws out decorative wire, and from it he spun morals with a storyteller’s skill. Sometimes he strung the episodes together in order, sometimes spiced them with a flash back or a cross-reference to events in Kollen’s life, but always the strand of the recollections returned to a theme like a compass needle shaken in the storm.

“I’ve been a deeply ruttled man, Kollen, but I always knew what was right even when I passed by the sign-post. Father’s wishes were well and proper, but when we lost the *Goose* at Skragech, and when cousin Elas drove *Isle-Hopper* on Majle’s Rocks, well, I didn’t think the one ship remaining could be divided in two. I wanted to wait until we could build or buy another, then you could have that one with an eighth interest in the *Luck* to make up for the delay. But you and I quarreled, and things didn’t go well after that.”

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They topped a hill and started down without a pause, although Kollen would've tarried awhile to rest and see the view of the cliffs that spread out before them. Yet Renik's legs and jaws kept swinging.

"I was coming to fix our quarrel at last when this whole business started. Now—too late! My fault. That ride to Fenward was years late. I thought I might raise our fortunes with this venture. Wrong again. Life isn't like a market debt, is it? It's not payable with a throw of the dice and a run of luck. Hm. Forty years, and that's what I learned."

He exhausted his chatter at that point, and they walked on toward the cliffs before them. But just before they arrived he tried a verse or two and discarded them. At the very destination he set down his pack and examined the terrain, while Kollen squatted on his heels and panted.

In the last part of the hike the plain had roughened in preparation for the convergence of the two ridges. The land now sloped sharply into the bed of a swift stream. The ridges met in a jumble of ravines and hillocks. From the clash, a sharply riven gorge cut the land and meandered beyond sight. The river ran around the chaotic land, turning sharply and doubling here and there like a rabbit avoiding hounds that suddenly had sprung from the ground. Mists hung like smoke where the river fell into the gorge.

Renik allowed little time for rest. The two men were soon walking again, following the river, sometimes pointing out the foot tracks of the Tuc who'd preceded them. Once they saw a glimmer of light reflecting from metal, and found a heap of the man's armor, which he'd worn under his clothes, and his gold-embroidered vest. Like himself, Renik mused, the Tuc was shedding the outward symbols and casings to expose the elemental being.

By noon they found a waterfall where the gorge converged to its narrowest point. Sunlight speared past the edges of the precipice and made the mist from the waterfall glow. Here despite noon sun, the south wall of the gorge was in deep shadow. The entrance squeezed like pursed lips through which the breath of Kollen's imagined giant blew a tune. Much of the song of wolves or a funeral keening sounded in that wind; Kollen resisted an impulse to charge back into the sun that burned invitingly in the open valley behind him. But Renik walked directly to the edge of the waterfall, stared downward with a smile, and yelled above the rush of the waters:

“I have it Kollen! Here:
“I saw the men of Salazen
who sat in that city, enchanted.
All laws were broke and fear unyoked,
and seeds of doom were planted.

And hear this tale: a man can sail
across the land, undoubted;
and he can sound the deepest ground —
the well of the world, unbounded;

I dropped a lead through earthy bed,
it sank well past the evening.
Don’t haul it, lad, a man goes mad
charting a depth unending.”

“I don’t like it,” said Kollen suddenly and harshly. “Stop acting like a brainless lump so maybe we’ll live through this. And step back from the ledge.”

Renik smiled in brotherly understanding. “It’s solid enough,” he said, “and here’s an easy way down. It’s just washed enough in mist to cool our sweaty brows.”

Kollen wasn’t sweating, but he stepped ahead and looked downward. The waterfall plunged over the edge about five paces to his right. A little below it struck a well-rounded ledge, and from here the mist was flung up from the splash. Kollen thought the round projection looked rather like the bald head of an ogre peering out from a sauna. The mist felt cool and gave a feeling like spider webs drifting against the face. He turned his gaze away and looked farther downward. The water rushed down the slope into a pool that filled the gorge as far as the next bend. Renik directed his gaze to a steep, rubble-clogged way that bordered the north wall of the ravine. There a man might make a cautious way below. And Renik rubbed his neck, where the charm was tugging under his tunic.

Through the remainder of the day they trod on a path between the river and the north wall of the ravine. The air grew colder with every step. They proceeded under the drooping branches of evergreens, which had miraculously found places to delve their roots. They walked until the afternoon light became an early evening and the water of the quickening river was as pale as a plague face.

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At last the ravine widened around them, and the river plunged into an abyss — and disappeared. Yet the gorge continued ahead. Around the two men, the roughly circular area was like a hole in the earth up through which they turned faces toward to the speckled twilight. Renik's charm tugged toward the place where the river emptied into the ground. But now the night was dead ahead, and even Renik was tired. There on a flat ledge they spent the night huddled in their cloaks and canvas and the fog of their steaming breaths.

In the morning Renik crawled from their tent, stretched, and fell down a short slope to the edge of the river.

"Beware the ice!" he called to his brother. He gained his feet uncertainly and eventually got back to the ledge where they camped. The knee of his trousers was torn; he got a needle and thread from his pouch and started sewing as best he could with frozen hands. As light began suffusing their dusky vale, they saw a film of ice coating everything. They also saw better the place where the river ran into the earth — a roundish hole whose lip was encrusted with blue-green ice.

Renik tugged his beard in thought and ended with a shrug. "Ice in late spring. We descend into winter. It wasn't what I'd hoped for." His voice wasn't merry.

Kollen alternated hugging and pounding himself. He'd brought a spare tunic and a thick woolen cloak, and neither of them had stopped the cold from icing down his bones. He took his fire-crock from his pouch and gathered deadwood and entire scrub pines pulled up by the roots. He started a poor little fire while Renik squatted on his heels and watched the river pour into the ground.

CHAPTER 22 — TO SAVE THE GRAVE MEN DIGGING

Devi: Come, my friend, bend your back and follow so
you'll see what night's delights abide.

Benin: What do you propose to find inside
that quiet thought alone can't help you know?

— Josanante, *Ascent to the Underworld*

“Someone drilled this hole in the ground,” said Renik as he squatted with his back to the fire. Kollen gave him a warmed sea-biscuit impaled on a stick, which he munched without interest.

“Who?” said Kollen through chattering teeth. “My supposed giant with an auger as wide as a ship?”

“Maybe. Look at it. Do rivers carve holes like that? It isn't natural. Look beyond the lip of the hole, out there. The ravine continues along, and it's dry now, but the stones in it are rounded. The river used to flow right along past here, before someone made a hole to swallow it.”

Kollen's eye's followed his brother's outstretched arm, but he turned back to the fire. “So my joke was truer than jokes usually are. A giant does live here; he chewed his way to the surface for a drink. There's his mouth.”

“But a toothless one!” Renik said. His mood had swung around again, and he slapped his brother on the back.

We can still be gummed to death, thought Kollen.

They gave up their fire reluctantly and went to the edge of the hole. It was a perfect cone with a medium slope, and it reminded Kollen uncomfortably of the giant whirlpool the ocean had become around Mountain Isle. Near the edge of the stream, occasional droplets of water shot upward, freezing on the men's woolens. Kollen lay on the blue-green ice that caked the edge and peered downward. He saw the water smash into a frothing pool at the bottom where a perfect hole let the river pour into an unseen cavern, spouting back a great, hollow noise. Renik got down on his own belly and joined Kollen.

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“This can’t be it!” Kollen yelled over the rumble. “You’d have to be a squirrel with ice-picks for claws to climb down there!”

Renik pointed to the charm he’d pulled from his tunic and shrugged; it didn’t tug anymore, but rather hung at a visible angle in mid air toward the river-well.

“No,” said Kollen. “We aren’t meant to enter here.” He didn’t like the way Renik was staring down with a small smile. “Although you were right about the place,” Kollen said further, edging away and tugging his brother’s arm a little, “someone must’ve made this hole. Someone with Habran’s kind of power. So someone dug himself a breathing hole in the ground, or built sewers under the mountains. Come on,” he said as Renik wouldn’t budge, “think of it as another one of Habran’s riddles. We just *aren’t* supposed to descend here.”

Renik finally turned toward him. “Yes, it *is* a riddle, and I’ve solved it without Hrothe this time. This is the place. Wizards always want to descend to dark places. It’s their philosophy.” He crawled around the rim, with Kollen following, begging to know the thoughts he thought. Renik was silent, but he stopped when he was about a quarter of the way around from the water fall. There he grinned at Kollen as he belted his gear another notch tighter and spread out the canvas ground cover of their crude tent. “The riddle is this: the descent will be easy enough, but not the way up again. It’s like a few proverbs we know, isn’t it?”

Kollen rushed forward when he saw Renik’s plan, but his brother kicked his feet from underneath him — not a difficult trick on the ice — and sent Kollen sliding away from the rim of the cone.

“I wanted your company for the last few days,” Renik called, “but you shouldn’t follow me now. Good bye and pleasant journeys, brother! Get the lads home. And don’t worry! Remember the winters at uncle’s farm when we used to slide down the hill on barrel staves?” He sat on the canvas and disappeared over the lip.

Kollen scrambled up, fell and slid, then made it on the next try. But by then Renik had disappeared through the hole where the river poured under the ground.

Kollen stood there for several moments stamping in the cold and swearing obscenest oaths. Then he unfolded his half of the tent canvas and set it at the edge. He got ready, recalling how he’d always been able to find those hidden rocks and roots on that hill behind uncle’s farm. Kollen ran and flung himself atop the canvas, pulling the canvas

over his boot tips at the last moment. It took only a few seconds before he regretted this action, and by then he was committed. The canvas slid down the cone so fast that his hood pulled away from his head and let his hair flying loose straight behind and his scream froze in a throat too shocked to scream for his stomach compressed into his lungs with the speed of an abysmal plummet. The icy walls were glistening blur. The water was noisy whiteness. Then he flew across a gap of some kind where the river fell, and then he thudded almost gently back onto solid ground as the plummet continued and twisted in wide circle in the darkness. He was spinning, and then tumbled to a halt.

Kollen felt a heat in the bottom of his pants, and that was his only orientation for a long moment. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw Renik waiting right at his feet. He was laughing. Kollen just sat still and gasped, having taken that entire ride on one breath.

Renik settled down in a few moments and said, "Well met, brother, although it was a stupid thing to do. The spirit of childhood possessed you too! Or maybe you came to hear the last stanzas of my song?"

"No!" said Kollen. "I came because you didn't care to ask for the lantern I'm packing, which'll be worth your life's wealth in this underground, I tell you from experience!" Kollen took a well-wrapped storm lantern from his sack, and a greasy bladder of whale oil.

The river arose from a deep but narrow pool, on whose shore the men had been deposited by the well-planned cone-path. The water then plunged through a knife-cut ravine and further into the ground. The path was rough and steep at first, and Renik admitted the ship's lantern repaid itself at least twice. Later the tunnel leveled, and the river flowed with more dignity. The path was icy, so they made their slow journey, guided on the right by the rustle of the stream, on the left by ice-weaponed walls, and before them by a shallow cone of lantern light. But when they were becoming accustomed to the darkness and the new kind of travel, Renik pointed upward at dimly outlined features of the tunnel's roof. Up there were buttresses and vaults. They weren't regular or squared like the work of earthly masons. They were inspired by human works, but took their uneven, flowing symmetry from nature. It was if the ground had *grown* pillars and arches to support the roof overhead. And sometimes an ice-spear

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grown too large would crash down like a winter thunderbolt. One time the men found a tunnel that suddenly led off from the path and upward.

“So there seems to be another way out after all,” Renik said. He looked at his charm, and it tugged him down the main tunnel. He chuckled. “But it’s not my way. Kollen, I’m glad to have had you by me this far, but now I really want you to go back. Someone has to bring the lads home. You’re the only one with enough imagination to do it.” He silenced his brother when he began to protest. “And there’s nothing to do with courage. There’s plenty of trouble back where we came from. Test your courage there.”

“It has nothing to do with courage,” Kollen lied. “The blind-man life is my new trade. I’m going on.” And that settled the matter.

Later in the trek Kollen’s stomach was telling him the time, and the time was near supper when their weary trudging brought them suddenly up against a wall. Their ledge simply ran out where the tunnel converged and the river knifed deeply and quickly into the rock. They stared at the wall for several moments, dumbfounded in the broken rhythm of the hike, and numbed by the cascade of water that shook the stone. And perhaps stranger still was the fact that a dim glow peeked out from the tunnel as it proceeded at the other side of the river. Light! Perhaps an end to this morbid hiking.

They finally stirred and sat down on their sacks of provisions. They ate silently in the unnatural dusk. Then Renik crawled on his belly to the river edge. The rush was about fifteen feet below. Here its course was the narrowest they’d seen, about ten feet across. The water was a torrent, visible only as a thundering paleness in the depth. The flood sent a fine spray in the air, and from the spray rose a mist that was the source of the ice. Now Renik slid further over the edge of the ravine while his brother shouted something and grasped his legs. Renik ignored his brother until he saw what he had prayed for: a bridge over the stream, a somewhat brighter paleness that stood out from the rapids. It was a bridge of ice that the river mist had spawned. Probably it had grown over a period of years, each mote of water freezing and building up on the sides of the ravine until they met in the middle and joined both sides in a crystalline embrace.

Renik told Kollen about his discovery, who shrugged at the inevitable plan. Renik would try it first, holding the end of their tent rope that he would loop around the bridge. If he should slip, at least

he wouldn't be drowned in the stream. He edged to the arch and straddled it, slowly pulling himself along and sliding the loop of rope before him. Renik was past the middle of the span when the rope fell through a gap. In the dim light he didn't see the gap ahead of him. His hands clutched emptiness, he lost balance, and he saved himself only by straightening and kicking up his legs behind himself as counter-balance — a life spent straddling spars had saved him. Not daring to breathe in his absurd and dangerous position, he slowly reached forward and touched the opposite span. Its edge was sharp, the ragged remnant of vigorous chopping. Of course. The Tuc was somewhere ahead of them.

Renik pushed himself up gently and answered his brother's incessant calls. "Don't come near the edge," he shouted. "Small problem here." The bit of bridge under him was freezing his crotch. He pulled the dangling rope from the stream, coiled it, and threw it to the opposite bank. Then he reached ahead again to explore the remaining stump of the arch. It was small enough around to encompass with his arms. Good enough, he thought, and drew a dagger, held it point downward, edged himself to the very end of the arch and made a short leap, really a kind of frog-hop that got him far enough across the gap to wrap one arm around the stub and dig the dagger in for a sure hold with the other. He hung there with his eyes shut. He felt only his cutlass slapping his leg as it dangled. As Kollen began a frantic calling he pulled himself up and was on the solid bank with the speed that terror lends to the human frame.

Renik took only a moment to regain his breath before he spoke to still his brother's fears. Then he knew what he had to do. He went back to the stump and bashed the delicate arch several times with his cutlass. It didn't take much to chop the rest of the bridge into the flood and leave Kollen standing on the brink.

They faced each other without speaking for a moment, and then Renik shouted, "Take that side tunnel, Kollen. If you rise into the night, remember that this time of year the three stars of Aladann rise in early evening; just keep them at your back when they rise, and as they ascend keep them over your left shoulder. That'll get you going toward the lads." He threw the short rope over to Kollen, and stuffing his pouch with a few biscuits, threw over the sack of the remainder. "Can't have far to go, now. But I have another stanza for my song:

"My road is bright with spirit light,

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not with the glow of the living.
Men die away who roam away,
and save the gravemen digging.

“Sorry I can’t finish it for you. Maybe I’ll sing it in your dreams some night, eh brother?” And before Kollen could reply, Renik turned down the path.

* * *

The intensity of the spirit light grew to the level of early dusk, and Renik saw his destination a short time later. He paused where the river flowed into a lake as the charm dragged at his neck. An island humped up the middle of the lake, and on it sat a dome. The round, smooth structure struck doubt and fear into him, and he paused.

Then Renik looked up and found something to make him forget his fear and aching muscles. It had taken a moment for his eyes to adjust to the brighter light, and when they did, he saw how the roof of the tunnel had become an underworld sky. The sides of the great cavern curved over to meet the horizon, and so he knew the boundaries of the cave and judged it to be no more than a mile wide and about a half-mile high. The flowing buttresses were evident here, too. Their shadows spread like the arms of a starfish from the top center of the cavern and down its sides. From a small hill far across the cavern, he saw the source of light. It was like a great bonfire lit up there, but if so, it was the size of a small village, and the light it threw off was uncannily steady.

As he traced the confusing patterns of light and shadow — the cavern was brighter than the tunnel but not as bright as the good clean day — his eye strayed far over to his left. He saw other lights, now, not the bonfire of the hill top but rather the sharp, square points that suggested lighted windows. Some of them stretched up in lines, and others were scattered points along the distant shore of the lake or appeared singly on the far shore. Someone lived here, in palaces and isolated villas or hermit lodges. Renik stood there for long time, it seemed, and then he sat down and gazed for another long stretch. At some point he ate and drank again as he studied the spires and houses and ornate garden walls. And since the capacity for shock had been burned clean out of the man, he was sedate enough for the finer kind of wonder — what kind of courtly life might thrive there? What endless revels of the night might occur where dawn never came to end

them? Did no one sleep in such a life? Then he wondered if a guild of clock-makers flourished in the city, and if not, then this unchanging, timeless place could use one.

Eventually Renik stood up. He stretched and turned away, for the truth could hardly matter. The charm tugged inexorably toward that central isle and its dome. The city, as fantastical as it was, was not for him.

He trod the shore of the lake in search of a route to the island. As he walked he left the river behind him, and soon he noticed that the black waters had taken on a hard sheen. The thought didn't quite connect until he strayed too near the shore and slipped on the ice. It had been very cold for the entire journey, but the river had been too energetic to freeze. But away from the mouth, the lake had frozen. He looked back at the river and saw a band of black water where the current continued unhindered through the lake. He tested the thickness of the ice, and found that it cracked most uncomfortably. But further away from the current the ice thickened and only groaned slightly beneath his feet, as ice is wont to do, but he couldn't help thinking that a spirit of the place was lamenting his path. Anyway, the lake had become a bridge to his fate on the island. He walked across it, taking his time. Whatever he was to meet could damn well be patient.

This would have been a fine philosophy were it not for the impatient charm. The sailor had learned to live with its constant tugging, but in the walk across the lake the bauble became insistent. And now it had grown hot enough to warm his hands around. He took the strap from his neck. It almost pulled from his grip. He wound the strap on his wrist and regarded the curious thing. It strained like a small dog on a leash. Within a hundred paces the small dog had become a mastiff, and then Renik was flung on his face, dragged by a racing horse across the ice.

CHAPTER 23 — TIES THAT BIND

An unbreakable rope is a sailor's hope — Proverb

Renik tried to unwind the strap from his wrist, but it was flesh-tight. He groped for his dagger, couldn't find it, then for his cutlass, which rattled on his belt, and when he touched it, found it tangled in his tunic, impossible to draw. He gave that up, and tried again to unwind his wrist from the strap. He succeeded by grasping the charm and shaking the entrapped hand vigorously until the strap slipped over his hand. He roared with pain — the charm burned his fingers while his knuckles scraped against the ice, which was like a hard metal file as it flew beneath him. Renik finally released the charm and heard it whistle through the air; it smashed into the dome that rose before him; the noise echoed across the cavern, and a flash of red light accompanied the disintegration. He skidded to a halt, bumping against a smooth, hard shore.

So much for an unannounced arrival.

The island was round, and the lake was like a pool that had frozen around a statue's podium in a lord's garden. It climbed in steps to the dome in its center. This was clear, but something was disturbing and alerted him to a danger. He squinted eyes and drew his sword. The underworld light was bright to travel by but too dim for comfort. It was not the clear, cheery kind to which folk throw open their shutters and are forced to smile at the new day no matter what hard work follows breakfast. Rather, it was like swampfire — uncertain and sickly — in which corpses awake and open blue lips to curse life. That was the disturbing part. And, accordingly, Renik's eyes gradually understood that two uneven heaps near the door of the dome were pale bodies camouflaged in the general paleness of the isle.

He approached the bodies, lightly clothed and wearing bronze breastplates, and found them lying in blood that reflected the swampfire light; one, a woman, was stabbed in the unarmored back, the other a man, in the front of the throat and many times in the sides. They were tall, slender people. Their skin shone so white that it seemed to absorb the blood stains as a clear parchment page drank ink. He shrugged and walked to the arch when he noticed movement among the corpses. Not dead! Renik back stepped and drew his sword

although what he was going to do to the wounded woman rolling up upon her knees he hadn't a clue. The woman finally stood and felt at her back, looked at Renik in surprise, and felt up at her neck and seemed surprised again to find a necklace there. Casting another shuddering look at Renik, she turned attention to her partner, now starting to quiver, now to jerk, and roll. The terrible wound in the man's neck was exposed to sight, and so Renik saw it closing before his eyes. He stepped back again. Eventually the man stood, and saying no word to his companion but also seeming disturbed to find a necklace in place, walked off across the ice with the woman, leaving their weapons where they had fallen.

Renik took some deep breaths and came to himself. His numbed mind didn't seek explanation but rather moved by rote knowledge — his presence known to these strange folk, he had to get soon to business, whatever it was. He stumbled to the dome. Through the entrance he turned his gaze. Renik saw another arch inside, and then a third. Through the innermost arch he saw the suggestion of a shadow, perhaps a head at profile. He stopped. Then he took another deep breath and sighed it out, in that exhalation trying to rid himself of all the tension and exhaustion he suddenly felt. That didn't work, so Renik spit and simply stepped through the arch.

The gray flash of a blade fell toward him as he passed the entrance.

Renik jerked backward, and the weapon shaved a hair's thickness of skin from his nose. The sword sprang on the stone paving and turned the dome into a dull bell. The weapon drew up and back, and Renik jumped fully into the dome and turned toward the threat, bringing his cutlass in line with a crouching figure in front of him.

The Tuc had changed much since Renik had last seen him only days ago riding through the streets as a concerned leader. He had ridden his horse with a certain posture, an assured height in the world. Now the gleaming coat of paint was gone.

He was bent and shivering in dirty clothes. He held his slender sword in both hands, and its tip shook in the green light, its master's eyes squinting and staring with a madman's purpose along its length. The Tuc abruptly broke his posture and made several advances. A light saber is a wily foe against a heavy cutlass, but the Tuc didn't attack with art, but with short thrusts and slashes, using the weapon more like a prod and a whip than the shrewd blade it was supposed to

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be. The sailor backstepped and circled, easily deflecting the more dangerous of the attacks. After thirty or forty of such exchanges, Renik had developed a comfortably warm heat, warmer than he'd been for the last two days.

Soon the Tuc pulled back beyond the inner arch and fought for his breath. The man was badly done. His body shivered uncontrollably. The bones of his cheeks stood out and formed shadows on his jaws that made his face seem hollow and ancient. Even in the bad light Renik could see that his lips were blue. No doubt he'd made a frantically quick journey here, with no pause for food or shelter but for the dew on the grass and the cloth of his shirt.

"Give me the sword," said Renik, "then leave or stay, whatever you want. I'm not here for you."

The Tuc jumped back a step, and focused his eyes more intently than before. He made motions to speak, glanced all around, then looked back to the sailor with questioning brows. Renik made a guess.

"Do I look like one of your spirits? I've come here from Salazen, but I haven't flown — see, my boots are plenty worn."

The Tuc worked his mouth and croaked something, and failing in that, made ferocious motions toward the inner arch. Renik looked around the place for the first time. He was inside a dome that housed a dome. To his right the inner structure curved away and peaked perhaps forty feet above him. The Tuc made another vicious movement at the inner arch. Renik unslung his water skin and slid it over to the Tuc, who stared at it suspiciously for several moments before he relented and emptied the contents down his throat. The effect was surprising. The man fell back and breathed a sigh; then he grabbed his stomach and vomited a short gush of water. As his knees buckled, Renik took the moment to beat the Tuc's sword from his hand.

"You drank too quickly," Renik said. "How long since you've had a drink? Two days? Yet you followed a river for at least the past day. This may be deathland, but the water is good." Renik swept off his cloak and dropped it over the Tuc.

"Who do you think lives here?" Renik asked. The Tuc was watching him just as intently as before, but now he was bundled up in his borrowed cloak, huddled by the arch.

The Tuc answered roughly, "Him."

"Who?"

“*Him*,” the Tuc replied with vigor. From beneath the cloak he jerked a thumb at the arch. Renik went to the arch and the Tuc scrambled out to bar his way. “No! It’s *him*! I tell you, I saw him. Today and....long ago. Labors, oh my labors! I had to protect my people, poor people! I dug up the city’s best councilors, those judged well by history, and we spent many nights discussing the solution. Their silence at last told me what I had to do. Don’t stop me. I saw him through the eye of the temple. He’s a sickness. He has a black sword and rules black borderlands that spread like plague sores.”

Renik didn’t like this wild talk. He understood parts of it from what he’d learned from Hrothe. He guessed some of the remainder and now stood uncomfortably before the final piece of the mystery. Doubt chained one foot in midstride. Fear cemented the other foot, while terror crept from the home that lies in every person’s mind and began shrieking its mindless philosophy in Renik’s ear. He took them all in his hand and gripped them until his arm knotted into iron strands.

Such things were not supposed to happen to simple, working people, he thought. He hugged that outworn protection, then cast it aside.

“But they chained him up, didn’t they?” the Tuc was saying. “Kept *him* for themselves, took his power and gave themselves *forever*.” The man scrambled further before the arch as Renik moved closer. “No! I know it now. I know now—something simpler! Who could’ve known? The answer is too near the problem! Water! Life-giving water! He’s surrounded by it here. It’s a fence. We’ll chip ice from the lake and drown him in water!”

“What did it take to break a man like you?” said Renik as the Tuc rambled. “You became a monster while you thought you were fighting a monster. I can forgive that.” He approached the Tuc, who, comprehending Renik’s plan, threw himself at his own sword lying across the room where Renik had thrown it. The sailor rapped him on the head with the flat of his cutlass. The Tuc went easily to unconsciousness. “A blow of sleep, not death, since the judge himself is imperfect.”

Indeed, he and the Tuc were rather similar — brothers, of a strange kind. One a shipmaster, the other a city-master. Both, too, leaders of mercantile communities. Both of them hoarders of the same goods that Renik had seen burning in the warehouse at Salazen.

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“We’re too similar,” he said to the unconscious man. “This is a strange place and a strange world, and all of it is getting stranger every day. But now I’m at the end, nearly. Let me hasten forward, wind at the back, to the black lee shore.”

Renik stepped through the inner arch and found a third and final dome. Here there was a door that evidently slid aside on great, bronze rollers. The slab of stone was operated by a crank attached to gears and rods. It was a complex, massive affair, fit for locking in a dragon. Renik paused and tried the crank, ensuring that he couldn’t be locked in from the outside once he entered the central dome. However much he strained, he could hardly move the crank.

And at the end of his inspection, as he sighed and steeled himself to enter, a whimper caught his attention. He raised his sword, but the rotten quality of the light masked the source of the noise until he dropped his sight to the floor. A giant white creature was crouched around the edge of the portal. It couldn’t really hide because of its size, although its milky white hide blended into the light walls. It was a man of sorts, a giant albino man simply clothed and manacled at the ankles, and he was trying to stuff himself between the crease of wall and floor to no avail.

“A slave,” Renik said aloud. He noted the muscles on the giant; they looked fit for cranking huge cranks. “What a doorman you are, sir. What an oar you could pull! Who scared you, giant? The Tuc? Well you might be scared, I guess. Stay there, stay scared.”

The giant whimpered as Renik spoke, peering from behind fingers spread across his oddly baby-like face.

Renik passed the last arch. Inside, he faced a high chair that was fenced in by three sets of chains that hung on nine posts. The top chain was gold, the middle silver, and brown iron the last. A blindingly white cloak was neatly draped across an arm of the chair, and a man squatted in front of this throne, toying with several objects. He looked up at Renik and gave him a wide smile of welcome. Renik knew him: he was the man who’d visited him and Hrothe while they drifted on the sea, the man whom Hrothe had seen in the water puddle on the deck of the *Luck* and while on the longboat, and, probably, the apparition that Kollen had seen on the mages’ ship. A fenced-in man who moved ghost-like through the world.

Renik sat down on the floor with his back to the wall. Here were enough mysteries for the sharpest scholar, but no immediate solutions or ends to adventures.

* * *

Kollen ran through the flying leap in his mind. He would light the oil lamp and turn it up brightly so that he could see where to step. He would throw his gear across the chasm. Then he would run, plant his foot on that rocky patch that wasn't iced over, and leap for that small suggestion of a stump of the bridge that still projected from the far wall. Of course, he would have to wrap it around with both arms in the most tenacious hug of his life, although the icy remnant tapered rather alarmingly.

But he wasn't as crazy as Renik. Kollen had turned back for that side tunnel, although the word 'coward' struck hot irons in him. And now that side tunnel was leading nowhere. True, it was alluring enough as seen from the main tunnel. Kollen had turned down the entrance and found himself in a small, natural cave. But the cave suddenly constricted and there followed a short tunnel. Kollen felt his way ahead until he found another cave. He had started being worried long ago. He cradled his lamp as if it were his infant child, and he gazed long into its tiny flame. Then onward he continued, finding another constriction through which he crawled for some time. The tunnel wouldn't end and eventually turned distinctly downward. Kollen swallowed bitter disappointment and sat in the darkness for a rest. He moved on when the lamp began to flicker. More time passed, and the tunnel heightened. Another cavern, and another jagged tunnel. But when he came to the next tunnel, a breeze blew out the lamp. A paralysis of will made Kollen watch as its wick faded to a red star in the night, then snuffed out entirely. His coals from the day-old fire had probably gone out by now, and the lamp oil was nearly gone, besides. He shrugged, allowing himself several moments to relearn the senses of blindness. And being recently practiced in the trade, he went forward at a respectable pace.

The realization struck him as he slid into the darkness one more time between caves: these passages might well lead nowhere, unlike the purposeful tunnel down which he and Renik had come. The possibility numbed him so much that, when he finally entered into a

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huge, well lit space of distant sights, he walked several paces before he knew it wasn't just another cave.

Then he fell dumbfounded to his knees. He knelt in grass that was bled to whiteness, but he ran his hands through it as if it were the green lawn of an upland meadow. He fell backward and stared up at the airy heights of this new terrain. A bird might have been confined in its flights under that roof, but values must be judged fairly against the times. Kollen breathed deeply. In the last few hours he'd felt suffocated, whether from excess or depletion of air, or from a weighted mind, he didn't know. Only the open space mattered.

He was in a small valley. To either side the stony walls tilted upward steeply, and from the ledges hung a curious moss, colorless like the grass, that fell in bushy masses. The confines of his valley suddenly became bearded faces — here a knob formed a crooked nose, there a ledge was a brow or chin. But Kollen hiked merrily between those faces, for hadn't he predicted to Renik the existence of earthy beings where they were going?

He was beginning to warm up to his pace when the sounds of fighting beyond the rise broke the pastoral charm. Thinking it might be Renik in trouble, Kollen drew his only weapon, Botha's dagger, and broke into a run. At the top of the rise he threw himself to his belly and crept up to assess the fight.

New sights! A city lay a quarter mile to his left, mansions, and towers and plazas burning in the witchfire that lit this underworld. A glassy lake abutted the city and in its midst was a circular island. But directly before him was a chaotic plain of knolls, ravines, and dells, all so irregular with jumbled stones and wild growth that lay amidst smooth lawns of grass that it seemed like a place where an architect had left his unused building material. And in this chaotic landscape, combatants fought on a smoothly lawned dell in front of him.

They were strange folk, tall and slender, and terribly pale where their skin showed from behind shields and armor. Their features were sharp and drawn, their eyes uncommonly large as if they were perpetual witnesses to wonders and horrors. The defenders were now three to the four remaining attackers. Several bodies lay on the grass. Kollen had decided to stay out of the battle when he saw that one of the remaining defenders, suddenly fallen to two, was a woman of exotic beauty. Perhaps she was darker than the others and thus had more of the hue of life, or her features less predatory, or perhaps it

was the way in which she boldly picked up a fallen man's spear and launched it. Like the men, she was simply clad in a shirt and knee-length kilt, although a circlet of gold formed a splash of color across her forehead, and a bronze breastplate was strapped on her. Now the second to last defender fell quaking to the grass as a spear impaled his throat and stood a gory length behind. The woman took up his spear and backed against a mass of boulders. The light framed the fall of hair over her shoulders and her straight body.

Kollen had never performed heroics as a trade, finding more pleasure in hearing the market-place singers tell of epic battles than actually testing the notion himself. In fact, he was more apt to consider any of his scrapes with fist or sword as some kind of error requiring a sterner schoolmaster in the art of stealth and wits (a philosophy nurtured by Hrothe's quiet cleverness). His recent adventures were one exception where he'd been swept up in the exaggeration of the times. Now the next exception: this attack by skinny demons against a lone woman, and no granting of mercy at this stage of victory.

He watched as the warriors withdrew, consulted each other, and then commenced to gather up a few spears and toss them at the woman from a distance. He came quietly down the hill as the woman dodged one spear and readied herself for another. Kollen threw his dagger at the unarmored back of one man and at the same time took a sword from the hand of a corpse. The man was feeling at his back as he crumpled, and the second was turning. The warrior was quick and long-reached and met Kollen's blade skillfully. But when he had the chance to see his foe, the warrior's face dropped and he called out a few unfamiliar words. By then the third warrior knew of the ambush, and he wheeled around to keep both Kollen and the cornered woman in his sight. He too looked on with amazement. Both warriors regrouped and spoke quickly together. The tips of their weapons shook.

Kollen glanced sidelong at the woman and saw that she too regarded him strangely, and backed up more tightly against the wall. Kollen wondered if his face had somehow transmuted into that of a lizard's during his stumbling around in the dark, or if he'd caught a fast-acting plague there. He had the frantic and absurd desire that the battle be over so that he might use his bright sword as a mirror. But now one warrior hefted his spear and the other a sword. The time was

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now, and Kollen charged ahead before the spearman could stick him from a safe distance. He dodged aside twice and the spear went amiss. Then he engaged them both at close quarters, wishing he'd spent some of his precious coinage on that sword master whom Fenward's nobility hired for their young bravos. Still, fear infused him with a sharpness of wits and speed of arm. As for his enemies, they fought demoniacally, but their very frenzy fouled many of their attacks as if they were unskilled at cooperation.

In the midst of one such a blunder Kollen lunged and caught a sword blade next the hilt and swept it down and off to the side; the weapon spun onto the grass. He continued his lunge and stabbed the leg of the second, and pulled himself from between them and flipped the tip of his blade across the throat of the weaponless man. Then he drew back completely from his stratagem to survey the damage.

The warrior with the cut throat fell with a bubbling word and moved no more. The wounded man rolled away holding his knee, and in that moment the woman went to him, probed for a gap in his armor with her spear tip, and dispatched him with emotionless efficiency. Then *she* drew back and watched Kollen. Kollen's attention was divided equally between his foes and his supposed ally. Far from feeling any victory, he was more interested in the way the colorless grass drank in the long spurts of blood and soaked up its color. His recent joy at the lighted open space was fading into an unexplainable melancholy.

Kollen turned to the woman and said: "Mercy isn't practiced here."

She stared at him the way *he* had stared at the strange creatures the tide had thrown up on Akrem's shore. Kollen's discomfort grew into irritation. He raised his sword to his face, but could see only a garbled image of himself past the dewdrops of blood.

"Yes, I *am* human," he replied with some heat, "and if you can't understand my tongue, you can still thank me."

She answered by sticking her weapon point down in the soil. Kollen considered this, and stuck his sword off to the side. She came forward a step, and so did he. She pointed to his arm, where a scratch from the fighting let out a small spring of blood. Suddenly she came all the way forward and ran a finger through the sticky stream. Her exploratory finger led up his arm and down to his hand, trailing a red line behind. She held his hand for an uncomfortable span of time.

Uncomfortable, because she was so beautiful and appealing while they stood in rivulets of blood that steamed in the cold air. And her clasp was hot, feverishly hot, and thus Kollen was surprised when she finally said with shocked pleasure in her face, “Your blood is burning!” This was doubly surprising because he had been shivering with the chill of the place. He broke free of her clasp and walked to the lip of the rise where he’d dropped his cloak and sack of provisions. He pondered her speech, which he would not have understood if she hadn’t spoken slowly. And only his long association with Hrothe, who knew more than one archaic dialect, allowed him to follow her words at all. Her words had age behind them, in more than one way.

The woman followed him up the slope. He looked at her and the dream-city beyond, and she continued to study him.

“You’re a man from above,” she said slowly, and with equal sloth: “we have always killed intruders.”

“Do you kill those who help you, and are these dead folk here intruders?”

“No, and no,” she said after thinking about it, and there the conversation stood for some time until she took his hand again. This time he didn’t take it back, because her grip warmed his own numb fingers.

Although they communed silently for several moments, the woman suddenly picked up the talk they’d left off. “But the people from above are not our allies.” A span of odd eye-gazing ensued. Kollen shifted on his feet, embarrassed and confused. Yet he resolved himself to hold her delicate pink eyes locked in his until she spoke again. “But *I* won’t kill you. Come with me, but pick up a sword and shield. Our mages have climbed the Thousand Steps and gazed on the blinding stars, and they saw Tahan ascending toward the Moon’s jaws. The games are not done, and spears sprout from every hidden place.”

They descended the slope, and Kollen took up weapons. The woman stopped to collect necklaces from each of the fallen. She went about this with great ritual, and named each of the dead as she took their ornaments, and twice counted the number fallen. And yet as she stood and looped the necklaces around the crook of her arm, the dead were rolling and sitting up even as Kollen watched. He gripped his sword and raised it, but he didn’t move because the woman came

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beside him and watched the horrible reassembly with a dispassionate eye. It was reassembly, indeed — wounds closed as if invisible stitchers worked at the seams. The process was not completed before the woman tugged Kollen on the elbow. “Come, they are no danger. They must go to the temple, and if they don’t, they’ll be found and brought. Come.” She shouldered a spear, and then they departed through the maze of hillocks. Kollen’s last glance showed him his former foes lined up and staring sad-eyed at his back, and then he jogged to catch up to his companion.

Kollen suddenly recalled that she hadn’t asked his name nor he hers. He opened his mouth, then shut it, unwilling to break the silence.

CHAPTER 24 — CITY ON THE EDGE OF ALWAYS

Heave m' lads, and haul away!
Why don't you break your backs today?

O master o' ship, we fear we're sick,
we've drunk too much and our stomachs are ripped.

Pull m'boys, split out your groin,
your legs are levers, your cocks are toys!

O master o' tide, sorry, we've lied:
we've dreamt of Death; o'er sea he rides.

You're liars all, so won't you haul?
That's not what I heard in the drinking hall.
So heave ho, so haul away!
You rolled into port where red wine pours,
with drink in your heads you lost your course,
you slept on a tomb and woke with a corpse.
And that was your fright,
and the yard-arm 's high,
so rest tonight.
— Old short-haul chantey from Salazen

It took about half an hour to pass carefully through those wild lands up to the walls of the city. They passed scattered patches of fields where obscenely thick crops were growing. The plants seemed to be moving of their own accord, but then Kollen discerned workers in the fields; they were very tall and as pale as the crops they tended so that the slaves — their legs were shackled — seemed to be a part of their own crop. He and his guide approached the city wall, where fruit trees grew along the edges, and their branches, too, were hung with bloated fruits. It seemed that life thrived in the underground place, without even the clean sunlight. But Kollen didn't like the looks of the odd harvest.

They entered the city through a postern gate for which the woman had a key, and passed down a narrow avenue and into a wider one that

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crossed it. She hurried him down between towering houses. These buildings seemed to have grown from the side of the cavern, no building having a seam of any kind, unless it was between door and jamb, window and shutter. The city was built on huge proportions, masoned in a smooth, glass-like stone, and Kollen saw that the streets were empty. They passed down another avenue of strangely wide proportions for the lack of traffic, and they passed under a grand arch of a palatial building, and up a spiral staircase. She bounded ahead, towing him by the hand until they came, panting, to a locked door. Kollen gripped his sword until his palm hurt, fearing at any moment an attacking horde of white demons. But his companion finally stopped fumbling her key and opened a heavy stone portal that slid aside on rollers. Together they pushed the door shut and threw its bolts. Kollen caught his breath, not knowing what he was supposed to fear.

The woman leaned against the door and watched him as he studied the sparsely but richly furnished place. Across a deep room an arched window pierced the wall to the outside; now it was shuttered with an intricate lattice that let through most of the light. A couch flanked by low tables lay against the left hand wall. He saw a niche and the edge of bed posts on the right. On one of the walls hung a tapestry whose undefined forms suggested curious ideas about art. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. He jumped, then turned around with more dignity and fell into a slow but deep embrace. He turned away from her pink gaze, but she turned his chin back with a firm hand. His sword clanged as it bounced against the hard floor. Her breastplate bonged as it slid down and away. Then she clung to him as she began a minute study of his face. After an awkward pause her hands went to work; she had love on her mind and Kollen surprised himself when his organ rose instantly, reflecting as he began to cooperate that his most forbidden and erotic dream had come alive.

She pushed him to the bed niche, pressing into him so that their curves came together and matched as the parts of a carpenter's inlays. There was much of unreality in the act, in the way they met like long-sundered lovers who'd forgotten all but the memory of attraction. But the entire adventure had lost all pretense at being commonplace, and with that justification, he fell wholeheartedly into a companionship with the nameless woman.

Later, Kollen awoke from a doze and immediately cursed himself for loving and resting while Renik could be in so much trouble. He stretched beneath the coverings, and watched his breath form a cloud of steam. He was sore, his companion having encouraged him in wild and lengthy sports. Lengthy, he knew, only by memories and strained muscles, for otherwise there was no way of telling time. The same glow poked through the lattice window, at the same angle, with the same brightness or dimness. He arose and left his friend in a deep sleep. She didn't stir. There was a chamber pot in an open niche, and he urinated in it. As he finished he spied again the disturbing tapestry. Shivering, he dressed and studied the piece, and found that it was formed from a complex pattern of interweaving from which one could see hints and shadows of human faces. The longer he stared, the more faces he found, like a magic mirror. Kollen tore his gaze away and rubbed his eyes. The artist was a genius of great skill and insanity.

He sat on the couch and watched the unmoving woman. He found food under a covered dish, something like bread and cheese; he wondered if they had albino cows down here, and if their milk was whiter than white. He ate the tasteless stuff, studied again the decorations of the room, and the woman still slept. He threw open the shutters and studied the amazing city from his height of four stories. He thought he saw people crossing the avenue at some distance; the place wasn't entirely deserted. After more time passed, Kollen became distinctly impatient. The woman continued to lie in a deathlike sleep. He gently shook her. Nothing. Suddenly he began to fear that she was indeed dead. Kollen rubbed his rough chin and started sweating at the idea of having slept with a corpse.

He sat on the edge of the bed and studied his dilemma, and the woman suddenly moaned a little, and mumbled a word or two. Kollen turned around quickly and shook her, but she only smiled faintly and lolled in her slumber. Well, she was alive, although she acted as if she'd been drugged.

He decided. Renik might well have come to the city by another route. What else was down here to come to? Kollen resolved to scout around the city and return later to the woman's chamber. There was a chest at the foot of the bed, and he sought through it for something he might wear in disguise. Luckily, the men and woman of the city didn't seem to dress differently. He found a hooded cloak made of silky material like spun spider webs, and he threw it over his

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shoulders. He took up his sword and slung his shield, and opened the thick portal. On his last look, the woman still slept, and he pulled the door shut.

Kollen explored the city for an hour and then returned to the room of his friend, who had apparently not moved since he'd left her. He found a jar of water and drank, and returned to the cold food, and ate. Then he leaned on the sill of the window and thought about what he'd seen.

The size of the city was all out of proportion to the numbers of inhabitants. He'd seen exactly eight people in his wanderings, two of them staring aimlessly through windows, a few passing by. Something else nagged the edge of his mind. He'd been disturbed by the proportions, or designs of the buildings. Of course, the structures were huge and built with unearthly techniques. And something else, a subtler worry beneath the perceptions: the city was too straight and perfect, simple and undecaying, imposing, hard, cold, and towering with detached magnificence. He couldn't narrow his aim to the core of his discomfort. Perhaps it was the cold. And the perpetual dim light.

"You haven't rested well," said the woman, which startled Kollen and almost sent him for a dive from the window. She had sat up in her bed with no signs of a sudden wakefulness; her eyes were large and bright.

"I rested well and had time to explore your city. I borrowed your cloak."

She didn't seem too pleased at this, and repeated the warning that all strangers are killed on sight. But despite the dire warning, she slipped from the bed and wrapped around Kollen, kissing him deeply. The appropriateness of death threats next to love-making was not clear to the man. He pulled away.

"Why? Why are your people hidden here? Why do they hate strangers?"

She smiled as she might at a child's questions. "Why should we not hate thieves? Why should we not fear? We have what all humankind will kill their closest friend to have. Haven't you come to steal it, my dark lover? Fear nothing from me; I understand. You saved my life, and we, too, know about debt and payment. I can pay you with what you seek."

"What am I seeking?"

“My lover makes riddles. Good, if you can tell me something new. You want to kill the death in yourself. This desire shall be realized, if you promise me two things.”

He should have been amazed, shocked numb. Instead he was standing there like a reasonable man listening to reasonable conversation. He knew she wasn't lying. Their disaster-ridden quest after Habran's treasures had lead him here, after all. Of course, they had *known* that something dread awaited them where Hrothe's charm led. Kollen had felt sure it would be Habran himself, sitting in mystic splendor on a throne, extending his hands for the treasures they should have by now collected. Kollen had devised a few fables concerning how they'd lost those magic objects, just in case the great mage was in an asking mood when they met.

But instead Hrothe's hints had shot true on the mark: Habran had taken his secret of immortality to a hiding hole.

“What must I promise?” Kollen asked slowly.

She said, “That you stay with us.”

“And the second?”

“That you stay with me,” she said, drawing him to the couch and intertwining both arms and a leg tightly around him, “because your blood warms me. I felt your heat before we ever touched, and I saw your glow before I saw your face.”

Kollen searched her eyes and spoke, avoiding contractual terms: “The terms seem fair, the reward more than enough.” A life spent straddling the middle of black and white had taught Kollen to avoid the total truth with a straight face.

The vague lie seemed enough. She untangled herself from him and studied him closely, then offered her hand. “We'll go now. You're the best treasure I've had in all my time. Our laws have a flaw in their policy toward the sunward people. It is numbers we should fear, but not the one man.”

Kollen found his sword, cloaked himself, and helped her with the great portal. “How old are you?” he suddenly asked.

She answered with a proverb: “Those who count eternity quickly fall asleep.”

* * *

“I sacrificed the lives of good men, my ship, my livelihood, all to come here and speak a word with you.” Renik paused, searched for

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words, and found more before the echoes of his opening speech died. “Sir, I’ve stripped from me both the materials and philosophies I’ve held since boyhood. I deserve nothing more than a reason for these transformations, and I now demand it.” He finished, and being too tired to bow before this speechless judge, reclined instead to a polite slouch against the wall of the dome. The man behind the triple chains sat cross legged and rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. A thick gold chain curled away from his ankle and led to his throne, where it was stapled. Its clanking was the only sound from the man.

Renik was more than ever confused. “I don’t know why I’m the hub of wonders and calamities. Had punishment been required for a life of guilt, then it were better to have drown me in the flood or strike me with the plague.” The man behind the chains inclined his head in a way that might have signaled acceptance of Renik’s reasoning, or agreement, or.... whatever.

The shivering white giant whimpered a little from his hiding place around the corner.

“What made that creature so full of fear? He has the strength to break either of us, if he had the will. Maybe he knows more than I. Should I be terrified?” The man shrugged and raised both hands.

Renik got up and peeked around the corner to check on the jailer and the Tuc; both were still prostrate, although the giant tried shrinking into the wall when it heard Renik’s footfalls. When the seaman returned to the silent man, the fellow was toying with a small figurine. It was a perfect resemblance of Renik. The man suddenly produced another of Kollen. The seaman took up a cross-legged position and pulled his beard.

“A long-lived Habran?” he said.

The silent man nodded.

“Who else could it have been? Who but a wizard with his wizard’s tokens? I’ve seen mirrors used as wizards tools, as well. Bring out mirrors with your sleight o’ hand tricks and show me again to myself.”

The silent man did indeed produce a mirror as if by sleight-of-hand trick, although Renik knew better — that nothing here was a trick. Habran showed the mirror to Renik. Renik hesitated, shrugged, leaned over, paused again, then leaned over some more to peer in it. He launched himself backward at the sight of a skull that stared back.

And as he regained his first startled breath, the lines of the room began to quiver. He became dizzy and had to blink to bring the room to clarity, although the room continued to shift perspective with a dreamlike quality. People and landscapes rolled across his vision, the world passing by with the speed of storm winds. He saw the mad crowds of Akrem attacking the *Luck*. Then the scene shifted to the fortress of Salazen and the fight on the walls. He saw himself fighting the ten soldiers, and his leap aboard the dry-docked ship and its short voyage, and the similarly short voyage of the *Luck*. The images snapped away with an audible ‘clink’ just as he watched himself turn the bow of the ship to the wrecking shore.

The silent man squatted in front of him, smiling in a friendly way. He had stood the little Renik-mannequin on top of his mirror so that object and image touched at the roots. Renik was suddenly reminded of the way one’s shadow could almost disappear under one’s feet at high noon.

Renik grinned a little. The silent man grinned more broadly.

“There’s a depth under us all, are you saying? Not long ago Hrothe said my ability to steer a straight course was my strength and my weakness. And people like you bring out that depth and jerk us along at rope’s end like puppets. That makes me...”

The silent man shook his head and tapped the Renik-mannequin on the mirror once.

“No? So a man’s madness is his own, and our depth is our own magic. You nod again. But you *did* have a hand in our affairs — at Akrem, where all hands turned against us yet foiled the mage’s plans to recapture us, and at Salazen, where I was protected from the mage’s spells as I searched for Hrothe and my brother. More nods! Hrothe figured it all out. So now I understand. You helped us come here with good speed. I understand all but this; why am I here? To unchain you? I don’t know why: you seem to do well enough even while you’re chained. Didn’t they know enough to chain your powers as well as your ankle?”

The silent man shook his head and scribed an arc with his finger above his head, and a vision of stars suddenly filled the room. The vision flickered, the stars moved, the planets wove among them even faster, as did the moon, until all suddenly froze in the familiar spring sky that Renik knew. The Flame of Anraa hung a bit above the

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horizon, and the stars swirled away to form a chain that the Flame burned through.

“I understand something of that,” Renik said. “Hrothe and the seawoman talked about the sky. You wizards, you all live with your noses in the air, chins tilted upward. The stars and planets have aligned somehow, and then there’s that flame in the sky, the damned thing. A special year, full of magic. Lucky stars, somebody’s stars, but not mine.”

The silent man would only slant his head and shrug.

This one-sided council was tiring Renik. *He* had come to ask questions but seemed to be doing most of the answering himself.

He leaned against the wall, vowing to say no more. It was to be a staring game, and Renik would out-stare the man until the end of time, or until supertime, whichever ever came first. But the man didn’t quite stare back and play the game. He climbed the two steps of his dais to the throne, the chain clinking like a series of tiny bells as it wound snake-like along the edges of the steps, and he swept his cloak around himself. There he stood for several moments like a statue carved in frozen speculation. Renik expected more of the dream-visions; they didn’t come.

The fellow kept his statuesque position until Renik took back his vow and began to squirm. He was aware of a queer change in the silent man, who seemed to be slumping as if he were falling to sleep on his feet. No, it wasn’t that. His clothes were slumping. His waist reduced, and the belt fell, its buckle jingling on the stone. Little clods of flesh fell from the bone and plopped on the dais like the filling of a sausage falling from the butcher’s table. Sinews unsprung like the over-taut wires of a harp, and organs slipped entire from under the white fingers of the man’s rib cage. Long before the transformation was complete, Renik was plastered against the wall of the dome. Great flashes of heat made sweat soak his woolens while his teeth chattered with chill. The change was only partly done, however. The apparition stood on a multitude of domes, some fresh, glistening with fatty, wet tissue, others yellowed and toothless. It took up a skull and studied it dispassionately. Again the apparition changed as fluidly as clay in the potter hands until the scene froze into a marble statue of a man. It seemed cold and inhuman, a stone god cold enough to suck heat from a bright day, and stiff enough to grace the lid of a tomb. Somehow this statue was more terrifying than the horrific

decomposition that had just passed; it was a form to haunt eerie dreams, a fit shape to stand framed in chilly white temples or as the figurehead of a plague ship. Renik covered his face.

When he looked up again the handsome, silent man was back with his sad smile of understanding. Renik caught his breath, and suddenly knew he had been screaming, and that his screams had been joining with those of the albino giant.

“You know who he is *now*, do you not?”

The Tuc staggered into the room trailing his saber, whose tip made a screeching sound as it dragged across the stone. Unrestrained emotion reddened and formed his face. His eyes were huge and unblinking; his hand relaxed around the hilt of his weapon. Renik licked his lips and forced his heart back down his throat; whatever Habran was or meant, the Tuc was now an immediate danger. He was a danger because he was in a region of madness where he was comfortable, where he was fully aware of the different rules by which the world might be known. Not quite human anymore, the Tuc had left behind some of his human vulnerability.

The Tuc brought up the tip of his sword and drew a circle in the air. Renik watched it with fascination. He made no move yet for the hilt of his cutlass, whose weight pressed invitingly upon his thigh.

The Tuc faced him. A trace of blood from Renik’s tap traced an outline down his forehead and cheek. He spoke from blue lips, but he’d regained some kind of oratorical power that must have once nailed disputatious councilors to their seats.

“I introduce you, sir, to our evening guest, Death’s prime minister — in fact, I think, through a leap of philosophy, Death himself. I am convinced. Do not rise! He’s not our guest — unless a guest in a fashion. What shall we serve him, then? The seeds of spring, a spring chicken, a rose in bloom and dethorned? No, serve kind with kind, the scythe with the avenging sword!”

He leaned toward Renik. The blue, quivering lips tensed, squeezed out a whisper as if they were in secret consultation.

“Sailor, I bear you no ill will. Only this: I *am* angry you gave me so little time to tell you the greatest truth, which is — that death can be killed! This man here has stolen his sword, mimicked the owner, *became* the owner, and the cure is gotten from the disease itself. He set up his kingdom, but the kingdom revolted, cast down their ruler and chained him here. Why? Do you know why? They share his taint!

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The demigods are misers and fight amongst themselves for more life than even immortality can give! They have his sword, but I'll get it — *we'll* get it, why not? An alliance! An alliance of the clean upperworlders against this tainted stock. We'll get this sword, this black sword that sucks in life like a drain whirlpools water to its center. I saw it in my dreams. The magic of the Dome showed it to me. I could never feel warm after that. No fur jacket was ever thick enough."

The Tuc now stared at the silent man.

"This hoarder of life is mine. Did you know you cannot hoard up a stack of coins without making ten men go poor? Too late I learned that. You've been jailed for the wrong reasons, jailed behind indissoluble essence, gold and silver, the immortal metals, and iron, though rusting, the gift of strength from the gods to humankind! But the jailers have been too kind or too stupid. Binding is not enough. Killing does all. And then life! I'll give it to prince and beggar alike. This poisoned race has wrested eternity for themselves. Not I. Not now is greed a fault of mine."

The Tuc advanced on the man behind the chains.

Habran took another step back but fixed his gaze on Renik. Neither appeal nor command lit his expression.

Renik stood up and took his cutlass, comforted by the thought that he was more confused than ever and it was time to simply let fighting instincts mercifully take over the situation. Of Death and Immortality he knew no more than a horse. He was a sailor, a salt-sprayed merchant.

"Around the other side," said the Tuc. "He can dodge around his chair, but two of us will be hammer and anvil!"

The man slipped over the chained enclosure, while Habran kept the chair between himself and his attacker. Yet Renik remained a while outside the chains while the Tuc approached the chained man.

Well, Renik mused, maybe I know Death, just a bit. Death is father and mother, a few rotted bones under a grassy mound. Every spring I go up there to see if they are washing out after the heavy rains. Death is my poor crewmen floating in the sea, inflated with the vapors of rot, nibbled by the cousins of the fish they themselves had eaten. I am myself death, began dying at birth and am now an expert at it. I have even made my living on death, a ship built of dead trees, pine ever green, and old oaks felled.

Renik and the silent man stared each other in the face. The eerie captive offered no advice. The sailor decided *that* was simple honesty. He liked that, and he finally entered the enclosure and straightaway launched an attack against the Tuc.

Renik was no philosopher, no scholar. But didn't he learn that the handsomest merchants were often the most crooked men, and a well-painted ship might still suffer from a rotten keel? The best deals a bane?

He had hoped it would be a treacherously quick blow. The Tuc waited for the cooperation that didn't come, which instead appeared as a sudden thrust of Renik's blade. But what should have worked on a normal man didn't work on the madman. The Tuc, too, was fighting for a fundamental cause, a most important one, he thought. He dropped the tip of his sword and performed an impossible parry.

The two heroes met in the arena, the light, razor-like blade against the heavy cutlass. Renik beat aside three life-taking thrusts in as many seconds, gave back a thrust and a slash, and was beat back against the throne by a gale of thrusts and disengages from his own counterattacks. He fell against the arm of the throne and rolled over backwards across the chair in a leap a street performer might have envied. All the while the steely rasps and grunts echoed through the dome and reverberated and circled through the air, turning the inside of the room into a dissonant bell tower. They entered into several blurred exchanges of three and four thrusts and parries. The Tuc broke rhythm, unexpectedly resorting to his edge, and Renik got at last the facial scar he'd always envied in other adventurous men.

And then Renik saw himself in the Tuc — saw himself in a contorted mirror. There he was, paler, thinner, twisted to new heights and lengths. The two images labored in unison toward similar but reversed goals. He leaned forward, the Tuc did too; Renik's blade thrust outward, the Tuc's met it. Their sweat popped from the same pores and arched through the air in the same curves, splattering the floor.

Renik almost died when that mirror image of himself betrayed the rhythm again with a cunning maneuver; the Tuc's sword paused, Renik parried empty air, and then the Tuc thrust. Renik recovered and fought on, but he didn't glance again at the face within his reach.

Renik was sure he'd left finger marks around the hard hilt, if it was indeed a sword he held and not a red hot bar, the weight of a tree

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trunk. He was losing the exchanges. His arm was paying the price of the heavier weapon. Blood sprouted from several cuts he hadn't noticed, and he'd not yet given the Tuc a scratch. The seaman slipped in his own blood and took another thrust in the side, but the thin blade bent on a rib. There was a way, he knew. He took a precious moment of concentration to map out in his mind the strategy. Precision. It must be absolute precision.

Renik moved his guard to cover his right side, then shifted his left shoulder into the line of attack as if he were straightening himself to leap forward. The Tuc missed no opportunity and feinted once and then thrust through the exposed shoulder. Precision! Now, Renik bit his lip through and pushed himself up the thin blade so the Tuc couldn't withdraw it. A punch of nausea shivered the sailor, and then his cutlass swung an arc and carved the Tuc's neck.

Renik realized that the chime sounds had stopped in the chamber. He suddenly knew with startling clarity that Habran had not moved throughout the entire battle except to avoid the two warriors. And now aware of a pain, Renik remembered that sword transfixing his shoulder. He dropped the cutlass and drew the thing out, fainting after that. He awoke face down to the floor, his cheek stuck to the stone with his own blood. Stirring, he sat up and saw that Habran sat cross-legged by his side. Renik felt dismayed until he decided that the fellow really had no power beyond his shadow games. Maybe it was that chain on his ankle. Renik sat up as best he could; his left arm and shoulder were useless but for the pain they lent to make waking life distinct from nothingness.

"Always too late learned," he muttered through dry lips, "the world is fair in the accounting of debts." He made the supreme effort and stood up, and he took his sword, swung it in great whistling circle, and hacked free the three encircling chains from their posts, and then the golden chain on the silent man's ankle, all to finish the task to which everything had led. The final ring of the cutlass against the stone floor was the tone of a gong that ended a festivity or announced the judgment of a king.

Now gray forms were filling the room with a noise. He tried to make an answer, found he could not. Arms sprouted from the air to bear him downward to the cold bed that had been prepared. He was not frightened; he would have plenty of comrades where he went. Perhaps father had chopped out a space for him, squared and

proportioned it with a carpenter's eye, and mother swept it clean and suffused the air with sweet-smelling herbs. She was always careful about leaving anything around that might rot. He lay back on the floor and breathed a sigh. He wondered if voices might pass through the ground, and if the dead might sometimes spin a yarn for each other — slowly, of course, perhaps a word every seven years, stretching conversations to doomsday in that fashion.

And just as he was beginning to like the idea, he recalled that loose strake on the ship that Atono had been worried about just before he had died. Renik swept away those long gray arms and sat up.

* * *

“Yes,” said the woman, “some of us were born in the upperworld, in Norathrem, although I was born here. I know nothing of this place you name ‘Salazen.’ They must have changed the name in later times. My parents were among Habran’s last followers, coming back north to stay with him at his old estate on the shore, as many others did after the war. His brother Shapor was ruined in the war and fled into hiding; there would be no trouble from him; and Habran had divided the empire into many small city states, and he set up strong rulers and left them on their own. They were all jealous little men, and so we didn’t fear another gathering of forces into a strong nation. The truth: they soon squabbled about borderlines in the wastelands between states and wasted their ambitions in such ways. We were safe in the north. For years we lived in peace as Habran lived in his tower. But with each passing year, he abandoned the chores of leadership. He cared only for his meditations and the dome he built on the hill. He did go on one more voyage, taking only a few trusted people. He returned alone several months later and he never spoke again.

“One day his councilors realized Habran didn’t age. Then we knew what his secret was, and the council rose against him, took him prisoner, and discovered the secret for which a great kingdom and two brothers had gone to war. Habran was so lost in his meditations that he was easily taken. He does not speak even now. Some of the eldest among us think he lost his speech when he made the black sword. Many think he is silent because he is a coward — a coward, because he feared the very thing he had found. We have kept him imprisoned because some feel he is connected with the sword — if he dies, then the sword may die, too. We kept him chained by hand and foot for a

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long while, fearing he might kill himself in some way, even though none here can die, unless in one way. And yet he always ate and drank, never made sound or sign that he wanted death, so we loosed him but for one foot chained.” She turned and gently pushed Kollen to the side of the avenue where, through a gap between the palaces, she could point out Habran’s prison on the island in the midst of the lake.

“What is this sword?” Kollen said. “What does it do? It seems very plain from what you say.” Everything was so plain down here, Kollen thought, that it was a fearful thing. Plainness is a horror, whether it was lightless caves, the white foam of rushing rivers, or the paleness of too-white skin.

“The sword is the sword. But it cannot be described. You will see.”

“And did you use it to chop out this city in the ground?”

“No. Habran had been here before us. He made this place, but we do not know how or even why. When his councilors rebelled and he was taken, we took his writings and pored over them, and among them was a map leading us here. He had prepared a final hiding place from his brother, we thought. We took it for our own! It had mansions to live in, enchanted slaves made of metal to labor in fields, and a great glowing jewel was set in a hill top across the lake. It gave us light. The jewel we kept — it need only be fed with a pail of water once in ten years. After some years we commanded the metal men to rip themselves into pieces, for soon we had other slaves.”

Kollen recalled the laborers in the fields through which they had passed from the battle ground.

“You stole the slaves from above?”

“No. Some wanted to leave the city after we came, and these we first made slaves, and then bred them as families of slaves. Some of us did not trust the metal servants, since they had been given life by Habran and so might serve him again through some stratagem. That is the tale of how the people of Norathrem came here with their secret and their prisoner. Had we remained above, how long could we have lived there? The world would have known of us and come to demand a portion of our wealth.”

“And everyone in Sala...uh, Norathrem went together? An entire city emptied to come here?”

“How can I know? I wasn’t there, and it was long ago. But I did hear a man talking once; he remembered much of the older times,

more than others. He said there were dissenters, and Nalra, the Prime Councilor who overthrew Habran, used the sword to kill them all.”

“All himself?”

“It is no ordinary sword. Nalra, wisest man in magic after Habran himself, studied the sword and learned its powers. One day he stood on a hill and threw it into the air; they say it changed into a great bird, or a black cloud shaped like a bird, and it swooped over the city, leaving all the dissenters asleep where they stood. A forever sleep.” The woman laid her head on folded hands and smiled.

Kollen grew colder by the instant, for the secret of Life evidently seeded death in its shadow.

They went down the avenues in silence for a while until they came to the temple-like building with a corner tower. Several dozen steps lead up the front of the temple, and they passed between columns and through a high arch. “This way,” she said as they faced portals that opened on a spiral stair. As they entered the stairwell Kollen stepped upon a pile of sand. He was surprised because of the city’s nearly desperate cleanliness, as if a legion of centipedes were employed to rout out the tiniest scrap in the tightest corner. But there it was, a floor littered with sand that his feet kicked into puffing gray clouds as they wound up the stairs, which were themselves so strewn with the stuff so that the footing was treacherous.

They climbed to a high, vaulted chamber. Many windows let in the outside air, and the chamber was especially cold. At one end of the room was a simple pedestal with something laying across it. The sand, or dust, was scattered thickly around the pedestal.

The woman stopped Kollen with a hand on his shoulder. She turned him around.

“It is fitting, I think, that one who has given me life should be rewarded with life. I will say that to the council before which I will bring you, for our magistrates are skilled in the reckoning of debt and reward by which the balance of life is maintained.”

She directed him to the pedestal. He stepped forward, keenly aware of the freezing drafts that blew through the windows and kept a fine mist of dust swirling in the air. And at this high moment in the quest, Kollen could only sneeze and wipe a running nose on his sleeve.

It was such a disappointing end. It was too easy. Yet here it was before him: a sword. Not exactly the implement of immortal life, he

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thought. And it was rather plain indeed, inscribed with no mystic runes or mythological creatures. It was straight, dark, and plain. He leaned close enough to touch it, but held back. A chill formed a barricade around the thing.

“I don’t understand,” he said, and then repeated himself more loudly, for his voice had come out like a whisper and made no echo. The woman stepped up and produced a gold cup from the fold of her cloak.

“You must scratch yourself with the weapon, then you need only taste the blood. The cure for the disease is let forth by the disease itself!”

“Simple,” Kollen said. “Habran’s magic is always so simple when you finally have it in your hands. But this is different.”

“Different because Habran did not make it. He copied it, captured its mirror image. He merely discovered how immortality is gotten.”

“Whose image? Whose sword?”

But the woman would only glance aside, demurring like a shy beauty asked too directly for a kiss.

“Your games,” Kollen said suddenly. “I killed your enemies, you were killing each other, no mercy, no....and then they came to life again. What...”

“It is the way of the world,” she said. “Sometimes we must reduce our numbers when births swell us too much. The first-deaths you witnessed ensure that our hiding place does not become crowded.”

“First deaths? What do you mean?”

“First-deaths. Play deaths, unreal. We cannot die unless by the black sword — it can give, but is pleased to take. Those who take enough wounds in the games to see darkness must come here or be hunted down and brought here. Or, if you tire of life, the sword is always here. Some take its offer, the very ancient.” She kicked the dust on the floor. “Give greetings to the tired and the defeated! The sword drinks them and leaves the dusty dregs. Life stands tall in their dust.” She crouched and scooped a handful most lovingly, swirling her finger around the dust. But she suddenly dumped the gray stuff. “I thought about it, once. I dream about it often, to go back to the earth. But not now, not while you are here to make my days new again. Together we will endure all the games, live, send the crowding excess to the sword — but never we two!”

Evidently, Kollen thought, life in the underworld operates under simple terms; lives are greasy coins stamped with human faces.

“I... I understand.”

“Of course, you must. The games give us all the chance to live.”

“Of course,” said Kollen. “I’m sure it’s all planned out.”

Planned to the last detail, he thought. Air and water, light, food that grows in a magical sunlight, without the need for spring or summer. Slaves bred to toil for the immortals, but the slaves immortal themselves, not even a natural death to free them unless the masters took pity and brought them to the sword, working at tasks never to end, not even the turning of seasons to mark the passage of time, no year ever done. And yet the masters seemed no luckier than the servants in this realm.

Actually, there was justice. Kollen saw that, now. The world’s workings made frightful sense. Life is Death, in the underworld.

The golden man had said he would not die, ‘if you’re the one.’ And Sulem had said on the ship, ‘You cannot die.’

Because I’m the one, I’m dead, destined to be here, Kollen thought. I’m a stupid servant of a mad sorcerer, and I’ve a gleam in the eye that’s the light of greed, and I won’t die but instead be sad and mad like the sea-witch or learn to compose melancholy little sayings about eternity like the golden man.

Panic swept through him; he clenched his fists to try to feel the warmth of his hands, to prove Life to himself, but he felt only a chill.

His companion noticed no panic and pushed him gently forward.

Kollen swallowed hard and thought harder. Before they had departed, Hrothe told him not to follow his heart, but to act wisely. “The two things are separated by oceans,” he had said, “for the heart tells you when to act, but wisdom tells you how and why.”

His heart was cold, his mind was ice.

Perhaps not dead, just cold, he thought. His lust — which was, after all, the heat of the spirit and the body — had been worked out or drawn out in that fierce little bout of passion with the nameless woman. Certainly, he reasoned, this made all passions into cold ashes, even with his grasp almost upon the greatest treasure of the world.

He reconsidered everything in the coolness of his mind. Endless life! His. And he need not stay in this dim prison, no indeed. There was nothing to keep any sane person down here. The jealous greed of the underworlders had been taken to an unhealthy degree. But then he

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mused while the woman began again her invitation; she thought he was on the brink of a decision. He let her words wander aimlessly about the chamber until they were sucked inevitably within that territory of silence that surrounded the sword. Kollen recalled those dreaming people leaning on their windowsills trancelike, and he knew what immortality might bring to even the lightsome upper airs.

Habran hadn't been captured — Kollen knew that with a fierce storm-flash of insight. He had taken whomever the sea woman once was and sacrificed her as his treasure's ward, as he did his gardener. And whoever had the dome on the hill in Salazen became the guardian by loosing the manifestations of nightmares. But Habran had been fair — he had sacrificed *himself* for his great error and made himself into the final guardian of the secret. He ensured his sword would have a hiding hole, and its pale occupants were a legion of unknowing guardians, addicted to the sword like a drunk to wine.

These realizations didn't strike Kollen with any earth-shattering finality, so he *knew* his conclusions were trustworthy.

“So,” he said quietly while nodding his head, “this is the mind working after the heart says go. Hrothe should be here to see his student.”

The woman didn't understand this quiet admission, and took it for some kind of agreement to her verbal prods. Kollen awoke from his thoughts and understood her odd and sudden attraction to him. She was an antipode drawn to a distant memory of life before eternity, and at the same time she would mold that memory to her own dreary image. Kollen himself could become her. A part of him wanted that. Her skin burned with warmth, with the magical light of the underworld, with life. Life in death.

It was very strange! He felt only sadness.

He roused himself and reached for the hilt of the weapon lying in its puddle of gloom.

CHAPTER 25 — THE DEFEAT OF THE DREAM BEAST

And on a mountain-isle we found
a man in hide of beast all bound;
he had stared into a mirror long
and found the beast within too strong. — The Sailor's Song

Kollen hesitated just a moment, his hand a palm's width away, and when the woman renewed a fierce round of encouragement, he lay hold. The sword burned! No, his hand *froze* to the hilt, for there was no smell of burnt meat, yet his fingers could not release the handle. He drew back and let go a stifled cry, but the sound hardly got past his teeth, for the cold had swept up his bones to his head, and each tooth felt like a needle driving through every socket of his jaw. The pain crept up behind his eyeballs until his skull threatened to split. But he held on to it, digging his fingers in as if to kill the force that flowed up his arm.

He thought he was beginning to withstand the storm when the weapon started shaking of its own accord. Slowly at first, then with the pitch of a tight harp string, the blade rose to a hum that drew out a long, low cry from the dome and numbed his heels. The woman wheeled around and cried out. Kollen ignored her and sought to stop himself from screaming aloud. Tears coursed down his face in two hot rivers. A second shudder went through the walls of the tower, and this time the woman screamed. The worst of the paralyzing pain was fading from his hand and was replaced by waves of shuddering cold that made him shake like a child being rattled by a brute.

The woman leaned out of a window in the tower and withdrew to cry out something that Kollen couldn't understand, although he felt another shudder run through the floor of the room and even echo in the titanic cavern.

Kollen staggered to the window. It took a moment for his eyes to focus, but soon he saw a column of men emerging from the distant city gate, or rather where the gate once was. Dust arose in the air where the art of the mages had cast down the portal.

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“My enemies!” he said. “Sorcerers who’ve followed us to take this sword. They were close behind us, all the time, all the time following our scent. But I came here first! And just barely in time because of my foolery. We have to go — *now*.” He took her hand and, still reeling, led her to the stairs. But he didn’t know where to hide or what to do with the rapidly warming sword.

When they’d gained the avenue outside the temple, they saw the sluggish city folk waking to life. People had emerged from doors, leaned from windows, stirred to a heat of life they must have found strange.

And now the advancing line of triumphant mages was a most pressing subject. The guildsmen knew Kollen’s face only too well and associated it with some of the more distressing events of their lives. He could read the anger on their faces, yet even so, he and Sulem recognized each other at once, and Kollen saw no anger in the mage leader, only exhaustion, worry, and, perhaps, doubt. Sulem even raised his arm to stop his fellows from advancing. But their momentum was now impossible to stop or direct. They spread out, seemingly blind to the doubt of their master.

And despite their obvious preparations against him, Kollen was unable to act, his will being encased in thick gruel or congealed blood as one of the mages wound a spell just for him. Kollen even saw it coming. It was a burst of darkness that had in it all the fury of months and decades of vain attempts at Habran’s treasure. The gathering of smoke or storm clouds came on as Kollen counted its progress by the knells of his own heartbeat. The form of the spell flashed for a moment before waning into a jet-black raven that Kollen saw only as a shadow that blocked out the sights around it. The bird rushed forward and metamorphosed into a bat: white teeth superimposed upon an outline of webbed wings. The mass was halfway across the plaza and changed again, now into a masked huntsman preceded by hounds that trailed vapors with every breath.

Then Kollen wasn’t holding a sword anymore, but instead a shield which hummed slightly as it repulsed the attack.

In the sluggish flow of time that surrounded him, he lifted the weapon with mild interest, found it was a sword again, if it had ever changed. He let another slow heartbeat sound an echo before he turned his gaze on the foe. But there was no mage strutting with anger before him; like his magic, the mage had changed in midstride, and a

mangled pile ebbed slowly on the smooth pavement before the eyes of his fellows. Another heartbeat rang its temple-clang, and in that span a would-be champion lifted eyes toward Kollen. Before the mage could act, Kollen *wished* for a magic spear of instantaneous speed, and in mid-knell the sword was a spear.

The vibrations of the beat were settling when Kollen drew back for the throw. A soundless wind: gale-force, arrow-quick. The second foe began his crumble with a curious expression, but death comes too quickly to notice when the heart suddenly sprouts a wide blade. A slight motion of the hand, and the spear drew back and was again a sword in Kollen's grip. His enemy began spouting a stream of blood.

Time snapped back to disappointing rapidity. The stricken mage went gracelessly to the stone while three of his comrades formed a circle and a fourth, the woman with the tattooed head, staggered back and fell, sweat-drenched, drained by the finishing of some supreme effort ahead of her comrades. And now Kollen was entrapped within a shimmering half-bubble. The wide-eyed woman behind him had backed away until she hit against the crystal barrier. Himself dazed, he wasted a fortune's worth of moments in wiping sweat from his brow and mouthing a heated oath before going back to work. He dug the sword point into the sphere. Its dark substance glowed and sparked; he ripped a diagonal slash from the height of his head down by his right toe, then, leaning, ripped across and up again to meet at the top of the triangle, upon which he planted his boot. Concerned with the entity being conjured in the midst of the circle of mages, Kollen couldn't have seen the sphere's architect start (and stop) laughing at the triangle of flesh and bone that fell from her abdomen. And so having witnessed the proof of the Law of Bodily Correspondence, *that* mage expired in the best of scholarly tradition.

In that span of time, a being of questionable humor was birthed with alarums and thunder in the midst of the handclaspings mages. It cracked its egg and singed their robes before they could leap clear. All this, while Kollen's melancholy heartbeats became again the measure of events.

Kollen knew it as it rolled toward him, somehow knew it. A dream beast. That was the best name for what came toward him. It lived in a child's dreams and slept when the youth turned adult. It advanced, shapeless yet shaping, of no symmetry but of a form fit for treading a brain-maze. Kollen recognized it at once for that which had

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chased him through the sweating nights; it had been the Thing behind closed doors, the entity behind the faces of kin and comrade who'd proved false and evil in the world beyond the doors of sleep.

Its heart, too, was a slow clash, and Kollen was enmeshed in its rhythm. This time the mages' spell was potent. They made the magic sword's nightmare-slow flow of time entrap him rather than give deadly advantage, freezing the tired but triumphant faces of his enemies, and dooming Kollen to admire Its oncoming stride. His mind was working with hawk-like speed, but as he turned to flee, he was knee deep in invisible mud. His heart broke past the slow rhythm of time and threatened to burst. His mind worked double time, but the body moved to the slow knells of the Dream Beast.

He ceased running and wheeled around as fast as the slow-motion laws allowed. He planted the sword between himself and the Beast; he willed the weapon to become a spiked, iron-bound portal against the creature. The thing threw its fury on it, and from within and without the iron bands screamed as they withstood the onslaught for a dozen of Kollen's heartbeats. Then the inevitable talons pierced the portal and bent it around him. Something told him not to let it go further; he jerked back on the handle and had the sword again, and the Beast stood up in its formless splendor. Indeed, he absurdly paused and admired it, for whatever is terrible in the world also commands the eye. It was fifty scythe-long talons sprouting on tails and tentacles and exposed bones, such that as it moved, it couldn't help but wound itself.

One instant longer and he'd been stone for the carving. An outlandish idea occurred to him as he plumbed his childhood store of hero tales that told him what to do with magic swords. Kollen hewed the ground. Slabs of stone fell away and bounced behind him, and he swung wide blows until he swam in a comfortable little tunnel away from the thing that tread above him. Yet he forgot that it too was a delver. It uncovered him with three swipes of its fifty talons, and stood astride the pit.

It blocked out the sick light of underworlders but lit itself for Kollen's delight. It would have him admire every nook and cranny, and he did notice the finer details: that huge eye peering from behind bare ribs, and wet organs laboring on the wrong side of the skin, the wrist-thick veins pounding with lumpy fluid. Then that was enough, and it was the talons again. They probed as the body sank upon

Kollen, they formed concentric circles of teeth in parody of the ugly sucker fish that he had once pulled up with disgust from the bay at Akrem.

Time for swordsmanship. A parry that stretched his sinews to the snapping point: the weapon rebounded against the rows and clanged like a steel rod against portcullis bars. He sheared one talon off and two sprouted through wounded flesh to take its place and the monster howled in delight. Nothing stopped that slow settling of flesh around him. Kollen turned and hacked his way out of the ground until he was out on the pavement and stumbling back up the steps of the temple. It followed.

Its talons were arranged across the steps in a row of fifty fingers that moved with spider-motions toward him. The talons became the bars of a prison, and the flapping, quivering organs of the beast were bleating jailers. Kollen had been in a prison once and had dreamt of a magic weapon that would cut iron bars. Perhaps that was the secret. But where was there to go except to those hallucinations of a mad physician? The weapon would go where he led, that was not the problem. It virtually hummed with loyalty and promised to burn through those imprisoning fangs if he but touched its edge to them. But there had to be a will behind the means, and his will melted and dribbled out his ears. Who was there to say there were no monsters? Liars! Liars who taught what they themselves knew to be wrong! Alone, alone, always a child left to find his way amidst a hundred blank sign posts. The child wept.

He wept, and then turned to the dark thing. He stood, he studied. In all the fleshy horror he saw familiar faces. Josum, childhood friend, and dead in childhood, fallen in the harbor after balancing on the edge of a dock. And Len, his hand cut off for thieving, Minkle, rotted in the dungeon after caught for murdering, and Jarn, who hanged himself, and Rus, who drank himself silly and galloped his horse under a bridge that wasn't high enough. They all grinned at him, each looking just a bit like himself.

And then Kollen slashed through those jail bars. Immediately a horrid flood of stuff burst inward, and still he cried and slashed through it all with eyes shut, feet slipping on sickening things.

Kollen's screams were ringing across that plaza and bouncing back into his face from the towers across the avenue. He awoke echoes down the long paths between the straight hard buildings and

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broke the slumbers of those who had dozed through the battle; but those who tossed in wakefulness buried their heads and prayed to their blind god for the ease of sleep once again.

Kollen wiped sweat away with the sleeve of an already wet tunic — wet, he saw with relief, with sweat and nothing else. He raised his eyes and sight came unnaturally clear. He could see straight through the gate that the mages had thrown down and on to the dome on the isle. The mages — they were gone, in their places only thin columns of smoke, as if incense in a temple burned there, or smoke from burned stew.

He walked from the midst of the steaming shadow that was burnt across the steps of the temple, and remembering vaguely the advice of several legends, Kollen didn't look back. But he studied for a moment the pattern of shadows painted on the pavement of the avenue, shadows cast by men who had been burned to dust in an instant. Kollen felt no triumph, and was even a little sad that he'd never learn why Sulem had hesitated before the onslaught.

He found his companion sunk down against the tower wall clasping her knees. He led the thunderstruck woman down the avenue, over the rubble of the gate, and to the shore of the lake.

At the shore, Kollen dragged a pram of bronze sheet-metal to the edge of the ice and gestured to the woman to climb in. She hadn't spoken since they were in the tower, and now she stepped back a few feet and offered Kollen nothing but a blank face.

“What's wrong?”

“I won't go there.”

“You must. Nothing will hurt you.” He hefted the sword in front of her; she stepped back again. “I have this.” But she wouldn't move.

“I'm cold,” she said after a moment. She was shaking uncontrollably. Color was coming to her pale face — a blue of the lips.

“Come on,” he said, “unless you want to go back to the city. But there's nothing there. Did you hear me? There's *nothing* there! Your ancestors never captured Habran. How could they, when he had this?” Kollen shook the sword in front of her paralyzed face. “I know what he did. He made you into jailers; he made you into guardians for the mistake he made. Your payment was immortality. Poor wages! Dreary wealth! Habran trusted greed and insanity to keep his secret until someone should come to solve the problem he made, what he

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and his brother made. Why he couldn't solve the problem himself, I don't know. I mean to ask, though, ask why he had to wait a few centuries for two brothers to come along. The law of the mirror? I want to ask. And when I'm done, I'll bring you out to a better place where flesh withers and rots, where time is precious. But first I have something to do."

Still she wouldn't move. He told her to wait for him, and he pushed the pram across the ice until the sheet groaned beneath him. He jumped in the boat and poled it across with the sharp end of the paddle, and the ice eventually cracked a few feet before the open water of the current. The expanse wasn't wide, maybe a bowshot's distance. He paddled while the warmth drained from his feet through the metal hull. Soon the bow rang against the ice of the far shore. Kollen ice-picked the boat to thick ice and then jumped out.

He jogged over the sheet to the edge of the dome. He entered carefully, tried to interpret the confusing shadows he saw on the walls, then gave up and went inside.

CHAPTER 26 — THE SILENT MAN CALLS

And a I saw a town where towers grow down,
the houses are holes to wall the ground,
where thieves are saints and saints are dread,
and healers' swords will mend thy head.
— The Sailors Song

Kollen looked through two arches and saw Renik laying peacefully on the pavement on a bed of blood before a robust figure of a man sitting on a throne. He was the ghost he'd met aboard the mages' ship, and probably the apparition Hrothe and Renik had seen at various times. Habran, at last. The adventure was complete; that which had sought them through ghostly projections of itself had been found. Now—what?

Bargain. It was time to bargain, because Renik looked in need of serious services available from very few people indeed. His brother had apparently fallen in a battle with the Tuc, who lay to the side the room framed in his own blood. Renik too had bled from many wounds, the worst of which, through his shoulder, still leaked. Kollen came forward, glanced at Habran, shivered, and then knelt beside his brother. Renik seemed as comfortable as a corpse readied for washing. Kollen bent close but could hear no breathing. He wasn't sure if he felt a pulse.

Both Renik and the Tuc had lain there for some time because the pool of blood around the Tuc had congealed. Renik's wounds seemed many but minor, although his shoulder looked bad. In the freezing air his shirt had become brown and crusty.

Kollen stood up and faced the mage.

"A trade," he offered, holding out the sword and pointing at Renik. "A trade," he said again. He raised the point of his sword.

Habran stared at him intently and, shrugging, gestured at Renik.

"Whole, alive, and healthy. Show me how to do it. There is a way, there is a way. This whole place down here has an answer for everything, doesn't it?"

The silent man gestured again, and stood up. Kollen gripped the sword two handed and stood his ground. The silent man frowned.

“I want my brother!” Kollen screamed, not intending to, but terror and guilt had combined to form a poison that burned his heart. He pushed the silent man ahead of him and cleaved his throne down the middle as a point of argument.

Suddenly Habran produced a bloody cutlass, Renik’s own, from the folds of his cloak. Its tip darted toward Kollen and he parried. His sudden foe circled the tip around the parry in a blurred disengage and Kollen frantically pulled the hilt of his sword in the direction of the new attack. Habran abruptly changed course again with magical speed, slapped Kollen on the cheek with the flat of the cutlass, and suddenly wove against the magic blade with his mundane one while Kollen was recovering from the surprise.

He was disarmed in an instant. The black sword spun in the air, and the silent man caught it, offering Renik’s old blade in exchange. Enchanted by fabulous and speedy events, Kollen accepted it without a word.

This was all strange enough, except that now Habran held the black sword at Kollen’s throat, and the weapon swelled to unarguable size, as fearsome an edge as there ever would be, and then suddenly the man reversed the sword, offering it to Kollen hilt first. He accepted it automatically, this time feeling no shock of touch.

The silent man knelt.

It was a while before Kollen’s mind could work. When he moved, he raised the tips of both weapons before his eyes.

“Habran,” Kollen said. The man nodded. “You wizards are always trying to teach lessons by hints and side-wise glances, never a direct word from the lot of you. What shall I tell Hrothe I learned?”

Habran smiled. Kollen gave him the black sword from his position of power — no bargains, nothing owed, nothing but the most basic debt of all, which was, in the end, easily paid.

“Take it. I want no weapon I can’t find in the dark.”

Habran accepted the sacrifice and bowed deeply, holding that bow for a long time; then he rose smoothly and swept out of the room.

Hrothe could be proud. The old man knew many magical formulas, none of which he could ever much interest Kollen with, but his student had figured out this the formula: the mirror images, brothers fated to come again and simply make a good decision against the great misplaced thing brought into the world by the ancient mage-brothers.

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Kollen went to his brother, who was not dead, and indeed, now sat up and said something unintelligible. He struggled in Kollen's arms before slumping back again. Wounds that had frozen over now burst open afresh. Kollen hurriedly tore strips of the Tuc's clothing to staunch the worse of the wounds, but he feared he might now be bandaging a corpse. There was no time to worry about that. He gathered up Renik's cloak and the abandoned water bag in hopes of using them on the journey back, because if he accepted the possibility of continuing life, he must also think about the details that maintained it.

As he started dragging, he heard a sound behind him, and turning, saw a white giant unfold the pillars of his legs and rise above him. Kollen took up Renik's cutlass in one smooth motion and again set himself up as a wall before his brother. The two confronted each other like statues until the giant made the first move, and this was to wipe his running nose and rub swollen eyes. The motions didn't threaten immediate destruction, so Kollen edged back and started dragging Renik toward the arch. He had proceeded through the second arch and was heading out into the open when he saw that the giant followed him. A deep rumble grew in the creature's chest, but it was only the way such a large being could whimper at sad realizations that his life was changing too rapidly for his little experience to embrace.

Kollen turned from the giant, summoned will from somewhere, and heaved Renik into his arms. His brother's heels bump-bump-bumped down the steps of the dome, while his new companion followed, ankles moving like long pendulums to the extent of the chain that bound them together.

Beyond the dome, the world was confusion and fury. Habran stood on the brink of the island and seemed to be leaning on the black sword. Kollen paused, unable to resist a last glance. He saw that Habran was not leaning on the sword; he was pushing it into the ground. The weapon disappeared up to the hilt, and then it launched itself from the mage's hand, streaking somewhere into the earth's body, leaving a geyser of stone dust hanging above it in the air. The isle rumbled for a moment. Habran sat down on the top step to the dome, leaning his chin on his fists. He was at last weary, it seemed. He spared a last glance himself — at Kollen. His lips moved. His face was deadly serious, and as he spoke, Kollen heard the words carried clearly.

“Why would a living man tarry here? Is it to learn of the coldest cold, that he slows his feet?”

That was enough for Kollen. He started out down the steps and toward the ice, dragging Renik with him. The giant kept pace with him, ankle chains going ‘clink, clink.’

For every step he took, fear seized Kollen more tightly than the last step. His body shook with cold and with more than cold. The bravest thing Kollen ever did was to forbear from dropping his brother to run unburdened across the ice. Ice? Was it ice? They walked across bones frozen together, and those weren’t bubbles frozen into water, but glassy eye sockets watching the slip and scuffle of man and giant treading above them. And suddenly the cool breeze of the underworld was not simply cool and moist anymore. The air was corruption, tomb-breath from a crypt opened in winter, and that ghostlike underworlder followed them, moaning louder every moment.

The little man gulped his air down as he pulled his brother along. Renik’s blood made a trail over the ice.

And winds were gathering in the cavern. They were a second sensation contesting with the sensations of corpses and crypts that assailed Kollen. These winds seemed to burst from the very walls, warm spring winds, rising in strength as if they’d been locked up for many years. The ice under the men’s feet cracked, made long shrieking sounds, and shivered to the quickening currents of the river. For all this motion, however, their progress was maddeningly slow; Kollen thought himself again stuck in that dream state of glued feet. He still could see Habran. He had gotten up from his weary squat. He stood at attention. He waited for something.

A voice spoke in Kollen’s mind — not Habran’s, this time! It was a greater voice, tinged with an odd and terrifying amusement.

“Wise people move slowly to the end when move there they must.” He hefted Renik higher in his arms. The voice came again, “And they run quickly from the end when they can.”

Kollen did a heave-and-jerk, and Renik was across his shoulders, and Kollen ran for the little bronze boat drawn up on the ice.

He ran until the ice broke under his feet. He fell into freezing water and spilled Renik on to the ice, but he acted quickly and drew himself back up on the ice with one motion when he bobbed upward, almost dragging Renik into the water but for a saving hand of the

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giant. Kollen shook water from his hair and wasted no time, for the ice was breaking up around them. He found strength again and hoisted his brother. He rushed toward the boat, planted a foot on the edge of a spreading crevasse of ice, and tried to leap. His burden did cross the four-foot gap; Renik was cast down into the boat, bending its thin seats and bursting their rivets — if Renik wasn't already dead, then he probably was now. But Kollen broke through to the water a second time. The giant then leaped across the gap with a frog-jump and plucked Kollen onto the ice slab where the boat rested. Now the slab broke free, and boat, men, and ice began drifting downstream. Half-fainting from terror, cold, and exhaustion, Kollen fell into the boat. The giant, too, was in shock, and he leaped upon the two brothers, flinging his arms across them, crushing them all together in a bundle. They passed down the river and along the shore where Kollen had left his companion. He thought he saw her, standing there still but couldn't be sure, because a throng of city people were gathering, summoned by their newly freed king. Some were quiet, and others wailed and fell to their knees or writhed like snakes with broken backs.

Kollen hid his face, and the albino creature started a long howl. Perhaps that was the best course of action, for they were gaining speed, the dim light giving out entirely to utter night filled with the clamor of water and bouncing ice. Kollen later recalled nothing more than the violent chattering of his teeth, the howls of the giant, and the spray of icy fragments on a hot wind.

Then they were out into the *real* night, a bitingly cold, starry-clear spring night with the smell of growing plants and wet earth. Kollen recalled a blank span of time devoid of everything but worship of the stars whose light seemed like blinking-bright storm lanterns hung from the impossibly complex rigging of a world-ship. Another memory: their boat bumping a shore, and crinkly grass under his feet. He performed several mechanical motions, finding flint and steel in his pouch and spending a long time kindling a fire from dried shrubs and sticks. Memory picked up some time later with a scene of the giant wrapped around half of the perimeter of the blaze, and sleeping. Strangely enough — strange, because high adventure ought to boil away all care for small detail — Kollen started noticing all the details as he gained heat in front of the fire himself. Renik had been washed clean of blood in the river journey, not surprisingly. But one of the

bandages had slipped up his arm and revealed the edge of a healed scar. He slept soundly. And in the next few meditative moments before sleep, Kollen saw that the giant had aged — gray strands gave some color to his pale hair, and wrinkles, thin as old razor cuts, were etched into his face. The creature — or man, rather, Kollen had now to admit, a big, pale man — seemed none the worse for the lost years, or at least was less frightening to behold.

The star Alhan was ascending. Kollen fell asleep in its wink.

* * *

Several days later the two short men and their tall companion, still shielding his eyes although it was late afternoon, came to a ridge and looked over a camp of shipwrecked sailors. Some were relaxing, others tended a fire upon which a few birds were roasting. The two themselves set down a burden — the remains of a stag that had evidently fallen from a cliff and broken its neck only an hour or less before the wanderers had found it. It had kept the brothers and their strange but quiet companion alive and strong on the long trek back, and none of them questioned this eerie good luck.

They watched the sailors quietly for several minutes without being noticed, content to observe the slow activity from their vantage point.

The events of the past days were already becoming the stuff of market-place stories. Kollen had begun to form the adventure into a good narrative that would earn them meals and drinks on the hard journey home. Renik threatened to pen them into a narrative worthy of printing into a moralistic allegory, and then laughed long and loudly. Later they had tried to fill in the missing parts of their tale. When they'd done this to satisfaction, they hadn't noticed that they had spoken of the entire affair as if it were a shared nightmare.

But they could not agree on what to tell Hrothe. Should they mention that his former hero, Habran, was still a hero no matter what mistake he'd made? The ancient mage had surely atoned for all crimes in self-punishment, and — so it seemed to Kollen — waited bravely for whatever judge had stalked into the cavern in the end.

Or should they, as Renik had suggested, say that the underworlders were always dead in a manner of speaking, only living in a false semblance of life, and thus little or nothing had been stolen from eternity, and Habran need not atone for the worst of the accusations they might lodge against him? But the brothers had soon

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ceased their judgments and smiled at their own charities, hastened on to pragmatic matters by the proverb, ‘A road for walking, an oar for pulling, life for the living.’

Now standing on the cliff, they looked into the pool of water that lay at the bottom. They saw themselves staring back, a little ragged but hale enough for well-traveled men of forty years.

“Lead the way down, Kollen! We’ve still an ocean to cross.”

“And what isn’t possible with a charmed fish riding the bow?” said Kollen, pointing to the gilded, wooden dolphin that lay to the side of some other gear. The figurehead from *Renik’s Luck* glowed in a patch of sunlight that had won past the dark pines.

Their companion giant sniffed the odor of roasting birds and awoke a pleasant hum within his chest.

* * *

And deep within a forgotten tomb not far in the desert beyond Akrem, a very old body stirred a bit as the sun flowered upward, but it could barely sense the new day, as if morning filtered through its mind like starlight through a dust-coated curtain. Shapor sensed that the quest begun by hateful brothers had been completed by a loving pair. Well, he remembered that Life had always been a little strange.

But stranger yet was the sudden vision he was having — a darkly clad being stood over him wearing a sword whose chill cooled down even the cold tomb; the being was weighing a beating heart in its hand.

Shapor squeezed shut the eyes of his mind and hurled a curse at his brother, whose face he hardly remembered. He did indeed hear a reply, but whether Habran had answered, or whether he’d only heard his own echo, he wasn’t sure.

By strange chance that morning, the gargoyle post at Fenward’s edge split at last under the pressure of the breeze, and the monster took the ground on his nose and ate dust. News of the demise of the last border monster did reach the Dahsa Clef Minoke one day. He was unexplainably sad after having established the Cult of Silence to quiet the temple gongs as he slept. The Dahsa’s melancholy often resulted in impetuous decisions, and now he disguised himself as a common man and hiked to the city’s limit to contemplate the death of the old statue. The Dahsa stood there for a melancholy quarter-hour, thinking about decay, change, discontinuity, and symbols for all of these —

thoughts likely to strike those in positions of dynastic power. When he returned to the palace, he commissioned an artisan to hollow out a boulder and set the post back up; and besides that, to set up a fresh companion for the old creature so that old and new would flank the road to Fenward. Following the resurrection, the stone carver dug a pit, leaned the new post from the back of his cart, and slid it home. This done, the fellow, an old man with hands permanently bent in an arc to fit chisel and hammer-handle, took it upon himself to renew the old statue — to sharpen up a wrinkle or two, and rescribe the line defining eyeball from cheek.

“Now, then,” the stone carver said, brushing stone flecks from his apron with a *scrrtch scrrtch* of his hand, “y’look proper old, again. Did y’think y’d escape y’wrinkles?”

Two beggars had followed the stone carver out and came forward after he left. Tenna the Blind and his crippled friend Oshen admired the restored gargoyle with hand and eye, and its new sibling.

“Is it a better monster who has a companion?” asked Oshen. Tenna bowed to honor the question, the consideration of which would mask the slight ache of hunger. They placed asses to sand, backs to posts, and considered.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wade Tarzia teaches writing and literature at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Connecticut. Besides fantasy fiction, his other writing interests are in his academic specialty area of folklore and medieval epic. When not writing and teaching, the author can be found walking in the woods or attempting to make something out of wood, from artistic carvings to small boats. He has published several pieces – articles, short stories, novellas, and poems – in such places as *The Journal of Folklore Research*, *Space & Time*, *Argonaut*, and *The Leading Edge*.

