

An Ironclaw Novel

DREAM-CARVER

Erin van Hiel

Sanguine Productions

To Piet
My dreams always come back to you

A Sanguine Book / published by arrangement with the author

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The Assignment

Bishop Renisi considered the letter in his hand as he surveyed the classroom from the hidden room high above. The missive contained a strange request. Careful consideration was needed to select just the right acolyte for the job.

It needed to be someone with unshakeable honour and piety, for travel to distant lands would test the faith. It ought to be a noble, to stand up to an employer's independent offspring. Above all, it had to be someone who could hold their own against all comers, spreading the Light wherever darkness reigned.

His eyes lighted on one acolyte who was busy listening to the reading of one of the riffraff that populated the orphanage. She was the daughter of a horse-lord, tall for her kind and too thin, unswerving in her faith. She was not as old as the lady might have hoped, but time would cure that flaw. And she was better off out of the orphanage, before she became aware of certain – truths. She would do.

The bishop signalled an acolyte in the corner. "Send Sister Annarisse to me at once," he commanded. The acolyte bowed, turned, and ran to do as he was bid.

"Your Grace can't be serious," exclaimed Annarisse. She nearly took a step backward, but overcame the impulse when she realized she had offended the Bishop. His narrowed eyes and slightly bristled hackles were a sign to tread more carefully.

"Are you then unwilling to serve the Light where the Saint needs you, Sister?" he asked mildly. The tone, the hackles, the dangerous glint in his eye, all produced a flashback to a similar scene in her father's study nearly two years before. Remembering the result of her lack of self-control on that occasion, Annarisse rigidly suppressed her reaction, schooled her features into pious humility, and lowered her tail, which had risen in indignation.

"I am sorry, Your Grace, for my untoward reaction," she said. "Of course I will do the will of St. Helloise in this regard, as in all others. I only meant to express surprise that you would find me worthy for an appointment to a noble house at my age. It is a great honour."

He gave her a hard look so like her father's that it nearly broke her control and made her shudder. Then he relaxed and gestured to a chair. If anything, this made her more nervous, but she did not show it. She sat, gracefully arranging her clerical robe as would the lady she had been raised to be.

He looked at the file on his desk. "You will be responsible for the spiritual well-being of young Baron Treeden MacDuncan of the Bisclavret. His lady mother is concerned that his adventurous spirit is like to lead him astray. Since she controls the family purse-strings, she has made it a condition of her financial support that he take along a confessor of her choice." Here he looked up. "On

my recommendation, she has chosen you.” He steepled his fingers, relaxed into the back of his chair, and smiled at her in that way powerful lords did, knowing that everything would be done as he wished. “Lady MacDuncan has made a sizable contribution to the Cathedral as payment for your services. It is in the form of an annuity, which can be cancelled at any time. It is enough to feed the population of the orphanage for at least a year.” He paused to let that sink in, and Annarisse mentally noted the near-blackmail of referring to her favourite project. Though she kept her features impassive, he must have seen something he liked on them, for his smile broadened as he handed her the contract. “The Baron is at the Hotel AltaVista, not far from here. He is expecting you. Report to him before sundown.” With a wave, he dismissed her. He had returned to his work before she stood up, and did not even see her obeisance.

Annarisse returned to her cell. With one part of her mind, she listed items to pack and letters to write before taking her leave. With the other part, she seethed.

How dared he! How dared he assign an Avoirdupois noblewoman as chief babysitter to a penniless Bisclavret upstart! How dared he put her in a position where loyalty to both her House and her employer would be impossible! The lupine Bisclavret were notorious for ignoring political niceties when it suited them, and they paid very little attention to the horse-lords as it was. What would happen when the Baron’s adventures led him to infringe on the rights of her House? The Rinaldi had no power to stop such an infringement, though they technically ruled all of Calabria still. No, with the Avoirdupois and the Bisclavret staring hungrily over their respective borders at the Rinaldi, the grey fox-lords had more to worry about than the squabbles between their two antagonists. In fact, they would be likely to encourage such squabbles on the grounds that they would keep both horses and wolves off their own doorstep. She needed to be able to share information about the Bisclavret with her father’s people, for the protection of all the Avoirdupois. But sharing such information would clearly violate her responsibility to her Bisclavret employer. The Bishop expected her first loyalty to be to her employer. Well, they’d just see about that!

She was stuffing her books into a rucksack when remorse hit her. She sank to her knees at her cot and prayed forgiveness of the Saint.

She was an emissary of the Light. There was no room in her life for petty inter-House squabbles such as she had been contemplating. Her assignment was to act as spiritual advisor to Baron Treeden as well as to his associates, and to be an example of the power of the Light for all to see. In prayer, she vowed to fulfill this role with honour, piety, and charity for all.

She rose, finished packing, and went to find the Baron.

High and Low

Salvatore examined the bottom of the mug. It was visible beneath the few remaining drops of ale and a heavy layer of sediment, some of which probably dated back years. This was a problem. Not the sediment; that was to be expected. No, the problem was that beer mugs were not supposed to be empty.

For a moment he considered the situation. Realizing it was up to him to rectify it, he raised his head and lifted his mug high over his head. In fact, he moved so quickly that he nearly overbalanced his chair and sent himself sprawling on the very dirty tavern floor.

A voluptuous vixen barmaid saw his gesture and came over, jug in hand. She pushed his arm down until the mug was resting on the table, and held it there gently while she filled it. “An’ how will you be payin’ me today, Cap’n?” she asked in a suggestive whisper.

He barely glanced at her overabundant charms before digging into his belt pouch. He pulled out two coins and peered at them in the dim light. One looked like a denari; the other he couldn’t tell. He picked out the denari, dropped the other carefully back into the pouch, and spent a moment fiddling with the catch, trying to close it, before giving up and going back to his ale. It took him a moment to realize the barmaid was still waiting for her payment. He dropped the denari into her hand, said, “Keep it coming, sweet,” and took a long pull.

She took the coin without comment, dropped it into her own pouch, and sashayed off to find a more amenable customer. Salvatore went back to contemplating what he had seen earlier.

Ferrante was setting sail again. The red fox growled in his throat as he thought of it. The *Corrado* was being outfitted for a long voyage. That scoundrel, that nave, that Rinaldi Admiral would be at her helm. He ought to be dead. He ought to be begging on the streets for his crimes. But no. The Don had called his favourite grey fox privateer out of retirement for a reason that nobody seemed to know about. Salvatore considered the ramifications of this as he drank, more slowly now. What on earth could be important enough to Don Rinaldi that it would require Admiral Ferrante’s return to the waves?

Salvatore was halfway through the mug when someone took the bench opposite him in his small booth. Blearily, he looked at the newcomer. It was a grey wolf, richly yet sloppily dressed. He was wearing a kilt, in a tartan Salvatore had no trouble recognizing. He groaned.

“Head hurt?” asked the wolf.

“Not yet,” replied the fox, wiping foam from his upper lip with the back of his hand. “Wha’ can I do for ya t’day, milord?”

“That depends.” The wolf signalled the barmaid, who immediately brought him a big mug of the finest house ale. The wolf sipped it, grimaced at its inferior, watered quality, and continued drinking anyway. At least there was no sediment floating in it. “Are you Captain Salvatore of the ship *Spirit of Midchain*?”

Salvatore leaned back and nearly overbalanced again. Righting himself, he gestured loosely with his mug. “And if I am?”

“I’m Treeden MacDuncan. My family owns your ship. I’m in need of it as soon as you can be ready to sail.”

“Then I guess I’m who you’re lookin’ for,” the fox replied. “No one in your family has taken any notice of the ship for ‘bout three years now.”

“I know. That’s because we have greater need of our larger ships, the slavers. The *Midchain* is too small for that line of work. But it’s perfect for the trip I have in mind. When can we be ready to sail?”

“Well, we need to discuss terms first,” the fox said.

“Very well, then. You’ll get a standard Captain’s share, I’ll get a standard owner’s share, and we’ll both forget to mention that you haven’t been paying an owner’s share for the last three years.” Treeden smiled lazily, showing most of his teeth.

Realizing himself outfoxed, Salvatore stuck out his hand. “Milord, we have a deal,” he said. Treeden shook it. “I gave my men a week’s leave a while back. Yesterday, maybe? What day is it?” Treeden told him, and the Captain winced. “Two days ago, then. I can send messengers to call them back by tomorrow, but it’ll take that long to find them. Is the day after tomorrow soon enough to sail?”

“Tomorrow night. Tell the messengers that anyone not on the ship by then gets left behind.” He stood up. “Be sober before the evening tide, Captain,” he said as he strode away.

Salvatore finished his ale right down to the sediment in the bottom, picked up Treeden’s half-full mug, and finished that too. Then he stood up and lurched off to find a room for the night.

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The Hotel AltaVista, while not exactly hidden, proved nevertheless to be difficult to find. Located a short walk from the Cathedral, it was a building exactly as flashy as its neighbours – neither more nor less. The neighbourhood in which it was located, near the North Gate, was an affluent one. All the buildings were several stories tall, with glass in their windows and gargoyles to keep the rain from pooling at the base of the masonry. They were set back a dozen feet or so from the road, and the inn’s stables were out of site down an alley and behind the building. It was just out of sight of the Three Spears Inn, the most expensive hotel in the city. Other inns proclaimed their status with lettered signs and richly-dressed doormen, but not the AltaVista. It had no sign, no footmen, and no obvious source of patronage. It seemed the establishment

did not want to be found. After enquiring of several people, the last of them a well-dressed wolf, she finally found the right building. The reason for the secrecy became immediately obvious.

The AltaVista was run by wolves. It catered to well-to-do merchants, come to buy ships or the cargoes they brought, and minor nobles of the Bisclavret. Hidden in the middle of the artisan district of the Rinaldi city, it was the centre of Bisclavret business interests in Triskellian. Annarisse expected the constabulary knew all about it; very little got past those foxes, if they felt they needed to know about it. Still, the common people would have trouble starting a riot aimed at a nondescript building in an affluent part of town. She had to admire the wolves' tactics in keeping their base of operations private to those of their own species.

Annarisse drew her nobility around her as she stepped through the door. She had learned as a little girl that observers tended to see what one wanted them to see. If one wanted them to see a cleric, one acted self-effacing and humble. However, if the goal was attention and servility from onlookers, it was important to project an image of noble hauteur. It worked. The concierge looked up, took her in at a glance, excused himself to the wolf merchant he'd been speaking with, and made his way to her.

The wolf merchant glanced at her with a look of racial insolence. The clerk behind the counter showed thinly-veiled hostility. The one who came in behind her pushed rudely past. Obviously, the Avoirdupois were neither common nor welcome here. Knowing that her best defence was to ignore the atmosphere, Annarisse did not acknowledge it by so much as a flick of her tail.

"My lady horse," the concierge fawned. "What may I do to serve you today?"

She sized him up. Though his words and tone were polite, there was something about his scent that gave him away. He was not pleased to have her there, and would do whatever he could short of outright rudeness to see that she left empty-handed. Armed with that knowledge, she chose her words with care and injected both noble and clerical authority into her voice. "I have come at the behest of Lady MacDuncan as a companion and confessor to her son the Baron. He is expecting me." Though her tone remained mild, she managed to imply that if the Baron was expecting her, the concierge should have been, too. His ears drooped slightly, showing that she'd scored.

"I will send someone to inform the Baron of your arrival, my lady," he replied.

As he turned away, Annarisse stopped him. "Signor, are you certain he is in fact in the building at the moment?" She knew instantly that she had guessed correctly by the shifty glance around that could not hide the hint of a smirk. "Perhaps, then, you could tell me where I would be likely to find him at this time of day."

At this point a cub ran up from the direction of the back of the hotel. He addressed himself to the concierge, seemingly completely unaware of Annarisse. "I found him, Father! He's at the Sign of the Drinking Fish, and he was well into his cups. He didn't look too happy at the message, but when I asked for Baron Treeden MacDuncan and the barkeep pointed him out, he couldn't do

much about it. And look! He gave me a whole denari!" He danced around his father, showing off his wealth. The concierge looked like he was struggling to swallow a whole chicken.

Annarisse nearly laughed out loud. Instead, she tapped the boy on the shoulder and handed him a half-denari. "The other half is yours, if you take me to the Drinking Fish," she told him.

The cub skipped away, saying, "This way, my lady! Follow me!" Before leaving she handed the concierge a substantial tip and thanked him for his help. There was no point leaving the boy's father in a nasty mood if she could prevent it. Then she picked up her sack and followed her guide.

The Drinking Fish was a rat-hole. Located within sight of the hired berths and patronized almost entirely by sailors of the nastier sort, it smelled as though a thousand sick drunks had spent their pay there. The floorboards were rotting and caked with a variety of dirt which would have sent Annarisse' lady mother into a fainting spell, immediately before ordering the place burnt to the ground. The walls were so poorly constructed that sunlight streamed through them in a random striped pattern, lighting up the pipe smoke and dust into ghostly swirls that hid more than they revealed. Annarisse was grateful that the ceiling was obscured by low light and smoke; she had a feeling she would not have been able to withstand a moment under it had she known its state of repair. The tables were rough-hewn wood slabs over trestles, caked with the slops from years of cheap meals and cheaper drinks. Annarisse did not even consider sitting down, since she had no wish for splinters in a sensitive part of her anatomy. She stood in the door, ignored by patrons and staff alike, and peered into the corners.

She found him without much trouble. A grey wolf, richly dressed, deep in his cup of wine, tended to stick out in an establishment of this nature. He was sitting at a table in the corner, his back to the wall. On his lap was a fox barmaid, dressed in a long skirt kilted up at the sides, and pushed up even further by one of the Baron's hands. She was giggling in a resigned tone, as though she knew what was expected and would do it for cash. Annarisse picked up her robe to keep it from dragging on the floor and marched over to him amid catcalls from the drunker patrons, and shushing from those who recognized her robes for what they were. Positioning herself with her back to the wall, she faced him and said, "Baron Treeden MacDuncan, I presume?"

He looked up at her through bleary eyes. Taking in her robe and holy symbol, he deliberately turned away from her and started to curse like the coarsest sailor. Annarisse waited, noting in passing that he refrained from cursing her, the Church, or his mother directly. Otherwise, his imagery was quite vivid, and Annarisse was impressed with his eloquence. The barmaid did not appear to notice the language, though she definitely noticed that his hands had stilled. She eyed the priestess with distaste for distracting her customer.

Finally he wound down, and then stopped. Still she waited. At last he turned around again to peer at her. "You're still here, then?" he said in his Bisclavret burr.

"You noticed." Tired of standing, she perched somewhat gingerly on a neighbouring bench. "Your lady mother has hired me as your confessor. I'm to see to the state of your immortal soul." She looked him up and down frankly. "If it's in nearly as sorry a condition as the rest of you, I'll have my work cut out for me."

The Baron guffawed so heartily he fell off his bench, dumping his doxy on the floor in the process. Annarisse did not reach down to help him, but he grabbed her robe anyway to aid in regaining his balance. A slightly greasy deposit of sticky, congealed wine remained on her robe as he let go. She did not touch it. "Did my mother know you were such a rich dish when she hired you?" he asked as he settled back on his seat, minus the wench.

"Actually, we've never met. The bishop recommended me to her. Tell me, why does your mother feel you need a priestess as a -" she stopped short of saying babysitter - "companion? The bishop had few details to give me."

"Let's just say my ventures, while profitable, fall below her standards for piety." He rose, swaying, using his claws on the scarred tabletop for balance. "My ship is in port. I would've been gone before you showed up, if the tide had been right." He straightened gingerly, wincing out of the light of a sunbeam from the wall. Fishing out a handful of coin big enough to pay for a year's worth of the wine he'd just spilled, he threw the money on the table and headed for the door with surprising agility for one so drunk. Annarisse was left to follow as she may. The patrons who had been pushed aside by the Baron gave way voluntarily when fixed with her best priest-look, and she managed to keep up. She reflected that the Baron already had a lot to answer for to the Light.

He wove his way expertly along the docks, narrowly avoiding collisions on at least three occasions. He seemed either unaware of the others who might be occupying that space, or supremely indifferent to them. Annarisse was betting on indifference.

A few minutes later, they approached a battered ship with more guns alongside than Annarisse would have thought necessary. It was a small ship, much smaller than the brigantine sailing out of port at that moment. It had been painted red at some point many years before, but the paint was peeling and the fresh caulking of the seams was gleaming bare and paintless in the sun. The deck, however, sparkled with cleanliness and every item on it was carefully tied down or stowed. She was moored at the end of a long pier, her prow pointing in towards the wharf, so that she would need to be towed into the harbour when the time came to set sail. She had two masts, one amidships and one fore, sporting the sails that would help her turn. The sails were furled, but appeared to her untrained eye to be square-rigged. Annarisse could see two small cannon on the fore deck and could make out six gun ports on the side nearest the pier. They were open, and each sported a medium-sized brass cannon that was clearly in better repair than the ship that housed it. The nearest had two mice rubbing

at it energetically with clean rags, though it gleamed so brightly already that Annarisse had to shield her eyes from its glare. Men were loading supplies up the gangplank, while a large boar and a red fox supervised and discussed a bill of some sort. The fox hardly glanced at the document before affixing his signature. The boar handed the bill to a chipmunk cabin boy, who ran down the gangplank and off to a warehouse with the enthusiasm of the very young.

The boar caught her attention for his sheer size. He was probably the largest person she had ever seen, both in height and girth. He towered close to a foot over the red fox, who was not small for his kind. Like many sailors, he had developed a belly from copious amounts of grog and much less exercise than was healthy. The belt around his waist had a seam in it, as though two belts had been sewn together to create one that was long enough. His face wore the expression of the perpetually worried as he tried to get the fox to sign another bill.

The fox was not that interested in the slip of paper being presented to him, and avoided looking at it by taking a drink from the flask he carried in one hand. Annarisse' first impression was of general scruffiness. His clothing was of good quality but badly stained and wrinkled. His whiskers and facial fur were caked together with spilled food and drink. His boots had probably once been black, but were now an indeterminate mud colour from the salt, dust, and rain of the city. His fur was a dull reddish-brown, showing obvious signs of neglect and poor diet. In all, he looked unhealthy and unkempt.

The Baron paid no attention to the two sailors waiting to board the ship with their load. He headed up the gangplank, nearly knocking a second cabin boy into the water in passing. He approached the fox on deck just as Annarisse reached the gangplank. She went ahead of the sailors at their gesture, and was in time to hear the Baron say, "So, Salvatore, when can we get my ship underway?"

The red fox stalled his answer by taking a swig from the flask. Annarisse could almost hear his thoughts as he considered his approach - rudeness, display of authority, or conciliation? He opted for a mixture of the last two, replying, "Baron, our ship will be underway as soon as I deem it ready. That should be by the next tide, which turns this evening. With your lordship as backer and myself as leader, we will conquer the waves with much profit all round. Have you met my first mate, Mr. Mietvani?" He gestured towards the boar, glancing up at the same moment and spotting Annarisse. Leaving the Baron and the boar, he strode over to her with his seaman's gait and asked, "What may I do for you, Sister? We are just about to leave on a voyage, and have already paid our tithe to the Church for the last one."

So Baron Treeden had not told the Captain that Annarisse would be with them on the voyage! Mentally adding another sin to Treeden's growing list, she drew herself up with authority and pitched her voice so that the sailors loading the ship could hear every word. "I have been engaged by Baron Treeden as his confessor," she announced. Treeden winced, probably at the idea that he had himself hired her. "I require a berth on this ship, as I will be accompanying the Baron on his voyage." She waited.

“No special berth is required, Captain,” drawled the Baron with his usual air of nonchalant command. “She can sleep on the floor in my cabin.” He gave her a deliberately lascivious look which nearly made Annarisse back away from him. She stood her ground, refusing even to draw back. If she was to make any headway with her charge, she had to establish her authority now.

“Actually, Captain, I will not sleep on the floor of the Baron’s cabin. That is not appropriate for a lady priest. I require my own cabin, where I can study and pray at my leisure. Please find me one.” She looked down her long nose at the shorter wolf beside her. “After all, I bear a rank equal to the Baron’s, and his mother is paying for my services as well as yours. Indeed, your services are conditional upon mine. As you respect a woman of the cloth, you will do this.” This was said in a slightly lower voice; for the sake of Treeden’s standing with the crew, it was important that they believe he had hired her and the ship himself. The Captain needed to be aware of how things stood, however, and if Treeden wouldn’t tell him, Annarisse would.

Salvatore looked like he didn’t know who to pander to. He appeared, in fact, to be unused to pandering to anyone, and found it very distasteful. To cover his confusion, he took another swig. “There is one, very small cabin available, my lady, but are you sure this assignment is really the best way for you to serve the MacDuncans? A lady of your calibre, stuck on a ship for months with a rather coarse bunch of sailors – I cannot promise they would not offend your delicate sensibilities.” He bowed flamboyantly, swaying slightly, and Annarisse wondered just how much he had imbibed already.

“Delicate sensibilities? I have worked with the children of the Orphanage du Temoin for two years now. These men have no stories worse than those children. My delicate sensibilities were left behind at my father’s house when I accepted the duty of teaching at the Cathedral. I look forward to the opportunity to minister to your crew as I am able. I have some small skill in healing which might prove useful on a voyage.” She stopped, surprised at the light that had dawned in the Captain’s eyes. Was it respect? She couldn’t be sure, but she pressed the advantage she saw there. “Where is this cabin of which you speak?” She felt the Baron deflate slightly beside her, as he realized the battle lost. With a flick of a claw, the Captain summoned the returned cabin boy and gave him some instructions in a soft voice. The child looked up at the priestess and gestured for her to follow him to her cabin.

The first battle was hers, she reflected. How would go the war?

Intrigue

Annarisse came up on deck as the Captain was giving the orders to set sail. Finding a place along the rail where she could watch, she stayed quiet as the sailors swung through the sails and rigging, directed by the fox's strident voice. "Two degrees to port on that trig! Look lively, there! Set the foresail to catch that breeze from the north! Ten points port on that! Mr. Santani, stand by to set the main topsail!" As the ship pulled slowly away from the others in the harbour, other sails went up and they picked up speed.

The priestess watched the city of Triskellian grow smaller behind them. She had lived there for two years now, except for a brief visit home a few months before, but she had never seen it from this angle before. The city was set on the eastern slope of a low mountain, and as they were pulling out at dawn it was lit with glowing orange and pink rays that brought some buildings into sharp relief while hiding others completely. She could make out the cathedral, its white limestone standing out against the red brick and wood of the other buildings near it, its stained-glass windows gleaming black as the sun hid their colour. In two years, it had become her home. What was she doing here? She felt a moment of panic, then remembered that two years ago she had left a home which had been hers for much longer. That leave-taking had not been by choice, but all had worked out for good. Offering a silent prayer for forgiveness for her lack of faith, she turned to observe the workings of the ship.

One of the cabin boys approached her cautiously at her signal. He was a chipmunk, looking to be about ten years old, and he was clearly very familiar with the ship. "Do you have the leisure to explain some things to me, Ally?" she asked him when he was close enough.

He looked towards Mr. Santani, the fox second mate, for permission, and receiving it, he stood beside her shyly and asked, "What would you like to know, Sister?"

"Well, for starters, explain the people on the ship. Who is who, and what does each person do?"

This was a topic Ally knew well, and he launched into an explanation excitedly. "There's Mr. Mietvani, the first mate, and Mr. Santani, the second mate. You know them? Mr. Mietvani also acts as our purser, that means he keeps the money and buys stuff for the ship, first mates mostly don't do that but we're a small crew so he does. There's Gorgo the carpenter, that's him over there, the red fox, you see him? He's just a sailor today, the ship's been in port more than a week so all the repairs have been made already. The ship's cook is a rat, Celric, and you don't want to cross him or you don't get to eat, or you only

get the burnt stuff at the bottom and who wants that? He's in the galley right now. You see the mice over there in the fore rigging? There's thirty-two of them all told, four per gun and eight guns, and they're the gunners. They keep the cannon in working order, and if we get into a fight they man the guns. They're fast, too. They can fire repeating rounds in under three minutes." He stopped, apparently out of breath, and looked at her to see if she was impressed at that speed. She wasn't; she had no idea if that was a good speed for a cannon or not.

"What is the difference between the first and second mates?" Annarisse asked him.

"Why, the first mate is in charge of the first watch, of the guns and the gunners, and around here, of the stores as well. The second mate is in charge of the second watch, the cabin boys, and ship's repairs. Mr. Santani is a good sail maker, too. If there's a hole in the sail from a cannonball or lightning or something, he'll be up there patching it up. He's training Theo to help him, because it's too big a job for one person, and there are two new wolves who've just joined the crew, I don't know them yet, but I heard one of them was a sail maker too."

"What do you mean by a watch?" was her next question.

"We stand two watches all the time, except when we're just starting out or there's a battle or something. The people on watch are sailing the ship, and the people off watch are sleeping. Their hammocks are strung below decks, just aft of your cabin, Sister. Right now it's all hands on deck, but as soon as we clear the harbour" he gestured towards the headland with the Rinaldi keep presiding over it, off to starboard - "then the second watch will be told to stand down, and they'll go sleep."

Annarisse nodded. Then she asked, "How do you and Theo get your lessons while you're aboard? Is there someone to teach you?"

"Lessons? I'm learning how to sail a ship all the time!" Ally looked a bit apprehensive, and started looking around for somewhere else he could be before she asked the next question.

Quickly, to forestall his flight, she told him, "I'll speak to the Captain about that. Surely he will spare each of you to me for an hour or two a day, so you might learn to read?" Now the chipmunk looked absolutely terrified, and Annarisse sighed inwardly. Why did boys hate reading so? "I'll speak to him about it later on," she told her guide. He nodded miserably. Just then Mr. Santani gestured to him, and he bowed to her briefly and ran off.

Baron Treeden MacDuncan strode purposefully into the Captain's stateroom. The ship had been under sail for most of a day already, heading southwest along the coast towards Bisclavret waters. Treeden reflected that it was time to bring the Captain in on his plans. The red fox was not one to be pacified with vague hints of treasure for very long.

Salvatore was sitting at his desk, fiddling with a sextant and drinking. Treeden hardly noticed the ever-present snifter. The Baron approached the

desk, flopped gracelessly into the chair opposite it, and said, "Have you ever heard of Gustafus the Green?"

Salvatore took a long, slow sip of brandy. He'd been waiting for this interview. In fact, he'd been sitting in his stateroom like a spider in his web, waiting for Treeden to come find him. It was nice to have the upper hand, especially when one's opponent didn't realize it. Salvatore thought of nearly everyone as either an opponent or a lackey. It had kept him alive. "I have heard that name, yes. Does it have a special meaning for you, my lord?"

"He was a pirate, one who actually built something that lasted beyond the end of his own life." Treeden opened the map he had brought with him, a detailed map of one part of the southern coast, from the River Nith to the point of the Auvrich Peninsula. His finger stabbed down on a point due east of the easternmost Corsair Island, on the coastline itself. "About here, there is a tiny island. Used to be a peninsula, but the storms out of the protection of the Corsairs are fierce, and the connecting land broke away in my grandda's time. On it is a tower that has been undisturbed for about thirty years now. Rumour has it the tower was built by Gustafus. Rumour also has it that he buried his treasure there."

Well, thought Salvatore. This explained why Ferrante had been pulled out of retirement. Most of Gustafus' treasure had once been Rinaldi treasure. He leaned back. "Rumour also has it that the tower is haunted, dealing death to all who brave it," he pointed out.

Treeden brushed that aside. "Ghost stories to frighten the gullible cubs with," he scoffed. "I know there's something there. We just need to go and dig it up to be wealthy beyond our wildest dreams."

"Or at least, wealthy enough not to need your mother's coin any longer," remarked Salvatore with the barest hint of a sneer. The Baron bristled, and Salvatore backed off. "I have information to suggest that Admiral Ferrante and the *Corrado* were heading in that direction. They sailed on the tide before ours, so they are only a day or so ahead of us. Is it possible they have knowledge of the same treasure-laden island?"

"It is quite possible, Captain. I have only this as evidence." He pulled out few mildewed sheets of parchment covered in a closely-written, old-fashioned hand. The Captain reached for them, but the Baron pulled them back. Fine, thought Salvatore as he took another drink. Let him think those pages gave him power. "They are pages torn out of Gustafus' Captain's Log. They contain a map to a cavern on the island, and the exact measurements needed to get us there. It is quite likely that Ferrante has the rest of the book, and if he does, that he is bound for the same place. My informant chose to sell to as many people as possible, to increase the asking price. But the drawing is very precise, and it is unlikely that Gustafus would have been so precise twice in the same book. We have better information, Captain. What say you? A quick treasure hunt, beating the Rinaldi at their own game, a trip to the Corsairs to sell what we find, and then home with our profit?"

The Captain deliberately set down his snifter on the desk, planted his hands on the clawed armrests of his chair and leaned back, one booted ankle resting on the opposite knee. For anyone else, it would have been a relaxed posture. Salvatore appeared to know little about any kind of relaxation, unless it were the kind found at the bottom of a bottle. "I am intrigued by this," he said in measured tones. "I think we can handle the spooks, or whatever party tricks have been put in place to fool the gullible. We have a problem, however." He paused. "Sister Annarisse."

"How is that chit a problem? She's so busy praying, she doesn't have a clue what's happening. After all, she's not a crew member. She doesn't get a share."

"Well, that's just it, Baron. She's of the Cathedral. Bishop Renisi plays his cards close to his chest, but this particular card is a valuable trump. Who would he sell it to? The Bisclavret, or the Rinaldi?" Salvatore steepled his fingers.

Treedon snorted. "The Bishop's not a problem," he said with such confidence that Salvatore was led to wonder how he could be so certain. "But Annarisse herself might be. You don't get a position as an acolyte of the cathedral without contacts. She could reveal information all on her own." He thought about it for a moment. "We make sure she doesn't know the full extent of what we find," he mused. "And also that she tells only the Bishop. He will keep her in line." The wolf smiled, nastily. "Or we will."

Salvatore smiled and sipped from his flask as the wolf left, still musing. He could manipulate Treeden with little trouble. His main goal in life was to stay out from under his mother's thumb, and that made his actions easy to predict. But Sister Annarisse might be a problem still. The question was, how was he to get her without her realizing she'd been acquired? He thought about it as he poured himself a brandy and swirled it gently in his glass, mesmerized a bit by its dark tones. A confession, maybe? He smiled. That would do it. A false confession, to make her think he was her supplicant. There needn't be any truth to it. He smiled again. Things would soon be well in hand.

Matters of Conscience

“My job, Baron, is to see to your spiritual welfare. I do that, in part, by hearing your confession.” The Baron had stopped backing up now, mostly because he’d fetched up against a wall. He was too surprised to see her even to push past her and leave the cabin.

Treedden had managed to avoid Annarisse for two days of sailing. He was incensed with his mother for having assigned her to him, and he didn’t trust her as far as he could throw her. Since she was taller than he, that wasn’t very far. She was undoubtedly lying when she said she had never met his mother. He knew a family spy when he tripped over one. It was possible, though, that she was as naïve as she appeared to be. Maybe she didn’t realize she was a spy? He considered for a moment. The Bishop was just devious enough to send someone who didn’t know what was going on. If that was the case, she was in for the shock of her life. He decided to find out whether this was innocence or an act. He pushed past her, sat on the bunk, and positioned himself in the rudest manner possible. Annarisse didn’t so much as flinch.

“My sins are no big deal. I’m comfortable with them. But I know things that would curl your mane,” he remarked, a wicked gleam in his eye belying his bored expression.

“I’m not interested in gossip.”

“Not even about your precious orphanage?” Seeing that he had her interest, he continued. “Remember that fox pup with the broad white stripe? The one adopted to a manor house on the Bisclavret border about three months ago?”

Annarisse did remember; Monti had been one of her favourites. “How do you know of him?” she asked.

“I know who bought him. In fact, I wrote up the bill of sale. As a favour to my mother, of course.” He watched her carefully as realization and horror dawned.

“But – I signed adoption papers!” she exclaimed.

“Of course you did. But the new “parents” belonged to my mother’s ring of procurers. Do you remember, by chance, who approved the family?”

“The Bishop himself vouched for them.” The disillusionment in her eyes made him uncomfortable, but the only sign was a twitch of his tail.

“Naturally. He got a tidy kickback on that one. We don’t often manage to get them that young.”

“You’re lying. You’re toying with me to get back at your mother for hiring me.” Her tail was twitching convulsively and she was clutching her holy symbol. Suddenly she closed her eyes, said a few words under her breath, and released a

prayer at him. The action calmed her, and her steady gaze met his with stony determination layered over desperation. "Tell me again. If you lie, you'll break the Penance, and I'll know."

His eyes went dark with anger. "You think to force me?" he snarled. "Well, so be it. My mother runs the largest slaver's ring in Calabria. Bishop Renisi has been an active participant for some eight years now. He's used illicit proceeds to support the strength of the Church in Rinaldi territory. He offers loans to Rinaldi lords, in exchange for their estates willed to the church. Then my mother ensures they don't live long enough to change the will. That part is easy. Those Rinaldi lords are always duelling. Easy enough to make sure one pistol misfires. The church owns substantially more land than they did a decade ago, and it's all being used by the Bisclavret. Eventually, the Don will be destabilized enough for our Duke to move in. My mother intends an earldom out of it - for me, not herself. I'd rather eat slugs, which is why I'm here." He paused. "Well? Was I telling the truth, Your Holiness?" He gave her an ironic half-bow without leaving the bunk.

She remained silent and still so long that his tail began to twitch. Finally, when he was on the point of doing something to rouse her, she said, "Why did you tell me this?" Her voice was calm, her words measured and totally flat.

"Because innocence like yours, while touching, only works in fairytales." He wanted her to leave. Why was she hanging around?

She was silent for a moment more. "Don't worry, I'm leaving," she said, reading his mind, with a faint note of the acerbity he was used to. Near the door, she turned to face him again. "But know this: when next we make port, I will be informing my father of this. He will make sure the Bisclavret do not profit from the misery of any more children." With a swirl of robes that reminded him of a noblewoman in high court dress, she was gone.

Oh, shit, he thought. Who the hell was her father?

Salvatore swaggered up behind her, flask in hand, without being too quiet about it. The Sister was standing at the forecandle, staring into the wind at the bare ocean in front of them. He touched her gently on the shoulder; she jumped a foot, then looked at him without a glimmer of a smile. In her eyes was a depth of sorrow that he recognized from the most secret part of his soul. His own demons stirred; ruthlessly, he pushed them down.

"Sister, I can't help but notice - are you feeling melancholy?" he asked.

She blinked the tears from her lashes, and surveyed him with more calculation than he would have credited her with. "Captain, may I ask you a personal question?" He smiled and nodded. "How much loyalty do you owe Lady MacDuncan?" she asked.

So, he thought. The Bishop's little mouse wished to grow claws. "She and I have a lucrative shipping contract, Your Grace," he replied. "My current assignment is not to my liking, however."

“Which is more important to you – serving the Light, or privateering for the MacDuncans?” She was watching him carefully by now.

“My allegiance to S’Allumer must always take precedence over all other concerns,” he replied mendaciously, with all the charm and sincerity he could muster infused in his voice.

She looked back at the water. He waited, knowing that reeling her in now would lead to a broken line and lost bait. Finally she said, “I have just learned that I cannot fulfill the assignment that has been set me. I feel it goes against what St. Heloise has called me to do. What I need to know, Captain, is whether you will help me complete my true mission aboard this ship.”

“What might that be?” He sipped from his flask to hide his expression from her. This was getting interesting.

“I must prevent Baron Treeden from gaining any more wealth and power for his family. I must stop the evil they are perpetrating on the world.” The strength of purpose in her voice was enough proof to convince him of her sincerity – if he had needed any proof. He began to reel her in.

“I think you and I might be able to come to an agreement, Your Grace. I too have been unhappy with some of the tasks set me by my Lady, and would like the opportunity to own my ship outright. Perhaps our purposes cross enough that we can work together.” He considered a moment. “I will endeavour to keep Treeden in the dark about certain things. He does not know nearly as much about the sea as he pretends to know, nor nearly as much of business matters. In exchange, I must ask that you do me one large boon.” He gave the final tug on his line. “I need you to teach me to read.”

She looked up sharply, surprised. “Why? I mean, why do you need this skill when you’ve reached adulthood without it?”

“Treeden has papers, ostensibly removed from the log book of Gustafus the Green. He hasn’t let me see them, but I can procure them for a short while if necessary.” He thought of the little rat whose services he employed for just such an eventuality. He was nominally a gunner, but his main purpose on the ship was to unlock chests to which the Captain needed access. “The problem is that they will not currently do me any good. I need your help to make sense of them, so that we can get what we need from the Baron. Can we work together on those terms?”

It was her turn to ponder. “I don’t really want to know much about the details, Captain,” she replied. “I know that I will not approve of much that goes on here, so I’d rather not be aware of it at all. But I must know, Captain, that you do not intend to renege on this agreement. Will you permit me to ascertain that?” He looked confused, so she explained. “The spell I would like to use is a Prayer of Penance. I will pray for you. Then you will tell me your deal again. If you are lying to me in any way, I will know, for the spell will be broken when you speak the lie. Will you let me do this?” She waited.

Salvatore whistled. “Whatever the Baron just told you has you tied up in knots, if you would ask such a thing of a prospective partner,” he replied. She said nothing, which was assent enough for him. Finally he nodded. She took up

her holy symbol and prayed, releasing the prayer with a little flick of her fingers. He felt the weight of the prayer settle on him as she nodded.

"I will help you keep the Baron from gaining access to most of the treasure we find," he declared. Her spell did not waver. "I will find out whatever details are necessary to complete our tasks, and in return, you will teach me to read. Does that suffice?"

"It does, Captain. I will release the spell." She did so, then extended her hand. "In partnership, Captain," she said, shaking his hand. He repeated the sentiment, then watched as she descended the steps and the ladder towards her cabin.

Only when she had disappeared down the hatch did he allow himself to smile. He repaired to his stateroom and poured himself a celebratory brandy.

He was midway through the second snifter when the demons she had stirred rose up to be heard.

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The Captain stared into the fire in the brazier and swirled his brandy in his glass. It was a tribute to his ability to hold alcohol that not one drop spilled, since he was already quite drunk. Though Annarisse had been peripherally aware of the drinking on the voyage, she had never seen Salvatore in a state she would call drunk, until now. She waited, not touching the brandy he had poured for her. She was in his cabin on his invitation; clearly, he had something he wished to talk to her about. She thought of their deal from earlier in the day to keep knowledge of certain parts of the treasure secret from the Baron, and wondered if she were here to cement it somehow. But no; the Captain's mood was dark, depressed even, and she shivered at the naked pain on his face.

"Sister, will you hear my confession?" His words were loud in the silence of the cabin, though he had spoken softly.

"Of course, Captain." She made her holy sign and blessed him. He did not kneel, though that was the customary position for a confession. She decided not to quibble.

"I killed them. I killed my own family." The voice was dead, flat, belying the anguish of his expression.

"Did they die by your own hand, then?" asked Annarisse. She had a feeling she knew what was coming. She'd seen this kind of guilt before, in children at the orphanage.

He looked up, shocked. "Of course not! I couldn't have killed them outright! I loved them!" He stopped, and buried his face in his hands. "But they're dead because of me. I could have stopped it, and I didn't." He quaffed the rest of the brandy in his snifter, then reached for the bottle. He didn't bother to pour it into the glass, instead dumping it straight down his throat. Annarisse winced. "I was at sea when it happened, but I knew there would be trouble. I should have protected them. I should have taken them to sea with me. I shouldn't have left them to the mercy of the Rinaldi. It's my fault they're dead!" He picked up his empty glass and bashed it against the wall. The cheap

glass shattered, leaving his hand cut and blood pooling on the floor. His shoulders shook with silent sobs. Annarisse stood rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but pity him. She had no prayer to cure his sorrows. No one did.

Without looking up, he said, "I don't expect absolution. This was a mistake. Leave me." His voice had gone dead again, and it chilled her to the bone.

She walked across the cabin, picked out a handkerchief from his open press, and went to him. Gently, she pried the remains of the glass out of his hand and cleaned the cuts. The brandy on the glass would likely ensure that they didn't fester. She wrapped his hand and said a prayer of healing over it, closing the wounds. Throughout these ministrations, he leaned against the wall with his head bowed, his eyes on the rest of the glass on the floor.

Finally she dropped his hand. Gingerly she picked up the larger pieces of glass to wrap in another handkerchief. The little bits would have to stay; she had no broom, and she would not disservice the Captain by sending one of the cabin boys to see him in this state. The bloody bits of glass would go overboard as soon as she reached the deck. She stoppered the brandy bottle and put it back in the rack, which was full of other such bottles in varying states of depletion.

Then she straightened, and addressed herself to her supplicant. "By the Light of S'Allumer and by the example of the Saint, I absolve you of your sins. Go, and sin no more." She made her holy sign in the air in front of her, going through the age-old motions with a deliberate reverence that was often lacking for more mundane confessions. "I am not going to assign your penance tonight, Captain," she told him. Still, he didn't look at her. "Having the blood of innocents on one's hands is not a matter to be taken lightly. You will do a penance, and it will change your life and others besides. It will make you a whole man again." His shoulders started to shake again; she waited it out. When he became still again, she said, "Get some rest, Captain. The Light has bleached away your sins, and they are no more. We will deal with your penance in the morning." She turned and left, closing the cabin door behind her.

The Captain stood where he was as her steps faded down the causeway and gave way to the silence of wind and wave. Finally, he crumpled to the floor where he was and slept, with the tiny shards of glass pressing into his flesh and reminding him that no priest could force him to forgive himself.

The Island of the Green Tower

Salvatore lifted his distance-viewer to get a better view of the island they were approaching. It was small, less than a mile in diameter, and roughly circular. The coast was mostly rocky, the seaward side considerably more so than the landward. It was forested with the hardwoods which predominated in this part of Bisclavret territory, and Salvatore could see the odd shape of a ruined watchtower rising just above the highest tree. It was built on the tallest part of the island, so it was actually quite a bit higher than the water. He estimated its height at four hundred feet above sea level, of which the tower itself represented half. The narrow strait that separated the island from the mainland was only a few hundred yards wide. It would probably hull the ship if he tried to sail through it. The *Corrado* was nowhere to be seen; most likely, Admiral Ferrante had sailed around to the other side of the island, which had a gentler slope to the sea and easy access to the tower. Well, let Ferrante search the tower, thought Salvatore. They knew better. The treasure was in a cave to which access was on this side of the island.

Treeden came up on deck, regarded the island with satisfaction, and began giving orders. "You there! Lower the longboat! "We'll be going ashore straightaway! You, you, and you! Arm yourselves! You'll be coming with us!"

Mr. Santani, to whom the first order had been issued, looked to Salvatore to confirm it. The Captain cancelled it with a wave of his hand and approached the Baron. "My lord, these are my men and my ship. The orders come from me." He stared down his snout at the slightly larger wolf, who bristled noticeably but did not attempt to override the Captain's order. Salvatore was the first to turn away, gesturing to the island. "I believe we would be wiser to go ashore under cover of darkness, my lord," he suggested. "The *Corrado* is undoubtedly anchored on the other side of the island, searching the Tower itself. We can follow your map from here without Ferrante ever being made aware of our presence."

"I was wondering when you gentlemen would inform me of our purpose here," said a female voice behind them. Treeden and Salvatore gave a little start of surprise, their ears lying flat for a moment before they turned to face her. Salvatore still looked a bit peaked from his excesses of the night before, but her makeshift bandage was gone. Treeden looked like he wanted to strangle her. That was fine, since he wasn't in her good graces at the moment, either.

"So when was I to find out about this little expedition?" Annarisse asked. "When you came back full of bullet holes? Well, don't think you're going to leave me behind. I've got my first-aid kit right here. I'm going with you."

The consternation on their faces was beautiful to behold. Clearly, neither had ever considered this possibility. “Sister, there are privateers, dangerous men, on that island,” Salvatore pointed out.

“Yes, and there will be more as soon as we land. Unless either of you would like to try to convince me that you yourselves are not privateers?” She fixed them with a hard stare, which they met defiantly. “Good. Now that we all know where we stand, here’s what will happen. I’m not much use in a fight. Instead, if it comes to that, I will say a prayer of love for each of you. You have only to call upon it when hurt to better withstand the attack.” She decided not to tell them the method by which that would be accomplished. “I will also patch up whatever wounds you acquire by means of a healing spell or simple bandages.” She paused expectantly. “Well? When do we leave?”

Treedden made a rude noise and turned away, but Salvatore answered. “After dark, Sister,” he said. “Do you own clothes that will allow you to move more freely than those robes?” She nodded. “Then please change into them. You need to be able to keep up.” He pulled a leather sheath off of his belt and handed it to her. In it, she discovered, was an unornamented, extremely functional dagger-cum-hunting knife of the sort used by experienced woodsmen. “No one from our ship will bother you, Sister, but the same may not be true of those we meet on the island. You need to be able to protect yourself. Do you know how to use this?”

“I’m a Deschamps,” she said simply. They both looked surprised, and she realized she had never told them her family name.

“The techniques you may have learned as a noble are somewhat different from the ones privateers are likely to use. They’ll do for now, but remind me to give you lessons.”

Reflecting that her father would have a heart attack at the idea of his priestess daughter learning street-fighting, she smiled and threaded her belt through the loops on the sheath. She was turning to head to her cabin when Tredden gestured to her. “So your father is Sir Phelippe?” he asked.

“No. My father is the Comte d’Ardelles. Uncle Phelippe has only one daughter, and she is much younger than I.” She considered the apprehension on his face, and found it good. “You and I may be able to work out a deal, my lord. I will allow you to expiate some of your sins, in return for my silence about your family’s activities.” She paused. “But just now there is work to be done. Please excuse me.” Giving him the little half-bow traditional between nobles of equal rank, she turned and strode away. He caught himself reflexively returning the bow, swore, and stalked to his own cabin.

By dusk all was in readiness. The ship, which had been sitting at anchor since early afternoon, approached the small lagoon and began to lower the longboat. Captain Salvatore gave his instructions to Mr. Mietvani, the first mate, for items of ship’s business which might arise. Four burly sailors, two foxes, a badger and a boar, were to accompany them. These men handled their weapons with the efficiency of long practice. Annarisse was certain none of them had ever set foot in a church in their lives.

The moon was full. Its light on the still lagoon made the water as reflective as silvered glass, and underlit the branches hanging out over the water with an eerie incandescence. As the longboat entered the lagoon, it became apparent that what had appeared from the sea to be a narrow bay was actually a natural harbour, protected by the promontory they had just passed. It formed a near-perfect circle of beach and cliff, about three hundred yards in diameter at its widest point.

In addition to the silvery moonlight, one spot near the shore seemed to be glowing faintly green. It was sheltered by the promontory, and would be entirely hidden from the view of anyone beyond the lagoon. Silently, the Captain directed the sailors to row for the beach in that direction. The slip-slap of oars in the water mingled with the lapping of tiny waves on rocks, giving Annarisse the impression of floating in midair above the water.

They landed silently, and Annarisse realized that the underwater light source was hidden from this beach by a tiny tilt in the cliff face. The men scrambled out of the boat, making as little noise as possible. Annarisse scrambled out after them, reflecting that it surely wasn't too much to ask that one of the supposed gentlemen hand her out of the boat.

The attack was swift and sudden. With a great whoop and a growl, a bevy of burly sailors fell upon them from the woods. Annarisse could see at a glance they were outnumbered about two to one, and she started to reach for her knife with one hand and her holy symbol with the other. Meanwhile, the Captain had his rapier in his right hand, a pistol in his left, and was parrying expertly while he waited for a clean shot. On her right, the Baron had his broadsword out and had already sliced one attacker wide open with it. The fox was staining the sand with his heart's blood while the fighting continued around him.

Annarisse was still trying to gather her concentration for a prayer of love when the badger of their own crew went down in front of her, his thigh gaping open and geysering blood. The horse who had killed him faced her, and thrust. The knife fell out of her hand from nerveless fingers. Knowing she needed to dodge, she stood rooted. As though in slow motion, she saw the broadsword approach her belly, knowing it to be her death. Her mind screamed one name as she waited for the blow to fall.

Suddenly there was another broadsword under the one which was thrust at her, parrying up. Mobile again, Annarisse scrambled out of the way as the Baron engaged the horse. The thrust that should have killed her was not entirely deflected; it cut Treeden's ear as it was forced up, and his cheek as the horse recovered and parried. To her untrained eye, the two appeared to be well-matched, and as the fighting went on around them, they parried and thrust, each scoring minor victories. Gathering her scattered wits, she attempted her prayer of love yet again, all her attention focused on the Baron.

Her attention was distracted again, this time by a gunshot to her left. The Captain was standing, bloodied rapier and smoking pistol in his hands, over the bodies of four attackers. Even as the Baron got in a stroke that killed the horse, Salvatore had dropped his rapier and was aiming his second pistol at another

sailor. Suddenly Annarisse realized that the battle was over; the three sailors remaining had dropped their weapons and surrendered. Seeing what was about to happen, she called out, "Captain, no!"

He cocked the pistol anyway, as the mouse at point-blank range in front of him trembled. "Stay out of this, Sister," he said.

"Captain, you will not shoot a man who has thrown down his weapon! Have you no honour?"

He glanced at her. "I save my honour for those who have some themselves," he replied. But he did not shoot.

"Take him prisoner instead. As you love the Light, Captain!"

His look was thunderous, but he gestured with his empty pistol to the three remaining crewmembers. "Bind them," he ordered, keeping his gun trained on the prisoners as the sailors complied.

Sure now that he would not shoot, she turned to the Baron to examine his wounds. The horse had managed another good slash to the body, and Treeden appeared to be barely keeping his feet. She pushed him gently to the sand, and began her spell of healing over the main wound. At first he tried to push her away, until she caught his gaze and said, "Baron, you acquired these while saving my life. The least I can do is return the favour." He subsided, and she completed the spell. A bandage sufficed on the ear. Then she rose and went to see to the Captain.

He was quietly giving orders to the sailors, who had completed the job of trussing their prisoners. "We'll have to scour the woods. We can't let any get away," he was saying. The look on his face was one Annarisse had not seen there before: determination, power, and a glee she found very disturbing.

Realizing that saying what she wished to say in front of the sailors was a bad idea, she asked, "Captain, may I see to your wounds over here?" He acquiesced, and when he approached, she said, "Is it really necessary to go after the rest of the crew? We are only six. They were -" she counted - "thirteen a few moments ago. Likely there are many more elsewhere. How could we hope to take them?" She stopped questioning long enough to say a healing over the wound in his shoulder; she couldn't believe he could still hold his pistol in his left arm with a wound like that. His other scratches were minor.

"We can take them, Sister. I'm sure of it." That glee was back in his face, stronger now. All of a sudden she realized what it was. As understanding dawned, her thoughts for the penance she had yet to set crystallized. Though the wound was mostly closed, she wrapped a bandage tightly around his shoulder, effectively immobilizing his left arm.

"Captain, we did not come here to fight other pirates, but to find treasure," she admonished. "Let me say my prayers for the dead, and then we shall go back about our business. There is no need to seek out more trouble." The light started to fade from his eyes, and she figured the worst danger had passed. As she started to move away, though, he stopped her.

"Sister, I would not do you the dishonour of reprimanding you in front of my men," he began, and she bristled. "But how I act in a fight, or how I order

my men to act, is not your concern. Next time I will thank you to keep your moralizing to yourself.”

She considered her words for a moment. “I’m afraid I can’t agree to that, Captain,” she replied. “In the midst of a fight, certainly, your orders prevail, but I will not abdicate my responsibility to the Light because of the possibility it will interfere with your orders to your men. I asked you to do the right thing. I would do the same thing again, to save those men, and to save your honour and your soul. If you wish to avoid such confrontations, you will have to consider the honour of your actions before I have to intervene.”

He suppressed the rage he felt and replaced it with a disarming smile. “It would seem, Your Grace, that you are becoming more my confessor than the Baron’s,” he replied. She smiled at him and turned to see to her priestly duties. She moved to one of the foxes who needed a healing from her, then began the prayers for those who had died. She was halfway through the rite when she realized she did not even know their names.

Annarisse looked up from the last prayer for the dead to find the Captain and the Baron conferring quietly. Their attention was directed towards the undersea green glow they had seen from the longboat. She approached them, and they opened their circle to include her in the discussion.

“We know now why the map seemed to make no sense,” Treeden was saying. “We were expecting access to be from the land. If the cave mouth is underwater, then the map is perfectly sound.”

“May I see the map?” asked Annarisse. Treeden handed it to her. Studying it, she quickly saw what he had meant. She pointed. “It looks to me like the cave entrance slopes upward, into the cliff,” she commented. “Only the first little bit will be underwater.”

“So will you swim it, then?” asked Salvatore, pulling his flask from his vest and taking the stopper out.

“She can’t go first! She can’t even handle a knife fight! If Ferrante’s men found another way in, she’d be either killed or taken hostage. I’ll go first.” The Baron began to shed his kilt, smirking when Annarisse glanced away in embarrassment. Salvatore appeared unwilling to let the Baron out of his sight; he issued quick orders, and by the time Treeden waded out, one fox and the Captain were getting wet, too. The other fox and the boar were left behind to guard the prisoners, and, according to the Captain, to keep an eye on her. Not to be outdone, she removed her belt, attached her holy symbol more securely to her clothing, and waded in, too. One of the foxes on shore made a move to stop her, but was halted by her flat stare. She watched as Salvatore dove, took a deep breath, and followed.

Rounding a tiny outcropping of rock, she saw the Captain silhouetted by the green glow. As she descended, he blocked it for a moment, nearly sending her into a panic. A heartbeat later the door was clear, and she entered it herself.

She swam in the green glow for a few yards before the passageway turned upwards. The source of the light was still up ahead, but she realized as she went up the bend that there were bits of silvered glass positioned in the passage, so as

to reflect light from the cavern above down and out into the water. Swimming up, she found her head poking up into a pool which quickly got shallower, ending on a rocky beach.

The room in which she found herself was a natural cavern. Where they were standing, the ceiling was about ten feet up, but the irregular shape of the cave made it feel much lower. Four or so yards to the left the ceiling started to slope down, then veer outwards to form a new ceiling much closer to the ground. The wall of the cave was shrouded in darkness underneath this new overhang. To the right, the roof rose sharply, ending in a triangular point some ten yards up and five over. Dead ahead was a smooth cliff face broken by a set of carved stone stairs and a tunnel mouth, six yards up. The cave was wet and dotted with stalactites and stalagmites, some of which met to form hourglass-shaped pillars. Directly in front of her was the source of the green glow, already the subject of some contention between Treeden and Salvatore.

Placed on a rusty iron stand about three feet high was a statue. It was about a foot high and vaguely fish-shaped, with a long snout and a smoothly rounded head. Its flippers were at the sides, and it appeared to have hands at the ends of them. A long, forked tailfin completed the sleek profile. The sculptor had captured the creature in the act of leaping out of the water, its body already arched for re-entry. It appeared to be made of glass, but the material was lit from within by a mesmerizing green glow. It took an act of will for Annarisse to tear her gaze from it.

"I am the owner of this ship, and the financial backer of this expedition. You may count what is in that chest as part of the shares to be divided, but this is mine," Treeden was saying.

"That was not the agreement I had with your mother, and I didn't sign any new ones with you. All treasure is included in the shares. If you wish to take the statue in lieu of your share, that can be arranged," answered Salvatore. He was fiddling with the iron stand, attempting to free the statue from it. Just as one of the sailors managed to open the chest, he succeeded, and the statue came away in his hand. He was staring at it, transfixed, when Treeden grabbed it out of his hand. They were both distracted by the sailor's "ahh," of wonder.

Inside the chest was the true treasure of Gustafus the Green. There were robes of the finest silks Annarisse had ever seen, dyed fantastic colours and intricately embroidered with wonderful creatures in golds and blues. Beneath these, individually wrapped in more silk, were miniature glass statues, fifteen of them, finely detailed and portraying the same creatures as the larger, glowing statue. Before the sailors had unwrapped more than two of these, though, a look passed between Salvatore and Treeden, who came over, grabbed the small statue from the hand of the sailor, replaced it, and closed the lid. "We'll examine the rest on the ship," he said.

"Men, search the cave. Bring anything you find immediately to me," the Captain ordered. The two sailors obeyed, and Salvatore went back to discussing the statue with the Baron. Annarisse stopped listening, preferring to poke around a bit in the cave herself.

It was some ten minutes later when the sailors reported that there was nothing else to be found. Treeden and Salvatore were no closer to reaching agreement, so Annarisse decided to end the discussion. She marched up to Treeden, who had it at that moment, and plucked it out of his hand. “We have prisoners on the beach who should probably have reported to their own ship by this point,” she reminded them. “We don’t want to be trapped in this cave by the other pirates we know are on the island. Let’s repair to the ship immediately and debate ownership of this bauble later.” Taking one of the burlap sacks brought for the purpose, she wrapped the statue and plunged the cave into darkness. Sheepishly she unwrapped it a bit.

Realizing she was right, Salvatore arranged for the chest to be towed down the passageway and up to the longboat. Then he held out his hand for the statue and gestured for her to precede him into the water. She complied, and soon found herself back on the shore, followed closely by Salvatore and Treeden.

One of the sailors they had left behind was lying on the ground, bound, gagged, and unconscious. The three prisoners were nowhere to be seen. The other sailor realized they had returned, and brought the longboat back from where he had rowed it behind an outcropping of rock. His tale was chilling.

“We was talking, Grub an’ me,” said the fox, indicating the boar who was sitting up now as his bonds were cut by Salvatore. “We thought it would be best to get the longboat off the beach – you know, in case more o’ them pirates showed up. We put one prisoner in the boat and I took it off under cover o’ them trees over thataways. Well, I was just in time, Sir, ‘cause those other sailors, they appeared out of nowhere, knocked Grub out, took their other two men, and left. They didn’t make a sound the whole time.” He shuddered.

“Did you know any of the pirates you saw, Tom?” asked the Captain.

“I thought I knew two of them, Sir,” he answered. “I used to sail on the *Corrado*, until – well, the Admiral, he wasn’t too happy with me that one time, and let me go. But I’d swear it was two of my mates from that ship what I saw on the beach just now.”

The Captain nodded as though this did not surprise him, and quickly gave orders to load the treasure into the longboat. Within moments, they were heading back to the ship.

Fleeing the *Corrado*

By the time they returned to the ship, Mr. Mietvani had the sailors standing ready to hoist sail. The treasure was hastily stowed, the anchor was weighed, and they were underway in less than a candle mark. They were too late. As they rounded the island to make for open sea, they saw the *Corrado* approaching at full speed, just barely out of cannon range.

Captain Salvatore was the first to spot the other ship. It was immediately obvious that they would not be able to outrun her; she was under full sail and moving much faster than they were. Captain Salvatore started barking orders, and his men leapt to obey, climbing the riggings like so many monkeys as they turned to head for the coast.

“Ally!” she stopped the cabin boy with a hand to his shoulder. “What’s going on?”

“The Captain’s going to sail the strait, Sister!” He ran off, towards the mainsail lines, to help furl it, and Annarisse realized what exactly it meant to sail the tiny strait between Gustafus’ Island and the mainland. The *Corrado*, a much bigger ship, would not try to follow, and they’d gain some time while she turned and circled the island again. On the other hand, tacking around gave the *Corrado* the opportunity to rake them across the stern before they entered the strait. It also posed the significant risk that the bottom of the *Spirit of Midchain* would be hulled on the rocks in the strait.

Annarisse found a spot out of the way of the crew, and began to pray.

She was awoken from her trance a few moments later by the cannon fire. The *Corrado* was now in range, and had opened up her two bow chaser guns, both twelve-pounders, on the *Spirit of Midchain*. Since she was still at speed, she couldn’t turn to shoot them with her port guns, for which Annarisse heaved a sigh of relief. It was short-lived.

The two cannonballs struck simultaneously, landing one on the foredeck, one aft, through the roof of the Captain’s stateroom. The first one had been smeared with pitch, and started a fire on deck. Efficiently, the crew leapt to put out the fires, while the ship continued steady on its course. Before the fires were out, their own port guns were firing. One ball hit the foremast of the *Corrado* about two-thirds of the way up, sending it leaning at an odd angle. Another tore some of the rigging that held the fore-topsail in place. The other two landed harmlessly off the stern. There was no time for more; they were entering the strait.

The Captain was at the wheel. Mr. Mietvani was dragging a sounding line off the starboard bow, hoping to detect sunken rocks before they hit the ship.

About half the sailors made for the oar decks to row, while the rest pulled in sail and loaded the stern gun. It was never fired, for the *Corrado* had seen what they were up to and had turned away, out of range, to circle the island and pick them up on the other side.

All fell silent on the ship as the Captain navigated. The cliffs rose up on either side, a stone's throw away. A slight miscalculation, a slight gust of wind at the wrong moment, would send them crashing on the forbidding rock face. The moon both revealed and concealed, reflecting off some things and throwing shadows over others. Mr. Mietvani pulled up his plumb line, knowing it to be useless, and trusting the Captain's skill to see them through.

Then the strait widened. The cliffs fell away on either side, first slightly, then dramatically. The colour of the water deepened, and the Captain relaxed his stiff stance. Handing the wheel over to the Mr. Santini, he called up the oarsmen and had them setting sail again. They were free, and they'd gained several candle marks. Still hugging the cliff as tightly as possible in the calm, moonlit sea, they prepared to outrun the *Corrado*.

It was one of the mice who approached Annarisse. "Sister, Ally was hurt by the cannonball to the rigging," he told her. She jumped up, sent the mouse to gather her first aid kit, and went to do what she could.

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Treeden closed the door of his cabin on the cannon fire and rubbed his hands together with glee. Everyone was busy with the battle and the ship. This was the perfect time to investigate his treasure.

The silks he set aside quickly. They were pretty, and well-preserved, and would fetch a good price, but they didn't appeal to him. Instead, he pulled out each of the glass statues in turn, carefully wrapping and placing each one in his press before pulling out the next. Treeden had a respect for wealth that he had for few other things.

They were lovely. There were statues of the same creatures as the green glowing one, sinuous, graceful forms that delighted the eye and the mind. There were three of a strange looking creature, with wings like a bat and a beak like a tortoise. The carving suggested a strange, layered kind of fur. He put those aside with a shrug. The others were all of various sea creatures, unlike any fish he had ever seen. Each involved exquisite handcrafting, and Treeden's mercenary heart rejoiced over them.

He got to the bottom of the chest, and paused, surprised. The chest was carefully lined with a fine brocade fabric, but it did not appear as spacious on the inside as he would have expected. Experimentally he lifted one side by its strap, and noted that it was heavier still than an empty trunk had any right to be. Something was off.

He unsheathed his belt knife and carefully slit the brocade along one seam. Lifting a corner of it, he realized that the wood underneath was not the same as the wood that formed the bottom of the chest. There was a false bottom, and whatever was beneath it was heavy. Excited now, he slit along the long sides of

the bottom, then felt around until he found what he'd known would be there – four indentations, perfectly spaced for the claws of a rat. Squeezing his larger vulpine claws into them, he carefully raised the plank. Propping it open with his belt knife, he reached in to remove what he found there.

Bound in the fashion of thirty years before, water-stained and hand-written, was a log of a ship's voyages, written in the hand of the captain of the ship. On the front cover was written, "Gustafus the Rat of the Corsairs, Log Book" and dates spanning a three-year period.

As the cannon fire stopped and the ship settled into stillness, Treeden lounged on his bunk and began to read.

It was morning. The *Corrado* was no longer on their tail, though Annarisse surmised that it was just over the horizon. She had retired after the hair-raising passage through the strait, still considering the idea for the penance which she needed to set for the Captain. Now that the light shone and the danger appeared to be past for the moment, it was time to find him.

She cornered him immediately after breakfast. He looked as though he, too, had sought his bunk after sailing the strait; he appeared well-rested, and the last visible signs of his night of excess were gone. He also appeared nervous; he kept looking to stern with his distance-viewer, he took more regular sips from his flask than usual, and his orders to his men had a sharp note which was not usually there. She approached quietly, but his fox's ears twitched anyway. Without facing her, he said, "I believe our business was concluded already, Sister. Perhaps the Baron has need of you?" The dismissal in his voice was as clear as fine vodka.

So that was how it was to be, thought Annarisse. Well, she hadn't grown up in a houseful of boys without learning something of tactics. "What I have to discuss with you is best said in private, Captain," she replied for his ears only. "But if you wish, I will shout your penance from the top of the main mast."

He hesitated a moment, then turned and strode towards his stateroom without a word. Annarisse followed, closing the door behind her.

"Captain—"

"No, Sister," he cut her off. "My confession was a mistake made in drunkenness. We will not discuss it again. Please do not try. Now leave." He faced the porthole, his posture shouting his defiance.

Annarisse snorted at him. "I didn't realize you would be such a coward, Captain."

He whirled on her, his hand moving to the butt of his pistol and his teeth bared in a snarl. Her eyes moved to his hand, but the rest of her stood her ground as she rigidly controlled her reaction. The silence lengthened, until finally Salvatore dropped his hand and turned away again, shame in every laid-back whisker. Recognizing her victory, she pressed her advantage.

"If you had been shot, you would not hesitate to see a healer. But because it is your soul that has been wounded, you hide it away while it festers, fearing the

searing rod that cleanses it. Well, Captain, you called upon a healer of souls two nights ago by confessing to me. I'd be a poor doctor indeed if I left the wound gaping open because of a bit of pain on the part of my patient."

By this time all the defiance had left his stance, leaving him defeated and old. "There are some wounds that cannot be healed," he remarked heavily.

"And you're afraid this is one of them? In your place, I'd fear that, too." She considered sharing her own soul-wound, but decided against it. He needed her strength. "Your sin was one of neglect. You failed to take sufficient care with your family, leaving them open to an attack by your enemies. Am I correct thus far?" He nodded, and she continued. "Then your penance must be to take care of others the way you should have done of your family. To do that, you will need to be in control of yourself." She walked over to the wine rack and selected a nearly full bottle of brandy. Hefting it experimentally, she walked to the nearest porthole, which was locked tight. She opened it. He caught the bottle before it fell into the ocean.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled, too incredulous to be angry.

"I'm breaking your drinking habit. That's the first part of the penance. You will sober up."

The look on his face would have made her giggle in a less emotionally-charged situation. "Can't I just donate my share of the treasure to your orphanage?" he pleaded.

"Though that would undoubtedly be good for your soul, it is not part of your penance," she replied. "I mistrust that money donated to the orphanage helps the children much with Lady MacDuncan in charge. However, the drinking is only part of the problem here. Far more important is your death wish." He looked at her in surprise tinged with shame. "What, you thought I hadn't noticed the crazy chances you take with your life? I had, and they have to stop." Her voice gentled. "Killing yourself won't bring them back. Nothing will."

He turned away suddenly, violently, his fist pounding once on the paneling. She permitted him his privacy for a few moments, before saying, "You need to be responsible for someone again. You need to be a parent again. That is the second part of your penance. Upon our return to Triskellian, you will accompany me to the orphanage and adopt two children of your own kind. The orphanage is teeming with red foxes, so it shouldn't be hard. You will raise them to follow the Light, protecting them and making them your heirs. You will remain alive until they are independent. You will be their father."

There was silence again. Then he straightened. It was not the easy authoritarian stance of the Captain, nor the shame-filled stance of the guilt-ridden drunkard. In it was determination, and desperate pride. "Very well, Sister," he said quietly. "It shall be as you say." He turned back to the window, his thoughts clearly turned inward.

"Captain?" she ventured. He did not reply. "What were their names?"

He was quiet so long, she thought he had not heard her. She was about to repeat herself when he said, "My wife was Lania. My son -" his voice broke. "My son was Pietro."

Quietly, reverently, she began the service to pray for the souls of the innocent dead. Her contralto voice moved through the ancient hymn as her holy symbol moved through the gestures which accompanied it. From that service, she moved easily into prayers for him and the souls of those on board. Finally she concluded with a sombre hymn of praise. Through it all he remained at the porthole, staring unseeing at the undulating waves as peace crept over his soul.

The Battle of Roxbarren

It was midmorning when the *Corrado* appeared on the horizon. Her mast was no longer leaning, though she was not flying full sail. The Captain called a meeting of the ship's officers, and Annarisse went to it, figuring she had a right to know what was going on. Mr. Santini looked askance at her, but neither Treeden nor Salvatore questioned her presence, so the second mate didn't, either.

"She's overtaking us, sir," Mr. Mietvani pointed out. "She'll be on us before sunset, and there aren't many routes for evading her at this point."

"There is one," the Captain replied, jabbing his finger down onto the map of the coastline. "Here," he said. "There's a fishing village here, called Roxbarren, protected by a small island the locals call Gull's Roost. If you don't know it's there, it's easy to miss. The main shipping lane goes between Gull's Roost and Salthaven, so Ferrante is unlikely to realize we've put in there. It'll be a good hideout until the *Corrado's* gone." He indicated Salthaven on the map, just to the south in the heart of the Corsairs.

The Baron studied the map. "I know of the place," he replied. "Precious little there but fish. Still, we need to repair our own deck and maybe sell some of those statues. We can lay low at Roxbarren a day or two, then head to Port Spar to sell our goods. Lady Ratatiner there is an associate of my mother's; she'll give us a good price."

"Fine. Be prepared for a fight, though; if we get there before sunset, Ferrante will figure out we've gone to the north of Gull's Roost instead of the south, we're going to have a battle on our hands." The Captain did not look at all displeased with this prospect as he left the stateroom to give the appropriate orders. Annarisse and the mates filed out, they to man their watches and she to prepare her healing supplies for a battle. Treeden went back to his cabin to read more of the log book.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, the deception was put into place. The ship swung suddenly north, hugging Gull's Roost Island closely. They rounded the tip of the island just as the sky was turning pink.

They were just a bit too fast. They had made their move before full darkness was upon them. The Captain, watching with his distance-viewer, realized that the *Corrado* had not been fooled. She also was turning north, staying in the more open water of the narrowing strait where she could manoeuvre better. Cursing, he turned and changed his orders to his men, sending them hopping to get the ship into the open strait and follow a more direct route to the fishing village. There was going to be a fight, and Salvatore

intended that it should happen in a sheltered spot, where help was at hand if necessary and witnesses would attest that he had not invited it. Ferrante would regret his privateering on the doorstep of the Bisclavret!

They were pulling past the tiny fishing harbour when the first cannonballs were fired. Still slightly out of range, they landed harmlessly in the water off the stern, but they galvanized the stern gunners to ready their cannon that much faster. As the mice readied their guns, other sailors took to the riggings, stringing their hammocks betwixt the masts in an effort to protect them. The goal now was to bypass the port entirely. It would be impossible for the *Corrado* to pass them, and very difficult for her to turn, so their best strategy was to sail straight through the passage between the island and the mainland, offering as narrow a target as possible while trusting the darkness to make them harder to find on the other side. Annarisse overheard the carpenter talking to Mr. Santini about a decoy once they reached the open sea, and the second mate was clearly considering the idea.

The priestess was prepared for a battle at sea. Not fazed by the cannon fire as she had been by the fight on the beach, she said a Prayer of Love for the Captain, which he acknowledged. Then, remembering how he had saved her life on the beach, she said another for the Baron. As the *Spirit of Midchain* came abreast of the village, she prepared her first-aid materials for the next exchange.

The stern gun fired its single shot, putting a hole high in the *Corrado's* port gunwale, where the damage was minimal. But if the *Corrado* was in range for them, they were also in range for her bigger guns, and the return fire was nearly instantaneous. The *Corrado's* two fore guns reported at the same moment, and Annarisse had time to look up and duck before the first ball struck the main mast just beyond her head. It had been pitched, and the friction of its passage created enough heat to start a fire. As the mast began to topple, it burst into flame. Slowly it tilted, as the sailors caught in the riggings attempted to save themselves. A few fell to the deck. A few attempted to climb down, only to meet the fire as it spread upwards. Several were still with the mast when it landed in the water with a small splash.

A few of those on the deck scrambled to lower a lifeboat to those in the water, hampered by the fallen ropes, sail, and yardarms that had turned the neat deck into a maze of fire and splintered wood. Mr. Santini and several of his men started to cut the mast loose from the ropes still attached to it. The drag of the mast and sails in the water was pulling the entire ship to starboard, adding a thirty-degree angle to the other dangers of the deck. Annarisse stumbled around, trying to avoid the burning rope, bandaging wounds as best she could.

As the mast was cut free, the deck started to stabilize, and rowers ran to turn the ship manually. Their only hope now was to use their port guns to good effect before the larger ship could turn her port guns on them. But the mast took time to cut free, and the ship had been underway straight ahead through the strait. Turning was a slow process, and the *Corrado* shot off its

stern guns a second time before they were in position. This time, the effect was catastrophic.

Both shots hit the turning ship just above the waterline on the port side. The angles and trajectory combined to give the effect of one huge hole, the edges of which were already aflame. The ship began to list to port this time, letting water into the gaping maw, raising the fiery starboard deck high into the twilight sky, washing rowers out to sea with every wave. The *Spirit of Midchain* was sinking.

Even as the sailors on deck had realized this, the *Corrado* fired again. The balls were aimed higher this time, and struck the gun deck and the rigging of the aft mast. The two gunners there were blown into little pieces, and two others on deck went down in screams of agony. Chaos reigned as sailors began lowering the longboats as fast as the pulleys would allow, piling into them with abandon. Two of the mice gunners thought to help Sister Annarisse and her two patients of the moment into the first boat. The Captain was fighting the fire at the base of the mast; he had been burned, and stung by wood that splintered up from the hole in the deck. Suddenly he realized what was happening.

“Abandon ship!” he cried, and headed, not for the longboat, but for his stateroom.

It was already afire. The floor was tilted at a steep angle as the ship began to sink, and he had to crawl to get to his press. But get there he did, and with burnt hands lifted out the glowing statue from Gustafus’ hoard. Carefully he secured it in his vest, wrapping another blanket around himself for added safety, before heading back on deck. He couldn’t get through the flaming door. Instead, he took his rapier hilt and bashed his way through the charred remnants of the port wall of his stateroom. The wood splintered, raining glowing coals on his fur and sending a spear of pain into his left thigh from a sharp cinder. He ignored it, in fact hardly noticed it, as he dashed for the last longboat which was even then being cut from the ship. He jumped into it, narrowly missing the cutlass that severed the last rope the next instant.

As the boat hit the water and the four sailors on board began to paddle frantically away from the sinking ship, he looked back. He was in time to see Treeden, silhouetted by the flames from the fire at the main mast, leap into the water clutching something. Then another cannonball sent a wave careening over the side of the longboat, and he began to bail.

Annarisse had been in the first longboat to set out. She, too, saw Treeden jump from the port side, his shadow cast eerily on the flames between her and him. “We must return to get the Baron,” she said to the second mate, who was rowing.

“We dare not, Sister, until the ship has sunk completely,” he told her. “There will be an undertow as it goes down, enough to pull in anyone who is too close. When the ship has settled, we will go for him, but now we must pull away as fast as we can.”

Realizing he was right, she put her supplicant out of her mind and began praying for the injured cabin-boy, closing his most lethal wound and binding the others. As they approached the fishing docks, she watched the prow of the ship disappear under the waves, backlit by the setting sun. Two more longboats had survived the sinking and were heading into the docks; one, she saw, contained the Captain.

She looked up in surprise as she heard the unmistakable report of more cannon fire. Who could be firing now, and for what reason? She took in the scene at a glance, and a wrath such as she had never before known came over her.

The *Corrado* had slowed, her mainsails furled. Every gun port on the starboard side now housed a gun, and Annarisse guessed that one or more guns from the port side had been moved to allow for maximum bombardment. The guns fired simultaneously. They were aiming for the village of Roxbarren. Even as she watched, two warehouses near the docks caught fire, and she could see fisher folk, who had been preparing to help with the rescue of the doomed ship, get cut to pieces by the black iron balls. The eight guns fired again as their longboat reached the nearest dock, and they ducked as the dock splintered in front of them. Other balls and some grapeshot hit homes and docks nearby. Lupine villagers were running everywhere, some screaming in pain, others in panic, others silently trying to help or support family members.

Finally they reached an intact slip, tied the longboat, and unloaded. Annarisse took charge. "Mr. Santani, start directing those people towards the church. It's made of stone and won't burn. You two, help Ally to get there, too. You, gather any able-bodied you see and start a bucket chain for that warehouse. It looks to be the worst hit." Reacting to the instinctive note of command in her voice, they ran to do her bidding. By the time the other two longboats had arrived, villagers were streaming towards the church and two bucket chains were dousing the worst flames.

Annarisse was passing a bucket up the chain when a sailor tugged on her robe. Turning, she saw the Captain, limping badly and smelling of singed fur, weaving towards her. With an unladylike oath of exasperation, she went to him. "Don't you have the sense St. Helloise invests in little green apples? Why didn't you call on the prayer when that last wound occurred? Light help us, we need to get you to a place where you can sit down. What are you carrying under your vest?"

"Something important. Where is Treeden?" he asked.

"I saw him jump ship, moments before it went down. I haven't seen him since," she replied, leading him through the bucket chain in the direction of the church. He winced as another cannonball struck the cobblestones a few yards away, sprinkling them with shards of stone. "The second mate said going back for him just then would be suicide, so we headed for the docks."

"He was right. Can you tell if he's alive?"

"I know he's alive. He hasn't called on the Prayer either; until he does, I will be able to tell if he's alive or dead. Nothing else, I'm afraid. He's a good swimmer, and he jumped wide of the ship. He may make it." They reached

the door of the small stone chapel, which was already crowded with villagers carrying a few meagre belongings. They looked at Salvatore with sullen dislike. When she realized why, she told those nearest the door, "This is the Captain of the sunken ship, plying these waters at the behest of his Bisclavret lady. Make room for him." Hearing that the red fox in their midst was not working for the Rinaldi galvanized them to action. They made room for him near the altar, and someone passed her a skin of cheap homemade wine. Grimly she set to work, staunching the flow of blood from his thigh wound and bandaging his burns. She had strength left for only one prayer of healing, but she didn't hesitate. Treeden might not reach her in time to need it, but the Captain could die tonight without it. His wounds seen to, and resting comfortably from the wine, she turned her attention to the others in the chapel. Though she had no more magic with which to close their wounds, she bandaged and prayed as the last of the light disappeared from the sky, leaving the fires of the burning village to fight the darkness. As these were put out one by one, the cannon fire stopped. She looked out the door of the church to see the *Corrado* continuing on through the strait. Annarisse looked after her for a long moment. Exhausted, bruised and battered, and suffused with a cold rage as powerful as it was unfamiliar, she silently vowed on her honour as an Avoirdupois to see that Admiral Ferrante paid dearly for the work of this night. Then she turned back to her work.

Treeden weaved through the chaos of the sinking ship, the chest of treasure clutched in his hands. He watched as the last longboat was cut away and fell with a splash into the water, knowing what it meant. Here, on a barren and rocky bit of coast, surrounded by enemies, fire and mayhem, he was going to die.

As the sloop changed angles, making the deck nearly vertical to the water, and began its final descent, he reached the railing. He grabbed the last of the oiled bladders placed around the railing to throw to drowning sailors, and cut it free with claws and teeth. Then he climbed onto a box of rope and jumped.

He hit the water already swimming, the bladder positioned under the chest, both held out in front of him. The sinking ship was between him and the village. Knowing the danger of staying anywhere near the doomed *Spirit of Midchain*, he struck out towards the open sea as fast as he could.

He felt the tug of the undertow as the ship went down, and fought it with all his strength. He went under for a moment, then struggled to the surface again. He was too busy fighting the current to watch the ship disappear under the water, but he was aware of the instant it settled on the ocean floor. The terrible undertow vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. In just a few minutes, the sea around him was totally calm. The only sign that there had ever been a ship there was the flotsam from the wreckage that littered the surface. The longboats were all nearing the shore now, having struck out much faster than he could. He was totally alone.

He was singed, weary, wet, and alone in a sea leagues from home. His livelihood was at the bottom of the strait. As the *Corrado* began bombarding the village, he realized that there would be no boat sent for him as long as the brigantine was firing at the survivors. For the first time in his life, his survival and his livelihood were entirely within his grasp.

A strange calm settled over him as he treaded water, a clarity of mind such as he had never before experienced. All his life, he thought, he had been beholden to someone else for his money and power. Everything he valued was constantly being used to manipulate him by the people who ought to care the most for him. But now, for this one moment in time, the ties that bound him to his old life had been swept away in fire and water. He owed nothing to anyone. If he were to survive, it would be by his own wits and strength. If he were to prosper, the means to do so was held in the chest for which he had risked his life.

So this was freedom, he thought. This was what it felt like to be one's own master. He laughed out loud, and the air around him shivered. It felt warmer, somehow, than it had a moment before. He laughed again, and this time the power of his newfound freedom was enough to swirl the air into a tiny tornado atop the chest of treasure. His crystal-clear mind produced the answer: with freedom came power.

He swam over to a splintered plank that had once been part of the hull of his ship. It made a passable raft. Manoeuvring first the chest, then himself, onto it, he began to paddle for the rocky beach that formed the outside lip of the tiny harbour. It would be a long, cold night, but he was alive and free, and nothing would stop him from seizing his new power by the horns.

Refugees

The night was uncomfortable. Most houses in the village had been struck by the cannonballs, and those that had not been hit directly suffered fire damage from their neighbours. By moonset, the village was a smoking ruin. The only building still in good condition was the church.

This village was not important enough to have a priest of its own. Instead, traveling mendicants came here to preach periodically, staying for a week or so before moving on. The lack of regular spiritual guidance made Annarisse the ranking clergywoman, and as a noblewoman, even of another House, she was also the highest-ranked official present. The Baron would have outranked her, had he been present; but, though she was certain he was alive and fairly certain he was not badly hurt, he was not there that night. Leadership fell to her.

She saw to the wounded. She made sure every child had someone to look after them, even if one or both parents were among the dead or injured. She arranged for supplies of fresh water. She sent parties out to salvage blankets from houses which had sustained only slight damage. She organized fresh bucket brigades when the first ones came in, exhausted. She heard confessions from those near death. She performed the rights for the dead over the three villagers and two sailors who died of their wounds during the night, and for the twenty-six people, eight of them sailors, who had died during the battle. She ate the hardtack thrust into her hand by a sailor as she passed him in the nave of the church. She attended to the Captain. And she hid her rage, her pain, and her frustration from the entire village.

She could not, however, hide them from Salvatore. He watched her as she moved calmly and surely amongst the villagers, and when she came near to where he was, he made sure she got a moment to sit and sip from the pitcher of water that had been provided.

False dawn was staining the sky when the gasp of the cub near her roused her from the stupor she had fallen into. He was staring at the door. She looked up to see Baron Treeden standing there, wet, bedraggled, carrying the treasure chest he had saved from the ship, and surveying the sanctuary with the air of ownership that he took for practically everything. She sighed, rose, and went to greet him.

“Baron Treeden! I am glad to see you survived the sinking,” she told him.

“I should think so. I’m your employer,” he replied, surveying the room. The cub came up next to her and tugged at her robes, unsure what to do in the face of the noble who had just come in. She scratched him absently behind the ears. Treeden looked down at him. “Boy, fetch me some wine and a blanket,”

he commanded. Annarisse bristled and nearly countermanded the order, but the boy had raced to obey before she could. Suppressing her resentment, she ushered the Baron to where Salvatore was resting.

"Well, Salvatore, it seems we're in need of a new ship," Treeden commented almost jovially. Annarisse stared at him. Something was different about him. His usual air of authority, obey-me-because-I'm-noble, had been replaced with a confidence which appeared much more solid. It looked to her as though he had learned to believe in himself.

"We are indeed, my lord," answered the Captain. "Since you appear to have rescued our bounty, we should be able to procure one in Port Spar with little trouble."

"Then we'll set off for Port Spar immediately. Gather the sailors together. We'll leave within the hour."

"We most certainly will not!" Annarisse had been enraged the night before; now she was indignant. "This village is in ruins because we landed here. These people are hurt and unable to fend for themselves. You, Baron, are the ranking nobleman of their own people. It falls to you to care for them until their own lord is apprised of the situation." She gave him her best Confessor look, expecting to be met with his usual sullen defiance. She was surprised to find him looking, not at her, but at the gathered villagers. She was quite certain he had never paid this much attention to any peasant before in his life.

"You're right, of course, Sister. The lord of this region is the Baron Affligent, isn't it?" Annarisse didn't know, but Salvatore nodded. "Well, his manor house is not too far from here - maybe two leagues, if I remember correctly. We'll get the people organized and head out as soon as we can. Meanwhile, Sister," and here he turned his new confidence on her, "you look like you haven't slept since we left Gustafus' island. And you, Captain, are clearly still hurt. You both need to rest. I will see to the arrangements." He turned to the child who had returned with the wine and two blankets. One he wrapped around his own shoulders. The other he laid out for Annarisse, nearly pushing her onto it. She needed no further persuasion.

It was noon when the refugees were ready to set out. Treeden had risen to the occasion admirably. While Annarisse and Salvatore slept, he had organized carts and drays to transport the injured, elderly and children. The less-damaged houses had been stripped bare of anything useful, and the items divided up amongst the able-bodied villagers. Fish was caught and cooked for everyone present, and dried stores were dug up for travel rations. By the time he sent a villager to wake up the priestess and the Captain, all was in readiness for the journey.

The trek took them through the hills along a rough-hewn path. Their destination was the manor of Baron Affligent, some two leagues distant, deep in the Muire Forest. As Treeden and Annarisse led the column through a narrow pass, he shared some background information on the lord of Roxbarren.

"He's a bit of a joke, actually," Treeden told her. "At least two of his neighbours are only waiting for a stretch of clear weather to attack him. He

supports the arts and sciences so well that his people are some of the poorest in Bisclavret. All their taxes – and they pay a lot of it – go to pay his astrologers and mages.” Treeden shook his head at that lack of responsibility. “My mother has been quietly strengthening his nearest neighbour, Baron MacRorran, for several years now. I’ve never known the old lady to pick a loser, so Affligeant will likely be dead by autumn.”

“What will it do to your mother’s plans to have you demanding hospitality of an enemy?” asked Annarisse.

Treeden snorted. “My mother is a back-room financier,” he replied. “It’s doubtful Affligeant knows she’s at all interested in his affairs. If I’m lucky, this won’t interfere with her plans at all.” He shrugged. “If I’m not, I might have to promise some aid in his endeavours, which will arrive far too late to be of any use to him. The important thing here is that he won’t turn away his own people or anyone who helped them.”

As they began the downhill march toward the column of smoke on the horizon, Annarisse prayed he was right.

Guests of the Baron Affligent

The Baron's so-called "manor house" was really a small, decrepit castle. The moat was full of mud. The drawbridge appeared to be rusted into the "down" position. This did not seriously impede castle security, however, since the walls seemed to have been breached several times in recent years, leaving gaping holes in several spots. The outer defenses weren't keeping out much of anything. The castle itself was in better shape. At least the windows contained real glass and the chimneys were clearly functional. The vegetable gardens just inside the walls were in excellent condition. They were neatly hoed, the leaves and detritus from the previous year had been efficiently composted, and the area gave the impression of being ready for imminent planting.

The villagers hung back as the party approached the drawbridge, clearly in some awe of their surroundings. Annarisse reflected that, given the relatively short distance between here and their home, these people ought to have more familiarity with their manor than this. Her father hosted annual events for his peasants and spent considerable time and money ensuring that most could attend. So far, Affligent was not getting high marks in her book.

Treedon, the ranking member of their party, strode forward to knock on the front door. Not a single guard or even a footman had yet appeared to challenge them, and Annarisse's opinion sank even lower. It took several minutes of intermittent pounding on the iron-bound door for it to be opened. Behind it was a timid-looking badger dressed as a butler. He looked to be at least as old as the castle itself, and peered at them through eyes clouded with cataracts. "Eh? Who's that, then? Whaddya want?"

Treedon drew himself up, instinctively using the same air of nobility that Annarisse so often put to good use. "I'm Baron Treedon MacDuncan, come to claim hospitality for myself and the crew of my ship, and succour for the villagers of Roxbarren," he announced, pitching his voice to be heard even if the badger were as deaf as he was blind. "Please inform your lord of our arrival forthwith." With one hand, he gestured for Annarisse and Salvatore to approach the door.

Behind the badger appeared a grey wolf, wearing a simple tartan and house shoes of venerable age. He himself appeared to be on the shady side of midlife, and had the air of one who lived mostly indoors. He had obviously heard Treedon's claim to hospitality, for his hands were spread wide in the universal gesture of welcome. "What a lovely surprise, my lord," he said. "I was not expecting any guests. Please, come in from the cold. How is your lady mother? Charming woman, that." He spotted Annarisse and the Captain at that

moment, and his smile flickered. “And your- um – friends, as well, of course.” He made an expansive gesture, which Treeden ignored.

“I’m afraid this is not a social call, my lord,” he declared sternly. “Last night, my ship was attacked and sunk in the Strait of Gull’s Roost, by Admiral Ferrante of the Rinaldi. The rogue then turned his cannon on the village of Roxbarren, levelling it, killing twenty of your people and leaving fifty more homeless. We have brought them here to seek succour of their lord. Are you able to fulfill this duty?”

Affligent looked beyond them for the first time to see the miserable huddle of peasants by the gate. He turned, spoke quietly to the badger who had no trouble hearing him, and returned to them with a more sober mien. “I must thank you for caring for my people as you have, MacDuncan,” he said. Several servants had appeared from the back of the house carrying piles of linens and baskets of bread. Treeden deigned to step inside now that the villagers were to be cared for. Salvatore and Annarisse followed, and the three were ushered into a parlour.

“I must say, MacDuncan, this is a serious charge you bring against the Rinaldi,” their host remarked as he settled himself on a threadbare settee.

“I’m aware of that. The sinking of a Bisclavret merchant vessel for no apparent reason could be considered an act of war by the Duke,” answered Treeden with the air of one discussing the foul weather that season.

Affligent glanced at Annarisse meaningfully, then gave a little cough and side glance back at the other wolf. She decided to call him on it. “I am currently in service to the Bisclavret, as Baron MacDuncan’s confessor, my lord,” she told him. “I have no interest in war-mongering among my own House. Indeed, the Deschamps family has no need to involve itself in the squabbles between the Bisclavret and the Rinaldi.” Treeden gave her an exasperated glare as Affligent’s expression went from surprise to consternation. Salvatore coughed into his hand and became suddenly very intrigued by an ornamental sword hung on a wall nearby.

“And you, Sir Fox? To whom do you owe your allegiance?” Affligent’s gaze, meant to be piercing, succeeded only in being myopic.

“Why, to anyone prepared to fight the Rinaldi in any way,” answered Salvatore candidly. “At the moment, that’s the MacDuncans.”

“Hmm. Well, I’m afraid I’m not in a position to help in that endeavour,” remarked the Baron with no apology in his voice or manner. “I will, however, grant you hospitality until you are ready to leave. Are your sailors amongst my villagers at the moment, then, MacDuncan?”

“They are indeed. Many were wounded in the battle, and those that weren’t have spent last night and today helping in whatever way they could. They are also in need of rest and sustenance before we continue.”

“And where will you be heading from here?”

“Port Spar. We will need another ship with which to track down the criminal Ferrante and bring him to Bisclavret justice.” Treeden appeared quite

relaxed in the face of the older wolf. Annarisse was impressed with his performance; holding one's own in the face of those of higher rank was not easy.

It was at this moment that the most extraordinary people entered the room.

Annarisse had heard of the bat people of the Bisclavret holdings, but had never seen one until now. The lady was dressed in an elaborate court gown styled loosely after Bisclavret fashions. Her fur was black, her ears large and shaped like a lilac leaf, deeply cupped. Her arms had folds of skin connecting them to her body, strong enough to give her flight. Her tail was accommodated under her elegant bustle and was therefore invisible. She was carrying an armful of scrolls and charts, and Annarisse recalled that her people were often astrologers.

The other person was, if anything, even stranger. He looked like a cat with his ears, tail, and whiskers, but she had never seen a cat marked as he was. His fur was a bright orange, marked with wide black stripes at regular intervals. His whiskers were well-groomed, and he, too, carried books and charts, though not astrological ones. He deposited these on the small secretary in one corner of the room, and came to sit down on a chair opposite Annarisse. His tail was still, his manner relaxed as he twiddled with his whiskers.

"Ah, Sélance, Kharaba," the Baron greeted them. "I'd like to introduce you to our guests." He made the introductions, to bows all around. "Sélance is my house astrologer; she has assured me that the stars are in favour of my learning and new sciences this year. Kharaba is a thaumaturgist, here to study some documents that I have managed to collect over the years." The Baron attempted to look humble and proud at the same time, and succeeded only in looking constipated. He did not notice, as Annarisse did, that Treeden had perked up at the mention of Kharaba's occupation as a mage.

"What type of magic are you studying, sir?" asked Treeden.

"The Baron's documents are primarily in the field of white magic," replied the mage. "They are quite fascinating, really. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to use the knowledge I'm gaining." His gaze sharpened, and Annarisse was reminded that his kind were predators. "Why do you ask, my lord?"

Treeden prevaricated. "Oh, my mother has access to some documents related to thaumaturgy. I was wondering if you might be interested in perusing them at some point." His relaxed stance belied the slight whiff of excitement Annarisse detected from him. Kharaba looked hard at the wolf, then smiled and nodded. Treeden relaxed, and Annarisse had the impression that a silent deal had just been reached. Affligent had not noticed this exchange, however, and asked Sélance a question. The answer sparked a conversation about astrology, from which Annarisse excused herself after about twenty minutes. Affligent carelessly directed a servant to show her to her room, himself so engrossed in his discussion with the bat lady that he hardly noticed when Salvatore rose to follow her. By silent consent, they dismissed the servant and headed, not to the chambers assigned to them, but out the front door to walk in the garden.

"Sister, what do you think of our host?" asked Salvatore.

“Do you really need to ask, Captain?” she replied. “He’s negligent with his people and his business affairs, nowhere near as astute as he pretends to be, and a racist boor to boot. His kind are the reason my people look down on the Bisclavret. But we are his guests for the moment, so I at least will remain polite while under his roof.” She looked up at the manor. “Such as it is. If it rains tonight, I expect we will get wet in our beds.”

Salvatore nodded. “We’re in agreement, then. What did Treeden tell you of him on the way here? I was further back, and couldn’t hear you.”

Annarisse told him what she knew, and how Treeden had come by his information. Salvatore nodded again. “In that case, we’d better leave before the weather clears. Can you do anything about the burn on my foot? It’s going to slow me down, and I don’t think we can afford that.” Obliging, she said a prayer of healing for him. He flexed the muscle and sighed with relief when it moved easily. “Thank you. So, tomorrow?”

“I think so. Perhaps after the midday meal. I’d like the chance to minister to the villagers once more before we go. Hopefully Affligeant will have them heading home shortly after that. I would hate to leave them here, knowing they’re likely to get caught in a war.”

“It’s not our place to do anything more for them, other than your priestly services. Much as we might like to.” He paused for a moment. “I’m considering finding a position for Ally in Port Spar. The poor lad was traumatized by his injury, and it’s not fully healed. He would likely be better off on dry land.” The talk turned to matters of ship’s business until a servant came to get them for dinner.

When Treeden awoke the next day, the chambermaid who had warmed his bed was already gone. He quickly checked his belt pouch, and discovered that the chit hadn’t taken her payment. He left a few denari on the highboy for her and rang for a servant. “Take me to the tiger mage,” he instructed the fox slave who came running. The lad bowed and led him down the ornately paneled but dusty hall, up the main staircase to the third floor, to the second door on the left. It was ajar, so Treeden pushed it open.

The room was small by Treeden’s standards, though of ample size for an office. It was long and narrow, with a south-facing window on the short end opposite the door. The long stone walls were lined with glass-doored bookcases which contained a wide assortment of scrolls, books, and esoteric equipment. At the end of the room was a large wooden desk with three neat stacks of parchment on it, a small hourglass, a few candles, and several quills stuck carelessly in an inkpot. In front of the desk, occupying the only chair in the room, was Kharaba.

Treeden dismissed the slave with a wave and approached the tiger quietly. “Affligeant is on his way down,” he said, and Kharaba jumped.

The mage gathered his paper and scattered it with sand to dry the ink. Then he carefully blotted it and cleaned his pen before setting the page and the

quill aside. Only when his work was carefully stored did he push his chair back, stand up, and turn to face the Baron. "Good morning, my lord," he said, with only a faint hint of reproach in his voice.

"The question, Mage, is whether you wish to be here when the Baron's neighbours come knocking," Treeden continued. He picked up a little glass vial of blue liquid and shook it experimentally. Kharaba hastily took it from him and set it down on top of a high shelf, after first ascertaining that the cork was still firmly in place.

"Baron Affligent has been very good to me," he remarked.

"He won't be for much longer."

Kharaba considered this. "Do you have a better offer to make?" he asked.

Treeden gave him a lazy lupine grin. "Adventure on my ship, vast treasure at the end of our voyage, and the opportunity to work for the MacDuncans," he replied.

"How much treasure is a vast sum, exactly?"

"I expect none of the sailors will ever need to work again." Treeden picked up another gadget from the bookcase, this one some kind of mechanical contraption. "You'll get a first mate's share. It'll be enough to buy and sell Affligent."

"A first mate's share? That's five shares, right?" Treeden nodded. "Make it seven, and you have a mage for your ship."

Treeden did not bargain. "Done. We'll be leaving at midday. Don't hold us up." With that, Treeden replaced the mechanism on the shelf and headed for the breakfast parlour.

Kharaba looked after his new employer for a moment. Then he sent a slave for his trunk and began to pack.

Using a cart and drays borrowed from their host, the crew of the *Spirit of Midchain* was packing up to set out just after midday. The cabin boy, Ally, and one other sailor were still injured enough to require transport in the cart. All others were afoot.

They were just starting to move out when the tiger mage came striding around the corner of the castle, followed by two servants bearing the largest trunk Annarisse had ever seen. He directed them to place this in the cart, then took his place in the line. Salvatore exchanged a glance with Annarisse, then headed over to Kharaba.

"Sir Mage," he said carefully, "I wasn't aware you would be joining us."

Kharaba glanced with surprise at his employer. "Baron Treeden has offered me the position of Ship's Mage, and I have accepted," he replied.

Treeden approached from the head of the line. "Now that the mage is here, what are we waiting for?" he asked, and turned to shout, "Let's move out!"

The wagon had just begun to creak when their erstwhile host came bounding down the steps from the keep. "Kharaba!" he shouted. "What is going on?"

Kharaba bowed to him. "I appreciate all you have done for me over the last few months of my service here, my lord," he said regally. "Baron Treeden has offered me a post on his ship. I have always longed to travel, and this is an excellent opportunity. Consider this my notice of leave-taking." He held out a sealed scroll, which the Baron took reflexively. His skin was red under the fur, and Annarisse thought she detected steam coming from his ears.

"I do not accept your resignation! There is still work to be done with my scrolls! You owe me!"

Kharaba straightened. "I was a paid employee. I fulfilled my contract to you. I am leaving. Unless you plan to stop me?" His hands were still peaceably at his sides, but he had unsheathed his claws. Affligeant did not notice this.

Treeden had approached by now. "Baron, you're going to have to do better than threats to keep your people by you," he said in a conversational tone. "I'll have my mother send payment for your hospitality. Kharaba," and he turned to the mage, "come join me at the front." He turned and walked away, leaving a sputtering Baron behind him.

After a moment of indecision, Affligeant descended into the courtyard and followed Treeden. "Just a minute, you! I'm not done with you!" He took off his glove and tried to hit the younger wolf with it, succeeding only in connecting with his tail. Treeden whipped around, grabbed the glove in one hand, and neatly shredded it with his claws. He threw the pieces back at Affligeant.

"I don't accept challenges from losers," he said. "I'd surely win, and then I'd be the one attacked within the month by your neighbours. Keep your castle as long as you can. And save your challenges for fights you can win." With that Treeden bounded forward and the column started to move, leaving Affligeant staring after them with loathing in his eyes.

Around the Campfire

The huge trees towered over the clearing where they had stopped for the night, providing the illusion of a roof high overhead. They rustled slightly in the early spring breeze, and Salvatore wondered what they were discussing amongst themselves. Did trees have secrets? If they did, this would be the night to share them. The firelight, the unseasonable warmth of the spring night, and recent events combined to give him a feeling of belonging which had been very rare in his life.

He looked sidelong at the priestess. She had finished her evening prayers and had sat with Ally while he fell asleep. Now she was sitting holding her knees in a posture that suggested little girl, staring into the mesmerizing flames with her thoughts clearly far away.

“Sister, may I ask a personal question?” She started, glanced at him and back at the fire, and nodded. “Why the orphanage? I mean, that is a post usually reserved for low-born postulates. Why would the daughter of a high-ranking nobleman have been there?”

She didn’t answer immediately. When she did, her voice was low, and he could hear the old pain in it. “My father did not support my calling in any way,” she finally answered. “It was his way of punishing me for pleading the case of my younger brother when Phelippe had done something Father considered dishonourable.” She paused so long he was about to ask another question, but she continued as he opened his mouth. “I always wanted to help. That was all I ever wanted to do, was help. There were two orders that might have taken me without a dowry, in the hope that my father would come around eventually, but they were not charitable orders. I needed to be where I was needed. The Bishop accepted me when I applied to him, and offered me the choice between working with the other highborns at the university, and the orphanage. You know what I chose.”

“Did your father come around?”

“Eventually. Not enough to pay me a dowry, but enough to give me pocket money, and to accept me back at Deschamps for holidays and the like.” She rested her forehead on her forearms, and Salvatore almost missed what she said next. “That’s more than he did for Phelippe.”

They were both silent, the memories swirling around them like the scent of pine on the breeze. Finally she looked up, and he could see that the pain, usually well-banked, was flaring in her eyes still. “And you, Captain? Why did you choose the sea?”

“My mother raised me alone. She would never say who my father might be, other than that he was never coming back. My impression was that he might be grey, but I have no way of knowing. Anyway, she died of a wasting disease when I was six. I grew up in that orphanage of yours.” She didn’t look terribly surprised, and he wondered idly if she had already guessed that. “The priests fed, clothed, and attempted to educate me until I was ten, but I didn’t want what they offered. I ran away. For a boy that age on the streets alone, there aren’t a whole lot of options, and each one is worse than the last. When an old – friend – of my mother’s spotted me by the docks, he offered me a berth as a cabin boy on his ship.” Salvatore stared into the flames, seeing the man who had raised him. “I think he thought I might have been his child. I knew I wasn’t, because I had once asked my mother, but she had let him wonder, so I did, too. He took me on board, he taught me what I needed to know, and he promoted me as fast as he could. I was twenty-two when the Bisclavret offered me a captaincy on his recommendation.” Salvatore fed a twig to the fire, gazing at it, fascinated by the glowing ember as it crept down the branch. “He even introduced me to his niece. He always thought we would make a good match.” The memories stirred had been good ones, mostly, and he felt closer to Lania than he had since she died. He wondered if she were there, watching him. Waiting for him. It was a comforting thought.

“Tell me about her.”

He was silent for so long she nearly repeated herself. “She was petite. A lot of people mistook her for a child much of the time. Her fur was the red-gold of sunset over the city in the summer. She had the most incredible eyes. . .” His gaze drifted off, over the treetops, seeing someone who was long gone. “She was a merchant’s daughter, accustomed to a life where her father was often away on business. She had no problem with the idea of my being at sea much of the time. We made up for it when I was home, though.” He smiled, and for one moment, Annarisse envied him. She had never felt that strongly for anyone. “She was a good hostess, and loved having dinner parties. We lived quite well, sometimes even had noble customers of her father’s over for dinner.” His voice chilled a bit. “Some of them may have been involved in telling tales to the Don.”

She thought carefully before she spoke again. “It’s good that you have so many good memories of her. In time, they will overcome the others. You’ll remember the joy.”

He lay back and stared at the branches overhead. “All the good memories won’t bring her back,” he said finally.

“Wasn’t she here just now?” Annarisse let that sink in for a moment, then turned. “We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow, Captain,” she said. “We should both get some rest.”

Taking the hint, he wrapped himself in his bedroll and turned over to sleep. But he lay there for a while first, watching the fire, thinking about Lania and wondering if Annarisse was right, after all.



Another statue had been found.

She had felt it as its magic awakened. She had been drawn to that long-forgotten spell, for the statue had lain dormant for many years before finally being rediscovered. The spell had no feeling but what she lent it; nevertheless it seemed to exult in its newfound freedom.

The creatures who had found it were busy, not stopping to rest or dream for days now. That would change. Soon, very soon, the spell would wrap her dreams around them, especially around the one who kept it to himself. A male, one with a weak will and an injured spirit. Perfect.

She reached into his mind as he slept, and saw the visions of his sleep. A lady, laughing, playing with a baby. Sunlight. Now a shadow, moving swiftly. A scream, then darkness. So, this was what had hurt him. She could use this. She pulled the memories from his unprotected mind, gently, oh, so gently. The time for harshness had not yet arrived. Carefully she moulded them, shaped them into the visions which would draw him to her.

He would be hers. He would be stronger than he was now, with her strength and her will. He would come for her.

She exulted in the freedom of her statue. It had done well to choose this bearer. Soon, very soon, it would come back to her.

Port Spar

It was just after noon the next day when they crested the rise above Port Spar to look down on the settlement. It was built on a long, narrow strip of land between the mountain and the sea. From where they stood to the water's edge was less than a mile, but it was so crammed full of wooden buildings of all sizes and states of repair that it would take more than an hour to reach the docks. Beyond the water's edge was built an impressive array of piers, boathouses, and dry docks that stretched out several hundred yards over the water itself. The harbour was shaped like the rind of a melon, half of a shallow oval. It was protected on the seaward side by a towering cliff of bare rock. Halfway up this, at about the highest point it could get before the slope became too steep for building, was a small keep. It had no walls, probably because the mountain at its back and the sheer drop at its front made walls unnecessary. The road to it wound up through the town, past practically every building in it.

Within half an hour, they came to the place where the main road forked, with one branch continuing down to the docks and the other wending its way to the castle. Treeden and Salvatore conferred at the front of the column. "I'll take the men down to the inns by the port, and meet you, Sister Annarisse, and Kharaba at the castle," Salvatore said.

"Better have them stay at the Sawyer's Place," Treeden remarked. "There's no other decent inn in town. Tell the innkeeper you're with the MacDuncans, and you'll get a much better price." Salvatore nodded, and began to lead most of the party down toward the docks. Treeden, Annarisse and Kharaba continued along the main road in the direction of the castle.

They were met at a gate positioned on the road, at just the right distance from the castle to be within crossbow range of the slit-like windows. It was manned by two guards, both wolves, who were well-armed and alert. So far, Lady Ratatiner was doing much better than Affligeant. The guards' challenge was answered by Treeden, and after a short conference between the two guards, the gate was opened and they were ushered inside. On the way to the castle, Treeden informed the guards that Captain Salvatore would soon join them.

They were invited graciously into the spacious front hall, and thence into a small parlour, by a polite, liveried butler. It was beautifully and stylishly furnished with carved wooden chairs and hand-embroidered cushions in tones of deep red and brown. The walls were hung with tapestries depicting scenes from Bisclavret history, beautifully rendered and lovingly kept. The fire was roaring in the grate. It was a thousand times more welcoming than Affligeant's afflicted manor house.

They waited in silence about five minutes before an elderly she-wolf entered. She wore a simple dress of delicate vintage, with a lace shawl that had taken someone weeks to knit. Her snow-white lace cap was pinned very precisely in the centre of her head, and her tartan was modestly draped over her dress. Only one thing marked her as anything other than a society matron, and that was the piercing blue eyes of a colour Annarisse had never seen in a wolf. The dowager smiled when she spotted Treeden and came forward with her hands outstretched. Treeden, who had stood as she entered, moved to her and clasped both her hands in his, kissing them gallantly in an obvious display of affection.

“My lady, you grow more beautiful with each passing year,” he greeted her with a formal half-bow. She blushed and giggled.

“My lord, you grow more charming every time I see you,” she replied, batting her eyelashes. She straightened just slightly, signalling an end to the banter. “How is your mother?”

Treeden hid his wince as best he could. “You’ve probably seen more of her recently than I have, my lady,” he replied. “I haven’t seen her since she agreed to finance my latest venture, a merchant interest in a ship called the *Spirit of Midchain*. We’ve run into a snag, though.” Treeden paused. “We ran afoul of that miscreant Ferrante out of Triskellian. He sank my ship a few days ago, and levelled the village of Roxbarren while he was at it.” He sat down on a well-appointed armchair and plucked a glass of sherry off the tray presented to him by a footman.

Lady Ratatiner looked indignant. “He sank a Bisclavret ship in Bisclavret waters? I know a few people who have been begging for an excuse to sink the *Corrado*, and this may be it.” She paused for a moment, thinking. “Roxbarren? That little fishing hamlet near Gull’s Roost, controlled by Affligeant?” At Treeden’s nod, she growled. “As if those poor people didn’t have enough to deal with, having him as their lord.”

Treeden bared his teeth in a lupine grin. “He won’t be bothering anyone much longer.”

“So I’d heard. Are the potential replacements any better?”

At that the talk turned to Bisclavret politics, with which Annarisse was only slightly familiar, though Kharaba took part in the discussion. She spent the time looking around the room, taking in the finer details of the tapestries and considering their situation. Lady Ratatiner would help them, she was sure, but there would be a price attached. She controlled Port Spar, with her finger in every pie in the settlement. If she decided they were worth helping, then they would set sail within a week. If she decided otherwise, they would be months in port and poor as church mice when they left. The real question was, how much would she want for her help? And how much would Treeden be willing to pay?

Her attention was caught by a question from Lady Ratatiner. “So what were you doing in that part of the Corsairs, Baron?” she asked. “It’s not the usual route for someone engaged in – um – merchant ventures.”

Annarisse glanced sharply at Treeden, who was opening his mouth to reply when the butler announced the arrival of Captain Salvatore. It was a good five

minutes later, after their hostess realized that proper introductions had never been made and proceeded to rectify the oversight, that everyone was again seated. Then the Lady repeated her question.

Treedden had apparently decided how he would spin this question. “We had information that led us to some merchandise you might be interested in, Madam,” he replied. “There were some lovely objets d’art in with the less important items. We’ll be looking for a buyer for some of it. May I ask who purchases the items for your home and business?”

“I choose items for my home, and I can put you in touch with the merchants who will give you the best price on the rest. Am I right in thinking that you must sell these goods in order to buy a new ship?” Her sharp eyes caught Treedden’s anger as well as his nod. “Well, I’ll see what I can do to make that happen quickly. I believe there are two or three ships for sale currently in port, though I don’t know if any will be of the type you’re looking for. In the meantime, I can offer you the hospitality of my home until you are ready to set sail. Though Sister Annarisse may decide she is more comfortable at the monastery?”

Annarisse demurred, preferring to stay close to her shipmates, though she did ask for directions to the monastery. The group scattered for the afternoon, safe in the knowledge that Lady Ratatiner would help them.

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The monastery was a poor one, dedicated to serving those who plied the sea for a living. There were only a handful of monks there and no nuns, each serving in silence much of the time. It was a confession day, however, so the small chapel was occupied by a wolf priest busy mending an altar cloth. He was white around the muzzle and ears, and a bit stooped from years of hard work, but when he heard her approaching down the stone aisle and looked up, his eyes were clear and his smile welcoming.

“Sister! I am pleased to see another person of the cloth in this place! My name is Brother Sylvain. Please, be welcome here! Will you need shelter for the night? Dinner?” He was so obviously hoping for the company that Annarisse was sorry to have to say no.

“What I’m in need of, good brother, is a listening ear and wise counsel,” she told him. “Is there a place we could go to talk in private?”

The priest nodded, replaced his cloth and sewing tools in a little chest which he placed in turn in a cupboard, and then led the way into the small garden. The bench to which he led her was between two rows of apple trees in the monastery’s tiny orchard. The garden was entirely hidden from the sight of the common people by a huge stone wall, some twenty feet away. The shade of the trees, new-leaved, gave the impression of a roof, while the openness of the bench made it clear that anyone listening to their conversation would be within sight of them. Annarisse sank gratefully onto the bench.

“Now, Sister. What is the problem?” Sylvain sat down at the other end of the bench and turned to face her.

She hesitated, suddenly aware that church politics might turn out to be worrisome here. She did not want to make trouble for the occupants of the monastery. "First, Brother, I need to know a few things. Who is your immediate superior in your order, and what are your ties, and those of the monastery, to the Cathédrale du Temoin in Triskellian?"

His gaze was piercing, but he answered. "My immediate superior is Monsignor Croydon, in Harrowgate," he replied. "Our order differs in several points of theology with the Penitent Order at the Cathédrale, and thus has very little contact with them. Is this, then, a matter of some concern regarding your superiors in Triskellian?"

"It is, and if you wish not to hear it as a result, I can withdraw now. I would not wish to cause strife in your order over something you and I are both likely powerless to fix."

He waved that away casually. "I owe no especial loyalty to Bishop Renisi, and I am good at keeping my own counsel. If I can do nothing to help with the problem directly, then no one else will ever know what you tell me, and I think the telling will do you some good. So say on, Sister. What is so troubling to your soul that you would seek out a confessor of your own?"

For four days, Annarisse had put her worries about the MacDuncan activities and her role in them out of her mind while they worked together. Now, suddenly, the dam burst. She told the kindly old wolf of her work in the orphanage, and of Lady MacDuncan's procuring of slaves from there. Bishop Renisi's part in the sordid tale came out, too. Through it all, he listened.

"How can I ever go back there, Brother Sylvain?" she asked finally. "How can I ever look that wolf in the face again, knowing that he has sold hundreds of free children into bondage? How can I fulfill my assignment, to minister to the son of a slaver? I want to hate him. I want to curse him as he has helped curse those defenceless children. I would like to see him banished to the lowest pit of a dark hell." She sighed. "And yet he saved my life, and I his in return. I understand where he comes from. I understand his hauteur. My brothers are similar in their outlook. Can I curse him for being who he was raised to be?" She stopped at last, amazed to find that for the last few minutes, she had been clutching her holy symbol so hard in both fists that its imprint was embedded painfully in her fingers.

Sylvain leaned back against the arm of the bench. "Baron Treeden is, of course, a problem," he said thoughtfully. "You will need to work through these feelings, else any attempt at ministry will fail. The Light does not shine through clouded vessels, after all. Still, I do not think this is the root of the problem. Or rather, this may be one root, but I doubt it is the one which is pushing up under your foundations." His gaze levelled on her. "Where did your loyalty lie, Sister? Was it to the Light, or to the Church?"

She gave his question her full attention. For the first time, she allowed herself to search her soul. What she found there shamed her. "I have been raised to be responsible first to the people immediately above me," she replied. "In a noble house, each person has superiors and inferiors in a hierarchy which

is very strict. Woe betide the person who steps out of place by so much as one hoof! Faith has been something I took for granted. Going into service at the Cathédrale was part of my self-punishment when I stepped out of the hierarchy of my home. I needed to have superiors again. I needed the structure of the Order to lend me strength. I have supported that structure for three years, with all my willpower and all my prayers. Now it is crumbling – or rather, the structure I thought was made of rock is just paper and plywood, as insubstantial as smoke and just as obscuring. I'm not sure what's left. My first loyalty was to the Church. Now that has been swept away in a loathing so deep it burns. I never believed I was capable of hate. What kind of priestess am I, to feel like this about my superiors and my supplicant?"

"You're a normal young woman," said Sylvain. "Normal people do not go through life with the kind of surety and support you've enjoyed until now. Normal people have to work through the grey areas of their lives, shining light into them when they can. You are not a bad priestess for having these feelings. In fact, you will be a better one for having dealt with them."

She sighed. "How do I deal with them?"

"First, you decide if you still have faith that the Light of S'Allumer shines for the illumination of all. Do you believe that?"

She thought for a moment, then nodded. A weight lifted from her shoulders.

"Now, you have to accept your supplicant as he comes to you. He is a noble, he is a boor, he is an unrepentant sinner. He tries to shock you, and he succeeds, perhaps more than he really wants to. Yet, there is good in him. He saved your life, when allowing you to die might have saved him some trouble. He took care of those villagers who looked to him in their hour of need, because it was his place to do so. He leaves most of the responsibility of his position to his mother, but when the situation requires that he act, he does. Your assignment is still to minister to him. How will you do that?"

"By appealing to the best qualities in him, I suppose," she answered. "His nobility, mostly. And by not asking him to change before he comes to the Light." She paused, lost in thought for a moment. Then she said, "I have to forgive him for destroying my illusions. It's not his fault the Bishop is a fraud. I've been blaming the messenger, haven't I?"

Sylvain smiled. "You have indeed. I think you know now what has to be done. Do you wish to make this a true confession and absolution?"

She nodded, and knelt for his blessing. Then she rose, made a donation to the monastery, took her leave, and went to find her flock.

Salvatore and Treeden went straight down to the docks from the castle. They had been directed to the harbourmaster's office, since he would be the most likely person to know which ships were for sale. They found him conversing quite forcefully with the captain of an impounded ship.

“Look, I impounded it because your docking fees haven’t been paid. The ship doesn’t leave port until I see the cash. You’d better borrow the money from someone. The fine increases by two denari per day.”

The fox who was the ship’s captain was looking very sour. “How can I make any money if you won’t let me take my ship?”

The badger shrugged and sat down at his desk. “It doesn’t matter to me how you get it. Just get it. The sooner the better. The moneylenders are the next street over.” He turned to the papers littering his desk until the fox stalked out, muttering. Then he turned his attention to the newcomers. “Can I help you gentlemen?”

Treedan answered. “We’re looking to buy a midsize fast ship, yesterday. What’s available?”

The Harbourmaster sized them up. “We don’t have any midsize fast ships for sail. There’s a barque, but it’s small and needs extensive storm repair. It should be ready in a week or so. There’s also a flute, big, but slow. Former slave ship. It could be ready to sail in a day or two, a bit longer if you need guns.” He looked at them enquiringly, and at Treedan’s nod, he continued. “There’s one brigantine, beautiful ship. Fresh from the shipyard at Triskellian, she is. The owner’s asking a pretty penny for her, but in my opinion, she’s worth it.” He named a sum, and Salvatore couldn’t hide his disappointment. It was more than Lady Ratatiner had offered them for the entire treasure.

“Can we see the flute?” asked Salvatore.

“Sure you can. She’s at slip 21, just down there a ways.” He pointed out the window, and Salvatore picked out the ship in question. Thanking him, they left and headed to check her over.

One of the carpenters working on her mast was obliging enough to show them around. The ship was wide in the sail and hull, sporting a simplified square rig that was remarkably easy to crew. Her bottom was flat, accounting for her slow speed as compared to the brigantine which was about the same size. The brigantine had more gun ports, but since they would be light in cargo while chasing the *Corrado*, it might be possible to add some extra small guns to make up the difference. The goal would be to load her down enough to take on the larger, better-manned ship, but still keep her light enough to reach her fastest speed most of the time. She required at least fifteen to run well, but could carry two hundred if the need arose. Since they had twenty-two crew members, they would likely need to hire a few more to keep the watches reasonably balanced. As the harbourmaster had indicated, she was a former slave ship. Her holds were equipped with chains and brigs for isolating cargo from each other. Unlike the *Spirit of Midchain*, which had lacked enough cabin space for all the high-ranking people on board, this ship had five cabins designed for ship’s officers and three more designed for passengers.

The barque, located two slips down, was much cheaper but much less suitable. Though fast, she was too small to carry all the crew who had survived the sinking, much less anyone else.

“Well, my lord?” asked Salvatore.

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it, Captain?” Treeden answered. “We can’t afford to wait around and see if anything better turns up. It’ll have to be the flute.”

Salvatore nodded. “I agree. We can add some extra guns, take on a carpenter to replace the gunner who had been doing the job, and spruce up that aft cabin for you.” Salvatore thought briefly about the other sailors who needed replacing. His “procurer”, the rat upon whom he had relied to obtain useful items in illegal ways, had been one of the gunners blown into fish bait by the *Corrado*. Though the entire treasure had been sold to pay for the new ship, Salvatore did not at all trust the Baron. He was sure the wolf still had a trick up his sleeve, something he was not sharing. He intended to discover what it was.

“Well, I’ll talk to the owner and get the purchase sorted out. You start hiring the new crewmembers.” Salvatore noted in passing that the Baron was starting to revert to his habit of ordering others around. Salvatore decided not to worry about it. He headed for the nearest portside tavern to hire some sailors.

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Kharaba wove his way through the denizens of the docks, trying and failing to be inconspicuous. The priestess was getting ahead of him. Where on earth could she be going? What was there of interest to a priestess on the docks?

Suddenly she veered up a narrow alley, and he figured it out. She was going to the monastery! Perhaps she was planning on learning more priestly spells. Maybe she would ask one of the mages there to keep him from boarding the ship when the time came. Kharaba hurried after her, still trying to stay out of sight of his adversary.

She disappeared inside the monastery wall, and Kharaba cursed under his breath. Now what? Looking around quickly, he realized that the monastery was walled, enclosing several acres of space, including the church, the cloister, and some gardens. The enclosure was much longer than it was wide, stretched out as it was at the base of a narrow finger of the valley. Maybe, if he was lucky, he’d be able to hear what was happening on the other side of it if he got close enough.

He cast a simple locating spell using the bit of the priestess’ cloak that he’d snipped the day before. It showed she was inside the church, out of reach of his ears. Just as he was about to cancel the spell, though, she moved. He cast another as the first ran out, then another, until finally she had stopped – dead centre in the gardens. Suppressing his elation, he made his way around the outside wall to find a good spot to listen.

It was harder than it sounded. The monastery was not built directly on the rocky valley floor. Instead, it appeared to have been built up over the years with heavy layers of soil, the better for growing those crops the monks tended. As it had developed, though, the walls had also been raised. While they were probably only eight feet off the ground from the inside, they were nearly double that from where he stood.

Another locating spell confirmed that his target was near enough to this spot that he might be able to hear something if he could just get to the top of the wall.

He removed his elaborate cloak, folded it carefully and placed it in a crevice at the base of the wall. Then he unsheathed his claws, looked carefully for spots where the mortar had already chipped away, and slowly began to climb. Twice he nearly lost his footing. Cursing his clumsiness and resolving to practise his climbing skills, he caught himself and continued.

Finally his claws sank into the mortar between two top stones. The wall was nearly two feet thick, more than enough to balance on if he decided to go over it. Cautiously, he peered over the top of the wall.

Sister Annarisse was kneeling in front of an old monk. He was going through the absolution ritual, and Annarisse was smiling. Even as he watched, the blessing ended and they both rose to leave.

Kharaba cursed again, lost his balance, and fell all the way down the wall. Picking himself up gingerly, he headed back around the monastery to pick up the trail of his quarry by the front door.

The Lessons

“Let your Li-ggg-t. . .”

“Light.” Annarisse patiently pointed at the next word.

“That spells light? Why does it have all those extra letters in it?” asked Salvatore.

“I don’t know. It just does. Keep reading, Captain.”

Salvatore settled down to read again, haltingly. He was making progress. He’d gotten beyond the alphabet for the first time in his life, but he was struggling with the words that were not spelled the way they sounded. Annarisse let her attention wander a bit, as she used to do while listening to the orphans read. She could correct him with her eyes closed; he was learning from her Book of Prayer, and she knew it from memory. While a part of her mind continued to listen and correct, the other part considered how to approach the Baron with her offer of compromise.

Suddenly Salvatore stopped, mid-sentence. She quickly brought her attention back to the task at hand, to discover him looking at her with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Our original deal, Your Excellency, involved you teaching me to read, and me teaching you to fight,” he said. “We’ve been at this for two days, ever since we got to Port Spar. It’s time for me to teach you something.”

“Uh. . . we need to get to the end of this prayer first, Captain,” she prevaricated.

“Nonsense. You’ve read it before, I’ve heard it before, and for that matter, so has the Saint. Besides, you’re bored. You really shouldn’t let your mind run off on you like that. Especially not so people can see.” He flashed her an engagingly evil grin, pushed his chair back and stood, offering her his hand. “Let’s do something fun, shall we? Do you still have that knife I gave you?”

“Well, yes, of course, but . . .”

“No buts, my lady. You’re going to learn an essential skill of the sea.” He pulled her to her feet and headed for the door to the small office where they’d been working. “I’ll see you in the rear courtyard with your knife, sensibly dressed, in ten minutes. Don’t be late, Your Excellency. We wouldn’t want me to have time to tell some things to the Baron, would we?” With that, he strode jauntily out of the room.

Reflecting that one should never make deals with pirates unless one wanted to be blackmailed or double-crossed, she went to her chamber to change.

When she got to the courtyard, Salvatore was already there, along with several of Lady Ratatiner's guards who were currently off duty. One of these was engaged in some good-natured banter with the fox, apparently claiming that no sailor could best him in a knife fight.

The manic gleam was back in the Captain's eye as he answered, "Would you like to test that claim against my steel, sir?"

The guard tried to demur, but his friends were egging him on. "I've seen you fight, Rolf! I put one denari on the fox!" yelled one. Instantly the betting began. Annarisse approached the guards, who parted for her with wary respect.

"I'd like to put twenty denari on the Captain," she told them. Her suggestion was met with surprised guffaws at the large amount, and some cheering as they increased the betting pool to include her. The pool, not surprisingly, favoured their compatriot quite heavily. The odds against the Captain settled at about three to one. Five minutes later, as more off-duty guardsmen came to place their bets, the fox and the wolf faced off across the hastily-roped courtyard.

The wolf was several inches taller and had a slightly longer reach, two factors that could make a difference in a knife fight. However, he was trained to use broadsword and bow, and the light knife did not appear to sit easily in his grip. The Captain looked totally relaxed as the two began to pace and circle, half-crouched. The first thing Annarisse noticed was how they were holding their weapons. When she had tried to fight on the beach, she had held her knife with the blade pointing up. Salvatore and his opponent were holding them with the points down, blade out. She quickly saw why; an upward flick of the wrist would cut into the opponent's body with all the weight of the thrust behind it. It was a deadly tactic.

The first feint came quickly, from the wolf, an upward thrust at the face. Salvatore parried it easily, managing a down stroke that shaved some fur off the wolf's ear without cutting it. The watching crowd had apparently been expecting that move; several were nodding approval while others looked blackly at their champion. The fighters parted again, pacing through the wary dance of the duel with grace and agility. The second clash was at Salvatore's instigation, as he thrust towards his opponent's torso. The wolf parried, but badly, and earned a slice on his knife arm for his troubles. The watching guards gave a collective yell as first blood went to the Captain.

Annarisse had plenty of experience watching fencing, with both rapiers and broadswords, but the knife was considered a less honourable weapon so she'd never actually witnessed a fight with them. The two combatants kept dancing out of each other's reach, then whirling in for a quick thrust. Many of these hit home, and cuts blossomed on the arms and torsos of the fox and the wolf. They also used their fists, blocking a knife thrust with a forearm while punching their opponent's face and body. Salvatore took a black eye on one side, while the wolf appeared to have a bruised rib on the right. At one point, Salvatore got in a very good swipe at his opponent's tail, about halfway down,

resulting in a cry of pain. The tail now hung at an odd, disjointed angle, and everyone present tucked their own tails closer to their legs in reaction.

Salvatore punched the wolf in the eye, as his knife arm came in from the side to hit his opponent's upper arm. It was a mistake to leave himself without an arm to parry, though; Rolf spotted his opportunity and brought his weapon up under the punching fist to hit solidly on the side under the ribs. Annarisse winced; in a real knife fight, Salvatore would now be dead. As it was, he danced away from further harm, the blood from the side cut staining the cobblestones as he moved. The crowd roared approval, and Rolf grinned and danced a bit to their cheers. Salvatore took the opportunity to swipe at his legs from his slightly doubled-over position, and the wolf howled in surprise; he had not expected such a quick recovery. The fight was once again even.

It took a good ten minutes of solid fighting before the wolf started to show signs of tiring. The crowd appeared impressed at the endurance and length of the fight; she overheard several people stating that they'd expected the fox to go down within moments. The guardsman had been training all morning, though. His responses were not as quick, and his parries rarely saved him from injury. Salvatore had been fresh, and he pressed the advantage mercilessly, bearing down with thrusts and punches as Rolf gave way before him.

Suddenly the wolf slipped on a blood-soaked weed poking out of a crack in the cobblestones. Heavily, he landed on the injured tail, as Salvatore got behind him so fast Annarisse never saw him move. In the blink of an eye, he had grabbed his opponent's knife arm and put his own blade to the wolf's throat. For a second there was dead silence. Annarisse looked at the Captain, saw the manic light in his eye, and moved to a spot where she could catch his eye.

He looked at her, and reason came back into his gaze as that dangerous look faded. He glanced down at the wolf and asked, "Do you concede?"

"Yes," croaked the half-strangled wolf, and Salvatore released him suddenly, pushing him forward and springing back himself. It took Annarisse a moment to figure out why the Captain was being so cautious. Then she realized that for a dishonourable person, a verbal concession could be seen as a chance to get in a cheap thrust, when the opponent was off guard. Salvatore was expecting that kind of betrayal.

It did not come. The wolf limped away, back to the other guardsmen. Annarisse intercepted him. "If you'll wait but a moment, Sir, I can see to your injuries," she told him. He nodded wearily, and slumped against the wall as one of his companions approached with a bandage. Annarisse went to see to Salvatore first.

"Well, you look better than you did after Roxbarren," she told him.

"I should hope so. You think a little knife fight like this one would lay me low?" He grinned lazily at her, and she grinned back.

"Not really, but it's nice to see you don't have to get yourself killed to make your point. Now sit down so I can perform this healing spell. Where's the worst cut?"

He pointed it out to her, just below the rib on the left side, and she went to work. Two spells later, he was in fine form. She left one little cut on his ear, figuring a few scars only added to his stature amongst his sailors. Then she went to perform the same service for the wolf.

He looked at her a bit warily. "Sister," he asked, "What do you charge for such healing?"

"I do not charge for the performance of my duties to the Light," she responded severely. Then she softened. "But if you wish to pay for these services, take your money to the monastery and donate it to the brothers there. They need it far more than I do." She knelt next to him and said her prayers over him, straightening his tail as the cartilage knit back together. When she was done, he stood, thanked her briefly, and headed for his barracks. She gazed after him, then went to collect her winnings.

Salvatore came up behind her as she was counting the last denari into her belt pouch. "Are you still up for that knife lesson?" he asked, making her jump.

She turned to him, surprised. "Are you?" she asked. "I thought you'd be tired."

"Not too tired for a little lesson. Come over here, draw your blade, and crouch a bit." He glanced at her hold on her knife, took her hand, and corrected it. The blade was now pointing down, and Annarisse realized that the hilt had been designed to be held this way. It felt comfortable, even light, in her hand. She tested it experimentally with a flick of her wrist. Salvatore jumped back quickly, and she realized she'd nearly stuck him.

"Be careful where you aim that! It's not sporting to cut your teacher before the lesson begins," he said with a jocular wink. She giggled nervously and checked that he was out of range before circling her wrist again. He watched her, amused.

"Have you done any fencing?" he asked. She nodded. "Well, forget everything you know about it. Knife-fighting is not at all like that. You don't get to parry without moving your arm, and footwork is much, much more important than blade work. The most important skill you need to learn is how to block and dodge." He lined himself up next to her and showed her the correct stance, knees bent, arms at chest height and forming a three-quarter circle. She copied his movement, and he grinned at her.

"Now let's practise the classic blocking move. Most thrusts are going to come from under your arms, because of how the knife is held. So the best block is down, left, and spin." He demonstrated. "If you do it right, your opponent's knife hand is knocked away far enough to put him off balance for a moment while you spin into the move and come all the way around, better balanced than you were before. Try it." He showed her again, and she tried to follow suit. As she turned on one hoof, though, she lost her balance and fell into him, sending them both sprawling. Gingerly she picked herself up and retrieved her knife, which had lodged point-down in a crack in the cobblestones.

“Maybe we should stick to blocks that don’t involve spins, for now,” Salvatore remarked as he got to his feet.

“Maybe I’m just not cut out to learn fighting,” Annarisse commented ruefully.

“Now, now, Your Excellency,” he admonished. “You wouldn’t let one of your students give up on reading this quickly, would you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Now, try this move.”

Within half an hour, she was sweaty, achy, bruised from several more falls and a few charges by her teacher, and wishing she’d never agreed to this. Who’d ever heard of a priestess learning to knife-fight, anyway? It was ludicrous! She stood up from her last spill and sheathed her knife. “Enough,” she panted. “We’ll do more another time. I think I learned one block properly. That will have to do for today.”

Salvatore looked at her, dishevelled, drooping and dirty, and gave in. “Fine. We sail the day after tomorrow at first light. So we’ll have a lesson tomorrow, and another on the ship as soon as we’re out to sea. I’ll get you in fighting trim yet.” He sauntered over to the well, filled two tin cups that were sitting next to it, and brought her one. “You’ll need to walk around for a bit to cool off. Otherwise you’ll stiffen up, and you’re bound to regret letting that happen. Would you like to come with me to see the ship?”

Taking his advice, she began pacing the courtyard. “I would like to see it, but I’d like to wash and change first. Give me one mark?”

“Make it two, and order a proper bath. I’ll see you out by the front gates.” He turned and headed for the stairs that led up into the family part of the keep. A few moments later, having caught her breath, Annarisse followed.

Annarisse surveyed the ship as the Captain talked about it. “She’s a flute, not very fast, but she’s got great hold capacity,” he told her eagerly. “She’s got a beautiful rigging system. She could lose her main mast completely and still make half-speed, provided the others weren’t damaged. And she’s got ports for fourteen guns. We’re going to add a couple more swivel cannons to the upper decks, just to bring her up to capacity. We also have to hire a lot of gunners. Those big guns take eight gunners each to crew effectively, and the ten-pounders take six.” As he spoke, he indicated the gun ports with one hand, and Annarisse had no trouble distinguishing the twenty-pound cannon from the ten-pounders. They all looked pretty big to her.

“What kind of hold space does she have?” she asked.

Here Salvatore hedged, suddenly realizing that taking Annarisse to see the holds was probably not a good idea. “Ample,” he said, “But the carpenters are working extensively down there. Why don’t I show you the cabins instead?” Without waiting for an answer, he led her towards the aft cabin which was being repaired by two carpenters. “This one will be Baron Treeden’s cabin. It’s the biggest, but also the farthest removed from the real workings of the ship.” He opened the door, and she realized that the furniture inside was all

new. Two armchairs had been upholstered in soft, expensive brown leather. A heavy, finely-sanded table had been bolted to the floor, and the bed had some very fine linens on it such as she had not slept on since leaving her father's house. A well-stocked liquor cabinet contained several fine glass goblets and a selection of good wines and spirits. Clearly Treeden had no intention of doing without his personal comforts on this voyage. She raised her eyebrows at the luxury.

Salvatore noticed. "I know. I didn't think the furnishings were worth spending a lot on, either. But I'm not the one who will be living in here, and it's his money." He ushered her out, then steered her towards the main cabins, where his stateroom and hers were located. She exclaimed over the size of her cabin; it was easily triple the size of her cabin on the *Spirit of Midchain*, and actually contained two bunks. She asked about this. "This used to be a passenger cabin, Sister," he answered. "If, at some point, there ends up being an extra female aboard the ship, I would rather have her in here with you than down below with my men. I'll arrange for an armchair or two, if you'd like."

She nodded. "A table and a reading chair would be nice, as well," she replied. "Shall I give you the money for them out of my own coffers?"

Salvatore waved that away. "It is to the honour of the ship that we pay to outfit your cabin," he replied gallantly. Then he winked. "Besides, this way, I get to say if you get a roommate or not." She laughed as they headed off to see the rest of the ship.

Rianna

The little weasel scurried along the wharf, darting in and out amongst the sailors and dock workers, trying to stay out of sight. She glanced back over her shoulder once, then again, and cursed under her breath. They were gaining on her.

She spotted a pocketbook jutting out from a backside near her, and took the offering without a second thought. Oh, darn. Now she had one more thing to hide before the constable caught her. This was getting worse and worse. Stowing the wallet in her vest with the one that had got her into this mess, she darted behind some barrels waiting to be loaded on a ship, and paused to catch her breath and assess her situation.

The elderly merchant wolf she'd stolen from had turned out to be quicker than she'd given him credit for, not to mention louder. Who knew there'd be a constable right around the corner, or that her mark would be able to bring him with one, high-pitched shout of, "Stop thief!" Two people had seen her scamper away and had pointed her out. What's more, the constable was the same one who had collared her a week before. At the time, she'd had nothing on her, and he'd had to let her go. But he had known she'd been guilty, and couldn't wait to get his own back. She really needed to practice her getaway skills. If she managed to get away this time.

She peered carefully around the barrel, and pulled back hastily. He was right there, searching the stack of twenty or so barrels in which she was hidden. She had to get out of there. Immediately.

Grabbing a smallish bundle, she pulled it over her shoulders so that it hid her face and disguised her stature. She stooped more than she needed to under the weight, making herself look as rat-like as possible. This wharf was crawling with rat workers, but there weren't too many weasels. Then she joined the end of the line of stevedores heading up the gangplank of the vessel in front of her. She didn't glance down at the constable as she got to the top, though it took all her concentration not to. Instead she went down into the hold with the others, deposited her bundle next to theirs, and turned to follow them.

Her opportunity came just as the last one was leaving. The door started to swing shut on her, and nobody noticed. Realizing that this hold was nearly full and was unlikely to see any more workers, she did not push the door open again. Instead she found a nice pile of extra blankets in a corner, opened a keg that turned out to contain salt pork, and made herself comfortable. With any luck, this ship would be in Triskellian before anyone came and found her.

In the meantime, at least she'd have a good meal.

Intrigue

Annarisse and Salvatore returned at the same time to Lady Ratatiner's castle. They were laughing and chatting until they spotted Treeden coming down the steps towards them. The tightly-controlled rage in his face was visible to these two who knew him well.

"Come on," he said tersely. "We need to talk."

Silently, Salvatore and Annarisse followed him back out the gate and down the road. When they were well out of earshot of the guardsmen, the Captain asked, "Well, my lord? What is the matter?"

"That old harpy has sicced the Indiacteur on us!" Treeden exploded.

Annarisse looked confused, but Salvatore whistled. "We shouldn't have sold all our goods through her," he remarked. "It was enough to raise her suspicions, apparently."

"Oh, she would have known anyway. Nothing happens in this town that escapes her notice. I thought her friendship with my mother would have been enough to prevent this, though. Friends don't betray friends to the Indicateur." He stomped angrily down the road.

Annarisse ran a bit to catch up. "Who are the Indicateur?" she asked.

Salvatore answered. "They're the Duke's eyes and ears amongst the Bisclavret nobles," he told her. "The wolf lords are an independent lot. To keep some measure of control, he assigns people to involve themselves in his nobles' business and report back to him. Theoretically, no one is supposed to know who they are, but in practice, these guys stick out like a broken tail." He turned to the Baron. "So someone has been assigned to watch us?"

"Henry MacIssen," Treeden gave the name the same intonation he used for the foulest curses. "He gave me some half-baked story about needing passage to the Spicer Islands, but our rooms had been searched a little too neatly, and grey wolves without titles do not seek passage on pirate ships. He's Indicateur, all right, and he's going to stick to us like glue to make sure his lord gets a share of our treasure." Treeden began to curse viciously.

Annarisse waited for him to wind down a bit, then shrugged. "It seems to me there's not much we can do about this spy," she pointed out. "Rather than complaining and cursing our luck, we should be thinking of ways to minimize his impact on the voyage." Privately, she was thinking that taxes to the Duke were still better than profit to the MacDuncans.

Salvatore concurred. "I assume he knows when the tides are and will be aboard before we're ready to sail?" Treeden nodded glumly. "Then we give him the third passenger cabin - you know, the closet-sized one as far as it can

get from my stateroom and still be on the same deck. We make sure to discuss some ship's business with him, but save important information for when he's not around." Salvatore turned to Annarisse. "Sister, do you have a spell that will locate a person?"

"No, but Kharaba probably does."

Salvatore hid his disappointment well; given a choice, he'd rather trust the overly-honourbound priestess than the mage hireling, but it seemed he would not have that choice. "Fine. Then we can ensure he's not listening before talking about anything sensitive. We can keep him in the dark without him even realizing it."

Treedon's smile was feral. "And with a bit of luck, maybe we could leave him behind somewhere. On a desert island, perhaps. Or as shark bait."

Annarisse rounded on him. "I will not have you conspiring to murder or abandon someone who is only doing his duty as he sees it," she told him sternly. "Go right ahead and work around him. That's politics. But if he boards the ship alive, he will return to Calabria alive, or I will see to it that you are held personally responsible for his death."

Treedon shrugged. "You'll do as you see fit, Sister," he remarked casually. "But I don't intend to have this sword pointed at my back the whole voyage." And with that, he turned into the first of the buildings they had come to, which turned out to be a tavern, and slammed its door in their faces.

Salvatore looked longingly at the door, but Annarisse grabbed his arm. "We have a reading lesson scheduled, Captain," she told him firmly, and steered him back the way they had come.

Salvatore entered the bar at the rear of a large group of sailors, unobtrusively. It was his fourth bar this evening, and he hadn't yet found what, or rather who, he was looking for. The night was no longer young, though, and if he didn't find it here, there would be no other opportunities before the tide turned in the morning.

He took a stool at the bar, signalling a barmaid for a pint. She sized him up with an expert glance and brought him the second-best brew, nevertheless waiting for his coin before putting the mug in his hand. He grasped the mug with his right hand, and caressed her wrist with the other. She lit up a bit at the interest; the time for her second career of the night was also approaching.

"Perhaps a nice girl like you would like to keep an old sailor company for a while after work?" Salvatore asked quietly, stroking her fur lightly. She preened a bit, showing her interest. He was probably a lot nicer-looking - and healthier - than most of her after-hours clients. "I'd be interested in some - companionship - but first I need to know something." He pulled out a denari and watched her eyes light with a very different look. So much for seduction, he thought cynically. Cash worked better every time. "There were two ships in here today from Port Olonoise. Did you happen to talk to anyone from either of them?"

Now her look was guarded. She took the coin, pocketed it, and withdrew her hand from his. "And if I did?"

"I just want to know who you talked to from those ships." Another denari appeared in his hand, but he kept it out of her reach. "I need to find someone. I think this friend of mine has gone to ground in Port Olonoise. I just want to find out if I'm right." He smiled winningly, turning on all his charm. "When I find out, I'll be back," he promised.

She considered the offer for a moment, then nodded. "The two in the corner there, the rat and the boar, see them? Well, they were in Port Olonoise not two days ago. Told me themselves, they did. Had a lot to say about it, too. They might be able to help you out." He flicked her the coin, and she caught it deftly. Picking up his mug, still nearly as full as when he'd ordered it, he headed towards the sailors she had pointed out.

They looked up as he approached, giving him the hard, flat stare that was designed to scare lesser mortals away with their tails between their legs. Salvatore was not a lesser mortal than these two, though. He pulled a bar stool up to the table and signalled the barmaid to bring another round.

"Do we know you, sir?" asked the rat suspiciously, and more politely than Salvatore would have expected. Then he realized the butt of his pistol was showing beneath his waistcoat. No wonder they didn't want to offend him.

"Not yet, friends, but that can be changed," answered Salvatore, jovially.

Neither sailor touched the drinks in front of them. "We aren't in the habit of drinking with strangers," said the boar. "Perhaps you'd tell us what it is you really want?"

Salvatore dropped his air of camaraderie and leaned in closer, the better to be heard in the noisy tavern. "I understand you men were recently out of Port Olonoise," he said. "I need to know if another ship was there at the same time. The *Corrado*." He waited for a reaction.

"And if she was?" asked the rat.

Salvatore flashed two five-denari pieces, making sure they had caught the attention of the two sailors before hiding them from sight again. "I need to find one of the men on board her," he explained. "He and I have an old debt to settle."

The boar looked at the rat, and they seemed to come to an agreement. "Mind, we didn't tell you this," said the rat, "but she was there, all right, getting some repairs done. Came in about four days ago, needing some work on the foremast that couldn't be done at sea. My guess is she'd have been there about two days to see to that bit of carpentry. That means she's long gone from there by now." The rat eyed the hand which had held the coins, and Salvatore flipped them into view again.

Holding them just out of reach, Salvatore asked, "Did you hear where they were headed next?"

This time it was the boar who answered. "They was all hush-hush about it. Didn't want to say much at all. But the scuttlebutt was that they was headed

south, to the Spicers.” He shrugged. “The old bear in the tavern there might know more, if you catch my drift.”

Salvatore flipped them the coins. “I do, and thanks to you both,” he replied. Standing, he looked around for the barmaid, to discover her keeping company with a first mate from another ship. That was fine, then. He downed the last of his beer with one long swallow, and headed to the ship for the night. They would sail at first light.

The Book

Kharaba knocked on the Baron's cabin door with some trepidation. He still didn't really know what to expect from his employer, and as yet nothing had been asked of him. He expected that was about to change. Dismissing the cabin boy who had been sent to fetch him, he entered at the Baron's summons.

"You sent for me, my lord?" the cat intoned with a courtly bow.

Treedren waved him to a leather-clad armchair and offered him the full glass of wine that had been waiting on the table. He then resumed his own place in the other armchair, sipping casually from his own glass. "I suppose it's time I tell you why I hired you," he said.

Kharaba tried not to look too excited. "It would be nice to have some details, sir," he admitted cautiously. He couldn't control the twitch of his tail, though.

"Your job here is to provide me with counsel on things magical," began the wolf. "I don't trust that priestess, the more so since she started cozing up to Salvatore. Besides, I doubt she knows the things I need to find out. Certainly the fox doesn't. They're both working against me any way they can. I need someone I can trust on this ship. Someone who has a vested interest in seeing that I get everything that's due me." He fixed the tiger with a penetrating stare. "Can I trust you to be that person?"

Kharaba bowed again. "Of course, sir. I commend your perspicacity in seeing through the horse priestess. I myself believe her to be most untrustworthy. She also knows less than she claims to know about magic. I can certainly give you better guidance than she, and I won't expect you to give up your comforts or your way of life in return. You can trust me."

Treedren thought differently, but he really didn't need total commitment from the tiger. Loyalty to an employer would be enough, so long as there were no better-paying employers on the horizon. He nodded. "That's good, then," he said. "So here's the story." Turning his back on the tiger, he opened the lock on the chest quickly. It was a new lock, made to order in Port Spar, and he had been assured it would take a professional locksmith some time to open it without a key. From the chest he lifted Gustafus' log book, hidden from Salvatore and Annarisse since he had found it in the cave on Gustafus' island. He carried it over to the table and plunked it down heavily.

"This is the log book of the pirate Gustafus the Green," he told Kharaba. "It details some of his later voyages, as well as his research into a vast treasure that he never had the opportunity to seek out. He spent more than ten years seeking out stories that would lead him to this treasure, and was just about ready to sail in search of it when he found out that the Bisclavret were on his tail and

were out for blood. So he hid this book and some of the treasure he already had, on the island where he built his tower. Before the *Spirit of Midchain* was sunk, Salvatore and I found that treasure. We sold it to buy this ship. What Salvatore didn't realize, though, was that there was more than a few pretty glass baubles in that chest. This book was there, too. He hasn't seen it. I don't mean that he ever shall."

Kharaba reached for the book, but Treeden moved it out of his reach. "Let me sum it up for you," he said. Kharaba settled back in his seat, keeping his hands away from the book. He understood the feral gleam in Treeden's eye, and knew better than to get between the wolf and the object of that obsession. "Gustafus tracked down and purchased several glass statues, some small, some not so small, depicting sea creatures of extraordinary grace and beauty. They had hands, but flippers instead of feet, and he surmised that they were intelligent, possibly even civilized." Treeden opened the book to a marked page and showed Kharaba an exquisitely rendered drawing of the statue they had found in the cave. The tiger caught his breath at the sight of it. "This is a drawing of the statue Salvatore has in his stateroom. The picture doesn't do it justice. It glows green, from the inside, though we were unable to determine the source of the light. It stands about so high," Treeden indicated a distance about a foot off the table with one hand, "and the artistry that went into it would make it priceless even without the glow. Gustafus had tracked down at least four other, similar statues, each slightly different, in various private collections about Calabria. I'm fairly certain one of these has since made it into the hands of Don Rinaldi, who gave it to Admiral Ferrante with a charge to seek out more of the same. Ferrante, in the *Comado*, is even now combing the waves for information leading to this treasure. We're going to get to it before he does."

Kharaba studied the drawing without touching it. "Were there other such statues in the treasure you found?" he asked.

"None that glowed. There were several others that depicted the same creatures, though. It seems only a few of the statues made ever glowed. Gustafus had a theory about the glow, though." Treeden paused. "He believed the glow was a magical connection, a way for the creator of the statues to communicate with those who were near them. He reported that after finding this statue and storing it in his personal press, he started having dreams that seemed to pull him southwards, beyond the Spicer Islands. Have you ever heard of a spell that could do this?"

Kharaba thought about it. "It sounds similar to a lesser eidolon spell," he remarked. "That spell allows the caster to project himself into an object, and see and hear what is going on around that object. I believe there's a more advanced version of the spell, but I'm not familiar with its properties. It is a thaumaturgic spell, however. It may be in one of my books." He grimaced. "I haven't had time to peruse my new books since I went to work for Baron Affligent," he admitted. "Certainly his books said nothing about this spell. But I will check mine, and see what I can find out. Did Gustafus have a destination in mind to seek out this treasure?"

“He believed the pull was from one of two sources. Either it came from Seal Island, a tiny, barbaric little place southeast of the Spicers, or it was coming through Seal Island from another source still further south. He was leaning towards the source further south, but he didn’t really have any reasons to give.” Treeden closed the book, turned, and put it carefully back in its chest. As he relocked it, he said, “I need to find a way to tell Salvatore which direction to go, without revealing the existence of the log book. Too much information is a dangerous thing in the wrong hands. He needs to know just enough to get us there, but not enough to double-cross me.” Treeden didn’t even notice his switch to a singular pronoun, but Kharaba did. He filed that away for future reference in his orderly mind.

“I might be able to help there, Baron,” said the tiger thoughtfully. “Salvatore knows that you know about the statue, right?” Treeden nodded. “So if you ask to have me examine it, I can perform some fake spells, or some real ones that don’t do what I’ll tell him they do. These spells I perform will tell me that the object originated on Seal Island, and that is where we should go next.” He smiled. “The best part is, the priestess has a spell to detect magic, but she does not have one to identify it. She’ll be able to tell that I’m performing a spell, but will have no way of knowing that the spell does not do what I say it does.”

Treeden considered this for a moment, then grinned. “Perfect. He’s decided to chase the *Corrado* for now, which will lead him to Port Olonoise and then into the Spicers. Let’s do this after Port Olonoise. We don’t want him to have any idea which way to go next.” Treeden pushed himself out of the chair and offered his hand to the mage. “You’re proving to be a valuable acquisition,” he commented cheerfully, before showing the tiger to the door.

As he headed back to his own cabin, Kharaba reflected that Treeden’s tendency to refer to employees as possessions was rather disconcerting.

Chains

The sailor dragged the weasel into the light. He'd caught her with her hand in the salt barrel, which was much lighter than it had been a day ago when they set sail from Port Spar. She had realized immediately that the game was up, and had come along without too much squealing and protesting. To be sure, the grip the sailor had on her arm was quite painful. It was probably better than the chains in the port jail, though.

She wasn't so sure when, a moment later, she found herself in the slave hold, wearing the heaviest, rustiest iron chains she'd ever envisaged. She hated chains. Chains were very, very bad news in her profession.

Finally, the sailor spoke. "I'll be right back with the Captain," he said with a low growl, flexing his claws as his ruddy fur rippled. She looked at the sharp, curved carnivore's weapons and gulped. She had a policy of not messing with foxes who were bigger than her. That was almost all of them, including this one. He was gone up the hatch without waiting for a reply. Rianna started to pick at the locks of the chains with her claws.

It seemed like half an hour, but was probably only a few minutes later, when another fox descended the ladder, preceded by the sailor who had caught her. He was also a red fox, dandily dressed but stained and smelling of brandy. She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

The Captain approached and planted himself in front of her, staring at her with a forbidding mien. He, too, was much bigger than her. The other sailor stood behind her, ready to grab her at his captain's command. She was in very deep trouble.

She waited. The Captain tapped his foot, once, twice, his claws clicking on the wooden floor. He fingered the pistol at his belt, lovingly. She gulped again.

"So you thought my ship would be a good place to stow away," he said quietly. She said nothing, too scared to open her mouth. "Maybe you thought this would be an easy ride – eating my salt pork and sleeping on my blankets while we took you wherever you wanted to go. Where was that, exactly? Triskellian, perhaps?" By now Rianna was dumb with pure terror. She cowered away from him as far as her chains would allow, and found herself backing into the sailor. With a little shriek, she started to push left, only to have the sailor pick her up under her arms at a signal from the Captain. Her feet dangling off the floor, she gibbered in fright.

He waited a minute as her whimpering subsided a bit, then said, "I don't like the tradition of having stowaways walk the plank, you know. It's messy. Such a waste of a good slave." He paused to let that sink in, and to let the

snivels die down again. "I need a reason to break the rules, though. I can't go around breaking my own rules without a good reason. So tell me, weasel." He leaned closer, staring her right in the eye. "Why should I let you live?"

Faced with this threat, Rianna suddenly found her voice. "I - I - I - I'm good at getting stuff," she blurted. Then she winced. She really hadn't wanted him to know that. "I mean I, like, buy stuff. Yeah, that's it. I buy stuff." He was still looking at her with that same levelling stare. She gulped. "And I can fit in tight places. I can climb. I might make a really good sailor." She made the mistake of glancing at his hand, which still rested on the butt of one of his pistols. She suddenly realized there were four of them. The terror overwhelmed her attempt at bargaining, and she let out a low moan.

Salvatore looked at the pathetic little mustelid dangling above the floor, and thought over what she'd said. So she was good at getting stuff, was she? He motioned to the sailor, who put her back on the bench, though he held on to one arm. Then he happened to glance at the manacle on her left wrist.

The lock was nearly open. With a snarl, he grabbed it and examined it. The rust around the lock was scratched, and the lock was loose enough that given another ten free seconds, she probably would have escaped it. He grabbed the other wrist. It, too, was loose. He snapped them together, checked that the locks had caught, and then released her. The sailor stepped back, as well. Rianna didn't move.

"If you can get out of those in five minutes' time, I'll hire you," he told her.

Needing no further prompting, she got to work. Two minutes later, the chains were draped messily over the bench, and Rianna sat before him, unfettered. He smiled. "I'll have to remember to use the tamper-proof chains if I ever throw you in the brig," he remarked jovially. Rianna smiled tentatively, unsure if that was supposed to be a compliment. "I'm assigning you to the galley for now. You'll be cook's helper. When I need you to perform some other - services - for me, I'll let you know. What's your name?"

"Rianna Nimbletoes," she answered.

"Welcome to my crew, Rianna," he replied. Then he turned and climbed the ladder to the deck, leaving the sailor to show her to her new post.

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"You think you can get the best of me?" the boar nearly screamed. He was bright red, his eyes nearly bursting from their sockets with anger. The rat he was arguing with was just as worked up. It looked like they might go at it then and there.

Mr. Mietvani came upon the two at that moment, realized what was happening, and waded into the fray. "Break it up, men. We'll have no fistfights amongst the crew on this voyage." He turned aside and gestured to the new cabin boy, a smart scamp of a chipmunk, who ran to get the Captain. Salvatore was there within minutes.

"So, what's the problem here?" he asked the boar.

"This rat thinks he can talk about my mother and get away with it!"

“What’s the problem with that? We all know what your mother is!” the rat shouted back.

Salvatore tried to suppress his smile. He’d been waiting for an opportunity like this since they set sail. He turned to the cabin boy. “Fetch the mage,” he commanded quietly. “We’re going to settle this like men,” he told the two sailors, “With a fistfight and rules. The fight will be over when one of you is out cold. Get up on deck.” They did. The other men realized what was about to happen, and the betting began.

Kharaba appeared just as the two sailors were stripping off their shirts. He approached the Captain and bowed. “You sent for me, Captain?” he asked.

“I did. I understand you have a protection spell – one that keeps combatants from taking damage in a fight. Have I understood correctly?”

“Yes, sir, but I have to warn you, if there is a discrepancy in strength between the two, my spell may not be enough to help one win over the other. I can give a defensive advantage, but I can do nothing to aid in the weaker party’s attack.”

“All the same, I would like to see this spell in action. You see the two men about to start fighting on my command?” Kharaba nodded hesitantly. “I want you to place your spell of protection on the rat, as the weaker of the two. I want to see if he will win the fight with your help.” Salvatore twirled his whiskers a bit, gazing assessingly, not at the sailors, but at the mage. Recognizing a test when he saw one, Kharaba said his incantation and cast the spell. There was no apparent difference in the appearance of the rat, but the tiger leaned back against the railing as though satisfied. Salvatore turned his attention to the combatants, who were staring balefully at each other, and gave them the signal to begin.

The two circled for a moment, then came in for a flurry of blows. The boar took two solid shots to the chest, but got in three to the rat’s head and torso. Salvatore winced at the second of these, a blow that should have resulted in a swollen, black eye. The rat hardly appeared to notice it, however, and the Captain realized that Kharaba was smiling. So, that was the protection spell at work, was it?

The noise from the sidelines was deafening as the sailors egged on their comrades. It seemed the two were equally popular, and the bets were only slightly in favour of the boar. The rat was playing up to the audience, dancing around and shaking his joined fists in the air every time he got in a good punch. The boar was more difficult to distract, which worked to his advantage.

The rat was unprepared for the next flurry of blows. Several connected solidly, and this time Salvatore could see bruises forming and bumps swelling. Clearly the spell was not proof against all damage.

It was over in less than ten minutes, with one final, solid punch to the rat’s temple. He fell straight back, knocking his head still further on a coil of rope stored at that spot. The sailors waited for the Captain’s signal indicating the fight was over; he gave it, and the boar’s supporters cheered as money began

changing hands. On Salvatore's request, Theo went to find Annarisse to ensure that the rat would be all right.

Kharaba seemed annoyed. "It's too bad my spell doesn't account for the stupidity of the person it is cast upon," he remarked acerbically. "If the rat had spent less time posturing and more fighting, he might have won."

Salvatore shrugged. "Thank you, sir mage, for your help," he said, and walked over to speak to Sister Annarisse as she performed her healing spell. Kharaba fumed silently as he went back to his cabin, vowing to prove his worth to the Captain.

Port Olonoise

Port Olonoise came into sight the afternoon of the third day out from Port Spar. It had been a good voyage, so far. Salvatore was pleased with the handling of the ship, and the thirty new crew members were getting along well, especially since the fistfight. He pondered that for a moment. Had the spell not worked, or was it simply insufficient for the task he'd set? Or was it that Kharaba was purposely under-representing himself for some reason? That didn't seem likely, but it was a remote possibility. He shook his head and called out to Mr. Mietvani to ready the longboat.

Olonoise was a horrible little hang-out. Its rickety, draughty buildings were built on a rocky shore with no protection whatsoever from the raging elements of the ocean. Many of the warehouses and businesses were built on stilts in the harbour itself, and most looked like they required more regular repair than they got. It was the most inhospitable place Salvatore had ever been, but he had in fact been here quite often since taking up pirating. This time, he was seeking the *Corrado*, and one piece of information he thought he would find here.

The Captain was choosing people to go on shore leave when MacIssen came up on deck. Treeden was a few steps behind him, scowling darkly. Salvatore knew why, but didn't show it. He approached the two wolves with a smile on his face.

"We're stopping here to take on some extra provisions, sir," he told MacIssen. "We'll be in port overnight, but there's no reason for you to leave the ship. This is a very rough town, and I intend to stay close to the ship myself except for my purchasing."

MacIssen was already shaking his head. "I must go into port, Captain! I would never forgive myself if I missed this chance to see what a privateer's hangout in the Corsairs looked like!"

Treeden came up behind him. "It's not a bloody carnival, Henry!" He looked at Salvatore enquiringly. "Are you giving shore leave?"

Salvatore nodded. "Some. My crew can handle themselves. Sister Annarisse told me she's staying on board, though. I'm hoping to be there and back within three or four marks."

"Well, I'm staying here, too. Not much to do in Port Olonoise except get in a fight, and I've better things to do than that." Treeden turned and stalked back to his cabin. He'd been looking forward to a few hours in the Saltbelly, but he'd be damned if he was going to be followed around by the eyes-for-hire while he drank. He decided to work on those spells he'd worked out, instead. Let the Captain think there were only two mages on the ship. Treeden knew better.

As it turned out, the handful of sailors, MacIssen, and Salvatore were the only ones to set out in the longboat. MacIssen looked excited, but the Captain was fairly sure it was an act. This town was a hangout for the most notorious pirates and merchants in or about Calabria, and MacIssen must know that showing his face here was especially dangerous for an Indicateur. Salvatore mentally shrugged off the thought. If the wolf managed to get himself hurt, so be it. He'd been warned.

As they disembarked, Salvatore headed for a merchant house he knew. The reputation was less than grand and the goods needed to be inspected carefully before the contract was agreed to, but it was the best bet for serious acquisitions that would not get him in trouble with MacIssen. The wolf was still tagging along, looking for all the world like a little lost pet, unused to being without its leash.

The old salt behind the counter looked up in some surprise. "Captain Sal, if it ain't you! Whatcha doin' in this neck o' the woods, you old scoundrel, you?" He offered a hand across the counter, and Salvatore shook it warmly.

"Business as usual, Joe, business as usual. How's the leg? Last I saw you, you were getting sewn up by a quack priest in Salthaven."

The boar shook his head. "I lost the leg, sir, but t'ain't much trouble findin' a job in a town like this with a recommendation from a well-known fox such as yourself to back me up. Mr. Dimitri, he was just ichin' to hire me." He threw a look to the wolf who had come in behind Salvatore. "Can I help you, sir?" he asked.

MacIssen demurred. "I'm with Captain Salvatore, as a passenger on his ship," he said easily.

The boar looked at him again, then at Salvatore, who gave him a level stare. Joe nodded, and Salvatore relaxed marginally. "So, Captain, what can I get you?"

"That'll really depend what you've got, won't it?" he answered, and the two settled in for some serious bargaining. MacIssen settled himself in a corner, leaning against a wall.

Nearly two marks later, they finished their deal as Joe sent some dockhands to the longboat with the purchases. MacIssen had hardly moved in all that time, though he had given his opinion on one barrel of salt pork before Salvatore had agreed to buy it. Salvatore was running out of ways to get rid of the wolf, and he certainly didn't want him following along to his next destination. Taking an Indicateur into the Saltbelly was like a drunk taking a lit torch into a gunpowder warehouse.

Finally, Salvatore said, "This is the last of it. I'll be heading back to the longboat in just a minute - just want to catch up a bit with my old second mate, here. Why don't you head back with the goods, MacIssen, and I'll meet you there?" For just a second, he thought the wolf would insist on staying. Then he apparently realized that he would blow his cover if he didn't leave at such a pointed request, and headed out. Salvatore turned back to Joe as soon as he was out of earshot. "Is Old Neant still running the Saltbelly?" he asked quietly.

The boar nodded. "O' course. Who else would want that stink hole? What's your business down there, Captain, if you don't mind my askin'?"

Salvatore thought about it, then decided to ask the first of his questions here. "Tell me, Joe, was the *Corrado* in port recently? Say, within the last ten days?"

Joe raised his eyebrows and whistled. "Indeed she was, and damaged, too. I had to wonder why she hadn't just set out for Triskellian, but then I figured someone must be on her tail for her to come here for repairs." He looked inquiringly at his former captain, who nodded. Joe whistled again. "Yes, sir, if you were after me, I'd be runnin', too."

"But Ferrante doesn't know I'm after him. He sank my ship, and he can't know yet that I've got a new one."

"Then I'd say, whatever mission he's on is more important than his ship, and for Ferrante, that's sayin' a lot. Never seen a captain so ferocious about keepin' his ship in fightin' trim as that fox." Joe shook his head. "He was in a mighty hurry, he was. Got those repairs and was gone again in one day flat. You chasin' 'im?" Salvatore nodded. "Then I'd say he's close to nine days ahead of you. The Midchain would be able to catch him, but you said she sank! What're you sailin' now, then?"

"A former slaver, a flute, the Riddock's Dawn."

Joe shook his head. "A flute? I'd guess there wasn't much for sale at Port Spar, then, for an old pirate like you to be sailin' one o' those. No flute'll ever catch the *Corrado*. Do ye ken where he's headed next, then?"

Salvatore slapped the counter and pushed away from it. "That's what I'm here to find out. What's the password for the Saltbelly these days?" Joe looked at him, and Salvatore sighed. "Not even for your former captain?" The boar shook his head, and Salvatore pulled out a denari and slapped it on the table.

"Sister of the Blue," he said, pocketing the coin. "When you sink the *Corrado*, come back here and we'll lift a glass to the good ol' days, Sir."

"I'll do that, Joe, and sooner than you may look for me." And with that, Salvatore strode out of the shop in the direction of the docks.

He approached the half-deserted westernmost pier just as the sun dipped behind the slight hill to the west. He was unsurprised to see two burly rats guarding the stairs leading down to the lower beach from the pier. He pulled out two unmarked gold coins of the sort favoured by those unwelcome in most ports, and gave them the password when they barred his way. The gold changed hands smoothly, and Salvatore descended the stairs.

Halfway down, the staircase twisted slightly, and a rotting wooden door in the bank opened in front of him. Paying another coin to the doorman, he entered the twisted warren of slimy, mouldering tunnels that led to the Saltbelly. The tunnels were alternately quite high and barely high enough to stand straight. The further he went down and around them, the wetter they became, until eventually moisture was dripping from the walls and ceiling in little rivulets. He knew the exact moment when the tunnel swerved under the sea itself, not so much from any change in the environment as from a distinct shift in pressure that made his sensitive ears pop.

“Slimy down here, isn’t it?” said a familiar voice behind him. Salvatore stopped dead, and the owner of the voice ran into him.

“Mr. MacIssen, what are you doing down here?” Salvatore asked, gritting his teeth against the angry sailor’s oath that had been on the tip of his tongue.

“I figured you had to have a good reason for coming down that staircase when your ship was at the other end of the wharf, so I thought I’d come keep you company. Those rats up top are a hard-headed lot. They wouldn’t let me down until I showed some steel and gold, at the same time.” The wolf grinned. “But I know how to look dangerous, and they saw reason after a moment.”

The Captain did swear now. “You forced your way in? If you want to live, you’re going to turn around and go right back the way you came, and straight to the ship. Those guys will make sure you pay for that, and they exact a high price.” Salvatore started to turn the wolf around, but he didn’t budge. Looking down, he realized MacIssen had his hand on his dagger.

“I’m coming with you, Captain,” he said, and his affable passenger persona was entirely gone. In its place was the hardened spy, and Salvatore decided not to push him just now. It was entirely possible the rats would see to this problem before they left; in any case, why tip off the wolf that they were on to him? Salvatore turned back and headed towards the undersea tavern without another word.

Suddenly they rounded a curve in the tunnel and found themselves at the opening to a large cavern.

In many respects, the Saltbelly looked exactly like any tavern in Calabria. It was grimy, smelly, and dark, lit only by a few dozen feebly burning torches placed in brackets along the walls. The patrons were noisy and boisterous, mainly drunk, and were harassing the barmaids who served them. In other respects, though, it was very different. For one thing, the wenches were slaves rather than free girls earning a living. For another, there was a brisk market in illicit goods of all kinds, including slaves, going on in the shadowy farthest corner, some fifty feet from the door.

The tavern keeper was directing the rolling of a fresh barrel of ale from a back storeroom across the muddy floor. Whenever one of the two slaves pushing it slipped on the slime, he earned a crack from the huge bear’s oar-like paw that sent him crashing, whimpering, into the wall. It took a remarkably short time for the barrel to be properly positioned and a tap inserted into it. The patrons greeted this achievement with a cheer, and the noise level rose higher still. The bear went back to his post behind the bar and continued serving drinks. Salvatore headed there without a glance at his companion, who tagged along anyway.

Taking the last seat at the bar, on a stool he hoped would hold his weight for the amount of time he needed to be there, the red fox signalled to the bear and got himself a mug of ale. He drank heartily, not even wincing at the sour, watered, sediment-filled sludge that filled his mouth. He’d been mostly dry since Port Spar, because of his penance to Sister Annarisse, and the beer tasted like the water of life to him.

He watched the bear surreptitiously while he drank. He was huge, on the shady side of middle age, and very scarred. His fur showed white around his muzzle and on a multitude of small scars, including at the base of his one missing ear. Though Salvatore had met Old Neant before, he had never really considered the rumours that circulated about him. Now, however, those rumours had become very important. They suggested, mostly to gullible hands on their first voyage, that Old Neant had once been the very young first mate to Gustafus the Green. Certainly he matched the descriptions of One-Eared Jovario to a hair. Salvatore had determined to find out what truth there was behind the rumours.

He called the bear over when his mug was empty, and gestured to him when he brought it back full. "Used to sail yourself, didn't you?" he said conversationally.

"Sure did, once. Long time back, now." Old Neant started to move away, but Salvatore stopped him.

"I'm interested in some information you may have," he said. The bear's eyes narrowed, and some gold appeared in the fox's hand. It failed to improve the barkeep's demeanour, though. Salvatore tried again. "I'm looking for a partner to help me find a treasure - a long-lost, very rich treasure. Would you be interested?"

The bear started to turn away. "I don't have the information you're looking for," he said.

"But surely Gustafus' first mate knew where he was planning to search for treasure," Salvatore continued. Conversation continued to swirl around them, but he had the impression several ears were listening which hadn't been a moment before.

The bear shook his head. "Gustafus' first mate probably did know. I don't." He turned away to speak to two people who had just come behind the bar and sought his attention. Salvatore was at a loss; how to make the bear agree to help him? Then he realized that the two who were talking to Old Neant were guard rats from above; that they were gesturing to someone just behind Salvatore, and looking at him suspiciously, too; and that Neant's eyes were narrowing and his hand was reaching under the bar for something which had nothing to do with ale.

The surge of elation almost caught him by surprise. So, there was to be a fight, was there? Well, bring it on! One hand stayed with his drink, while the other surreptitiously checked the two pistols closest to it. They were ready. He did not have time for more.

The bear gestured to a few men from the other side of the tavern; they came, claws unsheathed and unholy grins on their faces. Salvatore stood before they arrived, moved to a spot where he was near the door with his back to the wall, and looked for the wolf. He had found a spot at a table near the bar and was watching the fox, seemingly trying to figure out why Salvatore had left his seat. He did not appear to notice the two jackals bearing down on him. The rats

approached Salvatore, who smiled, showed his empty hands, and asked, "Is there a problem, sirs?"

"That depends, sir," said one, his voice slurring the appellation into an insult. "Are you with the wolf spy over there?"

Salvatore thought fast. If he acknowledged the wolf, they might have a slim chance of getting out together, but his reputation in this town would be ruined. If he didn't acknowledge him, and the wolf somehow survived, his reputation in Bisclavret would suffer the same fate. He sized up his chances, and said, "He's a passenger on my ship. I've been hired to take him to the Spicer Islands."

The rat's eyes narrowed. With a flick of one tail, the two jackals had MacIssen under the arms and had stripped him of his dagger and rapier. The rats moved in on Salvatore, clearly intending the same fate.

The fox drew the first two pistols, cocked them, and pointed them point-blank at the rats, who froze. "We'll be leaving now," he said conversationally. "No need to bother you further. If you'll just put him on his feet, there, no one needs to get hurt."

One of the rats lunged to the right, trying to come around the pistol and knock his arm. He was too slow. The Captain fired both guns, instantly killing the one who hadn't moved and winging the second. While his left arm fended off the still-charging rat, he holstered his right pistol and drew his rapier.

Meanwhile, one jackal had drawn his claws down the wolf's face, tearing an eye out along the way. MacIssen screamed in pain, then began to fight. As his kicks rained on his tormentors, several nearby sailors picked up their mugs and prepared to join the fight.

Old Neant had come around the bar and was manoeuvring towards Salvatore with a large whip in his hand. Salvatore saw it in time to avoid being disarmed, but took a cut on the ear from it. A third rat appeared from one side and stuck a dagger in his side, sending him reeling. Drawing another pistol with his left hand, he shot that one in the face. Gruesomely, his brains splattered backward over Neant and the other two guards who had appeared from that direction, deterring them slightly. Using his rapier to fend off the sailors who were turning the fight into a full-fledged brawl, he looked around for MacIssen.

The wolf was no longer fighting. The two jackals were holding him off the floor while a cat went at him with a dagger. Seeing that the wolf was as good as dead, Salvatore made the call. Getting out alive meant leaving the wolf behind. He gave his signal whistle to the men of his ship in the room; each of the ten who were there finished the part of the fight they had been engaged in, and headed for the door. One jackal got skewered by the ship's cook, another was kicked in the head by a gunner, and the remaining rat received a dagger in the back from a seaman. With these diversions, Salvatore made the entrance to the tunnels and was almost away when disaster struck.

In the doorway was another guard, a horse with a rapier in one hand and a main gauche in the other. He came up behind Salvatore as the fox was edging backwards, and the main gauche stabbed into his shoulder. Salvatore went down, fast enough to keep the blade from cutting any deeper, and sliced the

horse from underneath. As blood gushed around him from the horse's mortal wound, he reached over and pulled out the main gauche, nearly fainting from the sudden gush of his own life's blood.

Then two of his sailors had reached him, and two more were fighting in the doorway. They pulled him to his feet, holding the shoulder wound closed with their hands, and steadied him to run. Quickly, without a backward glance at the sailors still fighting their way out, the three headed out the warren of tunnels to emerge at the guarded door in the bank. One of them efficiently backstabbed the rat on guard there, as the other ran to do the same service to the two at the top. Another moment and they were free of pursuit, on the wharf.

Salvatore fought to stay conscious, knowing that he had to make it to the longboat before he could give in. If the men could get him back to the ship, Annarisse would see that he lived. But if he collapsed here, it was all over. With the two foxes supporting him, the three of them stumbled along the wharf as others joined them. Salvatore counted eight of his men joining him as they continued; he thought he saw one more coming up behind. Had they lost someone, then? He tried to form the question, but couldn't force it past the dizziness.

His men piled him into the longboat, needing no orders from him to know what to do. One used a piece of sailcloth to bind his wound as tightly as he could, and Salvatore did black out briefly from the pain of that. But in a very short span of time, the boat had reached the side of the ship and he was being hauled up the side using the pulley system set up for just such an emergency. He was not yet at the top when the shouts of the sailors brought Sister Annarisse running.

"Well, Captain, you've gone and got yourself stabbed? If I'd realized this trip would be that dangerous, I would have sent you out protected by a prayer or two," she remarked as she rolled up the sleeves of her robe and removed the makeshift bandage. She winced, then looked up at the cabin boy. "Lad, fetch me the black bag from my cabin," she instructed. Gently she pressed the sides of the wound closed, and Salvatore fainted dead away at last.

The Recovery

When he came to, he was lying face-down on his own bunk. His shoulder was bandaged so tightly he couldn't move his arm or his head. Exploring with his other hand, he realized that he'd been stripped of his clothing and covered by a light sheet. Continuing his inventory, he felt a bandage on his left thigh, covering a wound he only vaguely recalled receiving. His head was pounding, he was burning up, and he had never been so thirsty in his life. He groaned.

Annarisse's cool hand smoothed back the fur on his head as her face came into view. "Welcome back, Captain," she said calmly, her voice seeming to come from a great distance away. "How do you feel?"

"Bank the fire! It's hot as hell in here!" he answered, and she bent over to look in his eyes.

"I'd imagine you do feel like that, Captain, but it's actually quite comfortable in here," she replied. "You've taken a wound fever, not surprising considering how dirty the dagger was that stabbed you. Did you know you brought it out with you? Yes, well, you did, and it was encrusted with blood that never belonged to you. I've healed up the wounds, but I can't replace the blood you've lost, and you need blood to fight the fever. I'm going to help you to turn and sit; you need to drink what I have for you. It will make you feel better, and probably make you sleep again. That's just what you need to fight the fever, so you have to promise me you won't fight to stay awake." As she spoke, she helped him move his legs, then put an arm under his torso to help him sit up. Hating the weakness, he tried to push her away, succeeding only in falling back on the bed and jarring his shoulder. The world went black for a moment. Light returned as Annarisse managed to get him upright.

"Drink this. When you wake up again, I'll do a cure spell to see if I can get rid of the fever. But first you need to replace some of the fluids you've lost. That's right, Captain, drain it. I know it tastes vile. Frankly, that's the least of your worries. Now, lie down again. Someone will be with you, so if you wake up and need anything, just call out and we'll come."

"We need to leave port. I need to give the order - " Salvatore stopped, appalled at the frailty in his voice.

"The sailors who brought you back told Mr. Mietvani what had happened, and he gave the orders. We're well underway, and he's quite capable of commanding the ship while you're recovering. The best thing you can do for your crew is to rest. Lie down. Sleep." Lulled by her gentle voice and the hand stroking his fur, he obeyed.

She found the dreams of the fox, as she had often done since he had found the statue. They were different tonight. The action in them had a frenetic quality. The colours in them were red and orange, colours of pain and fire. Someone had hurt her prize.

She took the new dreams and muted them. The red became that of the sunset, the gold that of the treasure she would grant him. Southward, ever southward she drew him, showing him the way.

Come to me, fox. Fulfill your deepest desires. Find your lost love. There is no pain here, no fire, only the calm blue of the endless ocean and the sweet green of the island that floats upon it. She suppressed her impatience and sent him only the longing. He knew about longing.

As his breathing settled and his fever broke, she withdrew, satisfied. He would come to her. It was only a matter of time.

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Treeden met her outside the door to the Captain's cabin. "I need to see that he's alive, Sister," he said, trying to push past her.

Annarisse stopped him. "You would doubt my word on this? He lives, and will continue to do so, but he needs rest, and you, my lord, are not a restful guest. You will leave him be for the time being. He will be back on his feet in a few days, and you can harass him then." She turned the wolf around and gave him a gentle push to precede her down the hallway. Trained as he was to take orders from forceful women, Treeden obeyed.

They met Mr. Mietvani at the end of the corridor. "Well, Sister?" he asked.

"He lives, and sleeps, and heals as well as could be expected. I've left Theo with him," she said, referring to the cabin boy. "How goes the ship?"

"Just fine, but I need to know a destination. Right now we're just heading generally south, but the Captain left no specific orders and his log book contains no plans." The boar shook his head, clearly a bit out of his depth.

"We're heading to the Spicers," Treeden told him. "Port Bernantouse, to be exact. It's what, about two weeks distant?"

Mr. Mietvani nodded. "About that. So you'd discussed it with the Captain, my lord?"

"Yes," Treeden said shortly. Annarisse looked at him in some surprise, but didn't question it. The men needed someone in some kind of charge, and if it couldn't be Mietvani, Treeden was next on the list.

"Mr. Mietvani, I was wondering what the sailors told you about Henry MacIssen," Annarisse asked as he turned to go.

It was Treeden who answered. "As we were setting sail out of the harbour, a gang of them came out of the tavern," he told her. "They were dragging a wolf. I watched while they strung him up from the yardarm of the nearest ship. He was probably already dead by then, though." He shrugged. "One ship started to set their sail to chase us, so I gave the order to leave." His stare challenged her to question this; she paid it no notice.

"What will be the repercussions of his death for you, Baron?" she asked.

He shrugged again. "I am not responsible for an adult who got himself into a situation he couldn't handle. I didn't kill him. Salvatore didn't kill him. I don't see how there can be repercussions." He turned away and stalked to his cabin. Mietvani headed up on deck to make the course changes that would take them to the Spicer Islands. Annarisse went back to her own cabin to pray for Henry MacIssen.

Salvatore pushed himself off the bed, teetered for a moment, then fell back with an oath. It had been three days since the fight in the Saltbelly, and still he was weak as a baby. Annarisse came over from where she had been puttering at the brazier, making him another foul-tasting brew that was supposed to help him. She tut-tutted a bit, then put one arm under his and led him carefully to his armchair. As soon as he had settled in it, he pushed her away irritably.

"I don't need a woman fussing over me every minute of the day," he grumbled.

"Of course you don't, Captain," she said with a smile. "But you do need this medicine, so sit tight and we'll talk while you drink it." She poured the tea from the pot into a mug and brought this to him, taking up her own glass of water to drink while she kept him company. "This is different from the others you've had. It tastes better, for one thing. For another, it won't put you to sleep. In a little while I'll do one last healing spell on you. It should clear up the last of the fever, and with another day of rest, you'll be right as rain."

He grunted and cautiously sipped the hot drink. She was right; it tasted much better than the other pigswill she'd inflicted on him the day before. He took another, heartier sip, and immediately regretted it. It was very hot. She handed him her glass of water as he sputtered from the burn on his tongue.

"So, are you interested in hearing what has been happening on the ship?" she asked as he went back to his tiny sips. He nodded eagerly. "Well, let's see. Treeden told Mietvani that you and he had discussed heading for the Spicer Islands, so that's where we're headed. Apparently it's quite a long voyage, close to two weeks. Did you discuss that with Treeden?"

"No. It's a good idea, mind you, but we never talked about it. I wonder what he knows that I don't!" Salvatore mused on that for a moment, then brought his thoughts back to his ship. "Do you know what happened to MacIssen?"

Annarisse nodded. "Treeden told me he was strung up from the yardarm of a ship in the port, probably already dead. He didn't give details, and I didn't ask."

"You didn't want them. He was already pretty cut up by the time I got out of there."

"What happened?" Annarisse had been burning for more details for days.

Salvatore shrugged. "I was after information I was pretty sure I could get in the Saltbelly. Horrible place, that, but I should have been fine there. Would have been, too, if MacIssen had stayed on the ship." He shook his head. "The

fool forced his way past the guards, flashed Bisclavret coin at them in tiny amounts, and then was surprised when a bunch of them came to beat him up. They twigged to his real identity as fast as we did. They don't like spies in that place. His life was over the moment he entered the tavern. He just continued to breathe for a while." He sipped his medicine thoughtfully. "You know, I tried to protect him. I could have told them I'd never seen him before, and they would have believed me, or at least accepted my story. But I acknowledged him as a passenger on my ship. They attacked me, as well, and Henry didn't even get to put up much of a fight. I killed several of the guards down there, and I don't know how many more were killed by my sailors as they got us all out of there. But we couldn't have saved MacIssen."

"Tell me true, Captain. Did either you or Treeden arrange his death?" Annarisse fixed him with her hardest stare, and was rewarded with surprised shock.

"We did not, Sister. Treeden never left the ship, none of our men were involved in his death, and I didn't care that much about having him around in the first place. His death was exactly what it appeared to be - an Indicateur spy killed in an outlaws' port by outlaws. Nothing more." He met her stare, and she sighed with relief. He was telling the truth.

"So why the Spicer Islands? For that matter, what are the Spicer Islands?" she asked, changing the subject.

"It's an archipelago far to the southeast of Calabria, named because many of the spices we charge so much for back home are grown there. There's no real central authority on the Spicers; just a collection of petty tyrants, most of whom used to be pirates. Officially, though, several of the ports are controlled by the Bisclavret. We're probably headed for one of those. Did Treeden give a name?"

"Port Bernantouse, I think he said."

"That makes sense. It's a Bisclavret port, a place where illegally acquired cargoes change hands three or four times before heading back to Calabria. If you thought Port Olonoise was bad, you'll definitely want to stay on the ship when we get there. It's a nasty place even by my standards." Finally finished his drink, he started to stand up, then fell back in his chair with an oath. "Can you do something about this?" he asked.

"I can, and I will, if you promise to go back to bed afterwards," she answered. He promised, and she performed a curing spell. "Fulfill your part of the bargain, please, Captain," she suggested. "By tomorrow you should be ready to resume your duties, but I take no credit or blame for the results if you do not get some rest now." He stood with less help than before, headed to the bed, collapsed on it, and was asleep before she reached the door.

She smiled a bit. That herb worked every time. He'd sleep until morning now.

To Cheat a Cheater

Rianna crouched behind a pile of rope, watching the door to the cabin. He had to come out soon! She'd been here nearly a full mark now, since the Captain had sent her on this job. He'd told her to wait until the big wolf left the cabin, which he would do soon because the Captain had sent him a message. She'd watched the cabin boy enter the room, but he hadn't left yet. What was taking so long?

Finally the door opened and Treeden came out, trailed by the little chipmunk who'd been sent to get him. He looked around, and Rianna shrank back into the shelter offered by the coil of rope. Then the Baron turned, locked the door to his cabin with a key, and strode off towards the Captain's stateroom.

She waited a heartbeat until he was really gone, then darted out and started fiddling with the lock. There were no sailors in view just now, but that could change at any moment. She had the door open within moments and darted in, pulling it closed behind her. It was impossible to tell from the outside if this door was locked or not, which was a good thing for her. She could take the full mark the Captain had promised her.

She looked around the cabin. It was richly appointed, containing a soft bed, two leather-upholstered armchairs, a finely-made table carefully sanded to have not a single splinter on its surface, and a trunk. She looked again at the trunk.

It was old, mildewed, and clearly out of place in that room. The Captain had told her she would find a chest like this one, and had told her to search there first. "I'm looking for information," he'd said. "If you find something that might contain information, a book, for example, I need to see it." She considered for a moment, then noticed the lock on the chest. It was a padlock, and it was shiny and new. That settled it. A new padlock on an old chest? Something important to the wolf was hidden inside.

She set to work on the lock. It took a long time; the lock had been very well-made, and she didn't want to damage it. It was bad business to leave behind evidence of how you'd done your work. Besides, the Captain had intimated that he might want her to put the book back after he was done with it. She couldn't do that unless the wolf never realized it was gone.

Finally she heard the tiny little click that indicated success. She tugged on the lock, and was rewarded as it swung open. Carefully she laid it aside and opened the chest.

At first glance, it appeared to be empty of all but some clothing and a couple of weapons. Rianna frowned. This didn't make sense. Why spend good money to keep things safe that could be easily replaced? She pushed the clothing aside,

and realized what she had missed. The bottom of the chest was made of much smoother, newer wood than the rest. It was also sitting a good six inches off the floor. It was clearly false. She lifted just a corner of the chest to test its weight. Well, that settled it. It was far too heavy for a clothes-press. Whatever was hidden here was quite heavy, and it was located on the right side of the box. She moved the clothes and weapons aside, carefully, noting how they were folded. Feeling along the edge of the wood, she found a tiny hole, just the right size for a claw. A few inches further, she found another, then another. Stretching her small hands to the limit, she could just barely get her claws into the holes. She lifted the false bottom and peered underneath.

There was a book there, all right. It was old, as old as the chest, and it had little strips of cloth sticking out of it at intervals. Why would someone do that? Not bothering to worry about what wasn't her business, she started to lift the bottom right out so she could get to the book.

At that moment, she heard a key in the lock.

Quickly, she dropped the false bottom and started replacing the displaced clothing. As the door opened, she dived under the bunk.

She wasn't fast enough. The wolf closed the door behind him and locked it with his key, locking them both in. Then he moved to the bed, got both hands under the mattress, and lifted. He was unsurprised to see a small, furry form cowering as far from him as it could get, peering up at him through the slats in the bed frame.

"Come out of there now, you," said the wolf.

Rianna gibbered in terror. Treeden sighed. "You can come out on your own, or I can dig you out with these," he told her, showing his unsheathed claws. Eyes wide, she scrambled out and scampered for the door, trying unsuccessfully to open it. "I locked it," Treeden told her. "You're not going anywhere yet." He came up behind her, grabbed her by the arm, and half-threw her onto the bed. "Perhaps you're here for a little romp, are you?" he asked with a leer.

At just that moment, there was a knock on the door. He cursed, released the little weasel, and went to answer it.

Annarisse stood there, fingering her holy symbol with some nervousness. Treeden did not invite her in, but stood there in the half-closed door, waiting for her to state her business. Nonplussed, she stammered, "Salvatore realized after you'd left that he'd forgotten to show you the course calculations. He sent me to. . . that is, I offered to come get you so you could see them, my lord." She broke off, clearly unsure of herself.

Treeden snorted. "I have no need to see any course calculations, Sister," he told her. "I have no need to talk to Salvatore at all right now. But he needs me to leave my cabin, doesn't he? Is he hoping I won't realize he's had a spy going through my things?" He reached behind without looking and grabbed the weasel, who had been trying to figure out how to get around him and out the door. She cried out as his claws raked her arm, and began to contort herself in a desperate effort to escape. He held on, seemingly without effort. Annarisse stepped into the doorway and touched the little weasel on the shoulder. She

ceased her movements, calmed, but still ready to bolt. Annarisse looked at Treeden.

"If you have a problem with the actions of one of the crew, take it to Salvatore," she told him. "You don't get to deal with it in private."

"Salvatore sent her here. But then, you know that. You're trying to double-cross me yourself, aren't you, Sister?" He grabbed the weasel's other arm and pinned her wrists behind her. "I should simply kill her here. I can dispense low justice, and she was caught red-handed. She's guilty as sin. My sentence is death." He moved to put his claws at her neck.

Annarisse grabbed his arm. "You cannot dispense justice in any matter in which you are personally involved, Baron," she reminded him, thinking fast. "I can, however, because I am not the wronged party here. Nor did I send her to spy on you as you think. But if, as you suggest, it was the Captain who sent her, what good does it do to take her life? Take up the issue with the Captain. I will accompany you to the hold to put her in chains. She will not escape. After all, she really has no where to go. We're a week from any port. You and I will confront the Captain about this. If she is guilty, and if she acted under her own volition, I will be the judge, not you. I, too, can dispense low justice, remember." She looked him in the eye, reminding him of her nobility and rank in the Church. As she held his gaze, the anger started to fade from his eyes, and he went back to holding the weasel by the arm.

"Very well, then, Sister. If you will accompany me to the slave holds." Annarisse realized uneasily that, though the heat of anger had passed, the cold mistrust had grown. Salvatore had made a serious miscalculation, and it remained to be seen what effect it would have on the ship.

Salvatore looked up from his course plotting as the door to his stateroom banged open. His blistering curse died on his tongue as he realized who was there and what it meant. Rianna had been caught, and this was going to take some finesse.

Treeden stalked into the room with Annarisse right behind him. She was shooting warning looks at the Captain from over Treeden's shoulder. Salvatore had never seen her so agitated - not even right after she found out about the orphanage slave ring. Schooling his features into polite interest, he came around his desk and indicated armchairs for each of them. Annarisse sat, but Treeden remained standing. Salvatore considered for a moment, then sat, relaxing into the upholstery with a sigh. "Have a seat, my lord," he suggested. "Can I have Theo get you a drink?" He indicated the chipmunk in the corner, who was busy cleaning the bottles on the wine rack.

Treeden stood behind the indicated chair and dug his claws into the upholstery, tearing it slightly. "I want to know why you sent that weasel to search my rooms," he said with a snarl.

Salvatore turned to the cabin boy and gestured for him to leave the room. As the door closed, he steepled his fingers and looked thoughtful. "Why would you ask such a thing? Did you catch her amongst your things?"

Treeden's fist came down on the chair with the full weight of his anger behind it. The wood splintered. "She was in my clothes press," he answered. "She would never have gone in there on her own. She's a petty wharf rat. So the question is, Salvatore, what did you send her to get?"

Annarisse intervened. "You have no proof yet that she wasn't there on her own, or if someone sent her, who it could have been," she pointed out. Treeden snarled at her, but she stood her ground. "So far, you've terrorized that poor girl right out of her senses, and now you're accusing your partner of using her to spy on you. I have no doubt you've been wronged, Baron," she added in a more conciliatory tone, "but stop and think before you accuse people!"

Treeden did that, then smiled maliciously. "Sister, you are permitted to dispense low justice yourself, right? Would Salvatore here fall under that?"

She saw where this would lead, but felt she was powerless to stop it. They both knew the rules that governed such trials. "You know he would, Baron. Unless he claims justice of someone else, fearing he would not get it from me."

"He has no reason to do that unless he's guilty." Treeden turned to Salvatore. "Will you consent to Sister Annarisse' arbitration in this matter?"

He'd been neatly trapped, Salvatore realized. There was no help for it. "I will," he answered gravely.

"Then, Sister, if you would say a prayer of penance for your supplicant, here, to enjoin him not to lie to you, we can begin." Treeden was clearly enjoying this now.

Annarisse thought fast. It was unlikely Treeden was familiar enough with this prayer to realize if she changed it. It was said in archaic language; many of the words, while related in meaning to a modern word, did not mean exactly what a non-scholar would expect them to mean. Salvatore, however, had heard it several times in recent weeks. A bit of subterfuge was in order. She said the prayer, but when assigning the penance, switched the words just slightly. She saw his eyes widen in understanding; saw his small nod of acknowledgement as its weight settled on him. Treeden didn't see either; he was still looking at Sister Annarisse. She stepped back as the prayer was completed.

"Ask what you need to know, Baron. I will tell you if the prayer wavers," she promised, all previous signs of nervousness gone.

Treeden came around and sat in the damaged chair, facing Salvatore. "Captain, did you order the weasel thief to search my cabin?" he asked.

"No," said Salvatore shortly. Treeden looked inquiringly at Annarisse; she shook her head.

"Were you aware that she was planning to search my rooms, or that she was there while I was with you one mark ago?"

"No," said the Captain again. Treeden blinked. Annarisse shook her head again. The spell had not flickered.

"What the hell is going on here?" Treeden exploded.

“It would appear, my lord, that you jumped to some erroneous conclusions,” she told him acerbically. “I see no reason to continue this farce of a trial. Captain Salvatore clearly had nothing to do with the weasel being where you found her.” She released the spell, and Salvatore breathed easier as he felt the weight lifting.

“So what happens to her, then?” Treeden asked.

“I will take her under my charge. She will room with me, and I will put her under a prayer of penance to keep her from entering your chambers or taking anything which does not belong to her. Will that suffice?”

Treeden gave in with a snarl. Then he rose, overbalancing the chair and sending it crashing to the floor in two pieces. The entire ship shook at the force of the slammed door as he left.

Annarisse and Salvatore looked at each other as they heard his footsteps retreating. “That was close,” remarked the fox. “How exactly did you change the spell? I knew it was different, but I wasn’t sure how.”

“I made it so the spell would be broken if you cursed,” she replied smugly. “It was a good thing you kept your remarks short, or you might have set it off by accident, and Treeden knows what that looks like, I think.” She flopped gracelessly into her seat and glanced at the broken chair. “I’ve never seen him that angry before. It was lucky for Rianna I got there when I did. I thought she would melt into a little puddle of relief when she saw me.”

Salvatore shrugged. “Well, I guess I can’t use her in that way again. Can you bring her here? I’d like to know if she found anything interesting before Treeden showed up.”

Annarisse nodded. “I’ll do that, but not right away. She’ll need to calm down first, and I’ll need to tell her how things stand. I don’t think she’ll say anything to Treeden, but she’d better be primed just in case.” She stood and headed for the door. “Oh, and Captain?” she said over her shoulder as she reached it. “Whatever you paid her for that little enterprise – she deserves a raise for spending the afternoon in chains.” She grabbed the keys from their hook by the door as she headed out. Salvatore chuckled and poured himself a drink.

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Rianna was sitting on a bench in a tiny cabin in the slave hold, swishing her tail back and forth in the mouldy straw. Treeden had used the best-quality chains in the hold, and had fastened them so the weasel could barely move her arms. She looked up at the turn of the key in the lock. The wolf again, perhaps? He was scary.

It was not the wolf. The priestess was a slight improvement; at least she had no claws with which to tear out someone’s throat. Rianna slumped back against the wall as she remembered that it had been the horsewoman’s idea to chain her in the hold.

Annarisse closed the door behind her and approached the weasel carefully. “I’m going to release you from the chains,” she said, “but you have to promise you won’t run away from me. We have to talk first.”

Rianna looked at her sullenly. “None of this is my fault! I was just doing what that meanie captain told me to do!”

The priestess sighed. “I know, but that’s what we have to talk about. Will you stay after I unlock the chains?” She waited for Rianna’s nod, then went to work. The chains were off within moments, and Rianna started to massage her wrists as the increased circulation made them hurt. “Now, here’s the thing. Baron Treeden does not know that the Captain ordered to you get something from his cabin. It would be very, very bad for everyone, especially you, if the wolf lord ever found that out. So you have to remember: you can’t tell him that. Do you understand?”

Rianna looked at her incredulously. “You’re telling me to lie to him? He’ll tear my throat out if he ever finds out!”

Annarisse smiled wryly. “He’d have to race Captain Salvatore for the privilege,” she said. Rianna sorted that out in her head; as it became clear to her, she gulped. This was really bad. “All you have to do to keep your head where it’s supposed to be is avoid Baron Treeden. If he asks you questions, you refuse to answer. Has he ever heard you talk?” The weasel shook her head. “I thought not. He won’t be surprised if you don’t answer him, then. No matter what happens, don’t tell him anything about why you were in that cabin. I will protect you from both of them as best I can, but I can’t do that if you tell Treeden what you know. Do you understand?”

Rianna considered. “So I don’t tell the wolf that the fox is trying to steal from him, and in return, you keep me safe from the wolf and the fox? Well, I can do that.” She stood up to leave, but Annarisse caught her arm.

“One other thing,” she said firmly. “In order to keep you from being hung from the yardarm or disembowelled by an angry wolf, I had to promise that I would take you under my wing, as it were, and ensure that you didn’t steal again. That means you’re going to bunk in my cabin from now on, you’re going to learn to read, and you’re going to stay as far out of the way of the wolf lord as you can. I’m going to put you under a prayer of penance. If you even try to steal something, I’ll know about it, so don’t try. Got that?” Annarisse didn’t wait for an answer. “Fine. Let’s go. I’ll show you where your pallet is in my cabin. Oh, and Captain Salvatore wants to speak to you later this evening, when Lord Treeden is safely out of the way.” She released the weasel’s arm and led the way out of the cell. Sighing, Rianna followed.

Statue of Dreams

Salvatore studied the statue intently. It glowed as green as ever, lit with a strange inner fire that was disquieting in its very attractiveness. He'd been having strange dreams of these creatures, leaping and turning in the water, going down through green darkness. The disturbing element was that he was quite sure the dreams and the statue were connected. The dreams seemed to be pulling him southwards, past the Spicer Islands. It was an unsettling impression.

The knock on the door startled him, though he had been expecting it. It was time for another reading lesson, and Sister Annarisse was nothing if not prompt. He went to open it, the statue still in his hands. He had to trust her sometime; it might as well be now.

Annarisse looked at the statue with interest. She had not laid eyes on it since the night in Gustafus' treasure cavern. "Captain, I was under the impression we were to have a reading lesson," she said, a query evident in her voice.

"Perhaps we will, but I have a question for you first; something that has been troubling me," he replied. "Sister, have you ever heard of an object that could project images into people's dreams?"

She looked up in surprise. "I've never heard of such a thing, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist," she answered. "Have you asked Kharaba? He might know better than I would."

"I haven't asked him, no. I don't trust him, really; he's even more self-serving than the Baron, and he's Treeden's man at the moment. Anything I tell him will get back to the Baron, and I don't want that yet."

Annarisse nodded. "I can see that reasoning, Captain," she answered. "Have you been having vivid dreams lately?"

"Yes. Underwater, jumping in and out of the water, playing with people from my past, and a pull southwards." He looked at her to realize she was nodding. "Have you been having them too?"

"Once or twice, since we brought the statue on board. They aren't very vivid, though. Maybe because the object is stored in your cabin, you feel it more than I do, ensconced down the hall as I am?" She smiled wickedly. "And with Treeden in the aft cabin, it's doubtful he dreams much at all, if proximity is the deciding factor." She moved over to the sea chart on the wall. "Can you pinpoint where, exactly, the pull is leading you?"

He thought about it a moment, then indicated a spot with one sheathed claw. "About here, I think. But there's nothing really there, and I don't know why the dreams would be pulling me towards empty ocean." He studied the

chart again, then indicated another island south of the Spicers. "I think we should try here. It's almost off the charts, far enough that we'll have to take on extra provisions in the Spicers to make it. But it's the closest land to the place that pull is coming from." He shook his head, then looked up as the ship's clock chimed the mark. "Shall we begin our reading lesson, Your Excellency?" She agreed, and they got out their materials, after Salvatore had stowed the statue safely in his press again.

It was maybe ten minutes later that a knock came at the door. Opening it, Salvatore discovered Treeden and Kharaba there, the latter shifting with some nervousness from one foot to the other. Wondering what this was about, Salvatore decided to play genial host. "Please, gentlemen, come in, sit down," he said, gesturing to the chairs placed around the table. Treeden glanced at the spot where the broken chair had been, then took the seat that Salvatore had been using. The Captain said nothing, simply taking the second most-comfortable chair. Kharaba perched on a hard wooden chair, since there were no more upholstered ones.

"Kharaba and I were discussing the treasure we found under Gustafus' tower," Treeden remarked as Salvatore handed him a snifter.

"Indeed. An interesting topic, though somewhat passé, given that the treasure has been sold profitably," Salvatore remarked.

"Well, it occurred to me that one piece had not been sold." Treeden waited a heartbeat, but Salvatore did not appear inclined to rise to the bait, so he added, "The statue. The one that glowed. It was not amongst the treasure that was sold. Do you still have it?"

Salvatore nodded. "Of course. We had not agreed on how to dispose of it profitably, so I kept it. Surely we're not going to sell it in the Spicers, though?"

"No, of course not. But when I described the piece to Kharaba, here, he wondered if he might be able to glean something of the location of the rest of the treasure, by examining the artefact." Treeden sipped his brandy. Salvatore certainly laid down good stock, he thought.

"Rest of the treasure? How do you know there's more of it?"

Damn, Treeden thought. He was less drunk than they'd anticipated. "The original papers I had hinted at two treasures," he prevaricated.

"Hmm. You mean the ones you left in the ship's safe after Port Spar? I've been looking at those." Treeden looked surprised at that, and Salvatore dug the barb in a bit deeper. "Sister Annarisse has helped me with them, since she is more versed in old texts than I. We saw nothing like that in them." Annarisse nodded, though no one was looking at her.

Damn the man! Treeden would have been prepared to swear that Salvatore didn't know how to read; in fact, he'd been told as much by Mr. Mietvani not long before. He should have known the fox would find a way to learn what he needed to know. "I kept a few pages back," he lied smoothly. "Hadn't quite finished with them yet. The point is, Kharaba would like the opportunity to examine the statue. He thinks a few of his spells might force it to give up some secrets."

Kharaba nodded. "There is one spell in particular that will reveal the location where an item was forged," he told Salvatore pretentiously. "Another can sometimes reveal other items made by the same craftsman, or bearing certain similar qualities. These are difficult spells, of course, but I believe myself to be up to the challenge."

Pompous ass, thought Salvatore. "I'm delighted to hear it," he said. "Let me retrieve it for you." He went to his clothes press, fiddled with the lock for a moment, and returned with the statue. It glowed as blue as ever, and the fox experienced his usual reticence to put the object down or give it to another, even momentarily. He handed the statue over to the mage, who examined it closely for a few moments. Impatient, Salvatore asked, "Well? What can you tell about it?"

"Nothing, until I cast those spells I mentioned," the tiger reproved. Salvatore bit back an angry retort. It would be very interesting to find out what these two wanted him to know. He was fairly sure this was a bluff of some sort, but the best way to find out what kind was to let the thaumaturgist do his work.

Kharaba pushed up his sleeve and began his incantation. While his concentration was at its highest point, Annarisse mumbled another spell very quietly; a detect-magic spell. She held it back and released it just after he released his. Well, he was performing a spell of some sort, certainly; whether it was doing what he said it was would be anybody's guess.

"This object was created south of here," he told them in a pedantic tone similar to the one Annarisse used on students. "South of the Spicer Islands, in fact. Captain, have you a map close to hand?" Salvatore directed his attention to the chart on the wall, and Kharaba studied it for a moment before indicating a location. "Here, I think. Seal Island, is it called? Yes, that is the location the spell revealed." He sat back, pleased with himself. Salvatore and Annarisse looked at each other. He had pointed out the exact island they had been discussing not half a mark before.

Salvatore decided the gig was up, and he was tired of the games. "That is very interesting," he said, all signs of geniality now gone. "In fact, that is precisely where I was already aiming, having already deduced for myself where we should go. I'm rather confused, though. Neither of you," he indicated the wolf and the tiger, "have access to the information which led me to that decision. Now, that spell may have given you this information, but I find that unlikely. No, I think you had this information before you came in here, and were looking for a way to reveal it without arousing my suspicions." Salvatore stopped just short of mentioning the log book Rianna had found in Treeden's chest; he wasn't supposed to know about that. "So, where is your information coming from? And why," here he turned to Treeden, "have you been holding out on me with it?"

"And who's holding out on whom, if you had other information, then?" Treeden propelled himself out of his chair to menace the fox, who jumped to his feet, as well. Suddenly a dagger appeared in the wolf's hand as if conjured there.

Instantly Salvatore had his main gauche out, and a pistol in his other hand. Chairs were knocked over as the two began to circle.

Kharaba began to mutter a spell just as Annarisse made her way around the two combatants to get to him. Recognizing it, she spat out, "You fool! Don't protect him, stop the fight!" Then she made a grab for Treeden's knife arm. He shook her off without even looking, sending her flying back to land in a heap by the door.

Kharaba realized she was right; the fox had a gun in hand and three more holstered, and could probably kill the Baron easily. All that was saving the wolf at this point was Salvatore's defensive stance; he didn't really want to fight. The mage decided to take advantage of that. Knowing none of his spells would help in this instance, he did the next best thing. He tackled Treeden from behind.

The two went sprawling, and the knife flew from Treeden's fingers as his head bounced off a chair with a sickening crack. Annarisse grabbed the blade, throwing it into the Captain's press and shutting the lid. A moment later, Salvatore had his pistol aimed at Treeden's head, and Kharaba was carefully disentangling himself from his employer.

"Give me one good reason not to kill you," Salvatore invited in a soft, dangerous voice. The maniacal gleam was in his eyes, and Annarisse was suddenly very scared. Treeden just looked at him, still dazed.

"Because you would not kill in cold blood, Captain," Annarisse told him. She came up beside him and grasped the wrist that held the pistol. He didn't move except to tighten his grip on the trigger. "Salvatore, look at me," she commanded.

Slowly, he raised his eyes to meet hers. What he saw there had him relaxing his grip on the pistol, and she gently pried it out of his hand. He turned away, watching out the porthole while she went to Treeden.

Her questing fingers found a cracked skull, and probably a concussion, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. She turned him over so he was lying on his back, then began her healing spell. Kharaba didn't interfere; he was still panting from the exertion of stopping the fight. Within moments, Treeden was sitting up and rubbing at his head. He looked with loathing at Salvatore.

"Baron Treeden, you need to return to your cabin and rest that head of yours," Annarisse told him severely. "Before you go, though, I want your word that you will not attempt to harm the Captain in any way." Quickly, before he could gainsay her, she said a prayer of penance for him. It settled on him like a dead weight. He growled. "If you plan or attempt to fight or injure Salvatore in any way, I will know," she told him.

Treeden got up, gestured to Kharaba, and walked out. Salvatore deflated suddenly as though the iron rod had been ripped out of his spine. He slumped into a chair and reached for a bottle from the wine rack. Annarisse slapped his hand away.

"Captain, you are not supposed to be drinking," she admonished.

He reached around her hand, grabbed the bottle anyway, and took a long pull from it without bothering to get a glass. She took the bottle from him as his arm went lax.

“Well, at least we know now what was in that book Rianna found,” she remarked.

“We also know that I’ll have to watch my back for the rest of the voyage,” he answered heavily. “Treedon won’t take this affront to his honour.”

“He needs you, and he knows it. Once he cools down, you’ll be safe from him. Besides, Treeden doesn’t like getting his hands dirty with things like this. By tomorrow he’ll see it as a big joke that you were each hiding things from the other, all the while getting the same information.” She picked up the materials for the reading lesson which had been abandoned mid-prayer. “Shall we continue where we left off, Captain?”

“Not today, I think, Sister. Tomorrow afternoon, perhaps.” He stood and ushered her towards the door. The last she saw of him, he was closing the door with one hand and reaching for a bottle with the other.

Pirating

Salvatore rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He'd been waiting ten days since Port Olonoise for an opportunity like this one. There on the horizon was a small, defenceless, apparently damaged ship, limping along with half a mast. The Riddock's Dawn was not fast enough to overtake most merchant vessels, so Salvatore had not yet tried. This one, however, constituted an offering of fate that he would not pass up.

He started shouting orders to the men in the riggings, who scrambled to obey as they, too, recognized a target. Quickly the flute turned to intercept the other ship, as the Bisclavret flag went up. There was no sense in warning their quarry of their true intentions before it was necessary.

Treedden came up on deck while they were still out of range of the other ship. He peered into the dawn light that illuminated the junk from behind, showing up its splintered mast. "Damaged, is she?" he observed.

"Indeed she is, my lord, and she'll be more than that before long. A short chase and a good catch, that's how I like them." The Captain twirled his whiskers for a moment before striding to the chest where the ship's guns were kept. Quickly and efficiently he armed his men with pistols and provided them with shot. Warning them not to show the weapons prematurely, he checked that his own pistols were loaded and ready.

It was less than a mark later when the Riddock's Dawn pulled up to the other ship. She was strangely built, sitting low in the water with a simple fore-and-aft rigging that, while easy to crew, left her very vulnerable to damage of the type she had sustained. Her mast had been shorn off about halfway up, probably by lightning, and many of her sails were in tatters from the same storm. She was flying a white flag, clearly too damaged to even attempt to run. Her sailors, mostly strange-looking cats, were armed and ready, but clearly not expecting hostile action. Perfect.

The other ship's Captain approached the rail as the Riddock's Dawn came within grappling distance. He started to speak in a strange, guttural foreign tongue. "Do you speak Calabrese?" Salvatore called out to him. He shook his head. Salvatore spoke quietly to the men closest to him. "Be ready on my signal," he said.

Kharaba approached the Captain from behind. "Captain, I can speak to them," he offered. "I learned their language as a child, and I have some small spells which could be of use to ensure they are not lying."

Salvatore looked at him assessingly. He wasn't sure he trusted the tiger, but the fact was, the fate of this vessel was already sealed. No amount of parley

would save them or their cargo, so he might as well let the mage talk. He nodded. Kharaba looked at two of the sailors who were waiting by the railing, and they moved out of his way. "What shall I say?" he asked Salvatore.

"Ask them where they were headed and what help they need." Kharaba spoke to the other captain in the same guttural language. The other captain answered eagerly.

"They were headed for the Spicer Islands when they were caught in a sudden blow-up four days ago," Kharaba related. Salvatore smiled. The Spicers were primarily Calabrese, and it was unlikely anyone there was expecting this ship. Kharaba asked something else. "They would appreciate a new mast, if we could tow them to the nearest island."

Salvatore nodded. "Ask them what we will get in return for our help," he instructed.

Kharaba repeated the question, listened to the answer, and had to carefully control his expression as he answered, "He suggests a gem of great value - a sapphire of considerable size. Such gems are not uncommon in his land, but they are worth a great deal in Calabria. Where there is one such on a ship, there are usually more."

"Tell him that will be acceptable. We will board immediately to arrange the - um - tow." He gave the tiger a feral grin, and gave the orders to throw the grappling hooks even as the mage was repeating his words.

"Captain, perhaps a spell of protection on you? Just in case?" Kharaba offered.

Salvatore shrugged. "If you want. I doubt it will be necessary." As the two ships were linked with ladders, Salvatore gave the long-awaited order. "Board her, weapons sheathed until I whistle." The sailors obeyed. In moments, half the pirates were on board the junk and spreading out, slowly and unobtrusively surrounding the more vulnerable of her crew. Some of them looked nervously to their Captain for direction, but he was approaching Salvatore with hands open in welcome.

Salvatore smiled at the other captain, offering his right hand to shake. As the Zhongguoese sailors uttered a sigh of relief, the red fox reached over with his left hand and drew a pistol. As the pistol came up to point at the head of the tiger in front of him, he whistled.

Within moments, it was all over. Two of the cats lay dead on the deck, the captain of the ship had two pistols aimed at him, and all other sailors were being rounded up, tied, and transferred to the Riddock's Dawn by Salvatore's efficient crew. One little sailor, whom Kharaba called a monkey, continued to shoot at them for a few minutes from the rigging, wounding one sailor before a shot from one of Salvatore's pistols had him tangled dead in the ropes. As the last of the captives were transferred across the ladders, Salvatore motioned the other captain to cross ahead of him. He had reached his own deck and was overseeing the manacling of his prisoner when Annarisse appeared on deck.

She took in the scene at a glance. Praying she was wrong, she approached Salvatore. "Captain, what is going on here?" she asked, her haughty nobility at full force in her bearing.

"We are engaging in our chosen profession, Sister," answered Salvatore.

Treedon came up behind him and added, "There's always a profit to be made from ships such as this one. The sailors alone are worth a good sum in the mines."

Annarisse turned furiously towards him. "Baron, when I agreed not to use my connections to damage your business in Calabria, I was expecting that the slaving aspect of pirating would not happen on this voyage. You are in violation of our agreement!"

Treedon looked smugly down his nose at her. "We had no agreement about the uses to which I put my ship, Sister," he replied. "I agreed to no more children from your precious orphanage, but injured foreign ships are still fair game." He turned to the sailors who were watching the argument with interest. "Get those slaves down into the hold! Make sure the locks catch on the chains!" Salvatore gave his slight nod of agreement to the order, which Treeden did not see, and his men began to obey. Annarisse stood there fuming while Kharaba spoke quietly with the captain of the junk. The captain shook his head defiantly and growled at the mage, who slapped him and growled back.

Salvatore turned back to the exchange, asking, "What is he saying?"

"He's refusing to tell where his goods are hidden on the ship," said Kharaba.

Salvatore shrugged. "Then we'll search. Unless you have a spell that will force him to tell what he knows?" Kharaba shook his head, then shot another question at the manacled cat. It was met with another snarl of rage and defiance. Kharaba slapped the prisoner again, then walked away toward the ladders for the other ship, where sailors who had deposited their prisoners in the hold were awaiting the order to board and search.

Salvatore gave the chains into the keeping of a burly sailor, ordering him to separate this prisoner from the others in the hold, then went to talk to his men. "Search the holds and staterooms, but leave the captain's cabin and any guest cabins to me," he ordered. "We'll pool the results and divide up the shares as per our contracts. Leave no board unturned!" At that he and Treeden led the charge across the ladders, to cheers from his men.

Annarisse watched them go. Then, realizing that there was blood staining the decks of both ships, she headed downstairs to perform healings on those who had been injured.

Treedon was reading the log book again when a knock at the door startled him. *Drat that woman!* This time, she was going to leave him the hell alone! He stowed the log book in the chest, carefully, closed the lid, and locked the padlock. Then he moved slowly to the door. As he'd expected, Annarisse was there, her hands on her hips and fire in her eyes. He groaned inwardly. The

day had been going so well. "What do you want?" he asked in his most insolent voice.

"Your soul for the Light, Baron." She pushed the door open and entered unbidden. "Barring that, though, I want you to give up on this vile business and find something more worthwhile to do with your many talents."

Leaving the door open, he flopped gracelessly into an armchair, grabbed a bottle of wine from the rack and a glass from the shelf, and poured himself a liberal drink. "What business would that be?"

"Slaving! It has to stop!" The cabin was exactly four paces wide for her. Treeden thought she might wear a hole in the floorboards if she kept walking it. She looked at him. "We had a deal, Baron, and you've broken it. That means my next move will be to tell my father everything I know about the MacDuncan business interests. He'll put a stop to it. In fact, he has enough contacts in the church to do something about Renisi, too." She stopped pacing and leaned in close enough to smell the wine in the cup. "You can risk the destruction of your business interests in Calabria, or you can assure me that this will be your last sale of sentient cargo. I will put a penance on you to ensure that I know if you break your word. Are we agreed?"

Treeden smirked. "We are not. You see, you're on my ship now. We're two weeks from the nearest port where you might be able to get a message to your father. Sea voyages are dangerous things, Sister. If you're going to force my hand, I'll see to it you never get the chance to contact your father." He took a long drink and wiped his mouth on his left arm. "If we're going to play this game, Sister, you need to remember that I hold more cards than you do. Your trump has already been played. Mine has not. I have the advantage."

"You would threaten me?" she said, incredulous and aghast.

"I just did. Now listen. This is how it will be." His glass slammed down onto the table as he propelled himself to his feet to menace her. "I will continue my business, and you will not interfere. You are not my confessor. You are not my keeper. If you try to act as either, I will take action and you will not like the results. Now, are we agreed?"

She stood her ground. "For now, Baron. But this is not over." With a swirl of robes, she left, slamming the door behind her. Treeden settled himself in his chair again and pondered what he would do if he ever had to make good on his threats.

Salvatore looked up at the knock on the door. It wasn't hard to guess who it was, but he didn't want to talk to her. He finished his brandy, put the bottle back in the rack, and slowly rose from his chair just as the knock came again.

Annarisse pushed past him rudely when he opened the door. Surprised, he fell back a step before closing the door behind her. She must be extremely upset to be actively rude to him. This was going to be an uncomfortable conversation.

"Captain, I've come to the conclusion that I have been remiss in my duty as your spiritual advisor," she began in a forbidding tone.

“I wasn’t aware that you saw yourself as my spiritual advisor, Your Excellency,” he replied carefully.

She raised her eyebrows and looked down her noble nose at him. “You confessed to me and accepted a penance from me. Accepting your confession and assigning your penance gave me an obligation to aid you in fulfilling the tasks I set you. I am your spiritual advisor until you have completed your penance. And as I said, I have been remiss in that duty.”

“How so?”

“I have not given you the guidance you need to make headway in attaining your goals. The evidence of that is in your actions. You are still drinking. You are still lying, cheating, and stealing for profit. You are still a pirate. This latest act has proven to me that you need more attention from me to change. I’ve been praying about this all afternoon. I’ve decided what has to happen.”

“I’m not going to enjoy this, am I?” asked Salvatore.

“Do you enjoy being a slave to your brandy? Do you enjoy the melancholy you feel when you are drunk?”

Salvatore thought about it. “Enjoy is not the right word, exactly. I need them.”

“Well, you’re going to stop needing them. It’s time to start fulfilling your penance.” Grasping the holy symbol around her neck, she said a prayer. He felt the weight of it land on his shoulders, and recognized it.

“Did you just put a prayer of penance on me, Sister?” he asked angrily.

“I did indeed, Captain. The next time you drink, I will be here instantly because I will know that you have broken your penance. I will stay with you until the urge to imbibe has passed. I will do whatever it takes to keep you from drinking, if I have to use every prayer at my disposal to do so.” He had seen that hard glint in her eye before. She had the spine of a noblewoman, certainly, combined with a will wide enough to move mountains by thought alone. He had no doubt she would do as she said.

“And what if I decide to drink anyway?” The defiance was palpable in his voice.

“I will throw your brandy overboard before I will let you get drunk again,” she promised. “How long will it be before we see port again?”

“About three days, I think.” He did some mental calculations as he looked at his map. “Maybe four, depending on what’s behind that west wind that blew up about an hour ago.”

“That should be long enough. If you don’t drink at all in that time, the habit will be broken.”

“You expect me to take not a single drink in four days?” Salvatore was almost too surprised to be upset. He had never imagined that a simple act of piracy would land him in this much hot water with the priestess.

“I do. What’s more, you will do as I say if I have to tie you to your bunk and let Treeden run the ship.” She fingered her holy symbol again, pensively. “What will happen to those captives?”

“Baron Treeden intends to sell them when we make port. They won’t fetch much in a Calabrese market, but they’ll be worth something.”

“Could we convince him to let them go?”

Salvatore snorted. “Not likely. Take profit out of his very hands like that? He’d sooner marry a goat than lose that much money. You might as well simply admit that those men are bound for slavery.” His voice gentled a bit at her obvious distress. “You can’t save the whole world, you know.”

She sighed and bowed her head for a moment. When she raised it, the fire was back in her eyes. “But I can, and will save you, Captain,” she told him.

She left him standing there, empty snifter in hand, thinking that the last person who had tried to save him had been his wife. For the first time since that night, the thought did not take him to the bottle.

They were good dreams, tonight. Happy dreams. Those were always the easiest to manipulate.

The dolphins of her statues played in the water, glinting magically in the sunlight. South they swam, the setting sun on their right, laughing and playing the whole way. A fox lady swam with them. She beckoned to the dreamer, smiling invitingly.

She laughed as she felt his sleeping body react to the promise in the eyes of his dead wife. This one would be fun to play with!

Gently she withdrew from the dream. He would take it where he wanted without her help, for now.

He was getting closer, ever closer. The wait was nearly over. Surely this one would make it to her. Surely her magic and his strength would be sufficient at last.

She considered the dream, and his reaction to it, and let herself respond. Oh, it had been so long.

Soon he would be here. Soon he would be hers.

At the Slave Auction

The captain looked haggard and a bit more disreputable than usual since the altercation at Port Olonoise. He had been trying to cut back on his drinking since their confrontation three days before, though so far without much success. Twice this week he had reached the stage she thought of as his conscience, where he assumed guilt for all that had befallen his family and the first ship. Twice she had talked him through it and put him to bed to sleep it off. She was beginning to wonder if the penance was ever going to work. He didn't seem able to control his drinking. All her penance prayers were doing nothing more than warning her of when he had begun to drink.

It was a clear, warm tropical morning when she approached him on the deck. He had his telescope trained on a small island just to the south, just a blur on the horizon so far but growing in her sight as the ship headed for it. He grunted in satisfaction at whatever he saw there, then turned to her with a question in his eyes. She answered it with a query of her own.

"So those are the Spicer islands?" she asked.

"They are, Your Excellency. My information in Port Olonoise told me the *Corrado* was headed there. We will track her down." His voice had more determination in it than she'd ever heard there before.

Annarisse didn't bother to suggest that revenge on Ferrante was not the best reason to sail halfway around the world. Ferrante needed to pay for Roxbarren, and the Riddock's Dawn had been equipped with that retribution in mind.

"So where in the Spicers would he go?" she asked.

"That first island up ahead would be the first stop," Salvatore replied. "It's a Bisclavret port, theoretically, with a very junior baron overseeing it. You'll probably want to stay on the ship. I doubt a single upstanding citizen has ever spent a day in Port Bernantouse without being fleeced for everything they have by its port rats."

Annarisse drew herself up. "If you go ashore, I will too, Captain," she declared. "There are too many temptations for you in a port. I would be remiss in my duties if I let you go alone. If you wish, though, I will lay off my robes and carry my holy symbol in my pocket where it will be less conspicuous. I would not want to bring trouble to you or the ship by being obvious about my profession."

"That's a good idea, then." He didn't try to dissuade her, for which she was grateful. "We'll be making port within the mark, at which point Treeden and I will be going ashore to sell those slaves, gather information and maybe buy some provisions. If you're coming, be ready by then." He turned away to give some orders to his men up in the rigging, and she went back to her cabin to change.

The breeze off the island was hot and humid as they approached. The palm trees rose high above the gleaming white beach, giving shade to the collection of huts, shanties, and ramshackle warehouses that clustered above the high-tide mark. A small mountain with a cone-shaped peak rose up from the centre of the island, giving the beautiful setting a rather ominous undertone. The docks were built well out into the deep natural harbour, and were teeming with sailors and dock workers of every race. They had only one thing in common that Annarisse could see: none of them were on the right side of the law.

When Annarisse came back on deck, the slaves were being loaded into the longboat to be taken ashore by two burly sailors. Treeden elected to do this business himself, so Salvatore sent Mr. Santini with him to ensure a fair deal, and left in the other longboat with Annarisse, Kharaba, and those crewmembers who had not had shore leave in Port Olonoise.

The crew were told to listen for the Captain's whistle just in case they had to leave in a hurry; otherwise, they had shore leave for the rest of the day, expected back at the ship at sunset. Annarisse held onto the prow of the boat quite tightly as they cheered loud enough to rock it.

The Captain paid the docking fee for the slip where they were to leave the longboats, assigning one sailor to remain with them at all times. Then he headed purposefully towards the village, apparently in the direction of the taverns that lined the only real street. Annarisse went with him, but Kharaba peeled off to explore the town in a different direction.

Salvatore's attention was caught, however, by a barker standing outside one of the warehouses. "First-class slaves to be had here! Excellent prices! Hard workers! Auction starts in two marks!" He repeated his cry over and over, as people began to enter the building to inspect the wares. Salvatore glanced towards the nearest tavern and hesitated. Then he veered towards the slave auction. Annarisse caught up to him quickly.

"Are you planning a purchase, Captain?" she asked, trying and failing to keep the note of censure from her voice.

"In a manner of speaking, Miss," he replied, carefully, and she recalled that she did not want to reveal herself as a priest in their current company. Silently she followed him into the warehouse.

The first impression to hit her senses was the fear. The smell of it was everywhere, and it was so closely intertwined with the stink of despair that Annarisse nearly turned and bolted for the door. Unconsciously straightening her spine, she took a deep breath and continued in.

The warehouse was organized in long aisles of stalls, about two hundred in all, similar to those used for livestock but smaller. In each, with both hands bound and the rope hooked to a ring on the wall about six feet up, was one slave. They were all filthy. For many, it was impossible to get more than a vague impression of their race or age under the dirt. Most bore scars or welts from many beatings. Many were hanging from their ropes, unable to sit down for lack of enough slack in their bonds, too tired and miserable to stand. Some were crying. Some were glassy-eyed, and Annarisse noticed at least two who were

barely breathing. Some, probably those with the most understanding of their value, were standing and posing as best they could for their prospective buyers. It was the saddest, most evil place Annarisse had ever set hoof in.

Salvatore stopped a boar carrying a whip and asked a question. Annarisse was too busy controlling her revulsion to that place to hear what was said, but the answer had the Captain swinging to the left, passing several rows of stalls with only a glance. Finally he reached the last aisle before the open place where the auction was to be held, and turned down it. Annarisse gasped in surprise.

The aisle contained only children. Most were collared rather than bound, giving them slightly more freedom of movement than their adult colleagues. Again, they were of all races and filthy. Salvatore went down the aisle, glancing in each stall before moving on. Finally, he stopped at one, so suddenly that Annarisse ran into him. He steadied her, and she glanced at the slave in the stall.

It was a fox, streaks of red fur showing under the grime. She guessed his age to be around ten, taking into account that he was far too thin for any growing child. His eyes were bright, and his gaze alternated between a sullen look at the dirt floor and an almost hopeful glance at the fox who had stopped in front of him. When Salvatore spoke, he jumped a foot before giving him a wary, sidelong look. "What is your name, boy?" said the Captain, gently.

"Rodrigo," he answered. A passing auctioneer snarled and approached, getting his whip out. The boy cringed, and added, "Sir!"

Salvatore glanced at the still-snarling guard and put one hand on the butt of the whip. "You would not want to damage the merchandise in which I am very interested, friend," he said softly. "If he needs a lesson for impertinence to me, I will give it." He caught the boar's eye, and the guard replaced his snarl with a fawning grimace that made Annarisse want to crush his face under her hooves. "Leave me now," Salvatore said, removing his hand from the whip and turning back to the slave boy. The boar did as he was told, still fingering his whip as he walked down the aisle.

"Rodrigo, where did you come from?" asked Salvatore.

"From Bisclavret, sir," the boy answered. "My sister and I were sold by our master when our parents died of the ague last year. The lord we were sold to was taking us by ship to Port Spar, but his ship was attacked and all on board are now either here or dead." He looked indecisive for a moment, then appeared to make up his mind. "Oh please, sir, if you buy me, could you buy my sister too? She's younger than me, and she's so scared. We'll work really hard for you, I promise we will. Only please don't separate us!" He tried to go down on his knees to beg, but the collar brought him up short a few inches shy of the floor. He was left dangling for a second, unable to get his feet under him, until Annarisse stepped forward, grabbed his hands, and helped him regain his balance. He thanked her politely, his attention still on Salvatore.

Salvatore looked at the miserable child and felt a wave of pity for his suffering. The half-formed plan that had brought him into the warehouse suddenly crystallized. "Where is your sister?" he asked.

“Two stalls that way,” Rodrigo answered, pointing. “Her name is Malachae.” The hope in his eyes was more than Annarisse could take, and she turned away. Salvatore saw her move, and caught her eye.

“Will you go see the girl?” he asked. In a low voice so Rodrigo wouldn’t hear, he told her, “If she is healthy, I’ll buy them both. Would adopting them fulfill the penance you set me?” She nodded, understanding all at once his reason for coming into this vile pit. “Reassure the girl, then. If she is suffering, see what you can do to heal her without giving yourself away. The owners of this place do horrible things to people of your profession.” She nodded again and moved off. She found Malachae where Rodrigo had said she would be, leaning against the wall of her stall with her back to the aisle, her tail drooping and her shoulders giving the occasional convulsive jerk of exhausted sobs.

“Malachae?” called Annarisse quietly. The girl jerked in surprise, then turned around. Annarisse could see that, though she was clearly malnourished, disgustingly filthy and far sadder than any child should be, she was fairly healthy. Her prayers wouldn’t do anything that a few days of good food and care wouldn’t accomplish better. “My friend sent me to tell you that he’s going to buy you and your brother. You’ll be safe soon, and we’ll take you out of here.”

“Miss?” said the child, who appeared to be hoping against hope, “Your friend – is he a good man?”

Annarisse smiled. “He is a very good man,” she answered.

Treedden swaggered down the aisles of slaves, assessing the merchandise with an expert eye. He had already sold the Zhongguoese captives, not very profitably but there was no real loss in this business; every sale of a free captive was profit. It had been a while since he’d done any purchasing or procuring for his mother, but he knew what he was looking for and knew how to get a good deal on it. This would be some chit’s lucky day.

His attention was caught by the posturing of the fighter slaves. They were strong, from a variety of carnivorous races, and had been trained to fight. Several were wearing chains instead of ropes, indicating their strength. Several more were gagged as well as bound, and Treeden steered well clear of these. He didn’t need a slave who didn’t know not to use his weapons on his master.

His gaze finally rested on a hyena near the end of the fighter aisle. He was strong, clearly, probably strong enough to shred the ropes at his wrists, yet they had not been replaced with chains. That was a good sign. His scarred face and body indicated a life spent fighting. His gaze was direct as he sized up the wolf. He was neither defiant nor servile; that was good, too. Treeden walked on, sizing up a sullen brown wolf and a boar who was wearing enough chain to sink the longboat before returning to the hyena.

“What’s your fighting experience?” he asked.

“I was a mercenary in Zongou, Master,” he replied in slightly accented Calabrese. “I was on the losing side, and was sold. I protected my last master from harm for six years before his death.”

“How did he die?”

“He choked on a bone at dinner one night. He had fewer enemies at the time than he had when he first bought me. One of them took over the household. I did not defend it. There was no heir for me to serve, and the new master did not trust me to serve him, so I was sold.” The hyena stood straight, his arms held over his head by the rope. It had not cut his fur as it had most of the slaves, which meant he had not pulled at the rope or allowed his weight to rest on it. That denoted both strength and endurance.

Treeden glanced at the notice pinned to the wall. The starting bid listed on it was reasonable. He moved on, sure of at least one bid in the auction. It did not do to show too much interest. He wouldn't put it past the vendor to have moles in the audience, running up prices for people who had spent too long with one prospective purchase.

The next aisle had girls. The slack in their ropes was greater than that in any other group in that building; these slaves were the only ones with enough lead to put their arms down in front of them, or sit on the floor with their arms over their heads. The guards here acted differently as well. Instead of fingering their whips, they were fingering their belt buckles. The girls were mostly experienced in more than one respect; they were posturing for the admiring glances coming their way, calling out lascivious remarks to the prospective buyers, and generally playing to their audience. Treeden exchanged some banter with two of them before detecting the subtle signs of disease that had him moving on. In this slave, less experience would be an asset.

He stopped next to a pair of rabbits. They were small, apparently quite young, and were not posturing as the others were. One looked sullen, a bad sign in a concubine, but the other appeared shy, looking at him from under long lashes. She was white of fur under the grime, and shapely. His gaze was admiring, and she straightened slightly under the attention. She didn't seem afraid of him; that was good.

“Where were you before here?” he asked.

“I served a wolford in Harrowgate,” she replied softly. “His new wife sold off all the girls as soon as she married him.”

Treeden snorted. “Wise of her, though bad for you,” he remarked. She made no reply. “Did you serve another, before him?”

“I was a child when I was sold to him,” she answered. “I worked in his kitchens for two years before catching his eye.”

This was better than he'd hoped for. Only one master, and that a Bisclavret lord! He wondered if Kharaba had a spell to detect disease. The priestess probably did, but she would probably lie to him about the results, just on principle. He nodded to the girl and moved on, questioning two others in case there were watchers. Then he moved towards the sale area to bid on his choices.

Of Lost Honour

Kharaba pondered the instruction he'd been given by his employer. It did not sit well with him, but the entire conversation had been the worst he'd yet had with the Baron.

Treeden had come into his cabin after the abortive fight with Captain Salvatore. Still sporting a red welt under the fur on his forehead, still wearing dried blood from the small cuts he'd received as they'd circled, he'd asked, "What were you thinking, to interfere in my business?"

Kharaba, recognizing that his livelihood was at stake, had replied, "I realized that killing the Captain would get you killed in your turn by his men, and cursed by the priestess. I was protecting you, my lord, as any good employee does." He had gone over to the jug of water by his washstand, wet a clean cloth, and handed it to the wolf, who grunted and started washing the blood from his fur. "I meant no disrespect, my lord." He had bowed low, a courtly bow usually reserved for someone much higher up in life than a mere baron.

Treeden, appeased somewhat by this show of humility, had still not finished showing the tiger his place. "Well, Salvatore owes me a debt of honour, and you will be the one to arrange it for me," he'd said, then outlined his plan.

Now, on the dock three days later, Kharaba nearly moaned aloud. As if stopping the fight had not been trouble enough for him, he now had to do this to regain favour! Longingly he thought about what life would be like when he no longer had to answer to a mere lordling for his bread. Ah, the life he would lead! He spent a few moments musing about the wine, the women, the sheer power of being his own master. Then he called himself to task and set about his job. The day for that kind of power had not yet arrived.

Kharaba walked down the main road in town, such as it was. He passed the slave auction without a glance, other than to note the entrance of the Captain and the priestess. Strange, that. He would not have expected them to enter there. He turned his attention to the taverns, wherein lay his prospects. Carefully he selected the most likely one. Not the sign of the Seal. Not the Rat's Tail. Ah, there. The Sword and Shield. That would be the place to hire a mercenary.

The tavern was smoky, poorly lit, and teeming with patrons and the women who serviced them. The patrons in here were fighters. They wore their armour as the badge of honour that it was, and carried their swords openly and ostentatiously. Kharaba was aware of the silence that descended on them as he stood in the doorway. There was good reason for it. He was not one of them; they would make him uncomfortable until he stated his business or went away.

If he did neither, they would see to it that he was severely chastised for his effrontery.

Drawing himself up to his full height, he pitched his voice to be heard in the sudden stillness. "I am seeking a fighter to perform a commission for Baron MacDuncan," he said.

There was a slight stirring; some of those here were familiar with the name. That was probably a good thing. One stepped forward. "And how long would this commission last?" asked the jackal.

"One fight, only. You could be drinking again by evening." Kharaba smiled slightly. The jackal did not.

"What's the deal, then?" he asked.

"You would fight a debt of honour for the Baron against Captain Salvatore of the ship Riddock's Dawn," Kharaba told him. "The Baron doesn't really want the Captain dead, just beaten. Win or lose, you get paid, but win, you get paid more. The Captain dead, you get paid as though you'd lost." He waited.

"I'll do it for twenty denari," said the jackal off-handedly.

Another, a hyena, jumped up at that. "Twenty! I'll do it for ten," he claimed.

"Of course you would," laughed another, "it's more than you'll see on your next moon's contract!" A couple more laughed, until the hyena turned with his blade half out of its scabbard. Kharaba took note of their reactions; these men were afraid of the hyena. That was good, too.

"Eight to fight, three more to win without killing," he offered the hyena.

"Ten to fight, two more to win," was the counter-offer. Kharaba pretended to consider for a moment, then offered his hand to seal the bargain. It was ten denari less than the Baron had given him for this commission.

Two marks later they were out in the tropical sunlight, waiting for Salvatore to finish his business in the slave market. Kharaba had entered there, to assure himself that the Captain was still where he was supposed to be. The mercenary informed him that such fights were always fought in the open, and after the day's business had been completed. Figuring the hyena knew more about such things than he did, Kharaba had acquiesced.

Annarisse was the first to exit the slave market, leading a fox girl behind her. Kharaba stood up in some surprise. Surely the priestess, of all people, had not made a purchase! A moment later the Captain came out, leading another slave. What under the Light was going on here? Hastily he remembered his reason for watching here, and indicated the fox to the mercenary.

The hyena marched over to the Captain and threw a glove down in front of him. Salvatore looked up in surprise. "I challenge you to a duel of honour in the name of Baron MacDuncan," proclaimed the hyena in a rather bored tone.

Salvatore looked at Annarisse, who shrugged. "I'll take the children back to the longboat, then return here, Captain," she told him. "Don't take chances you don't need to take." Her look reminded him that he had other responsibilities now. Silently, he handed over Rodrigo's rope, and the two children were led

away by the horsewoman. Then he removed his coat, laying it carefully on the grass next to the square.

The hyena eyed the four pistols hanging in their holsters. "This is a duel, sir," he informed the fox insolently. "It is fought with rapiers, not guns."

Salvatore shrugged. "If you prefer. Am I permitted to know what the challenge is?"

It was the hyena's turn to shrug. "You'll have to ask the Baron that. If you live long enough. Shall we get started?"

Figuring he already knew what this was about since Annarisse had informed him of the broken penance, Salvatore unbuckled his holster, dropped it next to his coat, and balanced himself with his rapier. "If I am not permitted my guns, you are not permitted a main gauche, either," he pointed out. The hyena acknowledged that with a little sneer, then dropped his own sword belt. Now they were even. Each had a concealed dagger in his boot, and each knew the other had it.

The first feints suggested they were well-matched. About the same height and weight, the hyena clearly had more experience with a rapier. This was offset by the seaman's quick step and keen eye. The parries and thrusts came quickly, cleanly, and the watching crowd settled in for a good show. Within moments, the betting had begun. By first blood, (the hyena's, a small cut to the left rib) most of Salvatore's sailors were present. To a man, they bet on their Captain to win. The odds came out even, except for those few people who had seen Salvatore fight before. They knew that there would be no quarter granted should Salvatore win, and they were watching as the known gleam came to his eye. He never lost, when that gleam was present. The scales tipped in his favour.

It had been more than a day since Salvatore's last drink. By contrast, the hyena had been drinking not three marks before, and for most of the previous night. It was enough to make a difference. Slowly, inexorably, the hyena started to tire. His reaction time became longer, his thrusts shorter, his parries lacked strength. A few more rounds, and he made the error Salvatore had been waiting for. He thrust, up towards the chest, a moment before Salvatore shifted his weight. In doing so, he put himself off-balance against an opponent who was still well centred and able to change his direction.

Salvatore did not waste the opportunity. Almost negligently, he parried and sliced, hacking deep into the other's shoulder. Blood spurted, and the hyena fell.

Salvatore looked around for Annarisse. She was there, of course, without the two children. "Can you save him?" he asked her.

"Probably, but I would need to reveal myself to do so," she told him.

"Do it. No one will hurt you now," he said confidently.

She wasted no more time. Running to the hyena, she pushed away the mercenaries who had surrounded him to try to stop the bleeding. "Move aside if you want him to live," she commanded. They recognized the note of authority in her voice and did as she asked, warily, not moving far. Salvatore came to

stand behind her, one pistol out and cocked for all to see. The warning in his eyes and stance was clear. They widened the circle.

Her prayer was said quickly. The wound began to close; the bleeding became sluggish. She said another prayer; this time the wound healed to an angry red welt. She stood up and faced his comrades. "He will live, and he will have use of his arm again," she told them. They said nothing, staring at her. She understood; it would have been an honourable death for him, here on this sandy beach far from home. She had cheated him of that. Well, so be it.

One of them came forward with a small bag of coin in his hand. "Lady, for your services," he told her, offering it. She started to shake her head, then changed her mind. There was no church here, not so much as a portside shrine to the Light. She would take the coin and donate it where it would do good.

On her way back to the ship, Salvatore at her side, she counted it. There were ten denari.

Treeden's Education

Treeden perched atop the yardarm of the foremast and fiddled with the wind.

“Concentrate on the air you want,” the sage at Port Spar had told him. “What does it feel like? Smell like? Taste like? You need to know. Then you can call it. Then you can make it do what you want.” There, on a rock above the port town, the bat had created a whirlwind in his hand, then changed it to mist, then dispersed it.

Treeden had been practising ever since, but had not managed to call air even once. He was starting to get discouraged. Naturally he wouldn't be able to do this. What made him think he could to begin with? That little breath of warmth on the night the Midchain sank?

He thrust the self-defeating thoughts away and concentrated. What did the air feel like? He considered it. Cold, he decided. He would call cold air, so that he would know if he had succeeded. He closed his eyes and cupped his hands together. How did the gestures go? He moved his fingers, sinuously, sending them into a gentle dance for a breath of winter. He thought about the air he wanted - its dryness, its cold straight from the icy wastes, the way it would feather in his nose. He moved through it again, more gracefully this time, and felt the power stir. Once more. Forgetting the ship, Salvatore, and everything else, he gave himself up to the gesture.

The blast caught him completely by surprise. Snapping out of his trance, he breathed in the icy draught that wafted into his face from his open palms. He laughed and started to jump up, remembering where he was just in time to keep from falling out of the rigging. He grabbed at the mast again and swung himself up to stand on the yardarm as the breath of winter dissipated in the wet tropical heat. He'd done it! He'd called air!

He held to the mast and made the motions again, more confidently this time, calling more cold air. This time the blast came on the second try, complete with a few snowflakes. He didn't let himself lose his focus this time. Air could be held, molded, for as long as the caster kept that concentration. For nearly a minute, he breathed in the taste of winter as the snowflakes settled on his ears. Then a breeze rocked the mast and he grabbed for it with both hands, breaking his focus.

Twice more he practised, until suddenly he realised that he was nearly falling out of the rigging with the fatigue. Who knew magic was such hard work? Wearily, he dispersed his spell and swung down to the deck. He had succeeded. He could practise again tomorrow.

Seal Island

Nearly two weeks after leaving Port Bernantouse, Annarisse came up on deck one day to the sound of, "Land ho!" Borrowing the Captain's spyglass for a moment, she trained it on the still-distant smudge as the ship approached. Amidst the calls for sounding lines and spotters for underwater coral reefs, she observed the island carefully.

It was larger than Bernantouse Island by several miles, and sported a much larger volcano that towered over the southern bulge of the roughly kidney-shaped island. Training the glass on the south shore, she was put off by the black sand and rocks of the beaches. They were extensive and showed little signs of vegetation; apparently the volcanic activity did not lend itself to plant growth. Moving the glass slowly northward and compensating for the roll of the ship, she spotted the beach located at the inner curve of the kidney. The sand there was white, she thought. It was difficult to tell, because bodies covered the entire beach. She couldn't make out at this distance what kind of bodies they were, but they were grey, sleek, and appeared to have smooth heads with no ears on the top. Some were manoeuvring nets out of the water; others were repairing the nets; still others were shepherding children across the sands. Her attention caught, she followed this group with the glass. They were moving towards a small building nestled just under the first trees that lined the beach in that spot before the spine of the mountain rose up behind them.

She turned the glass towards the north end of the island. Here, too, a cliff dominated the view, but it was a very different cliff from the volcano on the south. This one rose about half as high, and was forested on its southern and western sides. Though the angle of their approach obscured detail, it would seem that the bare north face of this cliff was riddled with caves of all sizes. The cliff went right down to the waves with no beach.

Salvatore was studying the island too. They were approaching the leeward shore, which was good; the wind was blowing off the land, from the east, which would have the effect of slowing their advance and making a shipwreck on the rocks much less likely. On the other hand, it made bringing the ship into the natural harbour a near-impossibility. The ship would have to sit several hundred yards offshore while those who were going to investigate the island took a longboat in. In addition to this, the island appeared to have very few beaches, and beaches were usually on the leeward shore. If the wind were usually from the east, probably the other side of the island had cliffs. Cliffs meant deep water. Another ship could hide there at anchor indefinitely. It was entirely possible

that the *Corrado* had been here recently. If for any reason she were still here, she would be anchored on the other side of the island.

Then again, thought Salvatore, the chances that she was still here when they knew they had been eight days behind her only two weeks before were quite slim. He would have to risk it. The orders were given, and the *Riddock's Dawn* began to tack around into the lee of the coral reef.

Treedon came down from the rigging where he'd been sitting again, doing who knew what. He pulled his small folding spyglass from his vest, pushed his way between Salvatore and Annarisse, and peered at the island as well. "Not a very welcoming place, is it?" he observed. Then he turned his glass to the busy beach scene. "Well, if we're looking for an artist, that beach is the place to start. How close can we get the ship?"

"Not very, my lord. We're better off standing out to sea a ways and going in with the longboat. I doubt those people would be too happy if we suddenly came into their harbour with a gun in every gun port and all hands on deck. We want information, not terror." The Captain returned his spyglass to its tooled leather carrying case and turned to harry some hapless sailors who were stringing a line wrong. Annarisse turned to Treeden.

"These appear to be a rather primitive group, my lord," she pointed out. "Fishers, mostly. Do you think someone on this island has the skill to create those statues?"

Treedon continued to study the island as he answered. "If you have a better idea for finding more of those statues, please share, Sister," he invited. "Even backwards peasants sometimes have useful skills. Maybe we'll find an idiot savant here or some such." He shrugged as the ship began to turn, preparatory to dropping anchor. "At the very least, there's plenty of people here. Maybe the people themselves will be valuable."

Annarisse frowned at him. "It is one thing to take captive a ship full of sailors, knowingly plying dangerous waters. It's quite another to take poor innocent savages from their home for a life in the mines. I won't let you do it, my lord, so you'd better hope we find what we're looking for. There will be no living fortune to be made here."

Treedon smirked at her. "You know what your problem is, Sister? You need a man. A woman doesn't need as many opinions as you've got." He laughed as she bristled. "Besides, if Salvatore and I decide to do some slaving here, you won't be able to stop us. Maybe we should maroon you here. Then you can exercise your vast education on the poor sods we leave behind." He folded his spyglass and headed for the longboat which was being readied.

Salvatore came up behind Annarisse as she fumed, and told her, "He's full of hot air, you know. I'd rather maroon him than you, Your Excellency."

She didn't smile. "Promise me that these people will be safe from us here," she asked pleadingly.

Salvatore nodded. "They are safe. It's two weeks to Bernantouse. Feeding them all for that long would cost more than they'd bring us. It's not worth the bother. Besides, you asked for my promise not to take any more slaves on this

voyage. I gave it to you.” He smiled his engaging, boyish smile. “I’m still hoping we’ll need all our hold space for treasure.” She laughed, appeased, and turned to the longboat.

Salvatore, Annarisse, Treeden, his guard, Kharaba, and five sailors were to go ashore. They piled into the longboat as the bottom of the sun touched the horizon to the west. Its light lit the cliffs and trees with a halo-like effect, and Annarisse marvelled at the beauty. The sailors rowed as the four of them talked.

“Do the people of this island speak Calabrese?” she asked.

“Other ships have come here in the past, though not often. The island is charted, at least. Probably there’s one person here who can communicate with us.” Salvatore checked his pistols over as the longboat made its way past the reef.

“They’re ignorant savages, but surely they can talk,” Treeden exclaimed.

Annarisse shook her head. “I’m certain they can talk. They are working together far too well to be without language entirely. I just don’t know if we’ll be able to speak to them. They probably don’t see many ships. How would they learn our language?”

Treeden shrugged. “I brought one of the small statues to show them, just in case. They’ll understand well enough.” The longboat by now was only a hundred yards offshore, in water shallow enough to see the coral growing on the ocean floor. “Pull us up to the beach, men!” he ordered the crew. Since that was what Salvatore had ordered them to do anyway, they complied.

As soon as they had rounded the reef and come into full view, the activity on the beach had changed. The young and their keepers had waddled into the water and swum away from the beach, towards the north-facing cliffs. Those left behind had moved the nets further up the beach and had sought out weapons stored nearby. These appeared to be simple throwing spears, similar to the harpoons used by Calabrese fishermen. A small group of the ones still on the beach had detached and were now swimming towards the longboat, much faster than Annarisse would have thought possible given their bulk. Clearly, they were being escorted to the shore as a protective measure. Looking behind the boat, she realized that their escape route was also blocked by the spear-wielding creatures. Quietly she said some prayers for herself and her companions in case hostilities began. As they pulled into the shallow water near the beach, Treeden acknowledged the prayer with a grunt, Kharaba not at all, and Salvatore with a small smile.

Salvatore started to clamber out of the boat, but Annarisse stopped him. “You look like a fighter, and these people are ready for hostilities,” she said. “Let me go first, with my holy symbol out. They will know we come in peace.”

Salvatore looked troubled at this. “Do you have a protection spell to put on yourself? I don’t want you in harm’s way without one.”

Kharaba spoke up. “I have one, if you would permit?” He looked at Annarisse, who nodded. He cast the spell even as she was climbing out of the boat.

The seals parted before her, giving her access to the beach. She pulled her holy symbol out of the folds of her robe, holding it in front of her like the shield

it was. She heard the murmuring begin as they spotted it. They recognized it, then; the Light had reached even here. Thank the Saint for that. Once more on dry land, she stood straight and pitched her voice to be heard over the whispering. "I wish to speak with your leader," she said.

They murmured a bit more, then one figure stepped forward. He was wearing a tattered grey robe which had once been very similar to the one she was wearing. The fur on his snout was greying, as well, and she realized he must be quite old. He was stooped, moving very slowly and stumbling once as he traversed the beach. Most importantly, though, he carried a crude wooden holy symbol the same shape as her own.

"You speak with leader?" He said, haltingly.

"I would like to, yes. Are you the leader here?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Leader over there," he gestured, and she turned her head slightly to see one of the largest spear-wielders step forward. "But he speak not your tongue. I translate?"

Annarisse nodded. "May my companions come onshore?" she asked first. The priest spoke to his leader, who answered with words and gestures.

"He say they come, if you promise they hurt not us," the priest told her.

Annarisse was fairly certain there had been more in the exchange than that, but she held her peace. She bowed deeply to the leader, and said, "I will stand surety for them. They will not harm you or yours."

The leader spat out another sentence with more gestures. Looking very uncomfortable, the priest asked his leader a question. The reply made him droop slightly, and he turned to her. "He say he trust not fox. Other fox hurt two young after same promise. He want you be hostage while ship here."

"May I converse with my companions before I answer?" she asked gravely. He nodded, and she turned towards the longboat. "Captain, did you hear that?" she asked.

"I did. Are you willing to do this?"

"I am willing. I will stay with them until our business here is complete, then." She turned back to the priest and approached. "I will be your hostage. Captain Salvatore is not like that other fox. No one need be hurt here."

The priest repeated her words to the leader, who snorted and ordered three men forward. Two flanked her and pointed their spears at her while the third approached with a rope. Understanding what he wanted, she held out her hands to be bound. The knots were tight, cutting off the circulation at her wrists, but she bit her lip and stayed silent. The one who had tied her handed the free end of the rope to one of the guards. Only then did the priest speak again. "Tell friends come shore," he told her, and she nodded to the Captain. After a hastily whispered conference with Treeden, he left two sailors on the longboat, ordering them to take it slightly further out and await them there. The other three sailors, the Captain, the Baron, and the mage clambered out and waded to the beach.

It was Treeden who spoke, as Salvatore hung back slightly. "I have heard stories of a great artist who lives on this island," he said grandly. "We seek trade

with this artist which will benefit your people greatly.” He reached into his vest, at which action four of the seals nearest him turned their spears down and approached until the points were mere inches from his throat. Annarisse’s two guards also brought their spears in closer. He stopped. “I have an example of art in my pocket,” he said, and waited for the priest to translate. “I wish to show you the art I seek. I have no weapon in there.” As the old man repeated his words, the four who were menacing him backed off slightly. Slowly he brought a small glass statue from Gustafus’ treasure out of his inner pocket. The seal warriors backed off to the positions they had held before, and Annarisse’s guards relaxed a bit.

The priest approached and took the statue from Treeden, examining it for a moment before returning it to the wolf. “Artist who make live on island,” he confirmed, nodding. “But he no trade glass. He make for saint in sea.” The priest shook his head slightly as though searching for a word. “Saint in sea take statues, give power, give statues back. Saint called – carve dream? Dream-Carver,” he recalled, nodding vigorously.

Annarisse felt a flutter of recognition at the name. She had heard it before. “Why do you call the Dream-Carver a saint?” she asked curiously.

“Saint give light. Dream-Carver give light from sea.” The priest shrugged as though the answer were obvious.

“Where will we find this artist? I need to speak to him,” Treeden inquired eagerly.

The priest spoke briefly with the leader, who nodded. “He live cave in north cliff,” came the answer. “We take you there. You find not without guide.”

Salvatore spoke for the first time. “Did you guide the other fox who was here?” he asked.

The priest nodded sadly. “Gave two guides. They come not back. He kill them? He take them on ship? We know not,” he replied.

“When was that?” the fox pressed.

The old seal thought for a moment. “Three sleeps,” he answered. Salvatore’s heart leapt in his chest. Ferrante had been here three days ago, and had earned the enmity of these people. They were gaining on him.

“Why you care other fox?” asked the seal curiously.

“He committed a terrible crime against innocent people in Calabria,” Salvatore answered. “We are chasing him to bring him to justice.” The seal translated this to his leader, who looked surprised and gave an order. The spears pointed at Annarisse were lowered, though she was not freed.

“If you will take us there now, we can complete our business and leave quickly,” Salvatore suggested.

The priest shook his head. “Tide wrong,” he pointed out. “Boat make wood in water.” His gestures indicated the longboat spread in little pieces on the beach. Salvatore turned to study the beach and the ocean, and realized he was right. They would be able to get back to the ship tonight, but approaching the north cliff would be impossible until the tide changed at dawn.

Salvatore thought for a moment, then turned back to the priest. "I do not wish to leave my confessor here alone overnight, but it seems we cannot complete our tasks here until morning," he pointed out. "May we camp near her for the night instead?"

The priest translated this. The leader barked out a negative, and the spokesperson turned back to them. "You go your ship," he said sadly. "Priest stay here, hostage. After you speak artist, we take her to ship. Then you leave."

"May I speak with her for a moment?" he asked. "I will leave my weapons here if you wish." The leader nodded. Salvatore handed his belt to Treeden and approached Annarisse. "I don't like this at all," he told her quietly. "If I could, I'd take you back the ship right now and we'd leave. But we need more information."

Annarisse smiled at him. "I'll be fine here. They'll untie me once you're back at the ship, and I'll enjoy sleeping on dry land for a change. The prayer for love I put on each of you will remain in effect, so if you get hurt somehow, you can call on it. Do as they suggest, get what we need, and you'll see me in the morning."

"You're sure? I could get you out of here if you want it," he told her.

"No. I do not want anyone killed trying to save me when I'm not in danger. Go back to the ship, Captain. I'll be fine." She smiled. "In fact, if that smell of cooking fish is anything to go by, I'll eat better than you do."

He nodded. "Fine, then. Be safe, Sister." He turned and strode to the beach, the others falling in step behind him as he waded into the water. Annarisse watched them go with a heavy heart.

Confessions and Penance of the Night

Salvatore leaned back in his armchair with a sigh. Telling the crew about the Sister's captivity had not been a pleasant task. While she was not exactly popular with them, she was highly respected and trusted. Malachae and Rodrigo were particularly upset; Annarisse had been giving them reading and figuring lessons, and they were growing attached to her as a result.

The door opened without a knock, and Treeden entered. He was swaggering and grinning even more than usual, and his attitude set Salvatore's teeth on edge.

"So the meddling horse is gone. Care to celebrate before we set sail?" Treeden headed for the wine rack to pour himself a drink. Leaving the bottle open on the table, he flopped into the other armchair.

Salvatore considered the wolf's grinning face, imagining what expression it would wear if he shot a pistol at its owner's kneecap. The fantasy calmed him, and he reached for a glass and the bottle. "She'll be back tomorrow after we've seen the seal artist," he commented mildly.

"We should leave now. We know which way to go, and we know Ferrante is ahead of us. We don't need to speak to the artist."

Salvatore mentally shot the other kneecap. As the wolf begged for mercy in his imagination, he remarked, "I promised Sister Annarisse that we would collect her. If you wish to try convincing the crew to disobey me and leave her, that is your choice. But if you try, you may discover they feel more loyalty to her than to you."

Treeden sipped his brandy and stared hard at the fox. "I own this ship," he pointed out with the barest hint of a snarl.

"Yes, but I command it." Salvatore stood and approached the wolf, forcing him to stand so as not to have the fox towering over him. "It would be best, my lord, if you would not challenge me again. You will lose if you do."

"I will see to it you never sail again," Treeden spat at him. Then he turned and strode to the door, slamming it so hard the precariously-balanced brandy bottle smashed to the floor. Sighing, Salvatore called Theo to clean it up and sat back to finish his drink.

Annarisse watched the sun go down from her spot on the beach. She had not been moved when the boat had reached the ship, nor had she been untied. One of her guards remained, his spear on the ground beside him as he munched the fishcake the other had brought him. Her stomach growled. Silently she

debated the wisdom of asking for something to eat. She was still considering it when the priest approached.

He looked in surprise at her bound hands, then began to speak to the guard. Annarisse had delivered a few scathing rebukes in her time, and she recognized one when she heard it. The guard tried to defend himself, but the priest rode right over him. Within moments, the chastened seal was untying her hands. When she was free, the priest gave another clear order, and the guard waddled off sullenly.

"I send get food," the priest finally addressed her, sinking to the sand beside her.

She rubbed her wrists. They were bruised and swollen from the lack of circulation, but Kharaba's protection spell had kept further damage at bay. "Thank you. I was beginning to wonder if anyone would bother." She paused, then said, "We were not properly introduced. I am Sister Annarisse."

He smiled and offered her a half-bow. "I Brother Pamel," he replied. At this moment two children arrived with fishcakes for both of them, and they fell to.

As she started on her third of the salty, tender cakes, she remarked, "I was surprised at how much hostility was shown to us. Are your people always so wary of strangers?"

Pamel shook his head. "We greet with smile," he said. "Other fox change us. One missing cub be leader's son's son." The old seal gazed sorrowfully towards the north cliff. "He smart boy. Swim well, strong. Good guide? Why he come not? Leader understand not. Send warrior to see artist. Artist see fox, but boys with them not. Three days they come not. Leader sad for them. Worry. Protect tribe."

Annarisse nodded. "I would be sad and worried too, in his position. And it's his job to protect the tribe." She thought for a moment. "We're chasing the other ship anyway. We'll try to find out what happened to your cubs. I'm not sure we'll be successful, but we will try."

"You do that after we take you hostage?" asked the brother incredulously.

Before Annarisse could make a reply, she found herself yanked roughly to her feet. The guard had returned, and with him was the leader; it was he who was manhandling her. Brother Pamel leapt to his feet and began speaking quickly to the leader, who did not appear to be listening. He held Annarisse in a vicelike grip which was quickly numbing her arm. He twisted it for a second as he turned to bark an order at the guard, who was holding a length of rope. She bit her lip to keep from crying out.

While the priest protested, the guard tied her hands again and led her over to the trees at the edge of the beach. He tied the rope to one of these at about waist height, limiting her movements to two feet on either side of the tree. Finally the leader turned to the priest and said something shortly before leaving the beach again. Brother Pamel pounded the tree once with his fist, obviously furious but just as clearly not willing to disobey.

"I sorry," he told her, bowing several times.

"I know you tried," she answered. She tried to sit down, folding her legs under her, and discovered that by working the rope down the tree a few inches, she could sit with her hands not too far from her lap.

"He think not. Your fox be mad?" he asked, pleading with her for understanding.

"I don't know. Probably, though. It's not exactly good trade relations to treat a willing hostage so harshly. You may wish to suggest to your leader that I be untied and treated well before the Captain returns to the beach at dawn." She laid her head against the tree, suddenly very weary. "If you don't mind, Brother, I'd like to sleep now. I'll see you in the morning." She turned her head towards the tree and feigned sleep until he rose and left. He didn't see her begin to cry.

The conference in the Sister's cabin at that moment was of the most serious nature.

Two fox children and a young weasel were discussing the turn of events.

"I heard she volunteered," Rodrigo told his sister rebelliously.

"Well, if they asked that she stay, what choice did she have? I say we have to go rescue her." Malachae stomped her foot on the worn planks for emphasis.

"How're you gonna do that?" asked Rianna with some interest.

Malachae looked at her much the way a robin might look at a dragonfly. "We take the longboat, of course," she said.

Rodrigo shook his head. "Have you ever tried those winches?" he asked. "They're heavy, and they're stiff. I don't think the three of us together could lower the boat all the way, and even if we could, someone would see us trying and stop us. Why don't we go ask the Captain how we can help? He'll know what to do," said the boy with all the confidence boys have for their heroes.

Malachae wasn't so sure. "If he were going to rescue her, he would never have left her there to begin with."

"Maybe she doesn't need rescuing. Maybe they'll get her tomorrow, before we sail. Maybe that wolf is full of hot air like the Captain says."

Rianna perked up her ears at that. "Wolf? What did he say?"

Rodrigo looked uncomfortable. "He said we'd be leaving her there. He said we wouldn't ever see her again."

"The Captain wants us to call him Father," Malachae said. "Fathers don't do stuff like that to people. He wouldn't leave her here. Would he?" She looked to her older brother, who had never let her down before, for her answers.

Rodrigo preened a bit under her trusting gaze, and realized he had a job to do. It was up to him to keep Malachae from getting hurt. He thought it over, then made a decision. "We have to go see Father," he told her, putting all the authority of his extra two years into his voice.

"Well, I'm stayin' here. I don't wanna talk to that fox." Rianna pulled a biscuit from her stash and began to munch. It was hard work.

"Fine, then. We'll go." The boy pushed himself off his sister's bunk and led the way.

The ship was dark, the watch's attention turned to the sea. She rocked gently at anchor as the tides sang a gentle lullaby to those on board. The two children stole softly down the causeway to the Captain's door. It was closed, and there was no cabin boy resting near it. There were no sounds from inside, but the door had a crack of lamplight showing underneath it. Rodrigo gathered his courage and knocked.

"Com'in," said a slurred voice on the other side of the door. The two children glanced at each other, shrugged in unison, and opened it.

The Captain was slouched in his armchair, a snifter of brandy in one hand and a mostly-empty bottle in the other. He was bleary-eyed, his face tear-streaked, though from emotion or the oppressive atmosphere was difficult to say. The cabin reeked of stale air and alcohol, and the subtle scent of angry wolf.

Cautiously the children approached. "Sir? We wanted to know about Sister Annarisse," Rodrigo asked.

"She in't here," the fox slurred. "She's wit' them seals on the island. She in't here to save me."

"Will she be back tomorrow?" Malachae screwed up her courage to ask.

"I dunno. She said so. She said she'd keep me from drinkin', too, but her spell is gone an' where is she now?" The fox lifted his glass to his mouth and discovered, after a moment of trying to pour the contents into his maw, that the glass was already empty. He stared at it morosely for a minute before realizing he had a bottle in his other hand. He poured the liquid directly into his mouth, spilling it on himself and the floor when the ship lurched suddenly.

Malachae went to the towels hung by the washstand and went to clean him up. He looked at her through half-closed eyes. "Yer ma woulda helped me, y'know," he told her. "She wouldna let me drink. The priestess doesn' let me drink either, but she in't here." He reached over and pulled Malachae to her feet, then moved her to his knee. "Yer a good li'l girl, helpin' yer da like this," he said. His fetid breath washed over her face and she cringed away from him, terrified.

Rodrigo, unsure what to do, suddenly realized her fear. He took two big steps to cross the room and grabbed Malachae's arm. "Let her go! Can't you see you're scaring her?" he said to the Captain.

The fox let the child go so suddenly she and Rodrigo both tumbled to the floor. "Whaddya mean, scaring? You scared, girl?" His look was so pitifully sad, so horrified, it frightened her still further. She said nothing, but started to creep away on hands and knees, not even daring to get up while she was still close to him. Rodrigo helped her to her feet.

"I dinna mean to scare you. Yer a good girl." He propelled himself out of his chair with so much force he nearly planted his face in the floorboards, managing to catch himself on the table just in time to prevent it. "Ye'll be my family, won' you? I need a family. The pries'sess says I need a family." He stumbled towards them. Malachae screamed, and Rodrigo grabbed her to pull her out the door, slamming it shut behind them. Together they raced back to

the Sister's cabin, checking only to be sure the weasel was there before locking the door.

Salvatore opened the door in time to see them disappear into the other cabin. Softly he closed it again. He sank against it as his eyes teared up again. Through his broken sobs, he looked at the bottle still in his hand. This was the problem, then. Sister Annarisse had been right.

Shakily he got to his feet and moved to his wine rack. He grabbed one full bottle in each hand, opened the window, and began to pour. One after the other the fine bottles were emptied of their spirits; one after the other the containers themselves hit the water with a soft splash. When the last one was empty, he stood there at the open porthole, staring at the forbidding southern bulge of the island. It was some time later when he stumbled to his bunk to fall into his last drink-induced slumber.

The Artist

It was nearly dawn when Salvatore was awakened by Theo pounding on the door. He bore a tray containing chocolate and hard tack, which Salvatore hardly glanced at. This would not be a good morning for eating anything. He dressed and headed for the longboat, where the crew from the day before had reassembled.

“Okay, men, we’re going to get our seal guides, talk to the glassmaker, get Sister Annarisse back, and be on our way by the next tide,” he told them briskly. “You are to be your most polite to the seals, and remember, they don’t speak Calabrese. Your manners will have to show through gestures. Kharaba, do you have some protection spells to spread around, just in case?” Kharaba nodded and performed the spells for himself, the Captain, and the Baron. “Mr. Mietvani, you have command of the ship. When the longboat reaches the north cliff, please bring the ship in to stand off the north cliff a short distance for the sake of the rowers.” Mr. Mietvani nodded and went to give orders to the crew.

As the men began to lower the longboat, Salvatore approached the mage. “Is your protection spell for Sister Annarisse still in place?” he asked quietly.

“It ended in the middle of the night, sir. I can put another on her from the beach, if you wish.”

“I do wish. Can you tell if it was needed?”

Kharaba hesitated. “I know it did not deflect any mortal blows, and that she was in good shape when it ended. But I also know it was needed; it protected her from some minor damage. I cannot say how that damage was inflicted, alas.”

Salvatore gazed bleakly at the shoreline. “Some damage, you say?”

“Minimal, sir. I doubt she sustained what you would consider a wound.” He shrugged. “She has a protection spell of her own, after all. As long as she could reach her holy symbol, she could cast it. She likely used that when my spell wore off.”

The Captain nodded, then motioned for the tiger to precede him down the rope ladder to the longboat.

Just as they passed the coral reef, two hundred yards off the beach, they were met by two seals. These were warriors, carrying their spears at the ready. They took up positions on either side of the longboat, clearly guiding it into the beach. None of the sailors made any move towards their weapons, though Kharaba’s claws were unsheathed. A whispered warning from Salvatore corrected that.

The beach was nearly deserted. Standing near the fire pit was Sister Annarisse, her hands bound in front of her, fatigued but unharmed. With her were the seal priest and the tribe’s leader. Salvatore approached them slowly,

motioning most of the sailors to stay in the longboat. "I am here for the guides you said you would provide," he addressed the leader, and the priest translated.

The leader nodded, and gestured to the beach. "He say escorts take you to artist," the priest told them.

Salvatore bowed. "Thank you. How and when will the good Sister be returned to us?"

"You go, see artist. You go to ship from there. We bring Sister Annarisse to you. You come not here after see artist."

Salvatore bowed again. "May I speak with the Sister in private for a moment?"

The priest nodded. "Leave weapons on beach, then come. We go." Salvatore complied, dropping his belt so that the leather holsters protected the pistols from the sand, and came closer.

"Are you okay?" he asked, searching for answers in her face.

She hesitated, wondering how much to tell him. "I'm fine," she answered, deciding he didn't need to know details that would only anger him. "You broke your penance last night," she remarked, a question in her voice as she searched his face in turn. She could see his hangover in his expression, and it troubled her.

"I did, Sister, and it will be the last time." She looked at him in surprise; that was the most determination she had ever heard from him. "You may put another on me now, since I can see you want to, but it won't be necessary."

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "The prayer for love is still in place. If you get hurt, you can call on it to keep you whole. It will tell me all I need to know for now, and if it pleases the Saint I'll be back on board tonight. Go and finish your business here so we can leave." He bowed, turned, and strode back to the longboat, picking up his belt on the way. Within moments they were rowing out to the reef.

The seal guides swam in front of the longboat as the sailors rowed out of the lagoon and turned north. Mindful of the rocks closer to shore, they stayed nearly three hundred yards from the steep, forested hills that came down to the water's edge. The boat was well past the north edge of the island when the seals finally turned landwards, approaching the cave-pocked cliff from the north. In a few moments, they entered the small angled lagoon, formed by a spike of cliff jutting out to the north. It had the effect of protecting this cliff face from excessive wind, and of preventing shipwrecks in this spot. The longboat pulled up almost to the cliff face in the spot where the seals were waiting. The guides pulled some bales of seaweed from a tiny cave just above the high-tide mark and tied them onto the starboard side of the boat, to protect it from being scraped or holed by its rubbing against the cliff face. Then one of them clambered out of the water onto a tiny ledge a few feet away, next to which was a cave mouth just barely big enough to accommodate him. Into this he disappeared while the other waited expectantly in the water for them to follow. Wordlessly, Salvatore climbed out of the boat and stooped down to enter the cave. Treeden followed, and Kharaba after him.

The cave was the entrance to a passageway. The floor sloped upward for the first ten yards, though the ceiling remained at nearly the same height, with the result that the three big men were soon bent almost double as they walked. That lasted for maybe fifteen yards, though it felt like much more. Just when Salvatore was thinking he might try crawling to relieve the stress on his back, the ceiling rose and he found himself in a sunlit cavern about three times the size of the quarterdeck. The seal guide was there, conversing with another seal who was seated on a stool on the other side of the room.

Treedon punched him none too gently in the back, and Salvatore moved to the side to allow the others to enter. The last to come was the second seal guide. Salvatore noted that the two sailors who had been ordered to come with them were not there; presumably the seal had told them to stay behind. That left Salvatore, Treeden, and Kharaba against two warrior seals and the old one. Not great odds in a fight, but not horrible either. Then again, a fight would hopefully be unnecessary. He looked around the room with the eye of a man who had survived a dangerous profession by being ready for what came his way.

The floor of the cavern was a rough circle, flattened on the north side by the sheer cliff face. The sunlight was streaming in through the twenty or so holes on this wall, and Salvatore noted some ditches and depressions near that wall where water would run out of the cave during wet weather. The ceiling on the north side was at least fifteen yards up, allowing for the cathedral-like effect of the light. It stayed high for about half the width of the room before beginning a gradual slope on all sides, leaving the south end of the cavern with a bowl-shaped roof and very little light.

There was almost no furniture. Piles of rugs were scattered around the room, made mostly from woven cotton that had probably been traded here. Standing on the floor and lining almost every inch of wall space were statues. They ranged in size from slightly bigger than the foot-high one from Gustafus the Green's cave down to thumbnail trinkets, but they had a few things in common. None glowed with the green inner light that they had expected. All were made of fine, clear glass that had a slight greenish cast to it. Most were depictions of the same creatures as their statues, though some were of seals. All showed creatures in motion.

Sitting in the middle of the room, south of the trenches and depressions but still in the patches of bright sunlight, was the old seal on his stool. The tools of his trade littered the ground around him: awls, files, knives, and other tools Salvatore couldn't name. The tools were edged with a substance he at first thought was glass, but that seemed unlikely; glass wouldn't cut glass. When the answer came to him, he had to ruthlessly suppress the surge of avarice he felt. Stealing diamond-edged tools would get them attacked here and would surely result in the death of Sister Annarisse. Though he could handle the situation here, she could not.

On the seal's knees and draped down between them was a leather skin from a lizard he didn't recognize; this mat was designed to catch the razor-sharp bits of

glass that fell from the carvings in progress. As Salvatore watched, two more shards fell onto it from the seal's skilled hands.

"You stand in door all day, or you come talk?" asked the old seal suddenly, making the three visitors jump. Sheepishly they approached.

"We are glad to find that you speak our language, but how did that come about?" Salvatore asked.

"I learn my art in Triskellian, many years ago. I practise your language so I do not forget." The seal carefully took off one more sliver with his blade, then held his creation up to the light to inspect it. "What do you want? To supply a market with my goods? To buy direct from me?"

Treedden spoke for the first time. "We want to know about the statues that glow," he answered.

The seal nodded as though he had won a bet with himself. "You are second group this month to ask that," he remarked. "I tell you what I know, as I did them." He gestured to the floor a few feet from his stool, beyond the tools and debris. "Please sit." They obliged, somewhat gingerly for none of them liked the idea of putting their heads on a level lower than that of their host. The two guides remained standing. They had not even sheathed their spears.

"Many years ago I come back from Calabria and begin carving here," the seal began. "I carve glass made in the volcano. A ship came and bought some. Back then, I want to sell it. The ship sailed south, but storm blew up and it sank. Not long after, a seal swimming there found one of my statues on ocean floor near Island of Prin'ili. It glowed. He pick it up, bring it back to me.

"I keep that statue still. I have dreams, after it came back. I dream of dolphins, of a lady who want more statues made for her. I took six statues, all dolphins, to the spot where my tribesman had found the first one. I drop them there and swim home. I tell my tribe to swim there often. They pick up the statues they find there. Some glow, some do not. The lady tell me in dream she wants it like that. I sell the glowing statues and the others. They go to Calabria. More sailors come looking for them. She want that."

"Have other ships sailed south looking for this lady you speak of?" asked Tredden.

"Some did. At first I told them I make statues, not glow. They seek glowing statues. But none of those ships ever came back. More, the seals who take my statues there go to a different spot. The tides have changed. They cannot swim close to the Island of Prin'ili anymore. I know not why."

"The last group to come here, a few days ago. Were they going to go south looking for the lady?" asked Salvatore.

The seal nodded. "I tell them all ships die there, sink, but that fox very - what is word? - arrogant. He believe he different. Maybe he right. Maybe I was the last ever to put up with that." The seal chuckled rather nastily. "Lady want strong rescuer," he told them. "Ship can survive her storms, can rescue her. Maybe you that ship. Maybe you die like all the others."

"Does this lady have a name?" Kharaba spoke for the first time.

"Not a name, exactly. A title. Dream-Carver."

A thrill coursed through Salvatore. He recognized the name from his dreams. He had never heard the word, but the image it evoked was familiar. They were nearly there. "Can you tell us how to get to the spot where you drop off statues?" he asked.

"You have map?" Salvatore nodded and pulled out his spare chart. The seal looked it over, then pointed with a tool, making a tiny scratch on the parchment. "Here. But you have not Island of Prin'ili on your map. It over here." He made another scratch. "Be careful at Island, if you get there. No friendliness on that island." He chuckled again. "What you give me for my help?" he asked.

Salvatore had thought of this, but had not mentioned it to Treeden. He pulled a tiny leather pouch from his vest and shook it out. He heard the strangled protest from the wolf and smiled.

The seal took the sapphire and examined it. "Make beautiful statue," he commented. "It fine." He glanced up at them. "Good luck. You nicer than other fox. He Rinaldi, I think. They mean. You look mean, but you not mean. Not like them. You save my lady Dream-Carver." With that he turned away and picked up another tool to begin work on the gem. The guides ushered them to the door. A few minutes later they were back at the longboat.

The Return of the *Corrado*

They were met at the railing of the Riddock's Dawn by a very worried Mr. Mietvani. "Sir, the *Corrado* is sitting off to the west of the island," he told Salvatore before that one had put a single booted foot on the rope ladder. "She must have been there for several days. It looks like she's been making repairs of some sort. But she's spotted us, and she's heading this way!"

Salvatore launched himself up the ladder at speed. "Guns?" he asked tersely.

"Ready at command," the boar answered, much happier to be taking orders again.

"How far is she? Where's my glass?" Theo handed it to him, as the numbers were rattled off to him. They were unnecessary; a quick look through the glass had him calculating distances and ranges. The two twenty-four pound guns were even now at the long end of their range, though the smaller guns would fall far short as yet. The gun crews were waiting for the orders. "Bring her round, starboard guns at the ready!" he cried, and leapt to ensure all were well-armed.

The *Corrado* was turning even as he gave the order to fire. With her prow to them, she presented the narrowest possible target. One ball went wide, landing in the water on the brig's port side, but the other sheared off the yardarm and left the mainsail unrigged and useless. A cheer went up through the Riddock's Dawn.

It was short-lived. The *Corrado* also had twenty-four pounders, and they were mounted forward. She keeled over to starboard, presenting her port guns, and fired high, all eight guns at the same time. The twenty-four pounder took off the Riddock's Dawn's main topmast just above the rigging for the mainsail. The splintered wood rained down, skewering one of the luckless gunner rats manning a four-pounder. Two other balls hit the hull well above the waterline, holing it but not badly enough to sink the ship or even put them in serious danger. The others sailed harmlessly through the rigging to land in the water on the other side of the ship; two of them damaged rope or sail, insignificantly.

At this moment, Malachae and Rodrigo appeared on deck. Salvatore spotted them, swore, and swung through the rigging to get to them quickly. "Get below, both of you! I don't want to see you up here until the gunfire has stopped! Go!"

"But Captain, you're hurt!" Rodrigo said, and Salvatore realized that a splinter had apparently grazed his cheek, leaving it bleeding.

"It's a scratch. Go below, now. Take care of your sister," he told the boy, and the two children obeyed.

Meanwhile, the guns had continued to fire on Mr. Mietvani's orders. Studying the situation, Salvatore realized there was no more point. They were slowed by the loss of their mainsail, while the *Corrado* was still nearly whole. She was turning, in fact had already turned, and was catching the wind preparatory to flight. They would not catch her; a brig was faster than their flute to begin with, and they were now in need of some repairs. Regretfully, Salvatore called off the next round.

"Mr. Mietvani, report!" he called.

"We've got one dead, a few broken bones and scratches - nothing life-threatening," the first mate told him. "Main topmast is gone, sail's floating free. We can tack around to the lagoon again, and the island has enough wood to replace the mast and the missing yardarms if we can get the seals to trade us for it. There's a small hole high in the hull - the carpenter can have that repaired right quick, for it's minor, done by a four-pounder. Otherwise, we're fine."

Salvatore thought for a moment. "Bring us back round, then. We'll pick up Sister Annarisse and ask the seals for help. I would hope they'll trust us now, at any rate." He put one hand to the scratch on his cheek, suddenly remembering the prayer for love that he still hadn't used. Oh, well. This was just a scratch, after all. "I'm going below to find the children." He pulled his handkerchief out of his vest pocket and began mopping at the now-matted fur around the cut.

The two children were huddled together on Annarisse's bunk, looking very miserable. Salvatore entered quietly and sat down next to them. "The fight is over," he told them awkwardly. They said nothing. "I owe you two an apology," he said, startling himself. He didn't remember ever apologizing before, certainly not to children. But it felt right, so he kept talking. "I should not drink when you are around. I should have been there to help you last night, and instead I scared you. I'm sorry."

It was Rodrigo who filled the uncomfortable pause. "Do you promise not to do it again?" he asked, the sternness in his voice belied by the worried frown on his forehead.

"I have thrown all my brandy overboard. You will never see me drunk again," Salvatore promised.

Malachae reached around her brother to pat the Captain on the shoulder. "That's good," she said. "Can we still call you father?"

When he thought about it later, he was convinced he had felt the presence of his first family as his second came together.

By the time they were back in sight of the beach, there was a raft in the water being towed by several seals. On it was Annarisse, unbound. The leader and the priest were swimming alongside, accompanying their hostage to her freedom.

Malachae threw herself at Annarisse almost before she had her foot over the railing, nearly knocking them both backwards into the sea. "I'm so glad you're safe!" she cried, and Annarisse smiled.

"I'm fine, dear. Your father wouldn't have left me there if he thought I was in danger," she told the girl. Salvatore heard that as he approached, and smiled as well.

"Is your escort still below? I need to talk to them," he asked her. Then he answered his own question by looking over the railing. "Ho, Priest," he called before they could swim away. "I must beg a favour from your people."

The priest nodded. "Repair your ship?" he guessed.

"Indeed. It was damaged in the fight with the other ship, which was conducting its own repairs on the west side of the island. We need a tall, straight tree as a main topmast, and permission to stay here until it can be put in place."

Brother Pamel translated this to the leader, who nodded and replied. "You welcome to stay while repair ship," was the reply. "We have cut trees for mast. Many ships come here need repairs after storms. Keep tall trees for them. Our price one stone like you give our carver."

Salvatore smiled wryly. He should have known the guides would have told their leader about the sapphire. "Very well," he replied. "How will you get it out to the ship?"

"We float it out after high sun. Pay now?" he asked expectantly.

"Of course, of course. Just a moment." He ran back to his cabin for another gem, bringing a slightly smaller sapphire and thanking the Saint that he'd had the foresight to keep the sapphires from the Zhonggou ship out of Treeden's sight. This he gave directly to the leader, who came on board to receive it.

"I hope there will be no more talk of hostages between my ship and your people?" he said to the leader through the priest.

Brother Pamel heard the reply and smiled as he related it. "You fight other ship. You deal fair with artist, with us. You get not mad when hostage made uncomfortable overnight. You friend." He said the last somewhat hesitantly, as the fox's expression changed. He turned to Annarisse with a question in his eyes.

"You didn't need to know, Captain. I am fine, so there is no quarrel here." Her warning look had him subsiding, but silently he vowed to find out what had really happened on shore overnight.

The Storm

The next day, the seals waved them off with an extra barrel of salted fish and a spanking-new mast. Annarisse watched the island disappear over the horizon with no regrets and only slightly sore wrists. Then she went to find the children.

Rodrigo was easy to spot. He was learning to climb the rigging with the Captain, who was as sure-footed on the ropes as any Avoirdupois on land. "This one is the mainstay - it supports the mainmast," Salvatore was explaining, as he guided the boy's hands to the ropes.

"Why does the mast need supporting?" asked Rodrigo curiously.

"Because of the pressure of the wind. These masts take a lot of weight; all that sail, with all that wind filling it, would bend and break them if they weren't anchored to the hull of the ship, and to each other as well. The yardarms take some of the weight, of course. That's what they're for. But the stays take most of it. There's the mainstay, the forestays, and the rear stays to stern, and on a square-rigger like this one, there's the trigs to either side as well, mostly to help the ship turn quickly." Salvatore broke off and glanced down. "Sister! You were looking for me?"

"Actually, I was looking for Rodrigo. We have a reading lesson scheduled."

"Can it be rescheduled? The weather is perfect for some basic sailing lessons." He swung one leg over the bowsprit and let go with both hands so he was hanging from his knees, his feet tangled with seemingly careless ease in the ropes. Then he wrapped his hands in the rigging beneath him, disengaged his legs, and landed lightly at her feet. The whole manoeuvre took a few seconds. Rodrigo's eyes widened in admiration, and Annarisse chuckled.

"Far be it from me to put an end to your showing off for your son," she laughed. "Send him to me when you're done here, though, could you, sir? I don't want him to fall behind his sister."

"I'll do that, your Excellency. I believe Malachae was heading for the galley. That child eats like there's no tomorrow," he added.

"I'll look for her there, then."

She was nearly at the hatch when a sailor hailed Salvatore from the crow's nest, pointing westward. Reflexively she looked in the same direction. What she saw had her sprinting for her cabin.

A huge black storm cloud was bearing down on them from the west. Two minutes before, the sky had been a clear blue, near perfect sailing weather; now it looked like they were in for a huge blow. The wind had changed, too; where it had been from the north, an easy following wind for their direction, it was now a strong north-easterly of gale proportions.

Salvatore looked at it, swore, and swung into the rigging to help reef the sails, ordering Rodrigo down as he went. The boy didn't argue, but headed straight for Annarisse's cabin. Located amidships, nearly right under the forward hatch, it was one of the safest places on the ship in the event of a storm. Annarisse ran for the galley, where she found Malachae contentedly chewing a fishcake. Explaining tersely to the cook, she enjoined the girl to return with her to the cabin. They all three just barely made it before the storm hit.

Locked in the cabin, the three huddled together on Annarisse's bunk as the ship pitched and rolled. They had been in a few bad blows in their two months at sea, but none were at all akin to this. At times they were seated on the wall towards the stern, at times falling against the wall to the fore. Any item in the room that wasn't nailed to the floor, and a few that had been, was flying around with abandon and bruising force, never resting more than a moment before it was off again. In a momentary lull, while the ship was at the bottom of a deep trough between colossal waves, Annarisse blew out the small oil lamp to leave the three of them in the dark. Then she prayed.

It went on for hours. At one point, they heard a shrieking and pounding as though the ship was being torn board from board, and protesting its dismemberment. Then they heard a resounding crash before the ship went down into that momentary calm between waves. Annarisse kept the kids' heads close to her. She could feel water lapping at the hem of her robe, which was trailing on the floor, but she didn't move.

All of a sudden she jerked convulsively. A lance of fire drove into her leg and held there before whatever caused it was yanked out again. She fought off the unconsciousness that threatened her and reached down to feel her leg. It was bleeding, and there was a cavernous hole in it. She realized what had happened: Salvatore had finally called on the prayer of love she had placed on him. Knowing she had very little time before she fainted from loss of blood, she said a quick prayer for healing. It was enough to close the wound, and the two children did not appear to have noticed anything amiss. To be sure, they were too busy being scared right out of their wits to notice something like a different prayer from their teacher.

It seemed like days before the winds abated. Slowly, they realized that they were no longer being thrown against the walls. Then Rodrigo said something, and they all realized that the shrieking had dissipated enough to hear him. Then the rocking stopped almost entirely, and the ship was calm. The storm had ended as suddenly as it had begun.

Annarisse groped her way to the door, latching Malachae onto her waist and Rodrigo in turn to his sister. Together they stepped into the causeway, then climbed the ladder to the hatch just as it was opened from above. Salvatore, looking as tired as Annarisse had ever seen him, helped them up on deck.

The sky was clear again. In fact, a clearer day would have been hard to imagine. The sky was the deep aquamarine of the tropics, the waves were small and contained, and the wind was a gentle south-easterly that barely filled out the

few tattered sails that still hung from the masts. Annarisse glanced to stern, and realized for the first time what the crash they had heard had been.

Treeden's cabin had been built on the large deck towards the stern of the ship, just before the rudder and under the quarterdeck. It had been jarring to someone used to ships, for very few had any kind of building there. Now, having grown used to its presence, it was far more jarring to discover it gone. Where it had been, a gaping hole in the deck showed the effects of a massive wave. The carpenter and many hands were below decks, repairing the damaged hull before any more water got in that way; the cabin had been secured to joists reaching down into the holds, and when it had been ripped away some of these had come loose. The effect was to destabilize the construction of the entire ship, putting them in danger of sinking if they tried to make any headway at all. Annarisse stared at the hole, nonplussed.

"Where is Baron Treeden? Where are his servants?" she asked.

Salvatore just looked at her, too tired to answer, and shook his head. They stood there, frozen. A tug on her robe brought the priestess back to the present. "Sister! You're bleeding!" Malachae said.

She looked down; the girl was right. The leg wound was still not fully closed. The Captain looked at her leg, then back at her face, truly taken aback. "How did you get hurt?" he asked as he pushed her to a seat on a piece of debris from the mainmast, which she noticed had fallen.

Realizing he must suspect the truth, she decided to give it to him. "That prayer of love had the effect of transferring wounds from you to me," she answered.

He remained silent while she said another prayer of healing, then said with barely concealed fury, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have used it if I had?"

"Of course not! I" he stopped, and paused. "That was the idea, wasn't it? To save my life at the possible expense of your own?"

"You forget, Captain, that I was not in battle. I had the luxury of healing myself immediately, which I did. You are a man of action. My role is to keep you active, to the protection of us all." She stood and turned to the railing of the ship, staring out over the calm waters. "That crash I heard? The cabin being torn away?"

Salvatore nodded again. "He never had a chance. At least Kharaba wasn't in there with him. He's safe. Can you tell where Treeden is right now?"

She shook her head. "He asked me weeks ago to stop treating him as my supplicant, so I withdrew my prayers from him. I would be able to locate him, but that's all. What good will it do to locate a dead body? Better to leave well enough alone." She pushed away from the railing and looked around. "Was anyone else hurt? I can see to them now." Theo had come up to her with urgency written on all his features, and she followed him in the direction of the gunroom. Salvatore caught her arm before she left.

"We will talk more about that prayer, Sister," he promised. She nodded gravely and went to tend the injured.

The next morning, Salvatore called Annarisse, Kharaba, and Mr. Mietvani into his cabin for a conference. The discussion was grave as they took their seats.

“To put it simply,” he told them without preamble, “I have no idea how far off course we were blown in that storm. We could be anywhere south of the Spicer Islands at this point. If it’s clear tonight I should be able to get a slightly better idea, but the southern seas are huge and there are few islands of any kind. Half our fresh water was washed overboard with Baron Treeden, our sails will take days to repair, and the mainmast is being held together with twigs and jury-rigged. It can’t take full sail, which means we can’t make better than half-speed. The wind has died down to a ghost’s whisper since the storm, and I have no idea when it will come up again. We are almost becalmed. The owner of the ship and all his belongings are at the bottom of the ocean. We do not know the direction of the treasure we seek. I would like your opinions on our next course of action.”

Mr. Mietvani shook his head sagely. “I don’t like it, sir. If we knew for sure where lay Seal Island, I’d advise going back there. Seal Island is too small to risk passing it by, and there aren’t other islands near it. We were two weeks out of the Spicers, and the water won’t hold out long enough for us to get back there, even presuming we don’t sail right past them by accident. Still, I say we turn around and sail north; with any luck and some good rationing, we should make the Spicers at least, and if we’re lucky, we’ll take a prize with some water aboard before we get there.”

Annarisse shook her head. “I disagree, Captain,” she said. “We’ve come too far looking for this treasure to back away now without it. Can you not tell which direction to go?” She glanced pointedly at the press that held the dolphin statue. The Captain glanced thoughtfully at it, too.

“That’s a good point,” he remarked. “It may work. Kharaba?”

“I don’t understand, Captain,” said the tiger. “How would you be able to tell which direction to take?”

Deciding there was no point in keeping things from Kharaba now that Treeden was gone, Salvatore told him about the dreams and the directions he had been intuiting from them. Kharaba nodded. “That may be the best course of action then, Captain,” he replied.

Annarisse concurred. “Our best hope lies in finding that island the seal spoke of, and the best hope of doing that is that dolphin statue,” she opined.

“Thank you for your input,” Salvatore told them as he stood. As they began to leave, he said, “Sister, would you stay behind a moment?”

Annarisse hung back, knowing what was about to come. “Of course, Captain,” she replied a bit dubiously.

Salvatore waited until the others were gone, then said, “I wish you had told me what that prayer of love would do to you, Sister.”

She sat down heavily in the chair she had recently vacated. “My calling as your confessor is to see to your physical and spiritual well-being, Captain,” she

began. “My own comfort, even my own health, come a distant second to that goal. You have always been chivalrous to me, and respectful of my rank. I worried that you would choose to save me rather than yourself, if you knew the effect of the spell. To be frank, the ship can get along perfectly well without me; but it would never get back to port in one piece without you. All our lives are in your hands.”

He paced the small space for a moment before resting his hands on the chair back. “All of these things are true, and reasonable. But you did not give me any choice in the matter. It was my life, my ship, my wound even. You did not show respect for me, let alone for my rank, when you made this decision without consulting me. I had a right to know.”

She put her head in her hands. “You’re right, Captain. I should have done you the courtesy I would have expected of you, had the situation been reversed. I must beg your forgiveness.” She sat like that for a moment, while he tried to think of what to say next. He was still thinking when she ran from the room.

She hid in the forward hold, beyond the work crews fixing the patched hull, and finally let herself sink into her misery.

Her supplicant was dead. Never mind that he had rejected her and the Light; never mind that he had been engaged in a foul business that reeked of corruption. Those things were no excuse.

She had used his boorishness, his arrogance, his business dealings, as an excuse for some rotten sins of her own. She had betrayed her own honour over and over again in her relations with the Baron. She had conspired against him and his family with another who should have served them. She had aided Captain Salvatore when he tried to spy on his employer. She had lied and aided another in a lie while delivering low justice. She had counselled a thief to lie about her stealing.

How could she call herself a priest, having knowingly done these things? How could she ever look at herself as an honourable woman, ever again? What right did she have to call penance after penance on the Captain, when she herself was in such dire need of redemption? There in the dank, dark hold, she finally reckoned up her sins and paid for them in prayer and tears.

But the one whose forgiveness she really needed was not there to hear, nor would he have cared if he had been.

Time ceased as he hung in the expanse of the void.

He had no idea how long he hung there immersed, but the last tiny bubble of air had left his lips, and thus his lungs, long ago. The sea hung silent and beautiful as his water-logged eyes gazed their last. All thoughts of the ship, the crew, his mother, his life, seemed to swim away from him, tangible, but fleeting.

His mother. He never really had broken free of her grasp. He had tried for better, but failed. He was a disappointment. He had never had her killer instinct—which was probably why she quietly controlled an empire, and he hung in the sea waiting to die.

His death. The concept was almost absurd. He had always feared death, but now he met its steady gaze with his still-waterlogged eyes it all seemed so peaceful, so pointless, all of it.

His hazed mind swam back to the recent sinking of the Midchain. It was not so dissimilar a situation. But there his mind had been sharp, free ... the ship had sunk and with it, all his ties, all his debts ... it had made him free. Hanging in the ocean, injured, swollen and dying, he didn't feel so free now. What was freedom if one didn't survive to embrace it?

Soon now, so soon ... as he fell into the void the last thought to swim before his eyes was his mother, pointing and laughing as her failure of a son sunk beneath the waves to disappoint her no more.

Not ... Like This!!

Somewhere, forgotten, almost lost, he found a part of himself that defied the situation around him, a part that rebelled against this quiet ending, alone in the sea. He started scrabbling madly in the murky emptiness. But he had no idea which way was even up, which direction in the blackness to wage his life on. About as soon as the idea formed, almost, it died again.

But not quite.

His tired brain formulated the one plan that could save him, almost hope beyond hope. He struggled to make the shapes with his hands, but the storm had warped his once fine clothing into rags that bound him into a distorted lump. In agony at being so close to his goal he tore at himself with his claws. Bone met skin and tore hot welts as he madly thrashed the useless cloth into pieces that disappeared forever into the gloom. But he had done it. His tired hands finished the rhythm that he had been practising in the rigging. His eyes flew open and with the very last of his energy he mouthed the words. . .

Uncharted Island

“Land ho, three points starboard!”

The cry echoed down through the patched sails and torn rigging as the sun bore westerly, repeated by every dry voice back along the huge ship. Land. Within seconds, the ship was listing slightly to starboard with the weight of the crew who had gathered there to look. Salvatore was there instantly, commanding the best place on the deck. Unable to get a good view, he took to the rigging with his spyglass under his arm, nimbly making for the crow’s nest to get the best possible view of the land that would save them from this waterless living death at sea.

The land that met his weary eye was a gift of the Saint. Lit from the right by the setting sun, the first impression he had was of green, a verdant tropical expanse of forest that started at sea level. The second was of height, for the island appeared to be one large mountain, flat on top and treeless for the last half a mile. It was a few moments before his eye caught the glint of silver it had been searching for, a break in the trees that signified fresh water. He had no idea if this was the island of which the seal had told him, but it had water, so they would land.

He raced down the rigging again, calling orders as he went. Within moments every tattered sail they could safely carry was set. Every sailor on board knew what the island meant. Fresh water was just a few hours’ sail away, awaiting their empty casks and dry throats. It was an excellent motivator.

By sunset they were close enough to lower the longboat, but the Captain did not give the order. Mr. Mietvani came at his signal. “Do we have enough water for full rations for a night? I don’t want to go ashore at sunset,” Salvatore explained.

“We have quarter-rations left for two days, so we have half-rations for tonight,” the first mate answered. His surprise at the Captain’s measured decision was evident.

Salvatore nodded to himself. “Then we’ll break out the last of the water tonight, put out fishing lines for a fresh-caught dinner, and go ashore at first light. Tell the men.” He turned back to his spyglass, getting as much information as he could about the island.

The men were not especially pleased to be kept on the ship when fresh water was so close, but they appreciated their captain’s prudence and an extra quarter-ration of water was enough to keep them content for the night. They were busy in the riggings, splicing and knotting to repair damage as they had every night for the last twelve days. The dinner of fresh-caught fish was a welcome change from

the skimpy hard tack on which they had subsisted for so long. The ship went down with a minimal watch set, not long after sunset.

As the moon set just after midnight, Kharaba came on deck. He had been rather at loose ends since the death of his employer, and had always preferred to work his spells at night. His attention was caught by lights flickering on the island. He pulled out the little spyglass he'd secreted in his robes, and investigated.

The lights were halfway up the mountainside, stringing down into obscurity amongst the trees. They were moving in a sinuous yet jerky pattern, weaving around, then suddenly jumping, then going back to weaving. Some disappeared near the top of the mountain; others were not yet in view, hidden below the tree line. They were impossible to count, but Kharaba estimated their number at about thirty. The spyglass proved to be no help. All it revealed was a closer image of a light against the blackness. It appeared to be a flame; perhaps a torch of some kind?

Kharaba considered the situation, then decided it would not be prudent to keep this information to himself. He was heading for the Captain's stateroom when the priestess came on deck. She spotted him and came over.

"Sir Mage," she greeted him with the measured deference of a noble to a well-trained and valuable servant. He hid his anger under a small smile and bow. "What brings you here this fine night?"

"I was taking the opportunity of solitude to organize my thoughts and work on some difficult magic, but I noticed something onshore that startled me," the tiger answered, pointing to the lights.

Annarisse glanced at the island, then took a second look as she, too, spotted the lights. "It looks like a string of torches," she commented, and Kharaba cursed himself for not realizing that himself. "I wonder who lives there? And why would they be going up the mountain at this time of night?" She continued to observe as the last torch came up from the trees and reached the spot where each light had jerked. "Look, they all seem to jump at that one spot. Perhaps there's a break in the path there, where they have to climb more steeply? And the spot where they're disappearing - is it a cave, or are they going behind something? This is very curious."

Kharaba wanted to strangle her. How dared she come and steal his observations! But he said nothing.

"We need to inform the Captain," Annarisse decided, totally oblivious to his anger. She was turning away to suit action to words when they both heard a soft bump on the hull of the ship. One of the wolves who was on watch also heard it, and came to investigate as they looked over the railing.

Floating just barely above the water was a well-constructed raft, made of mature logs and tied with stout, hand-braided vine rope. It was perhaps two yards square, and sat in the water as though it had not been floating for long. On it was the body of a very strange creature. It was as tall as a full-grown fox, which meant it fit comfortably on the raft with a few inches to spare on either side. Its body was oval in shape, its legs spindly and ending in four-toed, claw

like feet. Rather than fur, it had long, tubular spikes, each of which had flat fur coming off of it. The flat fur was of many colours, though the predominant colour was green. The creature's head had quite a bit of red on it. Rather than a snout, it had a beak like a turtle's, with nostrils high up on either side of it. Though Annarisse could not clearly see these, it appeared to have wings, similar to a bat's, but more solid and covered in more of the spindly fur-things. It was quite clearly dead. The cause of death appeared, from this awkward vantage point, to be a slice to the throat. The fur on the creature's neck was certainly stained, though its back appeared to be untouched. Annarisse wondered at that; a knife wound to the throat should have produced a great deal more blood than had stained this creature's body.

Kharaba straightened and looked at the wolf sailor nearby. "Get a rope onto that raft, to hold it. I want to examine it," he ordered.

The sailor backed away, eyes wide in absolute terror. "It's a Morrigna! A Morrigna!" He was nearly incoherent with fear.

Kharaba and Annarisse glanced at each other. Then Annarisse called to another sailor on watch, a boar this time, and prevailed upon him to secure the raft. Meanwhile, Kharaba went to wake Salvatore. Within moments, sailors were spilling onto the deck, awoken by the commotion and the continued blabbering of the wolf. Salvatore did not know what was bothering them, but he gave permission for Kharaba, then Annarisse, to take a look at the creature.

It soon became obvious that every wolf on board felt the same way. They had calmed their compatriot slightly, but were grouped around the foremast, muttering and shaking their heads in foreboding. While Kharaba went down a ladder to investigate the raft and its grisly cargo, Annarisse went over to talk to them. They looked up as she approached.

"Sister, you must do something. You must make it go away," the first pleaded, still wild-eyed.

"What is it that has you so afraid?" Annarisse asked in her best confessor voice.

"It's a Morrigna. An evil spirit. They are said to steal cubs in the middle of the night. They swoop out of the sky and decimate villages. None of us are safe with it near!" His companions began to calm him, for talking about the malignancy was agitating him again. One of them spoke up next.

"It could be Baron Treeden, come back to haunt us for letting him die at sea!" The others appeared to take this suggestion under consideration, finding it even more terrible than their own imaginings.

"Bhruic, right?" she addressed the first sailor. He nodded, and Annarisse continued. "Bhruic, I'm going to investigate that creature when the tiger-mage has finished, but I can tell you this: it is no spirit. It is flesh and blood, just as you are, and it is quite dead. It will not hurt you." She saw the disbelief in their eyes, and suppressed a sigh over their superstition. "I will perform a banishing spell over it. If there are malignant spirits hanging around the body, they will leave when I command them to do so. I will perform an exorcism on the ship

itself if it will help, though I have seen no sign of any evil force here. Will these things set your mind at rest?"

All three nodded, but slowly. Heaven help us if someone steps on a thorn or gets bitten by a snake tomorrow, she thought. Quickly she said a standard prayer for them, a prayer of protection from evil, before making her way to the ladder where Kharaba was just returning to the deck.

"It's quite dead, of natural causes - no magic about it," he told her and anyone else close enough to listen. "Looks to me like a ritual killing, actually."

Annarisse nodded. "I'd like to go down and see for myself. I'll be back straightaway," and she disappeared from his view.

Investigating the corpse, she quickly decided that her first impression had been correct: the knife wound to the neck was the cause of death. Strangely, it appeared the blood had been caught in a container instead of being allowed to spill. She could see the slight ridge of blood made by the lip of the bowl which had been pressed against the neck. The bowl had been placed at the left side of the neck. This bothered her, but it took her a moment to sort out why. Then she realized: if the blood were flowing down to the left, that meant the creature had been lying down on its back when it was killed. Kharaba was right, then. This was a ritual sacrifice. She shuddered. Further investigation revealed that the ropes had been tied before death, for there were bruises under them. This creature had been tied to the raft, then murdered, then set adrift. She said her ritual prayers for the dead, chanting the cadences with more volume than was strictly necessary for the benefit of the wolves. Then she climbed back up the rope ladder to the deck, and motioned Captain Salvatore to come out of earshot of the sailors. Quietly, she told him what she knew.

He listened quietly. "There's an old Bisclavret legend about flying creatures that aren't bats. Probably that's what they're afraid of. Have you said the necessary prayers?" She nodded. "Then I say we cast it off and see where the current takes it. The sun will rise soon anyway; the eastern sky is already lightening. If you'll say your prayers to protect the ship from the evil spirits, I think we can keep the wolves from panicking. And I'll leave them on the ship for the day. No sense inviting trouble by having them on shore."

"If I may, Captain, it would be wise to either take one of them with us, or leave several others behind. We would not want them deciding to leave us stranded out of fear of these spirits."

"You're right, Your Excellency. Bhruic can come with us; the other two can stay on the ship." He signalled to the boat to cast off the raft. Within moments, the black shape against the greying sky had drifted out of sight.

One mark later, the sun was up and the ship was bustling. Captain Salvatore requested all hands on deck, and got them in record time. Quickly he named off the people staying behind on the skeleton crew, then detailed the hands who would fill the water casks and those who would hunt and search for edible plants. The larder had been depleted substantially by the storm, with several barrels of foodstuffs washed away and several more rendered inedible. He detailed two scouts to head up the mountain, to survey the island and make a

map of its coastline. Finally he decreed that Kharaba, Annarisse, the two children, himself, and two sailors would explore up the mountain a bit. His idea was to give the kids some much-needed exercise while getting away from the crew for a while.

The water from the stream was clear and sweet, and Salvatore drank his fill after the children and Annarisse had done the same. Some of the men were fishing in the shallow tide pools, or digging for clams in the moist sand of the beach. Others were filling water casks to be floated back to the ship. A few were cavorting and diving off the rocks, saving their assigned tasks until later. Salvatore got those ones in line quickly, then when all were working, left Mr. Mietvani in charge and headed for the narrow path that opened by the edge of the tropical jungle, at the base of the mountain.

"Captain, are you sure this path is good for the children? It's quite steep," panted Annarisse.

"Nonsense! They need some proper exercise! We won't go too far," he said as he offered her his newly-filled canteen. She took it gratefully, taking a long swig before handing it to Malachae.

"It's pretty here, Father," she told him, still shy about using that word but starting to get used to it.

"Don't be fooled, dear. There are probably dangerous creatures about. Make sure you stay close. Rodrigo, do you have that knife I gave you?" The boy nodded and puffed up a bit at the notion that his father thought he was man enough to help protect the womenfolk. Annarisse shared a carefully hidden smile with Salvatore over that.

They were maybe halfway to the tree line and a good three marks into their hike when Kharaba, walking in front, stopped suddenly. Salvatore had a pistol out instantly, and the two sailors had their swords, but Kharaba motioned them to put the weapons down. "Look at that idol!" he pointed, and they all looked.

Sitting next to the path was a large statue carved of driftwood. Grey with age and water, it bore a face remarkably similar to the glowing glass statue resting in Salvatore's press. The intriguing thing was not so much the statue itself, as the fact that the face was moving. Subtly, the expression changed from boredom to interest to cunning, then to welcome. Annarisse found it very disturbing. She considered a detect magic spell, then decided she didn't need it.

"What spell could control an object like that?" she asked Kharaba.

"It's an eidolon spell - the caster can see and hear whatever is going on within range of the idol, and possibly even cast spells through it." Kharaba didn't take his eyes off the idol, but he did begin the motions for a spell. Recognizing it, Annarisse decided to bring up her version of it. In moments, the party was encased in a circle of protection, and Salvatore, Kharaba, and Annarisse had extra protection layered on them by the thaumaturgist.

"You say it can hear us?" Salvatore confirmed with the mage. He nodded, and Salvatore stepped forward.

"Don't step outside the spell, Captain," Annarisse warned.

Salvatore waved that off, but did not leave the circle. Instead, he addressed a deep, courtly bow to the statue. "If you are near, Mage, we would be honoured by your presence for dinner this evening," he told it. Its expression shifted to polite neutrality. "We will remain on the beach until sunset to await your arrival." With that, he bowed again, then turned to leave. Kharaba did a quick detect-magic spell on the statue, then turned to follow the group as they headed back down the mountain.

Arriving at the beach forty minutes later, the orders came thick and fast. "Those casks are to be floated out to the ship immediately, along with the food that has been gathered. Shore leave is cancelled except for you, you, you, and you," and he pointed to four burly sailors who could handle themselves in a fight. "Children, you're going back to the ship immediately. Your Excellency, I would appreciate it if you would stay for dinner on the beach." He looked at her inquiringly, and she nodded.

In the rush of activity that followed, all but the cook, the four sailors, the mage, Salvatore, and herself left for the ship. Watching as the boats were shoved into the shallow water, Annarisse noticed something. "Didn't Rianna come ashore?" she asked Salvatore.

He shrugged. "I thought so, but she's not here," he answered. They all settled down to wait for their guest.



Summer, his mother's gardens.

He rode along the water bank as fine as any young lordling on such a day. His lungs drew deep of air tinged with the finest of summer's bounties, and his fine gentleman's raptor pranced onwards as he sat straight and tall in the saddle.

A maiden, beautiful as the flowers she picked, cavorted at the banks. First he stopped, then disembarked from his mount . . . oh sweet maiden. He threw her giggling down upon the garden, bathed himself in the opulence of her soft skin, feeling himself rising to meet her. Time stopped, and then they were in the stream, entwining bodies, falling under, tangling, deeper and deeper . . .

He opened his eyes with a start.

He ached, oh how he ached. Every fibre of his being beat a dull pain. He tried to focus, but even though he was almost certain his eyes were reacting as they should, a shimmering veil stopped him from really seeing much around him, tempting him with blurs and vague shapes and colours. He could just about make out a grey mass moving amidst the other subdued colours, but as he moved his head to follow it pain exploded above his right eye and he slunk back into the depths.

Rianna on the Mountain

Rianna took her orders from the cook as soon as they got into shore. “Go off into the woods to find edibles,” he told her with a wave and a wink. Taking that as the liberty it was, she raced off in the direction of the path, then realized that the fox, the horse and the tiger had taken that route just a moment before. Not wanting to run into them, or anyone else for that matter, she veered right, finding a route through the trees a bit west of where the ship’s party had disappeared.

There was no path, but that didn’t faze her. She wove her way expertly through the trees, avoiding sounds and keeping a nose out for problems. Her belly and her sack started to fill up with fruit hanging from the vines, waiting to be picked. She drank the milk of three coconuts, putting their meaty shells into her bag for the cook. Then she continued upwards. She crested a low ridge to look down on the other side of the mountain, when several large insects came under her sharp claws and teeth, too. She figured she wasn’t losing anything by not bringing those back; most of the ship’s crew didn’t really like eating bugs. Ah, but it was good to eat meat that wasn’t fish for a change! She was still savouring the last of these when she saw the eyes.

They belonged to a beast she’d never seen before. It was green, covered in scales, stood on its hind feet, and it had teeth that would make a wolf jealous. It had come out of the wood onto the path while she enjoyed her bug, and was now eyeing her in much the same way she had observed her snack on its leaf.

The creature started to pace towards her. Frozen in terror, Rianna would have stood there waiting to be eaten. She was trying to formulate a last prayer for light when a gunshot from around the bend in the path startled her. It felled the creature instantly, and she unfroze enough to look around for her saviour. He came around the bend with a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other. Immediately the knife was at Rianna’s throat, and she gulped as he holstered his pistol and grabbed her arm.

“What have we here?” said a cultured voice with a Triskellian accent.

Holding the knife was a grey fox, old but still in excellent form. He was dressed in the uniform of a Rinaldi naval officer, white breeches, blue coat with hammered-gold epaulets. Rianna was quite dazzled by the breadth of shiny medals decorating his chest. It took her a moment to tear her eyes away from them to take in the rest of the party.

There were two others. One was a priest, a badger wearing the simple brown robes of a monk and a battered wooden holy symbol around his neck. The other was a bat who, in Rianna’s opinion, was most strangely dressed for a

walk in the woods. She was wearing a ball gown of the latest style to come out of Harrowgate, though it was somewhat scratched and torn at the moment. Caught in its silken splendour were numerous twigs, leaves and small insects. How silly could she get, wearing a gown like that in a place like this? Rianna nearly scoffed out loud.

“Do you speak Calabrese?” asked the fox. Rianna nodded reflexively, then winced. She should have played dumb. But it was too late now. “Where are you from?”

Rianna thought as fast as she could. This was probably the captain of that other ship the red fox was always talking about, the one they were chasing. It wouldn't be a good idea to tell him what ship she came from. She tried to hedge. “I'm from the Muire Forest,” she told him.

His face hardened and he stepped forward, pushing her back into a tree and putting the blade close against her jugular. She didn't dare gulp. “Did you come on a ship?” She nodded, and the knife nicked her. She whimpered. “What ship brought you here?” he asked.

“The Barrok's Dawn?” she offered hesitantly, still trying to lie but not at all sure it was worth it.

“Is it under the command of a fox named Salvatore?” He apparently saw the answer in her face, for he didn't wait for her to say anything. Instead he turned her around roughly, pushed her to the ground with his knee in her back, whipped out some rope from his pack and bound her hands behind her. “You're coming with us,” he said, “and let's hope your Captain values your life enough to bargain for it.” With that the four of them began the march down the other side of the mountain, Rianna in front with a sword at her back.

There, anchored far below them two hundred yards offshore, was the *Corrado*.

Upon arriving at the beach, Captain Ferrante detailed two of his guards to stand watch over the prisoner before heading off to join his crew. Quickly and efficiently, the guards tied her to a log with some stout rope. The knots were not very tight, and Rianna had to restrain herself from going to work on them immediately. It would not do, though, to escape too quickly. She wanted to escape as the sun set, so they wouldn't follow her. Meekly she submitted to being tied, and replied with nods and shakes of the head when spoken to. The guard decided she was a simpleton and sat down a few feet away to clean, sharpen and oil his sword. She took the opportunity of the remaining daylight to survey the scene.

The most interesting item was a wooden room-thing which was sitting on the shore. It was conical, with the boards that formed the sides sloping up towards the middle. The sides gave the impression of a barrel, bound with big metal bands that held the staves together. Near the top, the sides stopped sloping and suddenly became straight again, giving the impression of a very linear bell shape. Coming out of its roof were chains and tubes for which Rianna could not begin to picture uses. Looking closely, it appeared that the room had no bottom. Instead, it had a little ledge that left a person-sized hole in

the middle of the floor. Rianna shook her head over it. Who would build such a strange-looking house?

During the time she had spent surveying the scene, it had changed significantly. The sailors were no longer lazing about the beach on shore leave. Ferrante had stirred them up, sending about half of them back to the ship and conferring with some of his officers near the second longboat. Rianna strained to hear what was being said over the noise of the sword against the whetstone.

“Won’t come by tonight,” the grey fox was saying. One of the others made a reply she couldn’t hear, but the Captain’s reply was firm. “They have no way of knowing we’re here. They’ve only been here a few marks themselves. They’ll be taking on water,” here his voice became muffled again as the other guard moved between her and the officers. A moment later she could hear again – “Need more than the skeleton crew, but not the full fighting force. I’ll stay on shore. So will the half crew already detailed, to guard the bell. The others return to the ship, turn her to catch the pirates as they approach from the west, and be prepared to sink them when they come. We’ve sunk their ship before with no great effort. We can do so again.” Ferrante turned his back to Rianna to speak to an officer on his other side. With his voice directed away from her, she missed most of what he said next. Then he turned back to the group at large and told them, “At first light, we sail around the island to catch them unawares. They’ll be begging for mercy before noon.” With that he turned and headed for the cooking fires, and his officers scattered to follow orders.

So, Rianna thought. They’re going to attack in the morning, are they? Well, the red fox was a meanie who had put her in chains twice, but he hadn’t made her walk the plank or anything. This fox was an even worse meanie, not even trying to hire her. She decided to escape to warn the red fox. Maybe now he’d trust her!

As the guard became complacent and sleepy, she worked carefully at the ropes. Why couldn’t they have chained her? Locks on chains were much easier to pick than knots on ropes. Gradually she loosened them until finally, just after sunset, they fell from her wrists. She glanced at the guard; he hadn’t noticed. No one else was close enough or at the right angle to see that she was no longer tied. Those sailors still on shore were eating or carousing. It was now or never.

She leapt up, stumbled a bit over the ropes, then gained her footing and grabbed at a stick lying loose on the ground. The guard had heard something that tipped him off. He stood up and began to turn just as she brought the stick down on his head, with the result that it hit his temple instead of the back of the skull she’d been aiming for. He toppled like a felled tree, ramming the other side of his head on a log in the process.

Was he dead? She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t stop to find out. She grabbed his sword, breastplate, and helmet, all of which were lying next to the spot where he’d been sitting to sharpen the sword. Then she took off into the trees. Behind her, she heard someone sound the alarm, so she ran faster. Within moments the

sounds from the beach were diminishing behind her and the ground was sloping in front of her.

She ran in a zigzag path up the mountain, squeezing between trees and pulling the breastplate and sword behind her, until the sounds of pursuit disappeared behind her. Then she slowed to a walk. She decided to try on the helmet. It had a feather on top! Pleased with her lovely new hat, she swaggered a bit as she walked. It would take a while to cross the mountain, but she had all night, really, and the moon was full.

She was nearing the summit and beginning to get worried about time when the bats appeared.

There were about seven of them, all much larger than herself, covered in weird body paint that made them look very scary. They surrounded her quickly, grabbed her sword, and took it from her. Then they moved in closer to look at her hat. They were making strange noises, very high-pitched squeals that she couldn't understand, but they seemed to like the hat. She took it off to show them better.

One of them grabbed it, exclaiming in what appeared to be delight. They directed their sounds to her, now, seeming to be pleased with her offering. Rianna made a move to take the hat back, but they evaded her, laughing. Hoping they'd give it back if she did what they wanted, she went with them as they continued up the mountain. Really, there was no choice. They were still surrounding her.

The path they followed came out soon to a small clearing in front of a cave. Rianna stared around in awe and growing terror.

There were at least fifty bats in the clearing, all painted with strange designs all over their bodies. They were arranged in two long lines down either side of the clearing, pointing her and the party of bats who had brought her here towards the cave mouth. It was not a deep cave, and the fire lit just barely inside its mouth lit the back walls of it quite nicely. She had no trouble at all making out the niches that had been carved into the stone, nor the items that occupied them.

For a moment she thought they were hats like hers, until she looked closer. Then she nearly started to gibber in terror.

They were not hats. They were skulls.

The bats looked at her reaction and laughed. Just as she was considering dissolving in a puddle of panic on the ground, she recognized what the two at the head of the lines were holding. One had a long length of rope, and the other a long, curvy bone knife. Both had started to approach her.

Instinctively, she flung herself backwards. The bats who had been blocking her escape were not expecting her to dive between their legs, and they were not fast enough to stop her. Their hesitation of a few moments was enough for her. She dropped the breastplate and sword belt, and flung herself headlong over the cliff.

It was a very bumpy descent. She hit tree after tree, until she figured out how to roll from side to side and thereby avoid most of them. In the time it took

for the light to go from dusk to full dark, she had come halfway down the mountain. Then she hit an especially big tree and stopped. Winded, bruised, and frightened more than she'd been since the wolf lord had found her in his room, she stayed utterly still to listen for pursuit.

She heard it. Over to the left, nearer to the path she'd taken to come up the mountain, bats were circling and squealing to each other. Well, then. If they were sticking to the path, she would stick to the woods. Quietly, using all her wood lore, she got to her feet and began to work her way down the mountain. Even the unfriendly grey fox was better than bats who wanted to eat her.

She took two steps down the mountain, tripped over a protruding root, and lost her balance. Rianna had time for one last wince before the ground came up to meet her and the world went black.

The Third Battle of the *Corrado*

The two sailors came barrelling out of the woods onto the beach just as the sun was dipping below the horizon. Salvatore leapt to his feet, with Annarisse and Kharaba half a jump behind him.

The mage had not appeared. The ship had just been signalled to send out the longboat, and it was pulling into shore as the men rushed out of the woods. Salvatore waited for them to arrive. They were talking before they had stopped running.

"It's the *Corrado*, sir! She's anchored the other side of the island! Her crew are mostly on the shore, she's floating a skeleton crew and making a new foremast. There were maybe ten people on board that we could see - everyone else was on the beach." The fox stopped running and talking, too breathless to continue. The boar took up the tale.

"They've got a big wooden contraption on shore - it's shaped kind of like a bell. We couldn't make hide nor hair of it. It looked like Ferrante was on the beach, too. They don't have a clue that we're here."

Salvatore's face was lit with a fierce joy as he realized what this meant. Within moments, the fire was doused and all of them were piling into the longboat to go back to shore. The Captain spoke quickly to Annarisse and Kharaba. "The moon is about to rise in the east, and it's nearly full. We can sail east around the island by its light, avoiding the lee shore, and be in a position to blow them out of the water or board them by moonset. Which direction was she pointed, Miles?"

"Her prow was in to shore, sir, but that headland to the east would cut off most of our approach. By the time she spotted us, we'd be in a position for a full broad-side with every gun, and she'd be at the wrong angle to shoot back. Mind you, she's got the stern chasers, two eight-pounders, but that's two guns to our eight on the starboard deck. And she has no foremast; she can't turn very well with just the mainmast, and everything's tied down for the night. They're resting at anchor."

Salvatore smiled. "Perfect. We can take them with no problem. A capture of the best Rinaldi ship - not a bad prize for a Bisclavret slaver." He glanced at Annarisse. "I'd like Malachae well out of this. Perhaps you and she could set up an infirmary below decks? Rodrigo's place is up with the crew, though."

Annarisse frowned. "Can Rodrigo run messenger between the deck and the infirmary? He's too young to be in the middle of the battle."

Salvatore looked surprised. "He's the same age I was when I went to sea. But all right - one of the cabin boys will be running messages anyway, it may as

will be him. Kharaba, can you put your protection spell on the gun crews? They're the most vulnerable and the most vital."

"Of course, sir. I can put one on you right now, if you'd permit me." Salvatore nodded absently, and Kharaba put the spell on him. They arrived at the ship just as he was finishing. The Captain vaulted up the rope ladder so fast his feet didn't touch the rungs at all. By the time Annarisse and Kharaba had followed at a more sedate pace, he was already issuing orders and the ship was buzzing.

Sail was set, and the ship headed east into the moonrise, tacking carefully around the headlands that interrupted the currents on that side of the island. The gun crews were loading, measuring powder charges from the barrels below decks, lining up shot, and polishing their already-spotless guns. The excited betting between the gun crews began as to which crew would fire fastest and most often, who would hit their target the most, and who would do the most damage. Annarisse heard comments like, "Bonus points for knocking out the mainmast!" and "Naw, the mast is nothing when we want to sink her. The highest points go to the crew that holes her under the waterline." The men's spirits were high after their day of good food and plentiful water. The survivors of the *Spirit of Midchain* were telling stories about that sinking to their more recently-hired shipmates, stirring up the righteous ire that was justification for any measure of action.

They rounded the second headland some three marks later, just as the moon reached zenith. The scene in the bay was almost as well-lit as it would have been in daylight. Salvatore surveyed the scene for a moment, and got a nasty surprise.

To starboard, now behind them a bit, was the headland that had protected them from full view of the *Corrado* up to this point. It formed a natural harbour some eight hundred yards across. No more than two hundred yards away, fully masted, no longer at anchor and more than half-manned, was the *Corrado*. She had turned so that her prow was pointing out to sea, but it appeared the angle was still wrong for her to fire on them; her port guns were pointed at the headland, and she would need to advance a good hundred yards, or turn three points to starboard, to get a proper bearing on them. However, the change in her position and in her staffing proved one thing. She had been warned of their presence.

Salvatore waited no longer. There was no longer a prayer of capturing the Rinaldi ship; better just to sink her, while their own starboard guns could sweep her broadside and prevent her turning.

"Fire," he commanded softly, as every ear on the ship strained to hear.

The guns roared, the ship rocked with the recoil, and a cheer went up from the sailors in the riggings even as the gun crews reloaded and fired again. Over and over again the eight guns discharged their deadly balls of iron and grapeshot, and over and over again the shots hit home.

The very first eight-pound balls tore through the rigging of the other ship, taking out both yardarms on the mainmast and main topsail and several of the

ropes that went with them. Half the main topsail was soon flying free, unconnected to its supports. Foxes were springing into the rigging to repair the damage even as other balls began to rain on them from the Riddock's Dawn. More eight-pounders holed the hull, too high to sink her but low enough to take out part of the portside gun deck. The Riddock's Dawn sailors cheered again as one of the *Corrado's* twelve-pounders, already primed and ready to fire, blew up instead when their smaller cannonball hit it. Within moments, the sail above that gun deck was on fire, and the two guns on either side of the casualty were soon too hot for their crews to handle them. Both fired, but wildly into the headland.

The second round was better aimed as the crews got into the rhythm of loading, firing, cleaning, and loading again. No fewer than four of the eight balls put holes in the hull, two of them within inches of the waterline. Another two took out the main topmast and the forward topmast respectively, rendering the *Corrado* essentially directionless, for there were no more topmasts with which to achieve a turn. She fired her chasers, hitting with one twelve-pound ball into the lower rigging of the Riddock's Dawn. The damage was minimal, involving a few splinters of wood raining on the deck below and causing two injuries to the gun crews. They ignored these, unwilling to leave the fight.

The Riddock's Dawn had continued to edge forward around the headland, so that by the time of the third round, she was nearly at right-angles to the brigantine and less than a hundred yards away. Salvatore held up his hand for a pause. A hush descended on the ship as he changed the order. "Point all guns low," he told them. "We want to take out strips of the hull. Be prepared to furl every sail at my command." He paused while the ship achieved the exact angle he was waiting for, then said, "Furl! Bring us to a dead stop!" Waiting just a second longer as the huge ship slowed, he finally gave the last order. "Prepare to fire in unison - Fire!"

The guns boomed, lighting up the night with their flame and obscuring it with their smoke. As the acrid fumes cleared, a great cheer went up.

The *Corrado* had been raked by the guns, exactly as Salvatore had planned. Two balls had hit at just the right angle to shear off bits of hull on both the port and starboard sides, leaving long, deep gashes across the entire prow. Water was pouring in at a tremendous rate. The *Corrado* was sinking.

Her crew realized it quickly, and the cry went up. She was going down so fast there was no time even to lower the remaining longboat. The crew simply jumped, and began swimming the three hundred yards to shore. Several were pulled under as the *Corrado* sank, while others grabbed bits of flotsam and managed to remain afloat.

"Bring us in closer, Mr. Mietvani," Salvatore ordered as the few injured amongst his crew began to head below for tending. The first mate complied, pulling up to within fifty yards of the shipwrecked crew. The men in the water were crying for mercy.

The Captain surveyed them from above, then gave the signal his fighters had been waiting for. Silently, they cocked their muskets as he cocked his pistols. Without a word being spoken, the crew of the Riddock's Dawn began to shoot.

Annarisse and Malachae came up on deck just as the musket fire started. The priestess realized immediately what was happening, and tried to restrain the girl, but the young fox rushed forward to look over the railing next to her father. Annarisse hurried after her, but it was too late; she had already seen. Together they watched as their sailors reloaded and fired again and again into the water. The pitiful cries diminished or changed to screams of pain as the water blossomed with blood. The crew kept firing until the last sounds had stopped.

Malachae turned to Annarisse, so stricken the priestess rushed to support her lest she faint. The girl buried her face in Annarisse's robes and sobbed as the priestess held her. Thus it was that Malachae was spared the sight of the crowning horror of that night.

Darting into the bloodied waves were sleek, silver bodies, their dorsal fins cutting the surf as they arrived, pulled by the smell of blood. Even as the last musket fired and the last cry was silenced, the sharks began their grisly work.

Within moments it was over. Silent, chilled a bit by the complete annihilation in which they had participated, the sailors began to clean their guns and prepare to rest at anchor.

In the priest's cabin, a child cried. And over the island, the moon reached its zenith.

Interrogations

The sky was just starting to brighten when Rianna awoke with a moan. Her headlong tumble had been broken by a stout palm tree, which had knocked her out cold for several marks. Cautiously she sat up and peered around the tree at the beach.

She noticed the change of ships immediately. The *Corrado* was gone, though the flotsam littering the beach suggested something very mean had happened to it. In its place was the Riddock's Dawn. They had figured it out and come to sink the other ship! Rianna shrugged. Who cared who won, if they were both meanies!

Next, she looked at the beach. A group of sailors were there, including all three of the people who had taken her prisoner the day before. She edged closer to hear what they were saying.

" - take a stand against the trees, kill as many as we can," Ferrante was saying to his men.

The badger and the bat looked at each other, apparently not too happy with this idea. Still, they hid in the trees near where Rianna was concealed, to wait while the remaining crew of the *Corrado* made their stand. They did not wait long. Even as they were checking their weapons and armour, a longboat full of fighters set off from the Riddock's Dawn, rowing quickly for the shore.

Rianna looked around her for something to use as a weapon. She realized that she was not far away from a supply of extra weapons and armour, brought ashore by the crew of the *Corrado* and then left there when they were ordered to return to their ship. She snuck out of her hiding place as the longboat reached the shore, and investigated.

"We are here to apprehend the criminal Ferrante, once captain of the *Corrado*," called Salvatore to the tense group on the beach. Rianna tested the blade of a sword, rejecting it when it wouldn't cut through some fur on her tail.

"Come take me, then, bastard!" cried the grey fox.

Salvatore drew two pistols, and his men did the same. The men of the *Corrado* were armed with swords and knives, with only two guns amongst the twenty of them. "Your ship is at the bottom of the lagoon. You have no way off this island unless I take you off. Hand over the criminal now, and I will see to it that all of you get back to Triskellian alive."

Ferrante laughed scornfully. "You would trust this pirate reprobate? He'll feed you to the sharks as he did your mates! Attack!" His men apparently believed him, for they began to run across the beach. Ferrante stayed behind, near the trees. Rianna tested a second sword on her tail, and found it much sharper.

Salvatore fired first, followed closely by each of his men. In moments, six of the attackers lay dying on the white sand. The others stopped running, suddenly realizing that Ferrante was not with them. They milled around a moment, too far from Salvatore for an attack, trying to decide what to do. Salvatore made up their minds for them. Drawing his third and fourth pistols, he fired again, dropping one more. The remaining twelve men turned and ran for the bush, only a few steps behind their captain.

Rianna marched over to the badger and the bat, who were still hidden, and pointed her new sword at them. She gestured with it, and the two moved towards the beach obediently. This was fun! She stumbled a bit as she tripped over the leather straps of the breastplate she'd chosen, and pricked the priestly badger in the backside. He yelped, and Salvatore looked in their direction. Seeing that the sailors were escaping, he detailed some men to follow them, then approached her.

"Rianna? How do you come to be here?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I took them prisoner for you!" answered the weasel.

Salvatore frowned, then turned to his remaining fighters. "Tie them up and put them in the longboat," he ordered. The five sailors descended on them, and in moments, the bat, the badger, and Rianna were all bound tightly in the bottom of the longboat.

Rianna groaned again as they forcibly removed her armour and sword from her. More chains! Sullenly she sank into her spot in the longboat.

Annarisse softly closed the door to her cabin and sighed. Malachae had finally fallen into a troubled sleep near dawn, the screams of dying seamen still ringing in her ears. She feared the girl would be injured in the mind with the violence she witnessed. Worse was the fear that she would lose her compassion for their fellow creatures as she became accustomed to the violence. The Captain did not seem to recognize this danger. Annarisse straightened her spine. He would have to be made aware.

She found a spot near the railing and watched through the pale light of early morning as the longboat carrying the prisoners was launched from the beach. The *Corrado* had finally fallen to Captain Salvatore. It had been his stated goal, she knew, from long before the sinking of his first ship a few months before, to best Captain Ferrante. But from the moment that ship had sunk, with Salvatore near death in the last longboat to escape it, his one purpose in life had been revenge. Though her piety rebelled at the thought and all her training urged her to reject it, Annarisse admitted to herself, in the quietness of her heart, that she also had sought revenge. As the longboat came within hailing distance of the ship, she said prayers for the souls of those so recently killed in battle. She was all the more fervent in her prayers for knowing that on some level, she had wanted them dead. She then recited, as had become her habit each day, prayers for the souls of the sailors and villagers lost at Roxbarren. She thought of each of those whom she had known personally, down to the smallest mouse, and once more

shed tears for all they had lost. For her desire for revenge, she resolved to do penance, but later.

She surveyed the beach as the light crept over the mountain from the east. The bell-shaped apparatus intrigued her greatly. One of the sailors had told her it resembled a diving bell, used in harbours to retrieve items lost overboard. This one was much bigger than the sailors had ever seen, though. She looked at the longboat that was approaching. In it was a badger wearing the brown robes and holy symbol of a brother of S'Allumer, and a batwoman who had been bound and gagged, probably on suspicion of being a mage. Rianna was also there, but that was all. Apparently Ferrante had escaped. Salvatore would not be pleased, she mused. But the longboat had arrived, and the Captain was signalling her.

"Will you talk to the priest?" he asked. "I want to know about that diving bell." She nodded as the first prisoner stepped over the railing.

First to board was the old badger cleric. She had no seniority over him in the Church, but she certainly had authority over him here. Deliberately she called into her mind her rage over the massacre at Roxbarren, using it to fuel what she was about to do. She drew her nobility around her and put its force into her voice when she spoke.

"Tell me about this diving bell," she told him.

"Well, Sister," he replied, with a bit of a sneer in his voice, "It is a device of my own invention, quite ingenious, really, which the unlearned among you," here he looked down his long snout at her, "could not hope to understand."

"Get to the point!" Her voice cut through his pomposity in much the way a cannonball had recently destroyed the mast of the *Corrado*. The Captain started to move towards them. "Understand this: I am in charge here. You will answer my questions, fully and directly. Now." She pulled herself up to her full height, and felt her carefully-cultivated humility fall away in the rush of assumed anger. For this moment, she was all noblewoman, exercising her ancient right in a manner which would have made her father proud. Deep in her mind, her priestly sensibilities protested. She ignored them.

"Well, Sister," and the sneer, though diminished, was still present, "Other diving bells have been made only of wood, to retrieve simple objects from harbours. Never before has a bell been made which -" He broke off at the sensation of a pistol pressed into his back.

"Please understand, good brother," said the Captain in a silky voice, "That it would not be difficult to implicate you in the criminal activities at Roxbarren which we have been sent to punish. It would, in fact, be quite easy to say that you had died from wounds received during the battle for the *Corrado*." He paused, and the badger gulped. "Try again. This time, follow the good sister's directions. Address her with respect. She will not let me kill a man of the cloth without good reason. Do not give her, or me, reason." He gestured to two sailors, who took the brother by each arm and held him a few inches off the deck. Annarisse looked on impassively while his tongue came out in a pant of panic. Then she stepped forward. Using her greater height and all the noble hauteur

that sat so easily on her, she quietly said, "Let's try this again, shall we? Do you know how to use this bell?"

"Yes, sister," he replied, now scared and meek. "I invented it, after all."

"Do you have maps to the - um, goods - which Captain Ferrante was seeking on the ocean floor?"

"The bat woman -" he made a gesture to the bound, gagged bat mage a short distance away - "was to perform the calculations necessary to pinpoint the location, following which I was to use the bell."

Annarisse looked over at the cowering woman. "Is this true?" she asked, still with ice in her voice. The bat nodded. Annarisse turned her attention to the sailors holding the priest. "You know the cell on the port side of the slave hold? The one directly under my cabin?" They nodded. "Take him to it and lock him inside."

"Should we put him in irons first, Sister?" one asked.

Her look grew colder, and her voice quieter. "Does one ever need to put a man of the cloth in irons like a common criminal?" she asked. They shook their heads frantically, awed at her demeanour as they were not by the humble services she usually performed on the ship. She gathered her thoughts and her holy symbol, and began to pray, while a part of her wondered if the Saint would listen to her in this mood. After a few words, the brother started to snarl, aware of what she was doing but unable to stop it. She released the spell and bit back a sigh of relief when it worked. Then she turned back to the sailors. "Lock him in the cell. No irons are necessary. Since he no longer has any books to study, I do not believe a lamp is necessary either. He will not perform any magic now. He knows what will happen if he tries." Then she turned and walked away, leaving them to do her bidding.

The Captain was waiting for her on the poop deck, with the weasel girl in manacles in front of him. He looked at her inquiringly. "The cleric will give us no further trouble," she told him. "He is quite thoroughly cowed. I put a penance on him to keep him from performing magic." She told him what the badger had told her about the bell; he nodded. Then she added, as the sailors were taking the weasel to the slave hold, "Is it really necessary to chain her up again? I simply can't picture her involved in treachery."

"Well, you must admit it looks bad for her. She left our ship freely, alone, supposedly to find foodstuffs, and the next time we see her, she's in the company of our enemies, dressed in their armour. I need to find out her part in this before trusting her on my ship again."

The Captain was looking at her oddly, and she realized suddenly that she was still carrying herself as the noblewoman who had interrogated the priest. Consciously she relaxed, dropped the familiar posture, and resumed the priestly mien that was customary to her. She thought a moment about his point, then brightened. "I've used my prayer of penance as a truth spell before. I can do it again." Salvatore winced with the memory, but nodded. "Let me tell you how I think we should handle her." Annarisse leaned closer and spoke quietly for a few moments. The Captain listened and smiled. "Do it," was all he said.

Annarisse descended the ladder to the slave hold quickly, not willing to leave the weasel alone longer than necessary. She had been chained using the most secure chains on the Captain's orders. Hanging there unable to move, she looked truly despondent. Annarisse did not pull herself up for this one. Rianna didn't need to be cowed; she needed to be convinced.

"Well, Rianna, you've gotten yourself into very deep waters with the Captain," she said, taking a place on the bench beside the girl. "We let you go freely from our ship, and next time we see you, you're in company with the enemies of the Captain, carrying one of their swords and wearing their armour. The Captain thinks you betrayed the ship to our enemies, and the Captain does not deal kindly with people who betray him." She waited for her words to sink in, watching the fear grow a bit in the weasel's eyes. Then she continued, "I have a feeling there's more to this than meets the eye, though. I told the Captain I didn't think you would be involved in a scheme like that, and I didn't think the chains were necessary. His opinion is that, until he is convinced that you did not betray him, you must stay here in chains." The little weasel slumped a bit more. Annarisse put an arm around her shoulders. "Here's the thing, Rianna. The Captain trusts me to be truthful with him. If you tell me you didn't betray us, and I believe you, then the Captain will believe me when I tell him that. I'm willing to be convinced, but I have to be certain you are telling the truth." She waited for Rianna to look up, and smiled at the gleam of hope she saw there amidst the sulky petulance. "So I'm going pray for you. When I'm done, if you lie to me, I will know. If I know you've lied to me, then I'm not going to vouch for you to the Captain, and I will not protect you from him anymore. Do you understand? Will you tell me what happened, from the time you left the beach?"

As she waited for the weasel's response, she quietly said the Prayer of Penance, casting it on Rianna and hoping she was right about the girl.

Rianna's tail flicked in occasional irritation, gathering more grungy straw as it did so. "It's *not* my fault! I went looking for stuff in the forest, and a thing attacks me, and the meanie captain shoots it, and gets all snooty, and he's just as mean as this captain, and I bonked his guard real good and didn't even get to keep the hat, the bats took it and wanted to skin me!"

She kicked at the straw to punctuate her irritation, and only succeeded in stirring up more dust. It had been such a nice new hat.

Annarisse looked at her in amazement, caught totally flat-footed by the implications of that pronouncement. Then she did a little double-take, and said, "Okay, let me just get this straight. I want to make sure I've got it all set in my mind, okay? So stop me if I get something wrong." The weasel just looked at her sullenly, which she decided to take for assent. "First, you were attacked in the forest by a thing. Then the Captain—do you mean the Captain of the other ship? Yes, okay, so Captain Ferrante—shoots that thing. Then you said he got all snooty. What did he do?" She waited for a bit more elaboration. This was much more interesting than she'd expected. All thought of tactics had flown from her head; she was totally engrossed in the weasel's story.

“He wanted to know where I came from, or something like that. I made up a name, told him the captain was a meanie, and he decided it was this captain!” She giggled a little at the idea of Salvatore being identifiable solely by his sour disposition. “Then he said a bunch of nasty things about us, and locked me up. He’s just as bad!”

Okay, that made perfect sense, especially since Ferrante had known Salvatore would be following him on the first available ship. Annarisse looked back at the girl; she seemed to have had a rough time of it. And she was telling the truth; there had been no breaking of the Penance to signify that she was lying. She thought for a moment. “So Captain Ferrante put you in manacles, too?” The little weasel nodded. “So how did you end up on the beach with breastplate and sword?”

Rianna giggled, still pleased at the memory. “It was the guard’s,” the weasel grinned toothily. “He had a hat too, but the bats got it, and wouldn’t even give it back.”

This was getting more and more confusing. Annarisse was beginning to get the headache she should have had after the cannon fire. She asked, “So you escaped from this guard, and stole his stuff?” Rianna nodded and giggled again. “So you were on the beach over here, in manacles, and you escaped, hit the guard, stole his stuff, and ran away. Am I right so far?” The little weasel nodded happily. “Where did you meet up with the bats? Which direction did you go, and what were they doing when they stole your hat?”

“Umm . . . bats . . .” she scrunched her eyes shut to remember the layout, punctuating each location with a jab of her finger. “There was the beach *here*, and I ran *this* way, and into the forest, and there was a mountain face with bats! They seemed to like heads, so I tried to give them my hat, but that wasn’t good enough. I guess they wanted my head for their collection. They weren’t even captains, and they were still mean!”

Annarisse thought this through. It would seem the girl had come across a pagan ritual with the bat-natives of this island. Collections of heads did not sound good at all. She looked back at the weasel with a little more respect. The bats’ intended victim had escaped; that warranted extra consideration in her eyes. “So after you ran away from the bats, where did you go? Is that when you ran into Ferrante and his men again?”

“Umm, I jumped down the mountain and got into the trees where the bats couldn’t swoop at me. I kept going through the trees and I saw the other captain and some of his crew. They were so mad!” Rianna grinned at the memory of her former captors plotting furiously after their ship had sunk. “I watched them for awhile when they were trying to figure out what to do, then I thought I’d mess them up till you guys got back to land. But they fought our guys and ran away before I could. So I marched out and got the badger and the bat. I didn’t get a chance to play with my new sword, so I dunno how good it works for me.”

This thought killed the giggles, and she went back to sulking about her lost loot.

Annarisse stood up and walked over to the water barrel in the corner. Using the dipper she found there, she brought a drink over for the little weasel. When Rianna had finished drinking, she said, "Well, you've told me the truth, Rianna, and I'm glad. I can see you didn't betray us after all. I'm impressed that you managed to escape the bats; I don't think I could have done that. I'll go tell the Captain what you've told me, and I'll get him to send someone to release you from the manacles and get your sword and armour back. You did a very good job, Rianna." Without waiting for a reply, she replaced the dipper and climbed the ladder to the deck to find the Captain.

The Diving Bell

Annarisse came up from her below decks with a very troubled look on her face. She tried to turn around the facts she knew, to make them make sense, but no matter which way she turned it, there was information missing.

The Captain spotted her, and came over to speak to her. "Well? What did the little weasel say?" he asked as they moved together towards his stateroom.

"Oh, she didn't knowingly betray us, though I think she gave us away by accident. In any case, she wasn't in league with Ferrante or anything. I'd send her back to the galley if I were you. But you should know some of the things she told me. First, a question: are you planning to go after Ferrante and those who are still with him on the island? Because there's some very strange things going on over there, and I think we should consider carefully before facing them."

Annarisse suddenly realized that she had not handled this very well. The Captain loved danger and sought it out; if she told him to consider something carefully, he was just as likely to tell her to get her coat and get in the longboat immediately. She waited with some trepidation for his response.

Salvatore preened his whiskers for a moment before replying, "I'm far more interested in what bits of treasure that diving bell contraption can show us than going after that derelict Ferrante." He looked off the bow of the ship towards the island he knew to be uncharted and decided, "I think Ferrante has what he deserves. He'll spend the rest of his life on this rock. It's better than the hanging he has earned himself back in a Bisclavret court." He smiled maliciously. He knew that Ferrante would not be hung by the Bisclavret, but would likely be ransomed back to Triskellian for some outrageous sum. Leaving him here would be by far the worst punishment he could devise.

Annarisse looked at him, caught flat-footed for the second time in as many marks. He was leaving a mystery with considerable danger, not to mention an arch-enemy, behind him to go looking for treasure! But, mindful of the narrow escape she'd had from her folly of a few moments before, she considered her next words carefully before saying, "Though honour demands that he stand trial, practicality suggests we would be better off getting the treasure first. Perhaps we will come back when we have it, and if he is still alive, apprehend him then?"

She thought a bit more. "I like the idea of him believing that he's been left here to rot or be eaten by cannibals. Did I mention the cannibals? Well, I'm not sure I could leave him to that permanently and retain any honour. But for a little while. . . Think you he could survive a week or two? Just until we come back for him, that is?" She smiled slyly at the Captain. "After all, it doesn't do to force one's hospitality on the Rinaldi, now does it?"

A cruel look crossed Salvatore's eyes for an instant before they resumed their expression of compassion. "Yes, as always you are correct, you Excellency. We will deal with the most important matter of retrieving the sunken treasure and not concern ourselves with the criminal Ferrante." He paused, taking a deep breath of contentment before saying, "I'm sure a fortnight will clear his head."

Annarisse nodded, content with the decision. She would deal with her underlying guilt later. "Well, now that that is settled, about Rianna. She came across Ferrante in the forest. He figured out she had come on a ship, and asked her which one. She says she made up a name, but the spell wavered a tiny bit at that; I think she couldn't remember the name correctly, but Ferrante guessed anyway. He clapped her in irons and took her to his beach, whereupon she escaped and stole armour and a sword. She ran up the mountain, ran into and then escaped from some bat cannibals, and ended up down the mountain again where we found her. There's no betrayal there. She's simply not bright enough for it. I told her someone would be along soon to let her out of the irons." She waited for his response. Surely this all-consuming hatred of the Rinaldi would not extend to someone innocently caught in their web.

Smiling warmly, the Captain responded, "Aye, we should free her. It was unfortunate that she had to be treated so, but until you were able to confirm her story her actions did look rather incriminating. Quite the addle-brained weasel, isn't she?" he said, dusting off his paws and chuckling. He sat down behind his desk and indicated one of the armchairs for her. Then he called Rodrigo over, asking him to find the purser and convey orders to free the weasel. When the boy was gone, he turned back to the priestess and said, "We need to discuss how to handle our two prisoners."

Annarisse turned thoughtful. "The priest will not likely be amenable to any suggestions," she told him. "He created the diving bell expressly for this mission, which means he was one of Ferrante's key advisors. He's likely to fight us every step of the way. I'm not so sure about the bat, though. Have you spoken with her?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. I'd like to see if she'd be interested in joining our crew, under watch, of course. She's unlikely to be valuable as a hostage, but I suspect we still need her skills to find the treasure. Do you know what kind of magic she is likely to have?"

"No, but Kharaba would. He worked with one of her kind under Baron Affligent."

"A very good point, Your Excellency." Salvatore turned to Rodrigo, who had just entered from his errand. "Go find the thaumaturgist, son," he instructed, and the lad raced off happily. In minutes he was back with the tiger.

"Kharaba, what kind of magic does the bat woman likely have?" Salvatore asked.

He looked surprised. "Why, probably none at all, Sir," answered the mage. "Her kind are usually astrologers. They study the stars and mathematics. Only a very few are mages. I wondered why she had been placed in chains and gagged. She is no danger." He settled himself in a chair.

“Your Excellency, will you go with the purser to fetch her?” Salvatore asked. “She can be released from her chains, I think, and your presence will indicate a change in status and respect. Bring her here. We’ll offer her a position with us equivalent to the one she had with Ferrante, and see if she’ll be willing to join the crew.” Annarisse nodded, rose, and took her leave to free the bat.

She found the prisoner in the first slave hold, loosely manacled and sitting despondently on the bench. She gestured to the purser to release her, and untied the gag herself. The bat looked at her in some surprise as the chains fell away.

“Sister, why do you release me?” she asked in a cultured Bisclavret accent.

“Our thaumaturgist has told us that you are not a mage, as we at first believed. The Captain believes you could be a valuable addition to the crew, if you are amenable to that. He would like to speak to you now.”

The bat stood up, shook out her full skirted gown, and curtsied gracefully to the purser, who turned away muttering in a gruff tone. Then she faced the horse again. “I would certainly like to speak with your captain,” she said. “I do not believe you and I were properly introduced. I am Semance de Repense.” She curtsied in turn to the priestess, who was struck with the incongruity of court manners in the dusty, dirty slave hold of a pirate ship.

Nevertheless, she had been raised with equal manners. She gathered her robe and curtsied in turn. “Sister Lady Annarisse Deschamps,” she replied. Then they headed for the ladder.

Kharaba and Salvatore were waiting for them. Upon the entrance of the two women, Kharaba rose to his feet fluidly and bowed. Salvatore, caught off guard, awkwardly did the same. Then he came around the desk to greet the bat. Annarisse made the introductions, to bows and curtsies all round. Then all four seated themselves in the armchairs.

“Kharaba tells us you are an astrologer,” Salvatore began. “What was your job aboard the *Corrado*?”

“I was the personal astrologer to Captain Ferrante, and I was to determine the exact location of the items he was seeking on the ocean floor by means of mathematics,” she replied. “We went up the mountain yesterday to set up the mirrors I need for that. Once I determined the location in the sea, Father Julien was to use his diving bell to retrieve the items.” She spread her skirts a little more carefully, and Annarisse made a mental note to find her a sewing kit to repair the tears and pulls in the fine fabric.

“What items was Ferrante expecting to find?” Salvatore asked casually, as though this entire voyage had not been geared to finding the same items.

“He wasn’t sure, exactly. He suspected that many shipwrecks had happened on this island in recent years, and that the creator of – certain objets d’art – might be responsible for them.”

Salvatore moved to his clothes press, opened it with the key on his key chain, and brought out their statue. “Was Ferrante’s objet d’art anything like this?” he asked, handing it to her.

She studied it for a moment. "It was very much like this," she replied, tracing some of the delicately carved lines with one manicured hand. "Such a shame - his statue is at the bottom of the lagoon now." She shook her head sadly as she handed the glowing statue back to the Captain. He replaced it in his press, sat down, and steepled his fingers before answering.

"We would like your help in finding the treasure," he said bluntly. "I am prepared to offer you a position equivalent to the one you held under Ferrante, though with fewer people on the ship, your share would be larger with us than it would have been with the *Corrado*. We will expect that you will perform the services we ask of you and generally act as one of our crew, in exchange for that share. Do you accept?"

"I would be happy to accept. It is a much nicer offer than what I expected," she answered, evidently surprised.

"Good. I will ask one thing, though. For the security of my crew, you understand. I must be sure that you will not attempt to betray us or lie to us. Would you allow Sister Annarisse to put a prayer for penance on you? If you do betray us, she will know instantly, and you will be treated as we would treat any other enemy." The inflection of his voice did not change, but the threat in the statement was perfectly clear to all present.

"That is a reasonable precaution under the circumstances, Sir," answered Semance. She turned to Annarisse and bowed her head for the prayer. Annarisse complied, then stood.

"I will offer you the last bit of floor space in my cabin, my lady," she told the bat, "since it is where all the women on board sleep. Will that do?"

"It will do nicely, thank you." Semance bowed again. The two headed for the door.

"Please return promptly, Sister," Salvatore requested. She nodded as she left.

Brother Julien

The interview with the priest was not nearly so satisfactory.

“Why should I help you? You’re going to kill me anyway. I know of your crimes. You can’t leave me alive.” Brother Julien stood before Captain Salvatore with belligerence oozing from every pore. He was not bound, for as Sister Annarisse had said, it was not necessary to bind a man of the cloth. However, two burly sailors were standing behind him ready to keep him from any dangerous action, and Annarisse’s prayer of penance was still in effect. If he started any kind of spell, she would know in time to counter it.

Salvatore considered before he spoke. “Sister Annarisse will not allow me to harm a man of the cloth, will you, Sister?” he turned to her with a nod. They had discussed this tactic, and she was ready with her reply.

“Of course not, Captain. But the bat woman has no such protection from me. You may not harm the priest, but she is fair game. After all, she is equally responsible for Roxbarren.”

At this the priest tried to make a leap for her, pure rage showing in his features. She sidestepped him neatly, and the two sailors picked him up by the arms and held him dangling off the floor. “She had nothing to do with that! She is innocent of any wrongdoing! Why would you harm her?”

Ah, thought Annarisse. She had struck a nerve. Salvatore picked up the theme. “She is less valuable to us than you are, anyway,” he pointed out. “We can use the diving bell to find what we want with your help, but her work is mostly done. Cooperate, and she will be freed in Triskellian. Otherwise, she will be marooned here with Ferrante.”

The badger snorted. “I can’t find anything without her,” he told them. “She’s my muse, my love. I will not work unless she is safe.”

“Ah, but there you are wrong, Brother,” Salvatore pointed out quietly. “You will work to keep her safe.”

The priest deflated slightly, but stood his ground. “I will not help you,” he told them. “I would rather die myself. But she has done nothing wrong. Let her live.”

Salvatore leaned forward, put his hands on the desk, and stood. “I think you deserve the opportunity to think about this a bit further,” he suggested. “A nice, quiet night will be a nice relief for you. Think about it. You have the power to save her life, still. I will give you until morning to make your decision.” He motioned to the guards, who put the short brother on his feet and escorted him back to the slave hold being used as his prison.

“Well, sister, what do you think?” Salvatore asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think we're going to get his help, but it really isn't that necessary," she replied. "We can figure out the diving bell, and we have the co-operation of the astro-" she broke off as the sounds from the deck intruded into the cabin. Suddenly she paled, and whirled to race out of the cabin. Salvatore followed her.

They arrived on deck to find the two sailors who had been escorting Brother Julien, standing at the railing looking over. Their expressions contained a mixture of astonishment and chagrin.

"What happened?" the Captain asked.

"He jumped overboard," the wolf answered, clearly nonplussed. "He just ran out from between us as we approached the rail, and threw himself off the ship."

The other sailor was nodding, his head bobbing so hard Annarisse wondered how securely it was attached to his neck. "He started to sing as he reached the deck - softly, like he was chanting a prayer or something. Then he just threw himself overboard."

Salvatore was busy lowering a longboat as he listened, all the while scanning the bay. Annarisse put a hand on his shoulder. "It's no use, Captain," she said quietly. "The spell came back to me. He's dead."

Salvatore sighed heavily and winched the longboat back in place. "Will you perform the necessary rites?"

Annarisse shook her head. "There are no rites to perform. He died by his own hand." She said this quietly, not wanting to disturb the sailors any further.

"Aye, I know, but surely there is something you can say - more for the crew than for the Brother." He looked at her pleadingly, and she made a decision.

"Very well, I'll do a brief service, but the crew should be on deck for it. He was a man of the cloth, after all. While you gather them, I will talk to Semance." Without waiting for a reply, she headed for her own cabin. Behind her, she heard Salvatore issue the order to get all hands on deck.

She had volunteered for this, she thought as she left, but now she wasn't quite sure where to begin. How attached had the bat and the badger been to each other? To hear him talk, one would think they'd been lovers, but Annarisse found that unlikely. The little bat seemed too pious to casually bed a priest, with no marriage vows on either side. Also, he was old enough to be her father, grandfather maybe. Or rather, he had been old enough. Now he was dead. By his own—um—foot.

She found the astrologer sitting on her pallet in the cabin which had long since ceased to belong to Annarisse. She was studying a chart which had clearly just been drawn up; apparently Malachac had done a good job of occupying her while the priest was being interrogated. She looked up, noted the wary expression of the horsewoman, and rose to her feet in one smooth motion. "You wish to see me, Sister?" she asked, diffidently.

Annarisse perched on her own bunk, and patted the spot beside her in invitation. Her guest took the hint and seated herself. "How well do you know Father Julien?" she asked.

“He is a comrade, of sorts. A very learned man, a genius, even. He has taught me a great deal.” The bat studied the horse. “Why do you ask?”

“Well,” Annarisse hesitated, “There has been a most unfortunate accident. It would seem that Father Julien would rather be anywhere, including the bottom of the bay, than on board this ship. He has—there’s no way to soften this, I’m afraid—thrown himself overboard.” She waited. “He implied that you were his concubine?”

“No, no, never that. . . he is—well, he was old, you see. But such a loss!” the bat rose and strode to the portal, looking out unseeing on the vast ocean.

“I am very sorry for your loss,” said Annarisse, feeling the words were inadequate for the situation. How to tell this impressionable young woman that her mentor had been an impious, recalcitrant bore, using the Church as a way to further his scientific investigations while practising very few of its dictates? Annarisse was only glad that neither she nor the Captain was directly responsible for his death. She was not sorry he was gone. She made her holy sign, belatedly realizing the impiety of having wished death on a man of the cloth. But she knew she would do no penance for that thought. After all, he was not with the light; having killed himself, he would reside forever in darkness.

The bat took a few moments to get herself under control, then turned to face the priestess. “Tell me truly, Sister. Did any on this ship hasten him to his death?”

Annarisse looked her in the eye and told the truth as she saw it—or maybe, as she wanted to believe it. “No,” she said. The bat nodded, slowly, her eyes never leaving the Sister’s face. There was a long pause. It was broken by the sounds of the men arriving on deck. “There will be a brief service for him. Shall we go?” Semance nodded, and together they left the cabin.

Mr. Mietvani, Salvatore, and Kharaba conferred quietly on the beach.

“We need to get the diving bell out to the ship, first,” the Captain remarked.

“We do indeed, sir, but it is likely to sink the longboat if we try,” the first mate pointed out.

Kharaba shook his head. “We don’t want to put it on the longboat,” he told them. “What we need is a raft, a stout one at least twice as wide at the base as the bell. Then we can tow it out to the ship without much difficulty. It has to be big, though, otherwise the weight of the bell will sink the raft.” He made some notations with his charcoal pencil on the parchment diagram in his hand. “Yes, you see? The mass requires a larger base than that – about twelve feet across.”

Salvatore shook his head. “These bags of shot on the bottom – they’re supposed to weight the contraption down so it will sink, right? What if we take them off?”

Mr. Mietvani nodded excitedly. “We can take them to the ship in the longboat, sir,” he suggested. “That should make the bell float.”

“Yes, and it will float better if we turn it upside down. It’s vaguely boat-shaped, after all. We can attach a tow line to the longboat to pull it out to the ship.” Excitedly the two began taking the ballast-bags off, calling other sailors to help them.

Kharaba watched the activity from the sidelines, and fumed.

When they finally got the bell back to the ship, Semance and Annarisse were waiting for them, very agitated. Salvatore took them aside immediately.

“The mirrors, Captain! They’re gone!” Semance was wringing her hands and nearly crying.

Salvatore glanced up at where the mirrors had been. She was right; at some point since darkness the night before, they had disappeared. “You need these mirrors to perform your calculations?” he asked, already knowing the answer. She nodded. “Well, it’s too late in the day to find them now. We’ll have to go up the mountain tomorrow to put them back in place. Can you be ready to go two marks after dawn?” he asked. She nodded again, still sobbing. The Captain looked at Annarisse helplessly.

“Semance, we will sort it all out tomorrow morning. It’s not an insurmountable problem. Come, we’ll get you a cup of tea,” the priestess said soothingly, and led the distraught bat towards the galley. Salvatore waited until they were out of earshot to swear viciously at the mountain.

Ferrante would pay for this.

Was he awake? Treeden couldn’t tell. Memories and reality seemed to be intertwined. He struggled to open his dream eyes. Truly, he was not awake, for ahead of him he could just make out the shape of Silvininay, his rabbit slave girl. His chest ached as the memory returned, sharp as a rapier, to spear through the clouds surrounding his brain. He had held her to him as the cabin fell to the sea ... she had cried his name as the waves took her under. He had scabbled amidst the churning ocean to find her, as debris rained all around. Kikuto pulled him out of the depths and the wind almost snatched his words as he dived in Treeden’s stead. “My duty.” But in seconds the sight and scent of them was ransomed to the waves. A matter of seconds had passed and they had been dragged far from the ship. A huge wave had crested overhead, something had struck his head, and he fell down into the depths.

He grunted as real physical sensation overcame his nightmare. Someone was caressing his shoulder, running their hands along his bare arm, softly kneading his bruised chest and working down to the rise of his hip. His still strained vision picked out the large dark eyes set amidst white fur, the long sculpted ears and soft hands. Silvininay ran her hands all over his body, but something was wrong. She didn’t have her usual supple touch. The hands seemed – needy. And where they touched his skin he felt clammy and cold. He tried to pull away but he seemed to be held down to something. He choked, attempting to form words to ask her to stop, and for the first time realised something was in his mouth, aiding his breathing as he hung in the crystal water.

He was in a tank. Clarity returned with a start as he tried to scabble away. He was in a clear box, his arms and legs were being held and his supposedly dead concubine was caressing him like nothing was amiss. She came closer, and with his clarity her illusion was fading. Behind those beautiful soft young eyes, sharp wizened ones too their place. Her pale fur was a wrinkled grey mass, and her long, foreign nose protruded from her cowl. She ran a finger down his belly and it burned a cold trail. The thing cackled.

“So, it wakes” it spoke in a raspy, yet oddly harmonic voice. “And here I had not finished my appreciation of you”. The dead cold sensation found his inner thigh. A whimper escaped his throat before he stopped it, but the creature heard and rocked with silent laughter.

“How many times have you forced yourself on one not so willing,” it muttered. “I can hear them in your dreams. They call out to me, my naïve Baron.”

He struggled, but whatever was holding him held him tight.

He cringed as the cold moved to the soft flesh between his legs and held him tightly. “I can see we are going to enjoy our time together,” the creature crooned, and in that instant feeling returned, and she backed away, the high resonance of her laughter echoing around the room

The Mountain

The party that set out for the mountaintop was a motley assortment that took up both longboats. Rianna was there, since she was the only member of the crew to have encountered the island's natives. Semance, of course, needed to be there to reset the mirrors in their proper configuration. In addition to these, Salvatore had detailed twenty sailors to accompany them, and had armed them with pistols and muskets. He fully expected to find and kill Ferrante and his men before they returned to the ship.

Leaving Mr. Mietvani behind at the ship with instructions to watch for lantern signals at dusk, he gave the orders to pile into the longboats. Rodrigo was one of the first to head for the ladders. Salvatore caught him by the arm. "You're staying here, son," he told him.

"But, Father, you said I was part of the crew!" the boy exclaimed petulantly.

Salvatore fixed him with a hard look. "You need to mind your tone, young man. You and your sister are staying here. The other cabin boys are staying, too. I'll expect to see the deck polished when I return."

Rodrigo hung his head. "Yes, sir," he replied with only the barest hint of sullenness. Salvatore decided to ignore it, and got on with loading the boats. In moments they were rowing ashore.

In the first longboat, Annarisse sat near the captain. In a low voice, she said, "Captain, if you would permit me, I should say a prayer of love for you now."

Salvatore glared at her. "You will of course do as you wish, Sister," he told her. "But I will not use it."

"That is your prerogative, sir. But it will be available to you should you need it." She said the prayer quickly, though he growled a bit in his throat as it settled on him.

The trek up the mountain took a lot of time, but was otherwise uneventful. As the sun climbed slowly towards zenith and began its downward turn, they wound up the uneven path, occasionally having to jump over obstacles in the path. They encountered nothing and no one.

Finally, some two marks before sunset, they arrived at the summit where Rianna had encountered the bats. Semance indicated a direction with one winged arm, and they continued quietly.

The mountaintop was rocky and grassy, bare of any large trees, and windy. It was also eerily quiet. The wind whistled hollowly around the rocks as they continued along a fairly narrow path, winding still further upwards. Twice Annarisse caught Semance as she slipped; the horse was much more comfortable

on this type of path than the bat woman. Semance smiled in a strained way in thanks, and Annarisse acknowledged it with a nod. Neither spoke.

Finally they rounded a sharp corner and, at Semance's silent insistence, filed through a narrow pass. They found themselves in a flat meadow, hemmed in on all sides by cliffs that rose up sharply and impenetrably. That is, all sides but one. To their right, the east, was a break in the rocks. It appeared to their view that the grass simply stopped. Closer inspection showed that there was indeed a very steep cliff there, with no barrier of any kind to prevent one from simply walking over it. Far below, looking like a child's toy in a pond, was the Riddock's Dawn, sitting at anchor in the bay. From this distance, they could not make out a single person on board her.

Semance walked over to the cliff, and remarked, "This is where we set up the mirrors, but they are nowhere to be seen." She looked around as though expecting them to materialize in front of her.

Salvatore looked around, then called his men over. "We need to search the caves around the meadow," he said, indicating them. "Go in threes, and listen for my whistle. I'll call you back if there's trouble. You five - you're staying with us. We'll set up a camp away from the mouths of those caves. Right in the middle of the meadow, with our backs to that big rock, I think."

The trios of sailors started to peel off to investigate the caves, when one of them shouted. "Look up!"

They did, and immediately began to crowd back around the rock. Annarisse began to bring up her circle of protection, and Kharaba said a prayer of protection for the Captain and, at Salvatore's whispered command, Semance and Annarisse. The sailors formed a circle with the rock in the middle, still looking up.

The creatures had apparently come from further down the mountain. As they watched, more of them shot into the air behind the rock face to the east, circled the meadow a few times, and began to land. Salvatore counted them. He got to sixty before they stopped coming.

They were bats, but they were not like Semance. For one thing, they were smaller in stature. The tallest stood several inches shorter than her. For another, their clothing was sparse. Some were naked. Some wore paint on their fur, describing gruesome patterns that evoked disturbing images in the onlookers. Their fur was not the same matte black as the Repense noblewoman's, either. Most were more brown than black, but the light of the sun as it set over the rock face made them look almost red. They carried spears or slings; a few had knives; all were armed in some fashion. They had only one thing in common: all of them wore a small wooden idol around their necks.

They settled in a wider circle, some fifteen paces away from Salvatore's crew. Quickly, he judged their chances. The pass down was blocked, and the path they had followed to get here was exposed to attacks from the air. Going down would cost them most of their people. On the other hand, the bats appeared to know little of battle tactics. This circle formation favoured the sailors in the middle and did not make best use of the bats' skills as flyers. They could use that to

their advantage. With the help of the protection spells and their superior weaponry, they ought to be able to win out in a fight.

“Sister, my lady bat, Rianna, stay inside the circle,” he commanded tersely in a low voice. “As we drop weapons, pick them up and reload them. The faster you can do that, the better our chances. Do you know how to load guns?” They all nodded, Semance somewhat uncertainly. “Good. Sister, that protection spell is our best advantage; keep it up at all costs.” He spoke slightly louder, to his men this time. “Be ready on my command. Shoot without command only if they attack first. Do not step outside the circle of protection for any reason.”

He was just finishing his instructions when one of the bats – the tallest, wearing a formidable array of paint – gave a high-pitched squeal. In unison, the other bats raised their weapons and prepared to attack. Salvatore saw this, and called, “Fire when ready!”

A moment later there was a burst of gunfire as all twenty muskets and both of Salvatore’s pistols fired almost in unison. Six bats went down, four apparently already dead. Seven more swayed on their feet or clutched at a wound. The first volley had hit home. Salvatore dropped his first two pistols and drew the next two, as Annarisse and Rianna each grabbed a gun to reload it. Semance struggled a moment with a musket, until Annarisse finished with her pistol, slipped it into the Captain’s empty holster, and helped her. Through it all Annarisse kept a tight rein on her spell, knowing that at any second, its strength would be tested.

The remaining bats, though startled, did not give in. Suddenly, spears and stones were hitting them from all sides. Or rather, they were hitting the circle of protection. Most of them bounced off harmlessly with a little ping. In less than a minute, the sailors were firing again. Five more bats fell, three dead. The others started to fall back.

As the guns were loaded again, Salvatore called out to them. “Put your weapons down,” he called, and mimed putting something on the ground.

The bats conferred a bit in their high-pitched screeches, and another volley of ineffectual spears and stones came at them. Salvatore shrugged. “Fire at will,” he said to his men, and suited actions to words, putting two bullets into the chest of the leader. He dropped like a lead weight as several more of his comrades took wounds. “Put your weapons down,” Salvatore called again, and this time, they complied. “Put your hands up,” he showed them what he wanted, and they dithered for a moment, until he pointed a pistol at the nearest unhurt bat. Hastily the hands went up, weaponless. The remaining bats were surrendering.

“Get them to circle over to this side, backs against the rock face,” Salvatore instructed his crew. While Annarisse kept the circle of protection on herself and the others who stayed close to the rock, the sailors herded the cowed bats into a small area. Efficiently, they began looping the rope they’d brought around the creatures’ wings, tying them together and keeping them earthbound. One, however, avoided them and began walking towards the group still at the rock.

Semance was the first to notice him. Her small cry attracted Salvatore's attention, and he swung around with a pistol aimed at its heart.

"Don't shoot, Captain," Annarisse cried. "He's carrying a white flag."

She was right; the bat who continued to approach was carrying what appeared to be a tattered white shirt of the sort commonly worn by naval officers. He was walking woodenly, as though he didn't see them. Indeed, his eyes were glassy and stared above their heads, and he stumbled at least once on the uneven ground. Five feet from the edge of the circle, he raised his hands and clutched at the idol around his neck.

From the idol came a few words Kharaba alone recognized. Suddenly all their protection spells failed. The backlash of the spells hit Kharaba hard enough to knock him over; he had had five individual spells in place. Annarisse, with her single spell, was not affected so seriously; within seconds, she had raised the spell again.

The face of the idol smiled slightly. In a raspy, weedy voice that went up and down in pitch for no apparent reason, it said, "Come find me, then!"

Kharaba, recovered somewhat, stepped forward. "We need the mirrors to find you," he told the idol.

It did not reply, but within moments, two more bats appeared over the cliff face. In the gathering darkness, they looked even more sinister, and Salvatore reflexively aimed upwards before realizing that they were carrying something. The two bats landed in front of them, putting the mirrors on the ground at their feet. Then they took off again, disappearing over the mountain.

Semance ran to her mirrors, inspecting them for damage, and looked up happily when she realized there was none. Salvatore bowed to the idol that had spoken. "What shall we do with our prisoners?" he asked it.

The idol considered a moment, then said, "Leave them in morning. Others free them then. Come find me." Then the idol's face went blank, and the bat wearing it blinked sleepily. Realizing where he was, he squealed in terror and took off. Salvatore let him go.

By this time the sailors had finished binding the captives. It was nearing full dark, and the moon had not yet risen. It was not surprising, then, that the only person to notice two more bats arriving was Semance, with her superior night vision. "Captain, look!" she pointed.

The two bats landed a short distance away and dropped the load they had been carrying between them. Without stopping, they took off again. Salvatore strode over to see what they had left this time.

There, stripped, bound, gagged, and bearing the marks of his two-day imprisonment, was Ferrante. Salvatore stood over him with a smile on his face, savouring the moment. Annarisse noticed this, and came over as well.

"How came you to be here?" Salvatore asked the grey fox. The prisoner just glared at him. It was Annarisse who stooped down and pulled the strip of cloth off his mouth. The fox still did not speak.

"When last we met, you had at least ten men with you. Where are they now?" Salvatore asked.

This time the prisoner replied. "Where do you think they are? They're dead. The bats killed them and roasted them over an open fire last night. Their skulls decorate the bats' caves now." He spat off to one side. "You may think you have the upper hand, Salvatore, but you're wrong. None of us will get off this mountain alive. You might as well let me have my last meal in peace. We'll all be dead by morning."

Salvatore shrugged. "That's as may be, of course," he answered. "But I think we'll live to see the morning, and the one after that, and probably a few more. I think we're going to find the treasure. And I think the Bisclavret will be very, very pleased to see you when we return you to Harrowgate for trial." He stroked his whiskers a moment, then asked, "Was it you or the bats who took down the mirrors?"

"It was us. The bats came upon us last night as we disassembled them." Ferrante slouched dejectedly where the bats had dropped him, laying on one side, not even struggling to get to a seated position.

"Captain, with your permission, I will make the Admiral a bit more comfortable. A drink of water, for instance, and correcting his posture somewhat, would be a kindness. Since he is our - guest - we must treat him with the respect due his rank," Annarisse said.

"As you wish, Sister," Salvatore replied, losing interest. "So long as he is still ours in the morning, you may do with him what you like." He walked away to begin setting up camp. Annarisse hauled the fox up by one arm and moved his legs until he was in a proper sitting position. Then she poured water from her own canteen into a little tin cup she carried and held it to the fox's lips. He neither resisted nor helped her, but he did drink the offered liquid. She checked his bonds to ensure the knots were still tight; finding them to be intact, she called over a boar to stand guard.

Kharaba was making tea in a pot over the fire that had been started near the rock where they'd made their stand. She went over to him. "Are you okay? I saw that magic backlash. It looked serious."

"It wasn't too bad. I need to rest, though. Your magic must be quite low, as well, Sister," he commented.

"Indeed. It's lucky we didn't need any healing spells, or I would have been in trouble. But it looks like the men have things under control over there, so you and I can get some rest." Suiting actions to words, she pulled her cloak around her and curled up by the fire.

Kharaba watched her for a moment, nonplussed. How could she go to sleep so easily with the enemy so close? He sipped his tea as he thought about the battle. Salvatore came over while he drank, and sank to the ground beside him.

"What did you think of that idol's suggestion?" he asked the tiger, quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping priestess.

"The mage was using the spells of my school, thaumaturgist spells, and very well," he answered. "Whoever it is, they are far more powerful than I or Sister Annarisse. Where exactly is this mage, do you think? I can't imagine why, if it

wants so much to meet with us, it would have failed to come to the beach two nights ago, or would not have come to see us here.”

Salvatore thought for a moment, then slapped his thigh. “Of course! If the mage lived on the island, it would have come to meet with us by now. It would not have needed to speak through idols and make slaves of the bats. It must live elsewhere. The treasure is under the sea, right?” Kharaba nodded. “Probably, then, when we find the treasure, we will find the mage as well. Under the sea.”

Kharaba nodded. “I do believe you’re right, sir,” he admitted. “That puts a whole new light on things, though. It means we will have to fight for the treasure, against a powerful mage. That request sounded very much like a challenge to me.”

The Captain smiled. “Then we will meet it.” He fell silent for a moment, then stood fluidly. “Get some sleep, Sir Mage. Tomorrow will be an equally long day.” He strode away to look over the prisoners one last time, and Kharaba curled up on the ground to follow his advice.

Darkness

He pieced his thoughts together.

He was held suspended in a tank, with something in his mouth aiding his breathing. His arms were being held securely, but by something fleshy and cold. Sometimes, he felt it—them?—move and shift weight as he hung there motionless.

He shifted his weight for the thousandth time and was rewarded by feeling his restraints shift weight too to match the movement. If he moved his arms slowly up and down, he could just make out fleshy bobbles on these living chains - but if he moved too quickly the things snapped back into place with a sickening crack of his joints.

But this was not the worst of his predicament. He had no track of the time he had been confined in this watery prison, but he was a creature of the land and air, not suited for a watery existence. His skin felt numb, and when he forced his head about to look upon the water-blurred mass of himself, his skin seemed to sag. He remembered times in the past: first, as a child, sulkily refusing to leave the warm tub until the water had cooled and the towels looked more inviting; then, as a teenage youth hungering after maidens, paying them to soap with him in one of the tavern private rooms, before pulling the wash maid in for extra fun and paying them both double. Either way, he remembered how wrinkled his skin had got, and how susceptible it was to tear and bleed after too much exposure to water. He wagered the time he had been imprisoned here far outweighed the times he had overstayed for pleasure, and he worried as to the condition of his body. For as long as he remembered being here he could not feel his hands and feet.

With each growing second, he grew angrier.

He had faced death, and raged against it, only to face another uncertainty on his life. Fighting the omniscient sea was one thing, but this was no natural nemesis. Whatever had him captive here was alive – living, breathing, and punishing. To give in to the sea was one thing. To acquiesce to a mortal, especially (of all probability) one of low birth was mind boggling. And as he thought, he seethed. Bottled memories of betrayal and insubordination fuelled his anger. He was going to die anyway—whatever held him held no goodwill towards him. Better to fight than let the body waste away.

He said a quiet prayer to nobody in particular, certainly not the Saint of the Light that had worked against him—hoping that whatever held him was the same thing that invaded his throat, keeping the breath flowing through his body.

Treedon bit down hard on the thing in his mouth.

Even underwater, the high pitched squeal was audible. Blackness poured from the thing in his mouth, and his air supply was halted. In the same second, the restraints holding him gave up just enough to draw his left arm free. He thrashed his numb limb over to the other side, twisting his naked body in the process, attacking the other restraint with his claws—and got the first real look at his chains.

The creature was a purplish hue, and seemed to be made almost entirely out of legs, which were now thrashing about. The thing connecting them had bulbous eyes, and a large cruel curved beak which was snapping and making its way towards him. He noted with satisfaction that more than one limb was trailing black blood. He tore at the ones still holding his feet and felt suckers pop as he sliced the thing with relative ease.

In doing so, the beak with its fathomless eyes had pulled itself closer and before he could react the beak sliced his sagging skin effortlessly at the top of his thigh. The flesh opened but little blood flowed.

Treedon thrust himself towards the creature, all claws and teeth. The thing was obviously not built for battle, as stroke after stroke of his almost useless clubbed hands drew large welts where the claws connected. Making a decision to use a part of him which was not numb, he sank his teeth deep into the thing's core and tasted its blood. The craze of combat overcame him, and even as he struggled again for breath, he tore the thing literally apart. The water turned black, and the thing shrieked its last, even as he still tore at the space it had occupied. In a fervour, he beat against the glass holding him in place, battering his worn body again and again. With a spark of inspiration, he pushed his feet against the glass, drawing in his knees in tightly, and propelled himself towards the back of the tank, the place he had faced away from and had never seen.

Even as he cradled his arms and braced for impact, the water became clear again, and he gasped in sudden clarity.

The back of the tank had no confines. Instead it revealed a large hole, like a window to a whole new world. A short passageway shimmered in a magical light, but beyond it—he gasped as the deepest, darkest secrets of the sea were revealed to him. He had never before envisioned such creatures even in nightmares. Immense gnarled creatures, long as small villages with massive fins paid him little heed as they sailed by on private business with the ocean. Things closer though, regarded him hungrily – things that glowed and pulsed, things whose jaws could hardly contain the rows upon rows of razor teeth. Whatever magic graced this small corridor was all that stood between him and the depths of the ocean, and he was slowly being pulled towards it. And even as the blood cleared from his tank, the pressures of the deep began to crush him. He struggled back, struggled for air, but he slowly moved on towards his doom.

He almost didn't hear the smashing of glass behind him.

The Lady

By the time the sun rose over the mountain top, Semance was already up and assembling her mirrors. She worked so quickly, with a bit of help from Kharaba who had helped with such things before, that she was ready to leave the time it was light enough to see the path properly.

On Salvatore's orders, they left the bats tied as they were, having been assured by the idol that their own people would come to free them shortly. Then they headed back down the mountain.

The trip was uneventful, though Annarisse and Kharaba had their spells ready in case of trouble. The bats were mostly nocturnal, so they were unlikely to follow during the day in any case. Shortly after noon, the trip down being much shorter than the trip up, they arrived at the beach. Two marks later they were on the ship and setting sail.

"Lady Semance, where exactly should we go?" Salvatore asked deferentially.

She consulted her chart and took sightings from the mirrors for a moment before answering. "That way," she said, pointing due south, "about five knots. I'll be able to tell for sure when we're closer. For now, sail slowly and be prepared to come to a stop on my signal."

Salvatore gave the orders to do as she said, while Annarisse and Kharaba discussed the events of the previous evening.

"I don't like it at all," Annarisse told the tiger. "A mage more powerful than either of us, with access to all the spells you use and probably most of mine as well, has challenged us to meet with her. What do you make of it?"

Kharaba had a slightly different view. "I think she's been testing us for a while now," he answered. "The storm, the bats - all designed to weed out those who were not good enough to do what she wanted done. I think she has a job for us." He paused, thoughtful. "We keep referring to this mage as a she," he remarked. "Why are we doing that?"

"Probably because the seal spoke of a lady, didn't she?"

"You're right, she did. How did you know that?"

"The Captain told me, of course." She stared out in the direction they were heading at the unbroken expanse of ocean. "So you think she is not going to harm us?"

"I think she wants to use us. I do not as yet know what her purpose for us is, but if she had wanted us dead, we would be so already. She could have cast spells through that idol last night - she did cancel our protection spells, after all." Kharaba pulled out a leather-bound vellum book and began to make notes in it with his pencil. After a moment he stopped, pulled out his pocket knife,

and began to sharpen the writing tool. Annarisse watched as the shavings fell to the waves below.

“Why would she have tested us? Why nearly kill us, not once but several times? What did she hope to gain? And what does she hope to gain now?”

Kharaba shrugged as he put away the knife and began writing again. “I’m sure we’ll find out the answers soon enough, Sister. For now, I would like to record the events of the last days. I am sadly behind in my journaling of this voyage.” He settled himself on a waist-high coil of rope and began to write diligently. Annarisse watched him for a moment, then headed for her cabin. She had some spells she wished to delay upon herself and the Captain, just in case the wizard turned out to be unfriendly to them.

It was quite late in the day when Semance gave the signal to stop. Immediately all sails were furled, and the sea anchor was dropped. The sounding line indicated the water was about one hundred feet deep at this spot. Salvatore called Kharaba and Mietvani over to discuss the use of the diving bell.

“How do we work this contraption?” he asked without preamble, looking around expectantly.

Kharaba walked over to the side of the ship and looked at the bell, which was resting against the starboard hull, suspended from the anchor chain of the ship. It was lucky they had not been required to move quickly, for the bell was quite heavy even without the ballast, and it was tilting the ship to starboard slightly even now. The tiger examined it again from several angles, before pronouncing, “I believe we should send someone down to test it out. We set the ballast, lower it until it sits on the water, then have the tester swim into it. Then we lower it as we would the anchor. We’ll play a bit with the tubes on the top and find out what works. Then we’ll go down after the treasure.” He leaned back on his heels, as though daring anyone to offer a better suggestion.

“That is an excellent idea, sir mage. Who should we send?” He looked around for a moment, considering and deciding against each of the people in the circle. Then his eyes lighted on the children, who had found a playmate. Smiling not very nicely, he strode over to them. “Rianna! I have a job for you!”

Rianna looked up innocently, hastily stuffing her hands behind her back. Hopefully the young foxes would not check their pockets any time soon. “Yes, sir?” she asked.

“I want you to go down in the bell to look for treasure.” Salvatore inserted that word purposefully, and got the desired reaction. Rianna’s eyes lit up at the mention of treasure.

“Uh, sure, sir,” she said. “What do I do?”

He led her over to the bell, motioning for it to be lowered. “You’re going to go down the ladder with this man here,” he indicated Bhruic, who was a good swimmer, “and he’ll show you what to do. It’s easy. You just have to watch out the window and answer our questions when we ask. Can you do that?” Rianna nodded enthusiastically before looking down the ladder. Then she gulped and tried to turn. Salvatore was standing right behind her to prevent exactly that. She looked over the side at the wolf who was already in the water, holding lightly

to the rope ladder. Salvatore crowded her a little more. Seeing no choice, she swung herself over the railing and scrambled down.

The wolf grabbed her arm and pulled her under suddenly, propelling her forcefully under the rim of the bell. She came up sputtering and grabbed for the ledge. "Here, now, climb up on it," the wolf instructed, showing her where to sit. "There. You'll be fine now," and he disappeared.

Rianna positioned herself near one of the windows and looked out at the calm ocean. "What am I doing here?" she asked the empty bell.

"You're going to observe the ocean as we lower you and the bell," said a disembodied voice. Rianna screeched and climbed until she was standing precariously on the little ledge. "It's Kharaba. I'm talking to you through the tube in the top of the bell. Look up. Do you see the tubes?"

Rianna nodded, then realized he couldn't see her. "Y-y-y-esss," she replied.

"Well, one of them carries fresh air to you, and the other carries bad air away. We want to know if you can hear us under there. We're going to start to lower you." The sailors began turning the crank, lowering the bell on its stout chain at a rate of about a foot per minute. Rianna clutched the seat and screamed again. Then she subsided into terrified silence.

Soon the bell was completely submerged. Out the window she could see light-filled water, getting darker by the minute, and fish swimming by occasionally. She put her nose to the glass, then screeched and pulled back a bit as a fish darted in at her. Quickly she caught her balance, holding onto the leather straps placed around the bell for support of the occupants.

"Rianna, what do you see?" came Kharaba's voice.

"Um. . . water, and fish," she replied. Then she happened to look down. "There's water coming in the bottom of the bell!" she cried.

The cranking stopped for a moment, while voices up above conferred. Rianna waited, unable to hear what they were saying. Finally Kharaba called, "I think we need to pump more air in to you, and we're going to try plugging this pipe to keep air from coming out. That should help. It means you're going to have to yell really loud to be heard up here, though. Do you understand?"

Rianna did not like that at all. "What? You won't be able to hear me? What if something comes to eat me? What if the water keeps coming in the bell? Get me out of here!" She continued in this vein as the bell started to sink again. She felt the difference in the air when the tube was plugged, and heard the steady whoosh-whish of air as the bellows were fitted to the other pipe. After a few moments, she subsided into terrified silence.

There were no further sounds of talking from above. Rianna held her tail curled around her, squeezing it convulsively from time to time and giving a small yelp of pain as she did. The water outside was growing darker with each jerky inch of descent. The fish had changed, now; instead of top-feeding, easily-caught types that she recognized, they were strange and alien. She saw one go by that was puffed up like a balloon. Another had a sword where its nose should have been. She was still watching this one when she felt a soft thump. Looking down, she realized the bell had hit the floor of the ocean. It sank an inch or so

into the wet sand, and the few inches of water that had been trapped by it contained wriggling fish and at least one crab that tried to pinch her toes. She pulled them up and screamed.

All of a sudden she heard a voice through the tube again. "Rianna, what do you see?" Kharaba sounded very far away, and so distorted she almost didn't understand him.

She did understand that he could hear her again, and put her terror into her reply. "Get me out of here!" she screamed, and repeated herself a few more times. She thought she heard the tiger say something else, but it was lost when she caught sight of something especially scary through the little round window. A big, grey body was rubbing up against the bell. It had a pointy fin on it. She screamed, and kept on screaming. Within a few moments, the bell had begun to rise again.

Rianna was still screaming when the sailor poked his head up into the bell to find her. It took him a few shakes to get her to stop and look at him. Realizing who it was, she whimpered and cowered, but stayed silent otherwise.

"You're to come back on the ship," Bhruic said gruffly, once he had her attention. He felt sorry for her, but he had his orders. She nodded timidly and followed him, emerging into daylight next to the rope ladder. At his insistence, she climbed it first. Salvatore and Kharaba were awaiting her.

"Well, Rianna? What did you see?" Salvatore asked impatiently.

"Sh-sh-sh-sharks!!!" she stuttered, collapsing to the deck, terrified all over again at the thought.

Kharaba and Salvatore exchanged an exasperated look, and the Captain called Rodrigo over. "Find Sister Annarisse," he instructed the boy quietly. Rodrigo glanced at the prone weasel whose trembling was enough to rock the boat, and ran to do as he was bid. The fox turned to the tiger. "Well, we know she survived the trip, and that she wasn't attacked," he said.

Kharaba nodded hesitantly. "We don't know if she found anything useful, though," he pointed out.

It was at this juncture that Annarisse arrived. Taking in the scene at a glance, she ran over to the weasel with an indignant swirl to her robes and helped the girl to her feet. "I'll take her back to the cabin and get her settled," she said to Salvatore, in a tone that indicated she would deal with him then. He nodded absently.

"By your leave, Captain, I believe I should be the next to descend in the bell," Kharaba announced grandly. Salvatore looked up, startled.

"To what purpose?" he asked.

"To find out where exactly we're going when we get to the bottom," the tiger answered. "It's just an observation mission, really. I'll be back quickly, having made some sketches of what I find, if indeed I find anything worth sketching."

Salvatore shrugged. "If you wish to volunteer, I will not stop you," he replied. He glanced at the sun, low on the western horizon. "If you wish to go, now would be the time. I believe we will wait until morning to go down ourselves."

Kharaba nodded, removed his heavy silk robe, and inserted his journal and a pencil into an oiled-leather carrying case that he had prepared for just this eventuality. Then he descended the rope ladder. When he had settled himself on the shelf seat inside the bell, he called out, "I'm ready!" The bell began its descent.

Kharaba's pencil flew madly across the page as he tried to record everything he saw. The fish which had terrified Rianna were recorded with sketches and descriptions of their colours. The seaweed that hung suspended in the water was captured in minute detail. The water which began to enter at the bottom of the bell was the impetus for some quick mathematical calculations, even as he called up to begin manning the bellows.

Gradually the light dimmed, and the pencil stopped moving on the paper as he stared out at the murky depths, transfixed by the play of light and shadow in this alien world. Mesmerized, he nearly missed the fleeting glimpse of another creature at the porthole on the other side of the bell from the one he was looking out.

It had a long, bottle-nosed snout, which it pressed against the window for a moment. Kharaba caught sight of it out of the corner of one eye, and shuffled around the bell quickly to see it. It did not stay long, but he caught a glimpse of it as it swam away. What he saw frightened him far more than Rianna's shark.

It was wearing armour and carrying a spear. It had hands on the ends of its flippers. It looked like the same type of creature portrayed by the Captain's glowing statue. Clearly, it was guarding something.

Shaken, he opened his journal again and began to sketch. The bump of the bell hitting the sea floor brought him back to his surroundings, and he looked up from his drawing. There was more to discover here than an underwater warrior. Looking out the nearest window in what he thought was probably a westerly direction, though he couldn't be sure, he realized that he had found what he'd come for.

About three yards away was an iron door, locked with heavy chains and padlocks. It was set into a wall made of glass, lit by an eerie blue light that had no obvious source. Kharaba cast a quick spell to detect magic, and was nearly knocked off the bench by the force of the affirmative answer. This was old power of a kind that had long since disappeared from the world above.

Behind the door stretched the strangest apparatus Kharaba had ever seen. It looked like the kind of pipe glassblowers used to create bubbles in molten sand, except that it was big enough for at least two people of normal size to walk abreast in it. It was circular, seamless, and transparent. It had a small entryway at ground level, then curved upwards, with glass stairs set in it to facilitate climbing. It continued on this upward path for about three yards before levelling out briefly. Then it curved down again, but only about half the distance it had come up. Again, there were steps. When it levelled out the second time, it went straight off into the distance. Almost fearing what he would see, Kharaba strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of its destination.

Shortly after the glass mage-tunnel straightened out, the land under it fell away sharply, creating a deep chasm. A hundred feet out in that abyss, lit faintly by the blue glow from the tube, was a tower. It appeared to be made of stone, though it was difficult to tell because it was covered in algae and seaweed. He could see no windows, but that didn't mean there were none - only that they had no light behind them to reveal their location. He couldn't see the bottom of the tower. For all he knew, it went down forever.

Feverishly he began to sketch, paying particular attention to the locks on the door. He doubted he had enough open-lock spells to open them all in the amount of time he had before needing to breathe again, but he and the weasel together might be able to manage it. He left the details of the tower deliberately vague, but he tried to get a good likeness of the tunnel in his journal. Just as he was contemplating how to draw the cliff, there was a slight change in the feel of the air in the bell and a distant voice called down through the tubes. "Sir Mage? Are you all right?"

Kharaba answered quickly. "I'm fine, I'm fine! Pull me back up!" Immediately the air changed again and the bell began its jerking ascent.

Power

Treedden's spine jarred painfully as he was sucked backwards—away from the gloom of the deep sea and the creatures that awaited him there. Small flecks of glass embedded themselves in his fur, and with a rush the water that had been his prison spilled on to the floor of the cave.

He curled on the floor, shuddering, hacking out lungfuls of water, and replacing them with his first real gulps of genuine air in he had no idea how long. Even musty cave air tasted good to someone who had been without longer than they had ever thought possible.

He rose to stand but fell painfully as his legs rejected him.

“So you thought to escape me, did you?” said the voice of his captor. Her feet and tail came into view, and lacking the strength to do much else, he snapped at them with his teeth. She screeched and backed away. “The only reason you're still alive, wolf, is that your shipmates have survived and are coming. You may yet be a useful bargaining tool.” Two strange, birdlike creatures approached him at her order, hauling him up by the arms. She gave them some instructions in a language he did not know, and they dragged him out the door of that room and across the hall. Within moments he was securely chained to a stone wall, and the servants had left him alone with the mage.

She touched his sagging, salt-caked fur and cackled. “You may still be of use to me, should your friends prove to be a disappointment,” she mused, trailing one cold finger down his belly. He shuddered, and she laughed again. “We will see, won't we, Baron?” she said. “But first we will see how long it will take for you to start to beg. I can give you many, many things, wolf. Not least of them your life.” She stroked lower, and he shuddered again, repulsed. She pulled away and left the cell, locking it behind her and hanging the keys on a ring near the door.

With her hand on the door handle, she turned. “It will be interesting to see how much value your friends place on your life,” she mused. Then she took the torch off the wall and left. Alone in the dark, he hung his head and wondered whether Salvatore would bother to save him.

“Captain, may I speak with you in your stateroom?” Kharaba asked as he swung his legs over the railing of the ship. In the flickering light from the ship's lanterns, Salvatore studied the mage. Something of interest had happened; something the tiger did not want generally known. Nodding, Salvatore led the way to his cabin and motioned for the mage to precede him through the door.

"I found what we came for!" Kharaba said, unable to contain his excitement a moment longer. Salvatore had never heard him be less than scrupulously polite; whatever the mage had seen had caused him to lose his measured composure, and his excitement was infectious.

"Well? Let's see it, then!" he replied, striding to his table and clearing it of papers with one swipe of his arm. Kharaba opened his journal to the sketch of the tunnel and tower.

"This is where we're headed," he pointed, and Salvatore bent over the drawing as Kharaba explained. "The door will require a good lock-picker in addition to my open-lock spells. There's simply too many locks on it for me to open alone. The tunnel appears to have air in it, though. If it didn't, there would be no reason for the bend in it. That's designed to keep water that enters at the bottom from immediately flooding the entire tunnel. It's ingenious, really."

Salvatore pointed to the cliff. "What's this?"

"The sea floor drops away there, and the water gets much deeper. The tunnel extends out over an abyss, the depth of which I could not determine. It connects with that stone tower there -" Kharaba pointed to the outline at the edge of his sketch. "I have no idea where the bottom of the tower is, if indeed there is one. I couldn't see it."

"Who would have constructed a tower on the bottom of the ocean?" Salvatore asked wonderingly.

"The Autarchs," Kharaba replied promptly. "It was constructed by the mages of old, as a fortress against the others. They had magic we can only guess at now. I don't know how they managed to make spells that would last so long after their own lifetimes, but the place simply reeks of magic still. Magic maintains it. Oh, for power like that!" Kharaba gazed over Salvatore's shoulder for a moment, entranced at the thought of such magic at his fingertips. Salvatore brought him back to the present with a question.

"How many can comfortably fit in that bell?" he asked.

"Four at most," the tiger answered, thinking. "We know there's a mage down there, so I should go. And yourself, of course. Perhaps two of the fighters?"

Salvatore shook his head. "No. Sister Annarisse must be one, unless you can match her healing spells." Kharaba shook his head, and the Captain continued. "If we need to open the locks on the door, then the other must be Rianna. No one on the ship can open locks as well as she can."

"That little weasel? She'll be terrified at the thought! She dissolves in a puddle at the thought of a shark!"

"She'll reform again quickly enough if we offer her a greater share of the treasure." Salvatore smiled nastily. "And if there are sharks, better her than someone whose skills are needed to get home."

Kharaba thought about this, then smiled, too. "Very true, Captain. When do we leave?"

He stood up and closed the journal, handing it back to the tiger. "Tomorrow, a mark after first light. Send Annarisse to me on your way out, please." Taking the hint, Kharaba took the journal, bowed, and strode to the door.

To the Depths

"You can't make me get in that thing again!" Rianna's strident soprano voice was raised in a screech that could be heard through every vibrating plank of the ship. Bhruic, who had been sent to fetch her on the grounds that she wouldn't put up a fuss in front of someone with claws, dumped her in front of the captain with an exasperated sigh.

Salvatore bent low, grabbed the arm of the still-struggling weasel, and whispered in her ear. "Those who come with us get a greater share of the treasure," he told her. She went quite still, as he had known she would. She stared up at him, the light of avarice in her gaze. "There is treasure down there, the like of which you have never imagined," he continued. "You have special skills that we need there. There are locks to open, and no one on the ship is as good at locks as you are." She preened a bit at that, and he held back his smile with difficulty. "Will you help us get the treasure?"

Her look turned cunning. "I'll do it for three shares," she answered.

Salvatore did a convincing job of looking shocked. "Two would be more appropriate," he answered.

She shook her head. "Three, or I stay right here," she said. He briefly fantasized about mistaking her meaning and marooning her. Then he shrugged.

"Very well," he answered. "But only if you come with no further waste of time." He stood up, releasing her. She got to her feet and moved to the ladder, descending rapidly and entering the bell with no further ado. Annarisse and Kharaba followed as Salvatore gave some last-minute instructions to Mietvani. Then he, too, descended the rope ladder.

The atmosphere inside the bell was tense as they began the descent. No one spoke. Rianna stared out the window, terrified yet mesmerized by the blue depths. A shark swam by, and she squealed in fright, nearly falling off the ledge and out the bottom of the bell. Salvatore caught her with one hand and put her back, then stopped moving with his hand still on her tunic, staring out the window opposite him. Kharaba looked, too, then exchanged a glance with the Captain. Both pulled out their daggers, and the Captain drew a pistol.

They were just in time. With an explosive splash, the warrior Kharaba had seen the day before erupted into the bell, already jabbing about with his spear.

Salvatore fired at him, and slashed with his main gauche. The warrior emitted a sound that had Rianna clutching her ears. Kharaba was on the point of casting a silencing spell when the creature disappeared under the bell again. The entire episode had taken less than a minute.

“Captain, that was close. I am putting a prayer for love on you now, in case he comes back,” Annarisse told him. He looked like he was about to argue, but decided against it. After all, just because the prayer was there did not force him to actually use it. As its weight settled on him, he resolved never to put the burden of his wounds on another in that way.

The warrior had not decided to leave them alone. Annarisse had just finished her spell when the bell gave a sickening lurch. Salvatore strained to see what was going on above them. All he could make out was the feet and tail of the warrior, hovering just above the bell. It jerked again, and began gathering speed.

It was Kharaba who realized what had happened. “He cut the rope! We’re falling! Hang on!” he yelled, his voice preternaturally loud in the small bell. They did as he suggested, grasping at the leather straps placed there for the support of the occupants. Rianna grabbed Annarisse as well, clearly terrified.

Instead of taking a quarter-mark to reach the bottom, it took barely five minutes. Ears popping, they took stock.

The warrior was nowhere to be seen. They were about three yards from the opening to the tunnel. “Could we swim back up?” Annarisse asked, and Rianna whimpered.

“Probably,” answered Kharaba, “but if we do, we’ve lost any chance to get here. The bell would have to stay here; we can’t tow it after us.”

“Sharks!” Rianna piped up.

Kharaba nodded. “There is that. We might not make it to the ship through the sharks. Especially since that warrior was injured when he tried to attack us. Sharks are attracted by blood.” He wiped at a spot of blood on the seat from the Captain’s stab wound. “I say we go inside anyway. Our chances of survival improve the longer we wait for the sharks to leave. We’re here anyway. We may as well get what we came for.” He pulled his knife from its sheath and stepped out onto the sea floor, covered in its few inches of water.

Salvatore shrugged. “He’s right,” he told Annarisse. “There’s no point waiting to run out of air in here, and we might as well swim up later as now. Who knows, maybe the tower will contain something to help us get back to the surface safely.” He sheathed his pistol and rose from the ledge, surveying the bell. “I say we try to lift it on a level, so that no air escapes underneath,” he told the mage. Kharaba nodded, and they arranged themselves so they could lift from either side. “Ladies, when I give the word, swim under the rim and head for the door. Open it as fast as you can; we’ll be right behind you. And don’t forget to take the deepest breath you can, and hold it. On three, Kharaba – one, two, three!” The two sides of the bell lifted at the same time, and Rianna and Annarisse swam under the rim at the Captain’s nod. A moment later the bell settled back in place as Salvatore and Kharaba followed.

Rianna studied the lock for a moment before going to work. It was without rust, which she found strange. Shouldn’t an iron lock be rusty? Behind her, Kharaba cast a spell to open locks, and suddenly her lock became much easier. Mage-locked, it must have been. She snapped it open and handed the chain to

Annarisse to unravel while she went on to the next lock. Kharaba opened another with his spell. Just as Annarisse was starting to feel faint from lack of air, the last one popped open and the door swung inwards. The four crowded in, Rianna first, scampering up the stairs to make room for the others. Salvatore slammed the door shut behind him.

“Kharaba, can you lock it again from this side?” he asked, studying it.

“Of course, sir,” the tiger answered, and suited actions to words. Then they ascended the steep staircase.

The stairs were made of the same glass as the tube. It was very disconcerting, Annarisse found, to walk on something transparent. The material was slippery, both by nature and as a result of the wet environment. Surprisingly, though, she could see no mildew or other signs of decay. There was water in here; the air was laden with moisture and the smell of brine, and the steps were treacherous. Glad that she had not worn her robe, she caught Rianna as the weasel slipped on the stair ahead of her. Fortunately there were not many stairs, and in a few moments they were in the main part of the tunnel.

It stretched out straight before them, leading to another iron door at the far end some fifty yards away. “Well, for the tower, then?” Salvatore asked, pushing past them to lead the way. As quickly as he could on the slimy glass, he proceeded down the tunnel.

The door at the end looked identical to the first. It, too, was free of rust, and bore many chains and locks. Kharaba cast a few more open-lock spells while Rianna picked them with her tools. They opened easily, and the door swung into the tower again. They peered through it.

“I suppose we should have expected this,” Salvatore commented wryly as he approached the first stair. “How far down do you think they go?”

“Since we can’t see around the spiral and there’s no hole in the middle, there’s really only one way to find out,” Kharaba answered practically. “Watch your step, ladies.” And he started down after the Captain.

The Tower

The stairs wound down and down and down, lit by the same blue directionless glow that lit the tunnel. Within five minutes, their legs were aching. Within ten, they were wishing they'd never heard of stairs. Annarisse counted five hundred steps before growing too tired and sore to care. There were no landings or doors off to the side, though twice they had to open iron doors covered in rust-free chains and padlocks. Each time they prayed they had reached the bottom, and each time there were only more stairs on the other side of the door. And still the descent continued.

Finally, they opened a door to find a landing. It was not lit, but no lighting was necessary since the blue glow spilled in from the stairwell. Less than a yard in front of them was yet another door, this time with no locks on it, not even magical ones. Salvatore opened it cautiously and entered the room on the other side. The others followed him.

The room was large, some twenty yards in diameter, and the shape of a half-circle. They had entered it where the straight wall met the curved, and so could see the entire room at a glance. The round walls were made of stone, carved and fitted so smoothly there were no seams to be seen. The interior wall was much rougher, as though it had been done as an afterthought. Still, it was stone, and very thick stone at that. It had three doors spaced evenly along it, all iron-bound wood, all closed. The ceiling was at least ten yards above them, but it was difficult to be sure because it was shrouded in darkness; the lights placed around the room did not reach high enough to illuminate it, and there was no blue glow. The lights were simple torches, made of driftwood and tar, burning with the colours and smells of wood long submerged in saltwater. They shed a flickering, ghostly light, an impression which was not helped by the spacing of the torches at very long intervals. The room was quite dim. At the corner directly opposite their place of entry was a huge statue, carved in the shape of one of the creatures in the glass statues, made of wood. It must have been made from the base of an incredibly old tree.

Piled around the edges of the hall were mounds of goods of all descriptions. There were wooden chests bound with iron, of the sort used to hold treasure; there were bales of fine cloth of all colours and descriptions, some nearly new, some mouldy and tattered, all salt-caked and stained; there were books, statues, paintings, and casks of wine; in fact, every type of treasure imaginable was stored haphazardly and carelessly around the perimeter. Kharaba exclaimed in delight when a pile of books caught his eye. He nearly stopped to examine them, but Annarisse caught his arm and pulled him away. "Later," she said shortly.

Rianna, meanwhile, had discovered a small chest which proved to be poorly locked. She had already removed two gemstones from it when Salvatore took it from her and threw it to the back of the pile. But he didn't check her pockets. The fox and the horse kept the other two moving towards the centre of the room, where another intriguing sight met their eyes.

In the exact middle of the room was laid a long trestle table, big enough to comfortably seat at least twenty people. However, there were five places set, with elaborate and expensive china and finely-wrought silver. The two places set at either side of the table each had chairs with holes to accommodate their tails, and were clearly for them. The place at the end of the table, however, had no chair. In addition to the place settings, there were dishes of food, some steaming, some cold, all alien. Cautiously they approached.

"Are we expected?" Annarisse asked, her voice sounding surprisingly loud in her own ears. Kharaba jumped, startled, and the priestess looked around nervously.

"It would appear that way, would it not?" Salvatore answered.

"Captain, please remember that you still have a prayer for love available should you need it," she told him in a whisper. He frowned, but nodded. She gave him a hard look.

"Whoever prepared this feast has very strange tastes," Kharaba said, casting a quick spell to detect if any of the dishes contained magic. He shook his head. "All safe, or at least, there are no spells on the food," he told them. Suddenly they all turned at a sound from the wall.

The middle door in the interior wall opened with a loud creak, and they all turned to look. Salvatore casually rested his left hand on the hilt of a pistol, and Annarisse clutched her holy symbol. But the figure who emerged seemed harmless enough.

Sitting in a chair that had two large wooden wheels where its legs should have been was an old, seaweed-draped creature they did not at first recognize. It had a long grey snout, tinged with white around the mouth, and appeared to have no nostrils. Where its ears should have been on the sides of its head were two indentations with membrane-covered holes in the middle of them. The seaweed hid most of the creature's body, leaving only the impression of sagging, dry skin which had once been sleek and wet. The chair was pushed by a creature they immediately recognized. Though its fur was not of the same brilliant range of colours, it was clearly the same type of creature that had been on the raft which had bumped into their ship. The pair wheeled into the cavern and approached the table, coming to a stop at its head.

"Welcome, guests," said the mage in a sandpapery ancient voice.

Salvatore bowed to her. "My lady," he greeted. "You are gracious to welcome us to your home."

She made little flicking motions with one seaweed-draped hand. "Such as it is," she said depreciatingly. "This is not my home, but rather my prison. Guests here are rare. Please, sit. Join me for a meal." She observed their hesitation and cackled. "The food is quite safe, though it is perhaps not what you are used to.

Please. The kakapo will serve you.” They sat, and the servant began dishing the food onto the plates. There were several types of seaweed, fish with the heads still on, and what appeared to be a small octopus for each of them.

As they began poking at the strange meal, her servant brought in other bowls, setting them next to her on the table. These contained live creatures, a different type in each bowl. They saw an eel, two small squid, and a starfish. “My pets,” she told them, stroking one of the squid with fondness. “Are they not lovely?”

Salvatore and Annarisse nodded in agreement, though the priestess had to choke back her revulsion to do so. Then Salvatore said, “My lady, we have not been properly introduced. I am Captain Salvatore of the ship *Riddock’s Dawn*. My companions are Sister Lady Annarisse Deschamps, Kharaba, and Rianna.” He pointed to each in turn, then waited expectantly.

“I am called Amaia,” she told them.

“How came you to be here, Lady Amaia? Forgive me, but this is a strange place for one of your kind,” Kharaba remarked.

“I suppose it seems so. Indeed, I did not always live in the air as I do now. I have waited long for your arrival.”

Annarisse shivered. The atmosphere here was oppressive, and this strange old woman was ghoulish. She had an air of evil about her which the priestess found revolting, and all she really wanted to do was bolt for the diving bell. But they could not leave after all they had done to get here.

“Have you awaited us, specifically?” Salvatore asked.

“Not precisely.” She poked a live sardine into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed before continuing. “I have been attracting ships here for many years, but my captors have sent storms to waylay them. Most have been sunk by the powerful magic which keeps me here, and my only recourse has been to amass their wealth from the sea floor by means of my spells and my servants.” She gestured towards the treasure that lined the walls, and Kharaba’s and Rianna’s eyes lit up once again. “But you alone have won through against the storms and the barriers sent to prevent you. You alone have come to rescue me!” She speared another morsel of seafood with her fork, and chewed the raw fish with relish.

Salvatore smiled and ate a bit of seaweed before replying. “But why would anyone have imprisoned you? And how long have you been here, to have accumulated such riches?”

“It is a long story,” she began. “I was once a – I believe the closest term in your language is “duchess”—in a sea far from here, to the south, where your kind have rarely ventured and whence they have never returned. I was not the most powerful in the sea in a political sense, but my cousin the king was a weak dolphin, ruling by consensus and diplomacy. He refused to make the difficult decisions that must be made, and he insisted on allowing others to hold power nearly equal to his own.” She smiled a bit, reminiscing. “That was to be his downfall, that trust.

“I determined that if he could not make the needful decisions of power, I could and would. I formulated the spells that would be necessary, and I gathered an army to overcome my cousin’s pitiful force. But I was betrayed.” Her look turned sour, vengeful, hateful. Annarisse had to call upon all her strength of will to keep from shuddering away, but she did it. “One of my underlings told the king what I was about. He called on his mages, none of whom were as powerful as I. They attacked my garden in the night, and together they just barely won out. My spells of protection were insufficient. I will not make that mistake the next time.” She stabbed another living fish from her plate, and popped it into her mouth. “I was banished, sent to live in this crumbling tower far from my home sea, with none but these useless kakapo servants to aid me. The mages of my cousin’s kingdom put a curse on me, whereby I could no longer perform magic in the water that is my native element. Then they guarded my prison round with warriors and set spells to destroy any ship that came near. They thought to cut me off, you see, from any who might help me.

“But I am smarter than they, and I have lived longer than they expected. The ships that were wrecked in these waters contained books, and one or two contained people of some interest to me, people who taught me. I learned your language through them, though without their ships they were not of great use to me. I learned the spells I needed to control the bats and the kakapos, who are my servants above the water. That carver on the island you visited some fourteen days back – the seal? He was kind enough to send me glass carvings to hold my spells. I have sent dreams all over Calabria and even into Zhonggou, calling ships to come here, praying that one, just one, would be powerful enough to win through to me. Finally, you have come.” She stopped, and looked around, obviously pleased with herself and them.

“What happened to the people who taught you?” Annarisse asked around her aversion.

Amaia shrugged. “They died when they had outlived their usefulness.” There was a pregnant pause in the conversation as they all digested this gruesome news.

It was Salvatore who asked the burning question. “What is it you want from us, then?”

“Nothing too difficult, or too demanding.” She paused and pushed back her empty plate. “I want passage to your city, Captain. I want to go to Triskellian.”

Annarisse nearly exclaimed in surprise. She had not expected that. The dolphin noticed her reaction and smiled at her. “You are shocked, Priest,” she remarked.

“Indeed, my lady, why would you wish to go to Triskellian?” Annarisse asked.

“It is not my true destination. I wish to hire ships there, to go after my cousin’s descendants. I wish to see my home sea again.” Her smile turned feral. “I wish to make them pay for my imprisonment.”

“What’re you gonna do to them when you go back?” Rianna spoke up for the first time.

“I will make myself queen, of course. The whole nation will regret the day they banished me.”

Salvatore leaned back in his chair and propped one ankle on the opposite knee. To Annarisse, who was tied in knots with nerves, he looked completely relaxed. “Forgive me for being so crass, my lady Amaia, but what is in this for us?” he asked.

“Half of all you see here. You may choose. Yes, sir mage,” she addressed Kharaba, “that includes half the books, if you wish them.” She spread her hands wide. “A simple trade, is it not? Half my wealth, for passage to Triskellian. I will leave the city intact. I have no wish to harm any in Calabria. Will you help me?”

Salvatore tapped the fingers of one hand in a complicated rhythm against his knee as he considered. “I have a better idea,” he said. “I want more than just this treasure.”

Annarisse stood up abruptly, knocking over her chair. “Captain, I must speak with you in private.” She paused to fix him with her confessor stare. Now.”

“Peace, Sister,” he said calmly. “Let me finish.”

“No, no,” Amaia said, a tiny, feral smile touching her lips. “You must have time to consult with your people. Please, discuss my proposal.” She gestured to the kakapo servant, who came to wheel her out of the room. “When you are ready, my other servant here will come fetch me,” she said as she left, and another of the strange birds approached. Kharaba harrumphed meaningfully, pointing at it. They all took the hint. The glassy-eyed servant was wearing a wooden idol like the one worn by the bats.

Annarisse decided she didn’t care if the dolphin mage used the magic in the idol to eavesdrop. “I have grave doubts about releasing this wizard into the world again, Captain. Nothing she could offer us is worth the dishonour of that act,” she told him. He demurred, trying to put her off. “I mean it, Captain,” she told him. “I will not allow this deal to be struck.”

Salvatore moved in as close as he could get to her. Before the kakapo could move close enough to overhear him, he whispered in her ear, “If she betrays us, I will kill her.” Then he moved back, and gestured to the kakapo. The servant did not move, but a moment later the chair on wheels appeared in the door again, and Amaia came back to the table.

“What is it you desire, Captain? Name it, and it shall be yours,” said Amaia grandly. Annarisse held her breath and prayed.

Salvatore leaned forward, planted both feet on the ground, and put both hands on the table, suddenly deadly serious. “I want Triskellian,” he said calmly, as though asking for another slice of fish. “I want the city to rule and to pass to my descendants. Can you give it to me?”

Red swam before the priestess’ eyes, and a roar of anger filled her ears. The traitor was going to sell out, not just the Rinaldi whom he hated, but everyone

else in the city as well! Her muscles tensed and she began to pray a prayer of Penance, even as she considered other ways to force Salvatore to abandon this course of action. This must not happen!

Behind the emotions and the mechanics of the Prayer, a tiny voice clamoured to be heard by her conscious mind. Her prayer was mostly formed when she acknowledged it. This doesn't make sense, it whispered. The Captain has never before indicated a desire to rule the city. He has a distain for landlubbers which knows very few bounds; he would not want to be tied to a city for all time. His distain for governments of any sort is even greater. This is not a logical request!

Visions of Salvatore ran like quicksilver through her mind: Salvatore carrying an orphan child after Roxbarren; Salvatore comforting her on the ship after she had learned of Lady MacDuncan's perfidy; the hope in Rodrigo's eyes as Salvatore untied his hands; the concern he had had for her well-being on Seal Island. She had watched as the suicidal drunkard had begun to show the moral fibre he'd been drowning for so long. Would he now turn around and throw that morality to the winds by seizing this power he'd never wanted? Deciding he would not, she dropped the half-formed spell and began taking an active part in the discussion. The dolphin and the Captain were pouring over an oiled seaman's map of Calabria, discussing terms.

"You cannot put a border there, Captain," she pointed out, leaning over the map to see where they were pointing. "That river is in Avoirdupois territory. You can take what you like of the Rinaldi lands, but leave the Avoirdupois alone." Amaia looked at her and nodded.

"Indeed, it would be bad form to take that which belongs to the House of your confessor," she agreed.

Salvatore pointed to a different spot with his right hand. "Perhaps here, then?" With his other hand, while the dolphin was distracted by the map, he brought out his main gauche and stabbed towards her.

The witch saw the movement and spun away faster than Annarisse would have thought possible. "Treachery!" she cried, as she reached her bowls of pets. With the fork that was still in her hand, she stabbed down into the bowl containing the eel. Instantly a blue lightning sprang up between her fingers, and she cackled.

Kharaba had a spell begun within moments. Recognizing it at once, Annarisse started casting her spell, too; his was a prayer of silence, and would prevent her acting if it were to succeed. She doubted it would succeed against the witch, but she didn't have time to consider that. Quickly, she prayed for the zeal to withstand physical harm. The Captain already had her prayer for love. If he chose to use it, she needed to be ready.

Rianna looked from the cackling dolphin to the "pets" in the bowls, then back at the lightning between her hands, then back at the pets. With an almost audible click, she made the connection. The pets were the source of dangerous spells! She grabbed the nearest bowl - one of the squid - and ran with it as far

from the table as she could get. Kharaba, his spell having failed, realized what she was about and helped her.

The Captain had his épée in his right hand, his deflected main gauche in his left, and was leaping at Amaia. The two weapons parried and thrust with lethal grace, opening new wounds with almost every strike. The first slice opened a long wound in Amaia's right arm, and her scream of frustration turned to one of pain. He stabbed up and under the injury with his main gauche, turning it sharply as he withdrew the weapon. The wound spurting blood. The lightning took its toll, though. Every time the metal of his blades connected with the arcing blue flame, Salvatore tensed and cried out. The shock from the épée was not so serious; the Captain fought off the effects with minimal effort even as the hilt sizzled. The second was much worse.

Salvatore had faced death many times. Many times he had sought it out, welcoming its promised oblivion. As the second bolt of lightning began its lethal course through his body, Salvatore suddenly realized that he no longer wanted to die. The faces of his two adopted children flashed before his eyes, followed by that of his wife. She was smiling and holding his son, and she was shaking her head. Not yet, she mouthed. Don't come to me yet.

He bid a silent good-bye to his family. Then he did what he had privately sworn to himself he would not do. He called on the Prayer for Love, allowing Annarisse to feel the lightning bolt in his place.

It felt like a fire coursing through her veins. It felt like coming too close to the Light. Mortal beings are not meant to do that, as St. Helloise had taught in her martyrdom. Annarisse screamed and swayed as every hair on her body sizzled. The world went grey for a moment. A roaring filled her head, and the words of the prayer she had just uttered swam around before her vision as though stirred in a pot of stew.

She had to resist! From the depths of her being she called on all her willpower and zeal for the Light to withstand. The greyness cleared from her vision and the roaring receded. She caught her balance on the table, and took stock. She was not in good shape; any further concentration would require her to be better healed than she was. Quickly she cast the healing spell upon herself. Even as the spell took effect, she witnessed the end of the combat.

"Please! I'll give you anything! Triskellian will be only the beginning of what I will grant you. I can give you anything! I can give you Lania," the Dream-Carver pleaded with Salvatore, as she backed away limping and stumbling.

He hesitated for the barest moment at his wife's name. Then, with realization teasing his consciousness and cold anger sharpening his focus, he caught up to her in one long step and hooked a foot under her unstable ones, tripping her backwards so she landed prone on a bale of cloth. He dropped his épée and used his right hand to pin her, ignoring the lightning. Then he brought the main gauche down towards her chest. As he thrust the blade into her heart, he said, "You can't give me what I want! She's dead!" The last of her

lightning coursed through him while the light was still fading from her eyes. He straightened slowly and collapsed.

Annarisse rushed over to him. Her prayer for healing took a long moment, and she was afraid for a heartbeat that she was too late. But his eyes fluttered open and he propped himself up to watch the wounds healing over and the scorched look leave his fur. Then he looked up at her, for once not bothering to hide behind his bravado. "Sister, are you all right?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "It was a toss-up for a moment, but I'm fine," she answered. "You, however," and she pushed him down again, "need another healing spell. Don't move until it's finished this time." She performed the spell, and could no longer restrain her patient. He jumped up quickly, going over first to ensure that the witch was truly dead, then surveying the scene more generally. He approached Kharaba and Rianna, who were still standing guard over the Dream-Carver's pets.

"Did either of you get hurt?" he asked. They shook their heads. "What do we do with these?" he asked Kharaba, indicating the bowls of pets.

"Now that the spell caster is dead, they have no more power," the mage replied. "We can simply kill them, or release them back to the ocean." He walked over to the dead dolphin and prodded her with one foot. "So the dolphin who cut the bell's cables was guarding her," he mused. "How do we get him to let us out?"

Annarisse snorted. "We killed the mage for them," she said. "They'll be so grateful, they'll give us whatever we want. I suggest we ask for safe passage back to our own seas. They can make sure we get a good following wind."

Salvatore nodded. "Indeed, Sister. But first we will need to prove to them that she is dead." He thought a moment. "I'll drag the body up the stairs and attract the attention of the guard. If we're lucky, he'll be able and willing to parley when he sees that she's dead. Kharaba, Rianna, could you start an inventory of the treasure here? Sister, the mage's rooms on the other side of the wall need to be investigated." He bent to the body and threw it over his shoulder. Staggering a bit at its weight, he headed for the stairs. Rianna ran to open the door, then came back.

"Well, you heard the Captain," Kharaba said, the light of avarice in his eyes. "Let's start counting the treasure. We'll put precious gems and baubles over here, fabric and other dry goods over here," he pointed to two bare spots in the centre of the room, "and books on the table." Rianna nodded and went immediately for the little chest the Captain had removed from her hands earlier. Wondering by how much the little weasel would manage to increase her share, Annarisse headed for the door through which Amaia had entered the room.

The door led onto a long, narrow hallway, barely wide enough for the chair in which Amaia had ridden. It was punctured at intervals with doors, all of the same metal-bound wood, and all closed. Four torches burned in brackets along it, providing the same eerily insufficient light as in the main cavern. Shrugging, Annarisse began opening doors.

The first one appeared to be a small workroom, full of books and arcane devices. On one of its walls was a huge map. She went over to study it, and realized after a moment that the detailed parts of the map were actually the seas. These were shaded in many colours, with lines radiating around the land in flowing patterns that appeared to indicate currents, and other lines that seemed to indicate depth. Symbols were placed in the shallow sea to the south that looked like different kinds of fish. The land was coloured a pale green around the edges, and most of it was blank in the middle. It was backwards to her view, but she supposed that for a sea creature it made sense. She studied the outlines a bit more, trying to pick out something she knew, and figured out that the land near the top of the map had to be Calabria; indeed, there was a city marked on its western shores that was positioned where she knew Triskellian to be. Excited now, she looked down toward the Spicer Islands. Yes, there they were! Following the map still lower, she picked out one of the only islands that was coloured in; tracing its contours, she determined that it was, in fact, Bat Island.

Knowing that the map would be safe where it was until she could show it to the Captain, she continued on to the next door in the hallway, on the left this time.

This room was long and narrow, perhaps three yards wide and ten long. At its end, against the curved outside wall, were the remnants of a glass tank and large quantities of water. It had not been cleaned up, and indeed appeared to have been only recently broken, for the octopus lying dead amidst the glass had not yet shrivelled up. Strangest of all, though, was the end of the tank that was attached to the wall. The stone in that place had been removed, leaving a long, circular tunnel through the thick fortification out to the sea. This had been stopped up with a big pane of glass, which in turn was supported by some of the wooden remnants of the tank. What had broken it? What had been in it? Who had stopped it up? She stopped short of stepping into the mess, but did bend to examine the piece of octopus tentacle that was nearby. It was a foot-long tip, minus several of its suction cups, and it appeared to have been severed from its body by teeth. Sharp canines, to be precise.

A touch on her shoulder made her jump and reach for her holy symbol, but when she turned it was only the kakapo servant. He was gesturing with one hand, urgently, but making no sound, and she realized that Kharaba's spell of silence must have succeeded against him. Stifling a giggle at the irony of that, she followed the strange creature out of that room and into the one across the hall.

It was wider, though shorter, stopping about halfway to the outside wall. Panelled in driftwood, it was carpeted with damp seaweed in an attempt to keep the floor slippery enough for the dolphin mage to be comfortable walking on it. About two yards from the door, iron bars were set into the floor at small intervals, forming a cell, the back of which was formed by the back wall of the room. The walls inside the cell were bare stone, polished smooth. Set into this wall were manacles at several different heights, all in varying stages of rusty decay. The room smelled of mould, urine and fear.

In the very middle, hanging limply by arms held over his head by the set of manacles with the least rust on them, his feet barely touching the floor, was a salt-caked, bedraggled, skeletal, naked wretch of a prisoner. As she entered, the prisoner lifted his head and looked at her.

“Sister! Come to rescue me at last, are you?” it said in a voice that had not been used for some time.

She stared, nonplussed. This wasn’t possible.

The ghost before her spoke again. “Get me out of these chains, Sister! It’s about time you lot got here. I was beginning to think I’d have to save myself.” He squirmed a bit, then swore as the metal cut his flaccid skin. “What are you waiting for?”

“Baron Treeden?” she asked, still not moving.

“Of course! You came to rescue me! Now get over here and finish the job!” The use of his abused lungs and vocal chords sent him into a fit of spasmodic coughing. He jerked around like a fish on a hook as his muscles convulsed, then hung limply again, his energy completely spent.

Finally, she looked around, spotting a key ring hanging by the door. She reached up to get it, and examined the keys on it. They were all very similar, and any one of the twenty might open any lock. The kakapo took the keys out of her hands and sorted through them quickly, choosing one and handing the ring back to her with that one separated from the rest. Taking the hint, she tried it in the lock on the bars. It fit, and with a bit of tugging and turning, she got the lock open. The gate swung a few inches into the cell, then got caught on something. Pushing at it, Annarisse and the kakapo managed to open it far enough to enter. The kakapo chose another key to hand to her, and she reached up to release the Baron from his chains.

They popped open with a loud screech of metal on metal, and Treeden fell to the floor in a heap, coughing again. He grabbed for Annarisse, but couldn’t make his numb hands close over her arm. He fell back with another blistering oath against the wall.

“Stay where you are, my lord. I might be able to heal you enough to permit you to walk, though I doubt I can do much more than that just now.” Treeden was in no condition to protest, so he submitted to her healing spell and felt the strength flowing back into his limbs. This time when he reached for her hand, his own closed around it, and he slowly got to his feet.

“Where is Salvatore?” asked the wolf, trying to kill time while he discovered if his legs would carry him without further support.

“He’s taking the body of the Dream-Carver up to the tower’s entrance, to show the guard there. Kharaba and Rianna are out in the main hall, sorting through the goods there.”

Treeden looked taken aback. “The witch is dead?” he asked, incredulous.

“Salvatore killed her. She nearly killed him in the process, but we all survived.” She picked up the wolf’s left arm and draped it over her own shoulders. He submitted to this with bad grace, growling a bit under his breath. Annarisse ignored him and continued. “That’s why I can’t heal you fully. I’ve

used all my magic, and will need to rest before I can finish healing you. We can at least get you out of here, though.” Suiting actions to words, she helped him walk to the main hall and thence to a chair at the table.

“Baron! We thought you were dead!” Kharaba looked up from his cataloguing to see his employer, and came over immediately. Together, he and the priestess manoeuvred the wolf into a chair.

“That’s not what the witch said,” Treeden answered as he settled himself.

“What does that mean?” asked Annarisse, surprised.

“Admit it! You knew all along I was alive! You just took your sweet time rescuing me! What would have happened if Salvatore hadn’t killed her? I would have been left here to rot, that’s what! You’re all traitors!”

Annarisse stared at him as anger began to boil in her blood. “You think we knew?” she asked, incredulous. “How could we have known? What could we have done differently if we had? And why attack us when we’ve just rescued you? You are the most ungrateful wretch ever born!”

“She told me you knew! She told me I was a bargaining chip in her negotiations with you!” Treeden tried to stand, but fell back, winded from the exertion of his anger.

“Oh, and I’m sure she was entirely truthful with you on every other matter, so you had every reason to trust her over us,” Annarisse replied, scorn dripping from her voice.

“And you’ve been so very trustworthy yourself, Sister!” In Treeden’s mouth, the title became an epithet.

“Baron, Sister! What is the point of getting into this argument?” Kharaba intervened. “We are here. You are safe. The Dream-Carver is dead, and her lies with her. We have better things to do than argue about them, or her, or anything else in the past.” He approached the kakapo servant, who had been standing quietly by the door all this time. “Can you find us blankets to sleep in?” he asked. The creature bowed and nodded, then turned to do as he was bid. The mage turned back to his shipmates. “Baron, I have never lied to you whilst I have been in your employment, and I tell you true: Amaia never mentioned you to us, nor did we have any inkling that you had not died in that storm. My locating spell placed you at the bottom of the ocean after that. How you survived, I’ve no idea, but we believed that you had not. That is the truth.” His eyes bored into the wolf’s, until Treeden finally nodded.

“Now, there is leftover food on this table, and blankets will arrive in moments. I suggest you eat, Baron, and then we should all get some rest until the Captain returns. I, for one, need it.” He pulled over a plate, heaped it with those of the leftovers that were not still squirming in their serving dishes, and placed it in front of his employer. Treeden fell to, and the others found bales of cloth with which to make beds.

Dream-Carver

Salvatore dropped his burden on a landing near the top to rest for a few minutes before continuing. He had rarely been so tired, nor had so much to keep his mind occupied.

The visions he'd been seeing these many months had come from the Dream-Carver. She had been in his head, feeding him what she wanted him to see, using his memories against him. How else could she have known about Lania?

He felt soiled. He had never lived a very clean life. Sailors didn't, generally. That was how it was at sea. He had had plenty of reasons to hate himself over the last six years since the death of his family, and his self-loathing had become a matter of habit. But always before, he had known that his thoughts were his own. However dark, however brandy-soaked, however suicidal they had been, they had been his. Now that security of mind was gone. How much had she read of his life? What else had she touched – corrupted? He remembered some of the beautiful moments he had relived in his dreams of his wife in weeks past, and remembered his reaction to them. Had she been there, defiling that? He shuddered in distaste.

How could he get clean again? How did one sponge dirt from one's mind? Sister Annarisse had helped him heal the spirit, but this was different. Could he even trust his own thoughts, or were they tainted forevermore?

He picked up the body again, stiffened into the u-shape it had taken on while he carried it. He was no stranger to death, but this journey up the everlasting staircase was the most gruesome encounter he had ever had with it. The arrival at the top was a huge relief.

He carried the body down the tunnel, until finally he got to the stairs at the other end. There he put down the body and sat down to wait.

He did not wait for long. Within moments, the guard was circling the tunnel, looking in at him and the dead body. Salvatore mimed talking to someone, and the warrior nodded, understanding, before swimming away again.

Half a mark later he was back, and had brought a companion with him. This dolphin was a female, unarmed and mostly unadorned, but for a small vest of an opalescent material that he found mesmerizing in the strange blue light. She entered by the unlocked door and climbed the stairs to meet him.

She said a few words in a language he did not recognize; he shook his head. She said a spell, then said in his own tongue, "You wished to speak with us?"

He stood and gestured to the body at his feet. "I did. I have killed your prisoner. She tried to enlist my aid in returning to her home sea to complete her

revenge against your people. I seek your aid now in returning to my homeland, in recognition of the service I have rendered to your people." He waited.

"It is indeed a great service," she replied. "I think I am in a position to grant you whatever aid you should require. What do you need from us?"

"First, repairs to our diving bell so that we may return to our ship in safety," he answered, ticking off a point on his index finger. "Second, your assurance that no sharks will molest us in these waters during our numerous trips to and from the surface." He paused. "The Dream-Carver had great wealth stored in her cavern," he said. "By the laws of my land, that treasure belongs to me and my crew."

"This is entirely reasonable. None of it originated with us, certainly."

"Very well, then. Third, I believe it was you or your people who sent the storm that nearly sank us on the way here?" She nodded, and he continued. "Then I would ask for similar magic, to take us home quickly and safely." He thought for a moment, then nodded. "I believe that's all. Can you do these things?"

"Indeed I can, and these are easy enough boons to manage. I will promise you one thing in addition to what you have named: wherever you go, if there are dolphins in those waters, you have only to call on them for aid and give them your name to receive whatever help they are able to offer." She paused, then blushed. "What is your name?"

He smiled. "Captain Salvatore, at your service, madam," he replied, bowing.

"I am Moieera, Water-Mage of the Coral Atoll," she answered, bowing as well. "Give your name to any dolphin who asks for it, and you shall always receive help. If ever a child of yours should sail these waters, he also may expect our help in times of need."

"Truly, you are generous, Moieera," Salvatore answered. "What shall we do with this?" and he gestured to the body at his feet.

She shrugged. "I will have the guards take it away, to feed to the sharks," she replied. "I would simply leave it here, but that would not keep the sharks away as you asked. I will see to it that your bell is repaired forthwith. You will be returned to your ship shortly." With that, she gracefully descended the short staircase to the outer door and left. The guard picked up the body and followed; a few minutes later, seeing that the mage had repaired the cords on the bell, Salvatore followed to return to the Riddock's Dawn.

Annarisse leaned on the starboard railing and gazed at the setting sun. Behind her the evening watch had set the sail for a night's slow passage on the calm sea. The dolphin mage had kept her promise; there had been no storms in the seven days since they had set out from the Dream-Carver's lair.

Salvatore came up beside her quietly. In silent companionship, they watched as the sky turned from pink to orange to violet to blue. The first star appeared to the north, just visible through the rigging.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Salvatore said, breaking the silence. He sounded hesitant.

“I was wondering when you would,” she answered. “About Lania? The dreams?”

“How did you know?”

“I know how special she was to you. It can’t be easy knowing someone else has been playing with those memories.”

Salvatore stared out to sea, not meeting her gaze. “I don’t know if they’re mine anymore,” he said after a moment. “I’ve not led a perfect life by any means, but at least my memories were mine. What do I do now that they’re not?”

“Amaia used you in the most heinous way possible. She used your strengths to her advantage, and she didn’t give you the benefit of agreeing to it first. She violated your mind.” Annarisse put her hand on the fox’s arm, turning him to face her. “But she can’t take Lania away from you unless you let her. She can’t spoil that. Remember your wife, Salvatore. Remember your life together. And banish the witch to the darkness of oblivion. She doesn’t deserve your memories.” She held his gaze for a moment before he pulled away again. The peaceful night closed in around them again. Salvatore let the night breeze whisper to him. She was right, he realized. Lania was still there. Nothing had changed.

“What will you do now?” Salvatore finally asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” she answered, thoughtfully. “My share will not go to the Cathedral right now, I know that much, but I don’t know quite what to do with it.” She fell silent, gazing at the reflection of a ship’s lantern in the water below. “I know one thing I will do, though. I must find my brother.”

“The one who was disowned?” She nodded. “Do you know where he might have gone?”

“He probably signed on as a mercenary somewhere. He was a good hand with a sword, and he would have had to make a living somehow. Do you think a bounty hunter would be able to find him?”

“In all likelihood. Offering a reward should help, too, but be careful to say that you want him alive, unharmed, and of his own free will. Bounty hunters have a reputation for being—overzealous—sometimes.”

She didn’t answer for a moment. “What will you do, Captain?” she asked finally.

“Well, that depends,” he replied. “I want a home near the sea, a place to return to at the end of each voyage. The Bisclavret will see to that, if I ask. My services should rate at least a small manor house. I can’t give up sailing, though. Maybe I’ll buy my own ship.” She looked up sharply at the warmth in his voice. He noticed, and chuckled. “Is that look of consternation for the idea that I might engage in slave-trading if I keep to this profession?”

She smiled wryly. “You know me well,” she answered. She waited, but he didn’t continue. “Well? Would you still deal in slaves?”

A light appeared in his eye, one she recognized. He was about to bargain. "I will promise to give up the slave trade, Annarisse, on one condition," he said, turning to face her with one arm supporting his weight against the railing.

"I may regret this, but I'm going to do it anyway," she told him. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Name your condition."

He savoured the moment, then answered, "I want you. I want you to remain as my personal confessor and tutor to my children. As long as you work for me, I will not trade in slaves. Do we have a deal?"

"I don't know what to say," she replied, a bit dazed.

"Why, say yes, of course," he fixed her with the boyish grin she'd seen so much of since he'd stopped drinking.

She shook her head. "It isn't that simple," she told him. "First Lady MacDuncan must release me; that will not be a problem, I think. Then I must arrange to change orders, for I will not remain in service to the Cathedral. I don't know what order I'll choose, but there will be much to do to effect the change. Then I must get the permission of the new order to accept secular employment." She paused, gazing at the stars to the west. "Can I give a conditional yes, dependent on the agreement of my order?"

"I can't ask for more," he replied. "I will await your decision before I set sail again." He pushed away from the railing. "What will Treeden do, do you think?"

Annarisse shrugged. "He won't let his mother dictate his life again," she answered. "Other than that, he hasn't talked to me hardly at all since my last healing spell." She grinned a bit maliciously. "It must be galling to have been rescued from such a place by two people who betrayed him, at least in his own mind. I doubt he'll ever forgive us for that." She, too, stood straight. "It is time for my evening prayers. Will you join me in them? Malachae and Rodrigo will be waiting for me."

He offered her his arm with a bow worthy of a princess. "Indeed, my lady, I should be honoured," he replied, and she laughed as she took his arm. Together, they left the starlit deck.

Above them in the rigging, hidden by the fold of a sail, sat Treeden, fuming. So they were conspiring against him again, were they? He began to consider his options. Waiting until the pair had been gone for several minutes, he descended from the rigging and went to find pen and paper in his cabin. Dipping it in ink, he began to compose a letter.

The lady priestess and the fox captain would pay dearly for their betrayal.

Epilogue

Dear Phelippe,

I hope this letter finds you well. Indeed, I hope it finds you. I have hired a bounty hunter to seek you out and deliver it. I pray every night that he is discharging this duty with alacrity.

Some time ago, I was assigned as confessor to one Baron Treeden MacDuncan, of the Bisclavret, as he voyaged on a ship called the *Spirit of Midchain*. The journey is over, and has been very successful. I now have funds that do not come from either the Church or our father. In fact, Father knows nothing about them, since my share was supposed to go entirely to the Cathedral. There are many reasons why I decided against that course. I'll share them with you when I see you next.

You are probably wondering why I'm writing to you, after my silence of three years. First, I apologize for that. I should not have let Father dictate how I would treat you. Despite his opinions, you are my brother and family is more important than any misplaced, overzealous sense of honour. He had no right to treat you as he did, and even less right to forbid me to see you again.

I'd like to make it up to you. I have means now, independent means. I am still in the Church, but I've left the Penitent Order and the Cathedral. I do not belong there any longer. My new order, the Anathasians, allows its members more freedom to accept secular employment. Accordingly, I've taken a position with the captain of the ship I was on, Lord Captain Salvatore. I have asked him if you might come join me at his household, perhaps to be employed by him if you should find the situation to your liking.

Please come. I will be at the Monastery of the Anathasians in Triskellian until the spring, at which point I will journey to join Lord Salvatore at Port Spar. His new seat is not far from there – it formerly belonged to Baron

Affligent of the Bisclavret. You may have heard of him. He was killed in a siege of his manor house some four months ago.

Please, please come. I miss you.

Your loving sister,

Annarisse

Dear Sister,

I hope this letter finds you in good health of mind and body.

I am writing to formalize my offer of employment to you, subject to the agreement of your order.

The terms of the employment are as follows. You will be responsible for the scholarship of my two children, Rodrigo and Malachae, comprising both their secular and religious education. You will act as confessor and chaplain to my household while it is in residence at Chateau Affligent, and also to the ship at large when we set sail aboard the ship Lania's Pride, currently under construction at Port Spar. These duties will be undertaken at the rate of two shares of any bounty taken, directly to your order, and two directly to you; also such stipend as we shall mutually decide, upon your attendance here.

If you or your order should require any further communication prior to the beginning of your employment with me, these can be addressed to my office in Port Spar at the direction of Mr. Mietvani, Port Manager's Office. I await your arrival at your leisure.

Sincerely,

Lord Captain Salvatore

Scribed by Malachae di Salvatore

Dear Sister,

Oh, I'm so glad you're coming! Lessons have been boring without you. Brother Sylvain is nice enough, and he teaches well, but he's not you. You made it fun.

Did I write good? The other letter, I mean? Father said I did, but fathers are supposed to say stuff like that. He bought me a palfrey, and he hired a teacher to teach Rodrigo and me how to ride. The teacher is the same person who taught the Duke! Isn't that amazing? He must have been very expensive, but Father says we can afford it, so I shouldn't worry. I do worry, though.

This castle is falling down around our ears. Father says it looks much worse than it did the last time he was here. There are new holes in the walls, and the kitchen garden was never planted this year. We're having to buy all our food. At least the fishing village nearby is operating well. I'm getting tired of fish, but it's better than nothing. The roof of the castle was hit by some cannonballs, and was never repaired. We've cleaned out the mess in the attic, and we're going to repair the ceiling of the rooms underneath, but for the moment several rooms are out of bounds to us because Father's afraid their ceilings might collapse. The roof has been entirely replaced. That was the first thing Father ordered done when we arrived. The abandoned tenant houses outside the walls are housing workers now, and Father says they'll be there at least until spring.

Guess what? Never mind, you never will. Baron Treeden offered Father a deal on some household slaves, at the knighthood ceremony in Harrowgate. Father took him up on it, bought fifteen people – and then freed them all and hired them as paid servants!!! Their purchase price is their first year's wages, so they have a debt to work off, but they're free when that's done if they wish to leave. He said he promised you he'd never have slaves again, but I think he just did it because of us. The other lords nearby are muttering about it. This kind of thing just isn't done. But I'm glad he did it.

The new ship will be ready to sail by spring. Father says we're all going. I can hardly wait. I miss the sea. Father says it's gotten into my blood. He's probably right. When I cut my finger the other day and licked it, the blood tasted salty like seawater. Father is smart about stuff like that.

Rodrigo says to say hello to you. Father wanted him to write a letter, too, but he said letter-writing was for girls. Brother Sylvain rebuked him for it, but he still wouldn't write a letter.

I have to go, it's dinnertime. Come soon, Sister Annarisse. We miss you.

Affectionately,
Malachae di Salvatore

Dear Master Amaldi,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and spirits. Regardless of your current state of being, however, I believe the news I bear will intrigue and excite you to new heights.

I have come into the possession of a collection of old books which will be of great interest to you. Without going into detail, for I do not want this letter to be intercepted by one unfriendly to our studies, they contain information and methodologies for items of mutual interest to both of us. Some of these methodologies are familiar to me, but many more are new, indeed foreign,

and I suspect that even your august learning will not encompass the entirety of the knowledge contained in these tomes.

I am returning forthwith to Triskellian, and the books will accompany me. I would be grateful if you would arrange for me to sojourn at the university, that you and I might peruse these acquisitions adequately. I believe it will take several months to complete a thorough study of their contents.

My employment with Baron Treeden MacDuncan will likely continue in the future, but I have requested a leave of absence to permit this line of study with you, and the Baron has agreed.

I await your opinion of these tidings with great impatience.

Yours in the Brotherhood,
Kharaba

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To His Grace Bishop Renisi, greetings.

This letter will serve to inform you of the events of my recent voyage, in particular of the actions of the acolyte assigned to me as my confessor, Sister Annarisse.

The sister's actions and judgement appeared to be lacking throughout the voyage. She engaged in scheming and machinations with others on board and with her family, with the full intention of ruining my business interests with which your Grace is also involved. She is fully aware of these business interests, including the Church's involvement in them, and intends to inform the Avoirdupois noblemen of her family of the same. I'm sure you realize the extent to which such actions could damage my family's reputation and your Grace's fine name, among other ramifications regarding Bisclavret interests in Triskellian. I trust your Grace will take appropriate action to rectify this situation. If your Grace should have need of MacDuncan services in order to take the actions required, I trust we will be contacted forthwith.

Please do not hesitate. A great deal is at stake. For now, all operations are suspended while the matter of the Sister's unfortunate knowledge is adequately dealt with. My mother has agreed to that course of action for the moment, but she grows impatient. Your Grace's immediate attention to this problem would be much appreciated.

I remain your most obedient servant in the Light
Baron Treeden MacDuncan

Acknowledgements

I can still remember the leer in the eyes of Patrick Emond as his character, Captain Salvatore, tried to convince mine, Sister Annarisse, not to sail with him. I remember watching with awe as he and Alexis Rudd, playing Baron Treeden, turned a bit of dead game-time while the ship was at sea into an opportunity to double-cross practically everyone. I remember the glee with which I contemplated the penance "I" was going to set for Captain Sal, and the superb role-playing that Patrick brought to the table when I blindsided him with it. I'd been playing *Dungeons and Dragons* for two years at that point, but those two taught me to role-play. I owe them my gratitude, both for the characters they brought to life, and for the lessons learned.

It was the summer of 2004, two years later, when the book really took shape. Jennifer and Ian Watson joined the group as Rianna and Kharaba, respectively. The role-play was excellent and the friendship better. My husband Pieter van Hiel, as storyteller, was outdoing himself. The villain and many of the setting details are his; I just fleshed them out. I lived and breathed the story, wrote and read character journals, contemplated difficult scenes, and generally got years' worth of fun out of the three months of weekly gaming nights. When it came to an end, I had to face giving up the summer's extended daydream and coming back to reality. In order to put off the thud of dream's end a few months longer, I wrote this book.

In addition to the four players and my husband, I must thank Jason Holmgren and the rest of the *Ironclaw* team for creating a setting that so thoroughly captured my imagination. On my blog, a team of friends stroked my writer's ego, reading scenes, suggesting changes, or just egging me on. Their help was invaluable. And lastly, my daughter Elizabeth, born in the year between the two halves of the campaign, put up with a mommy who was often glued to the computer for hours at a time. My best writing days could often be defined by the phrase, "two thousand-word nap." To her, and to the other family members who helped out while my brain was riding the waves (especially my mother-in-law, Lynda van Hiel) I offer my heartfelt gratitude.

~ Erin van Hiel
May 2007