

Canticle IV

*In silent seas, near as a thought
The Weaver of Light sorts the threads
Some are scattered, adrift
Some are clumped, knotted
None flow straight
Pairs have been split
Pairs have been paired
New threads added
Old threads separated
Across the weave, darkness
Below the weft, light
Throughout the warp, sadness
Between the threads, hope
Dancing in the current
Adrift, they sway
Finding one another
Seeking themselves*

Canto IV - Sea of Homecoming

Verse I

There was a sea of wonders out beyond the farthest haze, if one bothered to go look. There was one in the shadowy depths, and another above the grand firmament, where the fathoms ended. And, behind the looming cliffs that encircled and embraced the Harbor of Bryndoon, the cliffs upon which the palace rested and the Crown resided, there was no end to the mystery.

Marhyd, head of the royal ministry of knowledge and general odd-jobs mer for the Crown, understood this in her heart of hearts. She was used to the darkness of the tunnels from long experience. The inky black would wrap around her, swaddle her in its comforting embrace as she bobbed along. There were times where she regretted the necessary benefit of the glow-lamps, that her bulk made it unsafe to venture blindly along unfamiliar passageways. Such was the price of a life so well-lived as her own.

Then, one last stroke of the flukes sent her out of the familiar darkness and into something deeper. The glow of her feeble lamp, just enough to limn the tunnel walls and mark their presence, was consumed wholly by the cavern before her. In this night-beyond-night, where the firmament did not glow and the walls were unseen, everything was made small and insignificant.

Only three things brought a challenge against the tenebrous crush. The first came from high above, where the faintest of glimmers suggested a connection

to the firmament after all. This far into the evening hour, the twilight barely made its presence known. The other two things were large clusters of lamps set by mers of the Home Guard and her own ministry. One grouping of lamps gathered around the bodies of a mer and an abomination. To the dead mer, Marhyd paid scant attention; the guard's uniform was plain to see, and as such was left to the guards to deal with. Already they had the kelpen wrappings ready.

The abomination, now, that interested the ministra greatly. From a distance, one could mistake it for a mer. It possessed the same basic plan of the body, the same assortment of limbs and flukes. But with a true mer nearby to provide perspective, the thing's size became obvious. Its tail alone was two tail-lengths, and stretched out as it was, the abomination was clearly twice the size of the largest mer in the guard. On a closer look, Marhyd noted the deformities: the grey, scaleless skin, the shrunken eyes in a face otherwise dominated by a toothy, jawless mouth...

Oh yes, this was a rare specimen indeed.

Rarer still was the state of preservation she saw before her. From her sash, Marhyd took a long, thin rod of polished bone. She prodded the corpse, noting the rubbery flesh and the way the thick mucus sloughed off of it in sheets. It felt very solid, very material. Other abominations rotted away quickly upon death, their flesh soon sublimating into the water as a foul taste upon the current. Why was this one so different?

"A strange evening," said Aysmin, pulling up alongside her. The duchess carried herself well, but the ministra could see the telltale signs of exhaustion

around the mer's one good eye. Aysmin's abalone shell glimmered in the lamplight, dominating the left side of her face.

"It is a change of tide, to be sure." Marhyd turned her gaze back to the abomination. "I must confess that I am interested in seeing where it takes us."

The duchess eyed the wide, split mouth of the thing before them. Its stubby tentacles had curled outward and back upon themselves, revealing rows of narrow teeth. "This is what took Shalar from our ranks," she said.

"The guard, you mean?"

A solemn nod. "Shalar min Shandra, of the long knives. An able sergeant. She will be missed."

"Long knives, you say?" Marhyd brought her lamp in close to the flaccid body. "I see knife marks in this flesh, of different sizes. Also, it was stabbed quite a few times by a spear, if I am to judge. Was she alone?"

Aysmin's mouth skewed unhappily. "There was another guard with her, a recruit from the backwaters. It was she who finally made it back to the main halls to report this, though we've had a hard time getting her details straight. We shall know more on the morrow, once she's had time to sleep and calm herself."

"Not a spear-user, was she?" Marhyd continued her observations. "Some deep stab wounds here, though I am not sure they were all from before the abomination died. This mer wanted to be sure it was dead."

"I understand that feeling well enough. But no, to answer your question," said the duchess. "The recruit had a basic blade and little ability with it. Other

mers were here, and they must have taken their weapons with them. As well as one of Shalar's knives, for whatever reason. That part is less important than knowing who wielded the spear that killed this monster."

Marhyd had her rod in the thing's mouth, poking and prodding. "No one," she told the duchess. "Or rather, it was not a spear that dealt the final blow." Wedging the jawless orifice open further, she noted the irregular dark patches on the inside of the cavity. "Interesting..." With a wave of her hand she summoned an assistant to her side. "Examine the alimentary canal," she ordered.

The grey-clad mer complied, forcing her arm down the thing's gullet all the way to her shoulder. Its teeth were still wickedly sharp, and the poor mer's upper arm was soon a meshwork of thin and bloody cuts. The mer did not pay it any mind, so intent was she on her task.

The ministra pretended not to notice the grimace that flashed across the face of the duchess. While she had nothing but the utmost respect for Aysmin and her work with the Home Guard, the pursuit of knowledge was no place for the squeamish. Instead, she kept her eyes on the assistant, who was not extracting her lacerated appendage with a prize in hand. Marhyd was presented with a rounded pebble. It was suspiciously pristine for something found within the gullet of an abomination, and neither slime nor ichor would cling to its surface. Taking it in her palm, the ministra noted an unnatural warmth that was unmistakable in the cooling waters of the evening.

"Here is what killed our monster," she declared, presenting the pebble to the duchess. "An act of rune-work was used to push a tremendous flow of the caloric force through the creature's body."

"You mean a runic weapon?"

"Hardly anything that sophisticated. This was an act of improvisation, likely born of desperation," said Marhyd. "Offensive workings are not taught these days."

"As well they should not be," came a voice from behind. Mitera Yesca's gruff tones carried well ahead of her, the ripples of sound heralding the leondra's approach as she swept into the chamber. The mitera was in a fine, foul mood such as Marhyd had rarely seen the mer, and every square thumb of her fur was prickled for reasons not connected to the chill of the local waters. Behind Her Holiness, a younger leondra in the kilt of a temple prestra bobbed along with far less presence or confidence.

"The runes of power and their grammar," Yesca continued, "are a gift from the Mother of All, and to use them with the intent to harm Her creations would be sacrilege before Her."

"Well argued as always, Your Holiness," replied Marhyd. "Though in this instance, I believe the results speak for themselves." She waved her rod across the corpse of the beast. "Does your concern for the sanctity of life extend to abominations? For if not, then we could surely use the help in defeating them."

She noted with satisfaction the twitch of the eye that showed her words had hit a mark. A point it was for her, then. The mitera was always so guarded that it

made counting coup on her quite the challenge. All the more fun for her, then.

"Yesca, I understand your misgivings," Aysmin said. "But let us bring the matter before the council, at least. The ministra is right in that we must consider all options."

"Understood." The word was clipped and neutral, but far below her the mitera's tail flukes swept clean a patch of tile with their nervous motion. Another point for her, then. Marhyd could barely contain a grin. Her Holiness was in a fine foam of stress this evening.

The mitera foamed for another beat before waving her little attendant over. "Nehemi, see to the fallen guard. Make sure the prayers are said properly, and that the body is treated well."

"Y-yes, mitera..." The young leondra was shaking at her extremities, holding it all in with nothing more than that leondra seriousness that they must teach at the home temple in the Mere Kamazon. Certainly it seemed that not a one of their tribe was ever more than mildly discomfited by anything in normal times. Times were not normal, however, and from the way the prestra approached the body, now freshly wrapped in kelpen fabric, Marhyd could see that she'd known the deceased.

Ah, it was good to know that not all among the mer leondra had chilled veins.

Mitera Yesca waited until the young prestra was away before changing to the other subject on everyone's mind. "And the princess?"

"There were scales in her color near the guard's body," reported Aysmin. "At a guess, she was knocked

to the ground at some point. There were a few more near the statue." The duchess took her bond-sister's arm and led her in that direction. Marhyd followed out of curiosity. Her assistants were already busying themselves with the monster, and while the ministra would like nothing more than to take a set of shearing blades to its rubbery flesh, her gut was telling her to watch the mitera now.

"Can we be sure they are hers?" asked Yesca.

"It is not like Rhiela's color is a common one," noted the duchess. "We also found scales in red, green, and orange, which would match what Marsa told us."

"And you trust your daughter on this, Ministra Marhyd?" the leonda said, without turning to face her as they stroked along.

That only meant that the mitera could not see the current shape of her grin. "My trust in my dearest child is strong and true," she replied cheerfully. It was not at all a falsehood; she trusted Marsa to do exactly whatever Rhiela told her to do. She could inquire into the savory details later in private.

The ruff of fur at the base of the leondra's neck bristled, letting loose a flurry of silver bubbles to dance in the lamplight. Another point, so soon after the rest? Mitera Yesca was in a fine mood, indeed. It took Marhyd a moment to realize that she was not the one to score that particular coup, however.

A statue. She had not paid attention to it as she came in, so intent had she been on the dead monster. The stone in mer form lay at the edge of the lamplight, as grey and unnoticed as her assistants. At the mitera's command, lamps were brought in closer to reveal the

glint of a thousand tiny jewels embedded in its surface. It was a queen's bounty, a collection to humble the efforts of every mer galda in the Mere Kazahn. And so well preserved...

Marhyd let her senses flow away from her body and into the surrounding water and stone. Yes... She could feel the lines of telluric force crisscrossing the cave, protecting the stones from the ebb of erosion. The network of grammar was vast, complicated, and self-supporting. That aspect alone made it a masterwork of a level unseen in centuries. Oh, for a year of quiet evenings in which to study its intricacies...

And then the lamplight passed behind the head of the statue, and all conversation in the chamber ceased. The crystal that formed its hair caught the light, held it, and formed a halo of green to encircle the face. And what a face! Marhyd preferred them plump and innocent, but the statue projected a noble strength that was attractive in its own way. The combination of face and hair was enough to still the flow in her throat for just a moment, leaving her without words to speak.

The mitera did not share her sense of wonder, nor her appreciation for beauty. "This should not be," Yesca muttered into the still waters, forgetting for a moment that she was not alone.

"Should not be what, Your Holiness?" asked Marhyd.

"This statue. It is wrong, misbegotten, in ways that should remain forgotten. It is a remnant of an evil time, when wicked mers turned to the Mother's eternal foe for dire inspiration."

"Luher worship?" She tried to keep the humor

out of her voice, though her eyes still rolled. In all her years, she had never heard of such things as being more than bubble and foam, rumors that only grew in the telling. At least, in the here and now. Her mother's mother had spoken of records, archives, lost long before the Fall of Leïsi. She would have to search her memory when the time was available.

"The Holy Temple has a long memory, ministra," said Yesca. The mitera attempted to smooth her hackles down, but her claws still showed. "The heresy was eliminated long ago, but this statue was a piece of it. The hair proves as much."

"The green color, you mean? It really is a nice shade..."

"Yes! When was the last time this was seen on a mer, this shade like the grasses on the far shelf-lands?"

The mitera obviously meant this to be rhetorical, but Marhyde had an answer ready all the same: "This afternoon, according to my daughter."

"What!?"

A-ha! Another point for her! It was a good day for Marhyd's scorekeeping.

"You should listen more carefully to official reports," the ministra said smugly. "One of the mers last seen with Her Highness was green of hair and scale. Personally, I thought her to be from some backwater lineage and nothing more, but..."

"The description matches that of one mer from the Mere Scotia," said Aysmin.

"The one who was reported as killed," added Marhyd.

"And whose mother was given to your tender

care, ministra," the duchess shot back.

That deserved a full-bodied huff of indignation. "Well, if I had been informed that Messra min Naïda had living relatives out there who might plot an escape, I would have requested more guards for the ministry tunnels. As it is, I am down two assistants and several rare pieces of fulgurous rune-work."

The grizzled leondra was actually choking on her own water now. Bubbles sped from her gill slits and caught in her fur, lending the mitera an extra mane of froth and fury. Marhyde had never seen the like. For a five-beat, the only sound was the dull vibration of a growl passing through the mitera's teeth. The harmonics of its waves, densely packed, danced along the spines of all within earshot. It was a rare sound to hear from any of her race, proud as they were of their serenity and self control, and to Marhyd it was a shocking reminder of a time long ago when perhaps the foremothers of the leondra had not been so pacific. Not a current stirred, not a mer moved while the mitera had the black mood upon her.

Marhyd took the opportunity to observe this dramatic lack of cool. It was so out of character. Whatever significance this green mer held was lost on the ministra, but that would have to change. It was her job to know secrets, and she had done so ably for many years. She would be sunk if she did not know what could cause such a froth in Her Holiness, but it must have been important indeed.

"Search this place." When the words came, they were hardly better than the growl. "Determine which way the princess was taken, then remove all

guards from these waters. Let no one else in. Ministra Marhyd." The low rumble bore down on her. "Once the duchess is finished with her business here, you are to destroy the statue and block all access to this space."

"And how shall I do that, Your Holiness?"

"Be creative."

Or rather, the diametrical opposite of creative. Marhyd's mouth curled at the corners until her usual grin was a smile as broad as any shark's. Oh, she could think of all manner of ways to bring the entire cavern down; the only problem was that she could not use them all at once. The possibilities...

She like Mitera Yesca far more when the leondra was angry. Such fury made for poor decisions, and thus great fun for her.

Verse II

Night washed its way across the firmament, not as swiftly as it did over the cliffs of Bryndoon but still fast in its own manner. After so many days within the confines of the city -- and what a crazy few they had been! -- Sera found it to be peaceful, restful. There was something about life on the open currents that suited her.

"You expect me to sleep *where?*" Others, it obviously suited not. They were only a few hours of the day and evening into this little adventure of there, and it wasn't anything like Rhiela had envisioned. Just what the princess had been expecting was hard for Sera to say. The only expectations the silly chum could have would come from the tales of guards returning from tours of the backwaters. The red mer was certain that the princess herself had never left the home waters of Bryndoon. Whatever fantasy lay in that pretty golden bubble atop her neck, it was at odds with reality, and thus far reality was winning.

"In the grass, Your, ahem, 'Highness,' just like the rest of us." Sera gritted her teeth and bit back a snarl before it shook the waters between them. "No palaces around here, in case you haven't noticed. Gotta sleep where and when possible. If that means a grass bed, well, slept in worse."

"Of course you have."

"Course! And so has Ardenne, and the twins, too. None of us ever had a nice, cushy palace hammock." Sera shrugged off her pack, letting it fall to the matted grass below. "And if you miss it that much,

just swim on back!"

"In, in the dark?" That set the princess back, now didn't it? Already the firmament was faded to a deep purple, and only their little glow-lamp lit the waters. Soon enough they'd have to rest that, too, to keep the night swimmers from getting too nosy.

Sera shook her head, tsking loudly in case Rhiela couldn't see her expression clear enough. "Unless you can magically make it daytime again, chum. Now, wouldn't mind a bit if you made yourself a fat snack for something. That huge rump of yours could choke a blackshark, and those overblown floaties in front would satisfy the chomp-chomps to a tee. So go on right ahead, serve yourself up to the toothies, be all noble and muck. Keep 'em off of us, that will."

Even in the dimming light, her eyes couldn't miss how Rhiela went red in the face at the 'huge rump' comment, and about as purple as a ripe tuli pod at 'overgrown floaties.' For a moment, the hope drifted in that the royal brat might actually splash off and get herself killed. Small loss that would be.

"Y-you're just jealous!"

"Jealous? Nah. Tired and hungry and crabby, but not jealous. Open that hole in your head much more, might be I get furious, too. Now quit your whinging and pick a spot to bed down. Closing the lamps in ten verse, and no waiting.

With that, Sera started to hum the counting song used to time students at creche. Ten full verses of it actually took a while to sing, though Rhiela needn't know that. Everyone was bedded and concealed in the grass by the time she'd finished the sixth time around.

Then she put the lamp to rest, and herself as well.

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Rhiela had always thought she liked the dark. There was plenty of it in the passages behind the palace, unlit spaces full of interesting things. It could be explored for trinkets, pushed back with lamps, or wrapped around her like a concealing weave. That darkness had been a close friend. Out here, though... this was wild darkness, dangerous and uncontained. Her mind refused to accept the emptiness, filling it instead with the products of her imagination. It did her no good to shut her eyes; the darkness followed her inside. And when it did --

The memories of the day, or the past few hours only, returned to her. The grisly details floated and mingled in her mind. Shalar min Shandra, Shalar Long-Knives, surrounded by pinkish wisps of blood. The vision of the dead mer melted and reformed into that of Ardenne's mother, Messra Diana, still alive but swathed in purple torment. The ministra's face, laughing at a joke only the fat mer could hear, split apart to reveal the toothed maw and tentacles of the hag, reaching for her...

She awoke with a muted squeak. There was a hand on her shoulder, shaking her gently. "Who...?" she whispered.

"It's me." Ardenne's deep alto was not well suited to whispers, or at least the princess would have thought. The hunter's voice was a light thrum that barely vibrated across the waters. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. No." She would have shrugged, but there was no light by which to see it. "I am not sure how I

should be." After a pause, she added, "How is your mother?"

No light to see the shrug, but the roll of the hunter's shoulders was still felt along the line of her flanks as it pushed the water away. "She's still out," Ardenne said. "Whatever that... whatever was done to her, it's not wearing off. I'm praying that she wakes up in the morning, but..."

"I shall pray with you."

"You will?" Surprise curled through the hunter's voice.

"Trust me; I've had to float through so much ceremony over the years, I know every verse of common prayer there is." Rhiela considered for a beat. "Let us have the prayer 'A Light in the Depths' to start with:"

*Oh! Dearest Mother of All
Our blessing, our love, and our hope.
Though we find ourselves in still waters
By Your blessing, currents flow.
Though we find ourselves lost in the night
By Your light have we hope.
Though we find ourselves in direst straits
Without flow to aid or ebb to ease
Caught between scalding heat
And bitterest chill, we shall not despair
For You are with us always.*

The benediction flowed from her lips with fluid ease. Though meant for Ardenne and her mother, Diana, the act of recitation soothed her own heart as well. She drew one of Shalar's knives from its sheath

and cradled it against her breast. The words continued, but now they were as much in memory of the dead as they were for the hope of those still among the living.

*We pray tonight for Your loving touch
Not for ourselves, but for those in need
For she who cannot ask for her own sake
For she cannot cry with her own voice
May they find solace
May they find rest
May they find peace*

Rhiela let the prayer fade into the waters quietly, without any of the closing declamations favored by the prestra. Too much of her time had been wasted with all that pompous bubble-blowing, and she could imagine Cythera All-Mother's feelings being not too different, if She had to listen to all that blather on a regular basis. There was a poetry to prayer, but also a point where enough was enough.

"Thank you."

For a beat, she actually thought the Goddess had spoken. Ardenne had remained silent for the entire length of the prayer, and she had half-forgotten that the hunter was even beside her in the grass. The realization was as surprising to her as it was embarrassing. Very rarely was she ever so caught up in a prayer.

Then again, she had rarely felt the need to pray so earnestly. "Did that help any?" she asked.

"It helped me, at least," came the reply from the nearby darkness. "It... it is good to know that someone else cares."

"You're welcome."

She heard the rustle of grass as the hunter turned in place. "We should get some rest," said Ardenne. "It will be light soon."

"I'm not sure if I can," she admitted. The words came out timidly, which annoyed her. Princesses were not supposed to be timid, depths take it! They were supposed to inspire and lead! So far, that was the complete opposite of what she was doing, and the fact that the red-haired rogue was right in what she said, well, that was galling too.

"Worried about bad dreams?"

Oh, she'd almost forgotten about those, after the peaceful contemplation of prayer. Those terrors in the darkness had withdrawn, hiding in the murk with the night-feeders and products of her overactive imagination. "Yes," she finally replied. "And... er..." She chewed on her lower lip, caught between the need to ask and the shame of asking. "What's a chomp-chomp? Sera said something about them." Her cheeks were heated at the memory. "But she never said what they were."

"Small sharks, about an arm's length from snout to tail, but with mouth full of tiny, sharp teeth." A beat of a pause in the hunter's words. "More full than most sharks, even. They usually take round bites out of the flanks of larger fish, other sharks, dolphins, or even leviathans like cachalot or rorqual. They don't bother mers that often. The blind spots in our vision aren't big enough to hide in."

"That is good to hear."

"Yeah, there's not much in the Mere Leïna that

will hunt a mer, from what I've been told. The Guard keeps a good job of keeping orcs and the bigger whales away, and anything smaller won't pose much risk to us."

Thoughts of the hag crept back in, and she shivered in spite of the warm waters. "Except for abominations."

She could hear the hunter sigh. "Right. Those things. I wish I knew more about them. They don't appear in the Mere Scothia."

"I like the sound of those waters more and more now."

"Compared to your city and sea, it's not much," said Ardenne. "But it's my home, and it has my heart. I'll be happy to return."

Sad tones weighed the green mer's voice, though they were hard for Rhiela to fathom. Home was... what? To her, it was a place to rest, to do things, to keep her stuff. The palace was nice, but she could not imagine missing it the way Ardenne missed the reefs. Her mother, maybe. Marsa, definitely, but the rest of it was just there without any special connection. Oh, and Tiffy. She hoped Marsa remembered to feed the little octopod. From there her mind wandered, focusing on the memories of playing with Tiffy in the palace garden. At some point, she feel asleep once more.

Verse III

Set in the outer shellwork of the grand council chamber was a beautiful picture, a series of carved coral frames holding smaller pieces of shell and glass to form intricate patterns. It was a beauty to behold when the light of the firmament shone behind it, with circles of different hues for each of the nine seas. Mitera Yesca loved to look upon it and meditate in the beats and verses of time before she was joined in the chamber for a council session. The glimmer and shine was as close to divinely inspired as she had ever witnessed.

Sadly, it was so late into the evening hours that they might need to define the night further, and the picture pattern was dark. All the mitera had to remind her of the nine seas beneath the firmament was the gathering of mers from those seas, now filling the chamber. This was not a thing to which she could meditate, and so she did not bother trying.

It was fortuitous, in a way, that the representatives of the noble houses were at hand to attend an immediate convocation of the High Council. The only thing better would be if none could come at all. The waters were a-thrum with the vibrations of fluke and throat; the rich, comforting silence of the chamber popped like a bubble upon the firmament. No, she did not like this unusual level of activity. Not at all.

Yesca settled into her habitual spot and watched as the others vied for their places. It reminded her somewhat of the shell-home crabs that were so common in the Mere Kamazon. The little crustaceans would tussle amongst themselves for the best, most

spacious whorls and whelk shells to inhabit. The image brought a smile to her lips. Then came the memory of watching a particularly successful shell-home crab being mobbed by its inferiors, pried out of its shelter and left with the least of protections once the mob had sorted out who got which shell. The smile was swallowed up by a deeper frown, and she held herself more firmly in place.

The duchess and the ministra had taken their usual places as well, and the rest were left to align themselves along the triangle that they formed. The representatives of din Laërta and din Menhel, the two dominant houses of the Mere Leïna, took up positions near Aysmin. Their pale softness mixed strangely with the duchess's dark, metal demeanor. Between the duchess and the mitera, the representatives of the Mere Mezzerle formed one line of the triangle. Calla din Casima was a thin, pinched mer with a long nose, who kept her hands folded carefully against her chest and looked remarkably like a prawn when she was displeased, which was often. Merhi din Saëkra was the opposite, florid and full of body. Both their Houses depended heavily on the support of the Guard and the Temple to maintain the peace in their sandswept sea, so their choice of seating came as no surprise.

Nor was it a surprise to see who had clustered near Ministra Marhyd. Tilla din Valit, the other representative from the Mere Tessraï, was stuck to the fat mer like a remora to a shark, and the comparison was only more apt if one knew the history between the two Houses. Yesca sometimes imagined that Marhyd's House of Linnea only tolerated the House of Valit as a

useful political tool. Certainly, no din Valit had gainsaid a din Linnea since the founding of the two Houses.

On the line between the duchess and the ministra rested the representatives of the Mere Kazahn, Tamur din Hillia and Rei din Hatara. Neither looked happy to be seen with the other, but their alliances with the Guard and the Ministry all but dictated their placement. Yesca considered it amusing that for all the animosity between the two lineages, din Hillia and din Hatara might have been taken for cousins, or even sisters, so similar were they in bearing and coloration. Only the sheen of the firmament's light upon their inky black hair, one shading to blue and the other to red, marked a difference in heritage.

The final line of the triangle, the one that would connect the points held by Yesca and Marhyd, was filled by the lesser representatives, the mers of no great House who had been chosen to represent their native seas at yesterday's grand ceremony, but who would never have expected to become involved in the affairs of the Crown. Even now, there was a dazed and bewildered look in their eyes. Yesca shook her head. These were not her partisans, nor even her allies of convenience. They were a buffer, a trio of warm bodies to separate her from the ministra. She could not even recall all of their names.

"This convocation of the High Council is now called to order!" As the Queen's life-sister, Duchess Aysmin was officially in charge of the proceedings in lieu of the royal presence. Unfortunately, Anyis would not leave her chambers for any reason at the moment. The stress of the day, coming so close to that shared

anniversary of sadness, had proven too much for the fragile royal disposition.

She would have to visit her bond-sister and closest friend on the morrow. An hour of quiet contemplation and gentle embrace would do them both good.

"The first matter at hand concerns the whereabouts of Princess Rhiela." The words produced quite a stir, with many a fluke twitching in discomfort or dismay. "As all have surely noticed, Her Highness has not been seen since yesterday afternoon, when she slipped away from the festivities for what she said was a small, private party."

No matter how she might wish to, Yesca did not turn to glare at Ministra Marhyd. The fat mer had not revealed that little morsel of detail until a full hour after the first alarm was made. Of course, at the time the incident with the prisoner had seemed to take precedence, but still...

"We are not certain whom she was planning to meet, but it is likely that those mers were involved with the attack on Ministra din Linnea's personal offices," Aysmin continued.

Calla din Casima rose from her place, her arms still folded close. "It was the Free Flow rebels," she declared, not waiting for recognition before speaking. "I've warned you all before, have I not? Those anarchists cannot be contained indefinitely within the waters of Mezzlerle. Despite our best efforts, their numbers swell." The tip of her nose quivered with indignation.

"Yes, we are all aware of what you say." Aysmin

spoke with the tired tones of someone who'd spent too much time debating the matter in the past week. The mer from Mezzegheb claimed much and showed little to support it. "And while it is certainly possible that the Free Flow is involved, our best leads in the investigation point us in the direction of the Mere Scothia."

All heads turned as one to stare at the representative from that far sea. Messra Prinell min Nisa had the look of a tiny fry trapped in the gaze of a shark, with her eyes popping and mouth agape as she stammered a confused string of syllables into the water.

"It should be noted," Yesca said loudly over the thrum of the waters, "that the perpetrator who is believed to have a vendetta against Ministra din Linnea is originally from the Mere Scothia, but that she is a singular case with known motivations. While her actions are criminal, they do not and should not reflect upon her home waters."

That calmed the lot down, and won her a thankful gesture from Messra min Nisa as well. It was a small kindness, a small mercy to extend, and perhaps nothing would come of it, but it never hurt to throw scraps into the currents.

*

The ministra could have applauded. Would have, but for the consternation and confusion it would cause in the already muddy waters of the chamber. The moment simply was not the right one. But Her Holiness's save had been masterful, and now the scrawny mer from Scothia's reefs would be kissing the mitera's tail flukes forever more.

Why were the mers from that sea so underfed,

she wondered idly. Messra min Nisa looked like she was built of stick coral and kelp, and Messra min Naïda had not been much larger. Marhyd's own fat tail twitched as she curled herself into the cupped reclining cavity, perhaps in sympathy for those who need live the rough life out in the backwaters, with no soft silt-grass to line cushion them.

From the inner fold of her vest she retrieved a small package of kyun-pod fruit. The tiny red capsules popped and snapped between her teeth. *Poka-poka-poka...* They were a rare and favored delicacy imported from the Mere Hetropa, and she never regretted the time and effort she'd put into devising a means to raise them on her estate in the Mere Tessraï. The only problem was that others were always asking her to share, but in the flurry of bubbles and words that filled the chamber, no one noticed her discrete snacking. Marhyd let the conversation wash over her, picking out the details as it pleased her. All the talk of politics and military matters bored her, to say rightly, and so she let others handle the business. As necessary, she nudged her co-representative, din Valit, to speak on behalf of the Mere Tessraï. Like a good little pet, Tilla could be trusted with such simple tass.

Eventually the patter of voices slowed and the echoes died out. The time had come for the true business of this late hour.

"Have we discussed the matter of the abomination yet?" she asked sweetly into the empty waters, knowing full well that they had not. She could almost suspect that the mitera had been steering the debate away from this very topic -- almost, because

Yesca's face told her left no doubt that this was exactly what was going on. There was no need to suspect when such proof was at hand.

Tamur din Hillia was the first to speak. Blue-black hair swirled around itself in a thousand little curls as she turned her head back and forth. "What abomination? Has there been another incursion?"

"Oh, yes!" Marhyd exclaimed in false astonishment. "In the caverns behind the palace, if you would believe! One of Her Grace's own guards was killed while fighting it, perhaps even in defense of Her Highness Rhiela! Surely that was mentioned previously?" There, that was enough emphatic punctuation. Then again, why play a rôle when you could over-play it? "You really should come by my offices to see it. Truly is it an impressive specimen. It took a work of rune-crafting to defeat it at all."

And there was the stir that she was hoping to get. The thrum of the waters rose to block all meaning to the words now vying for place within the chamber. Some things were easy to pick out, however. It was not just that an abomination had made it so far into the city, or that the princess's disappearance might be connected to it. Those were enough to send anyone into a proper froth, but to add all that together with the means of the creature's demise, well... She could not quite hide her pleasure at the fluster, even as Mitera Yesca failed to hide her displeasure.

It was time to twist the knife -- metaphorically, this time.

"I must say that I am impressed with whoever cast that spell, and I do not say such things often, as

many of you may know. From what I have been able to divine from the ethereal echoes, this mer took a common pot-boiling spell and adapted it into an effective weapon against the abomination. Startlingly effective, in fact. It certainly worked better than anything else we have yet tried against those foul, lugubrious monstrosities."

Oh, she was proud of that one. She could practically see the other mers' heads spinning as they sought to place a meaning to the word 'lugubrious,' distracting them from any deeper consideration of her follow-through: "Actually, I was hoping to bring the matter before the military council. Perhaps the duchesses would find it useful. Do you think they might?"

And there went the finishing blow. How the regular House legates hated to be reminded of how little clout they possessed. Din Hillia and din Hatara were at each other's throats for the chance to bring the matter to a vote and take preemptive credit for future success. The Mezzegheb legates were not far behind them. Her Holiness did her best to shout them all down, to cow them into a proper obeisance to the wisdom of the temple, but a decade and more of fear at the thought of the shadowy threats on the current was not working against her.

"May we count upon the assistance of the Mere Arkhala in this matter?" Marhyd asked sweetly once the initial vote had crashed through.

"Ah?" Rethel min Ressa, representing the northernmost sea, twitched as if shocked. Her faded orange braids whipped lightly through the waters. "Oh,

yes. Yes. What few records as what remain shall be placed in yer care. Afraid it won't be much. Most was destroyed after the war. Taht, or thrown down the Maw," the mer added hastily, with an eye to the mitera.

Marhyd nodded at that, as it confirmed everything she had ever heard. After the destruction of Leïsi during the War of the Black Flow, the Temple had forced a ban on many sorts of rune-craft, and the Arkhalan rune keepers had swum frothingly in circles to prove themselves trustworthy, lest they be the next to suffer a military visitation. A great deal of knowledge had seen itself dumped down a hole in the bare stone of Arkhala's greatest mount, the swift current of which sucked all things in and gave nothing back.

"Whatever is left may still prove useful," the ministra said, showing a warm face to the Arkhalan mer. "If nothing else, the pieces we have may give outline to those we lack."

The council dispersed soon after, the individual mers leaving to pursue their own politics and perhaps a spare hammock. The mitera left as soon as it was polite to do so, bidding farewell to Marhyd but not speaking one word more. For her part, the ministra kept to her resting cavity and received visitors until well after the turning of the midnight hour.

"Ministra Marhyd? A word, if it pleases." Tamur din Hillia had waited until the last, and now the lithe mer eeled her way across the surface of the council shelf. "After discussing the matter with Her Grace," the mer said, flicking her tail in Aysmin's direction. "I would offer my nieces to act as assistants to the office of natural philosophies. Currently they are with the Home

Guard, but Her Grace is willing to part with them."

Oh, that was surely true. Aysmin hadn't had much good to say yet of Estrella din Hillia, and even less of her cousin and bond-sister, Tachiana. Estrella had actually born witness to at least some of the event with the abomination, though it had taken the ministry investigators the hours of the afternoon to get much of use from her. Once they had all the details of her testimony confirmed, it was doubtful that she'd be of any more use to Marhyd -- and the cousin, even less -- but the political capital of such a placement would benefit the House of Hillia.

She would simply need to decide the best way to benefit from it, herself.

"Thank you, Your Honor," she said. "They will doubtless be a credit to their House." A bubble would not have burst against the soft oiliness of her voice.

"Er, yes." The dark-haired mer seemed to be under no illusions there. "Please, make use of them as you would. My only hope is that they may be of some assistance."

Her grin was cheerful and bright in the night hour. "Oh, I'm certain I will be able to make something of them."

Verse IV

There was a ridge near the border of the Mere Leïna, beyond which the waters darkened and deepened towards the abyss. The flat-topped promontory of stone was swept suspiciously clean of sand and silt. Ardenne kept her eyes fixed in that direction, noting the curls and swirls of detritus that rolled across and betrayed the motion of the currents. That rock marked a launching point for mers wishing to ride the great western flow to the southern seas.

"There's no one guarding it," she said aloud. "Why is that? I'd think it deserved a guard posting at least."

"Out of the way," came the response. "Holdover from a decade ago, before abominations scared the local mers all the way to Bryndoon. Anyone riding the flow's more likely to get on near the capital or the Mires. Handy for wanderers, though."

"Like your mysterious friends?" It bothered Ardenne a little, that she still did not know where Sera's loyalties were moored. The red mer had connections, that much was certain, but she would not say to what.

"Right. Well, clear of sharks, orcs, and anything else. Day's a-wastin'." Sera waved once, twice, and then the twins appeared over the edge of the rise with the float behind them.

The construct of baleen, leather, and kelpen fabric billowed in the morning currents, but it was not fully active. Olga and Morga had promised that the flow would give it enough push without the need for rune-craft. The bigger problem, they said, would be

getting it to slow down enough to quit the flow when they needed.

"All ready," a twin announced -- Olga, the one with the marginally broader nose. The float was stretched into four broad fins now, prepped and set to catch the moving water. In the cradle at its heart, the hunter's mother lay as still as ever, with Rook and the princess to keep her steady. The twins would handle the direction, while she and Sera kept watch ahead.

Her hands braced against the rough surface of the rock; her tail coiled beneath her. She willed the passage of water to flush over her gills, and felt her heartbeat slow in response. Calm, calm... there was no need to be nervous. It was only her first time to ride the fastest flow of waters in this corner of the seas.

And Ardenne was not about to let Sera see her worry or fret. The red mer launched first, leaping into the rush. The hunter followed right after, pushing away from the edge of the promontory and towards the deceptively gentle ripples. Any lingering worries were ripped away as the flow took her.

Sera had not warned her of what to expect, and the hunter would not have believed it anyway. No current she'd ever ridden could compare, with the waters focusing her into a single stream of conscious motion that afforded no opportunity to look left, right, or any other direction than straight ahead. Strings of bubbles scraped against her face in their haste to pass her by. Up ahead, Sera's distinctively colored tail stuck out against the froth, and those flukes became the focus of her own movement. She could only pray that the shifty mer knew what she was doing.

They made break twice along the way, stopping each time at a cleared launch point. The four city-born mers had stuck with the float -- tied to it, in the case of Rhiela and Rook -- and her mother Diana rested peacefully within its folds with the rest of the luggage. Ardenne would rather have pushed straight through to the Mere Scothia, but she could concede that the others did not have the stamina. She was not entirely sure she did. Rook in particular was having a bad time of it, and the little orange mer's skin was tinging to green around her face and gills.

The first stop passed, and they stayed long enough for Ardenne to spear a few medium-sized bream for them to eat. The strips of translucent white flesh, shading to a delicate pink where the scales still clung, were a welcome meal for all. The twins surprised by her by catching a half dozen scallops as the little shells clapped away from the mers' presence. They pulled the little blue eyes from the edges of the shells, enjoying the salty crunch before prying them apart for their central column of muscle and the pink-orange wedge of their egg pouch.

There was a happy taste to the waters, or perhaps rather a relieved one. If it were not for the circumstances, this could have been an enjoyable picnic beneath a bright, clear firmament. Diana's motionless form, swaddled in the folds of the float, was a stark reminder that this was not all fun and games. It was not long before they launched themselves into the great flow once more.

When they slowed their strokes for a second time, the experience was less of an idyll. It was almost

the second hour of the afternoon, if Ardenne was judging the angle of the light correctly, with the shadows only now starting to lengthen and hide the spaces between rocks. The scene before them was much the same as the previous launches: open, empty, with bare rock and a few patches of sand. Scattered about were thin spars of coral and baleen, the sort that might support a tent, and thin tatters of cloth drifted like lazy fingers in the current.

Ardenne's eyes narrowed at the sight. Grandmother Naïda had been a weaver of great skill, and the old mer had made sure that her granddaughter knew enough of the craft to understand how cloth worked. There were runes carved into the loom and chants sung as the weaver worked, all to ensure the integrity of the fabric as it was made. Ripped and torn fabric degraded slowly unless repairs were made, and shreds like these would not last long at all. Someone had been staying here until fairly recently, and they had not left willingly.

"Were you expecting anyone here?" she asked as the red mer darted about, picking through the wreckage. Sera dug a small line of beads on a leather strap from the sand, and with that the mer's body slumped like she'd gotten a punch in the gut. One of the twins -- Morga, the one with the slightly sharper chin -- had to grab their guide before she snagged on her own tail flukes.

Sera's voice, when it came, was nervous. "Not... not exactly. Told you, got friends who swim this way pretty often. No surprise to find one of their camps, but..."

"Something smashed straight through this tent," Olga observed. "There are traces on the spars, like they were chewed on, and..." Olga held out a hand and rubbed her fingers together slowly. "Strange feel to the waters here. Sort of oily."

"Don't stick our head in too far, sis! Could be like the bubbles of rock-gas from the deep mines."

"Abominations." Sera spat out the word like she was tasting the waters herself. "We need to leave. Now."

Ardenne's eyes darted around. "But there may be survivors..."

"If none's showed her face or flukes yet, then none will," said the red mer, her face grey. "Gone, eaten, or worse. Who's to say? No point in finding out personally." The red mer turned back towards the launching space, wobbling as she did.

There was no sign that Sera heard the faint -ffft- of something blown through the waters, but Ardenne had. Grabbing Sera by the sash, she pulled the red mer back just as three darts crossed her course. The long points were slender and jagged along one edge, and they buried themselves in the nearby sand with surprising force.

On the far side of the darts' path, at their place by the float, Rhiela and Rook were shouting and pointing towards the far edge of the launch area. Jutting boulders created space for shadows, and the purplish things within those shadows were hard to see unless they moved. There was a sense of something rounded and prickly, and when one crept forward, Ardenne could see... well, she was not exactly sure

what it was. Perhaps if someone had disassembled an urchin's shell and then put it back together while still alive, with a round mouth on top and a whelk's foot on the bottom, that might describe it. Nastily barbed spines protruded from all angles, and even now several were changing direction to aim their way.

"Small ones," said Sera. Her knives were drawn and ready. "Seen these before. Cuts sting like nothing you'd ever believe, right before numbing you senseless." She and Ardenne pushed off the stone floor as one, allowing another barrage to pass harmlessly underneath. "Thank the Goddess they're easy enough to dodge once you know where they're at," she added.

"Knives won't do well against that," the hunter pointed out.

"Neither will that spear of yours."

To one side of the launch, the twins were making themselves busy, tugging and heaving at one of the old mooring stones. The rock had broken free, or perhaps hadn't been placed by the time the launch was abandoned, and it lay toppled and unrooted in the ground. Even so, the weight must have been staggering. Olga and Morga did not seem to notice as they chanted along to their work. The words failed to carry all the way to Ardenne's ears, but they had the sing-song feel of runic magic. Muscles bulged, strained, and then the stone was lifted by the combined strength of four solid arms. The twins fought as inertia pulled the stone back, right until they reached the tipping point of force where it became more difficult to slow down than to speed up. All they had to do then was aim it true, sending the mass straight into the prickly purple-black mass of fake

urchins. The stone's fall was slow, inexorable, and the abominations did not have a chance.

There was a large number of cricks and cracks, followed by a low squelch. The rattling of spines ceased.

"Good work," Ardenne called to the twins as they swam over.

Olga shook her head. Her broad nose was flattened and flared. "There's an awful scent on the waters here. More of those things will come."

"And we're not going to stick around, are we?" the other twin chimed. Morga stroked over to the float, where Rhiela and Rook were waiting with eyes wide. "Okay, you two. Let's get her up and swimming fast! Princess, if you could check Messra Diana's straps. Rook, see to the rune lines..."

The cloth and baleen frame was billowing open and shut in record time, looking for all the seas like a gigantic jelly. The weaker swimmers clung to it as the float rose into the open water, while the twins guided it towards the great flow. Sera and Ardenne took the flank position, keeping an eye out for trouble. Hands gripped tightly on spear and knife, and Ardenne noted how Sera's fingers refused to let go of the trinket she'd picked up. Searching the tableau one last time and finding nothing, the hunter took her hand, beads and all, and led her back to the safety of the rushing torrent.

Verse V

Stillness was a precious commodity. Such was Marhyd's opinion of it, at least. A rare quality indeed, so rarely observed in the seas. Few were the spaces where currents did not -- or dared not -- flow. The immense cavern, hidden so deep behind the cliff face of the palace, was this sort of rarity. The weight of the waters pressed down and held close, making every motion of a fin or fluke seem like sacrilege.

Marhyd fancied herself the blasphemous sort, and truly enjoyed saying things that would make the mitera growl and grind her teeth, but this was different. This place was different. For one of the few times in her long and checkered existence, the ministra could feel the true power of something beyond the scope of reality, and it was centered in this wide space.

She wondered if the princess had felt something similar on her many little excursions to this place in the past few weeks. Would they feel the same things, via the same senses? Would the ministra's finely tuned powers of observation mean anything? For once, Marhyd actually wished Rhiela were present to pose the question. Rarely did she find any use for Her Highness in a practical matter of science, and yet there they were.

It had taken some time for her to puzzle out what her own senses were telling her, but then again time was plentiful enough to spare as she and her assistants worked upon the corpse of the abomination. The pale grey flesh was rubbery beneath her knife, and did not so much refuse to be cut as simply passed to one side or the other before the knife's edge could bite.

An assistant was sent off, to return promptly with a pair of kelp shears. The tool looked somewhat like a pair of tongs, being a thin bar of springy metal bent sharply in the middle. The two ends of the bar presented razor edges which met like the maw of a squid, and between which no kelp could hope to survive. They sawed through the outer layers of the abomination just as easily.

Her grey-clad assistants had their tools laid out upon the tiled floor in orderly patterns, ready to take each slice of flesh as she stripped it from the main body, catching bubbles of ichor in rough bladders as they floated upwards, and taking notes on everything they saw. Each mer represented an enormous investment on her part, with weeks upon weeks of training needed to gift them with the mental faculties which the ministra required. If she were to ask one of them to give her a beat-by-beat account of the day, however, she knew that the mer would do so without nary an item missed. That attention to detail took effort to instill.

Inwardly, she cursed that idiotic green mer who had deprived her of two excellent members of her trained cadre. Their observations on Messra min Naïda would be sorely missed.

But on to the matter at hand. The corpse of the abomination was still surprisingly solid, with no answer as to why or how. Everything she had learned about this class of creature told her that it should be nothing more than an oily feeling in the water by now, sublimated away once its mockery of a life was ended, and yet here it was. She paused in her task to listen to an assistant's report whispered in her ear, and then

noded her acknowledgment. Marhyd took the shears and neatly severed a stubby finger from the monster's right hand. Holding it between her own thick little appendages, she watched as the specimen quickly dissolved into the waters. After a three-beat count, her hand was empty.

This was how an abomination should be, this long after death, and so her specimen here did not seem to be so out of the ordinary after all -- once it was cut up. Before that point, however, something was different. Some power was keeping the body together and intact... but how? That was the question.

Marhyd traced the tips of the shears along that grossly sleek skin, now cleaned of its caustic mucus. There were no lines, no ridges, no scales, nothing at all to distinguish one bit from the next. The monster was a uniform blubbery grey from its maw to the tip of its tail, except for in one spot.

She'd intended to open that section last, but now curiosity won out. There was a patch, a blazon of sorts that shone upon the abomination's breast. It was vaguely triangular in shape, with one edge straight and the others slightly curved, and it appeared to be set within the flesh, not upon it. Her shears went to work, tracing an ichorous black circle around the patch, then carefully peeling layer upon layer of dermis away. As before, the thing's skin and flesh dissolved to nothing almost as soon as they were parted from the main body, and the underlying patch became clearer as she worked.

Finally, her shears touched something which they could not cut, something hard within the mass of soft flesh. Marhyde switched her tools, choosing a

scraper to remove the bits of flesh which still remained, and then a pair of gripping tongs. Slowly the piece of not-flesh slid from the body of the abomination, revealing itself in the low light of the cavern.

In appearance, it was a slice of crystal, though how it might have been shaped was beyond the ministra's knowledge. Perhaps the size of an outstretched hand, the piece was a rounded triangle, longer on two sides, but curved and tapered along its sharpest point. She held it up to the light, noting its translucence and the way it seemed to catch the light in its glimmering surface. The shining motes within it seemed to exist on a layer far deeper within the material than was physically possible.

"Oh-ho, what do we have here?" she mused, raising her new prize high. Behind her, unneeded and unnoticed, the ugly grey corpse began its swift course to decomposition and oblivion.

Verse VI

There was a natural flow to the year which Mitera Yesca enjoyed. One month led to the next at a steady, inexorable rate, and with them came the festivals, the celebrations, and the rituals of observance in honor of the Mother of All. The princess's coming of age ceremony, regardless of how its aftermath now flowed, was but the beginning of a long chain of serious matters, of which she as the high mitera of Bryndoon had been placed in charge.

The thought occasionally came to her, uncharitable as it was, that the temple elders gave her the honor of these duties so that they themselves would not be bothered in their privacy and prayers. No matter; hers was to serve, and so serve she did. It kept her mind off of the more worrisome matters of the day.

Coming soon was the most necessary of dates, the importance of which could never be understated: the festival of the blessed sacrament. Festivals, rather; the seas would each in turn be visited by the trusted pilgrims of the Mere Kamazon, those prestra sacrista whose specialty lay in the convoluted prayers of the blessed sacrament. Yesca had herself made a study of those prayers, as any leondra might do in her youth, but like most prestra of the Temple, other matters of faith had called to her heart. She left the great words to those with both the passion and the compassion to facilitate the lives of the next generation.

Her business of the day was of lesser importance but greater experience: the allotment of prestra sacrista for the pilgrimages ahead. Already had

they gathered here in the Temple of Bryndoon, making their preparations and studies for weeks if not months before they were ready to set forth. But who would go where? The first of the festivals, here in the Mere Leïna, would be the largest outside of the leondra waters, but from there a few prestra to the Mere Scothia, a few to the Mere Arkhala... Two adventurous souls -- or three, if a volunteer could be found -- for the settlements of the Mere Hetropa. By longstanding agreement, a dozen prestra each would go to the Mere Tessraï and the Mere Kazahn, though it rankled her sensibilities for those seas to rate so highly.

To the Mere Mezzlerle, none. Again. The House of Casima would object, again, but they understood the risks of the Free Flow as well as she. Even more than she, if one were to believe the continued squawking of the mer in the council meetings. Every other contingent of pilgrims would have their honor guards, but there would be no chances taken with the sea over the sands. In any case, there was never much call for the sacrament in Mezzegheb. Only the viceroy's House and its cadet branches actually made the city of tents a home for the generations, and they could just as easily ride the greater flows to Leïna or Tessraï if they desired a blessing so much.

The string of shells at the entrance to her office did their job, clinking and plinking to announce a visitor. A polite visitor, no less; this one stayed at the entrance and waited the few beats for Yesca to clear the flat shells of business from the space before her.

"Be welcome," she called.

"By your words shall I be," came the reply. Into

the chamber swam a leondra, young and fit to set an envious thought to stir in Yesca's breast. There was many a long year between herself and this prestra sacrista. Nehemi min Noemi was but recently come to these waters, but already she showed promise.

In the mitera's mind, an image stirred of Nehemi, of the mer's face during the convocation to the Goddess just the day before. Already it seemed like an eternity since then, but the memory was sharp. It was a rare prestra who heard anything during the great convocation, and those who did seemed destined to swim far. Yesca herself could attest to as much.

"Is all well?" asked the mitera. "Are your preparations on the proper current?"

"That they are, o mitera," said Nehemi. "Though eddies there have been. Nothing to disturb the work, I must assure you, but..." The prestra's fur shivered and shimmered for a beat as the familiar tremor of nerves passed through. "It has been a long night, and a longer day before."

Never a squarer truth had been stated. The older mer allowed herself a grimace of agreement. "I shall speak true when I say that I am sinking myself in the work of the day so I do not need to think about yesterday," she said. "An awful business, both muddy and frothed. You knew her? The guard?" With a gesture she offered her visitor a spot on the floor to rest.

"Shalar, yes." Nehemi settled herself down with a flush of water on the gills. "Not too well, I would say, but she took her time to show me around the palace and the city, and... and she was friendly in a way that

many are not. The... the ceremony of farewell is this evening, and I have been asked to say some words."

"A difficult task in the best of times."

"I have given myself to the study of life!" Nehemi cried. "Not of death! I do not know what to say, or how to say it, or how to console those who knew her for longer than I, better than I. And... and for all their kind words, I am not convinced that anyone would wish me to attend."

Yesca rested her chin upon her folded hands and watched the young prestra. "Why wouldn't they?"

"There is no single thing to which I could point," Nehemi admitted. "It is only... a feeling. Not just among the barracks guards, but out in the city as well. A feeling. A sense that none welcome our presence. A politeness that cannot be faulted, save that it is used so rudely. My sister prestra and I, we... we have our concerns, our worries. We have heard the songs of past pilgrimages and thought we knew what to expect, but... is this a normal thing, which none do mention?"

"It is," said Yesca, "and then again, it is not. There is nothing straightforward beneath the firmament save for Her love of us, and nothing more convoluted than the emotions of a city. The events of yesterday, the death of Shalar and the chaos of Rhiela's continued absence have only exacerbated it. A greater abomination, in the tunnels behind the palace itself! Such terrible things cause terribly currents to flow amidst the manoa. Currents of fear, of anger, and of discontent. It is in their nature to strike out at that which threatens them, an itch to beat into submission enemies which they cannot fathom, and without clear

targets they may seek out anything sufficiently different to strike."

"But they would never dare raise a hand to a prestra of the blessed sacrament... ah," said Nehemi. "And thus discontent arises from envy. We do what they need, yet cannot do themselves."

"Precisely." A niggling thought worried at the edge of her mind, but the mitera was well practiced at ignoring such things. A young, fresh prestra such as Nehemi did not need to be laden with certain truths. Let the purity of her heart survive a while longer yet. "I think that you shall find more appreciative mers in the course of your pilgrimage proper," she assured the young prestra. "But if you need guidance, allow me to lend you a shell..."

She knew the exact spot on the shelf to search, though she dithered a beat for the sake of appearances. A single large scallop, flat and perfectly etched, was soon presented to the prestra sacrista. "This is an old work," explained Yesca. "One of the oldest of our written compositions. 'The Lament of Hiramini min Barabba,' it is called."

"I confess that I have never heard of it, o mitera."

"It is not in the regular Temple curriculum," Yesca told her. "The words are archaic, the form difficult to follow, and the subject too sad for most daughters. Hiramini was a foremother of our tribe, one of the first mitera, and a survivor of a war that nearly ended us all. Few details remain, for we did not wish to let our minds linger on such unpleasantness, and her lament is one of the few direct references to survive these many past

centuries. In it, she cries for her sister, dead possibly by her own hand. A terrible thing to do, and even more terrible for the fact that it was necessary for the survival of the tribe. And so Hiramini min Barabba composed this poem to let out her feelings of despair and teach herself how to deal with the dark necessities of life." The mitera let the water blow out her gills in a sigh. "It is a lesson worth learning, even if we do not wish to study it."

Nehemi accepted the shell with careful grace. "I thank you, o mitera. I shall... I shall do my best to understand."

"That is the best we can ever hope for," said Yesca. "Now, while you are here, shall we discuss where to send you for your pilgrimage? Nothing is set on the shells just yet. If you are not feeling up to the rigors of travel, I can place you with the group staying in the Mere Leina."

The younger mer was polite with the subtle shake of her head. "Thank you for your concern, but I think perhaps I should away from these waters for a while."

"Understandable. Ah..." The mitera checked through the shells. "The Mere Kazahn, then. The rim city has its comforts, and they always are appreciative of our efforts. The mer galda are somewhat blunt and unimaginative, but neither are they so bitter at heart as the manoa can be. It should be a welcome change from this general malaise upon the waters of Bryndoon."

"I thank you, o mitera."

"Was there anything else?" It was a formality, and already her eyes were straying to the remainder of

the flat shells of business. The prestra's concerns were assuaged, so there was only the final check before she was dismissed.

Nehemi's own eyes darted like little fish. "Actually... I, well, four days ago now, I was speaking with some manoa in a public bathhouse..."

"And they made you feel unwelcomed, as you were saying?"

"Yes, but that was not the thing." The prestra flushed her gills and little bubbles clung to the fur of her neck. "I was speaking of the blessed sacrament, of course, and how important it was for us to perform it, and I gave them the practice word. To, to make a point."

Yesca nodded. The mystic grammar of the sacrament was, even for a spell gifted from the Mother of All, a marvel of complexity. A prestra novita could study for years before the syllables came naturally. The practice word was a shibboleth, a string of nonsense created to flow with difficulty from the tongues of manoa, and it was shared feely by the prestra to make a point to all who would receive the sacrament: That only a leondra could do it properly.

"Well, one of the manoa in the baths, she could... she could pronounce it. Perfectly, on the first try, without even a thought." Nehemi's shoulders sank low and her body drooped. "She did so better than I myself could as a prestra novita."

That news was not cause for alarm, though it did give Yesca reason to pause. "Such is not unheard of," she admitted. "Rare, but not impossible. Did this mer realize what she had done?"

"Not exactly. At least, I do not think that she

did. But, if she could... would she be able to perform the blessed sacrament?"

The waters rumbled as Yesca flushed her own gills in annoyance. "No, for none would teach it to her, and that is all that matters. Never forget, Nehemi min Noemi, that we are the ones to safeguard the future of all, because we are called to this duty. Other mers under the firmament cannot understand what this means, what this blessing represents. Not the way we do. Have you seen this mer since?"

"No, o mitera. She was a caravanner, I believe."

"Gone on the next morning's tide, presumably." She relaxed, even allowed a smile to grace her lips. "There is no worry to be had, then. Do not let this surprise faze you, but instead allow it to inspire. Show this mer, and thus all the seas, what wonders the leondra perform for others. Be brave, be bold, and perform your services faithfully in the Mere Kazahn."

"I thank you once more, o mitera." Nehemi min Noemi pushed off the floor, making the rounded hand signs of gratitude and obeisance as she sculled backwards for the exit. "I shall not falter in my sacred task."

"Know you that I hold great faith in you," Yesca told her. "Now, be off with you. There are many things which I must complete before your pilgrimage may even commence."

The old leondra's smile persisted long after the prestra's exit. With all the fuss over the princess and the ministra and the depths-taken abominations, it was nice to focus on things which she as mitera could do for the mers of the sea. It was good to recall her place in

the waters beneath the firmament. And ever was it good to remind others of that place as well.

With that in mind, Yesca returned to matters of the great pilgrimage.

Verse VII

The current had brought them farther and faster than Rook could ever have expected. The old adventure tales had a lot of detail about what the hero did when she got to the monster's lair, but said naught about how she got there. It was near the end of the second hour after the noon, when the shadows began to grow once more and the waters prepared for evening, and apparently they were at the edge of the Mere Scothia already.

"You didn't tell us you knew magic," Ardy said to the twins when next they stopped to rest upon a launch promontory. There was no sign of anything moving on or around the great stone. If Red's information was to be trusted, then they were safe from abominations here. The orange mer noted that the hunter's eyes were more often looking beyond them than at them, watching the distance. Orcs plied these waters, they'd said.

"Didn't ask, now did you?" replied Morga. This earned her a sisterly swat upon the back of her head. "Ow! Hey, sis, what are you..."

"In truth," Olga said, ignoring her sister's grumbling, "it isn't a thing we think about often. The work songs are part of life in Valden. There are songs for mining, songs for crafting, songs for the forge, but they are all parts of the process, not a thing unto themselves like rune-craft workings."

It was a sort of question, and the answer was through Rook's lips before she really thought about it: "Cantrips!"

The word popped like a bubble, snapping attention to where she was settled on the sand. The little orange mer had a hand over her mouth as she felt the flush of embarrassment cover her cheeks. Oh, *bubbles*. Rook was conscious of everyone's eyes suddenly fixed on her. A part of her was happy to get the attention. The rest was just aghast at how often she managed to chew on her own tail-flukes to get it.

Still, it wasn't like she'd done anything wrong or stupid this time, right? In fact, as Baba Rill's sort-of-official apprentice, she probably had more experience with practical rune-craft than any of them. So she reasoned. So she hoped.

Oops. She was taking too long to calm her nerves. The others had the funny-eyes look to them as they looked at her. "Um, yer know, cantrips?" she stammered. "The little magics? Everyone knows a few, even if they don't realize it. Spells without runes, bits o' grammar what are good for focusing on what'cher doing, yeah?"

Ardy was nodding, at least. "Like my grandmother's weaving songs," the big green mer said. "She always told me they were necessary, but I could never see how. They just kept everything on the proper beat, but if you didn't sing them, the cloth turned out poorly."

"Lots o' times, keeping stuff on beat's all they do. Well, that's what Baba says, anyway. Something 'bout how mers don't always remember 'em right, and after a while the mistakes add up till the spell stops workin' properly. Could'jer sing me a bit?" she asked Morga.

The mer obliged, and heavily syncopated syllables filled the space between them like blocks falling into place. Morga had a surprisingly light singing voice, high and clear, that was a pleasure to the ears. Rook almost forgot to pay attention to the syllables themselves, but gave herself a mental shake and hoped no one noticed. It wouldn't do her professional appearance any good if she couldn't stay focused even when a handsome mer was serenading her, now would it? Though to be fair, Morga was singing to the entire group, and everyone else seemed to be enjoying it just as much as little Rook was.

"Well," she said as the last notes faded. "Without yer saying as much, I think it's got aught to do with the solid force. Yer know, stone, sand, stuff what sticks together well and makes clumps. Baba had a fancy word for it. Tell... tell..." She growled. "Caught in the gills, it is."

"Telluric." That word came courtesy of the princess, sitting next to her in the group's rough circle.

"That'd be the one, Yer Highness. So, was it a song for moving rocks? Like, making 'em separate from other rocks?" she asked the twins.

"Yes, actually." Olga sounded surprised.

Rook resisted the urge to flip around happily in the water. "Ya-ha! Got it on the first try!" Her brightest smile lit the faint shadows of the hour. "Know any more? Anyone? Baba said there were probably hundreds of little cantrips out there, doing what all she don't even know. Be a right pearly thing if I could bring her home a few new ones to try out."

"Just a few to encourage healing," Red

admitted. Rook had to wonder at the look that Ardy was giving the sneaky lady now. Wasn't like they didn't know she was keeping stuff to herself all the time.

"Er, actually, there was something else," said Olga. "All this talk's reminded me, but the old lady in Bryndoon, Baba Rill, she asked us to hold on to something for you."

"Yeah, that! Clean floated out of my head!" her twin chimed.

"Not that there's much to block the flow through there."

"Spare me, sis."

"What are you to going on about?" Ardy asked quickly before another sibling argument could get started.

Instead of answering right away, Olga stroked over to the nearby float and removed a wrapped bundle from the beneath the padding what Ardy's mom was not exactly sleeping on. The twin laid it down on the sand gently, but there was still the faintest of dinks. "So, yeah," Olga continued. "Right as we were about to leave Bryndoon to meet up with you all, the old lady showed up with this in her arms. She said her apprentice would know what they were. That's you, right?"

Apprentice... It wasn't a word Baba Rill used much at all, at least not to her directly. Hearing it from another mer that old Baba talked about her that way, it made her chest swell with pride. "Yeah, that's, ah, that's me. Lemme see what we got..."

She picked up the bundle, took a peek, and then nearly dropped it again as she realized what she was

looking at. Inside the woven fabric was a stack of thin writing shells, carefully packed with kelp in between. When had Baba got the time to put all this together? Had the old mer been hiding things from her -- hiding more things than usual? Rook picked one up and skimmed her eyes over the etched surface.

"Oh, bubbles."

"What is it?" Ardy asked.

"Shell out of a rune library. I think. Yer know," she said to those curious green eyes. "How the rune keepers up in Arkhala store all the stuff they've learned? Each one o' these has a rune defined on it, with all the details on how it works and what it works with... Oh, *bubbles*," she repeated herself, with more conviction and a short promise to herself to learn some better curses.

She had to let her eyes go over the lines on the shell again and again as she stared in disbelief. Seriously, there was no way between firmament and abyss that the shell was what it was saying it was in plain letters, but there it was! Wasn't it? Her own eyes could be tricking her, she supposed, but... but...

The princess answered for her. Rhiela had snagged a second shell from the library and was perusing it like someone who knew the basics but never expected them to be useful in real life. "This one seems to describe a spell in great detail," said she. "A spell for combat."

"Bubbles and froth! D'yer gots any idea what all this means? Ardy? Red? The two of yer o'er there? What we got here? These shells ain't supposed to exist! Baba told me o'er and o'er again that the Arkhala elders

threw it all down a big hole in the ground to make the Temple happy, and now here it is, and... and..." She paused a beat to flush her gills and bring herself closer to being calm. The excitement was getting to her, and the last thing she needed was to have a attack of the old nerves in front of everyone. "Soggy old witch lied to me. Must'a lied to everyone. Don't know all the times she told me, 'Rook, yer gotta forget all the stuff in those stories what ain't 'round no more,' and all the while she had this... this..." Words failed her, so she let out a stream of loud bubbles instead.

"So what are we gonna do with them?" asked Red. "Can't imagine the Temple would be happy for us to have all this." The mer didn't sound too upset at that thought.

"Let me have them." The princess's voice was calm and commanding.

Rook wasn't about to let them go, though. "Hey, now! What'cher be thinking? The only apprentice 'round her is me, and I know my runes at least as well as yer, if not better! Seriously, I don't think there's a better set of hands than mine for this, and not just 'cause Baba told the sisters there to give 'em to me."

"The Temple won't execute me for having them in my possession, if we're caught."

"Um, er, yer gots a point there, Yer Highness, but--" She waved a finger in front of the royal snout. "But! What'cher fail to appreciate is all the years of study and pracice I already gots in my wake. And... and..."

Rhiela had the most pitiful look on her face in that moment. If Rook didn't know better, she'd say the

princess looked lost. Bubbles, she didn't know better, though! Neither of them had ever been out of the city before, and yet here they were in the middle of nowhere with no real idea of what they were doing. Rook needed these shells, desperately, to give herself a reason to be here. Maybe Her Highness felt the same?

"Tell yer what, let's look through these together, once Ardy's got us where we're going, and then we can decide who gets what?"

Red was nodding to that. "Sounds like a good idea to me. Think we could all use some practice with those healing tricks, too. Now, getting dark soon, so set up here for the night and get a start out on the morrow..."

Rook and the princess gathered the shells back into their package, sharing a nervous look as they did. Both of them were in strange fathoms now, and about as out of their depth as a mer could get. Knowing she wasn't alone in this was heartening, Rook supposed.

There was a sort of crime that Baba had told her about once. It was called something like *less-uh mah-jest-ay*, and it meant a mer was disrespecting the Crown somehow. This little bubble of memory popped through her head as she gave the princess a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. Rhiela didn't treat it like an insult, at least. The golden mer even returned the embrace with extra-squichy interest.

"Thank you." The words slipped across her ears so lightly that they tickled.

"Be yer welcome," she whispered back, just as light. "Us city mers gotta school together, right?"

That got her a smile and a return kiss on the

cheek from the golden mer. Woo-hee! What would the snooty-snoots back in Bryndoon have to say 'bout that? Little runty Rook getting kisses from none other than the princess herself? Silly fancies floated through her head like so many jellies as she and Rhiela tidied up. This *less-uh mah-jest-ay* thing wasn't so bad after all.

Verse VIII

It had been the worst evening of her life. Estrella din Hillia could say that without a beat of hesitation. Worst afternoon and night as well, for myriad reasons. And it all came back to... that. She shivered in the early morning waters. The memory of that thing with its teeth and its tentacles and the sergeant caught by them -- her mind had done its best to block the images, to push them into the dark corner of the waters inside her head so they could be safely forgotten outside of nightmares.

For an entire afternoon, for the hours after she had somehow made it through darkened passageways and abandoned chambers to report the appearance of an abomination and the death of a guard to Her Grace, Stella had refused to say anything more. Let the scene speak for itself and let her speak of it no more. But they had wanted details. Oh, how they had wanted them. The grey mers had poked her and prodded her and pestered her for any last dribblets of memory they could provoke from hiding.

When Stella closed her eyes, the flashes of purple lingered still. She might not ever sleep again. She would certainly never forget the horrors of yesterday, no matter how much she willed.

No mers floated about the barracks as she finally made her way back to rest. She did not wish to speak to them, anyway. Her duty is may have been to report the death of Shalar min Shandra, sergeant of the guard, but a bittersweet one, like a rotten tuli pod. No other mer of the guard envied her that dubious honor,

and she was happy to see none of them afloat near the barracks now.

In the early morning shadows, the only thing she saw was her own cousin and bond-sister, sitting in the sand outside the barracks. Why, Strella could not say. Tachiana din Hillia hadn't had too good of an afternoon the other day, either, and the spiky-haired mer barely stirred as Strella settled beside her.

Very little could fix her right then. Perhaps nothing could. Or perhaps a beloved cousin's embrace might. So it flowed.

*

A new day for Tachiana din Hillia had started far too early in the perpetually dimmed chambers of the guard barracks. It wasn't her choice to get up, though no one had forced the spiky-haired mer to, either. Her little attack of the tasting sickness at the party had not gone unnoticed the day before, and no mers in her pod wanted to risk her getting sick all over them if they shook too hard.

Not that she would. Tachi could hold it in better than that. It was just... it had been too long since her last lick, her last taste of tuli pod on the tongue, and it showed in the way her arms trembled and her flukes shook. Gone to bed with a headache and woken up to a shiver so fierce she'd flipped her hammock. After that, Tachi hadn't tried to sleep again, even though the firmament was barely lit. Her cousin and bond-sister, Strella, had found her huddled in the sand outside around the start of the first hour of the day, and they had watched the silvered ripples above in silence.

Today would be better, she decided. It could

hardly be worse. Tuli was strictly forbidden in the barracks, and as a rookie guard she wasn't allowed into the city where most partook of it when they were of a mood. She could rest here and recuperate. Maybe. If her arms didn't fall off during swordwork practice.

Strella wasn't doing much better, though her cousin and bond-sister would not say why. Something had happened at the party while she was sunk under the weight of her tasting headache, and nothing she'd yet heard made any sense to her pounding skull. So Tachi did not ask, and Strella seemed happy not to answer, as they sat in the sand together. At what point they both fell asleep again, Tachi couldn't say, but she certainly remembered how they woke up.

A sharp clap sounded by their ears, the sound of two hands meeting with sudden force to break the waters with their noise. The slap of the wave hit her face, and she spasmed to attention. "Yes, messra!" she attempted to shout, though the words came out more like "Y'eh-mer-ss-ra..."

Lieutenant Grett floated over them with a sour face that in no way matched her yellow-blond curls. Tachi wished she had hair like that, sometimes. Blue-black and spiky was nice and all, but a mer could do with a change sometimes, and it might suit her...

Another clap shocked her out of her latest musing and back to attention. "Are we feeling rested?" asked the officer. "Yes? Good? Finally. You two have been passed out like a pair of old cokers all day."

"M'sorry..." Tachi mumbled. She really was, too. If only she had the right words to express it or explain it or...

Strella put a stop to that ramble with the touch of a hand upon her shoulder. "We are thankful for the courtesy," said her cousin. "As unmerited as it may be."

"Straight and deep." The lieutenant's glare remained on Tachi. "But now that you little misses have had your nap, it's time you finned it over to the ministry offices. Her Wisdom is waiting for you."

"What?" Strella snapped to attention, her face all serious. "I, I told them everything I could recall, and more! There really isn't, um, anything more for them to h-help me remember."

Tachi did not know what her cousin was going on about, and every reason not to want to know. Strella was always the strong one out of their pairing, the confident one who knew the right currents to ride. Not... not whatever her bond-sister was now, in this moment. Tachi would almost describe it as fright.

"Not that," said Grett. "The ministra actually seemed happy with all that. Only mer who is..." the officer grumbled. "So much so that she's getting you -- the two of you -- as assigned guards to her office."

The question slipped out on its own: "Um, why?" Tachi wasn't sure she wanted herself in this state.

"Depths if I know. Now, git!"

The two of them slipped into the barracks for a quick change of uniforms, and Tachi was struck by the feel of the waters. No place with so many mers within it should be so quiet. Something was wrong, had gone wrong, and she had somehow missed it completely. She couldn't even ask while they were in there. The hush was too strong, too scary for her to defy.

Any questions to Stella on the way to the ministry office was shushed before she got past the third word. The silence dragged at her flukes as entire verses of worry passed through her mind. It was not nearly so long a swim over as it felt.

It was even later in the day than she'd realized. Already the shadows were long and deep below the palace cliff, and the ministry entrance was lit by glow lamps. Tachi let Stella lead the way through.

"Estrella and Tachiana din Hillia, reporting for duty as requested," her cousin stated once they were inside. The front chamber of the ministry office was spacious, and every tail-length of it was a-thrum with activity as grey-clad mers went about their business. For a five-beat, it seemed as though none had noticed their arrival, but then a nameless mer separated from the throng and motioned for them to follow her to the next room, equally wide and equally busy.

What these mers were working on, Tachi couldn't begin to describe. She would need to understand it first, and her brain was not working too well while her stomach floated empty in her middle. Her nose caught the taste of various foodstuffs as they passed, so the grey mers must have been eating as they worked, but she didn't see anything out in the open. There was the taste of sweet pods, of cooked shrimps, of some spicy grass or weed, of...

Tuli. The delicate, sour taste was unmistakable, and just the barest hint of the treat traveled from her nose to her brain in the shortest of beats. One tiny piece, afloat in the waters of her mind, recognized that this was the last thing she needed in that moment. The

rest of her seized upon that passing taste and fought greedily for its possession.

All the troubles and the tremors of the day before came rolling back in like the tide, building in strength as she stroked along. Between one beat and the next, her flukes lost their ability to coordinate, and she lurched into her cousin by accident. Strella caught her, steadied her as they passed to the next chamber.

"Ah, the din Hillia cousins. What delightful little dolls you are." The voice was thick, sweet in a sickly way, and far too close to Tachi's right ear. Only the subtle early tremors of the tasting sickness kept her from shying back into the first chamber from surprise and fright. How she had missed the mer as they passed into the inner chamber... No, that was the sickness, too. In the painful clarity that came before the headaches, she could at least acknowledge where most of her problems originated. And she wanted none of it, even as she wanted more of it.

"Ministra Marhyd." Strella saluted. "Your Wisdom, you requested our services?"

"That I did." The ministra was the largest mer Tachi had ever seen, and she realized that here was a mer who enjoyed food the same way the spiky-haired daughter of Valen enjoyed tuli: frequently and likely too much by volume. "Your cousin Tamur din Hillia recommended the two of you, and Her Grace was willing to authorize the transfer to my service. From this hour, you are officially mine. And so... oh, what is the matter with her?"

The ministra was gesturing to her. Maybe. Possibly. Tachi wasn't sure because she currently saw

four fingers that were definitely the same one in different spots. She tried to follow them all with her eyes, only she was limited to looking in two directions at once as her vision split left and right.

There was a shiver to the water as Strella swore. "My apologies, Your Wisdom. Tachi... my cousin Tachiana is not well, and I am afraid it will get worse before it gets better."

It was a cold and clear eye that the ministra was giving her then. "Tuli shakes, hm? Tasting sickness?"

"Y-yes, m... Your Wisdom," Tachi admitted. "Didn't think it would be so bad..."

Didn't think at all, one part of her yelled at the rest. The clarity really was the worst part of the experience. She couldn't escape herself.

"Ah." A thick finger traced along the side of her face. "Poor little doll. It is so difficult, is it not? Trying so hard, and yet not getting anywhere? Our mortal flesh is so weak, and yet its hold over our conscious mind is so difficult to break. But you are in luck, little doll. I have the techniques, the special control of the fulguric force needed to help the consciousness overcome the terrible frailties of the flesh. If you would let me, I would help you end your dependence on that delicious poison."

"You can truly do that?" Strella asked. Her cousin had her hand, and squeezed it in support. "It is much to ask..."

The ministra's smile was broad and gleaming. "It is not a problem. You are mine now, and I take good care of mine. I can remove the toxic needs, the accursed fears, and the weaknesses of character holding

the two of you back from your fullest potential. Allow me to help, so that you may help me with my work."

The next surge of tasting sickness was at its height, and Tachi wished she would faint from the feeling. "P-please..." she stammered. "It hurts..."

"It is the right thing to do," said the ministra, in calm and even words.

As closely as Strella held her, Tachi couldn't miss how her cousin's arms went stiff, then relaxed. "Let us do what needs to be done," said Strella, also calmly and evenly.

"Good, good." The ministra clapped and grey-clad assistants responded. The quiet mers took the din Hillia cousins by the arms and pulled them apart. "I have the fulguric chambers primed and ready. My apologies in advance, but you will thank me for it, eventually. Until later, my little dolls."

Verse IX

It was on an early tide that they arrived in the Mere Scotia -- far earlier than Ardenne would have preferred. The light of the firmament was a bare glimmer above, and in the distance she could see the glints of the night feeders and their lures as they retreated to their dens for the day. The lines of her skin were alive and prickling, reading the currents in advance of anything big passing through. The worst threats did not need lures to catch their fill.

Everyone else had been warned into silence upon waking to the darkness before the morning hour awoke, and not a word passed between them as they cleared the evening resting spot and entered the great flow for the last strokes of their journey. There were better hours of the day to swim the backwaters of the reef -- practically any hour of the day, in fact -- but the last thing they wanted right then was for some mer to witness their arrival.

And no one did. They reached the little hollow in the reef, the one that she and her mother had used so often for long forays into the deep waters, and the only soul to see was the brown octopus that had taken up residence in one crevice. The little one gave up its hidey-hole quickly if begrudgingly, and they gave it room to move as it left. Sera in particular kept out of its way, pulling Rhiela back by the elbow when the princess tried to pet it.

Diana was settled into the hole itself, with what padding they could provide. The twins anchored the float above it to form a shelter large enough for them

all. It wouldn't be terribly comfortable, seven mers pressed together like that, but it did the job. Unpacking began in earnest once the morning hour was bright. The bundles that came with the float were filled with far more than she'd at first thought, which confirmed her suspicion that Sera had made arrangements to get away well before they made their attempt on the palace. Everything they had ordered from Baba Rill was there, as well as tightly wrapped rolls of tent material. Soon enough they had a tall band looped around, with a roof fluttering lightly in the currents.

Rook and the princess took the task of unpacking the library of shells and sorting it between them. The sight of that made the hunter shake her head. The markings on the flat scallops were nothing more than the tracks of bore-worms to her, only straight and sharp instead of wriggling backwards and forwards. She and her mother had left the matter of letters to the elders and the rune-workers. The schools never signed their presence on the current, after all.

Mother... Two days had come and gone, and still Diana was not responsive. Ardenne could not even look at her now, settled limp on the sand and receiving what ministrations Sera could manage. There was more silver in that brown hair than before, and lines were drawn more deeply upon her mother's face. Afterimages of violet force crackled across the darkness behind Ardenne's eyelids, and the ghosts of the grey mers haunted her dreams.

Her blood flowed chill in the warmth of the morning firmament. This was no way to live, to swim, to hunt, but as long as her mother was unconscious she

was trapped in this singular current which spun her round and round in circles.

"I'm going to scout around," she announced loudly, surprising even herself with the volume of her words. Without further explanation, she grabbed her spear from where it lay stuck in the sand and pushed off into the morning waters. As she swam, she listed all the reasons why this was a good idea, hoping and praying to find one that was truer than the simple urge to escape.

Verse X

"What now?" Sera growled the question out. Ardenne's departure took them all by surprise, but her own words were the first to shake the waters clear of the green mer's wake. Depths take her, but Ardenne was acting like the most fudge-brained, spoiled brat she'd every laid eyes on, and she'd met the princess!

"Let her go for a bit." That came from one of the twins. Probably Olga. "We can't blame her for how she feels, if we can even ken all of it. I don't doubt the two of us would be in a similar state if our mother was like this."

Frankly, she couldn't, but her life had certainly been a different one from that of the hunter or the twins. "If you say so. Still damn annoying."

Speaking of annoyances... She scowled in the general direction of the princess, who had returned to the now-deflated float to root through its packed goods like they were her own property. The nerve of a royal, as Messra Megael would put it. Act like you own the place, and somehow people started to believe that you did. Then you could loot it for all it was worth. That had certainly worked for the royal House of Brynduin, all these centuries.

With a squeal of delight, the top-heavy idiot pulled a prize from the float. From where she sat, Sera could not be sure of what it was, but it looked like a large conch shell wrapped in some garishly colored clothes. Her scowl turned to a puzzled frown. That had not been among the items she'd bargained out of old Baba, had it? The outfits certainly had not.

"Oh! She did it! She did it!" the royal chum burbled into the open water. "I wasn't sure she'd have the chance, but she did!"

"What are you yapping about?" Sera yelled over to her.

"This conch," Rhiela explained, bringing it over for her inspection. The thick outer layer of the shell was covered in etched runes that glittered silver in the morning light. "It's part of a set that Marsa was working on. If you speak into the mouth of one, then words come out of the other. Oooh!" the blithering mer squealed again. "I asked Marsa to pick this up from our room if she could, and she did! We agreed to wait till the evening hours before we would try to call each other, but waiting is so hard!"

"Sure is, for some of us," the red mer opined. "But the rest of us have more self control. So you're tellin' me that this shell's voice can reach all the way to Bryndoon?"

"Maybe? Marsa wasn't sure. Ministra Marhyd probably knows all the limits, but she was never one to share secrets, you know. This is probably one of the few working shells of its kind in all the seas, and nobody knows we have it."

"Nobody but your Marsa, and Mother of Pearl only knows who she's told."

Her Wobbliness was suddenly up in Sera's face, eyes a-blazing. "Marsa isn't like that! She's the kindest, sweetest, most trustworthy mer in all the seas, and you saw her face when we rescued Messra Diana! There is no way she would help h... the ministra. Not after that!"

"Alright, alright." Sera pushed the princess

away, and none too gently. The golden mer shrieked, though Sera doubted that it had hurt too much. Rhiela had all that padding, and so it flowed that she was well protected from frontal assaults. "See if you can get it working this evening, then. But not by yourself. I wanna listen in, maybe have a word or two myself. Might be we could learn something useful. But no telling her exactly where we are!" she warned. "What she doesn't know can't hurt us."

"Understood," the princess said with a sour face.

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, got more important things to do than jabber with you all morning."

"As do I." Rhiela huffed and then returned to the stacked packages of shells.

Sera shook her head as she stroked Messra Diana's hair. Beneath her hands, the older mer shifted like a dreamer in her sleep. It wasn't a remarkable thing at all, save that Diana had not so much as twitched since they'd removed her from that blasted circle of purple light. Sera traced out the healing runes upon another strip of kelpen bandagin, muttered the syllables to bring forth the magic, and pressed it to Diana's forehead. It wasn't much, but every little bit helped, it seemed.

Verse XI

Ardenne had chosen this place to camp, this spot on the reef, because it was so rarely traveled. Except for her mother and herself, no one came this way to hunt or gather, and it showed. The broad swathes of rooted grass were unbroken by track or trace, and the currents sent waves of glimmering silver and green across their tops. Upon the body of the reef itself, coral blooms sent their little fingers into the open water, and sponges formed massive towers which shifted and swayed in the current.

There were fishes of all colors, shells and clams of all sizes, and mobs of lobsters dueled for space in the sand and silt. But no mers, no patches of cultivated roots or kelp, no signs of the hunt. Ardenne could spin and dive and pretend that she was all alone in the sea.

Was that what she wanted? A corner of her mind cried yes -- yes to the solitude, yes to the safety of being by herself. Other thoughts nagged at her, reminded her of friendships and duties in which she'd become entangled. But no, no no -- she could not go back just yet. Her flukes quivered and shook, and her nerves gripped her throat until she was choking on her own water.

Memories of red seeped through her mind, bloody like the bodies she had left in her wake. Where that strength came from, she did not know, but she could sorely use it now. She needed strength, needed purpose, needed...

Her mother. She needed her mother, and that was not possible now.

Of their own accord, her flukes propelled her forward, guiding her into more familiar waters. This entire region of the reef had been her playground, her refuge from the taunts of the other daughters of her age group. She knew its rolls and curves like her own, could tell how far she was from home by the taste of the currents and the feel of their sway against the lines of her tail. It was just that her brain was not concerning itself with such things at the moment, which was how she came to be lost.

Perhaps 'misdirected' was the better word, as she realized after a few moments that she had gone the wrong way. Instead of back towards the camp, her flukes had taken her along the inner arc of the main reef, towards the sheltered shallows where many of the local crops were transplanted. The firmament hung low over her head, perhaps eight fathoms from the sand and silt, and with a warmth that tickled her skin.

By this hour of the morning, the daily work of uprooting encroachments of sargo clumps had ended, and other nighttime arrivals were also dealt with. Most of the gatherers would be out on the tides, locating new stands of pod plants and root-grasses to bring back her for storage and food preparation. There was only one set of flukes in motion that Ardenne could see now, one mottled brown form darting around the managed plants. Lyrika was slicing long strips of kelp with a shell knife, readying them for their place between the grinding stones that would make them usable in weaving.

She should have turned tail and left, should have fled before the questions inevitably came, but

Ardenne's body was as stiff and still as a coral spar. The green mer floated in place, neither approaching nor retreating, until the young gatherer noticed her floating there stupidly.

"Ardenne?" The mer's voice was a whisper on the waters. "Ardenne!" And then it cracked as Lyrika's excitement sent it into a high squeak. The name had barely passed the hunter's ears when the brown mer barreled into her. Skinny arms held her close, and a freckled face pressed against her flat chest. The next few words barely made it into the water. Ardenne heard them more through her own skin: "They said you were dead, that the orcs got you. Gran'mama ordered a memorial song."

"She did? I'm sorry to have missed it." There was a hiccup from her chest that might have been a laugh. "I... I needed them to think I was dead, before they could get around to doing it themselves. Mother's... we got her out, but she's hurt bad."

"We?" Lyrika pulled her face away just enough to give the hunter a questioning look.

"Yeah, I made some friends along the way. Sort of." In truth, she was not sure how to describe the likes of Sera, the twins, or Rook -- much less the princess. Things had just happened. "You'd like them, I think."

"So you're coming home now, for real?"

She bit her lip, wishing she did not have to answer that one. "Not yet, I..."

"What!" The smaller mer pushed herself away, looking Ardenne straight in the face now. "Why not? No one's cleared your grotto yet, so you're free to move right back in."

How to explain, how to explain... "It's not that simple. I can't, I mean, it's not, I... A lot of things happened in Bryndoon. Good things, bad things, I don't know how to explain things. There are a lot of mers right now who are very angry with me, most likely, and they have some idea of where I live. If I'm there when they arrive, it'll be bad for everyone. Depths. It might be bad for everyone even if I'm not there." Loose green hair whipped as she tried to shake sense into her own words. "Just... just warn your grandmother, please? And, and give her my apologies. I never intended... I needed Mother too much not to..."

The brown mer grabbed Ardenne by the ears and kissed her until the words ceased to sputter into the open water. Then she kissed her for many beats after that. Lyrika's tail curled around hers, and her nimble fingers buried deep into Ardenne's mass of green hair.

The hunter's heart thumped hard enough to shake the firmament, and her veins scalded with their heat. A spasm clenched her guts so hard that she winced from the pain, and that brought them both back to the present waters. With no small amount of regret on her face, Lyrika broke off the kiss.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," said Ardenne. "Something feels wrong."

"Oh, it's not me, is it? I've never, er, never tried to, um..."

"Kiss someone like that?"

"Yeah." A light blush spread behind Lyrika's freckles.

"No, you didn't do anything wrong. It... it

almost felt too right. Like, too much, too good. I felt like I was going to burst." She still did, in fact. The way Ardenne's innards quaked in that moment, even the slightest caress might kill her with sensation. She could barely endure the motion of the currents upon her skin... Depths. She'd gone swimming off to cool her nerves, and she had never been less calm than now.

"I, I really need to go," she said. "I need to be there when Mother wakes up."

"But you'll be back? Soon?" Lyrika did not look as though she would ever release her grip on Ardenne without some sort of assurance.

"Yes."

"You'd better." Lyrika retrieved her basket from where it had fallen in the sand. "I don't want to wait another two weeks for a kiss like that."

Neither did Ardenne. She wished she dared, but she was doing well just to keep afloat right then. They somehow made their goodbyes without touching again, though her skin remained hot against the waters. Only the thought of Mother, still lying unconscious back at camp, kept Ardenne from grabbing the little gatherer and doing... what? She wasn't sure. Romance had never been a thing she had imagined herself trying.

Now, as the silt-grass fields passed beneath her flukes, she could hardly think of anything else.

Verse XII

Ministra Marhyd's personal workshop was of a piece with its mistress: round, expansive, with all the appearance of comfort and welcome but none of the substance. Its nacreous walls were shaded to a different hue from the rest of the structures on the cliff, though Aysmin did not know how that might be possible. All the shell-works came from the same source, so it had to be some trick of the ministra's. The rotund mer was full of them.

One was right before her eye now. "And what am I looking at?" the duchess asked. The shimmery... item floated freely in the middle of the chamber, rotating slowly in her wake as she circled around it. The item was roughly triangular, but with curved edges that reminded her more of certain shells from the Mere Hetropa. Little else about it resembled anything she knew, however, except perhaps for ice. It was smooth like ice, but neither chill nor warm. Little traces of light followed her fingers as they traced along its surface, but a sudden nudge spun in its wake cavities of brightness that hurt the eyes to witness.

"I would give plenty pearl to have the answer to that question," said the ministra. "I seem to recall something in the records of my foremothers that might have some relevance... or not; it has been a long time since I read through those shells. I should away to the family estate in the Mere Tessraï soon, to check. But not now." The fat mer clapped her hands with barely contained glee. "Not when there are so many exciting things to do here still."

"Yes, about those..." It should not have surprised Aysmin how quickly the runic weapons project was coming along now that it had official approval from the council. It would be just like the ministra to have conducted illicit research in private and while the fat mer confessed to nothing, it was obvious that some of the equipment coming from her inner labs had been years in the making.

The council was satisfied now that something was being done, even if they did not understand most of it. The other duchesses were ecstatic over anything that would help against the abominable menace. Mitera Yesca was often seen grinding her teeth in barely repressed, seething fury. As for herself, Aysmin was not sure how to feel. Knowing the ministra as well as she did, disquiet and worry were good places to start.

"How goes the training?" she asked, finally. Instruction in these new weapons had been left to the ministra, as she was the only mer who understood them, but while Marhyd was many things, a patient teacher and diligent instructor she was not.

"It goes. The din Hillia girls are making progress in their studies. I adapted the methods I use to instruct my assistants, and the new regimen has done wonders."

A miracle, rather. The duchess did not ask for details; she did not have the stomach for it. Some things were better left unknown. In times like these, where the seas had turned dangerous and crowded with things which ought not to exist, it was the result that mattered most. They could worry later over the means Marhyd used to accomplish it. "So when shall we see these wonders in action?" she managed to inquire.

"Soon enough. Perhaps even by the end of the week, though I cannot say for sure. My pretty little dolls may need more work before they are presentable. So it goes, so it goes." Marhyd punctuated the sentence with a burst of her usual staccato chuckle. "And how fare you with the matter of the princess?"

Aysmin idly twirled the strangely lit item into a tight whirl as she sighed. "No sightings, no word. No sign of where these mers might have gone with her. The Guard is kept busy with the security of the Mere Leïna and of the Temple's upcoming pilgrimage, and the trackers by themselves are beset by things that cannot be described by dead mers. We need those weapons."

"I know. They will be ready soon. But if you need to track Her Highness, why not ask the mitera for help?" Marhyde chuckled to a joke only she understood. "Ask for an augury or somesuch. The Temple has its ways."

"They can vouch that Rhiela is alive," the duchess admitted. "But not much else."

A dismissive snort from the ministra. "Oh, they can do better than that, if they dare. But they won't. Ah, well. In my purely mundane and unenlightened opinion, you should send a pod out to the obvious destination: the Mere Scothia. They can ride the greater flows and be there in a day or two, yes? And no scary monsters lurk therein, so I imagine that Grett or another like her would not turn down the assignment. It's not that difficult, really. Whatever has happened with Her Highness, the main incident was all about Messra Diana and her daughter, Ardenne."

The waters rang with the force of a punch,

slamming through the ears and across the waters of the mind with flickers of light trailing darkness in their wake. Aysmin dropped to the floor of the chamber with her hands over her ears, for all the good that it did her. The ministra stayed floating, or rather drifting in place with not a muscle twitching. The sound came and went in a beat, but it was almost a full verse before Aysmin could bring herself to rise again, or for Marhyd to come out of her strange fugue.

"What. Was. That." The words somehow survived the trip through a jaw locked in phantom pain.

The ministra stared at the floating item. "I would give everything to know the answer to that question..." she murmured.

Duchess Aysmin had faced down pods of orcs, hunted the narwhal of the farthest north, and had even once fought a kraken that had arisen from the depths on the edge of the Mere Tessraï. Somehow, the ministra's simple assertion chilled her blood more than anything had. Her exit from the chambers was polite, but quick.

Verse XIII

Diana's recovery came with agonizing slowness. Many days, she lay in her sandy niche as stiff and unmoving as a spar of coral. Other days saw her writhe and twist like an eel in a trap. They took turns caring for her, massaging her limbs and feeding her morsels of fish meat. There were times when she would cry out, babbling nonsensically to a face that was not there, but mostly the older mer remained silent.

They planned their time around Diana; for lack of a better goal, she was their reason to continue. Rook and the princess pored over the shells in their library, making what sense they could of the runes upon them and seeing what each of the members in their party could learn to use. Many of the sigils were new to them, or had novel interpretations of grammar of which the Temple authorities would surely not approve. Sera drilled them all in the healing cantrips, going so far as to nick herself with her own knives so that they would have a chance to practice.

Every evening, they gathered to listen to Marsa's whispered words from the Mere Leïna. To hear the princess's friend tell it, the palace was still in a frenzy, with everyone chasing their tails without a current to follow. The secondhand reports of abominations in the waters were disturbing in their numbers. Something had stirred up the monsters. Everyone agreed on that. But as with everything else about the abominations, there was little more than rumor and guesswork. It kept the guards busy, at least. To the best of Marsa's knowledge, no pods had been

sent farther than the waters of the Mere Leïna as yet.

No one doubted her words, only her chances to get information from the barracks.

Ardenne, for her part, kept the entire group fed. She went out on the morning tides and hunted like she had never done before, bringing back clams and crab, bream and flounder, and one day she returned to camp with a long chain of salps, a colony of translucent round bodies whose rubbery flesh made for an interesting treat. The hunter spent less than half the day in camp, though everyone pretended not to notice.

And when she was not hunting, she was courting. That was not how she thought of it; she did not even know the word as it was used in the politer society of Bryndoon. Relationships in the Mere Scothia were often fleeting things, assignations made in passing as different groups traveled and resettled across the reefs. Arrangements were needed for when one desired daughters, as the prestra sacrista visited but once a year to perform the blessed sacrament. These arrangements helped to connect the villages, but few mers kept in regular contact with their life-mothers. Ardenne did not even know the name of hers.

What she did with Lyrika felt different, though she could not say how. Often she would go out to hunt, only to have her eyes alight upon some stone or shell of unusual color, and the next thing she knew, she was delivering it to the mottled brown mer and receiving a passionate kiss in return. And then she would continue her hunt and return to camp. She had yet to tell anyone else.

"I wish you could stay," said Lyrika on the fifth

day. In her hands, she toyed with the delicately spiked spindle conch that Ardenne had brought. It was bone-white on the outside, and a vivid pink within. "Though I don't suppose I'd get any work done if I did. Gran'mama has already scolded me twice this week for being so slow."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be." She snuggled against Ardenne's chest. The two of them had found a small space in the middle of the broad field of grass that was perfect for two mers who did not mind close contact. "I like it this way. Every time you appear, it's like a happy surprise all over again. My only regret is that I never kissed you sooner. Just the once, and then everyone thought you were killed by orcs. Now every kiss feels like it's stolen." She snuck another one onto Ardenne's lips.

"A regular thief, you are," the hunter teased. "So why didn't you? Do it sooner, I mean."

"Why didn't you?" she countered.

That was not the sort of thing Ardenne wished to ponder these days. Thoughts of her childhood always led back to Mother. "I just... well, it never occurred to me. Mother and I," she barely stumbled there. "We were always a little apart from the rest of the village. I didn't really know how to, you know..."

"Yeah, you always were the odd one," said Lyrika. "Remember when we were all little, and we wouldn't let you play with us because we thought you looked weird?"

"If you must remind me..." Ardenne twirled a lock of grass-green hair and sighed. "How things change."

"That they do." Lyrika's fingers joined hers in the twirling, until the mottled mer had two handfuls tightly in her grasp, and Ardenne's lips planted firmly on her own. Suddenly the warmth in their little thicket was on just the right side of unbearable.

She did not panic at the heat, not anymore. She did not understand it, either, but she knew it felt like a good thing. Mostly. It still clenched her guts something fierce if things went on for too long. As always, it was with regret that they had to end it and part ways for the day. After time spent alone with Lyrika, the camp's solitude-in-numbers was difficult to bear.

Verse XIV

The Great Western Flow was a grand and terrible thing, streaming chill waters from the northern reaches of the Mere Arkhala past the Mere Leina, through the Mere Scothia and Mere Mezzlerle, all the way down to the overly warm climes of the Mere Hetropa, where a mer could turn around and ride the Great Eastern Flow up the other way. Many were the caravans that traveled along it, even in these trying times.

Sometimes Grett din Laërta wondered why she had not just stroked off to join the caravans herself, in her slightly younger years when she still had yet to decide her course in life. Beneath the leather cap of her rank, tightly coiled blonde hair itched, and she could not take the beat necessary to scratch it properly. Not now.

A day spent on the great flow, rushing forward at speeds neither fit nor safe, and the hardest part came after they arrived.

The Mere Scothia.

How she hated this sea, how she had hoped never to return to its ugly reef and backwater inhabitants. But, like it or not, Grett knew the area around the Grandest Reef better than any other officer in the Crown's service. She might still have refused. Only the fact that she had helped personally to verify the lack of abominations in these waters led her to accept the assignment from Duchess Aysmin. In that one sense was this sea preferable to any other.

This did not mean she was happy facing anything or anyone else who lived there. She could not

scratch her own head just then because she feared that even the least sign of weakness might lead to her getting lynched.

"It is as I have told you," she repeated to the mers gathered in the common flats of yet another reef village. This one was the unfortunate sort of memorable. "We seek a mer, an outlaw, who visited terrible harm upon servants of the Crown in Bryndoon. Her Majesty takes a dim view of those who would mistreat her subjects."

"What does she think of you, then?" came a jeer from the back. Crowded as the flats were, and the babbling wake of mers gossiping, it was not possible for her to tell where the words originated.

"I am her humble servant." Grett took the opportunity to drive the notice-post into the sand. Carved from a long coral spar, the post carried a broad shell with the etching of a face upon it. She knew the face too well, though she had only met the mer once and not for very long. Ardenne min Diana was not a mer one soon forgot, much as she wished otherwise. "And she asks me to find this mer. We offer pearl for any information"

"Thought you said she was dead!" came another shout. The local villagers all remembered the green-haired mer as well, and more fondly than Grett. "Or did you tire of blaming orcs for your incompetence?"

That voice, Grett recognized. "It did seem as though they had," she said to the elder now sinking down from her shell-work hut. "And we were mistaken."

"Not the first time," tsked Elder Raqua. "Nor the last. Begone, Grett. Take your pearls with you. We want nothing of this."

"But she--"

"Went to get her mother, I'm betting. Just as she said she would." The old mer shook her head. "Like mother, like daughter. Nothing ever stopped Diana either, whatever she set her mind upon. I would trust Ardenne to do anything necessary to rescue her mother. Whom you denied ever knowing," the elder added pointedly. "And the taste of that denial lingers. We cannot trust you. So clear out. We want nothing of you, either."

"Likewise," the lieutenant growled out. "But I still must make inquiries."

"Fine, fine! Inquire away!" Raqua waved her arms in broad circles. "None of us have seen her since she left with you and those two overgrown prawns floating behind you right now. Not our fault you lost her. But let us make it easy. Herina, have you seen her? No? Neriss? You neither? Oh," said the elder, waving to a younger mer with similar colors, now stroking in from the fields. "My darling granddaughter Lyrika! Have you seen anything of Ardenne? They say she's returned to these waters."

The granddaughter came up short, shocked to a halt. "Ardenne? She..." A three-beat followed, then: "She's alive? Really? Truly? O, Mother of All, what news! Where? Has anyone seen her?"

"Perhaps the lieutenant has," the elder said.

"Who... oh, it's you." Lyrika made a face. "Never mind. I'll get back to chores. Sorry for the noise,

gran'mama."

The common flats shivered with the froth of laughter. At least some mers found this amusing, even if Grett did not. Still, it was better than fearing for her own scales right then. With a jerk of the hand, she signaled to the two guards behind her to follow her out of the village proper and towards their new camp. She did not bother saying a word until they were well beyond earshot of the village.

"Assign a watch to the gathering fields," she ordered. "And... keep an eye on the elder's granddaughter. There was something about that little outburst that I mistrust. If anyone is the first to hear news, it will be that one, I figure. But be careful."

She could afford to be patient. As much as she hated this sea, it was a safe place to harbor while everyone else chased monsters. There was no point in rushing around with tired flukes when their green-topped fugitive would eventually come this way. And she would not miss one whit the guard duties in Bryndoon. Things were getting weird in the home waters.

Verse XV

"If you would take your rest, Your Grace, we shall start the show." Ministra Marhyd was pleased with herself, and her words swirled and clung like sticky oil on the ears. The fat mer was looking a bit leaner these days, having worked through regular mealtimes day in and day out, though she was still twice the mer her daughter was in most every dimension. She dominated the broad stage of the amphitheater, even as her grey-clad assistants arranged targets along the stone walls that formed the backdrop. To the rear of the stage, a kelpen curtain blocked the tunnel to Marhyd's research area from view.

Aysmin was not sure what she and the other duchesses were gathered her to see that day, and such ignorance was never a source of happiness. Whenever Marhyd was involved, what a mer did not know could be quite painful indeed. On previous days, they had been treated to demonstrations of offensive rune-craft, ostensibly gleaned from the histories chronicling the War of the Black Flow. The ministra's distant foremother had lost that fight, but at great cost to Aysmin's own ancestors. To see the daughter of the Mere Leïsi so willingly and ably performing this service to the Crown was a grand irony to a student of history.

More than a student, however, Aysmin was a pragmatist. If the fat mer brought results, if she helped against the looming threat of abominations, then it was all for the greater good. The past was in the past, and it was the now which mattered.

They had seen small bundles that exploded into

large bubbles of steam, long-handled batons which could strike a shark senseless, and shells which scythed through the water to find their targets. What, she wondered, would they have to marvel at that day?

Marhyd waved everyone into silence and then clapped twice. The wide curtain behind her parted, and two mers swam forward. Aysmin did not recognize them at first, and it was only when they raised their heads and saluted in unison that she knew them. By their faces, they were Estrella and Tachiana din Hillia, one recruit of moderate promise and another of none at all. By their bodies, in the way they moved and more importantly the way they held themselves, they were complete strangers. The ministra had wrought a miracle here -- and 'wrought' was the proper word, Aysmin suspected. There was nothing natural about this.

Tachiana still bore her signature hair style, all spiky like an urchin, but the way she carried it was different. No longer did she seem to dangle from the neck down; no longer did she look like a puppet on laces of kelp. There was no slouching or limpness, only a hard sense of tension. Likewise, her cousin's bearing had changed, though not quite so dramatically. Before, Estrella had seemed to look down her nose at everyone and everything. Her eyes now looked straight ahead, never wavering from the ministra and her instructions.

One must have a chance to break the toys before they can be rebuilt. Marhyd's words came back to haunt the duchess's thoughts. Just what had been wrought here?

The ministra was more than happy to show off the results, if not the means. At the fat mer's

command, the two young warriors came forward to present their arms. On Estrella's wrists were a pair of broad metal bands covered with intricate runes. Tachiana's right arm was fitted up to the elbow within a jointed sleeve of stone and scale, with only the tips of her fingers showing.

"Marily," the ministra said sweetly. She gestured to the target on the far wall. "If you would please hit the shark's eye."

It was Estrella who responded, flowing sinuously but silently from attention to action. The young mer brought her wrists together, band touching upon band for a single beat. There was a spark, a flash of the violet shade which Aysmin had learned to associate with the fulgurous force. Estrella drew her arms apart now: her left held straight forward as the right pulled back to her ear. Between them stretched a long bolt of... it was difficult to say. The duchess had never seen the like. A spear of crackling purple light made a sizzling noise in the still waters of the amphitheater. Perhaps there was nothing material there at all, only the energy.

The young mer's right hand twitched, releasing the bolt. It leapt, reaching the target faster than any projectile the duchess had ever seen, and it left a bright black trail across her vision. Within the target, it left a sizable hole, precisely in the center.

The other duchesses all erupted with applause, and Aysmin added her own noise to the approbation. In public, it was best to show support for her fellow councilor. There would be time for words later.

Marhyd waited for the echoes to subside and

for her grey assistants to mount another target before calling the other din Hillia forward. "Martella, if you would, please?" It was a command much like the first, playful and almost loving in its tones, but with something swimming within it that could not be ignored.

No nod came from Tachiana din Hillia. The spiky-haired head did not even turn to look at the ministra. From Aysmin's perspective, it was difficult to say if the mer heard the command at all, except that she was already doing as told. In one elegant, emotionless gesture, Tachiana raised her right arm and its strange sleeve.

She did not know what to expect from such an artifact. Part of her doubted that it was a weapon at all. From the sounds of her fellow duchesses, they were as shocked as she when the sleeve of stone unfurled in delicate layers, like the flattened tentacles of some bizarre anemone. Eight glowing points circled the young mer's hand, the tips of the tentacles crackling with flashes of purple interlaced with thin filaments of silvery force. And then the waters shook with eight percussive blasts. The sound did not come from Tachiana's weapon; it came from the wall. Heads turned and gasps followed as the damage became apparent.

The target was encircled by eight craters, each deep enough to fit a mer's hand. The masonry was already crumbling, and the target fell from its place as they looked on. Part of the wall fell with it.

"The kinetic force of flow," said Ministra Marhyd in a lecturing tone, "is nothing to yawn at. When

concentrated properly, it packs quite the punch, as it were. "Thank you, Marilyns, Martella. You may return to the lab."

The two young mers did not nod, nor even salute. Pivoting in place, they swam back through the curtains to Marhyd's offices with an economy of motion. The other duchesses were too busy besieging the ministra with questions to notice or care, leaving only Aysmin to wonder.

Depths. What had the fat mer done to them?

*

"Only what was asked of me, Your Grace," the fat mer answered later, in the privacy of her own quarters. Aysmin was perched upon a resting couch, ill at ease, but the ministra had her usual pleasant mood upon her. She even had a packet of her favorite kyun pods out as a snack. "Their aunt told me to make something out of them, and so I did. Would you like some?" She offered the packet to the duchess. "They really are quite good."

"No, thank you. And I doubt that Tamur din Hillia would appreciate whatever it is you have done to her nieces."

"Why? I have made them useful, dependable, and in the case of Martella, no longer addicted to tuli. I fail to see the problem."

Not even a scowl could form on Aysmin's face. There was simply no good way to respond to this. She tried anyway. "You gave them new names."

"So I did. Special designations for special projects. Does not the Guard do the same for such things, or is that merely another error in the old tales of

adventure?"

"We at least understand that it is a temporary designation and not a new name."

The ministra's shrug rolled more than just her shoulders. "Honestly, the two of them are dear daughters. In fact, I was even thinking to adopt them, myself. It wouldn't be too hard to turn their hair purple -- not too different from Anyis's golden weed-wrap, I reckon, and Marsa could use some sisterly support in these trying times."

"You can't just..." Aysmin stopped herself and cleared her head with a sharp shake. The ministra would. She might even get away with it. Most of the damage was already done, and she was sad to agree that the din Hillia cousins were more manageable now. "And how is your daughter faring?" she asked, grasping for any change of topic.

"Well enough. She's been working with the kitchen staff most days, though she insists on keeping to her room in the evenings instead of going out and socializing. Her Highness was a major part of her life, you know, and she is not adjusting well to Rhiela's absence."

"None of us are, I would dare to say."

Marhyd had another of her chuckles. "Except the mitera, of course."

"Even she is heavy of heart, though she hides it well. It is the morale of all which concerns me. Sightings of abominations increase by the day, and already the city is filled with mers fleeing the outer settlements. Without Queen or Princess, we are grasping at bubbles to keep everything settled."

"Did you send Grett out as I suggested."

A beat of silence, a sigh of resignation. "Yes. Her and a small contingent, not even a full pod. They should be in the Mere Scothia already. If the green-haired mer is in those waters, they'll find her."

"And when they fail to catch her?"

She meant to growl, but only sighed again. "Let us hope for the best."

"And plan for the worst." The fat mer had her best face of business upon her. "We could send Marilys and Martella to retrieve our prodigal. Their training is almost complete, and should Her Highness be sighted anywhere besides the Mere Scothia, then my informants will have it to my ears soon enough."

"I... I shall keep that in mind, ministra."

"Was there anything else you wished to discuss, Your Grace?"

Nothing. Everything. Trying to keep stroke with the ministra was exhausting, and little Marsa was not the only one to wish she could shut out the entire sea. To the mers of the Guard, Aysmin could show a brave face, a hardened heart, and a fearless eye. To the ministra, who could not and would not be fooled by pretenses, she could only break even.

"Discuss things with me and Mitera Yesca before you plan anything new," she advised, though she knew it sounded more like a plea. "We must be as one in these times of uncertainty."

"Of course, Your Grace. Of course."

The scars of years past weighted her down as she left the fat mer's offices. It was all for the greater good, she told herself. They needed to push back

against the abominations, needed to retrieve Her Highness, needed to survive this as a people united, because the alternatives... Aysmin shivered in the warm waters of the passageway.

What she would not have given for an opponent she could fight properly, right there and right then.

Verse XVI

It was the start of their seventh morning in the Mere Scothia. Dawn had broken, spilling golden light across the firmament, and for a wonder Rhiela was awake to see it. She had risen early every day that week, a fact which she attributed to not having her usual, comfortable hammock to sleep in.

Nor her usual, comfortable Marsa to share it with. She greeted the morning light with a sigh. Marsa would be proud of how the princess spent her waking hours. With nothing better to do, Rhiela had no choice but to study like she had never studied before. At stake was her entire purpose and place within this little school of theirs, and she had no doubt that the sour-faced mer with the red scales would dump her at the first convenient spot if she did not give reason not to. So every morning she would wake up, greet Ardenne as the green mer left to hunt, and practice her rune-craft.

This morning, she had a specific task in mind. Rhiela checked the notes on the scallop in her hands, eyes following the sharply etched runes with the ease of frequent practice. Handing the shell over to Rook, the princess held her hands straight out with the palms up, and opened her mind. Her imagination drew the runes above each outstretched finger, and as she sang them in turn they spread to form a perfect circle around her hands. Delicate lines of light linked the runes in their mystic grammar, forming the lattice of the spell. Finally, the trigger word shot from her mouth, passing through the center of the imagined pattern and making it quite real. Tiny currents curved around her limbs as the twin

kinetic forces of ebb and flow reached a new harmony, as dictated by her words, and a circular plane formed in the morning waters.

It was described as a defensive spell in the rune library, a shield to deflect physical weapons or runic attacks. It was also, she could see now, quite serviceable as a mirror. Her face was reflected in its still surface, a little thinner than she remembered -- but then again, she was not eating as well as she was accustomed. Rhiela stroked back a span from the mirror so that she could see herself better, only to have the shock of her life.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!"

*

"Okay, okay." Sera was fighting a losing battle to contain the giggles within her chest. "Didn't quite catch that. You said the problem was what?"

"My hair!" wailed Her Wobbliness. Rhiela pulled on one golden tress for emphasis. About halfway along, the color began to mellow and darken, until by the roots it was a decent, if ordinary, brown. "What's happening?"

She delighted in the princess's panic, Sera did. Little chum was sending herself into such a frothing fit, and it was a shame they had to burst the bubble on such entertainment.

"Had your hair done recently, princess? Binding it with weeds, perhaps? Once a week or so?"

"Twice a week, but yes. What of it? It's just to keep my hair healthy and prevent the ends from splitting. The palace servants took care of all that. It's not easy to take care of at this length, you know. The

last time was, oh, two days before the big ceremony."

Sera couldn't help herself now. Barely repressed giggles were unleashed upon the waters as full-throated guffaws. The sight of the princess, caught halfway between shock and outrage, only spurred her on.

"What's the ruckus?" Morga called to them.

"This... this... little chum -- oh, this is too rich! -- been living a lie, all these years, and, and she never-ever realized!" Now the rogue was clutching at her sides from laughter. "The... the... --ha! ha!-- the royal family's so depths-taken proud of, of their golden hair and scales and... and... -- ha ha ha ha..." She needed to stop laughing, even as she knew that she could not. Too much air had escaped her bladders, bubbling up towards the firmament until she risked complete deflation. But it was just so hilarious! "They've, they've colored her up all her life, just to-to-to keep up the pretense!"

Oh deary day, what her friends in Mezzeret would say when they heard! This would keep everyone chortling for weeks. Even now, as she completely lost buoyancy and drifted to the sandy bottom, she was giggling like a mad mer. Everyone stared at her like she was one, too, which only proved that they couldn't appreciate good humor if it were thrust wobblies-first in their faces.

Once she'd settled down a bit, Morga helped reinflate her air bladders. Perhaps it was because she was in a better mood, or because there was no immediate threat to her life, but this time Sera definitely enjoyed the process more. Maybe the twin was simply

a better kisser than Ardenne? The rogue decided she might need to investigate this possibility again sometime... but not now. The others were waiting for an explanation.

"So, ahem, continuing on..." Sera massaged the sides of her chest and winked to Morga. The twin blushed, and she had to contain another giggle. "Okay. Simple enough. Royals always claimed a special connection to the Goddess, right?"

"We are the descendants of Branduin, First of the First Daughters below the firmament!"

"Save it for another time, little chum. Anyways, that bright yellow mess of hair they all have, it's supposed to look like the Goddess's own. How we can know this is true when all the statues are based on royals to begin with, I dunno, but!" Sera held up her hands to forestall the princess, and maybe to cop a feel if the royal wobblies came too close. "But, the problem is that daughters don't always take after their mothers as much as they'd like. Usually do, but not always. Ardenne being a prime example."

The all nodded at that. The hunter -- and where had that idiot swum off to this morning, she wondered -- had her mother's face and build, or at least the shadow of it, but that hair...

"Guessing that the royal ministry saw your hair getting darker early on, and kept treating it regular-like so's none would notice you don't look the part all through and through."

"But, but, Mother has to do it, too!" cried the princess.

"She does? Nice to see the fraud flows through

the whole house like that."

Ooooooh... that hit a nerve, it did. Sera could get a good look at the royal roots now, as the princess's hair about stood on end, so angry was the little chum. She was tempted to take a knife and chop it all off, right her and right now. That would serve the twit right, and make her easier to hide at the same time.

"I am only going to say this once, you ill-bred, lobster-headed ingrate," the princess declared in her huffiest, wobbliest, hauteur.

"All ears, little chum."

"I have never--"

They did not get to hear whatever it was that the princess had never done. For the life of her, Sera could not imagine much that Rhiela might not have done, up to and including kissing a grouper on the mouth, but she was willing to overlook such little foibles when they were so entertaining.

No one could ignore the interruption, however. It was a low, loud moan, lofted upon a current of pain and ache. Messra Diana would cry out once or twice an hour, but this time was different. This time, it ended on something intelligible.

"...mmm... oh... where! Where am I?"

Suddenly, the matter of Rhiela's roots did not seem so important.

Verse XVII

Hunting had been good that morning. A school of bream here, a few groupers there, and little clams up in the shallow heights -- the reef was full of sustenance when one knew where to look. Ardenne had even found a patch of pearl root plants in a little stretch of silt, far from where they usually grew. She had taken a few but left the rest to grow strong. They would make a wonderful gift for Lyrika that afternoon, when the two of them had next planned to meet. Thoughts of the mottled brown mer's warmest thanks, expressed in quick little kisses, kept her warm all the way back to camp, where the others awaited their lunch.

It was a routine, and one that Ardenne was already comfortable with. The late morning water made for a calm passage between the warm waters of the heights and the cool tensions of the campsite.

Those same senses that served her so well on the reefs told her that something was wrong as soon as she swam into camp. No one was out in the open, and the waters were hushed, but the sand around the big tent had been disturbed by the strokes of many flukes.

"Ardy!" Rook's head poked out from the kelpen canvas, and a freckled arm waved her over. "Yer mom's awake!"

That energized her like nothing else. Ardenne was across the sand and at the entrance before the orange mer's words could fade from the waters. She pulled the flaps wide, but could go no further for all the mers already crowded within.

"About time you got here," said Sera. The red

mer was feeling Mother's forehead and checking her eyes. "Busy time fishing? Or just avoiding us all some more?"

"Oh, don't be like that!" And now the princess was adding her words to the already crowded waters. "We all need to eat, after all."

A snort cut through. "The way you tuck in, I'm surprised you're not even more top-heavy, brownie."

"How dare you! I ought to--"

Diana's body shook with violent coughs, and the noise brought silence to the tent. "Who... who are you all..." The question was hard-won, and the words almost too pained to flow from the older mer's mouth.

"We're friends, Messra Diana," the princess said in a soothing voice. The words flowed easily, as if from long practice. "My name is Rhiela."

As Ardenne watched the conversation unfold, she heard Rook's whisper arrive on quiet bubbles: "She keeps forgetting. Done introduced ourselves five times now. Say!" the orange mer continued in a louder voice. "Don't'cher forget li'l Rook over here! And we got Ardy with us now!"

The twins slipped out of the way to let her move forward. Olga gave her an encouraging pat on the back that knocked bubbles from her air bladders. For a week now, she'd been afraid of this moment, even as much as she hoped it would come. She could hardly bear to look at Mother now, so frail and gaunt from the past week of illness. The mer was the barest shadow of the mother she remembered, with only a ghost of the strength and vitality of a reef hunter. Even the eyes were duller and darker than before.

"M-mother?" Her voice betrayed her. All of the nerves and stress sunnk deep inside found a way out in those simple syllables. Why fight it? Her body trembled as she embraced her mother, then went stiff with shock when the older hunter did not return it in kind.

Mother was staring at Ardenne's face, and a spark of something passed behind her eyes. "What..." The first word was the barest of whispers. The words which followed it were not. "What are you doing here? Have you not done enough?"

"Mother, what...?"

"Who are you calling mother, you... you... I do not even know what you are! Teasing me away from safer waters, out almost to the abyss! Doing... doing..." For a beat, Mother was at a loss for words. Fingers grasped for bubbles as her mind grasped for words. "You know what you did, better than I! And to leave me after that, and with a child..."

"But Mother, it's me! Ardenne!" the hunter cried. No one else in the tent dared speak, though they all nodded to confirm her words.

"Do not think you can trick me with foolishness. Ardenne is but an infant! Where is she?" Mother wailed, pulling at Sera and Rhiela as they tried to hold her down. "Where is my baby daughter? Oh! Cythera curse you..." A hiccupy giggle followed. "But... but she already has, hasn't she..."

"Messra Diana," Rhiela asked carefully. "How old is Ardenne?"

"Not yet two years old, and in no shape to take care of herself. Do you know where she is? Is she with my mother?"

Ardenne shared an uneasy glance with the red mer and the golden. "Grandmother Naïda passed away eight years ago," she murmured. Mother did not seem to notice.

"Ma'am," said Sera. "You've been through a lot recently, and you're a mite confused. That there's your daughter."

"No, she is not! That's... that's... Depths take it! What was your name?" Mother cried again. "The fat mer wanted to know that, too. And the ring... the ring!" She clutched at her chest. "Where is it?"

"It's right here, Mother." Ardenne held out her hand to show, only for it to be slapped away.

"Stop calling me that! Only my daughter can call me that. Oh, where is she?"

"Mother--"

"You are not my daughter!" From somewhere, Mother found the strength to scream the words. "You are a liar and a fake and... and... and... an abomination. That is what you are! Get out! Get out of my sight!"

Her flukes were only too happy to oblige. They carried her out of the tent as fast as they could, tearing away from her mother, fleeing from the words that made no sense and yet hurt so badly. And so, like every other day in the camp, Ardenne made her escape, and this time she did not care if she never returned.

Verse XVIII

How long she swam, Ardenne could not say. Distance mattered more than time, and by that measure she had swum far indeed this day. Once more her flukes took the initiative, steering her towards waters more welcome and warm. Of course she had planned a visit to Lyrika that day, but now she had a special need for comfort. That final, terrible tirade from her mother continued to echo through the waters of her mind, growing louder with each reverberation until the sea itself screamed at her.

And then...

And then...

Ardenne crested the last ridge before the shelf. She kept her belly low to the reef, scales scraping lightly against the rolls of coral, and her hair flowed freely like the grass. Her eyes searched the open waters, noting who was or was not present on the flat shelf. All of the shouts and the shrill words in her head faded to stillness as she found Lyrika tending the fields south of her. It was still early, and the work was not yet done. She would hate to see the mer in trouble with her grandmother, but she needed... what, she did not know. Comfort. Care. Connection.

Whatever it was, the sight of Lyrika was enough for now. Ardenne kept to the grass stands at the edge of the field, as far opposite in direction from the reef village as could be, staying unseen even as she watched. Other mers came and went, each to their own task, but Lyrika lingered. Did she know? Did she sense the hunter in the grass? It was all Ardenne could do, not to

rush out and take the mottled mer in her embrace. But once the other mer was alone, it was easy to swim low and around the patches of transplanted pod-fruits to deliver a kiss carried on a string of bubbles.

Lyrika stiffened with surprise. Her eyes darted around, but their mistress remained still. The expression on her face was not one that Ardenne would ever like to see. "What's wrong?" she sent on another string of bubbled whispers. "Has something happened?"

"They've come. They're watching," Lyrika sent back. The brown mer's attempts to weed her patch nonchalantly all ended in failure as she shook. "Swim away, quick! Before--"

"Ardenne min Diana." It was a bold declaration, solid and loud upon the waters. A somewhat familiar head of blonde curls rose from the grass on the verge closer to the settled reef, practically in front of Lyrika. "You have broken the public trust and caused harm to the Crown and her subjects. Come quietly and peacefully or-- oof!"

Only two mers knew what was in Lyrika's carry-sac: the young mer who packed it and the soldier whose face it had just slammed into. The mottled mer let the momentum take the sac from her hands and stroked hard over to Ardenne. "Swim away!" she cried.

The hunter grabbed her by the hands and kicked away with her strongest stroke, sending silt into the waters as more soldiers of Bryndoon rose from the grass. Lyrika kicked with her, adding some speed, but it was not enough. The mers in red and gold were rested and ready, not to mention many. Two of them sped

along to Ardenne's left, another two to her right. Shadows above gave away the positions of at least two more. That covered the routes back to the village, around the gathering fields, and up to the heights. The only direction to swim was towards the outer reef, towards the camp.

Towards Mother.

No. Not again. The words escaped as grunts. They would not take Mother a second time.

Lyrika squealed as the hunter rolled in the current, pulling the mottled mer behind her as the spear went up and on guard. The first two soldiers who come near had their metal blades batted away, the edges finding no bite upon the thick kelpen bindings of the spear handle. That unsettling, familiar shade of red hazed her vision but not her sight, and her fist drew a different hue from their faces as she broke their noses with a pair of straight punches.

"Get back," she told her friend. Out of reach, she meant. Spears beat blades handily, but only if she had the space to swing it. Right then, four soldiers approached, intent on not letting her have that room to move.

*

This was getting too damned familiar. If Sera had a fine pearl for every time she had to rush after the green-haired idiot into the middle of something both stupid and dangerous, she would not be a wealthy mer by any means, but she would certainly be rich enough to know better. But as no one else in the camp had the least idea of how to follow a mer through the wild waters, it was her job to tail the hunter. Sera only

prayed that the hunter would not have time to get into too much trouble.

She had nearly reached the shelf near the village, nearly caught up to Ardenne when the soldiers popped out of hiding.

Yes. Like that. Trouble like that. Sera was not sure why she even bothered with optimism at this point. Her supposed friend was a vortex for trouble.

At least the soldiers hadn't spotted her yet. Between the lieutenant's puffed-up declarations and Ardenne's evasive maneuvers, all eyes went one way while she went the other. She did appreciate seeing Grett get slammed in the face, though. A few more good whacks would finish the job right.

Her eyes tracked the chase as the mers sped past her place amid the sponges. The hunter was in fine form, whirling her spear in tight arcs that drew eddies in the water and threw off the strokes of the soldiers' blades. Ardenne even succeeded in disarming a few of them.

This was not a fight that could be won, however, and they all knew it. The mers in red and gold held back, tested the flows, and then timed their thrusts. Ardenne could block one, two, three... and a line of red sent color into the current as one blade drew across her arm.

Oh, for some Ferga's Rest. Sera did not regret the way she'd used the last of the paralytic weed, but she did wish she had more on hand. Without it, she had few options that did not involve rushing in with both blades drawn and a will to die painfully.

But options there were. She'd gone over some

of the rune-shells with Rook in the past week -- enough to be sure that the advanced grammars were beyond her ability to properly ken -- but they had managed to find one spell that was simple, versatile, and well-fitted to herself. It was just that she had never done it with any sort of speed before.

Ah, well. Time to muck around and find out. Sera palmed a stone from one of her many little pouches, cupped it between her hands and murmured the short string of syllables that was the spell grammar. Rook had said that it was composed almost entirely of runes controlling the kinetic force of flow, and Sera could feel the stone shiver and quake even before she came to the trigger word. When that final syllable hit the waters, she could only aim the stone and hope that it traveled straight.

-fshhussh- was the sound of it leaving her hands. Not so loud for its speed. A beat after it went free into the water, the spell took full effect, and with a scream the stone broke the waters at unnatural speeds. It did not succeed in hitting a single one of the Bryndoon mers, but it didn't need to. The speed of its passage brought the noise, and the cavitations it left in its wake collapsed with painful pops against the scales of many a mer.

Unknown noise, unknown threat, unknown origin. It was enough to break up the pod of attackers, enough to cause panic. And then Ardenne and her little friend race off for the distant haze.

Sera followed swiftly after.

*

It had been going so well. Grett was proud of

how the soldiers of her pod came together to wear away the outlaw's defences, only for it to go all muddy without warning. A thin line cut through the waters, dragging behind it a wake of stinging bubbles and a roar of noise that slammed both the ears and the scales along their flanks. It was a combination to make any mer flinch and recoil.

And thus the two mers made their escape, again.

"After them!" Grett shouted. She hoped her cohorts heard that, because she was having trouble doing the same over the ringing of her ears. Ahead on the currents, the green mer and brown mer were joined by a red, and the lieutenant didn't need to hear her own curses to feel their force. Of course the outlaw had not come alone, even to what had by all signs been a romantic assignation. Powerful strokes carried the lieutenant forward, ahead of her pod, as her vision focused on those three.

At her hip was a new thing, one of the ministra's little projects. Grett had spent much of the week training in its use, and if she was not an expert then no mer was. To her fell the honor of its first use in action. The strap of leather was studded with icons of carved stone and etched metal, and it fit against the palm of her hand with a comfortable snugness. She felt its warmth grow as she clenched her fist around it.

One moved faster than three. Grett could kick, stroke, and scull as necessary to ride the currents in this stretch of the reef, the area she knew best. Even if the outlaw knew it better, that mer was slowed by two friends who were not so experienced. All Grett had to

do was get within six tail-lengths, extend her left arm, and release her grip on the ministra's device.

Ebb and flow. That was all the fat mer had talked about during the explanation, and the lieutenant recalled little else. Instead, she experienced the brief sensation of being the center of the seas, with all things floating before her now drawn relentlessly towards her clutching hand. A vortex swirled into existence, sucking and pulling with more force than a great flowing current. It lasted for all of a three-beat, yet felt like a full verse. Keeping her left arm steady was effort enough, but Grett had her right arm ready for when the three mers ahead of her came rushing backwards. Her blade came up, came around in one large sweep, and slammed against the outlaw's spear. The spar of kelp-wrapped bone shattered, and Grett shouted with glee as the metal continued into the green mer's flank. A glancing hit, but enough to leave a bruise and knock some scales off.

She brought up her off-hand once more, unleashing the vortex in the face of the red mer with the flow reversed. She did not care what happened to that one after she was flung across the waters. "I have you now, Ardenne min Diana," she snarled.

"I guess you do." The outlaw's tones were low and resigned. That head of green nodded to the local mer, the brown-scaled granddaughter of the old flounder in the village. "Just... let her go. I'll come with you then."

That was worth a snort of contempt. "No. No more mercies, no more special deals. She helped you, she attacked me, and so she shares in your punishment.

Now, where are the others?" she demanded.

"Where are yours?" came the reply.

"Don't change the subject! My pod is following right behind, as you well know." That should have been evident. Even the slowest of soldiers would be upon them soon. If she held the blade at the outlaw's neck for a few beats more, then her cohorts could bind the mer up quick and easy. "But where are your friends?"

"Long gone, if they know what's good for them," said the green mer. "There are orcs in these waters, as you'd know."

What game was the outlaw playing at now? Grett would have raised another blast, just for the spite of it, but the device on her palm had gone cold. It would need time to regain its power, she knew. The sword would have to do, and so she raised it between them. "We wait her until my cohorts arrive," she declared.

"Suit yourself." The outlaw had her eyes up and looking past Grett's shoulder. The granddaughter shrank and huddled behind green scales and flukes. "It might be a while."

The play of ripples along her flanks told Grett otherwise. Without looking, she knew that the mers of her pod approached from up-current. She could feel the water as it was pushed towards her by their movement. But the green mer's continued stare at a point past her shoulders, the brown mer's whimpers of fear, those made her doubt her well-trained senses. The feeling of approaching mass grew, and there was more of it than there should have been. Larger than a mer would be at this distance.

She had to turn. She had to look. She had to see the black and white shape closing in on her with its mouth wide open and so many teeth on display with shreds of blood and scale between them.

Grett did not see much else after that.

Verse XIV

The orc took only the one bite out of Lieutenant Grett, but it was a bite that encompassed most of the poor mer's upper chest. The black and white beast whipped its body, shaking the blood from Grett's body and snapping the neck with a sickening sound. And all through this, it sang a tune of clicks and squeals that were not words, but held meaning nonetheless. They boasted and laughed at the misfortune of the mer caught between the teeth of a master predator.

Ardenne heard it mostly at a distance. She had Lyrika by the hand, and for the second time that day swam with blind speed to anywhere that was not where she had just been. It wasn't till her tail was stiff and tired, till she could feel the ache in each frill of her flukes, that she paused for them to rest. Then the shells fell from her eyes and she took notice of her surroundings. The length of the reef continued to curve to the south, where it would reach the edge of the abyss soon enough. That much she could tell from the light of the firmament and a faint memory of their heading when the sudden need for escape had appeared.

Nearby, Lyrika groaned. "Are... are we done swimming?" the mottled mer complained. "Where are we?"

She wished she could say where and be sure in her answer. She'd rarely traveled this far along the reef, even with her mother's guidance, and as she looked around she saw no familiar landmarks. For the first time in years, she was lost in her home waters.

Still, she reasoned as she massaged her flukes,

everything she knew upon the reef lay to her north. All the two of them needed to do was to rest up and then swim till things became familiar again. Hopefully that would happen before nightfall.

"Oy! Ardenne!" called a familiar voice across the waters. "Where the depths did you swim off to?"

If Lyrika were not here... thought Ardenne to herself. If the brown mer weren't here, she would have hidden right now. A dozen good spots were apparent to her experienced eye, and the red-haired rogue could pass on by, none the wiser. She could run away... like she had been doing for the past week. Her flukes weren't the only things getting tired of this.

Ardenne sighed and remained in place with Lyrika stuck to her side as the red mer approached. "Hello." She did not know what else to say.

"Lo, yourself. And 'lo to you, too, miss...?"

"Lyrika," came the mumble from behind Ardenne's right shoulder.

"Ah, yes. Thought I recognized you. A couple weeks back, that soldier Emera messed with you and Ardenne here messed her back, right?"

Green eyes stared spear-points at the other mer. "Are you here to chat, or are you still angry at me?"

"Wouldn't be much of a friend if I were." Sera settled on a sponge not far off. "But you make it hard sometimes. She like that with you?" the red mer asked Lyrika. "Bit distant, stops talking, stuff like that?"

The other mer snuggled against Ardenne's shoulder. "Sometimes. You just have to be patient. That's what Mama told me."

"Mothers..." Red hair shook slowly against the current. "Never figured 'em out, myself."

"You don't get along with your mother?" Somehow, Ardenne was not surprised to hear that.

"Would need to get to know her 'fore I could get along with her, and never could manage that. Long tale, another day," the rogue said. "Talking 'bout you right now. Both of you, I guess. She's why you've been out of camp so much, huh." Sera gave Lyrika an appraising glance. "Got that sweet look to her. Nice."

She could feel the blush against the skin of her back. "It's... it's complicated."

"Of course it is."

"Is she... is she going to be alright? Mother?" was the only question that she could think to ask next.

"Maybe? Depths, we still don't know what all they did to her. Rhiela and Rook are taking care of her now, trying to talk her around to sense. Another long story," Sera added for Lyrika's benefit. "Several of them, more like. You do not want to know the details. Lots of stuff went muddy."

The mottled mer shifted her head around and asked, "Is that why Grett is... um, was here?"

"Exactly. How'd you get away from her, anyway?"

That put a pause to the conversation for a three-beat. "You... didn't see?" Ardenne finally asked.

"Got a face full of flushing vortex, if you didn't see. Knocked me for a frothing loop. Didn't come to for dunno how many beats, then had to track you all the way here. Wasn't easy," she added with a glare.

"Sorry."

"No worries. Let's get back, okay? And see Lyrika back home, for that matter. Don't want her washing afoul of the soldiers, right?"

"Um, about that..." Ardenne hated to be the bearer of bad news, but if Sera hadn't noticed the orc as it ripped a chunk out of Grett, then it could only have been because the orc did not want to be seen just then. And if it hadn't wanted to be seen, just where was it going... "Oh, depths," she concluded, casting her eyes upward.

The firmament was dimming above as the reef fell away below. The great drop-off to the abyss took in all light and gave nothing back, swallowing the brightness within the gulf of emptiness. But in the clear fathoms between the two, a dozen large bodies swam. The smallest was twice the size of a mer, and the rest much larger. All shared the same coloration: dark above and light below. Large, round patches of white were placed behind beady black eyes, and toothy jaws leered at the three mers.

The orcs had followed. Suddenly those hiding spots she'd noticed earlier seemed far more welcoming, even with the three of them crammed together, but an entire pod of the sleek, heavy creatures had them surrounded before an attempt to hide could even be made. There was no sound on the water except for the clicks and growls that passed for speech amongst the beasts. More could be seen in the distance.

"Still think that Scotthian orcs are friendly?" she muttered sideways to Sera.

"Reconsidering my opinion, yeah." The red-haired rogue pulled in closer to Ardenne, but never

took her eyes away from the black and white forms as they closed ranks. "Um, shouldn't they be attacking by now?"

"Don't give them ideas!" hissed Lyrika, now almost completely hidden behind Ardenne.

Yes, they should have, and the hunter could not begin to say why they were not. A single orc was a difficult foe even for a pod of mer defenders, as Grett had discovered not long before, and by now Ardenne had lost count of the number of large bodies swimming around them.

"Think they want us to go that way," said Sera, pointing south. There were fewer orcs in that direction, all arranged in a way that formed passage rather than block it. "Well, only one way to find out for sure, right?" the rogue added before stroking away.

"Is she serious?" squeaked Lyrika. "Orcs eat mers! We just... we just..."

Sera shook her head. "Heard that, many a time. Seen it? Never. Okay, so I completely missed it just now, but still haven't. Only met orcs twice in my life 'fore this, and wasn't hurt either time. Neither was Ardenne, for that matter."

"Me?" Green hair shook in confusion. "Okay, first time was up on the ridge, with the soldiers right on our tails. I figured the orcs went after them."

"Think you figured wrong. And that was the second time." Sera turned to rap Ardenne playfully on the forehead. "Though you might not remember the first too well. C'mon! Who'd you think fixed up that noggin of yours after the Bryndoos koshed it half in?"

Ardenne scowled. "I'm not an idiot. I figured

that out days ago."

"And how do you think I found you, hm? Not knowing a thing of the reefs, and coming on a stranger in need, just like that?" The red mer jerked a thumb towards the nearest orc. "Was led to you. Wouldn't let me go till I did something. Didn't want you hurt at all."

And earlier, the orc had gone only for Grett and her soldiers, not for them... This was hurting her head. Ardenne eyed the sleek bodies now flanking their passage through the evening waters. The orcs kept stroke with the slower mers, and maintained an exact distance even as the light stretched thin over the abyss. Between the larger beasts, smaller bodies flitted around -- dolphins and lesser whales, by the look of them. The hunter felt their presence as much through the vibrations upon scale and skin as through her eyes.

What was an assortment like this doing out here, on the edge of the abyss itself? She could not even identify half the species surrounding them, but none of the ones she knew could be said to get along well with one another. The orcs were opportunistic hunters who would eat a delphin as readily as anything else. Nothing should be sharing these waters with them, and yet more bodies continued to pass by and over them, visible against the firmament.

She kept Lyrika's hand in her own. It was hard to say which of them needed the reassurance more. Time stretched on, endless and immeasurable, though the silver light steadfastly refused to fade. Above was a shimmering plane of indigo, with the barest hint of waves lapping across it. Down below--

Down below was darkness of the purest sort.

They had already passed the edge of the world, the cliff where the reef ended and the ocean floor began its headlong descent into nothingness. Her eyes searched the soft, fuzzy boundaries of that darkness, eager to find something, anything, to anchor her spirits before they too were dragged into oblivion.

There was a reason why all mers took the name of the depths as a curse. These were waters fit to swallow the soul, and try as she might, Ardenne could not avert her gaze from the indefinite vastness. Her imagination stretched and tore as it attempted to fill it.

And then, something appeared. A vague outline, a dark grey blotch that could barely be seen against the backdrop of nothingness. Her eyes, confused by the darkness and the lack of references, tried to tell Ardenne many things about its length and size as it rose from the depths, and none of it was true. The skin of her body gave a more accurate telling as it felt the grey body approach.

Beside her, Sera the Red gave a short cry of surprise, and Lyrika crowded her body as close to Ardenne as possible. The green mer did not mind. She only wished she had someone to hide behind as well. It was fast apparent how badly her eyes had been fooled.

The grey form passed the assembled orcs, dolphins, whales, and mers. Though still far distant, it was overpowering in its wake. With astounding speed it rose to the highest fathoms, not stopping even as it breached the firmament itself and sent great crashing waves of foam and light across the top of the world. For one dizzying moment the bulk of the beast actually left the embrace of the seas, cresting above the firmament

only to return with a resounding *-smack-* that rattled Ardenne's teeth with its force.

"What..." Sera tried to ask, as the massive cachalot sank to their level.

Ardenne could have teased her for the reaction and ignorance, but the hunter's eyes were firmly on the great grey whale as it settled itself a fair distance away. There must have been a hundred tail-lengths between it and them, and still it looked impossibly large. One eye, as large as a mer by itself, was turned to observe them. A toothy grin, small only in comparison to the beast's bulk, leered at them. Its blocky head alone was larger than her and Lyrika's home village.

"Do... do cachalot eat mers, too?" Lyrika whispered in her ear.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Good..."

"They prefer kraken and other monsters from the depths. We wouldn't be much more than a snack." Or at least, so she had heard. There were plenty of stories out there of the greater cetaceans, and her mother could only vouch for so much. It was rare for any mer to approach a cachalot like this.

Even rarer to survive the experience. She chose not to mention that part aloud to her friends.

There was a rumbling on the water, a deep base thrumming that vibrated through her bones and teeth. As the dolphins, orcs, and lesser whales around them joined in the chorus, she realized that it was the cachalot leading the song. The space between the firmament and the abyss filled with the noise, and she felt it as much through the skin as through the ears.

Against this thrumming background, a beautiful weave of song spread and flowed. Its alien tones were nothing like what came from the throat of mer, but nevertheless Ardenne had heard its like from the far edges of the reef. Not up close, not in the flesh, but this was a song that carried far upon the waters. And now the singer could be seen swimming up past the great grey whale.

Of all the cetaceans to ply the seas, the grandest were the rorqual. Larger than even the cachalot, these gentle giants were more often heard than seen. Their keening was sometimes called Cythera's Lament, though it had never seemed that sad to Ardenne, nor happy. The whalesong was simply too alien to process.

And then, like the confluence of currents, the eerie notes came together to form recognizable words.

--Greetings. Mer-hair-red. Mer-hair-green. Mer-hair-brown.-- The words echose through her body.
--Greetings, curses, hatred, esteem. Here-this-place, future-past-convergence. Here-this-place, peace-in-conversation. Comprehension?--

"Er, greetings!" Ardenne shouted, pressing her voice to be heard in the busy waters. It was the one word that she could truly say to have understood from all that, and it seemed a good one to repeat.

The rorqual was still a far ways distant, but its dark blue back and pale belly were distinct against the firmament. With might strokes of its flukes, it passed through the cooling waters, and the pods of lesser whales scattered in its wake. The background of clicks and groans settled back, but never faded completely.

--*Name, Song-Under-Firmament*-- came the words on the waters. --*Purpose, voice. Gentleness-of-Tide, Strength-of-Waves, message. Comprehension?*--

"Not one whit," muttered Sera, so low only Ardenne and Lyrika could hear.

Best to start over again, with names. "Greetings! Er, my name is Ardenne, and this is Sera and Lyrika. Why have we been brought here?"

--*Knowledge-absence-ignorance. Lack-of-time. Lack-of-fortune. Strength-of-Waves, come-to-renewal. Gentleness-of-Tide, happiness. Two-one-contentment. One-one-sadness. Renewal, necessity. Green-hair-mer, renewal, facilitator. Red-hair-mer, brown-hair-mer, assistance. Comprehension?*--

"So... it wants you to do something," said Lyrika.

Sera groaned. "And we have to help you... with something. And it's annoyed that we don't know what."

"Looks that way. Ahem." Ardenne flushed water across her gills. As fluid as the words felt as they flowed past, it was hard to say if they and the grand cetacean were speaking the same language at all. "Please tell us how to do this thing," she called out. "What do we need to do?"

--*Evidence, testimonial, purpose*-- sang the rorqual in ever-rising tones to shake the bones and froth the blood in their veins. --*Fragments, relics, origins, results. Beginnings-to-endings. Birthplace. Birthright*--

"What?" Something poked the hunter in the small of her back, pushing aside Lyrika with a squeak. The mottled mer returned the sound in surprise. Behind them was one of the smallest dolphins, a tiny

pink-skinned beast no larger than Rook. It squeaked at them again, nodding its head.

--*Guide. Helper. Friend*-- At that, the little pink dolphin flipped over once and then dove straight down. The eyes of the three mers followed.

There was a prominence, a mount that rose from the depths some distance from the edge of the abyss. While it was higher than anything else around, it was still too deep for most of the plant life of the reef to prosper. Its rounded peak was fringed with dark brown kelp, and in the center was a stone structure. The rest of the area was swept clean of silt and mud.

--*Home*-- came the voice of Song-Under-Firmament. --*Shelter. Redoubt. Sepulcher. Strength-of-Waves, sanctum*--

The words weren't making any sense, and Ardenne wondered at the whale knowing the names of things that she herself had never heard of. To her eyes, it was simply a structure, a set of stones piled in a certain way. There was a floor, set in tiled shells similar to the cavern behind the cliff of Bryndoon. There were pillars, eight of them, circling around that floor and supporting a thin roof of carved coral. Walls rose up behind them to create an inner room with a single door. Everything was in pristine condition, clean and complete without a single sign of time's passage to mar its surfaces. The place felt ancient, and yet it could have been completed just the day before.

Peering through the door and into the shadows of the structure, she could make out signs of previous inhabitants: old sleeping hammocks and hunting gear. A spear head lay abandoned on the tile, and as she picked

it up to see, Ardenne knew what she would find. A sliver of giant clam shell, carved from the hinge where the nacre was thickest and filed sharp on the edges. Diana's personal mark was still visible on the base.

"Mother..." She shook her head. What had happened here?

"Um, Ardenne?" Lyrika was waving to her from the center of the room. "Come look at this." The mottled mer was floating with Sera, and both were gazing up. There was an eight-sided opening in the top wall of the building. In the exact center of the chamber was a slender finger of stone pointing up to the firmament. Three inches down, there was a groove that traveled all the way around.

--*Strength-of-Waves*-- The voice of the rorqual echoed from above. The thin light from above was occluded, and briefly the eye of the beast filled the eight-sided gap to gaze down upon them. --*Betrayal. Diminution. Death. Fault-of-mers. Shame. Disgrace. Desecration!*-- The whole structure shook at the cetacean's scream. --*Time-of-Redemption. Time-of-Rebirth. Strength-of-Waves, green-mer, black-stone-ring*--

There was a warmth on Ardenne's left hand -- had been for some time, she realized. It thrummed in time with the rorqual's song, and when she brought her hand to her face, its outline was visible as a thin line of nameless color. Some strange impulse prompted her to remove that band of stone from her finger, an aura of color trailing behind as she pulled it through the water. It settled upon the finger of stone, sliding down its length and onto the groove.

The song of the rorqual faltered as an explosion of silence stilled the waters, and the now all-too-familiar spectrum of darkness filled the room with its brightest shades of black. She could see Lyrika, Sera, and the delphin as figures in ultramarine limned in dark lines of purest white. They might have been screaming. Ardenne knew that she herself was, though no sound registered in her ears or upon her skin.

As suddenly as it had begun, the silence released its hold on the waters, and the rorqual's song slowly filtered back in. The darkness became dark once more, but the colors did not retreat completely. They shone from the walls, top to bottom, in strange signs and runes that were more akin to art than any etched shell. In the faint, strange light, Ardenne could see Sera staring at the nearest wall.

"Seen something like this," the red mer said quietly. "Not quite the same, but similar."

"Where?"

"These old stones, out by Mezzeret. Big 'uns. Ancient. Camfion like to set up tents 'round 'em, for luck."

--*Journey! Investigation! Discovery!*-- The words within Song-under-Firmament's music had the sound of a command with the undertones of a plea. --*Mers, redemption. Strength-of-Waves, renewal. Ocean, peace*-- The great cetacean let forth a wave of notes which shook the walls and raised bits of debris from the tile floors.

The waters set around Ardenne in that moment. For the past week, she had done little more than float in place, when she was not flirting with Lyrika, and her

flukes twitched with the need for action. What she'd needed was a goal, a target at which to aim all her pent-up frustrations, and now she had something. It did not matter that a giant whale was telling her to go to some place she'd never heard of because her sort-of-friend thought she saw something familiar in the magical lights of a building that should not exist. It was not the time for that sort of critical thought.

She was not the only one to realize. Lyrika had not moved from Ardenne's side, nor had the brown mer's eyes moved from the hunter's face. "You're leaving again," she said in sad tones.

"I think I have to," Ardenne replied in kind. "And not only because someone will come after Grett eventually. There's something on the waves, and it's caught me. Ah, Sera?" she called. "How soon can we get to this Mezzeret place?"

The red mer had been staring at the glowing signs, a shell and thick urchin stylus in hand, and the words startled. "What, decided just like that? Gone crazy in the head for real this time?"

"The abyss could become the firmament tomorrow and it would not make my life any less crazy than it is."

Sera snorted bubbles. "True enough. What about, ah, your mother?"

Ardenne turned back to Lyrika. "I know it's a lot to ask, but could you look after Mother? She's... she's still not all right, up in her head. It's hard to explain, but she doesn't wish to see me now, and maybe it would be better if she didn't. I..." Her voice skipped a stroke. "We need some time to figure out what in the indigo

depths is going on between us, what went on *here*," she said with a broad sweep of the flukes. "And that won't happen if we don't move forward. But..."

A rough-worn hand, a gatherer's hand, reached out to stroke her cheek. "I know what you mean. Mostly. Enough, I guess?" Lyrika's smile was tilted thin. "Just promise you'll come back, right?"

"Of course. And when I do, there will be so many amazing tales to tell you, I'm sure."

The smile widened. "I'll look forward to it."

"Just kiss her already and let's get going!"

"Sera!"

The red mer's laughter echoed across the chamber. "Can feel your blush from here. That's how red you are." She stroked over to pat the hunter's shoulder. "No worries. Miss Lyrika, you seem a good 'un. Messra Diana will be in safe hands. Now, if the two of you need any pointers, I've learned from some of the best in the Mere Mezzlerle. Oh, the stories I could tell..."

It was well into the first hour of evening by the time they made their way back to the camp, and the only reason they might dare at all was because of the shadowy shapes of the orcs escorting them. Ardenne stammered and stuttered all the way while Lyrika just listened mutely as Sera added more and more details of the caravanseries of Mezzegheb, tent city of the sands, and the hosting mers who welcomed weary travelers. It was hard to tell what was true and what was said simply to make the hunter blush.

And in their wake, the little pink delphin continued its mission.

Verse XV

Two days later and the float was properly packaged with everything ready to go. Putting all those packages back in place was a more difficult task than pulling them out, even without Messra Diana's presence to account for. *Wasn't that always the way of things?* Rhiela wondered. Order was ever so much more complicated than chaos.

She snorted bubbles at that. Merciful Mother of All, but she had spent too much time in conversation with Marsa. Ever evening there had been whisperings through the magic conches, often with Sera or Rook at her side to suggest questions. Even the smallest scraps of information proved useful, giving them an idea of how things flowed in the capital. The lavender mer was never sure of much, but all the little details, gleaned from kitchen chatter or guard banter, could be pieced together over time.

Tonight was the last chat for a while. They couldn't risk the conch en route, so it had gone in the packs as soon as she and Marsa had said their short farewells. Rhiela hoped that her best friend could handle the solitude for a few days.

The princess hoped she herself could, too.

*

In the distant waters of Bryndoon, safely harbored within the shell-work walls of the chambers she had shared with Rhiela, Marsa gave a sigh of relief. The princess, Rhiela -- her Rhiela -- was safe for another day, as were the others. She did not know much about most of them, but over the past week she had heard

their occasional words through the rune-marked conch, learned the little details of their lives, and perhaps she felt that they knew her a bit better as well.

Sera, who was always so angry -- at Rhiela, at the others, at the ocean itself; but sometimes it would slip, that mask of anger, and Marsa could hear the sadness underneath.

Rook, always excited over the next adventure, because otherwise she'd be too scared to swish a fluke. Marsa could understand the feeling all too well.

The twins, whose names she could never keep straight, though their voices came out separate and distinct through the conch shell. How she wanted to see them at work sometime.

And Ardenne. Ardenne... her heart still skipped a stroke when she heard the hunter's voice, much the same way it did for the princess. Ardenne was the toughest of riddles, because not even the green-haired mer knew the answers. Still, the thought of the hunter brought a smile to her lips as she replaced the conch in its hidey-hole. She hoped they could return soon -- all of them.

The strings of cowrie shells rattled at the entrance, and Marsa shoved a kelpen mat over the hole before her mother could barge through the door. It was just wide enough to allow Marhyd entry, though it took her a moment.

"Hello, Mother," Marsa said as brightly as she could manage. Ministra Marhyd rarely visisted, even before the troubles began. Normally she would simply send one of the grey-clad assistants to check on her daughter's well-being. "To what do I owe the honor of

your presence?"

"Now, now, Marsa. No need for such formality. Can't a mother wonder how her daughter is doing?"

"Yes, Mother; I suppose you can." But had not, not in person and not for a long time.

Marhyd floated over to the wide, baleen-bound hammock that her daughter and Rhiela had shared, and eased her bulk into it. The whale bone creaked in protest, but held. She waved her daughter to settle at her side.

"Come, com. Tell me how you've been spending your days. Helping with the kitchens, I heard?"

"Yes, Mother." The ministra was playing some game, and she did not know what. She and her mother had not been this close, physically, in years. Marsa squirmed as the ministra crowded the hammock. There had to be some trick, she knew. That was how Mother worked.

"Oh, Marsa. Can't you assuage an old mer's curiosity? Talk with me some. Chat, gossip. *Be a good girl.*"

Only the sharpest of ears could have caught the subtle tones swimming in those last four words, but their effect on the ministra's daughter was unmistakable. Martha's body went slack, and her eyes became dull and flat. Her head bobbed along as her flukes clung to the ministra's side.

"Now, Marsa dearest. Tell your mother everything..."

Canticle V

In subtle seas, distant as dream

The Weaver of Light surveys

Her work, incomplete

Her threads, sorted

Her thoughts, unsettled

The pattern, formed

The pattern, grown

New things, included

Old things, excluded

But...

But...

Nothing forgotten

Remembrance is nigh

Revival is nigh

One of six, fallen

Five of six, remaining

None of six, known

All of six, alert

Threads flow

Patterns weave

Singing promise

Bringing threat

Changing currents

To the life of the world to come

Canto V: Seas of Hospitality

Verse I

When night came to the Mere Kazahn, it was with the sudden sweep of an ambush predator, pouncing upon the waters of the city's deep crater and engulfing them in the dusky murk. The mer galda who called this sea their home had long since learned how to fight back, how to drive the darkness out with well-crafted lamps and the steady glow of moss and worm. Beyond even those shone the light of the rune lanterns, enspelled by the crafters of generations past to be bright so that others could be guided through the tricky mountain currents.

To Ser Gillian, Voice of the Galda and overseer of all that flowed in the caldera of Valden, those magic lanterns were a source of both pride and of shame. Once, in the murky waters of the past, her people had crafted wonders. They had made things of beauty for themselves and for their daughters to come. Now... her eyes focused down the length of her beaky face, picking details out of the dusk in the same way she had picked stones of value out of the dross as a child. The city of Valden, nestled in its caldera, never truly slept. Day in and day out, mers were hard at work, carrying or crafting for the benefit of a distant sea.

Upon the rim, the shell-work homes of the manoa glimmered with the final warmth of the day's light, and then a little longer after that, grace of the lamps kept within them. Soon, however, the manoa would retire. They would dim the lights and sleep in

blissful ignorance of the industry continuing on in the depths below them.

Here in the privacy of her loft upon the caldera's central spire, Gillian could let her hackles rise, could feel the fibrous scales along her neck and back spread in a display of anger like nothing most manoa had ever seen. The waters wuthered with the sound of her hiss of distaste.

Shells clattered at the door to the chamber, disrupting the hiss and breaking it into little wavelets, to bounce off of walls and into nothingness. "I hope I am not interrupting annything important," came the voice of Elshia, liaison between the galda and those who lived high on the ridge.

"Nothing of import," Gillian confirmed with a sigh. "Nothing but the usual. My apologies."

"Nothing to apologize for as well," Elshia said in return. The manoa with the pale yellow hair and light green scales swam around her, smoothing down those ruffled hackles with a delicate hand. The liaison was a daughter of the Mere Tessraï, and shared the brighter coloration and disposition common among those of Leïsi descent. Sometimes, Gillian could envy the mer for both. The fathoms of the galda were too dim and dour at times.

"What news from the palace?" she asked. "Anything of interest?"

"Plenty, all of it confused and muddy," said Elshia. "Something has happened at Bryndoon, and the viceroy is not happy, but neither is she talking. The heads of the Houses are gossiping like old crabs, though if they know anything for certain then they're keeping it

close to their breast. The ladies din Hillia and din Hatara are scheming, as per usual, so I am to assume that their sisters in Bryndoon have passed some word to them." The blonde mer sighed, releasing a flurry of tired bubbles. "I would rather be swimming with the sharks tonight, in all honesty."

"Is there opportunity to be had?" That was always the question, and one that Gillian could ask no other mer.

"Of course there is, but opportunity for what? None can say for sure." Elshia waved the galda down. "I know, I know. You have a singular flow to your mind, dear, but I would still advise you to wait until after the festival of the blessed sacrament has passed. Ensure your next generation before all else."

It was sound advice, even if Gillian hated the truth behind it. "The mer camfion found a way around that issue," she complained, not for the first time. "Why can we not as well?"

"Because the mer galda are not the mer camfion," Elshia replied, also not for the first time. "The soldiers come, and the the camfion swim away. Their lives have no obvious anchorage, and that is by their own choice. It came with a price, and do you think the galda could pay the same?"

Now it was Gillian's turn to blow bubbles out her nose half-heartedly. "...no. We galda must find our own way, craft our own tools if we are to be free. But to leave our very future held hostage in this manner... it is hard to accept, even after so many generations have swept into obscurity."

"Join the chorus," said Elshia. "The Leïsi may be

treated better, may act like we're better at times, but we're no happier about the seas we swim than you. A little more time, that is all we need. My sisters in Tessraï promise that they're close to a breakthrough, but the current is against them at all times. Perhaps with this chaotic mess now flowing through Bryndoon, they can finish their work."

"One can hope."

To decipher the runes and grammar of the blessed sacrament, that dearest and most precious treasure of the mer leondra... that was a prize, indeed. It was possible, she knew; it had been done before in an earlier age. The ruins of the Mere Leïsi lay as testament to the wrath of the leondra and their allies in Bryndoon when their hold over the seas was threatened.

But that was then, when the legions of Bryndoon were strong and proud. In the now, with the maelstrom stirring in the distance, perhaps the outcome would be different. Ser Gillian could only hope, and such hope was a fragile thing upon which to hang the fate and future of her sisters.

A pale, slender finger ran down the length of her nose and across the rigid lines of her mouth, eliciting a ticklish snort from her and a giggle from Elshia. "Worry about the future tomorrow," said the blonde mer. "When its time is come closer. It's too late in the evening for such a heavy heart."

"So it is," Gillian agreed. "What of yourself? The open waters and their currents are treacherous at this hour."

Elshia fluttered her gills and held a hand to her heart in mock surprise. "You don't say? Why then, I

suppose I simply must ask for a space to rest for the night. Some may gossip, as they always will, but as liaison it is my job to communicate with you, after all, and such things take time."

"Time, yes." Gillian's arms were strong, as befitted a hard-working galda. Elshia fit within them easily, body and tail. The blonde mer kept her arms encircled around the galda's ruffed neck, smoothing down the fringed scales with a touch. A sharp kick of the tail propelled them both to someplace more private.

Tomorrow belonged to the future, but the night was theirs.

Verse II

It was sometimes said that all currents flowed in their own time to the sands of the Mere Mezzlerle. Sera had heard this many a time in her twenty years under the firmament, from those who said it as a blessing or a curse for the sea to deal with. The great expanse of Mezzlerle, fine sand stretched broad and pale beneath the silvered waves above, rested near to the center of any map ever drawn by the hand of mer, and the great flows passed by it to either side, north to Bryndoon, Tessraï, and Arkhala, or south to Kazahn and Hetropa. Going against the flow was a difficult proposition, and for caravans which needed to change their tack, it had proven simpler to cut across the open waters of the Mezzlerle to reach an opposite flow rather than to fight the one they were riding.

All of which she could have explained to her companions as their float was carried along by the great eastern flow. Could have, but did not. Sera the Red was not in the mood for conversation, and the others soon let her be.

"It certainly is empty out here," the princess opined after half a morning over the sands.

What did the palace brat know... A practiced eye could look out upon the vastness and notice all manner of things, from mooring rocks to sand-pod patches, diggerfish to flat-traps. But what the princess meant was that there was no sign of anyone living anywhere. To a Bryndoon mer, the lack of a city around them must be strange. Little Rook was often caught staring towards the far reaches, where the details of the

waters faded into obscurity, with an uncomfortable look upon her face.

"How... how much farther to Mezzegheb?" the speckled orange mer asked. In her hands, a string of cowrie shells clattered from nerves. "I, I think I should rest inside the float for a while..."

Sera did not answer the question, but only nodded as Rook retreated to a space of safety. The princess followed soon after. The Mezzlerle did that to some mers; she'd seen it in the past. The broad expanse stretched out below the firmament, so vast that it faded into the reaches in all directions, and it left in a mer the mad need for anchorage and walls to ward off the feeling that they might all wash away in a strong current.

She was honest when she said she preferred it out here, but few ever believed her. Ardenne did, she knew. The green-haired mer swam calmly alongside the float, turning her head from time to time as more of the expanse revealed itself in the distance. It was a scale's flip to determine which of them sighted their destination first.

"Half a degree to the left," the hunter called to the twins. "Mezzegheb is an hour distant."

"Hour and a half!" Sera corrected. Distances were a funny thing, a truly tricky thing to tell out on the sands. As keen as Ardenne's sight might be, her own blue eyes had the experience here.

At their posts, the twins had matching shrugs roll down their shoulders. "Whichever it is, it won't be soon enough," grumbled Morga. The billows of the float answered to her direction and tacked to the left,

putting them on a straight course for the blot of color in the distance. As the light of day continued to shift across the firmament, that blot grew and gained definition, until the city of Mezzegheb beckoned them in.

They were not going to avoid the customs check. Sera had already advised them of as much. The float was swift for its size, and nimble like few she'd ever seen, but there was no point in playing the smuggler with what experience they had at handling it. Her knowledge of the back currents was tattered at best. In no way were they equipped to slip past the viceroy's patrols without notice, and so they would not bother with the attempt. A story had been concocted, of a band of friends on the current to the Mere Tessraï, and the sights of Mezzegheb were but one more item on their youthful adventure.

Sera kept her mouth shut and let Morga do the talking, once the float was moored at the city's second anchorage. The old rock stood out of the sands a good ten tail-lengths, and a dozen small floats were moored there. Most were local, little caravans and traders who made their business amid the far-flung settlements of the sands. She knew some of them, and was known. All the more reason for her to keep her head down and her hair covered.

The viceroy's guards were not local; when they spoke it was with the accents of Tessraï or the manoa of Valden. Sera hid a grin as well. The Crown never sent its best mers here, or so she had always heard, and nothing had ever proven it to be otherwise. Certainly this bunch were not pearls hidden in the shell.

"And what is your business in the city?" one guard was asking in bored tones. She was the third to ask them that same question so far.

Morga smiled and said, "Just passing through on the way to the Mere Tessraï and we thought we'd stop by for a little fun," also for the third time. The guard showed no more sign of listening than the previous two had. After the quota of prodding and poking had satisfied the guards that there was nothing overtly suspicious about the little float, their group was given permission to continue on -- though not before Morga showed the appreciation of herself and her friends with a small bundle of pearl roots. Those had been Sera's suggestion; good snacks often went further than good pearl where bribery was concerned. The guards would eat well for the next few days.

So far, so good. She was not sure just what trouble awaited them, but she was not going to be optimistic about it. This was Mezzegheb they were swimming into, after all. If ever there was a place for trouble to await discovery, it was here.

*

Growing up in the lee of Bryndoon, within the greatest community of mers to exist under the firmament, Rook had thought herself pretty well learned in how a city worked. The manoa capital was formed from cluster after cluster of shell-work homes tied together with kelpen cables, and the broad avenues between them were filled with swimmers and floats. To her this had always been the definition of industry, of business and busyness.

No place could be more different from that

image than Mezzegheb.

It was not just the physical differences, though they might matter still. The Harbor of Bryndoon was tucked into a natural curve of its surrounding cliffs, and there was always the sense that the world sort of turned upwards at the far reaches. The city of Mezzegheb was an outie to Bryndoon's innie, planting itself on the biggest lump of rock in the middle of the Mezzlerle Sands and sticking there like a brightly colored patch of sargo and barnacles. Everything stuck out and and stuck together, from the tent poles of carved whale bone and walls of woven kelp fabric to the funny little pennants rising above the mess of color. The currents above the city whisked the pennants this way and that until they swam like schools of fish.

Rook giggled as they passed one such school of colorful fabric, but then Sera motioned them along, and she found herself inside Mezzegheb.

From the outside, the city had looked like one big tent cobbled together from a bunch of smaller tents, their woven walls encircling the rocky base with only a few flaps scattered around for entrances. On the inside, there were no walls. Or at least, she corrected herself as her eyes adjusted to the murk, inner walls were low and carefully placed, dividing the innards of the city into smaller chunks of chaos. Mers were everywhere, dashing through the waters at odd angles and at speeds that would never have been allowed back home. She heard a nearby collision better than she saw it, and the sharp cry of pain and surprise made her wince.

"It's certainly... lively?" said Olga. The twin was a solid presence in the middle of the thrumming waters,

and Rook was behind her in an instant. She held on gently as she peeked over broad shoulders.

"You get used to it," Red told them. "This here is the open area. Everything, anything for sale. Keep a hand on your purses. Go up that way..." The red mer pointed left. "... and you find the games area. Wouldn't recommend. No time, less pearl. Lots less, after you visit there. Along the other way, there's the hospitality area. Hammocks for sleep, tuli if that's your thing..."

"It's not," Morga said in distaste.

"... and whatever companionship you might desire, for a modest fee," the red mer finished.

It took a moment for Rook to figure out exactly what was meant by that, and when the realization came crackling through, her face felt the color of Red's hair. What could she say to that? What could anyone say?

Leave it to the princess to speak for the rest of them: "The reputation of this place precedes it." Rook could hear the bubbles of derision pass through the mer's nose, so distinctly that she might've seen them with her own eyes. "Every vice to be found under the firmament, gathered beneath one large tent."

"Gotta keep it somewhere, little chum. This is as good a place as any. Unless you're volunteering your rooms back home?"

Rhiela's hair, now a darker, mellowed brown for most of its length, whipped around as the princess huffed her indignation. "I would never--"

"A pity." Red interrupted with a poke of a finger at the princess's chest. "You'd make pretty good pearl at it."

Yikes, that was harsh. Probably true, Rook was

willing to admit, but harsh. The princess was about ready to launch at Red's throat, only Morga had an arm around the royal waist and Ardy had calm hands on her shoulders. "What are we doing here then?" asked the hunter. "I doubt that there's anything here to interest us."

"Wouldn't mind looking, though..." Morga mumbled to herself. If anyone besides Rook noticed Olga's glare at her twin, no one gave a sign.

By now their eyes had adapted to the murk, but they would have seen the rogue's shrug easily enough anyway. Of all the colors in the depths, red was the most visible, for reasons that old Baba had tried to explain to Rook at one point. It hadn't made much sense then, but it was still true.

"Need to find a few mers," Red told them. "See what's floating, what's sinking, and it's better if'n you all aren't riding my flukes while I do it. So go, see the city, have a taste of all the worst the nine seas have to offer. Might even enjoy some of it." The rogue had her back to them now, waving offhandedly as she swam away. "Find you later."

Rook stared over Olga's shoulder at the stir of activity all around. "So... where do we start?" she asked.

Verse III

There was a short list of mers in this city who Sera wanted to see. There was a far longer list of those she did not want to see, or be seen by. Even with the snood to hide her hair color and the general murk to make her scales less obvious, the rogue was all too aware of how easy it was to pick her out by anyone who knew her. A few tail-lengths downcurrent from where she'd left Ardenne and the others, she pivoted onto a different flow entirely, one that hooked around the outer edges of the tent and back to where the locals dwelt.

For all the mers under the tent, it was rare to say that any actually lived beneath it. The Grand Tent of Mezzegheb was the proverbial place for those with no other anchor, mers who never grew sargo on their flukes, as the saying went. There were the noble Houses of the Mere Mezzlerle, of course. Those two lineages squabbled and argued, and yet they shared the viceroial residence like the close cousins they were. But the residence was not actually under the tent; rather, it enjoyed the fresh, clean currents of another rocky prominence not far to the south. The Mezzlerle Guard made its barracks there, and the leondra of the local temple as well, so none of the mers in charge actually lived under the tent.

That only left the emers who had nowhere else to go. Sera slipped along the side of a stout, nondescript tent whose kelpen canvas showed no sign of purpose. After a five-beat of listening at the seams, she was sure that those within were not on her long list,

and so she pulled the shell string to announce her presence.

"Yes, yes, who... oh, my!" A mer had stuck her head out and was now staring with violet eyes to match the highlights in her hair. "There's a color I haven't seen in ages."

"Hey, Klara," said Sera. "Got to town, thought to say hello."

"And get all the gossip, right?" The mer known amongst her friends as Klara snorted a bubble. "Get in here. Drazie's out on her business, so we've got a while open."

That was good to know. She slipped through the slit in the canvas with as little movement as possible, and the material hardly swayed with her passing. The inside of the tent was the opposite of its outer face. There was no doubt that this space had a purpose, and it was home. Food pots and fish baskets hung from the top wall, and simple hammocks served for sleep or repose as their occupants did other things. There were a dozen of the kelp-knot beds, but only one was currently in use.

"Hello, Lyneve," she said. "How are... ah."

The pink-haired Lyneve looked up from shell of poetry she'd been reading, and she was not alone. A tiny body clung to her front, swaddled in simple bandages so as not to float away. The young mother put a finger to her lips and smiled.

"Ah," Sera repeated, but more quietly. "Congratulations, I suppose? Wasn't expecting..."

"None of us were," said Klara. "So it flows."

"How much longer until...?" She let the

question meander out onto the waters.

Lyneve's smile twisted sour. "Not much longer, I'm afraid. Not going to let me off easy this time." She cradled her sleeping daughter. "Not any easier the second time around, either."

"No, don't suppose it would be..." A shiver hit her body, nerves going chill from top to tail. "Look, I know neither of you've been interested in the past, but..."

"Still aren't," said Klara. "Here's home, such as it is."

"Got that." And depths, how she wished she did not get it. "But, ah..."

Klara looked her up and down with all the seriousness of an effective older sister. "In trouble again, are we?" she asked.

"Not the way you might think," Sera assured. "And might be we all are. Wanted to stop by, drop a word of caution 'fore swimming on. Dunno what all's gonna happen, but it's gonna get muddy. First sign of trouble, swim for the Drift. Going over there soon anyway, right?"

Lyneve nodded sadly.

"Yeah. Got friends who'll be watching, if it all goes bad. Just..." She gulped back her water. "Just want you all safe, okay?"

"Even Drazie?" Klara snorted.

"That one can go suck a puffer and dance off the sleepy-dreamies." She didn't bother wiping the scowl from her face. "So sure, don't tell her. But anyone else, well, just keep your eyes open. And..." Now her face softened as she looked back over to

Lyneve. "Does she have a name yet?"

"Limina," the pink-haired mer admitted. "Know I shouldn't've, but I wanted her to have something from me, even if..."

Sera and Klara both nodded. They got that, too. The red mer stayed for a few verse longer, chatting and gossiping and getting the useful news on many others not currently present. Soon enough she was saying her farewells and repeating her cautions. There was danger on the currents, and she still was not sure what she was going to do about it.

But maybe the next stop would help there.

Verse IV

Time was slippery as an eel in Mezzegheb. The fabric firmament of the great tent blocked all view of the real thing as the light shifted throughout the day, and swarms of glow-lamps kept the interior at a perpetual state of twilight. There was enough to see by, but Rhiela min Anyis, of the House of Brynduin, First Daughter under the firmament, could have done without the view. Or the tour. Or the entire experience of being there. But she was only one mer among five, and this was no place to be alone! So as the group schooled along, so did she.

If only they would school along with more alacrity.

"Whoo-ee, lookit that," Rook was saying now. The orange mer motioned everyone over to one round depression in the foundation of the city, where the great anchoring stone of the tent provided a natural sort of theater. Mers of every size and color rested along the outer rim, and more floated above. It took some poking and peeking around this wall of flesh and scale before any of them could see what Rook was on about.

In the center of the stone theater, a mer had settled in place. Glow-lamps circled around her, providing a mockery of the day's light in this murky place, and beneath that light, the mer gleamed. Every inch of her was the purest of palor, from hair of silver to scales of pearl. The only colors were the chips of blue in her eyes and the garlands of green entwined around her arms and body. It seemed impossible for such a one to exist, and in that impossibility was born the sort of

beauty that none could ignore. Rhiela found herself unable to turn her eyes from the performance as it began.

There was a song, a gentle crooning without words that echoes across the limited waters of the theater. It bounced and wrapped around the mers of the audience, and many joined their own voices in harmony as the pale mer continued. It was no music as the princess had ever studied, and while it was... interesting? she supposed, it was not an art she would think could attract such attention.

And then the first garland of green was tugged at, drawn taut by an alabaster arm and offered to one of her many admirers. A single pearl was given in exchange. Without a break in the song, the rough caravanner who had paid for the honor now pulled gently. The pale mer twirled, creating a small current as the garland spun her about. Then that strand of green was gone, pulled free of the mer's costume, and she was offering another. This time, the honor was sold for two pearl, and the singer spun faster.

Three garlands were offered, taken by three grinning sisters in Valden livery for the sum of a dozen pearl, and their tugs were not so gentle. The pale mer twisted and turned, never pausing in her melody as the first garland of the three came off, then the second, and finally the third... and there was nothing left. The mer holding the lucky garland swam in, took the performer's hand, and the crowd parted to let them pass. Laughter and rude comments from the other garland-bearers left little doubt as to where the lucky mer was headed.

"Whoo-ee," Rook repeated. The little orange

mer was stuck on Olga's back, though the twin did not seem to mind the speckled arms around her waist and chest. "Ya don't see the likes of that back home."

"Thank the Goddess," said Rhiela, though she kept her grumbling low, for local waters only. Was it not sung in the litanies of old that the first and greatest gifts of Cythera were love and beauty? That these should be treasured and nurtured, for the glory of all? *And yet, a niggling whisper of thought insinuated, what was this display if not a celebration of both...*

No! She shook her head violently, whipping bubbles from those traitorous brown tresses. This, this perversion attached a price to the gifts of the Goddess, cheapening them.

Was fifteen pearl really so cheap? the whisper continued.

Rhiela wished that her own head could screw off, like some doll of shell and kelpen fabric, so that the insidious little voice could be removed, plucked from the garden of her thoughts like the noxious weed it was. She could not look at the stage another heartbeat, not even as the gathered mers cheered the arrival of a new performer in garlanded green. Pushing away with a heavy stroke, she left Rook and the twins to their filthy interest. The three of them could...

She paused upon that thought. The three of them. And herself made four. So where was... ah. Rhiela spotted a familiar shade of green after a heartbeat's search. Ardenne's hair blended with the dusk and the kelpen fabric walls of Mezzegheb, but there was just enough contrast of hue for a friend to notice. The hunter appeared to be curled in upon

herself, her tail wrapped around until nothing but the top of her head was visible.

Oh, this did not bode well at all.

"Ardenne?" She sent the name on a focused wave across the waters. She did not doubt her own accuracy, that the word reached its intended ears, but the other mer did not react. "Are you okay?" Bending down from above, Rhiela carefully poked at green tail flukes. "Ardenne, please. You are scaring me here, and this place is unnerving enough as it is. Speak to me."

There was a harsh gasp, a flurry of bubbles released under duress, and then, "Sorry. I am, I am not feeling my best right now."

The princess considered that for a moment. "Well, we have not eaten anything here -- not that I would trust the food, mind you -- and it is rather sudden to be catching anything. There is no telling what is floating in these waters, but..." She stroked the hunter's flukes, as her own mother once had long in the past to calm a daughter's night terrors.

It did not have nearly the same pleasant effect here. Ardenne shuddered and shook breaking the local water with a tortured gasp. "No, please... I, ah, the mood is wrong. It..." The green mer reached for the words. "The current of my blood beats fast and... and every, any touch is too much. I-I am sorry, but..."

Her hands were already removed from her friend's flank. "No, no. It is I who should apologize. Only, what brought this on?"

Mutely, Ardenne raised an arm to point at the performance theater. Another of the sisters in Valden livery was swimming off with a petite young mer with

blue scales of Leïsiatran stock. "Wrong..." The word floated in the water between them.

"I am not so much a fan of it, either," admitted Rhiela. "To think anyone could find entertainment in that, that..."

Green hair shook, and not in pain. "No... something is wrong with me." Another gasp broke the water. "A, a pain inside. Or... not quite pain, but not good. I don't know..."

She let a few choice words flow. "Can you swim?"

"N-no."

Nor could the hunter float properly, it seemed. A lady should not cuss the way she wanted to now. She would need help.

"Wait a moment." It took too many moments to drag the twins and Rook away from the theater area, much to her dismay and annoyance. None of them had as yet thrown away pearls on cheap thrills, but she mistrusted the look on Morga's face as they finally pulled away.

"She's ill, then?" said Olga, finally grasping what Rhiela had been hissing in their ears.

Mother of All, this place was a bane to both morals and mind, if a mere dance could reduce her friends to gibbering idiots like this. "We need to get her somewhere secluded." Her patience was far shorter than the few heartbeats it took for anyone to react. Slapping her hands together once, twice, thrice, Rhiela resorted to her most royal tones when she said, "Now, ladies!"

Between them, the twins could carry Ardenne,

despite the feeble protests of the hunter. Few places on her body did not seem to provoke a response, and the feel of so many hands upon her had Ardenne in shock. Or at least, that's what Rhiela thought to call it. So much went on in the hunter's mind that she found difficult to understand.

Rook scouted ahead, braving the busy currents under the tent in search of calm. "Oy!" the orange mer called. "Cheap hammocking o'er here! Move a tail and get Ardy in!"

At the edge of the hospitality area, as Sera had named this wholly unwelcoming span of waters, the fabric walls hung closer together, flapping along the bottom as the currents flowed through. The little space which Rook had found for them was the barest definition of a sleeping chamber, with poles for hammocks, a few pillows stuffed with kelpen weave, and little else. "Got it for the rest of the day," Rook told them. "Three pearl for the lot of us."

"Not too bad," said Morga.

"Yeah, gathered this kind of place is for the tuli-lickers after they gots too much on the tongue," said Rook. "And, um, might be they gots even less by the time they wake up. Lady what runs the place seems a little..." The orange mer shrugged and wagged her hand back and forth. "Just sayin', think she was disappointed how only one of us is completely *in-dee-spozed* at the moment."

The twins shared a look of worry, and after a beat Rhiela took her own share of it, too. "We could all use a rest," came the royal decree, "until Ardenne is feeling better, at the least."

"I'm gonna keep looking outside, if'n it's all the same," Rook told them.

"Why? We need to school together."

"Begging yer pardon, Yer... er, Rhia, but we gots to be careful 'round these waters, right? And, and!" the orange mer continued. "Part 'a being careful is *ree-con-ay-sonce*." The big fancy word was accompanied by a wobbly grin. "Now, whatever's ailin' Ardy there, it's gonna take time to get over, and that's time what could be spent figgerin' out what to avoid in this here crazy place. So!" Rook concluded. "So! We catch two fishes in one net. I do the *ree-con-ay-sonce*, and you keep this handy-dandy base 'a operations for me to return to so's I don't lose yer. Sound goody?"

"I'll go with her," said Morga. She glanced to her twin. "If you don't mind staying?"

"Not at all," Olga replied. "Stay safe out there."

"Always do." Morga ignored the roll of her sister's eyes as Rook tugged her away by the wrist.

In more normal times, Rhiela would have had a terrible feeling about this. Now, it was just a part of her life. It would be stranger to have a good feeling. To her surprise, she found herself hoping the red mer would return soon, so they could all leave this mad tent. But until then, she could wait and see what the reconnaissance duo discovered.

Verse V

There was a little voice in the back of Sera's head, one which strove to make itself heard whenever a situation led to second thoughts. She had long since learned to ignore it whenever she found herself back in the uncomfortably familiar waters of Mezzegheb. To anyone with half a brain, the entire city was one big school of bad feelings and awful decisions. The smartest tack was to avoid the place entirely, and in the silent waters of her mind, Sera cursed the fact that life kept forcing her to ride the stupidest currents.

Such as now. Even with her hair bound up and its color disguised, the risk of discovery had better odds on it than any game to be played in this city. Sera had not bothered to gamble pearl in years.

But there she was, sidling up to a circle of mers playing dirty scallops. The rulse of the game jostled in her head like the finned shells themselves as the dealer collected them into a sac. Tied up, the sac was passed around the circle three times, to be tossed and tumbled, and then each player took seven shells blindly. The draws were for their eyes only, but Sera could read good fortune or bad in the faces of her opponents.

The shells were battered and chipped, with a number and a mystic rune etched at the center of each. A mer with clever fingers would pull the best shells out, nine times out of ten, if given a calm moment. Sera could do so in the briefest of spans, with all others watching. The hardest part lay in faking surprise as she lay two pairs down upon the sand. Each held the mark of the kinetic force of flow, a double-barred line pointing

top to bottom, above numbers in sequence: two and three, five and six. Discarding the last shell, she waited for the others to make their choices and for the dealer to begin the second shuffle. A one or a seven with the flowing rune could win her the round easily.

That was not the point, however, so Sera pulled out a random assortment on the next draw. Complete dross, lacking rhyme and reason. The mer on her left put together a triad of hot, chill, and shock runes, all with the same number, to win the small pile of pearls for the round.

"Ah, you almost had it," said the dealer with a smile. A Leïsi mer, with blue-tinged hair and scales, she held the sac as the players poured their shells back in. "Another round? See if you can do better?"

"Another round, another time," promised Sera. "But for now, some refreshment. Any good tuli around here?"

The dealer nodded her head to the left. "Try Meelah's tent, down on the third row. Tell her Khaf sent you, and she may even give a discount." One blue eye winked, and Sera responded in kind. Message received and understood. Bowing her head to the other players, and in particular to the mer who now was several pearl richer because of her, Sera pushed off and made her escape.

The city floor was the single most orderly thing about Mezzegheb, though it took a local with experience to see it. Over the years the mess of shops, gambling circles, and assorted hospitality arrangements had settled into neat rows, curved to accommodate the dips and hollows of the stone below. Out on the edges

were the cheapest of spots, while just off the center was the viceroy's own personal club and its little school of noble hangers-on.

Getting an invitation to that gloriously overstuffed tent cost more than any mer could spend in a day in the less refined curves of the tent city -- and there was stiff competition to see how quickly a mer and her pearl might be parted. The Houses of din Casima and din Sakra took turns providing their services as viceroysal hosts, and Sera could only wonder at what prices such political hospitality was purchased. Never cheaply, that much was for certain.

But oh, for a chance at Lanita din Casima, current viceroy of Mezzegheb. Were she able to pay the price, Sera felt she might just do so.

That was a thought for the flow, something to let float ahead of her as a lure to reach for, so her spirit may follow.

As such places went, Meelah's shop on the third row numbered neither amongst the nicest nor the worst. It was partly open to the water, with a long plank of fishbone and kelp across the front bearing a variety of merchandise and samples. On the inside were casual hammocks of the sort which experienced tuli lickers preferred, and to Sera's eyes it was apparent there was more to the space than just that. An inner wall or partition, most likely, and nothing out of the ordinary for a place that kept much of its stock out of sight. The place was, then, exactly as she had expected.

"Greetings, miss," said a jolly, older mer with the jowls of a lifelong tuli enthusiast.

"Ah, this is Meelah's tent, isn't it?" Sera let her

voice rise nervously. "Only, Khaf over at the dirty scallop circle told me you might have, um, a patch of white tuli..." The rare stuff, and good to ask for because no one ever had it in stock for long.

The presumed Meelah gave her a long look. "Huh. Might be that we do. I'd have to go check. Anything else good for you, if'n we're out?"

"Tessraï red-stripe," she answered quickly. "Ah, could I come along to see? My sister, she has exacting tastes."

No questions came from that. Any decent shopkeeper would have been wondering just why a mer with 'exacting tastes,' as Sera had put it, would even be inquiring at this shop. Any honest shopper would be wondering how a shop like this would have red-stripe, which often sold for more than white tuli among the nobby classes. Sera waited until she'd been led through the hidden slit in the wall and into the storeroom before she nodded to Messra Meelah and let the real conversation begin.

"Okay, what's all this about?" hissed Meelah. "Siobhan's spread the word to stay low and quiet until the mud clears, whenever that is, so this'd better be good."

"Oh, the best," Sera told the other mer. Her hands made one particular sign, clear enough to make the shopkeeper choke on her own water in surprise. "Yes, exactly. Pass the word on to Dulut that I know exactly what's gone over in Bryndoon, and that I'm going to need a pick-up for me and... oh, five friends by the old rock for the day after tomorrow. She knows the spot."

"You... you..." In the light of an old glow-lamp, Meelah's jowls wobbled as she shook her head. "Heard stories 'bout you. Never thought to actually be a-meeting the Bloody Shadow herself."

"And as far as anyone knows, you have not," Sera reminded the mer.

"Course and current, yeah..." Meelah led her back out, switching topics as she did. "Sorry that I couldn't have anything better in right now. If'n you come back in a day or two, my private patch should be ripe. Might be your sister'd like some 'a that."

"I might just do that, then," said Sera. "And thank you for your time."

With that one item of business over and done with, it was time to quit this stinking city before any more bad feelings or awful choices decided to stick with her. She could only hope, without much confidence at all, that her companions were staying out of trouble.

Verse VI

Bubbles and froth, this place was a mess! Once and only once in the past, Rook had asked old Baba Rill about the tent city of Mezzegheb. The grey-scaled runeworker seemed to have traveled everywhere at one time or another, and Rook had figured the old mer was the one to ask.

Baba'd looked at her all queer-like and then said that there weren't no easier place in the nine seas for a mer to go and lose herself. Rook hadn't really cottoned to the meaning then.

Now, the old mer's words made a whole lot more sense. Mezzegheb as a place wasn't that difficult to navigate. It was a city for the caravans, settled by the caravans, and so there was a certain order to its layout if a mer were to float on up a ways and give it a good lookover. But speaking as someone who until recently had made herself a living on the peddling of questionable rune charms in the back markets of Bryndoon, Rook had never seen so many ways of grifting pearl off a mer gathered in one place.

"These prices are crazy," said her companion as they swam through the food markets. "Look at the prices on those things. I'm beginning to understand why a few pearl roots went so far at the gates."

"Yeah, really." Rook was doing her best to ignore the numeral marked on the shingle shells. Small wonder that this row was less crowded than the rest: fun was cheap, but life was expensive. "Makes yer glad to have Ardy an' Red around, finding food for all of us."

"Where to next?" asked the twin. So far, the

two of them had passed the performance stages, watched the gaming tables long enough to know they didn't understand any of the rules, and avoided the merest scent of the tuli tents. That left a good third of the city left to explore, but a lot of that appeared to be private establishments, members and invitations only, with the approaches all watched by guards in local livery.

Rook wasn't about to go stick her nose in that if she could help it. Not without some decent bribes in her hands. "Back to the tent and see how Ardy's doing, I suppose."

Morga's lips pressed thin. "Yes, I guess we should..."

"Don't like her much, d'yer."

"We got off on the wrong stroke," the twin admitted. Thick arms crossed her chest. "And, well, I can't deny she's been a help in a lot of ways. Not so many as she's been a problem, though. Sometimes it feels like we're a string of salps getting tugged along by a turtle, like in Granny Lieza's stories."

"Oh, I haven't heard that 'un yet!"

"Well," said Morga as they swam along. "It goes something like this..."

Until a week and a half ago, Rook hadn't known what a salp was, it not being a common food animal for mers in the city, but again thanks to Ardy's foraging ways, she'd had plenty of experience with the rubbery, free-floating things in their long community strings. The mental image of one such string mistakenly latching onto a turtle and getting pulled around will-she, nill-she was both entertaining and close to heart. And when the

clever octopod came in to disentangle the entire mess, well... Rook could only hope their own messes were so easily resolved.

"Oughta set yerself up a stage of something," she told the twin. "Really. Lotta mers wouldn't mind chipping in to hear a good story or three. How many d'yer know?"

Morga rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Can't say, really. Granny Lieza told us so many, and I never did keep count. They're just fun. You know, passing the time in the workshop when you're stuck doing a basic task?"

She thought she got the idea. Most of the work Baba'd ever given her in the old mer's rune shop was the basic, boring stuff, and she'd be sunk if she couldn't have used a funny little tale to help the time flow faster.

Then again, the last time she'd been silly enough to get distracted while doing one of Baba's little jobs, she'd nearly destroyed a cookpot and gotten a scalding for her trouble. A mer had to be careful with runeworking.

"Well," she said. "Dunno about that, but if'n I had the gift of gab like yer storytelling, I'd be making pearl fin over fluke. Why, sometimes I think to myself, Rook-my-miss, yer needing an extra something special, and bowl me with a bubble if I know what it is, but--"

It was not a bubble that bowled her over. If she was going to speak proper-like, Rook had done more of the bowling, or at least the not looking straight ahead as she swam. From the top of her orangey hair to the tip of her speckled tail, she was not that big of a mer, so it didn't take much to knock her around any.

"Hang on there." Morga grabbed her shoulders as she tumbled backwards. "Oh, um, our apologies." The twin lowered her head respectfully to the bumpee.

Rook blinked a few more times than she needed, because something was obviously not working right with them. The two mers before her now, one with a peeved look as she rubbed her flank, were such a set that they might've been twins, too. Same sort of faces, thin and done up pretty. Same cut to their hair and trim to their fins. Same figure under their garland outfits, she noted with a twinge of envy. Only, one was the palest of pale, the very lass they'd seen in the performance circles earlier in the day, and her friend was the darkest of dark, so black that Rook's eyes had to add in shades of purple to convince her brain that some mer was floating there.

So, probably not twins. But if Night and Day could be sisters born, then these two might be the same.

A blush bloomed across Rook's face as she realized that she'd somehow snagged the end of a garland in the collision, and the pale-skinned performer's top was now threatening to fall away. "Er, um, sorry 'bout that," she mumbled as she handed back the length of green.

"You had better be," said her accidental victim in a stuffy accent like nothing she'd heard before. "If you should think for a moment that you could get this for free, without a single pearl in hand, why..."

"She said she was sorry." Morga had Rook tucked between her elbow and flank. It was rather comfy for the orange mer. "It was an accident, plain and

simple. No harm done, and well be on her way."

The darker mer slapped her flukes off the ground to send herself between them. Grabbing Rook by the arm, this one cooed, "Now, no. We wouldn't want to have to call in the guards about this, now would we? You may call it an accident all you want, but you did grab Drazie's top without paying, and nearly pulled it clean away! That would be at least ten pearl, wouldn't you think?"

"At the least, Delie," the one called Drazie echoed. "It's all up to the luck of the pull, of course, but I've known mers to put more than twenty pearl into the honor, and enjoy it fully."

"But, but..." Rook squirmed, but she couldn't pull her arm free. "I didn't mean to! And yer gots the thing fixed back up already."

"Sure she does..." The darker mer smirked, her lips a purpled line of amusement. Reaching over, that one yanked a different garland off of Drazie's outfit. This time, the entire collection of greenery fell away, leaving the other mer completely exposed. Not a bubble of shame stuck to Drazie's face, pale and clear beneath silvery locks of hair.

After a three-beat of silent gawking, Rook realized that somehow the end of the garland had made it into her hands. "Wait, what's this...?"

"Guards! Oh, guards..." The waters swelled with the lyrical call of the matched mers lifting their voices in song. "Oh, please help! They are getting so grabby down here..."

A strong hand took Rook by the arm. Her first thought was to fight back, and she really did try, only

Morga caught her free hand before the slap could connect. "Come on," said the twin. "We're out of here." Facing against the two performers, the mer of Valden grunted wordlessly and then pulled Rook along without bothering to care if anyone got in the way.

Drazie sank to the ground, and even rolled a ways in the wake of the twin's sweeping flukes. Delie was singing to the high waters again, adding the word 'ruffians' to the chorus.

Somewhere up above, Rook caught the sound of blow-shells, those spindly littl things the guards in Bryndoon would carry. Send a proper stream of bubbles through one and it would vibrate a call out upon the waters. The sound carried a surprising distance, but Rook didn't want to bet on how far off these were.

"On our flukes," she told Morga.

"Of course they are." The twin pulled her around a corner created by the placement of two large tents. "Depths! This place is windier than a whirly-curly worm's chew-path!"

That was true. Rook had no idea what that worm even was -- and now was not the time for another story -- but as they attempted to navigate fabric-draped passages on tuli-scented currents, it was hard to disagree with the comparison. Above them, the open waters beneath Mezzegheb's topmost wall sparkled with the glow of lamps, and it was so tempting to swim free of the closed-in maze of smaller tents...

Morga kept her anchored down, hissing a warning as blow-shells sounded over their heads. After so many twists and turns, Rook couldn't say where they might be, and neither could th guards, for now. A break

into the open waters, though, that would give the game away immediately.

The two of them slipped behind a fold in the largest tent they could see, pulling at the fabric to hide themselves better. The whistling of the blow-shells faded into the distance, until the only sound was the fluttering of their own gills. "Are... are they gone?" asked Rook.

"Not going to stick my head out to see."

"Can't blame yer for that." She peeked, just a for a beat. The first thing she saw was red, and the sight made her choke on her own water.

"Who's there?" a familiar voice sounded. The fabric ripped away, and old Red herself was staring at them with cold blue eyes. "What in all the indigo depths are the two of you doing here?"

"Um, hi, Red..." said Rook. "Um, yanno, we were just asking ourselves that very question. Morga, sez I, why are we in fact here? Is it, um, the flow of the currents or, or blind chance, or..."

A rough, calloused hand ended her babbling. Rook tried to say "Thanks" through the fingers, but only blew bubbles.

"We floated into some trouble," the twin admitted.

Red's gills shimmered with a flush of bubbles as she sighed. "What kind of trouble?"

"The kind that likes to make more trouble by calling the guards on a mer for funsies." Morga growled. "After shaking us down for a few pearl. What kind of place is this?"

"Exactly what I told you it to be," Red replied.

"Well then, where'd you leave the others?"

"Rented a tent space," said Rook as she pried the fingers away from her mouth. "Ardy was feeling poorly."

Red hadn't exactly been smiling, but now she really wasn't. "Oh, what is it now..."

"Can't rightly say, only it ain't too much fun for her." Rook shivered her nerves straight. "Um, think you can get us all back wi'out the guards catching on?"

Blue eyes narrowed. "You two didn't start the problem?"

"Nuh-uh. No way, no how."

"I learned my lesson," said Morga with one arm across her chest. "It was all on those two mers. Oh, what were their names. D... D something, the both of them. One a pale whie, the other all dark."

"Drazie and Delie," said Rook. "I think that's what they said."

"Oh. Them." Red's face softened a punch, but her eyes were harder than ever. "Always a pair of funge-brained lackwits, but sounds like they're meaner than ever. Well, then. Let's make sure they don't see us on the way out."

"We're leaving town?" Nothing could've sounded better to Rook right then.

"Did what I came for, so time to hit the currents." Red let out one last sigh of exasperation. "Before anything else happens."

*

Even after much time spent in distant waters, Sera knew the space beneath Mezzegheb's great tent like it was the back of her hand. It did not take long to

navigate a crooked route back to where the others were resting, cutting through tents or over performance stages with a swift disregard for the formal boundaries. The three of them were there and gone faster than most would notice, if any of the tuli-licking caravanners even looked up from their diversions.

The local merchants and dancers could have told a different tale, but they themselves were too preoccupied with their caravanner guests to raise a complaint for a nuisance so swiftly gone. Word did flow; that was unavoidable, but Sera kept her kelpen snood tight around her hair, and her face behind a wide-spread hand. Perhaps that would have been enough if they hadn't swum right past a familiar mer's performance spot. One blue eye caught the satisfied smirk on Drazielle's face in a single frozen beat of the short span of their passing.

The performance had only begun, and the garlands were all in place. Drazielle wouldn't squeal -- not to the guards, nor about anything of importance for another hour at least. Business was business in Mezzegheb.

Sera wouldn't, couldn't, trust them to have any longer than that to make their exit. Sunken depths, but she wished this little adventure could have led them anywhere but here.

Verse VII

The light of the firmament shone at an angle down through the waters of Bryndoon, and the shell-work chambers of the palace caught the afternoon radiance, pulling it through translucent walls to create a diffuse, warm illumination. From the inside, the chambers of the princess were awash in pinkish orange.

Upon the broad hammock of baleen and kelpen fabric, Marsa restlessly lay. Lavender hair -- more of a brown now, due to the lighting -- floated unbound around her as she rocked in a stray current. Beside her were a dozen flat shells, the final cantos of the writings of Dierdre min Thesia. She had meant to read them again that day, but so far they had been better served as playthings for Tilly. The little octopod made a game out of stacking them and then tugging on Marsa's hand to get her attention.

"Mhm, yes?" she murmured. "Oh, thank you. You truly are a marvelously smart little thing, aren't you?"

It was hard to read Tilly's eyes with their weird, sideways pupils, but the *-bloop-* she made seemed happy enough. With the flick of a tentacle, the shells scattered, to be picked up and arranged a different way.

She was not sure how long she'd been stuck in the chamber with only Tilly for company. The days passed faster than she could bother to count, and Marsa sometimes doubted that the outside world still existed. The light through the walls dimmed and darkened, only to return stronger the next morning, but if she relied solely on the evidence of her eyes, in the manner of the

great theosophists of classical thought, there was no proof that anything existed at all but herself, the room furnishings, and the octopod. Food arrived at the door with the regularity of the tides, but by whose hand, she could not see. As she chewed her food, her thoughts would arrange the facts of the evidence between her teeth to theorize the existence of providers outside her personal existence, teasing out conclusion after logical conclusion to prove or refute the thesis of loneliness, only for the meal to end and with it, her philosophical connection to the greater waters beyond the chamber.

The door was neither locked nor sealed. Only, she did not feel any urge to quit the place, nor any duty which would require her to leave. Every job she had been given in the palace, every job for her entire span of years, had revolved around the princess, around Rhiela, and in the midst of the royal absence she had... nothing much at all. Vague memories of work in the palace kitchen flitted through the waters of her mind with hardly any wake left after. All that floated in there was the quiet, dominating sense of inutility.

As if sensing that thought, Tilly blooped out a request for scratches along the stretchy, smooth skin of the octopod's forehead. Tentacles curled in delight as the request was granted.

So, there it was. In this moment, her one reason for existence was the care and comfort of a grateful octopod. Marsa almost smiled as one of Tilly's tentacles wrapped affectionately around her wrist. There were worse jobs.

A faint chime disturbed the waters of the chamber, sending a brief, faint shimmer across her skin

that could almost have passed ignored and unnoticed, save that a part of her heart had been waiting for it, aching for it for uncountable days now. The calling shell was removed from its hidden spot behind the shelves, and Marsa tapped it lightly with her fingers so that it would be willed into life.

"Hello?" she said softly into the open mouth of the shell.

"Marsa!" echoed the voice of the princess, soft but strong. "Oh! I was afraid we'd reached the limits of your wonderful runework."

"Apparently not." A smile did turn her lips now. Her efforts to copy and complete one of her mother's overlooked projects had turned out far better than expected. Given the grammar of the runes involved, she was not sure if the shell even had a limitation for distance, but every day without the voice of the princess had made her fear that the limit was found. "Is everything going well over there?"

A faint mumbling and grumbling could be heard. "Yes. Well, no. But yes. We're all fine, but I think I shall not be gracing Mezzegheb with my presence again anytime soon."

"You're in the tent city?" Marsa had heard stories about the caravanner's paradise -- who had not? -- and she did not think she would be taking it so well if she were to visit.

"Yes. A thoroughly despicable place, a veritable reef of, of..."

"Perfidious iniquity?" she suggested.

"Sure. That. Thanks, Marsa, for your beautiful way with words." Another grumble echoed across.

"And to top it off, Ardenne's fallen ill. It must be the water in here; the currents are truly awful at washing out the taste of tuli."

Her tail, flukes dangling limply off the side of the hammock, flailed a beat at the name. Marsa had not been down to their secret place, had not seen the wondrous statue, since the morning before Rhiela's precipitous exit from the palace, and for unfortunately good reason. She had yet to tell Rhiela what her own mother, the Ministra Marhyd, was supposed to have done to the cavern ruins. Rumors had floated past her ears a-plenty in the days soon after the palace had shaken from the inside out, but she had not the nerve to confirm them in the empirical manner.

"Ah, I hope that she feels better soon," Marsa said, in lieu of any bad news.

"Yeah, really. We're supposed to be heading out to open water soon, and..." The shell offered up a minor swear word. "Sera and the rest are back, so I need to cut this short. You take good care of yourself, okay?"

"Yes, Rhiela..." She nodded happily as the shell chimed that the connection was cut, for she knew she would hear the princess's voice again.

At no point in the next hour did she realize the new purpose her body found after the royal call. If asked, she might say that she had gone to sleep early, as the light of the firmament dimmed to nothing, for that was all she could remember.

Tilly the octopod would tell a different tale, if only she could speak more than just *-bloop-*. It did not happen every night, but when her friend with the food

went limp and stiff at the same time, the octopod knew to retreat to her spot behind the kelpen pillows. The friend would swim off, and then return before the light did. Tilly might *-bloop-*, might caress a slackened hand with a tentacle, and yet get no scritches until full morning's light came to bring the friend back to herself.

Such nights were never good, the octopod had decided.

Verse VIII

Morga's eyes were about adjusted to the murk beneath the great tent. It was not too different from a closed-off workshop on the spire of Valden, at least as far as lighting was concerned. The tastes on the weak currents of the city, especially the inescapable and irritating perfume of the tuli pods, conspired to fill the gills with a fug worse than a cave higgly's nest of slime, and that had colored her vision like an actual cloud of bubbles on the water. That sort of murk, no eyes could get used to.

It was not until they slipped outside through one of the smaller slits in the great tent's outer wall that she realized just how much the stench of the place had affected her. Under the soft silver light of the early evening firmament, the sands of Mezzlerle seemed like day.

"Whew." She spat the word quietly through her gill slits.

"Indeed," her sister answered. "I prefer the view outside as well."

A tail's length ahead, Sera had an ear cocked and listening. "Kinda nice, right?" said the red mer. "Time I was little, used to love sneaking out past curfew, just to sit on the sands for a verse and watch the shimmer. Almost got ate by a sand trapper a few times," she added, her smile thinning out to nothing. "Let's all be careful, alright?"

"Understood." Between them, Morga and Olga supported the ailing Ardenne. The poor mer's face was almost a shade to match her hair, skin paled to a sickly

green. Personally, Morga still blamed it on the taste of the tuli in the water. A whiff of the stuff in passing was enough to make her feel queasy, and back under there a mer couldn't really avoid it. She was feeling a mite green, herself.

"Where shall we be staying, then?" asked the princess. Rhiela was swimming alongside them with Rook in tow. Browning ringlets shook in the dimming light. "Another night out in the open, with sand trappers -- whatever those may be -- and Goddess-knows-what else? And," she pressed, "with a sick mer on our hands?"

"Rather go back in there?" Sera hooked a thumb at the big tent, now some distance behind them. "Night feeders are at least honest."

Rook was trembling as she clung to the princess's arm. "Yer didn't get the guards called on yer, Rhia. And for no reason at all. Ain't a place for an honest mer."

"I'm sure that if we explained what happened..."

Morga had strong reservations about that, and she was not the only one. Ahead of them, Sera made a sudden stop in mid-stroke, spinning around to jab a finger at the princess's chest. "You, little chum," said the red mer, "have never had to deal with a mer with the authority to sink your entire life just because she doesn't like the cut of your hair. What d'you think you can do, just swim into the viceroy's private club office and ask for help?"

"Well, I have met Lanita din Casima before, and she's not a bad mer, so..."

Cool evening currents carried the sound of the

slap well. Gold mer and red were equally dark shapes against the pale sands, but that sound left an image on the ear that was unmistakable. "Do not speak like you know her, chum," hissed Sera.

"But I do know her!" Rhiela tried to return the slap, only the rogue flipped backwards before the royal hand could connect.

"You've met her," Sera corrected. "Doesn't mean much at all, that. And perhaps forgetting your own little problem?" Whirling on a swift stroke, the red mer eeled around Rhiela to grab a hank of hair. "Would a mer believe you right now, brownie?"

Oh, this was getting to be too much, thought Morga. Leaving the hutner to her twin's capable arms, she beat a fast stroke over to grab both gold mer and red by the shoulders and force them apart. "Okay, we do not have the time for this," she told them. "Your Highness, just believe me when I say that there was no good way out of that mess that would have us out of town in less than a month. And Sera..." She blew a sigh through her gills. "You're on edge. We're on edge. But you far more than us. Anything you need to say?"

The red mer shrugged Morga's hand away. "No. Now, let's away. Shelter is a short current from here. Unless you prefer taking your chances outside?"

"Not really..." The words were short, raspy, but they flowed from Ardenne's throat. "I'd... I would rather a place to lie down again, soon."

The eyes of all were upon the hunter, who for her part did not try to cover or hide a thing. Might be she was too tired, thought Morga. The way the sealskin tunic hung on Ardenne's frame, the mer looked

half-starved.

"Come on," she said, taking Ardenne's left arm while her twin kept at the right. "We'll get you wherever it is we're going. Only, ah... hands off, okay?"

"Morga..."

"What? It's a valid thing to worry about! You get punched right in the front and then see if you're not shy about it."

"S-said I was sorry..." muttered Ardenne.

"Yeah, I know you are, but..." Morga shrugged. "I need to vent sometimes. That's all."

Sera cleared her throat, sending a loud flurry of bubbles over her gills. "If we are ready?"

"I know I am," said Rhiela. With Rook in tow, the brown-gold mer pushed off with her flukes to swim where Sera now pointed into the distance. "Well?" she called back to them. "Aren't you coming?"

Holding the green mer steady, Olga and Morga launched themselves forward. The pale sands of the Mezzlerle swept beneath them, with only the occasional puff of dust as a sign that anything was alive in there. A strange, lonely place this was, Morga had decided. Vast amounts of nothing in between little bits of something. A place that existed to be passed through. She had to wonder why any mer would choose to live there.

Looking ahead to the red-tinged shadow of Sera on the currents ahead, she wondered what it took for a mer to come back.

*

Song in the night. Squeaks and clicks, shooting through the waters, finding food, echoing back. Not much food. Not big food. Open waters, too open. No

grass, no kelp, no place for food to live. Bad place for a pod.

The little pink delphin had no name as a mer might know it, and the string of song used to call her was dense and difficult. The rorqual who was Song-under-Firmament had named her as guide and friend to mer-green-hair and mer-red-hair, but if she were to be called anything, it was Watch-with-Clicks. That was what she did most of the time.

She had tried to follow more closely behind those strange ones, those mers who were to be called not-enemy, but the noise they made was uncomfortable to her. Mer-brown-hair and mers-who-look-alike did not act welcome or friendly. Mer-orange-hair was the sound of fear, when sounds she made.

Not good, not good. Song-under-Firmament had sung the commandment, and Watch-with-Clicks obeyed. Watch mers. Help mers. Strength-of-Waves, to return. Gentleness-of-Tides, to be happy. All to be happy. But with no help, no success. No following, no help. No friendship-with-mers, no following.

Watch-with-Clicks sang the song of annoyance-when-alone. First, eat tasty fish. Second, find friend-mers. Third, help. Good plan. Right plan.

The little pink delphin swam off into the night, with silvered firmament above and pale sand below.

Verse VIX

At this point, Rhiela was not sure what she might expect of Sera's promised shelter. The nights since her birthday had been spent outside more often than in, for a totality of her experience in open waters. Her flukes were constantly fatigued from the swimming. Her hands and eyes ached from the study of those rune-marked shells which Rook's teacher had left to them. Her scales were dulled from lack of polishing sand. And, worst of all...

She hated to even think about the state of her hair, which meant that it was as often on her mind as it was on her head.

So, what was this shelter to be? A hole in the sand? A pile of rocks? Another tent, like Mezzegheb? Rhiela could not say which would be worse, and in the dimming light of the hour she could not see far enough to tell. When the red mer called a halt to their strokes, she had to trust the mer that there was anything around to see.

"This way." And Sera was off again, dipping towards a dark body of rock that arose from the sands. If there was anything anchored to the promontory, Rhiela could not distinguish it from the rest.

"Er, be yer coming, Yer Highness?" In private, Rook still sometimes used her title of address, and she adored the little orange mer for that courtesy. If she had taken nothing else with her from the palace, she at least had her dignity.

"Haul tail, brownie!"

It was thankfully not a fragile thing. Rhiela let

off a string of annoyed bubbles, then took the orange mer by the hand and dipped to follow.

The promontory was larger than it had looked from a distance. A lack of anything else around meant that it was hard to compare, but the rock rose many tail-lengths in height above the sands, and was even larger around. Closer in, Rhiela could make out the clumps of coral, kelp, and sargo which sprouted across its surface to form a miniature reef in the midst of the expanse.

"Don't dawdle," said the red mer. "Ain't likely anyone's watching the open water at this hour, but don't chance the wrong sort of attention right now."

"Which is?" All things considered, Rhiela was not sure what the right sort of attention would even be.

The red mer did not bother to answer that, much to her annoyance, but rather tugged at a patch of kelp. The entire mess of green-black foliage pulled away to reveal an opening. Sera motioned them to enter. Rhiela peered in. It was not quite so dark as the rear passages of the palace, back in Bryndoon, but she did not have a glow-lamp with her this time. "You first," she said to the rogue.

"What, brownie, don't trust me?"

"Not enough to dive blindly down a hole which you know better." She turned away from the opening to glare. In the dusk under the firmament, it was likely Sera did not even notice.

"Brownie's got herself cold flukes."

"That's not what... and stop calling me that!"

"Oh, sorry, little chum. Hurt your widdle feelings?" Sera brought her face in close enough to see

clearly in the low light. Blue eyes were wide and hard.

Somewhere behind the princess, Rook spoke up: "Um, Red? Rhia? Yer think this be a right time?"

"No, because it's time a certain mer got her overblown bubbles down the hole!"

"Not until you slough the mud and come clean about what's down there!"

"What's it matter if'n it's soft? All need to hurry, so hurry!"

The orange mer wasn't finished. "Only, I think someone's coming..." she said.

All conversation stopped; the waters went quiet and still. Through the last echoing ripples or Rhiela and Sera's argument cut a new voice, coolly amused. "Why, Seraffine. What a long while it has been. Please, do your friends the courtesy of showing them the *front* portal, if you would."

*

A long sigh flushed over Sera's gills. Of all the mers who might have spotted them, spotted *her*, in the Mere Mezzlerle, this one was far from the worst. It did not make the interruption any more welcome. "Matron. Only meant to bide a time in the old rooms," she said quickly. "Nothing more 'n that."

The mer now gliding down the evening currents with a glow-lamp in hand was elderly only in appearance. Nothing in the way she moved betrayed any of the years she held, and Sera knew just where to look. Enough of her own youth had been spent trying and failing to outmaneuver the mer. No, the fur across Matron Mihayela's face and form may have gone grizzled, but nothing else had.

"Well then, come along," the old leondra told them. "If we were to await the moment wherein Seraffine recalls her manners and makes proper introductions, then we might greet the dawn over the firmament first. Mihayela, prestra skola and first matron of this crèche." The lady took a bow. "And yourselves?"

The twins gave a formal nod. "Greetings, matron," said the slightly older-acting one. "My name is Olga, and this is my sister Morga."

"From Valden," the second twin added.

Sera stifled a growly groan. Now was not... *never* was there a good time to volunteer the little details!"

Between the twins, the green mer stirred enough to speak up: "Ardenne, from Scothia. Ah, my apologies, but I have been feeling not so well as of late."

"You poor thing." Matron Mihayela reached down to stroke Ardenne's head. A string of syllables flowed from her mouth, delicate pearls of sound arranged into what Sera recognized as a variation of a healing song. "I hope that this should do you some good, whatever the malady upsetting you now."

"My thanks, messra."

That was absolutely the wrong title of address. Sera knew it. The Matron knew it. Depths take it, even Brownie min Front-Bubbles knew it, and the others could probably guess. In other waters, with other leondra, this would be a problem. She would need to have a long chat with the green-haired mer again, and soon.

But there were two more introductions to worry

about first. Rook was her usual, bubble-headed self, talking up a swift current without much thought to the words she set upon it. Little of the orange mer's past was problematic, not as yet, but Sera had to tug a fin to keep her from starting in on the tale of their day in Mezzegheb.

Depths, that was a story she would need to tell the matron later, herself, once she'd figured out the best whirl to put on its flow. But right here, right now, it was not the stuff of good first impressions.

The worst was last to come. How many times had she impressed upon the royal pain in the flukes that it was best they go incognito? Too many to count, and probably not often enough. Half the seas were likely searching for the errant princess by this point, and the only current flowing in their favor was that the royal chum didn't look quite like herself. But if that secret slipped just once...

"Rhia min Anni," said the princess, bowing politely with her hands impeccably poised in the signs of respect. "Latel of Bryndoon. We are graced by your hospitality, matron."

Would wonders never cease... Sera released the water from her gills before she could choke. At least one of them had listened!

"What manners," noted Matron Mihayela. "I might hope that some of this may rub off on you, Seraffine."

"I dare say we have much to learn from each other," Rhiela said. The rogue could hear the quirk of a smile in that voice. "I know that I have learned many things already."

She could be thankful to the firmament above that the matron did not ask for details right then, because the only things Sera could say for certain that the princess had learned were how best to lie and make herself look less suspicious. And cusswords. Plenty of cusswords, if Brownie had paid proper attention.

"Come along, then," said Mihayela. "It is well past dark out, no matter how the firmament shines tonight. So let us away. The little ones are likely bouncing off the walls without me in there. You remember how it flows, Seraffine." Her nod was hidden by the darkness, but the matron assumed rightly that it was there. "Oh, how happy they shall be to have you home, if only for a short while. She never does stay long," the leondra mock-complained to her guests as they swam. "In and out, all the time, when she isn't missing for months on end. I do hope you have some good tales to tell the little ones this time, Seraffine."

"Yes, matron..."

*

It was a pretty long way around that rock. Probably, as Rook figured it, anything what could stick itself out of the sands for any length of time had to be bigger than most, or else the flow of the currents would pull the pale grit right back over it, faster than flash. With the sand all pale and pretty around it, the rock was a black shape in the scenery with details a mer could sort of see if she squinted right. nothing on it or around it to look like a shelter, though. The profile was all rugged and natural as could be.

Rounding one bulge in the rocky mass, her eyes caught on a glimmer of light. A solitary glow-lamp, a

runework one, drifted upon its tether. By its flicker, the face of the nearby cliff was drawn with thick bars of darkness. Between them, the outline of a door was barely visible.

"My apologies for the lamp," said the leondra lady. "It has been acting up as of late."

"Mind if'n I get a gander at it?" Rook held back a nervous giggle as the matron gave her own gander at her. "Only, I been learning and working with runes half my life, it feels like, and seen a few lamps like this before." More to the point, and not something she'd ever tell, but one time she'd broken Baba Rill's lamp so it went all flickery and sputtery like this one, and old Baba had made her sit down and practice the fixing of it till she could about do it blind. Without giving the leondra lady a beat to reply, Rook swam over and tapped the lamp lightly.

It was an old one, this lamp, and well made. It'd have to be, to last so long out here. A carved bit of stone anchored the runes from within a cage of coral, and the glow kind of danced across its surface instead of coming up from it. She sang a short string of syllables, the general call for inspection, and hit the end of the litany with the emphatic clicky-cough that set the magic to wrok.

The light hovered for a beat, then expanded outwards, forming itself into runic shapes in a wide ring around the anchorage stone. Here and there, Rook could see what she'd expected to find: blurred strokes of light, places where the shapes had smeared or frayed, until the rune was so bent out of shape that it was a miracle that the power still pulsed through it.

She'd fixed busted lamps before, but she'd never built one from the bones up. That was about what she had to do here, though.

The waters stirred beside her. Rhia was there, all of a sudden, and the mostly-brown hair still had a bit of the old gold to it by the lamplight. "Marsa always had me watch when she tinkered with things," Her Highness said in a low voice. "Now I'm wishing I'd paid more attention."

"Got'cher feeling straight there, Rhia." Rook teased the ring of light around. "Gonna have to doubly-double the check on all my runes for this one."

"But you can fix it?" asked the leondra lady.

Her eyes were busy committing the string of runes to memory, but her mouth said, "Might be we can, matron, but might be it's easier to make a new one." Her mouth paused to yawn, flushing water across gills. "Might be it's better to try it on the morrow."

"If you can, then we would certainly be in your debt." The leondra lady wagged a finger at Red. "And we could certainly forgive and forget any little shenanigans involving the rear rooms."

"Yes, matron..." Wow. Rook hadn't ever thought to hear that kind of tone out of Red's mouth.

"So, um, what kinda place yer gots here?" she asked. "Kinda off the fast current and all..."

"Didn't Seraffine mention where you were going to stay?" The leondra lady had a hand to her lips as a chorus of nays and nopes arrived to embarrass Red some more. "Ah. Then welcome be you all to the Wayward Drift, crèche for the motherless."

"The unwanted." Red turned her face away to

frown into the darkness. "This was a mistake."

The leondra lady stroked over to the doorway and tugged it open. "I doubt that. While I know that it has never been much to your liking, Seraffine, if the city of tents were safer for you, then that is where you would now be. I may only hope that you don't bring too much trouble in your wake this time."

"Never mean to..." Red stopped herself. "Another time to talk, matron."

"Yes." With a graceful sweep of her arm, Matron Mihayela ushered them inside. "For this evening, be welcome. We shall worry about the rest on the morrow."

Verse X

It was long since night in Bryndoon, as the firmament had drawn its flukes across the waters and swept away the light. Along one end of the harbor, where the dwellings of the royal guard shared an uneasy coziness with the work tents of the ministry, a school of glow-worm lamps pushed the darkness upward and outward to provide the mers below with one more hour of productivity.

And what could be done with but one such extra hour a day! wondered Aysmin as she observed the latest of training drills. The speed with which the ministry produced the basic runic armaments would have been scandalous if anyone stopped to consider the implications. The duchess had, and she held no doubt that Mitera Yesca had as well, but for the moment they both had reasons to stay their objections.

"Such sin against She who loves all," she heard the mitera say, and none too quietly. The two of them rested at the edge of the training range, and had the privilege of privacy so none would hear. "If our targets were ever that which lives and swims..."

"I would say that the abominations meet both those criteria," Aysmin replied, more from habit than any need to debate. This had been much argued over the past week, behind thick shell walls to muffle the force of Yesca's shouting.

The octopod was out of the sac, of course. Now that the duchesses of the royal regiments had seen what Ministra Marhyd offered, there was little chance of them giving up any of it until every last abomination

had met its end. And possibly not even then; some of the trainees were possessed of an enthusiasm for their new toys which bordered on the unseemly. Aysmin had not yet mentioned to her bond-sister that at least one pod had been sent out already with a runic armament in hand. She only hoped that Grett made good use of it and brought back the princess safely.

On the range below, Martella din Linnea was at practice with another of the ministra's newest offerings. Aysmin had seen this one, a short baton which from one end spouted a steady and solid flow that would whip through the water and around opponents. Or through opponents, as the spiky-haired mer now proved. The target dummies around her were soon missing parts.

After a mere week it was nigh impossible to think of this mer as Tachiana din Hillia, the habitual tuli licker. Marhyd had made good on her whimsical suggestion of adoption, and had somehow managed to gift the newly-dubbed Martella a crown of lustrous purple spikes atop her head.

The mitera had not responded to the remarks about abominations. Perhaps that talk of sin had pertained to something else.

"We shall let those of future generations judge our actions." Aysmin blew out her gills. "Just as we ensure that future generations exist to judge us."

"They shall not be kind," Yesca predicted. The grizzled leondra shook her head. "Too many actions, too many sins born of necessity. I merely assume my soul is bound for the indigo hell and strive to bring myself upwards to the firmament."

"That is one way to look at it, I suppose..."

Aysmin left the words to drift, and her sister-by-fate raised none of her own. In the silence they watched Martella destroy the last of the target dummies.

There was a brief wave of displacement as a large body settled into the sand beside them. "Impressive, is she not?" said Ministra Marhyd with no small amount of pride in her voice. "What grace, what power!"

"We were only just discussing that," said Aysmin. Beside her, Yesca grunted something akin to an affirmative, bred with a curse word. "Truly, she is a tail's length and more above the rest."

Marhyd's staccato chuckle poked at the waters. "Heh-heh-heh, but isn't that the truth. I mean no disrespect to you or your fellow duchesses, Your Grace, but if I were to catalog only the most humorous of failures this week... Well, I am glad to have given them the weakest of items with which to practice. A flow-whip such as Martella's would result in a recruit of many slices, I fear." The ministra chuckled at her words. "Of course, I could offer some special training."

"No." The single barked syllable came from Yesca's throat, just ahead of a growl.

"Your family has grown large enough as it is," Aysmin replied, politically.

Another rough chuckle stumbled across the waters. "Yes, yes, that is true enough. And some trainees are coming along splendidly on their own, in any case. Now, if we were to talk of business, Your Grace, have you heard back from Grett? She was a particularly good student, and I have some new toys she might like."

The duchess kept her expression even. "No, there's been no word, but the Mere Scothia is a large sea to search on nothing but a whim, no matter how educated. If she does not report back by the end of the week, we shall send a follow-up."

"And would Her Holiness have any thoughts as to where the princess might be?"

Yesca harrumphed. "In trouble, but not in peril. That is all the auguries will give, much though we pray."

"Yes, yes, funny how that works... But have either you come to a decision, or even an opinion, as to my motion to send Marilys and Martella out to search for our errant young lady with the golden hair? I can assure you that they are ready and willing."

Undoubtedly they were, for Marhyd had told them to be. Aysmin had not dared discuss it with the mitera yet, but... "If you had a target for your little dolls, perhaps."

"Oh, but I do!" said the ministra with a contented smirk. "I have only just now received word from my, ahem, special sources that the princess has been sighted in the Mere Mezzlerle."

"What?" Over the course of a single syllable, Yesca's voice raised itself tenfold.

"The tent city?" asked the duchess. "Or the outskirts?" Either might be bad, if it were brought to light, though for different and equally damning reasons.

"The great tent of Mezzegheb," Marhyd confirmed. "Why? I have not one idea. Her Highness never did seem the sort to enjoy such goings-on, heh-heh. So? Shall I let my little dears get to work?"

"It would require the utmost discretion." There

was a pain in the mitera's voice as she admitted even that much.

The light of the glow-worm lamps caught on Marhyd's grin. "But of course, Your Holiness. I shall get on to the arrangements now, and they may depart upon the morning currents."

Just what they were letting loose upon the waters, Aysmin could but wonder. She prayed for future generations to be kind in their estimation and understanding.

Verse XI

When morning came to the Mere Mezzlerle, it was with a grand school of shimmers and glints as the light of the firmament split and raced itself across the open sands. There were few things to catch and stop the spread of light, and no shadows worthy of note.

Resting on the portico of the Wayward Drift, Ardenne took in the scene. It was peaceful in its own way, though so different from her life on the reef. Everything was so different. Even the waters as they played against her skin were warmer, stranger. Her borrowed hammock was bound with a different variety of kelp, and the grain of the weave felt scratchy against her skin all the night long. The pains in her gut, she had brought with her, but those were strange as well. They had subsided, but not sunk too deep. Occasionally an odd motion would bring a wince to her face, but that was all for now.

None of that had flowed together to form a comfortable night of sleep, more was the pity, which led her to this current now. In silence, she saluted the morning as it arrived.

The sounds of wakefulness began to rise from the Wayward Drift in myriad little notes, grumblings and mutterings of uncounted voices. Ardenne kept herself turned to the view outside.

"Hey, who're you?" A face popped into her field of vision: young and speckled, with a gap between the front teeth wide enough for an anchovy to fit through. "Hain't seen you 'round. A little old for the Drift, aren't'cha?" The little mer was ten years old at most,

and a striking pink color all over. Scales and hair were deeper in hue, like the efirmament in the moments before dusk, while the skin was that delicate color found on the inside of certain shells. The eyes were a bright and inquisitive brown. "Well?" the young mer said.

"I'm only a guest," said Ardenne. "Passing through. We, ah, arrived last night."

"Oh, should'a figgered you for one of Sera's friends!" The pink mer flipped and giggled. "I'm Lehay, by the way. Where ya anchored, 'riginally? Hain't never seen someone with green hair like that."

"And I've never seen someone with pink hair," she replied. "Not up close, at least."

Lehaya twirled a lock of hair. "Yeah, it's a nice color, right? The biggrs keep telling me I oughta 'prentice with the dance circles in Mezzegheb, make some good pearl, but..." A shrug sent the hair flowing back. "Might be I want something else. Yanno?"

"Yeah, I... er, the dance circles? As in..." Her guts clenched at the memory of the performers in green garlands. "Wouldn't you be a little young?"

"Never too early to start a trade, they tell me." The little mer made a face. "So what do you do?"

"Hunting, on the reef of the Mere Scothia."

"Coo-ee, you're far from home, ain't'cha."

She let her own shrug answer that.

"But yeah, if you're with Sera, you must travel a lot. Seems like she's been everywhere there is to be!"

"Is she up?" asked Ardenne.

"Yeah, saw her and Matron swim out a ways. Probably talking about what trouble she's in now. Yanno..." Lehay grinned at the green mer expectantly.

"If you happen to..."

"Sorry, don't gossip."

"C'mon! Please? It's gotta be Free Flow business, right? You can tell us!"

Us...? Ardenne hadn't realized, had been too distracted to realize, but there was an entire school of young mers floating around her now. No two were of the same color, though all of them together formed a striking display. There was everything from a pale whisp of white to a blue-black dark as ink on the water, and everything in between. Near to two dozen eyes all stared at her in open curiosity.

"Um..." She left the syllable to tickle the waters for a beat. What was there to say? What could she say? That she had no idea what the question even meant? Or... "Ahem, you do understand," Ardenne began once more. "That I, ah, cannot say anything definite or, or Sera will have my guts for a new hair snood, right?" A cloud of giggles rose to that. "Exactly. So instead, how about the time she and I met..."

"Was it exciting?" asked one young mer, hair and skin a dark brown but with scales of bright blue.

"Did you kiss?" asked another, mostly in shades of yellow.

"Yes and... technically yes," she admitted. "So, I'd got myself on the bad side of a pod of Bryndoon soldiers..."

There were oohs and aahs as she wallowed through the tale, with no few gasps of delighted horror as she described the arrival of the orcs, and laughter at the trick Sera had played to convince their pursuers to leave well enough alone. The part with the technical

kiss was met with giggly approval as well.

"Did you ever find your mom?" Lehaya asked as the story wound down.

"Yes, but..." She hesitated. "That is a story for another time. It was, it is not a pleasant one, I'm afraid. I, well..."

"But she's still alive, right?" squeaked a big-eyed little one, perhaps six years old at most, with blue curls cut short.

"Yes."

"And she still loves you, right?"

Ardenne choked on her water right then. "Yes, yes. She most certainly does." The memory of her, at least. "But... but she is still resting at home. It was, ah, it was very rough on her."

Big eyes rippled around the edges as the blue-curled mer's lip quivered. "I wish I had a mommy to rescue..."

And the conversation sank like a rock hurled into the abyss. What was a mer supposed to say to that? Ardenne certainly did not know the answer to that question, but she was relieved that the other young mers could handle it in their own way. The entire school converged on the little blue mer, forming a wild mass of color around her as she received hugs from everyone in turn, and then everyone hugged everyone else. Even Ardenne found herself embraced, snuggled, and cuddled too many times to count.

"I'm sorry," she said once there was space in the water to drift an apology.

"Don't worry none," Lehaya assured her. The young mer was pink around the eyes and nose, but her

voice held steady. "It's something that comes up often enough. We all got our own ways to deal with it."

Casting a net through her thoughts for something, anything to say, Ardenne asked, "Have any of you had breakfast yet? Maybe I could help? A not-empty stomach deals with most problems, I've found."

The suggestion was met by a chorus of cheers, and Ardenne found herself dragged through various tunnels and holes in the Wayward Drift until they were arrived at a small open patch set in a natural hollow of the rock. She recognized most of the plants set to grow there, and some of the fishes in their cages. Just what could be made with them remained to be seen.

"We usually eat at the instruction hall," Lehaya was explaining. "But it's the Lady's Day today, so all the prestra are busy praying for the lost souls of Mezzegheb."

"Won't do 'em a fat lotta good!" her little yellow friend said amidst much giggling.

"Yeah, I know, right? But they don't like us visiting their little temple, so we're outta the net for the day. The only biggers you'll see 'round here's matron, 'cuz she thinks all that prayer's a waste of time, too."

"Don't let her hear you say that," commented the friend with the blue-black hair.

"Eh, she knows we all know..."

Ardenne glanced around. "You don't happen to have a cookpot or anything like that?" Much as she liked her fish-meat right off the bone, travel with her new friends had gotten her more accustomed to actual cooking. And a few of those pods in the garden were

too tough on their own for a mer's jaws to chew.

There was in fact a pot, and a large one at that. A box of scrapers and knives got shared around, and the various ingredients were slaughtered, harvested, scaled, peeled, deboned, or cored in swift time. It may have taken them longer to get the cooking pot to work, in fact. While she and the little daughters knew how the thing was used, more or less, that did not mean they had enough experience with it. "We usually let the matron do this part," Lehay admitted.

"Well then, let us surprise her this morning," said Ardenne.

The pot was sealed and set to chuffing in the middle of the crèche's largest chamber. Her friends all wandered in as it cooked, introducing themselves officially to the curious young mers as they did. Olga and Morga had spent the first hour of the morn searching the area around the Wayward Drift for useful bits of stone and coral, while Rook and Rhiela -- no, she reminded herself: the name was Rhia, for the moment. Rook and Rhia had figured their way through the runic grammar of the aging lamp by the front entrance.

Under the amazed stares of the crèche-daughters, the twins proceeded to build a new lamp out of the parts of the old, patched together with whatever was handy. Rook was in charge of the enchantment, with Rhia holding their notes and confirming the mystic grammar as the orange mer continued along. By the time breakfast was done cooking, the new lamp could produce a steady glow.

"Impressive," came the voice of the matron. Mihayela entered the chamber with a fluid grace, while

behind her Sera splashed along with a sour expression stretching all the way down to her flukes. Ardenne hoped that this would not prove to be a bad sign. Knowing the red mer's disposition, a happy Sera might have been a greater cause for alarm.

"Look, matron!" Lehay called. "It works all right-proper now!"

"So it does. And breakfast is almost ready as well! What a bounteous Lady's Day, indeed," said the matron. It was hard to miss the twitch of Sera's flukes, just then. "Thank you for showing my little lovelies what a mer can do if she applies herself. Too many leave this crèche to go no further than the tents of the city."

"Not that those old biddies in the hall taught us much of anything useful..." Sera muttered.

"What was that, Seraffine?"

"Nothing but the truth, matron."

The old leondra's sigh sent bubbles to streak her fur. "I know, but you should not let Skola Ruti or Skola Stefahni hear you say that."

"As if Old Whiskerbrains could hear me at all."

"Shall we eat?" Ardenne suggested quickly. A dozen and more little voices chimed in their agreement, and everyone else was pulled into place around the pot as its lid was cracked and warm, delicious currents wafted through. The youngest of the little daughters chased the scents, flushing them across their gills and giggling at the taste. Carved pod fruits and whole fish were parceled out in precise order: first to Matron Mihayela, then to the guests, and then to the daughters from the youngest on up. Sera and the five visitors

she'd brought ate sparingly, though it took a brief reminder by way of a fluke slap to rein in Rhiela. The princess blushed, finished what she had, and took nothing else from the limited bounty of the cooking pot.

Bellies were not filled by the end, but no one complained of hunger, either. It was not an unfamiliar feeling for Ardenne, but the princess had a grumbly look on her face that would likely last the day.

"Now, daughter of my heart," Matron Mihayela said to the young ones. "You all have your tasks to do. Let us not tempt Skola Ruti or Prestra Seba into more rude words by leaving them unfinished." The old leondra shook her head as Lehaya and her friends launched off in all directions, leaving the chamber near to empty within a few beats. Only the echoes of their giggles remained.

"Mother of All, lead them not into temptation," the matron prayed. "Because surely they find it well enough on their own."

That brought a snicker out of Sera. "Some things never change."

"Yes, though I dare say that none of them are as creative or rebellious as you were Seraffine. But now..." The matron motioned for them all to come closer. "I suppose you have some questions to ask in regards to my little orphelines?"

The word was new to Ardenne's ears, but it put a name to something that had been eating at her curiosity. "No mothers, the little blue one said. She seemed, ah, upset about it?"

"Yes, Rulika." Sad brown eyes met hers. "She is young, which makes it hard. And she did not come here

until she was almost four years of age, which is worse. Most of them arrive shortly after weaning. Le haya's own little sister is due to arrive next month, which shall make things exciting! Nothing like an infant to cause confusion."

"I remember," said Sera. "Pinky was a right mess herself. Serves her right. Stopped by to see Klara the other day, though. Little one's right cute."

"Wait..." Rhiela was just now catching up to the flow of the conversation, and her confusion still reflected in her eyes. "Their mothers are still alive, but they are here? Why aren't they...?"

"Because they're unwanted, Brownie. Because we're unwanted... Sink it, should never 've come here." The red mer attempted to launch herself away, only for the matron to hold her back with a gentle hand. "Look... just, look. Some mers aren't suited to be mothers. It gets in the way of their business, or they don't have their own mothers for support, or... or..."

They never found out what that last 'or' was to be, but it put a fearsome face on the red mer. This time, the matron could not hold her, and she was gone from the room in half a beat.

Rhiela's question followed on the ripples of Sera's exit. "But then, why choose to accept the blessed sacrament? I understand that not all mers wish to be mothers, or are good mothers even if they do, but..." Not-golden hair drifted messily as she shook her head. "Well, you all have mothers, right? I mean, I know that Ardenne does, obviously, but no one else really talks about family."

"Mine's gone," said Rook. "Got herself an ague,

maybe five years ago? Old Baba took care 'a me even before then."

The twins were, to all appearances, having a private conversation solely through the medium of their eyebrows. With a sigh, Olga finally said aloud: "We never knew our birth mother. They found us on the edge of the Mere Tessraï after the Night of the Five Villages, but not her. We were adopted by a mer named Tefira."

"Otherwise called Mom," said Morga.

"So it is enough to say that we are interested in what Matron Mihayela is working her way around to telling us, because it might shine a lamp upon the mystery of our birth as well." The twins moved their hands into the signs of polite request, with palms flat and turned slightly.

"How could I refuse such manners," said the matron. "Truly, I wish you all could stay longer, only I fear that the skola would call the guards of Mezzegheb down on you if they found you here. They do not much care for outwater mers learning the dirty little secret of the sands, you see. But... in for a minnow, in for a flounder, I suppose. To put it baldly, none of the orphelines, the young daughters of this crèche, were born by grace of the blessed sacrament."

Rook squeaked. "That's possible!?" The twins had matching, troubled expressions on their faces while Rhiela was simply shocked speechless.

It was all slipping into place now. "That's why they don't go to the temple for Lady's Day," said Ardenne. "The prestra don't think they're worthy of the honor, or something like that."

"I think my young charges make them nervous," the matron admitted. "Nor do they want it widely known that the blessed sacrament does not confer motherhood, but rather facilitates it. To tell the truth, it has always been possible to have daughters without the benediction of a prestra sacrista, but it is truly a rare thing to happen. That we have so many here is a testament to the nature of Mezzegheb's entertainments and how often a favored performer may participate in them. There are entire lineages of dancers born daughter to mother without aid, and they all find themselves here, eventually. Even if the mother does wish to keep her daughter, the prestra skola and the viceroy's ministry find ways to convince her. I dare say most of my little dears would have a loving mother here if they were not banned from visitations. That is what happened to poor Rulika and her mother."

"And to Sera?" guessed Ardenne.

"No... Serafinne is a special case in many ways, and I suppose that I should let her do the telling of them in her own time. But," said the leondra as she brought her hands together. Let us finish up our work here. Messra Ardenne, if you could handle the dishes? Messras Olga and Morga, could you install our new lamp? Messras Rook and Rhia, I might have a few more runeworked items in storage that could use your assessment. If you need any assistance, the orphelines should be done with their chores soon. Your presence will surely encourage them to swiftness."

The six of them went in all directions from there, each to consider in her own way the lessons learned that morning.

Verse XII

It felt good for Olga to work with her hands, the way she was meant to. Her good tools may still have been on the float, safe-guarded at the port for the next week grace of a generous deposit of pearl to the local authorities, but the Wayward Drfit had a decent enough set available in its store rooms. The old blocks of shark-bound stone were old and soft at the edges, but still serviceable. As she rubbed a chunk of coral into a more rounded shape, Olga let her thoughts roam.

Her sister echoed them out loud: "Do you think that's why our birth mom left us? We weren't supposed to happen?"

It was not the most pleasant of thoughts. Olga's grimace served as her answer.

"I mean, yeah, it makes sense, and it would explain why there's no record of a twin birth..."

The *shuf-shuf* of the shark-bound stone filled the space of the waters.

"So what do we do?" Morga did not quite wail, but her own borrowed knives were put aside for a moment. Now was not the mood.

Olga paused in her work. "We do as we have been," she said. "Travel the seas. Learn, discover, and return home to tell others what we have seen and done. And make sure that Mom knows exactly how much she means to us."

A sisterly chuckle rewarded her for that. "Okay, like the story of the lonely hermit crab. No place like home, and all that."

A slight shift in the current told them that they

had a visitor. One of the orphelines, the one mostly in shades of yellow, poked her head around the corner to blink their way. "Oh, um, don't wanna interrupt or nothing..."

"Never a problem," Morga assured her. "What's floating, ah..."

"Oh! I'm, uh, my name's Nameel."

"Good to meet you, Nameel," said Olga. She held up the shark-bound stone. "These aren't yours, by any chance?"

"No! Um..." The little mer hesitated, light brown eyes darting around. "I mean, yeah, I guess they belong to the crèche? But no one's using them."

Morga was examining her knives. "That's a shame. Lots of things you can do with good tools, even if they're old."

"Really?" The orphan's eyes had an amber gleam to them that put Olga in mind of certain works of jewelry their mother had made.

"We could show you a few," she offered.

Nameel took the shark-bound stone from her hands, visibly struggling with its mass as she lifted it up. "Whew, that's a heavy. How do you two bigger manage?"

The question was answered well enough with a single arm, subtly flexed until the muscles swelled thicker than the yellow mer's neck. "Years of practice," said Olga. "But let's get you a smaller tool from the kit box." A selection of better-sized implements was available, and the twin offered the younger mer one of those. It fit Nameel's hand better in every way that counted. "See? Now you're ready to start."

"So, um, what are we making?"

Her twin held out a chunk of old coral. Its mass was compacted, eroded, with all manner of possibilities still held inside. "You tell us," Morga said to the young mer. "Find us a shape in there, and we'll show you how to bring it out."

*

There were too many things in the seas which Rhiela did not know, and this fact brought her nothing but frustration. The Temple had never made a secret of the fact that it kept secrets, but a mer could logically guess what the subject matter might be, if not the details: the blessed sacrament, other sacred spells, rites, and lore, anything about the old magics that were deemed too dangerous for any mer to use. Those were the sort of things she would expect the Temple to keep close to its chest, for the value or the danger they represented. But this...

Daughters without sacrament, treated like muck and ignored, all so that none would hear or care they existed. Never had she thought the Temple act so wrongly till this.

It was two weeks and a little more since her own birthday, when she had given solemn oaths to lead, nurture, and protect the mers of her realm, and just because she had immediately after swum off on an ill-advised adventure, that did not mean she could take her oaths less seriously.

But what could she do for those poor little ones, these orphelines? She did not know the answer to that, and the frustration was a jagged shark's tooth in her gut.

So now she focused on something else she did not know well at all, but it was an honest sort of ignorance. She knew just enough about runework to be secure in admitting she did not know much about it.

Somehow that made it more palatable.

Across from her, Rook was working hard from the opposite direction, figuratively speaking. The orange mer had plenty of practical experience with runework, but little depth when it came to theory. Even though half-again-half of everything Rhiela had learned from Marsa went on the swift current between her ears, on the way out as fast as it went in, what bits had remained stuck inside amounted to a greater education than the streetwise mer could ever have gotten for herself.

Rhiela just didn't know how to apply what she knew, while Rook did. Together the two of them made one almost competent apprentice, she figured. Unfortunately, they lacked a teacher, and the shell library from Baba Rill was hidden in the float outside Mezzegheb.

"Okay, I'm thinking I got this figgered," said Rook. The orange mer never took her eyes from the object in her hands. It was a shaped piece of stone, almost a cube except for how its edges were subtly out of proportion. The matron had claimed it to be runework, and a quick check had confirmed as much, but otherwise no one could say what it was supposed to do. Catching the flash and flicker of the runes as their bright shadows passed under Rook's fingers, Tiala could make out the grammar of flow, of ebb, and of the caloric force -- but what those together might command, she

could not say.

Not far distant, they had an audience. The littlest orphelines had flitted off for a game in the mid-day waters, but the older daughters had stayed in to watch the runework with interest. "So... what is it?" asked Lehay. "And how're you doing all that? Where'd you learn it? What--"

"All good questions," said Rook, with all the pride of someone barely older and hardly wiser getting the chance to show off. "I been studyin' with Baba Rill in Bryndoon since I was like eight years old, since before my mom passed. Mom taught me a bit, too, but it was mostly Baba. How to use stuff, how to look it right, sometimes how to make it. Rhia here's got the more classical *ed-yoo-kay-shun*, so if yer all be wantin' the fancy words, she's yer girl."

"Oh? Oh! Yes, that's right." Now she truly wished she had paid better attention in those lessons with Marsa, because the orphelines could have shaken the waters with the force of their excitement. "But, ah, I am afraid we cannot stay long. It's, ah..."

"Just a guess, and yer all can correct me, but we're a-thinkin' our friend Sera ain't too popular with certain mers hereabouts," Rook said with a bubbly lack of tact.

"Ain't that the truth." Lehay led the chorus of giggles. "If the skola from the instruction hall hear she'd been by, it'll be nothing but penance prayers for the next week!"

"Which is why yer not gonna be tellin' anyone, right?" Rook had a fine wink that spread the laughter even more. "But yeah, this here's complicated stuff, an'

we can't teach much 'a anything in an afternoon. I'll try to explain it as I go, though. So this here part..."

The grammar of magic was a wondrous thing, a poetry of force scribed upon the world itself. She and Rook had different approaches, coming from different directions, but still Rhiela could appreciate the little orange mer's budding talent. The orphelines could ooh and aah, and perhaps be inspired. That would not be enough, but it would be a start, like a spell laid in advance.

If... no, she told herself, *when* she returned to the palace and took her proper place as First Daughter under the firmament, the plight of these poor young daughters would be a thing she could see to. And then, she decided, it would be time for the mitera to answer a few questions about the blessed sacrament.

Verse XIII

So far, the visit to the Wayward Drift had gone just about as Sera had thought it would. Better, actually -- she thanked whatever providence had led to their arrival on the one day when the crèche teachers would not be around -- but in most every other way as expected. She was now launching herself away from her third argument with Matron Mihayela that day.

Again, as expected.

"Doldrummed old biddy..." she grumbled to herself, not at a mutter, as she made haste through the outer chambers of the crèche. Several orphelines giggled and trailed in her wake. They'd all been expecting something like this as well.

"The matron sank your plan again, huh?" little

Gwenni asked. Sera only grimaced, which was answered with a bright pearly smile in the middle of the dark-skinned lass's face. "Thought so. Better luck next time?"

These orphelines, these daughters under the firmament deserved a place where they could grow up happy, and the matron was yet to be convinced that the Wayward Drift was no longer that place, if indeed it ever was. Well, times would change. Sera had given her misgivings, her warnings, her words of caution. If and when things went muddy, she hoped to be able to gloat to the matron's face somewhere safe for them all.

"We're leaving," she barked to the twins. The two were surrounded by a small school of carved figurines. The russet lookalikes shrugged and handed their tools over to little Nameel, who received them with great seriousness.

"Back to the city?" asked Morga. The twin's face spoke her distaste better than any mere words could.

"You two, yes," Sera told them. "To fetch the float. Tell the guards the rest of us are too wobbly to swim and you're picking us up by the rear flaps. Happens all the time, so they shouldn't think twice."

"Gotcha. Come on, sis!"

In the next room over, she located Rook and Brownie min Front-Bubbles doing their rune-stuff to an appreciative audience of littles. She was almost sorry to interrupt. "You two, if you wanna keep working on that thing, fine, but take it with us. Find someone to send it back to the matron whenever you're done."

A heavy huff made the front-bubbles rise higher.

"And you're ordering us, because..."

"Course of the fact that we don't want trouble, and the skola are due back by the end of the noonish hour." The princess didn't get it, predictably, but the shared look on the orphelines' faces should've told her what. Again, Sera felt like cursing the matron's stubbornness. Her own experiences with Skola Stefahni had been more than enough to convince her to leave, years ago, and she doubted Old Whiskerbrains had mellowed any.

It was far easier to pull Ardenne away from the cleaning duties of the kitchen. The green mer didn't voice a single word of complaint, simply nodding and following along. The entire crèche of orphelines saw them out, trilling and cheering as they swam off into distant waters.

She wished she could take them all with her. Next time, she promised herself, she'd bring a float big enough to do just that. "Go with the flow, lasses!" she called behind her. The answering shout was much louder than any skola would've approved, which did her heart proud.

"Time to show you all the right side of this sea," she told the others.

Canticle VI

*In night-stained seas, clear and dark,
The Weaver of Light remains at her task.*

The warp, luminescent.

The weave, illuminated.

The wake, darker than dark.

Flows, crossed.

Waters, muddied.

The sands, broad.

The currents, narrow.

From all leads to one,

From one leads to all.

Discoveries, made.

Mysteries, remaining.

A time to gather.

A time to disperse.

Threads of darkness.

Threads of light.

Of time and tide.

Of wake and wave.

Of compassion and strength.

Many the threads.

Many the twinings.

Only the future to come.

Only the future to fail.

Either and both.

The death of the world that is.

Canto VI: Seas of Comfort

Verse I

Mitera Yesca preferred not to avoid things. It was a solemn teaching within the Temple that the future would arrive regardless of the current, and if it was not the future one liked, then a mer had to face it head-first and see why, accept why, it was different. By knowing, by understanding such things could she hope to steer the flow of fate to her favored world to come.

That said, some tasks were more onerous than others, and the relative importance of priorities helped her put them off until such time as she was ready to deal with them.

And as much as she hated to admit it, Queen Anyis was one of those tasks. Most mers would think that Her Majesty had taken the disappearance of her daughter poorly, shutting herself away to grieve in private. Yesca knew better than almost anyone that not a thing about Anyis' personal life had changed since Rhiela had left. The queen rarely quit her own chambers for anything, not even meals.

Yesca carried a tray with her each time she visited. Invariably, Her Majesty had eaten neither recently nor properly, and only the mitera commanded enough respect to get the mer to take care of herself.

The mers of the realm needed their Queen, needed the symbol of the All-Mother's love that she represented. Yesca feared that they would never have her.

Anyis was in her usual place upon the padded

couch of the royal chamber. In her hands she held a roughly made statuette. "It is the day," said the Queen. "The day that was the day that..." The skewed flow of words curled inward, bringing silence to itself. "And she is still gone."

Leaving the tray on the nearest pedestal, Yesca joined the golden mother on the couch. The platform of stone, coral, and siltgrass cushion had been designed with two in mind, if they were close. She cradled Anyis in her arms, saying in soothing tones, "We all miss her. Yenefra was too soon gone from this world."

The sound of the name, the syllables which few dared mention in the royal presence, filled the waters until naught else could squeeze through.

Sixteen years. Sixteen anniversaries spent in morning, and each one worse than the last. She did not think she could contain half as much sorrow within herself as the Queen did, every beat of every day. Anyis had let herself be defined by her loss. By their loss. Sixteen years ago had Anyis lost her sister bound by fate, born within the same hour of the same day and thus linked in life forever after. Such was the tradition among the high families of the manoa. Anyis min Devery and Yenefra min Theáphila, together since the day they were born, just as their older siblings.

The mitera of Bryndoon, born Yesca min Theáphila, mourned for reasons both same and different. Her younger sister had been the joy of the Mere Kazahn, a bright and loving child who was favored of both Crown and Temple. A beautiful life, a beautiful future, and...

"Tell me," pleaded Anyis. "Tell me once again. I

cannot bring myself to remember the details."

She wondered why the Queen begged so for suffering, but as she had promised, all those years before, the mitera bore the weight of the memories for Her Majesty. "It was a quiet night," she began, the words of the story falling into their well-practiced order. "Yenefera had taken a position as prestra skola at the Library of Kamazon. What a perfect fit for her." The pride remained in Yesca's voice even as all else positive now fled. "But a treacherous current it was, between the Library and the City of Temples, and though we would warn her, still she worked until the late hours before beginning the swim home. The Mere Kamazon is not too distant from the western abyss, and strange things may come out at night to feed."

Yesca felt the shiver of her fur, felt the strength of Anyis' grip around her chest as the Queen shook. With a minimum of detail she finished telling of how her sister, Yenefera, known lovingly as the Little Mitera, was found dead the next morning. Her body had been slashed and bitten, though no warrior of the Temple could say just what had done the deed.

They held each other for a long verse after.

For whatever reason, the telling of the tale always brought Anyis out of the weeks-long funk that possessed her this time of year. Before long, Her Majesty could sit up and accept the food as Yesca passed it to her. The story was over, it was done with, and the details were even now turning ephemeral and fleeting in the waters of Anyis' mind. The golden mother would recall almost none of this by the end of the hour, though in all other respects she would appear

to have regained her senses.

The mitera knew that impressions were misleading. Even at her most lucid, Anyis was in no state to make any decisions, for herself or for her subjects. The realm needed its Queen to lead it, but it did not need Anyis in that roll. Though she might wish it not so, in her heart of hearts Yesca knew that the Queen's time under the Crown was limited to however long it took to locate her daughter the princess.

Depths take it, but Marhyd's little dolls had better get the job in Mezzegheb done well and promptly. There would be no end to the trouble if Her Highness lingered too long in such a deplorable place.

Verse II

Business in Mezzegheb flowed fast around small things, thought Olga. Indeed it seemed to speed by in direct proportion to the number of pearls hidden between her fingers as she shook hands with the local port authority officer. It was a miracle to witness, this sudden acceleration from floating doldrum to purposeful action. She and her sister had arrived well after the half of the hour and left before its end could come.

"Hope you all enjoyed yourselves," the official said with a wink to her eye.

It was in long-suffering tones that Morga replied, "Some of us more than others." Their travels with one Tachi din Hillia, spiky-haired tuli enthusiast, had given them much experience with that reaction, and the officer nodded with complete understanding as she waved them along.

"Oy, you!" Morga went stiff at the call, sharp and shrill, and Olga heard a muttered curse arrive from her sister's throat. The slender mer jetting towards them was pale as the fishes in the caves beneath the Valden spire, and would have been beautiful if not for the sneer. "Yes, you!" the mer continued. "Where's your little friend? She still owes me!"

"Well, considering how drunk on tuli she had to get to forget your ugly face, I'd call the two of you even," Morga shot back.

Pulling herself up short in front of the twins, the pale mer jabbed a finger at Morga's chest. "Now listen here, sweetheart, but your little orange friend owes me,

and this ain't a city that's kind to debtors."

"Poke that thing any closer," her sister growled back, "and I'll be charging you five pearl for the pleasure."

A derisive sniff rippled across. "Sure, like you're worth that much." The performer's outfit was more practical that day, in that it was not meant to come apart at a single pull of a strong current, but it did little to hide her breasts as she huffed them forward in indignation. "Don't mess with the professionals, sweetheart. We've been doing this longer."

Her twin was doing well enough on her own, but Olga decided that now was as good a time as any to lend a fluke. Looming behind the performer, she let her alto voice rumble the waters: "If by 'this' you mean shaking down mers for small pearl," she said, "that is still to be seen. So this is the mer who tried the... what was it called... the bump and whirl?"

"Yeah, sis. That's her. She wasn't that good at it anyways."

"What!? I am the best--"

"Oh, so you admit you were trying to scam my friend, then?" Morga had pulled herself to a straight vertical, with shoulders squared and every line of her arms flexed. Within a beat, Olga was up next to her sister in a matching pose. Either of them alone was easily twice the size of the pale mer, and the performer's nervous glances back and forth confirmed that she had realized as much.

"Everything alright over there?" called the port official. Olga did not doubt for a moment that the mer was fully possessed of a pair of ears capable of hearing

the conversation, but the friendly-phrased question offered a way out.

"We're fine," said Morga. "Thanks for asking. Just had to tell our new friend here that her playmate from the other day is a mite... how do you say... indisposed? so sorry, but your little date's got to be canceled."

"Alas, we know how much you were looking forward to it," Olga added. "But that is how the currents flow, sometimes."

The officer snorted in amusement. "Isn't that the truth. Well, Drazie, if your heart's not too broken about it, my shift ends soon and I just happened upon some rare delicacies the other day."

"Oh?" The pale mer's mood would turn on the tip of a spiral shell.

"Yeah. Pearl roots from the Mere Scothia. I've had them stewing at my tent all morning, so they should be ready. If you'd like a try?"

"That does sound nice..." Drazie turned her body in the water even faster than her mood, leaving traces of silt and bubbles in the water. "Do tell your little orange friend that she doesn't know what she's missing," the performer sang back at them. "Oh, and say hello to Red for me." With a swirl and a splash, the mer launched herself back to the fabric borders of the tent city. "See you after your shift, Ramunda!"

The port official chuckled. "She's a live one, isn't she. My thanks, young messras. We're not allowed to enjoy the entertainments, to it's not that often I have a chance with the local lovelies. This will be a fine day indeed."

"You're, ah, welcome?" said Olga.

Morga shrugged. "I guess someone's gotta enjoy her company. Best of luck."

With a quick salute, Ramunda directed the two of them away from the mooring posts and into the open water. "Back flaps are to your left. I hope your friends get to feeling better."

"Oh, I'm sure they will be fine," Olga told the mer. They were mindful to take the leftside currents for appearances, but as soon as they were safely out of sight of the mooring station, the twins had the float turn straight out onto the sands.

They could not leave the city behind fast enough.

*

Waiting upon a current-swept stone, a mere handspan above the sands, Rhiela fought her unease. Large, rolling piles of sand, rock, and old coral hid the city of tents behind their curves, but it was still too close for anybody's liking. Beside her, Rook had attacked the remaining mysteries of the runecraft cube with all the force of nerves and anxiety, but conceded the effort some time back. She did not know what the orange mer was working on at the moment, but it kept her quiet.

To her other side, Ardenne sat poised upon the stone with her new hunting spear ready. The old one had been cracked in half during a fight with one of Rhiela's own royal soldiers, though she hadn't been there to see, and this new one was the best the hunter could manage in the time sense. It was a rough length of bone with an old shell point bound at the end with

sinew. She hoped that it would do against the things Sera warned about that lived beneath the sands. None of them had sounded a pleasure to meet. And beyond those things, they also had to worry about abominations. They'd seen none in the waters of the Mere Mezzlerle as yet, but with all the fuss back home over an increase in sightings, greater caution was needed.

A puff of sand went up, a tail's length from where she sat on the rock. Rhiela let out a squeal of surprise.

"Just a goby, chum. Little fish, good digger. The mer camfion consider 'em to be good luck, 'cause they don't stick around areas with nastier sand-critters."

Ardenne eased the grip on her spear. "So this spot really is safe?"

"Would I lead you wrong?"

"Yes," the green mer stated flatly. "That time on the heights, and the mires, and..."

"Hey now, you were ready and willing to school with me on those, remember? And not like you haven't done your fair share, too. Why--"

"Can yer shut the flap-a-gills a beat and let a mer work!" Rook griped. "Tryin' something here, and yer be ruining my concentration." Speckled hands were open flat, and when Rhiela squinted she could make out the flicker of a runic grammar in action.

That was still a weak point for her, though she hated to admit it. Aside from the mirrored shield spell she had somewhat mastered during their stay in the Mere Scothia, she had yet to succeed with any off-the-fluke casting. Items were one thing, but casting

the powers under the firmament from her bare hands, well... If there was one point where she and Rook could agree, it was that the great magic-wielding mers of the old tales were awesome in repute and they would like to be just so, themselves.

Which would not happen if they could not master a basic attack spell. The soldiers had them, they knew. At least, the ministry was making items and equipment that a soldier could use. Lieutenant Grett had one, back in the Mere Scothia when the soldiers chased Ardenne and her friend. But Sera couldn't find the runework after the orcs were done with the poor Grett...

Rhiela was glad she only heard about all this well after the fact. It turned her stomach even now.

But from the red mer's description of getting dragged around and slammed in the face by nothing more than strong currents, Rook had taken inspiration. The flicker around her fingers was the result. The feel of the magic spoke of the kinetic force of flow, as well as the... telluric? Rhiela's brown crinkled in thought as she puzzled through it. That most solid and stubborn of forces beneath the firmament hardly seemed compatible with the one that was motion for the sake of motion. Her fingers twitched as she followed the orange mer's gestures.

A great puff of sand arose from below, a plume of grit which billowed upwards into a whirl of heavy darkness in the water. It danced in place for several beats before vanishing into the current. Rook lowered her hands and sighed.

"It was... very pretty," the princess opined.

"Impressive, actually. I don't think I could manage something like that."

"Thanks, Rhia." The other mer leaned back on the stone and blew bubbles out her nose. "It was s'posed to... I dunno, be like yer gots sand-scrapers what scrub yer all 'round, something like that. Make for a fast bath."

"Or a fast skinning," said Ardenne.

"Yeah, or that."

Distraction abated, Rhiela turned to Sera to ask the regular question of "When will they get here?" It was the third time by her count, but there wasn't much else to use for conversation with the red mer.

"Any time now... There." Sera's finger pointed to the far curve of a sand hill, where a dark shape was now coming around. "A-yup, that's them. And... oh, depths."

"What?" Rhiela shaded her eyes from the radiance of the firmament above and watched as the float came closer. There were two other shapes right after it, dark against the colorless sands. Then three. Then four.

*

"Hurry it up, sis!" yelled Morga.

Olga's left hand formed the miner's sign for belabored acknowledgment, because some things were obvious. Her right hand was firmly on the steering bauble of the float, which had already been coaxed into the highest speed it could safely maintain in the calm waters above the sand. Its outer flaps now fluttered and beat, open and shut and open again as they gathered water and sent it jetting behind. They had

long since ended the animating chants and now hung on as best they could, because there would be no catching the float if it got away from them now.

The things following them had no such problem. In fact, the eel-shaped abominations with the slender tentacles had better jets on them than the float itself. They slipped and curled around the wake of the twins' float without a thought for the speed.

Sera's meeting point was up ahead. Olga could see it clearly for herself, and the colors of her friends on the rock were hard to miss. If she turned the bauble now, the entire float would take a deep curve around, and...

The abominations were fast, but only in straight strokes. That was the sole reason the two sisters were still in one piece. The float went into a turn, and the things which were not eels continued on ahead for several beats before they could orient themselves and resume their pursuit.

*

Rook watched the float come right at them. She watched the things chasing the float slow and turn to follow. In the back of her head, a little voice was gibbering about how she should watch less and do more, and it was her. The rest of her body must've been a stranger's, because it wasn't listening at all to what the voice of herself was saying.

Arms wrapped her from behind, squeezing pleasantly around her waist and against her back. "You can do this," Rhia whispered in her ear.

For a beat she couldn't, because she was a-shivering with ticklish delight. But that got her body

to acting like her body again, and the little voice got to ordering everything about to what it should be doing. Her hands were up, fingers splayed and palms flat. In her mind's eye, she put each of the major runes of the grammar into place, one for a finger, and let the connecting runes fit in between with the webbing. It all clicked into place, faster than even during practice, and the net of the mystic grammar leapt forward just as the ugly eel-things came close.

The sands below the abominations rose up in a great burst, grains of grit riding the currents in whirls and swirls what caught things in their rough grasp and did not let go. The eel-things struggled and snapped, but the sand would not release them before taking its toll on their scaleless hides. Scrapes and scuffs leaked oily blood into the water that soon faded to nothing but a memory of a bitter taste.

Slowed down, the abominations were easy pickings for Ardy's spear and Red's knives.

"I knew it." Rhia's whisper tickled her ear. "Marsa was always the same way. You get all nervous and freeze up, but when you relax..." Another quick squeeze left a pleasant press against Rook's front and back, and then the golden-brown mer let her go. "Seriously, that was some good, swift casting. I'm green with envy here."

It was tempting to commit a bit of the old *less-say majesty* right then, but too embarrassing in front of everyone else. Rook settled for a happy return-hug of her own and a quick kiss on the cheek while Sera and Ardenne finished off the monsters.

Verse III

The eel-things, unpleasant as they were, did not take their deaths well. There was much thrashing and lashing with their tentacles as Ardenne's spear skewered them each in turn, and after that a few beats passed before they accepted their dooms to the tips of their tails. But as soon as the twitching ended, the limp bodies began to dissolve around the edges, soon to be nothing but an unpleasant feel upon the waters, like a thin and oily mess.

Ardenne knew that should would never be used to that. For all the abominations she had fought and killed since leaving the Mere Scotia -- not such a number, but still far too many -- each one of them had left her wishing that it would be the last one. The things made her feel sick on the inside, even above the odd pains and cramps that had struck her the other day.

There must have been something, some sign in the stroke of her flukes through the water to hint at how she felt, because the others gladly gave her the first seat within the float's limited space. Rook squeezed in right beside her with one of the rune-marked shells in her hands. The mer settled into the smaller seat with a contented look on her face.

"What's got you so happy?" the hunter had to ask.

"Oh, the *sat-iss-fak-shun* of a job well done, don't'cher know." The shell hid the smirk, mostly, but it still showed around the edges. "Gonna do s'more studyin', see what else I can get to doing well. Hm..." The orange mer hummed tunelessly as she read on.

Being not a mer of letters, Ardenne could not begin to decipher the scratches on the surface of the shell, and she did not even wish to try. Her thoughts turned inwards, to the many things she'd learned that day, and outward to the scenery of the Mere Mezzlerle. The sands were pale and colorless as ever, with the occasional rocky outcroppings, uniformly dark in contrast regardless of their color. Shadows played across the sand, of animals in the waters or ripples in the firmament.

A single shadow dominated the sands in the distance. It was so large that, no matter how she bent her neck, Ardenne could not see where it ended, only where it began. The details were lost in the far-off haze.

"Almost there!" shouted Sera. "Just up ahead."

"Where?" asked Rhiela.

"Was sayin', up and ahead. Got eyes, right? Use 'em."

The shadow on the sands was cast by something above, and as their float approached, that something grew less vague and more green. A solitary, immense mass of sargo and kelp floated in place, practically to the firmament, with only a thick kelpen cable to anchor it to an outcropping below. Their own float passed into the shaded expanse long before it reached that point.

"What...?" Ardenne could only get the one word out, but it was the most important.

"Welcome to Morag Head. One of the fortresses of flow, and the ride to our next destination." Sera's arm was up and waving to unknown eyes.

"There are mers up there?" Rhiela had her eyes

shaded as she tried to follow the direction of the wave.
"How? Who?"

Amid the sprawling green, small figures swam freely. Only by peering at them did the entirety of Morag Head become obvious to Ardenne, and even then she was not sure she believed what her eyes reported. The mass of greenery was as large as any one section of her home reef in the Mere Scothia, or perhaps larger still. There was no way to tell when the farther reaches were obscured.

"Watch your mouths up there," Sera warned. "Those're friends, but not always friendly. Or sometimes too friendly."

"Which is it?" Rook's shell was on her lap, forgotten as the orange mer stared upwards.

"Complicated folk." Sera shrugged. "But they hate the Temple and they don't trust Bryndoon mers much, so..." The red mer's thumb jerked back towards Rhiela. "Should probably keep mum on certain details. Clear?"

"As the morning firmament," said the princess. "This is the Free Flow we're talking about, isn't it? The rebels." Rhiela's face was hard to read for anything but the distaste so strongly scrawled across it. "I've heard reports."

Sera waved her off. "Not worth the water they floated in on. And this ain't exactly the Free Flow. These're the mers what inspired it, sure, but the Flow's found across the seas, hidden here and there in plain sight. All the mers of the Free Flow are welcome on Morag Head, but they don't live on it."

Eyes squinted, Ardenne caught the moment

three bodies left the protection of the foliage and began the descent through the fathoms to where they now floated. Even from a distance, the thick, scaleless tails and side flippers were obvious. "Mer camfion," she said. Any comment about possibly being too friendly made more sense to her now. "Ah, if they, um..."

The rogue read the blush on her face with ease. "If they feel like offering hospitality, and you're not comfortable with it, tell 'em no. Just do it polite-like. No punching."

Her mouth tightened in annoyance. "I wouldn't..."

There was a chuckle from the front, where the twins sat. "Yes, you would," said Morga. "My chest still aches when I think about it."

"Well, you weren't being hospitable right then," Ardenne shot back.

Rook's eyes bounced back and forth during the exchange. "Um, missing something?"

There was no time to explain, for which Ardenne was grateful. The three camfion were swift, and though the fathoms numbered a full hand's span and more, it did not take them much time at all to cross it. Ardenne's sole previous experience with this tribe of mers had been Rohaise, the wanderer who'd helped her and Sera go against the greater flow and reach the Mere Leïna from Scothia in a few days. That was enough to prepare her for their appearance.

They were older mers, these camfion, though not necessarily old. Her own mother's age, Ardenne figured. Their top halves lacked the slender grace that Rohaise possessed, being sturdier, better muscled, and

more motherly in the chest. The kelpen wraps they wore around and under the armpits were barely enough to contain it all. Thicker waists still looked dainty when seen above tremendous tails more akin to a cetacean's in size and strength. The little side flippers paddled lazily as their owners settled into a comfortable floating position before the visitors.

"Hail, capetas." Sera bowed her head. "Nantsi, Eilee, Ailit. Too long, too long."

"Too long, indeed," said the middle mer, the one Sera had called Eilee. Like her sisters to the right and left, her hair grew long on top, but kept the temples and ears bare. The three of them all possessed brown hair dappled in different patterns of white, patterns that extended to their bare skin, though faintly. A broad forehead merged with a broader nose to provide a long ramp for wide-set eyes to stare down. "Heard we a mite from Rohaise, when last she passed through on her way to Mezzeret. Some business in the royal harbor, was it?"

"Went a mite muddy, at that?" said the camfion to the left, Nantsi. Ears swiveled towards the visiting mers. "And bring you guests this time? A rarity. Need we ask how muddy things got?"

"Knowing the answer already, right? Immensely." The sigh Sera released was loud and dramatic. "And happy to tell you all and Dulut about it. Ah, Dulut's not with you?"

"At Mezzeret," said the third camfion, Ailit. "Getting you all stowed on the Head, then casting off. But first..."

"Ah, yes." The red mer bowed her head.

"Introductions. Everyone, these three are the capetas, the mers who run Morag Head. Nantsi, Ailit, Eilee. Well respected, honest, maybe a dozen daughters between them?"

"Eleven," Eilee confirmed. "Two grand-daughters now, as well."

"My best regards to your lucky daughters." Sera waved a hand through the currents, pointing out each of her companions in turn. The hunter was not surprised to be first: "Ardenne min Diana, of the Mere Scothia. Rohaise probably mentioned her."

"Yes." Ailit nodded. "How fared that business with your mother?"

A stone crashed through her stomach at the memory of her last talk with the mer who birthed her, but Ardenne was able to stutter out a generally positive report with just the bare facts. It was hard to read the wide-set eyes of the camfion, but if they had questions of her account, those would wait for later.

"Next up," said Sera. "Morga and Olga, twins from the Mere Kazahn. Crafters."

"Didn't think Kazahn manoa knew what honest work was," Nantsi cracked.

"Most of them don't," replied Morga in matching tones.

Olga added, "We feel sorry for them, sometimes."

"And from the Mere Leïna," the red mer continued, gesturing to the last two of their companions. "Rook min... ah..."

The speckled orange mer finished for her. "Should be Rook min Raël, but that's not too common

to say mother-names in the Mere Arkhala, so Baba never let me get in the habit of it. I do runework and stuff," she told the capetas. "If'n you gots anything broken, I could use the practice at fixin'."

Nantsi chuckled. "Might be we have sommat in need of repair. And your last frind?" The senior camfion nodded to Rhiela.

A thrill ran down Ardenne's spine, a little line of shock that served to get the rest of herself ready for trouble. She did not know the camfion all that well, nor their particular ways, but she was pretty fair at understanding Sera. It was not much of a guess that any friend of the red mer's would not take well to the truth of the princess. The question was, what would their roguish companion do in the here and now?

"Rhia? Oh, she's been tagging along since that business in Bryndoon," Sera began.

"Bryndoon?" Ailit's nose twitched in disdain. "Not much good out of there these days."

Rhiela had drawn herself up to her full length, chest huffed in that way that made her indignation clear but otherwise did little for her dignity. The princess's top had seen far better days. "I left Bryndoon because I want to help," she said flatly. None missed that the words were aimed more towards Sera. "And I shall continue to travel and learn until I can do everything that needs doing."

"So what *can* you do, young'n?" said Eilee. "Asides filling your blouse?"

The princess's face went bright pink, all the way up to the dark roots of her hair, as Sera and the camfion shared a loud chuckle. "I am studying runecraft with

Rook here," she declared. "I've already mastered a shield spell, and I am working on a blade spell right now."

From Nantsi, an appraising eye looked the brown-gold mer over. "Might you be more interesting than you seem at first," she said. "Well, with the introductions concluded, shall we be off? It's a long day and more to our destination."

"Why, er, yes, I suppose so..." Rhiela's words tripped over the sudden change of subject, and she remained quiet for some time afterwards as she helped Ardenne and the twins stow the float properly.

Ardenne had to pat the mer's back or shoulder a few times to reassure her. To reassure herself, actually. The current was heading once again to strange waters, and that was enough to make anyone nervous.

Verse IV

It was a busy hour of the day in Bryndoon, with the light of the firmament gracing the shellwork beauty of its buidlings to guide mers of all colors through the outer waters and inner passages as they carried out their tasks. Marsa was among them, making a straight line between the palace and the guard barracks on the other side of the cliff's gentle curve. She did not mind the crowds, paid no mind at all to the busy bodies swimming towards and away from her. She did not even need to ignore them; most took one look at the ministry insignia upon her tunic, the sign of the House of Linnea next to it, and then wisely decided to swim upon a different current to their destination.

The assistants, those grey-clad mers who bowed to her mother's every whim, nodded as she approached the ministry tent, and she in turn acknowledged them in the same manner. Along her shoulders, the satchel of shells rattled.

"Good morning, my daughter," said Ministra Marhyd. Her mother was a slimmer bulk than before, brimming with an energy that ate her food as swiftly as she could fit it into her mouth. "How was your swim here? Were there any issues with the crowds? I know how that used to trouble you so."

"All was well, mother," she reported. No further words were volunteered as Marhyd made a quick examination of Marsa's face and eyes.

"Pupils dilated normally, no slackness of muscle, responsiveness as expected..." the ministra muttered to herself. "Good, good. It is encouraging to see that your

treatments are taking so well, Marsa."

Within her mother's voice dwelt something to prompt a response. "I am ever thankful, mother."

"It always sends me a thrill to hear you say that. Now, go see your sisters. They'll be leaving at the end of the hour, so allow them a proper send-off, understood?"

"Yes, mother."

A single float waited in preparation at the barracks mooring post: one of the small, swift types used by couriers to the far seas. The folds of its kelpen exterior fluttered in the currents, and inside it were bundles marked again with the signs of the ministry and the House of Linnea. Marsa knew their contents well; she had helped her mother finish several of them. Some other time, in the safety of her chambers when the actions of the day grew dreamlike and ephemeral, she might have a vague reminiscence of them and feel sorry for whoever would be on the receiving end of their power. That was if she remembered what they did; those hours of rest were when the tender ministrations of her mother were at their weakest, and her mind did wander so.

But she was not in her chambers now, nor the princess's. She was out and about on family business, and such thoughts did not float to mind.

"Martella!" she cried instead. "Marilis! Is all ready for departure?"

Her sisters were clad in blackest green, the kelpen weave strengthened by runic processes until it was tougher than sharkskin. Their faces and hands were pale, while their hair was the lavender of the House of Linnea. Unlike Marsa with her long braid, the sisters

kept theirs short: Marilis's swept back and pinned, Martella's in spikes.

"Greetings, sister," replied Marilis as she checked the last of the straps on the float. "We shall away soon."

"And be back sooner," promised Martella. "We shall find those wicked mers and smash them up right well!"

She had her best smile on at the sound of that. "I look forward to hearing your stories."

"And to having your precious princess back?" Martella teased.

Her cheeks went red, and for a beat she could feel herself sliding back into her old habits, into the hazy mental blindness of her chamber-time, ruled by anxiety and worry. All too suddenly was she aware of the mers swimming around, and if none of them looked her way, that did not mean they might, and if... Her body shuddered at the thought, air bladders expelling clouds of bubbles even as she fought to keep them in.

And then a hand was on her back. A heavy hand, but fever-warm and comforting as it stroked her skin. "Now, now," came her mother's whisper on a current for her ears only. "We shall have none of that. Be strong, Marsa. Be in control. *Be my best daughter.*"

The subtle harmonics which rode upon those last few words buoyed Marsa, lifting her spirits and dispelling the weights of doubt and fear. Yes... she was the best. She knew that. Mother had told her, and thus was it true. She would need to remain best, for... for... The black current almost overcame her once more, but with her mother at her back, Marsa found the strength

to push through.

She would be the best for Rhiela, the strongest and the bravest, and the princess would love her for ever and ever. Things would be as they should.

*

Ministra MARhyd kept an eye on her daughters as they finished the preparations. How beautiful they were, three little dolls in a row with their matching hair in the light purple tones of the fulgurant force. Such a difficult, quarrelsome energy to control and direct, and yet the things a mer could do with it, once properly harnessed! Marhyd fancied that no mer to live since the War of the Black Flow had shown even half the skill, half the prowess with which she herself could manipulate it.

Nor could any mer imagine the uses the fulgurant force may have, beyond the simplistic application of directed shocks, the sort of thing which even common eels and rays might manage in the wild. Her Grace might suspect -- surely did suspect, after the miracle of the din Hillia girls becoming competent -- but in this era of abominations and rebellion, none would speak of suspicion when success was at hand.

Oh, this was a wonderful time to be alive, as wonderful as any other and yet more so.

She did allow herself a beat to regret the need to use Marsa so, but the results were a marked improvement over the weak-spined little thing living in the princess's wake. That was an image in need of correction, and so like any good mother, she had corrected. The occasional lapses were to be expected, but it would not do to push too hard, too fast, lest the

greater plan be compromised.

Marilis and Martella, now... The ministra ran her gaze across her two new daughters as they smartly and efficiently concluded the loading and directed the float to the launch point. In many ways, those two had been simpler to work on, though not easier. Marhyd simply had less concern about the material cost of the outcomes she sought. Still, it had worked out well. The former din Hillia girls were focused and dedicated, loving daughters and deadly warriors, but they required a proper test of their mettle to make sure that her efforts were not in vain.

And if any place under the firmament could test one's resolve, it was the tent city of Mezzegheb.

Marhyd smiled and waved with Marsa as the float cast off and her adopted duo began their swift trip to the sea of sands. If Marsa heard the rough, staccato chuckle to rumble in her breast, the girl was too well trained to take notice.

Verse V

Watch-with-Clicks sang sad notes to herself as she roamed through the waters-above-sand. This was a lonely place, a quiet place with neither the clicks and calls of the delphin pods nor the immense volume of joyous noise from the rorqual. Not enough fish, and thus not many of her kind would come to this sea. Not many of the wicked mers, either; those ones stayed close to the rocky and weedy patches, as they always would. The little pink delphin was not concerned with them.

But her mers, the ones-to-guide? Where had

they gone? The question was important; the question was terrible. She did not know the answer.

Querulous, questioning clicks. Echoes under the firmament with no response of note. The circuits around the smaller great rock, wherein the little wicked mers sheltered. Their laughter and trills were no delphin song, but their emotions were a calming sort of happiness.

But they could not answer the question, and without an answer Watch-with-Clicks knew not where to watch to fulfill her duty. She could only swim to the far distance, away from the little great rock and the big great rock with its funny covering and sour tastes, and trust in the guidance of Gentleness-of-Tide and Strength-of-Waves.

A click returned to her, and with it the sense of something large in the distance. Larger than a rorqual or a cachalot, and those were the only things which Watch-with-Clicks knew to compare. Lone did she swim before this something became more than a shadow on the senses, abut when she knew she had found it, still she did not know its naming.

It was kelp. And sargo. And weeds of every sort, all floating high over the sands, all growing downwards -- and never was there a thing she had seen like it! This new thing bobbed in the flow of the current, kissing the firmament as a delphin might for the breath of life, while a long strand of kelp reached down to touch a rock below.

And then, the strand did break! It quit the rock and floated free. Her forehead felt the sounds of mer-song as the entire mass of green did shiver and

shift, and all was caught in a current like none Watch-with-Clicks had felt upon the water-above-sand.

Wicked mers, tricky merrs, moving the green like this. Watch-with-Clicks kept her distance as she followed. Her mers, her stubborn and strange mers, would doubtless be upon this mass, for that was how the currents flowed these days.

*

As Ardenne lay upon a bed of foliage, so green as to match her hair, she could feel the subtle shifts as Morag Head left its mooring and went adrift upon the currents. There was little for any of them to see, snugly bundled as they were, but plenty to hear and feel through the waters.

The song began immediately, a deep crooning as the camfion of Morag Head made love in their voices and gave power to the flow of water around them. There was a gentle push of acceleration, such as she had felt before on their little float, but stronger, more immense, as if the sea itself were in motion. At the heart of the song, Ardenne thought she heard the voices of the three capetas come together in a harmony which all others followed.

"The Mere Mezzlerle's a lot wider 'n most mers think," Sera was explaining to the others. "Got a huge expanse of nothing but sand -- no rocks, no grass, nothing -- before you get anywhere worth talking about. But over that way you get these huge mats of sargo that break off and float freely a while, like sargo does, only..."

"It's stupidly humongous, it what'cher gonna say?" Rook guessed.

"The way the camfion grow 'em, yeah."

Ardenne could not see the red mer, but she could hear the grin on her face. "Let 'em roam the firmament, grow, get big and full of food for the main settlement. Ride 'em around, and the guards in the tent city never realize what they're looking at."

"And they just trust us enough to show all of this?" The princess had a fair point, Ardenne could admit. A new worry floated into her heart to join the rest.

"Trusting me, at least, and you lot are with me. And where we're goin'..." Sera drew quiet for a beat. "If'n they don't think you're trusty, they just won't let you leave. Simple as that. So be good."

One of the twins rumbled -- Olga, from the serious tones: "And where is it we are going?"

"To Mezzeret, true capital of the Mezzerle Sands and a sight better place to visit than the city of tents. Gonna love it, really."

Verse VI

Behind the façade of the Temple of Bryndoon, past the clever architecture and well-formed statues of the Goddess which greeted the lay mers with open arms, there was the promontory known as the Stone of the Faith. Crissed and crossed with passageways, it was ever a busy place as prestra of all ranks went along their business, but few ever stopped within it. Most every spot of importance and utility lay outside the Stone; its passages merely connected through it.

Opposite the grand temple face, there was an open clearing of stone pavement filled with soft sand, carried laboriously from the home waters of the Mere Kamazon and carefully sifted to provide the softest bed upon which to set the leondra tents. Unlike the flappy structures the manoa used for travel shelters, the tents of Kamazon were formed of stiffened kelpen slats fashioned into curtain-like walls that encompassed a prestra's personal cell. The walls curved towards the top, pulling inward until they resembled an urchin puckered up for the evening. There were no flow-holes, for the space between kelpen slats allowed the fresh water to flow in freely. There was no entrance save through the top, nor any way to seal away the world. No prestra would need that.

Curled upon the sand at the bottom of her cell, the prestra sacrista Nehemi min Noemi pondered. There were myriad things she should have been doing instead, but her thoughts weighed heavy and her heart heavier. In her hand she held the 'Lament of Hiramini min Barabba,' gifted to her by Mitera Yesca, and though the

light was dim within the slatted tent, her fingers read the etched letters as well as her eyes. She repeated the words of one verse to herself, matching voice to the texture beneath her fingertips:

*O! what cruel kismet
O! what price,
Of pearls made sanguine in
My sister's grasp, her final
Treasures a memento of the life
A fatal trade for the future.
Little Zakias, piece of my heart,
Who fits the lacuna, never now filled
I weep, I cry, I give ululation every day.
The tragedy, this loss,
Mothers and daughters, never again,
For what purpose?
For what goal?
The world to come,
The world that was,
So they tell me.
For this, your lives in vain.
For this, your deaths in glory.
The world is dead.
The world is renewed.
What sanguine pearls
In recompense for our loss.*

It was rough, raw, so unlike the delicate poetry of the Mere Kamazon and yet indelibly leondra. Nehemi's heart ached for this mer of so many generations past. Her mind wondered at such need to

cry out, to blame the waters and the fathoms from firmament to abyss until finally there came acceptance of the facts, acceptance of the reality.

Hirami min Barabba, ancient mitera of yore, had the benefit of knowing what had come of her loss in the end. Nehemi was not so self-assured. She could not put to words why she had felt so close to the guard, Shalar min Shandra, nor why a single, senseless death affected her so. All she had were the mitera's word that she would understand, given time, and a shell of poetry that said much the same.

Too much time spent reading. Too much time lost pondering. She let the shell fall to the sand. On the morrow would she begin packing her things in earnest, for the pilgrimage was soon to set out. Soon would she see the Mere Kazahn and perform her sacred duties for all the mers of the city of Valden. Then would her life have meaning. She would not live her life in vain, nor would she let Shalar's passing go unremembered.

There was a list, etched upon a soft shell by her own foreclaw, of names she could recommend to prospective mothers who had yet to decide. Shalar was the first upon it.

May the poor mer's spirit live on in memory.

Verse VII

What was she expecting? Rhiela could not truthfully say. The mer camfion had never come up as a topic of conversation in any of her lessons, beyond the bare facts of their existence and an event in the distant past referred to only as the Fugitives' War. And even that last detail had been hard-won, nestled deep within a splendidly dull treatise on military tactics which her Aunt Aysmin had bade her to read the year before. Rhiela could not even say for certain who had won that war, if it had indeed ever concluded.

The only certitude she had was that nothing the fat-tailed camfion could do might ever match the splendor of Bryndoon's shell exterior when it caught the final rays of light from the evening firmament. That was a beauty, she felt, with which nothing could compete.

The great mass of green traveled for the day and through the night, and in the darkness Rhiela dreamed of her dear home and dearest Marsa, who awaited her still. The shell domes gleamed through morning, noon, and into the evening as they played with little Tilly the octopod and shared stories over tasty treats. The day was just about to end with a delicious kiss when the rolling wake of reality forced her out of slumber and into the dim green light of a new day.

She grumbled through the breakfast of pod fruits and kelps provided by their hosts, and some time later grumbled more as Ardenne helped disentangle her from the passenger moorings when it came time to leave. As they disembarked from Morag Head and got their first glimpse of Mezzeret, Rhiela came to a simple

but staggering conclusion of the sort one never seemed to want first thing in the morning: that it was possible to outdo the efforts of another without ever competing in the same waters.

Mezzeret was laid out upon a flat plain of stone and sand, bounded by rocky hills all around. Above each hill there arose a twin to Morag Head, or rather triplets, quadruplets, more mountains of green above than there were rocks of black and grey below. Mers swam up to the great expanses and down to the neat pattern of white-stone buildings upon the plain. Each structure below was studded with tiny points of color, and as they all descended Rhiela could see that those points were shells of myriad hues, set in patterns that pulled and fooled the eyes until she could see the ghosts of images swimming upon those flat surfaces, shifting as they passed by and their vantage changed.

The open areas were swept clean, either by current or by hand of mer, with none of the detritus of civilization, the broken bits and half-eaten husks that a mer might toss aside, confident in the facility of the bottom feeders to remove them. Rhiela had never much thought of the ground beneath her flukes, but someone here did. Many someones, in fact, and so thoroughly that it made her aware for the first time of a way in which her own beloved city was lacking.

Rhiela was ready to hate the mer camfion for that. No other reason was necessary.

"Coo-ee, what a place," said Rook as they swam down together. "Think maybe they's got a spell or runic artifact that directs the flow down there? Cleans and clears and everything? Might be we could use sommat

like that back home."

"I do not know what you are talking about," she replied stiffly.

"Sure, yer place up high, prolly can't see it, but Yer H... er, yer gotta see things from where I'm swimmin', an' that's the back end of the peddler row, full 'a the junk the nicer neighbors don't want. Gets to be right-o mucky down there. Old Baba'd be real interested in a good cleaning tool."

The orange-speckled mer's bubbly excitement was as annoying as it was contagious, and Rhiela caught herself nodding along to Rook's guesses as to this or that, of how things might work or how they could be adapted. She even volunteered a few ideas in spite of her mood, in spite of her unease.

There were a few things which every camfion appeared to have in common, judging from the ones she could see in passing. They all seemed to have colors in a spectrum of brown to black, often dappled with white to form individual patterns. No blondes or russets, as might be found in Brandell, nor any of the more vibrant colors of Leīsiatran ancestry. No greens like Ardenne, for that matter. To counter this, the camfion wore untold variations of braid and bead atop their heads, or dangling threads through pierced ears, or stacks of bracelets.

Very few wore anything directly over their chests, though many of the outfits did have the woven architecture to support them from below. Rhiela did her best not to stare, truly she did, but it was hard to miss getting an eyeful, even by accident.

Glancing over, Rhiela could see Ardenne

blushing a furious red, and a grimace passed over the hunter's face as she kept a hand on her stomach. "Ah, I am not feeling well," the green mer admitted. "Perhaps the currents shook me too much on the way in."

She offered an arm, and the hunter took it, clinging all the way to her shoulder. The need to concentrate, to focus on guiding two bodies at once, helped take her mind off her annoyance at the city and its inhabitants.

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A small, focused flow of water carried the syllables of Sera's name past her ears. She smiled but did not turn her head to see until the familiar form of Rohaise settled into a steady stroke beside her. "It has been a busy few weeks," the camfion commented, still as carefully aimed notes.

"You have no idea..." she whispered back. A break in her stroke pulled her further behind her companions as they were led to the visitor quarters, and she could face the other mer without worrying about anyone overhearing. The songs of the camfion stirred the waters too much for general sounds to carry far. "I have missed you," she said to Rohaise.

"And I, you." The camfion took her hand as they swam on. "And worried, too. The patrols went crazy mere days after last we parted, and I had to quit the Mere Leïna entirely. Whatever did you stir up from the mud this time?"

"Still working on that," Sera admitted. "Brought friends to help, though."

"So you did..." Rohaise turned her broad neck to watch the mers swimming ahead of them. "Any

among them a leman, perhaps?" she asked in the usual blunt manner of the camfion.

A snort escaped her nose. "Them? Nah. Couldn't keep up with me if they tried."

"Ah, I thought perhaps the burnished brown one with the rack. Surely she catches the attention."

Laughter and indignation conspired to choke her on her own water. "Depths forbid. Rhia is... let's say a bit of a prude. Shoulda seen how scandalized she got when I was tellin' about camfion hospitality."

"Oh really..." The average camfion had an amazing set of lips on her face, as Sera could say from pleasant experience. They could pull back in an instant to show teeth, or wriggle around as mirth flowed out. Quite dextrous, too. Most anything a manoa could do with her fingers, a camfion would do with her mouth. Suffice to say that a camfion smile was a broad and garulous thing, as Rohaise was showing now.

"Don't be too awful 'bout it," Sera warned. "Brownie's an annoying chum at times, but she means well."

"High praise, coming from you."

Was it? She wasn't so sure. Liking Brownie min Front-Bubbles was a thing beyond her, but it might've been that she had a grain of respect for the princess. More than when they'd first mer. Maybe. Sera would not confirm, but she would amply deny it if asked. Swatting Rohaise smartly on the mer's thick tail, she changed the subject instead.

"You remember Ardenne, right? She's been through a lot, even since you met her. Tell everyone that if she says no, to leave well enough alone. Don't

want to push her."

"Understood." Rohaise's mane of hair drifted behind her as she nodded. "I would ask, but we shall all hear it in the morning, I suppose. But first, to the visitors' party! Will you be interested in joining me later for a more private welcome?" The camfion's wink was almost as emotive as her smile.

"Thought you'd never offer." Sera's own wink spoke far more without words. As the camfion swam off, her mind turned to happier things, to pleasant distractions from the events of the past few weeks.

Ah... it was good to be home.

Verse VIII

When she and her sister had left their homewaters for the distant reaches of the seas, Olga had known to expect strange and unusual things, odd customs, and unfriendly attitudes. The mers of Mezzeret were certainly unusual, but there was nothing unfriendly here. The five of them were escorted halfway across the city's plateau by what could only be described as a parade of mers, most if not all of them about their own age. It was an excellent way to see the city and, she suspected, an equally good way for the city to see them.

Morga got into the stroke of it soon enough, taking any opportunity to flex an arm and show off muscle. If she were to be honest, Olga caught herself doing the same without even thinking about it. The mer camfion seemed to delight in swimming and streaking past in flashes of speed, with whistles and song to compete for the attention of their guests. It would have been impolite not to react.

When they arrived at their destination, a rounded building of fitted stones and a cloth dome rising above, it was to find a party waiting.

"Come, come, no sense in letting a good welcome go to waste," Sera urged them from the rear. The red mer stroked forwards, waving them on with her flukes. She seemed more at ease than Olga had ever seen her before.

It made her wonder if she and her twin came off as tense to the others, being away from their home as they were.

Tense or not, their hosts intended them to relax. There was food in plenty, kelpen wraps and weed pastes, fruiting pods and chewing roots. Nothing of flesh, fish or otherwise, and to her relief there was no tuli, either. Each of the guests was paired with a host, and Olga spent the afternoon hour chatting with a young camfion named Anslee about life in the Mere Kazahn.

"Coo..." Anslee was saying. "And the galda, they really do have those long scales down their arms?"

"And up on their heads and down their backs," Olga confirmed. "They're used to help with diving and lofting on the hot currents. Or to signal their mood. My sister and I had to make do." She placed a hand to her forehead and flashed her fingers to demonstrate. "And we'd go lofting and diving with cloth sacs on our backs when we were young. Different tools for a different job, like with those flukes you've got on your waist."

"Yea, I can see that." The camfion considered her own side-fins, fluttering them around in circles as broad as her accent. The mers of Mezzeret all spoke in half-song tones with the vowels stretched long, it seemed like. "I'd love to meet a galda someday. We don't get in too close to the hot mountains."

"And the galda don't ever leave them." Olga nodded. "But things change in time. We all hope to see the travel bans lifted eventually." Inwardly, she felt a pang of regret. One of the very reasons why she and her sister traveled the greater currents now was to observe and report back to the galda elders, eventually, but she did not know what those wise souls would think of it all. It surely seemed as though she and Morga had

drifted into murkier waters than any could have expected.

"So how do they kiss with those beaky mouths?"

Blink, blink. Her eyes did the speaking for a beat. "Ah... they don't, I suppose. At least, not that I have ever seen, but they are serious and private mers..."

"Darn, and here I was hoping you could tell me what it was like to kiss one."

Another long beat passed. "Unfortunately, that sort of relationship between manoa and galda is not met with approval in Valden." And it was almost entirely on the manoa side, she knew. That was one of the unspoken truths of their life as they grew up. Though their mom raised them well to be galda in all but scales, she and her sister couldn't risk getting into that sort of relationship with their friends in Valden. Openly, at least, and that was hardly satisfactory. She did not doubt that this was one more factor behind their journey year abroad: to find someone who would accept them properly in a romantic sense. She preferred not to dwell upon that.

"Huh, so sad." Anslee leaned in, snuggling up against Olga's arm. "Love's a thing to share. Doesn't make sense to tie it all up like that."

She would need to be denser than the little urchin of Granny Liese's stories to miss that hint. Glancing around carefully, Olga could see her twin getting cozy with her own host, though the two were still only talking. Rook appeared to be deep in discussion with a pair of camfion over something quite exciting to her, while Rhiela sat to the side and nodded.

Ardenne was off in a corner, talking with an older mer in less flamboyant clothing. Sera was nowhere to be seen.

Which brought her back to Anslee, who was looking up at her with warm, wide-set eyes and a shy grin. Olga had been trying to ignore how nice the camfion's open vest looked on her, but... here in this place, that was certainly impolite. So, leaning down, she expressed her appreciation in the best way she could figure.

Anslee giggled. "Don't kiss much, do you?"

"First time," she admitted, feeling pink around the edges.

The camfion winked. "Come on, then. I know a room nearby where I can give you a few pointers." Olga let Anslee take her by the hand and lead her off. She caught a glimpse of Morga's surprised face right before her twin's own host started snuggling harder.

So for once, she was the one diving deep without looking. Or rather... Olga kicked up a beat to wrap a strong arm around Anslee's waist. Not without looking. She could see exactly where this could lead. Strange waters, strange customs. And very friendly attitudes.

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It took more than a few beats for Rook to pick up on the stillness. Like the waters where she sat were humming and buzzing with chatter fit to hide an entire room's worth of sound away, and that didn't stop when the rest of the conversations did. If anything, her friendly chat with the camfion lasses sitting to either side only got more animated. The three of them were deep into the details of one of the caloric runes from

Baba's shell library when Rhia happened to say, "Oh, there they all go," in that sort of unhappy-but-not-sad tone that Her Highness had when something annoyed her.

"Whassat?" She looked up and around to find that the four of them were all the mers in the chamber, schooled together along one resting couch. The twins had vanished, and Ardenne's flukes were just now disappearing around a corner. "Huh. Guess they're gettin' an early night of it."

"Something like that." Her first new friend on the left, Elspeth, had a funny little giggle to her. The new friend on the right, Blaer, echoed with a laugh of her own.

Rhia, though, she wasn't laughing and she wasn't smiling. "I cannot believe this..." the princess muttered. "Our first night in a strange city, and, and..."

The details were knocking together in Rook's head like a gnarled bit of grammar, but she came to a conclusion sooner rather than late. "Oh. Yeah, right. Sera mentioned all that, din't she. Well, can't blame a mer for bein' friendly-like, right?"

"And we do love being friendly around here," Blaer said with a smile that stretched her mouth from the left ear all the way to the right. "But Rook, you were saying about that rune?"

"Oh yeah, well, yer gots to look at it this way, I'm a-thinkin'. It's drawin' the heat from one direction, so..."

It was a fun conversation to be having, and they'd been having it ever since Elspeth and Blaer had mentioned that they were training to be runeworkers

for the big floaty-plants. Those things required some muddy-massive workings to move at all, and Rook hadn't ever met a mer with as much to say about the kinetic forces of flow and ebb with their various runes. The surface of the stone couch was marked with smudges of mud and fruiting pod pulp as they'd drawn out diagrams and grammars to illustrate their points, with Rook adding in a little something whenever she had one to give.

Likewise, the camfion lasses loved to hear about her tricks with runecraft, oohing and aahing as she described some of the stuff she'd put together recently. Sand still stirred from when she'd demonstrated that bit of whirly-swirly grammar what had smacked those abominations outside of Mezzegheb.

"I shall be heading to my hammock, then." Rhia was up and stroking away even before she said it. "Enjoy your chat, Rook. I'll see you at least bright and early in the morning, I suppose."

"Fair night, Rhia. So..." she continued once Her Highness was gone. "Yeah, turns out that if'n yer use that rune to pull all the heat away from a spot, then..."

The three of them were huddled in together, head to head to head, as she marked out the grammar in crude strokes. Pretty was something it weren't, but she got the idea across. Elspeth had suggestions for flowing runes, while Blaer knew the ebbing runes to a tee. When they were done, the diagram was still a right mess, but it had a surprise waiting in one corner.

"It looks like you've turned a heat rune into a chill rune, almost." Elspeth's broad nose rippled with amusement. "Mite complicated way of doing it, but

interesting true. Would it work, do you think?"

"Only one way to know for sure." Blaer pushed off and grabbed both their arms. Momentum pulled them all up, over, and across the threshold of the room in a tangled knot of arms and flukes. It was a miracle they didn't break anything when they hit the far wall of the passage. Only their composure took a right bump to it. The giggles propelled them all the way to wherever the camfion lasses were taking her.

Rook wouldn't have thought this would be how her evening would go, but she'd go muddy if she wasn't going to enjoy it as much as she could. Elspeth and Blaer, she decided, were just the sort of fun she'd been missing. She hoped everybody else was having as good a time. Even Rhia in her hammock all alone.

Verse IX

In the depths of night, little moved. Little dared move. The night feeders were out and about, but those ones more often lay in wait, gulping and engulfing any little fish unwise enough to swim by or unlucky enough to be entranced by a glimmering light.

Along the strongest flow to Mezzegheb, a lonely float swam on. Its flaps were tattered and tired from riding the great flows, and its riders did not look much better. They mumbled the chants of ebb and flow which kept their vehicle in motion, and it was a testament to its crafting that its billows never skipped a beat even when they did.

The firmament above glittered with hints of light, and deep shadows were cast upon the sands below. In between, the float continued with its lamp lit, and schools of little fishes followed out of dazzled curiosity. Medium-sized night feeders picked them off one by one, unwilling to let such a bounty go to waste. One such feeder, a long and lithe eel with a mouth full of teeth, swam straight at the most obvious hole in the float's exterior.

An armored hand met it, palm flat and fingers outstretched. The eyes of the eel, weak as they were, could not miss the glare of purple flickering between those fingers. Nor could the purple force miss it.

The hand pulled the remains of the eel inside. At the other end of that arm, Marilis din Linnea examined her kill with a blank curiosity. "Bore eel," she said after a beat. "Eats its way straight through its prey. A pointless death."

"Shall we eat it?" asked her sister, Martella.
"You did cook it well enough."

Marilis sniffed it closely, tasting the water that passed over the corpse. A grimace crossed her face. "It is as disgusting as it looks," she declared.

"Like a live higgly?"

"A what?" she asked her sister.

"You remember. A higgly. It's... it's..."
Martella's voice slowed as she struggled to place the word within her memory. "Funny. I know that I've heard of such a fish, and that it is a disgusting little thing, but..."

"It is not important," said Marilis. "And we do not need the food. Look, our destination lies ahead."

The tent city of Mezzegheb glowed faintly in the darkness, the protective patterns of its fabric walls shining as they did their work. No feeders in the darkness would be entering the city, tonight or any night. Inside the tent, none would ever notice.

The official at the mooring posts took one look at their shells and waved them on. In the light of the lamps, the port mer's face was forever pale, but for a beat she had the hue of a fish's underbelly. "I, I shall send word ahead..." the mer stammered.

"Please do," Marilis told her. "We need to get things started."

Not far from the mooring posts, a flap in the tent fabric opened to reveal a different sort of darkness inside, one broken into pieces by a thousand little lamps to light and guide visiting mers to where their pearl might be spent. Those same lamps did nothing to reveal the activities those pearls were spent on, though it was

never difficult to guess.

"A disgusting, rotten place," Marilis said as they swam down the main avenue of tents to the viceroy's offices. "Let us finish with it soon."

"Yes, yes..." murmured Martella. There were scents on the current that neither of them would claim to know, but at least one of them brought small shudders to her chest. Her bristled hair shook as she failed to clear her head. "How shall we begin the search?" she asked. "How... ah... should we investigate each business, or..."

"We speak to the viceroy first, see what she has to say, and then make our decision," Marilis reminded. "On orders from Mother. And if the Lady din Casima suggests something counter to those orders, we know to ignore her. This city's rot will get to anyone, sooner or later."

"Of course, yes..." Martella's eyes tracked along the row of stalls where fruiting pods were sold. Something about them smelled so right, so delicious. But later. Yes, later. She could almost hear Mother's calm words of instruction, those perfect rules by which her daughters should live their lives. Not all that smelled pleasant was good, Mother had said.

But they smelled so nice...

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The private office of Lanita din Casima was a singular tent at the heart of the city, having the chambered structure of a great whorled shell set upon a foundation of stone and coral. Set within the measures of kelpen fabric were sections of Bryndoon shellwork so that the revelers within could look out upon the rest of

the city and gloat. Lamps gave the shell walls a dark glow of gem coral that was matched by the viceroy's own meticulously styled hair as it draped over one eye. Upon a hammock of woven kelp and shell beads the lady reposed, not looking to her visitors for many beats after their arrival.

"So you are the ministra's little sharks," din Casima said finally. "Tell me, are things truly so chaotic in the capital right now?"

"The Council has things in hand, Your Elegance," Marilis assured her.

"Ah, then it is worse than I have heard." The lady's hand covered her mouth's impolitic laugh. "The capital is the capital, and Mezzegheb can be nothing but itself, however. What brings the ministra's sharks to these waters?"

Orders within orders, secrets within secrets wrapped themselves around the heart of Marilis, but Mother had been very specific about what to tell, and to whom. "The princess is gone," she told the viceroy. "Missing. She has not been seen in over two weeks."

"So I had heard. My dear cousin on the Council does try to keep me informed when it suits her. What else?" The viceroy plucked a single tuli pod from a nearby bowl and tasted the scent off of it. With a shiver and a smile, she replaced it in its container. "Please, be brief. We are cutting into the evening's entertainments."

"We have reason to believe that the princess is in this city now." Martella kept her gaze focused tightly on the mer. "Or has been recently. We are tasked with bringing her home."

In her hammock, the Lady din Casima shifted. "You are serious. Too serious, perhaps. Why would a good little mer like Rhiela come here? I would not think that your uptight mitera back in the palace would allow her to so much as dream of the sort of games we play here, so she would never come on her own. So... she was brought here, perhaps?"

"It is possible," Marilis admitted.

The viceroy's visible eye had a glint of red within the blue. "The Free Flow?"

"Also possible. We have etchings of the mers most likely involved..." Though not as well done as Marilis would have liked. Their sister Marsa's descriptions had been detailed enough for three, but not for all. She let Martella present the shells to the viceroy, who nodded at the first and the second, only to stop at the third. The poise, the pretense of leisure drifted away, leaving only a predatory crouch.

"This one is known to us," din Casima declared.

Marilis glanced at the shell. "Sera. Mother's name unknown, home waters unknown?"

"That is she," the viceroy told them. "She was born here in Mezzegheb, but no mother would ever claim her. A known agent of the Free Flow, if ever difficult to net."

A smirk swam over her sister Martella's face. "Difficult for you?" asked the spiky-haired mer, "or difficult for us?"

"Difficult for either, to be sure," said the viceroy. "But for us together, well... I think we can catch more fish than just a certain red snapper, that is for certain. I shall pass the word, and we should know where she is,

or at least where she has been, by the light of morning. Until then..." The poise had returned to Lanistra din asima as she again toyed with a tuli pod. "...do please enjoy what entertainments my humble city has to offer. If I may--"

"We are honored," said Marilis in politest haste. "But it has been a long and fraught trip to these waters of yours, and we would rest. Alone."

Lanistra din Casima hid another impolite laugh behind her hand. "Ever the professional little sharks. Go, then. Rest. Let us continue on the morrow. I shall summon a maid to show you the more proper resting chambers."

Taking her sister by the hand, mindful of the small shivers which shook it still, Marilis escorted Martella away from the audience chamber. "Are you alright?" she asked on a short bubble of sound for their ears only.

"It's... It's..." Martella let out a long flush of water against her gills, only to cough at the effort. "I shall be fine. It is as you said. A long and fraught journey. Let us rest."

Marilis knew not why her sister reacted the way she did to certain sights, certain tastes on the water, no matter how faint. Their mother would not say. The best she could do was to be there, to hold her sister's hand as the tremors faded and Martella regained her nerve. And never would she mention what she had been instructed to do if her sister did not recover or broke the flow of their mission.

Secrets within secrets, orders within orders. Marilis would keep them all. She was a good daughter.

Verse X

When Ardenne awoke, it was to a warm body curled around, one with strong arms to hold and a slow heart's beat to hear. Her face rested against the upper chest of a mer camfion named Sarsia, her ear flat against the skin so that the steady thump-a-thump was easy to sense. She had fallen asleep to it the night before.

Awake, part of her wanted to scramble free, to escape... what? The feeling of being pressed, of being caught? A calmer part continued to enjoy the warmth and the lullaby beat, the feeling of togetherness that was more motherly than lovely.

Sarsia did not miss the subtle twitches that announced an end to slumber. "How do you feel this morn?" The words rumbled from the older camfion's chest directly to Ardenne's ears.

"Better, better..." she mumbled back. When Sera had spoken of camfion hospitality, when Ardenne had seen it for herself with the roving Rohaise, it had seemed that the broad-faced mers were interested in only the one thing, and the green mer's insides had churned in unpleasant ways at the thought. But Sarsia... her red-haired friend had told their hosts to go easy on the green-haired hunter, and so there was Sarsia. Motherly Sarsia, easily of an age to Ardenne's mother Diana, with patient ears, calming words, and comforting arms. Ardenne had not slept so well in weeks. "Thank you," she added after a beat.

"Never a task," Sarsia assured her. "It's been many a year since my own daughters would cry from

the night terrors, but it is nice to say that still I have the calming knack."

A smile trembled at the corners of Ardenne's mouth. "Yes, that you do. I guess I should see where the others are."

"And hear what all they've been up to." The laugh of a camfion was large and loud, filling the limited space of the chamber. "Or perhaps not. If they were my daughters, there'd be all manner of gossip of a morning about the night before."

A flush of heat passed her cheeks. "I'm not sure that..."

"Oh, we all know the manoa can be such prudes," said Sarsia with a wink. "No need to be embarrassed about embarrassment. Enough flowing through as there is. Take your time, figure out what you're doing with your leman back home, and be yourself."

The hunter was not sure what 'leman' meant, though the word had come up several times the previous evening. Ardenne was afraid to ask. That it had something to do with the overly friendly attitude of the camfion towards practically everyone was obvious, but the particulars...

Her stomach churned. The particulars could wait until after breakfast.

The opening meal was laid out in a long, open chamber with a fabric wall overhead and arches all along the sides that led to the open water. Sarsia escorted her in, gifting one last embrace before going about her own business for the day. The meal was just for the manoa, she saw, with small fish and large clams

included amidst the usual fare of the camfion. Rhiela was expertly cracking some cockles shells with a pair of metal rods hooked at one end. The princess's face was sour as a yellowed sweet pod.

One ear was all Ardenne needed to know why.

"Aw, come on, sis! Was she really that good a kisser?" Morga was saying.

"That is a personal question that shall remain private," replied her twin. Olga's smile was terrible at keeping secrets, however, and Morga howled with laughter as the first sister's composure happily crumbled, grain by grain.

"Well, Cairisty was curious," Morga continued. "You know, about how differently the two of us might go about things, and that got me to wondering, too. We've never compared notes."

"Never anything to compare," Olga noted back.

"Exactly!" A double-seeded green pod waved through the waters between the twins as Morga attempted to gesticulate her point. "And now that we do, we should! You know the camfion will... depths, they probably are talking about us right this beat at their own breakfast."

There was a loud crack as a cockle shell gave way to pressure and split in twain. The princess kneaded the base of her thumb and winced. "Really. Must we gossip so? Show some decorum, please."

"What's'at, *deh-ko-rahm*?" With a yawn on her lips, Rook finned her way into the chamber.

"It is what one does, if one is acting properly," the princess informed the orange mer. Her huff of indignation was as slow flush over the gills.

"Ah. Okay. Still not sure 'a what, but anyhoo..." Rook settled down next to Ardenne. The hunter handed her a small root, one known around the Grandest Reef as the wakey-up. A chew or three usually did it for her, but Rook made it all the way through before her body perked up in one great beat, from the tip of her flukes to the crown of her head. The orange mer shivered and shook herself all over. "Whoo-ee, that's somethin' right there. So what'cher all talkin' about?"

"Our evenings," said Morga. "Or at least, I'm trying to." An indignant glare was ignored by her twin.

Rook giggled. "Yeah, some party, right? Me, Blaer, and Elspeth were up to, like, the middle 'a a night hour talkin' runecraft."

"I recall," said Rhiela. "So the three of you worked something out?"

"A-yup, and wouldn't'cher know, these camfion kept a few runes what we've forgotten? All kinetic force runes, ebby and flowy o' course, but that's 'zactly what I needed for that thing from the Drift. It's a heater, makes these thermal currents to warm up even a really big chamber, like what the palace had with the fancy pillars an' stuff. That's at full flow, o' course. Prolly not a good idea to rune it long like that."

"Well, at least one of us had a productive evening," the princess said pointedly. "Without, ahem, shenanigans."

"Oh, and then Blaer an' Elspeth taught me these li'l flowy cantrips what can be used to tickle a mer, and whoo-ee, are those fun-fun if'n you gets creative..." A dreamy smile passed over Rook's face. "Surprised we got any sleep at all last night, for honest, 'tween that

and the kisses an' the cuddles an'..."

"I think she got us beat, sis," said Morga. Her twin only rolled her eyes in response.

Sera swam in to the sound of Rook trying to continue her story of the night before, over the twins' squabbling and Rhiela's attempts to change the flow of the conversation. "So everyone had an enjoyable evening?" asked the red mer. At the princess's harrumph, she amended herself: "Everyone who wanted to enjoy it, that is?"

"I cannot complain," said Olga.

"Yeah, but you won't tell us, either!"

"You recall what Granny Liesa had to say about the chatty oysters."

"Spare me, sis."

Sera leaned down to pat Ardenne on the shoulder. "Doing better?" the red mer asked. "When... well, warned 'em about you, to take it easy and all, but didn't think Rohaise'd send her own mam over."

"That was...?" Now that it was mentioned, Ardenne thought she saw the resemblance. "Ah, when next you see her, give her my thanks for, er, for sharing."

"Sharing. Hah." Sera chuckled. "That's one thing the mer camfion are good at, for sure. How they've survived this long out here. No blessed sacrament for 'em, not since the war what never got started."

"The Fugitives War," said Rhiela. "That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Surprised you've heard of it, brownie. Mers up in Bryndoon don't talk 'bout it much. Kind of embarrassing, to get a war started and then no one

shows up. But after what happened to the galda, the camfion weren't 'bout to stick 'round, so they all left. The Crown and Temple must've figured they'd either come back or die out with no sacrament to help 'em have daughters."

"But instead it's like... like the girls at the Wayward Drift," said Ardenne. "That's it, isn't it? That's why the mer camfion are so, ah, friendly?"

The red mer nodded. "What Mezzegheb does by accident, Mezzeret does on purpose. Let you all figure out which half of this sea is happier at the end of the day. Or the night," she added, smiling at the sour look the comment left on Rhiela's face. "But 'nuff about that. Eat up! Got a meeting with the keepers at the start of the hour."

Ardenne had to assume that meant something or someone of importance. In strange waters, she had to trust in the roguish red mer's judgment and guidance. An evening of weeping and being held had done her good, though. She no longer feared what was to come, at least not without reason.

Reasons would come soon enough, she knew. There was no point in welcoming them in from the passing flow.

Verse XI

It was dark when Martella let sleep claim her, and it was dark when it relinquished its grasp. Her inner sense of time told her that it must be morning, and she believed it. Mother had worked hard so that she would have it, and so it must work. She swung from her hammock into the waters of the room, feeling around until her hands brushed against the boxy shape of a glow-worm lamp. With a twist and a shake, Martella roused its occupants, revealing the larger details of the sleeping chamber.

She was surrounded by walls of kelpen fabric, loose at the bottom for the lower currents to flow through. Most color was lost in the dim light of the lamp, but she could see the contrast of a dark pattern on a darker background. Four spars held the upper wall in place, and between them the hammocks were strung. Her sister's was empty.

"Marilis?" she called. "Where did you go?" A light froth of panic passed over her for a second, a ripple which broke against her resolve. Her sister would be close by. That she knew. Marilis would never leave her alone, ever.

One section of fabric shivered and then parted. A thick seam of light widened into an opening, with the silhouette of Marilis in Linnea within it. With a squeal of relief, Martella launched herself at her sister, tackling her before the other mer could clear the opening. "Oh! Where have you been? Has there been any news?" She was interrupted by a loud gurgling. "And will there be breakfast soon?"

"Soon enough," promised her sister. "Come along."

Following a narrow tunnel of fabric and passing through another seam, Martella found herself in a well-lit chamber with a translucent shell-plate set in the wall. Outside, the forever twilit city beneath the great tent continued on its myriad business as their host watched on. Inside, the table was set with meticulous care, each basket or cage of delicacies given its proper place in the order of consumption. Sweet pods, long pods, pearl roots, a dozen varieties of edible kelp and weed, wriggling shrimp and squirming salp -- there was even a small bowl of kyun pods, their mother's favorite, which could only have come from the Linnea estate in the Mere Tessraï. Martella ate sparingly, but she had a bit of everything, nonetheless.

Except for the first basket. The taste upon the waters turned her off even as it prodded at her brain.

"You partake so early in the day?" her sister asked their host.

"Some do," the Lady din Casima replied. With a short clap, a servant was summoned to remove the offending foodstuff. "It can be a difficult place, Mezzegheb, especially to be in charge. A single tuli in the morning does wonders, sometimes."

Martella could not see a sneer on her sister's face, but she could hear it in the mer's voice: "Thank you for the offer, but no."

"As you prefer." The viceroy smirked. "Your sister as well?"

Depths take it, but she almost said yes. "I am happy with your meal, Your Elegance," she said politely.

The twitches remained under the table, where the movement of her flukes blended with the currents down below. "I do not require anything else."

"Ah, so..." Lanita din Casima stared at her with half-lidded interest. "Perhaps I have been reading the currents wrongly. A professional risk, of course, but I do pride myself on my ability in the art. It is how I gained the viceroy's office at the age I did. But if you say otherwise..."

The mer's words trailed off, but their wake continued to shake the balance of the waters for several more beats. Martella chewed slowly, but when the silence had grown too long in the tail, she felt obliged to swallow and ask, "What do you mean, Your Elegance?"

"Speaking from my experience, you would appear to be two, maybe three weeks off of a substantial tuli habit," said their host. "It's there in the twitches and the stutter, and quite pronounced."

"I, I n-never..."

"So you say, and that is where I float confused, for my same instincts speak to me of your sincerity." Lady din Casima pursed her lips in thought. "Ah, it is your mystery, and not mine. I shall not judge."

Martella's nose twitched. She rubbed it absent-mindedly, but then the sight of her own hand, the skin of its back all smooth save for a single mole near the thumb... and why didn't she recall having such a mark, in such a place. Her flukes twitched harder.

"We should move on to the business at hand," said Marilis. "There is much to do, if we are to locate the princess and render her to safety."

The sly look, the secretive smile vanished from

din Casima's face. "I have put the word out amongst the performance circles and tuli dens. If any have seen Sera the Red in the city of late, a handful of pearl should encourage them to tell us more. In truth, there may be a few of them waiting for just such a call to be made. Certainly none of them would volunteer if there was pearl to be had for it."

"That says more for your city than I think you intend," said Marilis.

The viceroy chuckled. "You would not be the first to make that observation, little shark. But if it means that we shall not have long to wait, well then..."

It was halfway past the hour then. Before the blowing of the following hour's horn, a mer had joined the three of them in the chamber. She entered without fanfare, her head bared and her eyes downcast in the presence of Her Elegance. An exotic beauty of pale skin, pearly grey hair and scale, she wore a snugly fit weave of kelpen fabric that covered all even as it made the mer's figure abundantly apparent. Martella kept her own eyes down and away.

"Drazielle. Why am I not surprised."

"You know this mer?" Marilis' doubtful tones floated on the water like oil.

"Few are the mers who live their whole lives in Mezzegheb from beginning to end, little shark. I do try to keep track of the ones who do. So, Drazielle, what have you to tell us?"

The pearly mer's eyes shifted from the viceroy to the sisters in lavender and black. "Rightly unsure if'n it's worth your time..." she began.

"But it was worth pearl when you mentioned it

to the guards." The viceroy sighed. "You and I both know whom we shall discuss right now, and I am willing to double the bounty on information if you start talking within a five-count. One... two..."

"Saw Sera the other day. Make that two evenings back," Druzielle said. "Wasn't exactly sure at first, cuz it was naught but a glance as she swam by with a couple 'a marks."

"Her marks or your marks."

Even the mer's pout was beautiful. Martella had given up on not looking, but she did what she could to avoid staring. "Would 'a been mine. Had a bump-in with 'em, got a guard to swim over, even, but they got away without paying."

"A common scam," din Casima told her guests. "Cause a scene, call the guards, get a few pearl off the hapless caravanners before they realize what's floating. The ladies in the performance circles are supposed to be above such things, however," she added, with a pointed glare at Drazielle.

"Hey, business was slow and I was in a mood, alright? Not that I got anything for my troubles. Li'l Orange might 'a paid triple for that bump if'n I caught her."

Little Orange? Martella's ears perked at that. There was a familiar note to that description. Selecting one of their portrait shells, she presented it to the performer. "Did she look like this?"

It was one of the better drawn of the sketches the had, the portrait of a petite mer with shorter hair and speckles on her skin and scales. By the notes etched along the side, they knew this mer to be orange

in coloration, with a pronounced Arkhalan accent when she spoke.

"A-yeah, that's the one. She and the bigger weren't looking where they were swimming, and they bumped me hard," Drazielle said again. "Nearly launched my entire top loose into the currents, and that thing's a pain to get back together on you fast-like. Had a show right after, too. So of course I wanted her to pay me for the time."

"Yes, yes." The viceroy rolled her eyes and placed a few pearl into a dish upon the table.

"Promised more 'n that," the pale mer said flatly.

"And once you tell us something of substance, you shall have it. So, you saw this mer with Sera?"

A nod sent wispy hair swirling. "Right at the start of my set. Sera was leading Li'l Orange and her friend through the back. Got a good look."

Martella chose another shell from the stack. "Was this the friend?"

It was the best defined of all the sketches, this one, of a rugged-looking mer, thin in the face but strong in the arms and chest, with a squared jaw and hair that was actually colored green in the etching, somehow. Their little sister had spent more time with this one than the other four combined, and she had to wonder at the artistry even as she wondered about dear Marsa's state of mind.

"No, no... didn't see this one. Would 'a remembered if'n I did. Coo-ee, she's... well, she's something," said Drazielle. "This other mer I saw, she... ah." There was a flick of the eyes towards the dish on

the table.

The Lady din Casima added a few more pearl.

"Alright, then. It's a-coming back to me. This other mer was a bigger, and a strong one, too. Sort of a russet, light brown and red, arms thick as my tail. Her and her..."

With a grimace, another few pearl was added to the dish.

"Her and her sister," the performer said. "Saw the two of 'em, like two fishes in a school over at the mooring posts. Had themselves a nice little float, too."

"And you're sure they were friends with this Sera mer?"

The pearly mer snickered. "I told 'em to tell Red that I said hello, and they didn't even ask who I meant. Yeah, they know her. She must 'a been helping Li'l Orange hide out in a side tent all night and sent the sisters to fetch their stuff. Two of 'em said they were heading 'round to the back flaps, up northeasterly, cuz their friends weren't feeling up to a long swim, but..."

"Not with one of Sera's crew."

"My thought exactly, Your Elegance. Me, I figger they were meeting up with some mer outta town. Maybe even some mers," Drazielle said. "Not that I care why, but you probably do. Am I right?"

"Just... go," said the viceroy. "Leave. Take your bounty and be gone."

The performer did not need to be told twice. The pearl plate was emptied and the mer's flukes out of the chamber even before the words ceased to echo in the water.

"Was that worth even a small pearl?" asked

Marilis. "It did not seem as though she knew much of anything."

"She knew Sera was in town," said din Casima. "And there is little chance that she was mistaken. The two of them grew up together, though rarely have I seen less love lost between two mers. She also recognized one of Sera's co-conspirators and gave us a detail we did not have about our latter two mysteries."

"Yes..." Martella examined the least detailed of the five sketches, paired portraits so generic in design that they could rightly be taken for any mer. "Sisters. Strong in the arms, a hair color..." There was something strangely familiar about the performer's description, and it annoyed her that she could not say why that was. A tug at the edge of her thoughts, a nagging that was not unlike how she felt about certain tastes on the water, if less nauseating.

Now Marilis spoke: "But where are they going? You and that mer both seemed to know something, and we should know what that is. So tell us, Your Elegance."

"Ah, little shark. Always on the move, always quick to the bite. Well, if she... if they have left the city on the northeasterly currents and did not immediately quit the Mere Mezzerle, then their most likely destination is Mezzeret, home of the mer camfion."

Her sister swore, and not quietly.

"Precisely. Dangerous to us, dangerous to the princess, and without much recourse for us to even follow them to the far reaches, for the sand currents are fickle and fraught. Unless they decide to return by way of Mezzegheb, we are not likely to see them again."

"Unless they are lured back, drawn back, forced

back," said Martella. Her fingers, palms, hands all itched with a sudden need for action. "T-tell me, Your Elegance, but do you still have problems with the Free Flow?"

"Perpetually." The viceroy spoke through a grimace. "Yes, we suspect they have communications with the camfion, but there is little I am able to do unless and until we are able to prove that. We cannot even say how many members there are in the city."

The sneer on Marilis' face truly befit a shark. "But if we needed a message sent, and were not too particular about how?"

A reddish glint returned to blue eyes. "Yes, there is a thought. Let us discuss this further..."

Verse XII

At the heart of Mezzeret, as close to the geometric center of its complicated pattern upon stone, sat the Hall of Keepers. So Sera had called it as she ushered them over, and Rook was left wondering what it was that was kept. The only other keepers she'd ever heard of were the rune keepers of Arkhala, and oh! had Baba plenty of things not to say about those mers of the far north. One of these days she would have to nag the old mer into sharing some of those stories she sometimes hinted at.

But this place, this hall... Rook kept her mind open as wide as it could stretch as she tried to encompass everything within her memory. The Hall of Keepers was a room without a top wall, an outline of a building in coral pillars with nothing above but the shining firmament. The ladies of the mer camfion came and went as they pleased, though plenty paused at least a few beats to smile and wave to the visiting manoa. Rook was still a beginner at telling the broad-faced mers apart, but she could pick out Blaer and Elspeth immediately by the patterns across their faces. She'd spent enough time studying them in detail the night before. The two sweeties each blew her a kiss on a swift, private flow before kicking off to wherever they needed to be.

A happy shiver ran all the way down to her flukes. This adventuring stuff had its perks, that was for sure.

If the Hall was the heart of the city, then the heart of the Hall was a circle of sand bounded by carved

stone and coral blocks. Three mers floated above it, each one gone almost completely to grey, so Rook figured they had to be about of an age with Baba Rill. Fenella, Innis, and Islee, Sera had said their names were. She'd leave it to the rogue to remember just who was who.

Lucky for her, she had little to say, so after all the introductions were made once again, for maybe the fifth time in three days, Rook could float on back and watch Sera do most of the heavy gabbing. The camfion all listened to her, at least, and even nodded along. It wasn't until the red mer began to draw out strange symbols on the sand below them that things got serious.

"Where did you find these markings?" the first keeper asked.

"Odd little shrine in the Mere Scotthia," Sera replied. "So far out that there was naught else but the firmament and the abyss. So, you recognize 'em, then?"

"Yes," said the first keeper.

"It is not something which mers should interfere with," said the second.

"Too late for that," said Sera. "Cuz whatever the something is, it's right interfering with us now. My friend Ardenne here is dumped chin-high into a muddy depth, and these markings are the ladder up. And it's something that the Crown ministry is interested in, so..."

The third keeper spoke: "And thus, if we do not make it our business, the ministra will make it ours at the worst of all possible moments."

"Way things are going, yeah," agreed Sera. "Already saw at least one Bryndoon out and about with

a runic weapon, what like no one's seen since the last war. So the only question is, how big and how bad?

"Another question," said Ardenne. "What in all depths does it even say?"

A good one, that. Rook had bumped her brain on the funny scribbles for a few days and couldn't get even the start of an idea. Where did one part end and another begin? No telling. Where did the words even start? She didn't know.

"We cannot say," said the first keeper. "Not to those who do not already know. Only to our successors may certain things be said without foreknowledge."

Ah, so they were *that* sort of keeper, thought Rook. Keeping secrets.

"What we may say..." The second keeper choked on her water for a beat, then looked to her fellow sisters. The other two camfion nodded, and so she continued. "What we can say is that there is a fact, a history to these markings which the Temple has declared anathema. Our knowledge of it, in even this smallest part, led to the Fugitives War, to the willing exile of our foremothers. The Temple believes the knowledge now lost, but we keep it safe for the future, and keep it secret for our safety."

Sera nodded. "We understand."

"We do?" muttered Ardenne.

"But..." said the third keeper as she traced one section of markings with a finger. "There is mention here of aught that is not explicitly forbidden. A place -- places, rather. Seven in all are described. The cavern of stillness behind the cliff..."

Rook was pretty sure she wasn't the only one to

get a shiver at the reminder of that little adventure. But if ever a place had seemed important, the lair of the hag certainly had. She wondered what these other places were like.

"The heights of heat," the keeper continued, "and the depths of stone. The heart of ice and the pit of..." Mobile lips curled and twisted as their owner pondered. "I am not sure of the right word here, but it is akin to the snapping shock of the striped eel, which bites without its mouth."

"The fulgurant force," said Rhia. "All these places are related to the forces under the firmament, are they not? The cavern... you remember it, correct?" the princess asked to her friends. "Stillness, ebb. The others mention heat, stone, chill, shock... and the other two?"

"The House of Mother's Wisdom," said the third keeper, "and the circling current. Fecundity and flow. You are correct in your surmise, young one."

Rhia almost smiled at the compliment before apparently remembering she didn't like camfion that much. The frown wasn't as stuck to her face as before, though.

"Awful vague," said Ardenne. "Not much to go on at all."

"Not necessarily," said Rhia. "Seven forces, seven seas."

"Nine seas," said Morga, who up to this point had been hanging back and letting others talk.

"The Mere Tessraï is technically one half of the Mere Kazahn," Rhia countered. "Historically, it was partitioned after the mer galda gave up their claim in

preference for the Mount of Valden. And it's right on the other side of the Black Flow from the Mere Leisi, so you could even claim that it's one broad sea from end to end." The princess didn't catch the funny looks on the twins' faces, but Rook sure did. Might be this conversation got continued later.

"But the Mere Scothia..." Now, Rhia paused. "Well, that's where this mystery message was found, so it's not likely to be giving directions to itself, is it?"

"Got a point," Sera admitted. "And if'n there's one thing the Mere Mezzlerle has, it's currents and flow. So, Grand Keeper Islee, would you have an idea where a mer might find this circling current?"

The third keeper, Islee, drew back her lips into what should've been a smile if not for teeth. The mer camfion had a right set of chompers. "This is verging on matters which..."

"Understood. One last item, then. Ardenne, show 'em the ring."

Rook had almost forgotten the little band of inky black existed. The green mer kept it out of sight, tied to a sinew thong around her neck, and Rook had the feeling that only its obvious importance to her mother kept the hunter from simply throwing it away. As usual, light did funny things around the ring, and the rays trickling down from the firmament seemed to curve around it, rather than reveal any details.

"This..." said Ardenne. "This came from the same shrine as those markings. The ministra, she wants it, wants to know what it is, and is willing to do... to do terrible things to any mer who might know more. I'm thinking we should figure it out for ourselves before she

does, and our only lead is this list of places you mentioned. Please, Grand Keeper Islee. Point the way, and we shall be gone without another word or question."

The keepers drifted away for a long set of beats to confer, which was Baba Rill's favorite word for looking busy and hoping the customer went away. It hadn't always worked at the shop, and it wasn't going to work here because Sera and Ardenne were stubborn as crabs, but at this point in a haggle, a short break was expected. She doubted it would last long.

And it did not, in fact. Rook held back a giggle as she wondered what prize she might've won, if'n it were a contest, only for the giggle to turn to a snort of surprise as a stray current tickled her right ear. Glancing that way, she could see Elspeth and Blaer grinning from behind a column. She quietly swam over.

"Hey," she said to the pair. "Gonna be a while. Everyone's still in a hagglin' mood."

"Yeah, we can see that," said Blaer.

"Never seen Innis so serious," added Elspeth. "It must be important."

"A-yeah, but dunno how much yet," Rook admitted. "Seems like every time we find somethin', it gets even more important. What'cher gonna do, though?"

"We can think of a few things." Elspeth giggled.

"What, in the middle 'a the day? That's a... that's a..." Her words sputtered out as Blaer ran fingers down the side of her tail, right along the most sensitive line of scales on her flank. "That's a swell idea, honest, but I... I gotta... could'jer stop doin' that for a beat so I

can tell yer to stop doin' that?"

"Oh, stop teasing her," said Elspeth.

"Um, yer be doin' it too."

"So I am." The camfion lass giggled. "Sorry, but we've never had a manoa leman before, and it is such fun..."

In the not too distant waters at the center of the hall, Innis was announcing the keepers' decision. Much as she wanted to continue this conversation and all the non-wordy things that went with it, Rook had to shush the lovely pair so she could hear properly.

"It is the decision of this hall that an allowance be made for Sera, friend of the camfion, and her companions to visit the Flowing Gardens of the Stone of Mezzeret."

Hardly had the words met the waters when the murmurs of many surprised camfion chased right after. Rook turned back to her new friends and said, "Okay, no idea what that means, but it's a biggie, innit?"

"The biggie-est," said Elspeth. She and Blaer embraced the orange mer from both sides, blowing a few sweet words into either ear. "See us before you go?"

"And when I get back," Rook promised.

Verse XIII

To a delphin, names were a difficult and complicated concept. The pink one who knew herself as Watch-with-Clicks did so because that was the thing she did. Not so long before, she had been Catch-the-Fast-Fish, or Hide-in-Kelp, or Little Daughter. As she changed and grew, so did the way she described herself in song. Mers were different, however. She had spent enough time watching and listening to understand that the wicked ones put names on things and expected them to stick like mud and slime.

She did not know that the city she now cautiously circled was called Mezzeret, nor would she care about some name in the mer-song, at once so simple and yet so impossible to pronounce. After a morning's observation, Watch-with-Clicks had come to a conclusion: This city was the Flow-Through-Place. Currents met here, gentle but powerful, and nothing in the city seemed to obstruct that flow. In fact, many things moved with it, lifting and drifting lazily as their tethers pulled fast. Even the great thick colonies of sargo and other greenery swayed gently, and the yummy fish which lived amid the green would on occasion find themselves pushed or pulled into open water, where a certain young delphin might be Catch-the-Fast-Fish for a while once more.

With her belly full, Watch-with-Clicks settled into a bed of kelp, ignoring for now how the blades of green tickled her skin. As high as the mass of foliage floated in the waters, it was a simple matter to kiss the firmament as necessary to keep the breath in her lungs

while allowing her eyes to remain focused below. The pink dolphin had no doubts that her mers-to-guide would show themselves soon.

Downwards, a shout. The careful, limited modulations of mer-song. Words that meant nothing, tones that meant all. Watch-with-Clicks relaxed in her hiding place. Mers were easy to excite, but she was not the cause of this.

There! A spot of green, moving along like no clump of kelp or weed could. Green-haired-mer, Child-of-Waves. Red-hair-mer. Other mers-to-guide swam with them. Many of the strange, whale-tailed mers gathered. More shouts, more noise. Tones of surprise. Tones of worry. None of anger. All came together below the mass of green.

Kelp shivered and swayed in new currents, strange currents. Mer-song filled the waters, until the pink dolphin was forced to hide deeper within the foliage, so itchy and against her skin, so the noise would not hurt so much. She squeaked and clicked to herself a little song, such as her mother's mother had taught. In her little space within the green, the waters ebbed and went still. Went silent, almost. The swaying motion of the greater green brought small noises, but the grating mer-song faded away.

Watch-with-Clicks now focused on being Calm-in-Rest. Sing the song to lengthen and preserve the breath within the lungs. Stay still, so the song would last. Hope that the whale-tailed mers did not take their mass of green too far, lest the song fade and the need to kiss the firmament return before it stopped.

Calm-in-Rest waited.

Verse XIV

Ardenne had had enough of being tied down. When the option was suggested, she happily chose to ride the outer layers of Morag Head with the camfion singers. Having ridden the greater flows with their little float, she thought she knew what to expect. She was almost correct. There was only the matter of degree.

The great flows were faster, for certain, but when she traveled them it was as a moving body in moving water. Morag Head moved, but the water around it did not. Still waters felt swift as it passed through them. Far below, the sands continued in their pale sameness, with only the occasional stone moving swiftly past to reveal their true speed.

She tried not to focus on anything in particular. It only made her dizzy.

The far reaches were hidden in their usual haze, holding their secrets for as long as they could before Morag Head's approach inevitably revealed them. The dark stones which broke the sands grew in number, coming together into steep hills which shed grit into narrow crevices to form crazed patterns across their faces. They rose up into cliffs and mounts topped with green, and the song of the verdant float slowed in tempo so the camfion could maneuver it more handily though the depths between them. The water which passed over Ardenne now was swift on its own, and it brought with it clouds of grit and strange tastes upon its current.

She hoped they were soon to arrive. Her eyes searched the farthest haze, where the shadows of

mounts rose towards the firmament. Some may even have breached the bright glow above, but hid that deed with crowns of sargo and fringes of kelp and grass.

Morag Head navigated its way through the maze of peaks, coming uncomfortably close to several. But then the mounts fell away, fell behind in the wake of their passing. Ahead was an open expanse, clear through to the far reaches and practically a small sea unto itself. The lower depths were filled with the same white sand of Mezzlerle, except for at its center were a single great stone rose like a spear through the water. Moored to it was the largest growth of sargo, kelp, and weed that Ardenne had never imagined possible. It expanded from the top of the stone as a nearly perfect bubble of green. Its edges were ruffled by a current that never seemed to quit. From higher above, the firmament shone down with its light, bringing new and strange colors to life amid the foliage.

The Flowing Gardens. From how the camfion spoke of them, Ardenne had not been sure what to expect, but there was an unexpected beauty in how the colors shifted across its surface as currents tickled through layers of multi-hued foliage. According to their hosts, the gardens held paths and passages within it, a veritable maze the center of which was only legend.

The strange message of the shrine in Scothia had not said as much, but none doubted that their goal was at the heart of the green. On a whim, Ardenne retrieved the black ring from around her neck and held it between thumb and forefinger, so as to see the gardens through its hole.

The world went dark, in that strangely familiar

way, where the light fled and was replaced by a thousand hues without names. Greens to reds, blues to yellows, and all around were the outlines of plant and mer in glowing streaks of black. In the middle of the ring's point of view, the Flowing Gardens blazed with colors that bit into the back of the eyes and refused to let loose.

She lowered the ring, and her vision returned to normal. No headache came this time, no sense of blood rushing to her head, nor of pressure behind her face. Whatever the ring had done, it was less spectacular than before. Small blessings, she thought.

"So, we're really going into that?" she asked Sera once the rogue had emerged from the innards of Morag head with the other manoa passengers.

"Only way to go," replied Sera. "Supposed to have an old shrine in the middle, what the camfion built long time back. Before the Fugitives War, even. No one's seen it in livin' memory, but they know it's there. Follow the paths, get there, look around, leave."

"Nothing is ever so simple as that." Ardenne looked the verdant mass over once more. "Where is the entrance?"

The red mer pointed. "Bottom of the main body, near to the stone. So they tell me."

The twins had shrugged on their packs and shouldered their hammers, those blunt weapons of solid stone held with kelpen bindings. We'll check ahead, then," said Morga.

"Be careful."

"At least one of us shall be," Olga assured her.

"Spare me, sis."

*

Morga knew stone as only a galda could. She had worked it, shaped it with her own two hands into forms both useful and fantastical. There was a feel to worked stone that a natural outcropping would never have, and yet that was exactly what her hands found when they touched the base of the garden spire. It was not where it should have been, this stone; some mer had moved it or placed it.

Her eyes went left and right, noting how far her sight traveled before any degree of curve could be seen. Her hands told her that it had been worked, wrought in some fashion, but everything else about it said that this was not possible. She rubbed at the surface of the stone some more, tickling it for further information, like the crab had done to the whelk.

This was not one of Granny Liesa's silly stories, unfortunately. The spire told her nothing.

Not far off, Olga was performing an examination of her own. Catching her eye, Morga's twin nodded in silent agreement.

Depths. How did anyone make something like this? Where had the skill, the knowledge of the skill, gone?

They kept their hands against the stone as they rose, noting any patterns or designs. For the first fathom or so, all they found was graffiti left by some camfion of old, the etchings filled with years of weed. As the mass of green neared, looming over their heads until the firmament was blocked from sight, more patterns appeared. Most common were circles with looping lines within them, twisting and connecting and

coming together at the center. Perhaps they were meant to be maps. Not a one was the exact same pattern as the next.

And then, the entrance: a squared-off frame of stone fixed perpendicular to the spire. Greenery grew all around, but not within. More magic, she figured. Somehow, this little proof of power seemed more comprehensible and thus more impressive than the immensity of the spire itself. Morga stuck her head up and through, into a shaded space filled with vague shapes. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Morga could see that there were statues of mers -- not just of camfion, but manoa, leondra, and even galda as well -- set into the spire. Foliage grew above and below, but not on or in-between.

She was examining the statue of the mer galda, admiring the fine work of its graven fringed scales, when the others swam up through the entrance.

"Coo-ee," said Rook. "Can yer feel the power in here? Layers upon layers upon sunken layers of runes, I'm a-thinkin'. Rhia, yer get what I'm sayin'?"

The princess nodded absently, with only one ear turned to the conversation. With soft strokes, she floated over to the statue of the manoa. "Yes, yes. It is... ah, how did that spell go..." After a few beats of staring at her own fingers, Rhiela managed to summon a small bubble of light to her hands. Its glimmer revealed colors set into the statues, mostly with small tiles of glass -- difficult work, that -- but occasionally with true gemstones. Morga's estimation of the crafters who'd made these could not have risen any higher, for it already lofted above the firmament itself.

One color there was that all the statues had in common: the head of each was topped with the green of fresh kelp. Even the crest on the galda was of a matching color, unlike any Morga had ever met.

Unlike any of them had ever met, prior to a few weeks ago. Morga was not staring at Ardenne, and she hoped that no one else was, either. The hunter got punchy when she was embarrassed, as the twins had learned.

"This is a place like the cave behind the palace," said Ardenne, as if they hadn't all thought it already. "A place of worship."

"No temple, though," said Sera. "The prestra wouldn't approve 'a the statuary."

"Um, why not?" asked Rook.

"Too flat-chested by half. Never seen a statue of the Mother Cythera what hadn't so much on top that it'd be a wonder for her to swim."

Above the flickering bubble of light, the princess's face easy to see but difficult to read. "Be that as it may..." said Rhiela, "and I am not saying you're wrong, but... is this the place we are actually looking for? I would have expected something more..."

Morga nodded to that. "Interesting as it all is, we're still looking at the entrance hall. There's supposed to be a maze in here, right? So where is it?"

"Above." All eyes turned to look where Ardenne was pointing. Three stone circles were clear to see in the foliage overhead, each perfectly cut and fitted, but without any sign of support beyond the plants themselves. "Three paths, probably cramped. We should split up."

"Not sure if'n that's the best idea," said Sera.

The hunter shrugged. "There's not enough room to do much beyond get in each other's way. Hardly a better idea."

"True, but still--"

The princess groaned. "Enough talk! The hour is waning, so let us get to it! Come on," she said as she grabbed Ardenne by the bicep and pulled the green mer to the middle entrance. "We shall see where this one goes."

"Well then," Morga said to her twin. "Shall we take the one on the right?"

"Might as well." Olga hefted her gear, then sculled upwards to the circle of stone.

"See you two at the end," Morga called back to Rook and Sera as they swam off.

*

Snug as she was within her little bubble amid the green, Watch-with-Clicks was slow to realize that she had ceased to move. Stillness, calmness all around, and no mer-song to hear once her bubble was dispelled. Poking her beak out through the foliage, she sent out a few brief squeaks and clicks to listen and see what lay without.

Open water, many mers, a tall thing that her squeaks barely felt around, but... There was something in the water here, an energy. It was like the resting place of Strength-of-Waves, and that was all she needed to understand about it.

They had arrived. They were at the next importance-of-being. Mers-to-guide were already inside, most likely. Watch-with-Clicks was outside. The

song of her kind had many things to say, none of them bad enough to describe this.

Carefully, quietly, the pink delphin squirmed her way out of the greenery. It was with fast fins that she shot to the firmament, breaking through into the sweet breath above to fill her lungs and sing the song of longest breaths so that it would last her as she dove deep and followed. Mers-to-guide would need Guide-for-Mers.

Verse XV

This place was too much like the still waters of the cavern behind Bryndoon. Rhiea could feel it in the waters that flowed over her gills, could catch a hint of an odd taste-that-was-not. There was something floating around them, floating through the walls of green that moved with the passage of the currents. The local kelp grew thick and lush, and even the hunter's knife could not make more than the smallest of cuts in it. Water could pass, but they could not.

Above, the firmament appeared between blades of kelp and mats of sargo, lending everything a dappled pattern of pale green. The open space of the maze continued in a long passage that curved up, over, and around thick beds of weed and ancient blocks of coral. There were no turn-offs, no splits in the path, but only twists and turns to make the head spin and cloud a mer's sense of direction. Where exactly they might be in relation to the entrance, Rhiela could not say.

And then they exited the green. Into the entrance hall, from the lefthand portal. "How!?" she demanded of the waters. They didn't bother to answer her.

"This entire place is impossible," said Ardenne. "Come on, let's try it again."

Rhiela glanced at the statues. They were as they had always been, and it was her own annoyance that made their faces seem amused. "Yes..." she hissed. "Same entrance, or another?"

"The same one, first," Ardenne replied. "To make sure we didn't miss anything."

They had not. The passage was far from straight, but it had no branching paths. This time, they exited via the righthand portal. "What is wrong with this stupid maze?" she groaned. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Calm down, first of all." The green mer's hand was warm on her shoulder, and she sighed at the touch. "If there is a trick, it is in our heads," the hunter concluded.

There was wisdom in that, she felt, but like most words of wisdom the princess had received over the years from lessons and instruction, it did not seem to be of immediate help. She should be the first to admit that her head was a mess, had been for over a week. "I... I wish Marsa was here," she admitted. "I wish I'd told her to go with the twins when there was the chance."

"Your friend in Bryndoon?"

"More than a friend," she said. "My fate-bound sister, born on the same day and in the same hour. We'd been together so long, did everything together, and I didn't think about how it would feel to be apart, and..." Dearest Cythera, she was babbling worse than Rook, but now that it was going, her mouth did not wish to stop. "I do not truly know what I am doing here, or why, but everything seems to get on my nerves, and..."

"Guess we're both lost," said the hunter. Ardenne tapped the side of her head. "In here, at least. Maybe that's what's wrong?"

"That would be a great and terrible spell to cast over this place," said Rhiela. "Like something out of a child's tale or a parable of the Goddess." Another groan bubbled its way from her chest. "What are we to do?"

*

"So, er, Red. I was wonderin', since it's just the two of us, me and yer, right-a-now and might be yer know more 'bout this than anyone else I could ask, but..." Rook's eyes watched the surrounding green with nervous twitches, but her thoughts and words were soundly elsewhere.

A sigh from her companion. "What is it?"

"Well, yer see, it's about last night..."

"Oh, yeah. Blaer and Elspeth, wasn't it?" Sera winked and thumbed at her. "Kinda surprised us all, actually. Those two are a right pair, thick as kelp since they were littles. Not even a real leman between them for the longest time."

"Yeah, er, yeah. What's'at word mean again? They used it a few times an' I felt dumb for not knowin', but gots the feelin' that it's important an' I should be knowin' what's up with it."

Red nodded in that way that a big sister might have. "It's one of their words. Don't think any mer not friendly with the camfion would ever hear it. Sort of more than a lover, not as much as a bonded partner. Most mer camfion end up with one or two mutual partners, all official-like with happy ceremonies and big parties to celebrate, but they can't do that till they all got a daughter. Before that, they'll fool 'round with most anyone they like, or even a mer they don't like."

"What, really?" Rook tried to get her brain around that, but couldn't quite.

"Yeah. Got a few funny words for that sorta thing, but not very nice ones. An experience, though, getting together with some mer you absolutely detest

for a crazy night."

Her brain slowly caught up, but it still took a few beats. "So, yer..."

"You met her." Red chuckled at the grimace that crossed the orange mer's face. "Yeah, that one. Just the once, never again. Much prefer a mer what likes me, and me her. So what me and Rohaise has, that's leman. If'n we're ever in the same waters, then we're together. Ain't promised or bonded, and even if'n we were, there'd still be that special thing 'tween us. Lotta times, a camfion's leman ends up her partner for life, anyhow."

"So if, um, they asked me to, um..."

"Then count yourself blessed, lucky, and beloved," Red told her. "Means they really, really, and I mean really, liked you and want to continue their relationship with you for as long as they can. Said yes, I hope?"

"Of course!" Oh.. she could feel her face turning red. The warmth was there, but the dappled light of the firmament helped hide the colors. "Just, um, never really thought about this sort 'a thing before, and now there's this, and there's them, and I mean both of 'em..."

A snicker carried beautifully through the narrow confines of the maze passage. "We're all young, so enjoy it. Believe me, the mer camfion are the best lovers in the nine seas. Lots to learn from 'em."

"If yer think so..." Rook glanced around. "Er, we ain't made any turns, right?"

"Yeah, why..." Red paused. With a muttered cantrip, she waved a hand through the waters. Rook's

ears couldn't quite grab the full meaning of the grammar, but it felt like one of those old rhymes meant to help with something, if anyone could recall the sound of it right. Maybe the red mer had. Rook couldn't tell, but the expression on the rogue's face turned sour. "Basic orientation charm," she explained. "Should give a sense of how far we've swum, only..."

"Nothing?" Rook guessed.

"Fat muddy opposite. A sense we've swum farther than the breadth of the garden already."

"The big curves? Goin' round and round the spire?"

"Perhaps... or perhaps something else. These waters are strange." The red mer stiffened her flukes. "Feel that?"

She was about to ask what the rogue meant when the feeling passed her, too. A small ripple, a disruption to the flow of the current, the suggestion of an echo as something moved against everything else.

A section of kelp rustling out of time with the rest. "Behind me," Red ordered. Her knives were already out.

In a little pocket on her hip, Rook kept a number of small, rounded pebbles. They didn't look like much, mostly because they weren't, but they were enough to anchor all sorts of spells in a pinch. That had saved her tail not so far in the past. Cupping a pebble in her hand, she got the runes for a caloric bubbler all ready in her head for her to recite.

The foliage rustled, shivered, then fell quiet. They stared at the spot. "Eh, maybe a fish?" Rook suggested with a sinking lack of hope.

"Never so lucky."

*

How long had it been, Olga wondered, since she and her twin had had time to themselves, just the two? Not since their flight from Bryndoon, she figured. Even in the calmest of times, someone else would be around to chat, and while she would never grudge their company, still it was nice to have a moment alone with her sister, to be a regular school together.

She could only wish that her sister might share her exact feelings in that regard, or agree with her idea of good conversation.

"Come on, sis! You can tell me. How was it?"

"It is not my place to say," Olga replied, for the fifth or the sixth time. She didn't care to keep count.

"But why not?" Morga pressed on. "Seriously, I mean. We know they won't mind. Probably talked about us a dozen times already, so..."

Navigating the passages of green was annoyance enough. At times it got so narrow that her shoulders kept scratching against the sides. She did not need her sister's incessant questions grating on her nerves. With a grunt, Olga acknowledged defeat. It was better to remove one annoyance at a time. "Nothing happened," she finally admitted. "Some kissing, some cuddles, but we didn't go beyond that."

"Oh..." The waters went quiet for a three-beat. "You too, huh."

"What do you mean, 'you too?'"

"Well, you were acting so confident the other night with what's-her-name..."

"Aislee."

"Yeah, her. So I had to, you know, match up. Got all kissy with Cairisty, but..." Her twin sighed. "Got nervous and couldn't get much past that."

That was worth a chuckle, and Olga paid up happily. "We are quite a pair, aren't we."

"Matched set, even." Morga flicked a finger at the decorative pearl earring in her left ear. Olga copied the gesture with her right ear automatically. "So, when we get back..."

"Yes?"

"Are you going to kiss her again? Or should we swap? Cairisty was curious, after all."

"We are not having this conversation." With hard strokes, Olga left her sister protesting in her wake. Neither paid much attention to how the kelpen walls behind them shifted and moved against the current.

*

Did any see? Did any notice? Guide-for-Mers knew not, thought not, hoped not. Without family, without pod, dolphins were for mers an easy catch. Whale-tailed mers did not have teeth-in-hand like others did, but not-safe, not-safe! Not for straight across the water, not for open swim. Fast fins from sargo patch to next, always hiding, always safe. Guide-for-Mers was Hope-to-Hide too often that morning.

Last stretch, open water. Guide-for-Mers was briefly Fast-of-Fin, crossing the distance between long beats of her heart. To the strange stone up its side. A moment to be Watch-with-Clicks again, to speak and see the opening with her forehead. Fast-of-Fin again, swimming up the side, through the opening, into the

dim green water.

Two mers-to-guide, here. Once more Guide-for-Mers.

"A delphin!" Simple notes, simple sounds. Too basic for true meaning, but the tone told more. Word-of-self for lesser whales. Word-of-fear, right now.

"It's out little friend from Scotia," said green-haired mer, Child-of-Waves. "Did you follow us all the way out here? I thought we'd lost you on the way to the Mere Mezzerle." Again, simple sounds, no poetry, but tone was friendly. Friendlier.

A squeak of welcome echoed through the waters, returning to her forehead with an image of walls around and mers-of-stone. Three openings above. A choice? An indecision? Simple mers could not decide, perhaps. In need of Guide-for-Mers. She floated up to the openings, sounding them out. The first echoed down, and then back through the second. The second went up, and then back out the third. The third echoed back to itself.

Simple mers, not-so-simple trick. Three more squeaks, three different results. Strange side-echoes, muffled by soft kelp. Perhaps. Perhaps.

Loud squeaks, calls for attention. Circles swum in place, below the middle opening.

"I think she wants us to follow." Tones of surprise.

"But we already tried that one..." Tones of doubt.

"I don't think it matters," said green-haired mer. Tones of decision. Loud squeak of agreement. If no choice was right, then no choice was wrong. Swim,

follow, find. Guide-for-Mers to do her job.

Kelp sticky, stretchy, grabby. Strange against the skin. No dolphin liked the thick kelp forests or grass fields of the reef, those places for wicked mers. Narrow spaces, narrow planes, not for dolphins at all. But the job was to guide, and so now she was Guide-for-Mers. Squeaks and clicks to find the way, feeling strange things move the kelp this way or that.

Wait for thing to pass, for wall to thin, and then Guide-for-Mers could push through with her beak, could see through with her forehead. Open space, mers-to-guide. She squeaked to green-hair-mer and brown-hair-mer, and they followed her through.

*

Sera could swear that she and Rook had traveled around the entire curve of the Flowing Gardens three, perhaps four times by now. She could swear that and swear at these same gardens in the same thought. Forwards or backwards, the view never changed. And her little pathfinding cantrips only made her more confused.

More than that, however, Sera was worried. Twice again they had caught a sense of something moving within the walls of kelp, and there was no doubt in her mind that this same something was responsible for their confusion. If it was deliberate -- and it certainly seemed to be -- then she had to assume that the mystery something was a threat. Her knives did not leave her hands, and she noted that Rook had a pebble at the ready.

Enough with the games, she decided. It was time to make a move. "Rook? If'n you could spare a

spell, throw a pebble into the wall ahead." The kelp there was even now rustling counter to the currents. "Don't care much what it does, just need something."

"Right-o." The speckled mer cupped the pebble in her hand and whispered to it carefully. There was a flush of heat upon the water between them, and Rook hissed in pain as she through the overly warm stone as fast and as hard as she could. "Gotta work on timin'," she muttered.

Sera's attention was on the wall. As the stone came near, its heat producing a boiling froth of steam bubbles around it, the kelp was pushed back by the thermal currents to reveal... something. Even seeing it, she had trouble putting a name to it. Thick, long, studded with spikes along ringlike segments of armor, it flexed and bent to avoid the orange mer's bundle of concentrated heat. As it rolled, it revealed an underside full of tiny, pinching claws.

It was unlike any living thing she had ever seen, which decided the matter of names for her. Only one word would fit: "Abomination." She spat the word into the water. A beat later, it was joined by much swearing.

With a tremor upon the waters, the armored tentacle ripped free of the kelpen wall and reached for them.

*

There was no warning that Morga could see. The wall of kelp nearest her sister bulged and burst. A tentacle as thick around as her own arm swung through the waters, slamming into Olga and throwing her towards the patchy top wall of sargo. Thin trails of blood drifted in its wake.

"Sis!" Her hammer was out and in motion. The heavy stone on its kelpen cable spun around, gaining momentum to smash its target. Thick as it was, however, the tentacle presented a narrow profile, and her first strike was more bounce than bash.

It did get the attention of the monster, at least. The tentacle lashed out blindly at first, but tensed and waved as she kicked with her flukes to dart out of the way. The next swing came far too close for comfort, and Morga got a good look at the rows upon rows of pinching claws upon its underside.

So, it was blind, or at least fumbling in the dark, but like many night feeders or deeper denizens, its sense of flow and motion was excellent. Morga sculled as carefully as she could to minimize her presence in the water while she tried to figure this beastie out.

Armored, heavily. Lots of layers and chinks to keep it bendy and mobile. A good knife might get a prick in, but she couldn't say how much good it would do. She couldn't even way what this thing was, or was supposed to be, but a thing with a reach like that had to keep its important bits elsewhere.

The tentacle hadn't stopped moving. It winded in a sinuous motion like a blind cave eel, and when it came close beneath her, Morga swung her hammer again. This time, she wasn't aiming to strike. The stone head of the hammer looped beneath the tentacle in a narrow arc, the cable binding around it tight as she twisted.

Muscle or blood or whatever it was that made the thing move, a tourniquet might... yes. There was a faint squelch, then the sensation of something within

the tentacle bending and giving way. The entire length beyond it, all the way to the tip, spasmed for a beat before going slack. There was a distant roar, and the tentacle's owner pulled it back, dragged it back as fast as it could.

Morga let it go. She had more important things to focus on.

"Sis? Sis! Are you okay up there?" she called. The only reply was a groan of pain. "Hang in there, sis! I'm coming for you."

She found Olga wedged between two stands of sargo, the stiff-edged plants providing enough support to keep her twin from sinking. Olga had made no attempt to pull herself free yet, and a quick check told Morga why that was.

"Depths," she swore at the sight of welts running down one side of her twin's body. It looked like a dozen tiny crabs had held a dinner party, snip-snapping strips of skin and scales. An examination of her own hammer showed where the thick cable had been chewed upon in untold tiny bites.

"M-morga?" The words were followed by a shiver. "It's c-cold and it burns and..." the skin around the bites was turning red, and the color was spreading. "Venom, I th-think."

The syllables of the healing cantrip were already on Morga's lips, and in her head she accompanied them with a prayer to the Goddess Cythera that she remembered the spell all properly. Sera had done her best to teach them how to use the basic healing tricks, but there hadn't been much time to practice until now, which made it the absolute best and worst time to do

so.

Now wasn't the best time to test her mettle, but was there ever a better moment?

As she finished the chant, the answer came to her as a pleasant, warm glow which surrounded both sisters. There were nicks and scratches on Morga that she didn't even realize were there until suddenly they faded, and Olga's twitches and jerks lessened as the red marks faded. In a few beats, they were only slightly worse for wear, rather than half-beaten out of shap.

"Well then," said Morga. "Glad that worked. Can you float? Swim?"

"I think so." Her sister winced as she pulled herself free of the sargo, but she steadied up and nodded. "Yes. We should go find the others."

"Way ahead of you." She pointed to the break in the kelp, from which the tentacle had emerged. There was a deep hole, and on the side the view of an open space. "Let's go check that out, shall we?"

Verse XVI

Ardenne had to help the princess through more than one tunnel in the kelpen walls before they arrived at waters broad enough for them to float freely. Rhiela took it as well as could be expected, only muttering her complaints as she adjusted her top. "Why are we even following her..." she said again.

"Because unlike us," the hunter replied, "she seems to know where she's going."

The little pink delphin made steady, regular clicks as she nosed through the kelp, occasionally stopping as if to listen. To what, Ardenne could not say,

but it worked. Twice more did the delphin lead them through tunnels they could not have found on their own, occasionally pulling up short and flipping fins at them until they stopped as well. Those times, Ardenne knew that she saw movement in the kelp far ahead. She felt no urge to investigate too closely, and especially not after a roar sounded deeper in the Flowing Gardens.

And then, after one last tunnel, there was open waters above, kelp below, and a solide barrier of green behind them which rose past the firmament. Ripples of waves broke overhead, shattering the light of day into countless green spangles. The dark presence of the stone spire was there in the backwaters, but Ardenne was focused more on the fore.

Rook and Morga were tending to an injured Sera, whose swearing grew stronger as they worked. "Oy! Ardy, Rhia!" the orange mer shouted. "Get over here and help! Red's in a bad way!"

"What happened?" said Ardenne as they sped over, leaving the pink delphin by the barrier.

"These huge tentacles happened. Din't'cher see?" Rook was applying a weed wrap to Sera's arm, where long tracks of crab-pinches had slashed a path around. "Been comin' from the kelp on out!"

"Missed them somehow." Luck, and a delphin, the hunter knew. A squeak from their little pink friend warned her that the reprieve was short.

"What?" Morga began to ask, but Ardenne waved her silent. The delphin continued to flip and thrust, pointing the way with her beak. The object of her attention was the spire itself, the dark stone rising from the green until it stopped mere fathoms from the

firmament. Upon it, a crown of sargo twisted counter to the currents, and beneath the whisps of green was a darkness that was not stone.

A dozen tentacle raised themselves from the foliage below, each armored in thick rings up and down their length. They were dull at the tips, but along their undersides countless bladed pincers could be seen. Following with her eyes, Ardenne confirmed that at their base they all hung from the sargo crown of the spire.

It was similar to a breed of starfy the hunter would sometimes see at the edges of the Grandest Reef, if much greater in scale. Those starfies had been at most an arm's length across, but their arms dangled into the currents to catch their prey, mostly shrimp or small fishes.

At this size, a starfy could catch whatever it damned well pleased, and this one's arms were long indeed. "Everyone, roll to the right!" she shouted. The first tentacle fell through the waters to miss them by mere finger-lengths. It slammed into the kelp and sargo below, to sink in deep and burrow through the green. Several other arms dipped down to join it, twisting and digging deep.

"What do we know about this thing?" Ardenne called out as she swam.

"It hates heat!" Rook shouted back.

"You can choke its circulation in the tentacles," Morga offered. "But it's got venom, so watch out!"

"It sees motion in the water," Olga provided. The twins swam close together for a five-beat, only to split away as a tentacle went for them. It paused as

their wakes hit it from different directions, and they sculled away easily.

Sera's groan carried far. "Stabbing it doesn't do a depths-taken thing." The red mer still couldn't swim on her own, and so Rhiela was helping her away from the action. Neither mer looked very pleased with that.

It was not much to work with, but the hunter's mind was swift. Flexing the muscles surrounding her air bladders, she let out a single, large sound, a belch to shake the waters. The three nearest tentacles all paused for a beat as the sound passed over them, and they they swung around to grasp for the source.

Her mind was perhaps too swift; it had outraced itself on what to do next. With all the speed her flukes could manage, Ardenne slipped between two tentacles as they converged. Her hands gripped the ringed armor and held on tight with the tentacle flexing and bucking beneath her. She rode it all the way to the kelpen floor, letting momentum shoot her forward as the tentacle crashed and buried itself back into the green.

Two more now rose from the foliage, ready to greet her with a sharp embrace.

*

Why she was stuck with helping Sulky min Lobster-head to safety, Rhiella was not sure. As she watched Ardenne fend off two tentacles at once with naught but her spear, the princess was relieved to not be in the thick of things -- then ashamed at herself for even thinking such a thing. What was she here for, if not to help others, after all? To figure out what she could do?

Next to her, the rogue's groan reminded her of

the reality, that she could not even get a healing cantrip right every time. With the runes of healing fixed in her mind and their corresponding prayer on her lips, Rhiela sought to improve her record with casting the spell. A full verse later, and the red-haired mer's heartbeat was slowed and the marks on her skin less red than before, though the swelling was still worrisome. Some measure of success at least, this time.

"Wh-what's goin' on?" Sera muttered. "How're they doin' out there?"

The princess turned an eye to the fight. "Ardenne's making noise and dodging," she reported. "The twins are taking turns baiting and smashing the things. Rook and the delphin are on the far side and I'm not sure... Ah!" she shrieked as the kelp before them erupted and another of the armored tentacles swung towards them.

Her hands were up, her mind shining with the images of runes she'd committed to memory in the past week. Few were the spells she could say to have mastered, and none she would think she could do promptly. It was nice to be wrong.

Over each outstretched finger, a rune blazed in her mind. Mostly runes of ebb, one of flow, three which were supposed to connect to the telluric force, but upon some whim of instinct she replaced them with frigid runes without a beat spared for thought. The altered grammar of the spell came out in a rush, and the shield which sprang from her open palms caught the tentacle in the middle of its plunge. The stillness of ebb slowed its force; the motion of flow deflected it away. The chill of the frigid--

Spines of ice that shot through the chinks in the ringed armor, lodging between the plates and slicing whatever lay below. Cold might burn as strongly as heat, and the abomination must have thought so, for its appendage retreated as a roar of pain shook the firmament.

"Thanks, Rhia. Made it mad."

"And kept it from smashing us!" she snapped back.

"Yeah. Good job, that. Keep it up."

Which was easy for the rogue to say, thought the princess as more of the monstrous fingers rose up to find them. For a while after that, it was the last thought she could spare.

*

From a quiet fathom, not far from the gleam of the firmament, Rook was weighing her options. In her bag were several more pebbles for her to empower, though it wasn't clear where she could use them. Downright muddy down there, in fact. The long ugly things seemed to pop up out of nowhere, and the central body couldn't even be seen from beneath the sargo crown.

Not far off, the little pink dolphin was kissing the firmament, or something like that. Rook was no expert on dolphins, orcs, and others of that ilk, and she had to wonder if any mer knew enough about the beasties to understand what it was doing. In any case, a beat later the dolphin was right beside her, slicking and squeaking.

"Sorry," she said back. "Dunno what'cher sayin'."

With a short squeal of what sounded like

annoyance, the delphin swam high, did a flip-over, and then dove straight into the action. There was a familiar gleam around its form, a silver stream of bubbles that flowed behind it in a long wake. Pinky was going a sight faster than any mer could, and Rook doubted the speed was all natural for a delphin, either. In wide circles around the open waters the delphin went, faster and faster, until it was dragging all of the currents behind.

The tentacles all paused in the same still quality of confusion.

Of course! Hadn't Olga said the thing felt motion? Well then, Rook thought to herself as she dug through her pack, it was time to muddy the waters in new and interesting ways.

In her hands, the little box from the Wayward Drift sat with its grammar repaired and completed with the help of her lovely new friends among the mer camfion. She would need to show her thanks and appreciation to Blaer and Elspeth properly once they got back to Mezzeret. The thought brought a warmth to her heart and life to her lips as she began the chant of activation.

*

The things, the obscene fingers of a hidden abomination could not see, Olga knew, but that was not the same as being blind. It was a distinction she wished would stay philosophical, but those were not the waters they swam right at that moment. In this arena of green beneath the bright firmament, she and her twin were hard at work to test the limits of the monster's blindness.

The tentacles were linked by more than the

central body. They reacted to the same sensations, regardless of the distance, so what one felt then three would converge upon. How Ardenne was surviving their attention, Olga wasn't about to guess, because she and Morga had enough trouble at their flukes.

"Yah!" shouted her twin, rolling out of the way of a tentacle and smacking it with her hammer. A good hit where the rings flexed could cripple the entire line of the appendage, but it often took a few hits to get right. This one took the hit and arched itself to strike back at Morga.

Her own hammer cracked into its underside, where the pinching claws bent and broke. Another strike from Morga's side put a visible crimp in the armor, and a dark, oily substance leaked into the surrounding waters. The tentacle slipped back beneath the kelp, but its sisters rose up to replace it.

"How many of these things do you reckon there are?" Morga said, flushing her gills from exertion.

"Enough to be a problem."

"Awfully vague there, sis."

"As Granny Liesa always said, if you put a number into a story, it is a problem only for the storyteller."

"Spare me, sis. Gran never told stories about sea monsters." Morga ducked back and under a searching tentacle. "I sort of wished she had."

"You can tell yourself one, next time we're home." Olga's hammer slammed once more into the ringed armor of the nearest appendage.

"I just might... huh?" Both Morga's strikes and her complaints came to a halt for a beat as a pink shape

streaked past. The delphin was going faster than a galda in full dive, with streams of bubbles to follow. The abominable fingers at its, at her passage, leaving them open for more slams and bashes from the sisters. "I wonder how she's doing that."

"You'll have to ask her," Olga said again. "Give your brain a workout trying to understand the answer."

"Spare me, sis."

From above came a shout of "Oy!" Rook descended at breakneck speed, a small and boxy object sputtering between her hands. "This thing's about to go right bubbly, but I need yer help gettin' it to the right spot 'fore it does!" The speckled mer pointed to the crown of kelp and sargo atop the central spire. "If'n we can get it under there..."

"On it." It didn't matter which twin said it first; with a nod the words left their throats together, and so together they acted. It was not so different from the ball games played between the daughters of Valden. The 'ball' was shaking and sending up bubbles, yes, and the tentacles would certainly tackle harder than any young galda, but...

But they were best as a team, swimming over and under tentacles still confused by the delphin's wake, passing the 'ball' back and forth as it grew hot and scalded fingers. There was a hollow at the base of the crown, half again the size of a goal basket, and when Olga passed the 'ball' to her sister for the last time, Morga expertly sent it along into the target space.

Then they got to see what Rook had meant by 'go off.'

A tool to heat and circulate water in an enclosed

space, Rook had described it. Useful in cooler seas or deeper fathoms. The orange mer must have urged it to its fullest force, because with a flash of heat and a rush of flowing current, the boxy artifact forced the entire canopy of foliage to rise. Anchoring growth stretched and snapped, and loose sand poured out in waves to reveal the true heart of the gardens.

There was a small shrine built upon the spire, a simple structure of stone walls and coral roof with a table of some sort within it. Olga's eyes could not make out more than that, because a large and lumpen shape moved to block the view. The central dome of the abomination sat there, an enormous starfy surrounded by arms both short and long. There were no eyes atop its body, but Olga couldn't doubt that it was glaring at them.

*

Mers do right, enemy found! Guide-for-Mers squeaked her satisfaction. Monster-should-not-be was a black spot in her sight-of-clicks, a darkness which her forehead refused to note. She was close enough to see with her true-eyes, but wished she were not. She saw it, and it saw her.

"Evil! Wicked!" The notes of ancient song rose from the shell of monster-should-not-be. Tones were sour, sickening, a perversion of sacred song as once was taught to friends-of-whales in age-long-lost.

"Evil-you! Wicked-you!" she sang back. "Twisted! Monstrous! Should-not-be!" Around the sacred song she wove tones of disgust, of pity, of disdain. "You choose this!"

Many were the words of perverted verse to

follow. She ignored all. Focus on the proper job. Guide-for-mers still had mers-to-guide, and next was green-hair-mer, Child-of-Waves. Swimming tight circles around the mer, she clicked for attention, pointing her beak to the top of the spire.

"Yes, I see it." Tones of doubt rippled through green-hair-mer's voice.

Tones of annoyance filtered through her own song. She would have told green-hair-mer straight, if that one could understand the friend-song -- and if monster-should-not-be could not.

Guide-by-leading. Mother-song-of-wisdom. Swift to swim, straight to swim. Others follow. Calling the sacred song to herself once more, Guide-for-Mers raised the force of flowing current around her and launched swiftly through the waters, between outstretched tentacles, and over the body of monster-should-not-be. Beyond the enemy, the old place-of-mers remained with its treasure. Guide-for-Mers felt the strength in it, knew it to be the reason for monster-should-not-be to rest there. Grabbing with her beak, she pulled the treasure away and swam with fullest speed.

Tentacles many, reaching, grabbing. Tearing at skin and flipper. Cries of pain, song of fear. Heat-of-cold ran through her flesh.

"Hey, stop that!" One-of-two had the heavy stone, hitting the monstrous appendages. Two-of-two smashed from the other side. Together, the two-of-mers beat back the little-claws that nipped, and Guide-for-Mers could scull away, to deliver her prize to green-hair-mer.

She hoped to have guided enough. Soon she would be Needful-of-Care.

*

There was a spear in Ardenne's hands, a blade of knapped stone and shell bound in kelpen cord to the end of a long bone. It was hers, and it was an awful mess now. The blade was chipped and cracked, while the bone showed signs of chewing so heavily that it was a wonder the thing hadn't yet broken in two. The fight so far had not been kind.

And now, from the delphin's beak, she received... a new spear. This one was formed of a single piece, without any binding at all. Its blade was long and pointed, with a cutting edge down one side like the tooth of some deep-water cachalot whale. From tip to butt, it was formed from the same dark, glassy material as her mother's ring.

There was a feeling of heat at her chest, as if the ring agreed and recognized a sister in the spear. On some passing thought, barely understood, Ardenne took the ring out once more and held it to her eye as she looked to the abomination upon the spire.

The light of the world again turned inside out, the firmament shining black and the shadows turned bright. The thing on the spire was an emptiness, a void defined by the crackling energies around it. But at its crown, there was a light, greater and brighter than anything else Ardenne now could see.

She lowered the ring, and the colors returned to normal. The thing was again a lumpy dome of shell and weed, vaguely resembling the fishing starfies she knew from the Grandest Reef. Like those spiny-skinned

things, it could flex and bend its arms to catch prey out of the currents, trusting its feel of the waters as much as Ardenne trusted her own eyes.

The rush of heat and flow beneath the canopy must have been terrible for it. Only ill luck had permitted it to grab the pink dolphin, and she eyed with worry the scores of tiny, prickly bits on the beast.

First things first, however. With a firm grip upon her new spear, Ardenne turned her eyes back to the monstrous starfy. Its arms waved wildly in the raw currents, and she was not sure how she was going to avoid getting caught. The part of her that saw the world now in shadows of red did not care. Launching herself into the middle of the heat vortex, Ardenne ducked and rolled around flailing tentacles, and if one got in her way, well, that was why her new spear had a cutting edge. The blade sliced between rings of armor, leaving an inky stain of blood in her wake. Up she raced, past the garden's central spire, around it, into the shelter beneath its floating canopy. The small shrine, a copy of the one in the Mere Scothia, was noted and then ignored in favor of the abomination lying squat before it.

Arm after arm spread from that dome, stretching far and deep into the kelp before arising elsewhere. Up close, only a few shorter arms could reach where the hunter now swam. Ardenne sliced the tip off the first one to come too close, and then dove at the center of the domed body before the others could move in.

There had been a light at the crown. Her spear struck where that had been, finding a joint in the armor

where thick and knobbed plates met. The staff of her spear was strong, unbending, and it pierced straight through to crack the starfy's outer hide and skeleton. With a twist, she broke it open, and the light could be seen. All that was left was to pull it out.

Her hand thrust in, gripping the glimmering thing. Beneath her, the abomination released heavy flows of water in a scream that rattled the firmament itself. In the red haze of her mind, Ardenne could not care. Not about the noise, not about the black blood leaving the wound in thick clouds, not about the cuts and scrapes to her own arms. With one last pull, she removed the shining, curved triangle of shell, its pearly light independent of the firmament's.

Beneath her, the monstrous starfy collapsed. All arms went limp as the softer tissues dissolved to inky black between the joints, and within mere beats the rings of armor fell apart with nothing left inside of them but an oily feel and bitter taste on the water.

In her hand, the prize. Ardenne held it up to her face, the better to see its curves and wonder. What was this thing? What was it doing inside of an abomination?

What was she, to know that it was there?

Verse XVII

Across several seas, behind the palace cliffs, and in the hidden spaces of Bryndoon, Ministra Marhyd was settled in with a stack of shells to peruse. The etched set of scallops was just arrived that morning from her estate in the Mere Tessraï, where the family library was kept safe for future reference. Now she proved her own memory of past readings. Certain research had been done, by generations long lost to history, preserved by a past Ministra din Linnea and put away for a time of need.

Her eyes went up to the pearly light of the curved shell on its pedestal. The near-to-triangular shape glimmered of its own shine. It brought to mind memories she had not considered in a great long while, indeed. Thus had she the need to refresh them. If she could decipher the etchings of a stylus that had gone bent and broken out of shape over two centuries ago.

She was not in her usual office. That space was too busy with the matters of arms and armament. Fun as that was, Marhyd had taken to a new haven for when she desired some peace and quiet.

Let Her Holiness assume the old Luherite temple was destroyed. Marhyd had certainly caused enough noise when she sealed off the old tunnels and opened new ones into her personal maze of chambers. The cavern was calming in its stillness, and as far as the company, well, the vision of Luher's Herald springing forth from the stone floor was a sight for weary eyes. She understood her daughter's fascination with it quite well, and possibly better than the girl did herself.

Upon the pedestal, the pearly glimmer grew bright, until the far topmost walls of the cavern were briefly visible. To her keen and esoteric senses, the call of power to power was unmistakable.

"Well, well," she said to herself. "What are we up to now, I wonder."

After a full verse of beats, the shine dimmed to its regular level, and Marhyd turned her attention back to the stack of shells. With a sac of her favorite kyun pods at hand, the ministra dove back into the hard work of remembering. There were answers to be found and mysteries to be explored.

Whatever was going on in the Mere Mezzlerle, she was certain her daughters would let her know about it soon enough.

*

What was the hour? Martella din Linnea could not rightly say. Morning, noon, night, all was the same beneath the blasted tent of Mezzegheb, the false firmament of fabric with its dim and evenly spaced glow-lamps. Even her inner sense of time failed her as it second-guessed itself with the feeling of beats, verses, even hours lost to the fugue of action and purpose. That happened now and again, usually after Mother gave a command, but rarely for so long or with no outer frame of reference to bring her back to center.

Instead of the light of the firmament above, there was ugly fabric and sickly lamps. Instead of the bustle of Bryndoon below, there was...

There was wrack and ruin, an entire district flattened. Coral spars were shattered, and long strips of fabric shredded. Her eyes caught the shapes of mers in

the midst of the mess, and from the haze of memory came a list of names and faces, portraits on shells provided by the viceroy as suspected members of the Free Flow. It had been her task to find them, to force them out.

The rune-bound gauntlet upon her arm was still warm. There had been other tasks to accomplish. Mother's special gift stirred, its blades coming apart to pose like the stinging arms of the anemone with her hand in the middle. Faint points of light tipped each one as they yearned for new targets.

A stirring at the edge of the destruction. Mers skirting the wreckage, their heads turned away from the worst. Turned away from her.

It was too easy, raising her arm. Too easy by far to let the lit tips crackle and flare with the building forces of destruction. Her eyes saw the targets, calculated the distances and the directions before unleashing the full wrath of the indigo hell, but through the fugue of action her mind was not truly looking at them. Eight mers. A flick of the wrist, a twist of the arm, and eight pulses of kinetic flow would cut through the waters beneath the tent, each to find a singular target and reduce them to a foamy mess. So easy, without need for a thought. Like that, eight mers dead.

A ninth mer met her eyes. A ninth mer, held over her mother's shoulder so that their shared hair color blended into one froth of pink. Curious eyes stared without comprehension at the disaster the adult mers avoided at every stroke.

Stared at her.

She could see the little one's smile.

Her mouth copied the expression, and her composure broke before her face did. Muscles relaxed along her arm, and Mother's gift settled back to quiescence, tips curling back around her wrist and locking in place.

"Do you need to rest?" came the voice of her sister behind her.

Her grunt was not an answer, but it carried the meaning.

"It was good work." Marilis was leaning over her left shoulder. "Careful, methodical. Mother would approve?"

"She would?" The smile cracked at the corners. "That is good. If you say so, sister. But will it bring us the princess?"

"Our host seems to think so." With a finger, her sister directed her attention to where Lanita din Casima was surveying the damage. The coral-haired mer did not seem too upset over the destruction wrought upon her own city. Or at least this portion of it. The viceroy's grand whorl tent and its surroundings were left untouched, as were the trade depots and stock tents which brought Mezzegheb its wealth. Only the entertainment district was to be hit, according to this plan, and with it the Free Flow rebels whom the viceroy had identified as using the ugly collection of smaller tents to further their seditious activities.

At the moment, the Lady din Casima was speaking to the mer with the daughter. "It is a terrible time to be about," the viceroy noted.

"Terrible time to be here," the mother replied. "Got to take this one out to the Drift sooner or later, and

right now sooner's looking good. Or not take her at all?"

For some reason, din Casima found this worth a chuckle. "Fine, Klara. Take the little one to where she'll be safe. And the rest of you all? Lyneve?"

The mer floating next to the young mother had her arms crossed and her face serious. "Safety in numbers, Your Elegance. Waters aren't safe out there for a mer alone." The slant of her mouth put silent judgment on the safety of the waters within as well. "Won't be long."

"It had better not take too long." The lady waved to the guards at the edge of the district to let the mers pass. "But we're busy here, so I won't keep you waiting. Go, go, and make your way home soon. As soon as we've set the circles and tents back, you'll be needed for work. Understood?"

"As always, Your Elegance." The small school of mers bowed with practiced timing, then finned off quickly.

Marilis had kept her voice in, but as soon as it was polite the mer was over by the viceroy's side. "Is it smart to let them off? Won't they tell someone?"

"I thought that was what we wanted?" din Casima countered. "To let Sera the Red know that we are after her?" Another dismissive wave. "Worry not. Those mers have no place to go but here, and so to here they shall return. That is the way of Mezzegheb. So it flows."

Martella could not care about the politics. She could barely bring herself to acknowledge it. When action came, the seas seemed so calm. Clear. Pristine.

There was herself and there was the target. And then the target was not. Simplicity itself. Why one should muddy all that with reason and excuses, she could not see.

She could see the face of the little daughter, still with her head up and gazing curiously in her direction. A shudder took her, from the spikes of her hair to the tip of her flukes, and her stomach heaved. Swift fluttering of the gills helped to settle her, but brought a different assault upon her senses. The destruction had ripped the currents beneath the tent until nothing led anywhere, and the scent of the city rose up to mix around her. Hanging over the stench of long habitation was the taste of blood in the water, of mud and murk freshly disturbed, of... Her mind still refused to put a name to the sour-sweet taste that pervaded so much of the city, even though shivered as it tickled across her tongue.

"Careful, sister," said Marilis. "Remember the calm which Mother taught us. Save your strength and resolve for those wicked mers who took Her Highness."

Yes... yes. The spines of her hair shook with her nod of understanding. She flushed water through her gills and out her mouth to remove the offensive taste. Stay calm. Stay strong. The mission had hardly begun. Now came the waiting.

If only she could clear the memory so easily, wash out the vision of that little face, mother and daughter with hair so alike.

Verse XVIII

Never would Sera the Red ever so deeply hate a color as she did right then. That was the main thought to swim through her mind as the others helped her navigate her way out of the Floating Gardens. She hated the particular shade of green, that vague color where the lighter kelp blended with the darker sargo. It was almost the same as the unkempt mess atop Ardenne's head, and how Sera hated the hunter for a beat, for dragging her into this insanity.

But no, that was the pain talking. A single tentacle had nearly done her in because she'd been stupid and reckless in the face of something she had no idea how to deal with. The dozens of tiny bites scoring her body were a witness to how well that had turned out. Their venom forced her skin to blush with a shade of red to match her hair, and the swelling bloated her arms and torso to the point where it couldn't feel like her own body at all. At some point she realized they had quit the gardens, but her limbs bobbed in the stray currents and would not stop until they were on Morag Head.

When she came to, it was to see Rhiela performing another healing prayer over her injuries. There was another thing to hate: that she could not find it in herself to hate the stuck-up royal as much as before. So it flowed.

"H-hey," she gasped out. "How long's it been?"

"Half the mid-day hour," Rhiela told her. "We're most of the way back to Mezzeret, I think. Rest up. You'll need your strength soon enough."

"Thanks, Rhia," she murmured. "Ah, is that...?"

Safely secured across from her in Morag Head's little kelpen grotto, just below where a pocket of air silvered the foliage with its bubble edge, the pink dolphin opened an eye to focus on her. A greeting squeaked across the water. The little cetacean's skin looked as red and pained as Sera's felt, with at least as many track marks left from the abomination's embrace.

"We haven't decided on what to call her," said Rhia. "But she's definitely on our side. Whatever side that is. This is all so confusing." Brown-gold curls shook in the stillness of the grotto.

"That's life." Sera flushed her gills as she thought it over. "Still, good work. During the fight. Really mean it."

"Thanks." The princess turned back to the little dolphin, stroking the pink skin and whispering more healing words.

Sera was not about to say she was just as confused as the other mer. That was life, after all.

After some time spent swimming the muddy currents of her own mind, she awoke to the feeling of Morag Head coming to a slow and steady halt. There was a certain change to the stillness of the kelpen grotto that was unmistakable. A careful twitch of the flukes, then a second, proved the efficiency of the princess's healing technique. Another thing she could not find fault in -- it was an ever-shortening list of things to be angry about.

"And how be you?" The familiar voice of Nantsi, one-third of Morag Head's leadership, drifted in ahead of its mistress. The capeta slipped through woven

drapes with the surprising grace of the camfion, giving a curious side-glance to the delphin as she sculled over to Sera's side. "Not dead yet, eh?"

"The indigo hell wouldn't take me." Sera twisted her way out of her loose bindings, though not without care. "But thanks for being there for us."

"Don't thank us yet. Something's up in town."

"Damnit, what now?" Scowling ached less than anything else she could do in the moment. "Abominations on the water?"

"The keepers have the flags raised. You all are to meet with them immediately." Nantsi looked her over. "Not one to be saying, cuz of how I weren't there, but you're looking like something the octopod dragged over. Are you sure you're well enough to swim?"

"Gotta be." She hid her wince as she kicked off into the open water. "But, ah, if'n you've got someone to help with Li'l Pinky? Don't think I can get her a-movin' with just me and Rhia here."

"That can be arranged." Large and wide-set as they were, there was no missing a camfion's eye-roll. Within a short measure, three of Morag Head's singers were called in, two of them for the delphin and the third to politely lend a hand to their dear friend Sera the Red, should she need it. With such an offer tendered, it would have been rude to turn it down, and so she spent much of the swim down from the verdant float snuggled against the singer's chest.

She thought the princess might have said something about that, but Rhiela held her silence all the way to town, and again after Sera was transfered to the waiting arms of Rohaise. The welcoming kiss was kept

short, both for Rhiela's sensibilities and for the fact that they couldn't have the keepers wait too long.

As it was, they were the last to arrive. Ardenne, Rook, and the twins were already situated before the three keepers, and from the look on their faces, the news was not good.

It was the keeper Fenella who began. "Starting not long after you set forth, we received word from our friends in Mezzegheb, via the whistle shells."

"All of them," said Islee. "Each blowing the same codes."

Innis carried the current. "Distress, damage, destruction. Someone is rooting the Free Flow from the tent city, and they are none too careful about who else is cut. The whistle shells repeated this message until they fell silent, one by one."

Sera swore in the back of her gills. The little shells worked a bit like Rhiela's big talky-conch, only they sent short and long chirps from which the camfion and their allies had devised a code. They had to be blown in person, so if one went quiet in mid-whistle, there wasn't much in the way of misinterpretation there.

"It was the last of them whose message differed," said Fenella. "At the very end, after a pause of many beats, it said, 'They want the princess.' Sera, dearest among our friends, what have you brought down upon us?"

Oh, *depths*. This was so far beyond bad, she would have to invent her own word for just what it was. Later. If she survived this. Sera did not fancy her odds at the moment. "I, well..." she began.

"She did not do anything." By her side, the princess drew herself up straight. "If anyone's fault this is, it would be mine."

Sera screwed her eyes shut, dreading the inevitable words to follow. She'd warned the mer, warned them all, and they'd been so good about not blabbing, but now...

"And how would that be, young mer whom we hardly know?" asked the keeper Islee.

"It is because you hardly know me, and for that I must apologize, for I fear my original introduction was shorter than it should have been." Golden-brown hair fanned into the current as the mer faced the camfion proudly. "For my name in full is Rhiela min Anyis... din Brynduin, and I fear that this menace seeks me."

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Before she even rose to speak, Rhiela knew what reaction her words would prompt: three beats of silence, five at most, followed by a confused clamoring from every camfion within earshot, which may well have been every mer currently in Mezzeret. The noise would echo into the distance as the news spread, only for the three keepers to command everyone back into silence. Four beats after the words left her mouth, every single part of her prediction had come to pass.

"Would you all be quiet?" The keeper Fenella did not shout, and yet she was the largest presence in the public forum by some quirk of volume. Her voice simply filled more space, forcing the cries of shock and surprise to the far reaches, where they dissipated. "Ahem. Now then, that is quite a claim, young manoa. On the face of it, one might say it seems impossible."

"The truth often does, as I have seen," said Rhiela. "For I have been told lies far more convincing than the last three weeks of my life have actually been, and yet here we are." She took a bow. "Alas, I am not at my best. Without a regular weed-wrap, my hair loses some of its luster."

"So we see." The keeper swam in close, nostrils flaring as her broad mouth pulled into a frown. "It has been long ere we last saw any mer from the Crown here in Mezzeret, much less the Crown itself. I would wonder at the quality of our hospitality, for I know you were not accepting of it the previous night."

And there was another thing to come and nip her on the flukes. Sera had even said these mers took their love-sharing seriously, free though it was, but it had not seemed so important when she was a relative nobody.

Now, she was a somebody, and all knew her to be an inconsiderate guest. Things became more important.

"I..." She flushed her gills nervously. "I am sorry for my rudeness in that regard. The truth is, I... I already have... I believe the word is leman. She is very important to me, and until I am able to return home to her, I would not do anything to hurt her or the trust she places in me."

"A fair reason." Fenella snorted, and the tension riding the waters settled with the suddenness of that sound. "And what do the voices of Mezzeret say?"

The buzz of words arose from all around, and Rhiela saw that the crowd had grown since she'd last dared to look up. Perhaps the entire population of the

city really was in attendance. Across the hall of the keepers, mer camfion floated by pillars or by sand, or even high above to cast shadows against the firmament. Broad faces stared from all directions, but she kept her own eyes front and center on the three keepers. Her ears caught more than enough as it was.

"Send her back!" some shouted. "To the Free Flow!" cried others. "Let the manoa deal with her properly!" Still others spoke in their silence, their eyes drilling her skull like it was a prize oyster. Had so many of the camfion borne knives the day before? She had not noticed then, and could not afford to ignore it now.

"And what do her companions have to say?" The words flowed from the keeper, but they forced an ebb to all other discussion. "Well, Sera our friend? You of all mers should have some interesting views on this."

The red mer's reputation preceded her as always. Rhiela was left to wonder what that reputation even was, that it left such weight in the waves, but she held her piece and floated to the side as her companion took the front place before the keepers. The red rash and welts from monstrous pincers had yet to fade, but the swelling had receded enough that the rogue could keep steady as she spoke to the keepers and the crowd.

"Lots to say, nowhere to start, really," Sera began. "The princess here got mixed up with us in Bryndoon of her own choice, heped us get Ardenne's mom away from where the ministry was holdin' her." That produced a murmur around the hall. "Yeah, them. Pleasant as ever. After that, she showed us a way out the back, through the old temple cave what I told you all 'bout the other day, your ladyships."

"We recall," said Islee, "that there was a matter of an abomination."

"Yeah, that too."

"Similar to what you met in the Floating Gardens just this morning?" There was louder murmuring to shiver the waters now, as this bit of news found new ears to inform.

"Not so big, just as nasty," the red mer confirmed. Got a guard killed, saving the princess then."

"Her name," said Rhiela in as loud voice and as even a tone as she could manage, "was Shalar min Shandra, who did her job with honor, even to the death. But I could not be content with that, so I left--"

"Forced herself on us at knifepoint," Sera informed their audience. "To her own throat, even."

"--I left to learn why," she continued undaunted. "Why the abominations, why the deaths, why the seas are as they are, and... yes, and why no one tries to fix any of it."

The middle of the keepers, Innis, eyed her carefully. "Be it you may not like the answers to these questions you're having."

"Nor do I like that I must ask the questions at all," Rhiela said to her. "But I must, and so I do. And now I shall return to Mezzegheb to seek an answer there as well."

"Lost your senses!?" snapped the red mer. "Handled yourself pretty well against a tentacle or three, sure, but whoever's ripping through the tent city--"

"Wants me, personally," Rhiela snapped back. "I

am perhaps the only one who can face her and not be attacked immediately. Whoever she is, she won't hurt me."

"That's not the point, you..."

The cloud of murmurs surrounded them, again reminding that this was not a private argument they were having. Rhiela could feel herself reddening with embarrassment, but did not dare let the emotion color her voice as well. She was the First Daughter under the firmament, regardless of her current placement beneath it, and she would act as such: with decorum as her shield and words as her spear.

"Well," said Islee.

"Well, indeed," agreed Innis.

Decorum kept her from responding out loud, but Sera echoed her feelings of "Well, what!?" with words of her own.

"It is a day of rarities," said Fenella. "A mer of the Crown who actually cares, that is one thing. But to hear Sera the Red give even a minor compliment to that mer, well..." The keeper chuckled through her nose. "Well, indeed. Thus," the camfion continued, "we cannot agree to your request. Our friends in Mezzegheb have all fallen, so swiftly that we cannot even say by whose hand. Were we to take you as far as an hour's stroke away from the city of tents, our own floats would be put in peril. It is risk enough to send mers around the anchorages and meeting spots, hoping for survivors and not ambushes."

"Madams, though it is a danger," said Rhiela, "could you have someone stop by the Wayward Drift? They are as family to Sera, and I doubt that is a good

thing to be in these waters right now." Her hand found the red mer's own, and received a thankful squeeze. "And after that, if you would have any suggestions for where we should go, or how we should get there, I would be in your debt. These are strange times and stranger waters for us to swim, and even this fool that I am knows she must ask for the wisdom of her elders."

Floating there, the singular focus for the attention of an entire nation, was more frightening than any abomination, more threatening than any beast of fang or fin. Were she alone, Rhiela was not sure she could survive the force of all those eyes staring, stabbing, judging her every word and gesture. But there was one hand in her own, giving a gentle squeeze. Then the other hand, her left, found Ardenne's within it. The anchor and the lead, keeping her steady and pulling her forward.

One alone before the nation, that was impossible to withstand. Three of them together could take on the world.

End Book Two