

Disbelief—what were they thinking on that pleasure ship throwing them out to sea?—quickly settled into panic when Anson caught sight of the shadow beneath the water. Their first warning the miasmic beast was on its way towards an easy meal had been the frantic departure of large schools of fish and other sea creatures. Their second had been the mantibab that poked up its head above the water and asked if they needed a ride out, and fast.

“From what?” Anson had asked. Which apparently had been the wrong answer, because the bab had just shook its head in disbelief, dipped beneath the waves, and shot off like a firework.

And so there they were, alone on the waves and clinging to a life preserver that would almost certainly not preserve their life given the sheer scale of the beast lazily oozing its way through the water, leaching all the color from the sea as it did so. The bowroo paddled pathetically, taking in the sights around them, desperate for any sense of salvation and—there! Prika’s Steps weren’t so far behind them; the currents had been generous enough to pull them close to shore, surely they could—

Feel the pull of something massive beneath their paws. Their long tail coiled up away from the sudden down pull as the beast’s slender jaws began to spread.

Anson figured they had maybe, at best, a few seconds. And the only plan they had was a bad one, but they’d been left with a great deal of rope... The angle needed to be perfect, they wouldn’t get another chance.

The water shifted and began to draw them downward and the situation was so absurd Anson felt their fear recede like the waters on a beach just before a tidal wave. Because they’d gotten lucky, stupidly, unbelievably lucky. The top jaw of the beast’s long, narrow maw had come up right in the empty space of the rope, which as it continued to surface grew taught at the edges of its jaws, digging into the miasma that oozed around and over it, incorporating it into the beast’s body itself, until finally Anson was drawn up onto the back of its gummy head. The only thing between their body and the beast was the life preserver, and they scramble to get up to on their feet, their grip tightening on the rope as though they were reins.

It was hard to keep a stable hold when the beast just kept coming out of the water. Anson chanced a glance back, down the thing’s inky-dark arched neck and saw numerous drooping spiny appendages, each capped with a strange marble of cinnabar light, breaking through a lank mane of dying kelp. Several meters down from their absurd height they saw multiple instances of scythed, segmented limbs like those of a particularly cruel isopod churning the water’s surface. And still somehow more beneath the water.

A noise like a purr or an explosion or both rumbled the beast’s body, sending thick gobs of miasma splashing into the water below. It turned its head, agonizingly slow, the glowing filament whiskers twitching as its blind cinnabar eye rolled in its—did these things have skulls? towards the pleasure boat docked at Prika’s Steps. Anson pushed hard with their back paws against the life preserver, anchoring it as deeply in the miasma as they dared.

Smart, because it began surging towards the pretty white beach where that gullible pawbird and some red mantibab with too-long hair were preparing to board the boat. Anson hadn't seen the latter on the boat when they'd first managed to get on board, but they looked ritzy enough for it.

Anson squinted, trying to make sure the little lelokit wasn't still hanging around because this was about to get gnarly. Seeing the coast clear, they began shouting, "HEYYYYY! BEASTIE INCOMING!" until their lungs and jaw began to ache.

Faustus considered Prika's Steps a wash. He'd found a patron willing to fund his studies, but good grief was Aphelion annoying. Sure, they'd been willing to surrender the golden pearl so he could leave the Steps with some walking around money, but had they needed to be so... smug about it? And then to learn they owned the yacht he'd spent the past week vacationing on (nevermind how long it had taken him to scrape together the coins to take that vacation!).

"Ah, well. Looks like your vacation's been cut short, dear," Aphelion says, halting in their tracks on the beach and digging their paws into the white sand.

"What are you—oh no. You lead them here?" Faustus knew the bowroo couldn't hear him, but what else was he going to say as the beast surged onto the beach. Its bulk seemed to ooze around it, sloshing forward after it had halted before receding back into shape and leaving puddles of miasma smoking on the sands.

Next to him, Aphelion had called a delicate golden bow and an embroidered quiver full of arrows to them and was nocking an arrow just as Faustus was getting his feet beneath him. The mantibab's magic burnt a sunset red, bright against the shadow made by the beast. But they weren't shooting. Why weren't they just shooting the thing? Faustus cursed himself for leaving his spellbooks in his cabin back on the yacht and fell into a defensive posture behind Aphelion.

Anson—that was the bowroo's name, he remembered now—began yanking hard on the rope embedded in the beast's jaws and it huffed a great and cloying red mist that rolled across the beach and left Faustus doubled over, coughing. More importantly, and what Aphelion must have been counting on, was that the beast began to rear back onto the coils of miasma not yet dragged up onto the beach. It rose and rose, its isopod's limbs slashing fruitlessly at the air as it bellowed a noise like a rockslide, exposing a river of crackling carmen where the inky miasma fell away. Something white churned and roiled inside it, and it was at this that Aphelion finally loosed their arrow, and then one more, just to be sure.

As suddenly as they struck the core, the miasma closed over itself, the beast letting out a horrible shriek and thrashing its massive body in the surf. It looked somewhere between a wolf-eel and a seahorse and some nasty sort of bug, he thought, seeing its shape properly for the first time only as the miasma began to fall from its body in great, wet gobs. Still falling to

pieces, it pulled itself weakly up the beach on those skittering spiky legs, finally slowing down enough that the bowroo had time to hop safely down to the sands.

They laughed, harsh and grating, their hands on their hips. "Not bad at all! What a vacation!!" Aphelion preened.

Faustus groaned, stepping around the quickly dissipating pools of miasma in the hopes of spending the trip back to Windan hidden away in his cabin.